Philosophical Practice and the Reform of Education: a Lipman’s essay.

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The supremacy of an empirical approach, that seems to be the trend that currently characterizes the educational policies of the more developed countries, makes educational curricula uncoordinated and fragmented, based upon poorly coherent lists of skills rather than integrated parts of a single project. This is a clear complaint that Lipman expressed several times, but that seems to be particularly emphasized in an essay published in Italian in 1988. The title of this paper is Pratica filosofica e riforma dell’educazione, and its English original version, as far as I know, has never been published. As the title announces, Lipman grounds upon philosophical practice his project of reforming education. Western school systems seem to be in a deep crisis. This is because the general vision and the kind of knowledge underlying them have become unreliable. For the purpose of achieving a desirable reform, the remedy Lipman proposes is, as we know, philosophical inquiry. Beyond the educational value it has in itself, philosophical inquiry is invoked here as a bridge towards a comprehensive reform of the whole education system. In order to understand why philosophical practice might be allowed to undertake this role, it is important to note what Lipman says about Socrates’ figure concerning its role within the polis:

"Certainly, Socrates realized that the discussion of philosophical concepts was, by itself, only a fragile reed. What he tried to demonstrate was that doing philosophy was emblematic of a joint inquiry as a way of life. It is not necessary to be philosophers in order to foster the self-corrective
approach of the "community of inquiry": rather it can, and should be, encouraged in all our institutions”.

There seem to be then, in Lipman’s view, two possible ways of doing philosophy at school: one acts as a "healthy contribution to the program” currently in force and the second, broader, consists in the "way in which it [philosophical practice] represents the paradigm of the education of the future as a way of life which has not yet been implemented, and as a kind of practice”.

Lipman’s proposal goes, more properly, in the latter direction, as evidenced by his own words:

"Educational reform must bring the common philosophical inquiry into the classroom as a heuristic model. Without the guidance of such a model, we will continue to wander and the program will continue to be a mess”.

It is necessary, then, to implement research that can transform the "mess" that school curricula are now into consistent learning and training environments and we cannot do this unless we identify and intellectualize the factors of dissatisfaction and of failure. "From which point of view has education mostly disappointed us?” - asks Lipman. And his clear answer is: "The biggest disappointment of traditional education was its failure to produce people approaching the ideal of reasonableness” and, after that, he adds:

"It may be that in previous centuries unreasonableness was a luxury that human beings could afford, even if the costs were high. It should be obvious, however, that the costs of our tolerant attitude towards irrationality are now well beyond our means. [...] We should think together or die together”.

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1 Lipman M., Pratica filosofica e riforma dell’educazione. La filosofia con i bambini, in “Bollettino SFI”, n. 135/1988. The essay was translated into Italian and edited by Luciana Vigone, who first introduced Lipman’s project in Italy. Cfr. also Vigone L., La filosofia con il bambino. La filosofia per il bambino, in “Bollettino SFI”, n. 131/1987.
2 Ivi, p. 17.
3 Ibidem.
It is based on his sound belief in the value of "reasonableness" that Lipman undertook and carried out the construction of the PfC curriculum. In the American scenario the crisis of education reached a level of alarm shown by the well known National Commission on Excellence in Education’s report, *A Nation at Risk*\(^5\). In relation to the debate and the proposals for reform that the document aroused, David Kennedy tried to show how the PfC curriculum has all the qualifications to be a winning paradigm for a "reconstruction" of the school system, due to both the pedagogical equipment that distinguishes it and the profound changes implied by the pedagogy of the "community of inquiry", in terms of both the promise of restructuring the traditional role of the teacher, and the prospect of decentralization in the governance of schools. All of these are perspectives from which to address the "second revolution in education" closely related to the Copernican revolution already undertaken by John Dewey\(^6\).

As is apparent, Lipman’s proposal launches a double challenge: the first, more explicit, to educational practice and the knowledge related to it; the second, more implicit, to philosophy itself. The philosophy of the last century is crossed, as we know, by a widespread sense of unease about and criticism of Reason. We can say that the past century has been the age of an irreversible "crisis of Western Reason".

It is not the place, here, to consider, even with a few comments, the philosophical scenario of the crisis of reason, but it may have some special meaning to briefly recall the relation between Socrates and Nietzsche as the *topos* where the rising and the declining reason are compared with each other. Nietzsche’s ambiguous attitude towards the Socrates figure seems to be crucial and, in many ways, the very opening of the criticism of Western Reason.

