Discussion of conceptual knowledge as an aspect of philosophical teaching

Gaiani, Alberto (2012): *Insegnare concetti. La filosofia nella scuola di oggi*, Roma: Carrocci.

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Alberto Gaiani's book *Insegnare concetti. La filosofia nella scuola di oggi* (Teaching concepts. Philosophy in the school of today, 2012) emerged at a time of reform in the teaching of philosophy in Italian high schools (It. *Liceo*). The text is presented as an investigation into the issues left open by current guidelines on teaching philosophy, and as the development of an alternative didactical proposal. In particular, it considers the developments that the *National Guidelines* (*Indicazioni Nazionali* 2010, see the appendix) brought to the teaching of philosophy in relation to the programmatic decisions made since the Italian postwar period in response to fascism. In his later book *The Thought and the History. The Teaching of Philosophy in Italy* (*Il pensiero e la storia. L'insegnamento della filosofia in Italia,* 2014) Gaiani describes the history of the teaching of philosophy in a more exhaustive way. In Italian fascist schools after 1936, the teaching of philosophy tended to have the character of the history of philosophy taught through textbooks and, according to Gaiani, Italy "abolish[ed] didactics based on teacher freedom and introduce[d] a strong prescribed reference to the ministerial program"[1] (Gaiani 2014: 59). Together with other important reforms in the past, the reform of 2010 can be considered as an important