The charge that Nietzsche levelled against Socrates and socratism as responsible for the death of the Greek tragic spirit and for the foundation of intellectualistic ethics does not seem to be without appeal. Not few scholars, indeed, have emphasized the ambiguity of the German philosopher towards the Socrates figure. At the risk of forcing the texts, Walter Kaufmann\(^7\) does not hesitate to say that Socrates was a true idol for Nietzsche, an exemplary model of how a philosopher should live. In fact, according to this author, the primacy given to reason at the expense of the passions belongs much more to the Socratic

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philosophers then to Socrates himself, who, rather would appear to Nietzsche as the first “philosopher of life”.

In this view, the sharp distinction between Socrates and Plato gains weight (according to Vlastos’ view8) and, at the same time, it becomes easier to understand Nietzsche’s ambiguity, his swinging between a strong condemnation of Platonic socratism, on one hand, and his not explicitly declared admiration for the Socrates figure, for his ironic style and his liking for the masks, on the other9. At the end, Socrates represents the rising of reason and it is exactly with the history and the destination of reason that Nietzsche seeks to deal, despite, necessarily using categories and tools provided by reason itself. It seems to be the same with regard to Socrates: he condemns him without being able to get rid of him altogether.

Both Nietzsche and Socrates appear as decisive turning points in the history of Western philosophy and what they undoubtedly share is their respective attitudes towards tradition. Both show a strong will to upset the existing order, both live out of date, both indicate a “beyond” that requires commitment in interpretation and in jumps of perspective. Without the inheritance, wholly Socratic, of the critical power of thought, Nietzsche would not have been possible. The practice of demystification, the irreverent action, inaugurated by Socrates, explodes anew in Nietzsche; it turns against Socrates himself and, above all, against the Platonic interpretation of Socrates’ life.

The "reasonableness" to which Lipman appeals as a regulative idea for the reform of education has nothing of the rationality of Plato’s world of forms, nor of the geometric Cartesian rationality. If properly interpreted, it can include both the Socratic and the Nietzschean lessons and excludes both those interpretations that have brought philosophy out of the ordinary human world and those that have proclaimed the overall crisis of reason, and, consequently, the possible end of philosophy. Reasonableness is not the metaphysical Reason; it is a term including the category of possibility and, therefore, it appears marked out with an ethical commitment. In Lipman’s view, it had to do, also, with hermeneutics since no education is given without sense-making.

With respect to education, the metaphysics inaugurated by Plato has had, among its consequences, the fixation of some peculiar connotations of Western educational systems and of their prevailing pedagogical trends. The Catholic

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project of the Ratio Studiorum (1599) was grafted, in many senses, on the Platonic-Aristotelian model. The network of Jesuit schools, in Europe and the Americas, has designed the basic structure of modern educational systems, even in later secular versions of the modern nation-state. Some of the background characteristics of this kind of Paideia are the following:

- An organization and administration tending to be centralized, bureaucratic and hierarchical;
- Paternalism (rewards and punishments);
- Imitation (repetition and rote learning);
- The consecration of the textbook;
- Competitive individualism.

The battles of the many educators who have put themselves in a critical attitude against this tradition have not brought about, after all, any highly effective transformations. Just consider the case of John Dewey. Even though he was very influential internationally and in terms of pedagogical reflection, his work did not cause any structural disruptions in the organization of educational environments and practices in any country in the world, let alone in the US. The truth is that modern school systems have been controlled by political power and put at its service (in a particularly striking way in the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century). With the strengthening of democracies in the second half of the century, the school systems, rather than becoming places of cultural development and learning for an active citizenship, have quietly submitted to another power, economic and technocratic.

The autonomy of education

The "reasonableness" which Lipman appeals to is primarily a symbol of the demand for greater levels of autonomy of education from external powers. If national school systems are institutions bureaucratically supported by the political power of modern nation-states, education, on the contrary, belongs to the domain of civil society and should benefit from a wide degree of autonomy. As Lipman points out:

"The school must be defined by the nature of education, and not education by the nature of the school. Instead of insisting that education is a special form of experience that only the school can provide, we should say that anything that helps us to discover
meanings in life is educational, and the schools are educational only insofar as they do facilitate such discovery”\textsuperscript{10}.

Reasonableness is, therefore, a principle of self-regulation that includes a clear ethical value and, at the same time, puts forward an intrinsic methodical habit that, being basically different from a "technology of education", expresses itself by indicating a direction and by giving a sense of consistency in terms of the whole process of education. What is especially at stake - Lipman says in the cited essay - is to exploit the resources of philosophy in order to transform the curriculum from a showcase of "subject-matters" in competition with each other into a "texture" of languages and practices of training that the background of philosophical reflection and the spirit of inquiry can weave across and hold together. Insofar as the issue of autonomy in education has to do with the relation between means and ends, the comparison between Plato and the Sophists might be significant. It is what Lipman maintains at the end of the essay, when he writes:

"Without doubt, Plato, especially in his early years, was attracted by many things that the Sophists had to say about education, but he fixed strict boundaries when he suspected that the emphasis on grammar, rhetoric and dialectic would not be counterbalanced by the immersion of the student within the richness of humanistic culture [...] Plato would have been very unusual if he had not felt despair at those quack sellers of pedagogical nostrums descending in their hordes on Athens. [...] Even now the word ‘thinking’ is on everyone’s lips and pedagogists have taken to spruce up even the least attractive of their products, presenting them as some kind of cognitive process or problem-solving. [...] We must be prepared to hear parroting from every corner of the educational community that the purpose of education is to prepare thoughtful and reasonable students, and that philosophy can have an important role in achieving it. We also need to be prepared for pseudo-philosophical approaches of all kinds, which will compete to get into the schools. It is up to us to devote our energy to distinguish the philosophical from the pseudo-philosophical and the philosophical from the non-philosophical”\textsuperscript{11}.

\textsuperscript{11} Lipman M., \textit{Pratica filosofica e riforma dell’educazione}, cit., p. 27.
There is a possible objection that may arise at this point. We can summarize it in the following question: "Given Lipman’s recurrent and insistent appeal to the past, to the classical philosophers, to what extent is his proposal actually innovative?". After all, the primacy of the humanities and the privilege accorded to the teaching of philosophy, accompanied by a contempt for modern science, has its roots in the humanist paideia of the Renaissance and it is even today widely appreciated. Actually, such an objection can be resolved just by taking into account the Copernican revolution that Lipman performs with regard to the way of understanding philosophy.

I guess that Lipman’s claim to make a clear distinction between philosophical, pseudo-philosophical and non-philosophical should be an outstanding and unending commitment for all of us. Turning back to Lipman’s essay, he remarks how for the scholastic tradition "what is required, for the most part, of students of secondary schools is the learning of philosophy". The move that Lipman maintains is needed, instead, is towards "doing philosophy". Lipman explicitly introduced the term "philosophical practice" in 1988, but certainly he had conceived it while writing Harry Stottlemeyer’s discovery (1969), shortly before - I would say - the German Gerd Achenbach’s Philosophische Praxis, before Marc Sautet’s Café-Philo and before Lou Marinoff’s philosophical practice as well. The "philosophical practice" Lipman suggests as the paradigm of education reform and as a projection of a lifestyle for the future of humanity has its roots in the early contact of philosophy with the polis. If philosophy has survived, somehow, in the face of the advancing of technical and scientific knowledge, this is because it has had to give up its essential identity: "The price of survival - Lipman notes - was high: philosophy had to renounce all claims to exercise a significant social role". What Lipman has in mind, however, is not to be confused with some forms of the application of philosophy to specific areas of practice. From his point of view, in fact,

"The example of doing philosophy is the dominant solitary figure of Socrates, for whom philosophy was neither an acquisition nor a profession, but a way of life. Socrates is for us a model not of known

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13 Lipman M., Pratica filosofica e riforma dell’educazione, cit., p. 11.
17 Lipman M., Pratica filosofica e riforma dell’educazione, cit., p. 11.
or applied philosophy, but of philosophy that is practised. He
guides us to recognize that philosophy as an act, as a form of life, is
something that any one of us can emulate.\footnote{Ivi, p. 12.}

It is on the concept of \textit{practice} that I want to focus further, because I feel that a
mature consideration about the semantics of this term may shed light on some
relevant aspects of PfC. What, among other things, is evident from the social
sciences literature concerning the concept of practice is its a-reflective or pre-
reflective nature, and its gestaltic character. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, within
his theory of action, supports the thesis that social agents develop strategies of
action based on a number of provisions, of which they are unaware, acquired
during socialization, and he calls these condensations \textit{habitus}, seen as a kind of
grammar that provides the basic rules and patterns upon which are grafted the
variety and multiplicity of actions required by the social environment. The
development of "practical sense" is closely related to the mastery of \textit{habitus}, and,
therefore, it appears, on the one hand, incorporated as a set of given rules and
patterns; on the other hand, it is likely to provide different responses to
variations of the social context and to its demands.\footnote{Bourdieu P., \textit{Le sens pratique}, de Minuit, Paris 1980.} It is quite clear that this
vision of Bourdieu reaffirms the a-reflective nature of practice. It is true that he
also recognizes and emphasizes the power the \textit{habitus} has to generate some
novelties and he distinguishes them from mere customary routine. Nevertheless,
individual creativity, the Socratic \textit{a-topia} remains out of this interpretive scheme.

For Michel de Certeau practice is such to the extent that it is not discourse, so
that it assumes a specific sense just as Winograd and Flores argue when using
the example of hammering in order to distinguish, in a Heideggerian perspective,
the pre-reflective knowledge (embedded in a practice) and the reflective one.
Within the hammering practice there is no "hammer" as a concept categorized
through the operation of class inclusion. The hammer, for the joiner's overall
action, is not an object separate from the hammering. Only the condition of
"unusable" makes the hammer available for reflective thought. Following this
perspective, participating in a practice involves 1) a complete immersion in the
situation and 2) a reciprocal influence between the agent and the situation;
moreover 3) that the dynamic nature of social behavior precludes any accurate
prediction, 4) that it is impossible to have a stable representation of the ongoing
situation, 5) that any representation is an interpretation that cannot be assessed

\footnote{De Certeau M., \textit{L'Invention du quotidien}, Gallimard, Paris 1990.}
as right or wrong and, finally, 6) that language is an action creating a situation rather than describing it\textsuperscript{21}.

We can find elements of undeniable suggestion for a definition of practice in what Wittgenstein called "language-game". In his interpretation of language\textsuperscript{22}, the essential operation is the demystification of the language, emptying it of all its alleged extra-linguistic referents (metaphysical).

In this sense, language is never a private matter, but always a social interchange. The meanings are given in regulated social practices. Possessing a concept means learning to obey the rules of an ongoing practice and sharing a specific "form of life". For Wittgenstein too, reflection aimed at asking questions about the rules of the game is not admitted, except - it should be noted - for Wittgenstein himself.

Each social practice has always to deal with that kind of paradoxicality highlighted by Gregory Bateson in his studies about humor, about game and, more generally, about the concept of "frames" and their role in communication and human knowledge\textsuperscript{23}. Bateson made it clear how human interaction is mediated by two coexisting levels of communication and meta-communication and how the latter is usually dissolved and absorbed inside the practice within which it operates retaining its status of tacit knowledge\textsuperscript{24}. A "community of practice"\textsuperscript{25} is, therefore, by definition, a social formation that tends to perpetuate its typical \textit{habitus} and not to develop inquiry and reflective processes. As emphasized by Lipman, "The glue that holds a community together is practice, but it does not have to be self-critical practice"\textsuperscript{26}.

The point where we are now, could be represented by an imaginary confrontation between the claim that ends Wittgenstein's \textit{Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus}\textsuperscript{27} and Gregory Bateson's challenge. On one side: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent", on the other, according to Bateson's view, whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must \textit{not} be silent. It is what we must, indeed, talk more about, because it is perhaps the only topic worth talking

\textsuperscript{27} L. Wittgenstein, \textit{Tractatus logico-philosophicus}, Kegan Paul, Londra 1922.
about. What is worth talking about, are the rules of the "language games", those "things – Bateson explains - that cannot be communicated openly: the premises of how we understand life, of how we build our visions of life, and so on"\textsuperscript{28}, those ordinary and everyday aspects of our experience we do not see "because we have them always before eyes"\textsuperscript{29}. And, I would like to add "that we have them also upon the eyes" as the lenses that determine the size, the clarity, the color of the objects of vision, as Baconian "idōla" functioning both as constraints and as possibilities. As possibilities because they allow us to frame and organize the world and our experience, as constraints because they impose a "this way" in front of which our fundamental helplessness is exactly corresponding to the alleged level of certainty.

According with the classic pragmaticist approach\textsuperscript{30} a “community of inquiry” is expected to reflect upon its own practice in order to enhance it, but what happens if the practice to be shared by a "community" is assumed to be the reflection in itself? In this case, the first consequence is that we give up the dichotomy action-reflection or, if you prefer, practice-theory. The practice of reflection is, at the same time, a reflection upon the practice, but it is never a pre-reflective or a-reflective practice. It is exactly the "philosophical practice" or "philosophy as a social practice", since a practice cannot be but social. A social practice, to function as such, needs a setting, a frame, an implicit regulation. As for the performance of a game, or a psychotherapy session, or a ritual, the opening of a session of philosophical practice is dependent on the effects of the tacit meta-message "This is a philosophical practice session", which works as a context-mark and it triggers all the adjustments that the context by itself implies\textsuperscript{31}.

The interior of a PfC session is, in some sense, a cave. But, unlike the Platonic cave, which has only one opening that leads from the world of opinion to the shining truth, we can imagine the PfC cave as bounded by layered semi-transparent walls, included in larger caves and adjacent to other caves all communicating with one another, a kind of labyrinth that communicates with other labyrinths. A prisoner in all these caves becomes philosopher when from the center of his cage he leans out of its bars or tries to reach the walls attempting to look through their transparency; so, if supported by Eros, he abandons his

\textsuperscript{28} G. Bateson, The Position of Humor in Human Communication, cit., p. 47.

\textsuperscript{29} L. Wittgenstein, Philosophische Untersuchungen, cit., p. 129.


center and walks towards another place (elsewhere) together with other prisoners following a direction. Now let us consider that following a direction implies some sort of method.

The method as a walking strategy

A reflection on the methodology must include a number of considerations about means and ends and their relationship. Briefly, if the goals and the assessment of them are located outside the philosophical practice, then the method cannot be anything but good technical equipment for all uses, and this is the proper lesson of the Sophists. If, on the contrary, the fixation of the ends and their evaluation is part of the reflective activity, then the method becomes a dynamic strategy integrated in the walk itself.

To give a concrete example, if in a classroom we call a pupil and ask whether he/she would like to have another life after death, we are just playing with such issues and we are putting our child not in a situation of philosophical wonder, but in a situation of terrible embarrassment from which he/she cannot hope to free him/herself except by giving whatever answer. If he/she is pressed to answer the question whether it would be better to have three lives or four, we are just using him/her as a sounding box of our own thoughts.

Very different is the case of a 10 year old girl whose father has died. When she comes back to school, during the PfC session the community introduces the topic concerning the death, helping the pupil to filter her experience reflectively and supporting her in taking herself some distance away from the situation of suffering. Here life and death are not a subject as any other for an eristic play, but they stand out as serious questions arising from living experience.

Philosophy as a social practice does not favor any obstinacy on formalism, neither of rules nor of content; it gets rid of performance anxiety and fuels the creativity of thought through open questions whose answers are not already in the facilitator’s head. The facilitator never assumes an inquisitorial approach that makes thinking like a torture, a sort of confession wrung by violence. This kind of procedure seems quite similar to that of the exemplar Plato’s *Meno*, where the ignorant slave must only answer “yes” or “no” to the closed questions that Socrates asks him, keeping him in a position of a mere spectator of the heuristics practice that Socrates carries on by and with himself.

It is more rewarding to perform as a brilliant philosopher in front of an audience rather than to “facilitate” the starting and development of a coherent
and meaningful reflective route in a philosophical style with a group of people, so that everyone can be a protagonist and where the dialogue framing and its direction are built along the way, following the argument “where it leads”. For this kind of practice a "science of education" is needed, as close as possible to the project Dewey expounds in The sources of a science of education, a project which, after the parable of the encyclopedia of the “Sciences of Education”, is still waiting to be widely realized.

Within Dewey’s proposal the fusion of theory and practice and, simultaneously, the constant exercise of reflection play a central role in the definition of a "science of education", housed in a border between two kinds of 'sources': on one side we find "sciences" such as psychology, sociology, philosophy and others potentially useful; on the other side we find ordinary experience, specifically the educational practice taking place in the field. The challenge is to make the 'art' of education more "scientific" through a reflection on itself fueled by knowledge having a secure theoretical status. Such a science of education, while preserving its specific nature as a competent practice (techne), cannot be formalized once and for all. The facilitator, as the physician or the architect, is a "reflective practitioner"32 who should possess the art of using science in his professional field.

A certain degree of "scientificity" of the educational practice also involves the possibility of solving the problem of genius, a typical figure of any artistic activity. Brilliant teachers do exist and they are so not because they are familiar with “educational history, psychology, approved methods”, as Dewey points out. However, the problem is that “the successes of such individuals tend to be born and to die with them: beneficial consequences extend only to those pupils who have personal contact with such gifted teachers”33.

Each of them is unique and unrepeatable because his/her know-how, as a non-reflective practice, cannot be taught to others. These figures, Dewey notes, induce slavish imitation and admiration. They seduce and influence their students by creating dependence rather than autonomous and critical thinking. The "scientificity" in education must be understood primarily as a generalization of good practices, as a transfer of skills from experts to beginners through "legitimate participation" in the practice and common reflection34; it must also involve a recognition of strategies and settings. These are all tools fully belonging

to the PiC that Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp handed over. They are connotations that make up an identity, not rigid or fixed on archetypes, but still an identity that cannot lead us to confuse the philosophical practice of PiC with other practices, some of them philosophical as well, but hardly comparable to PiC.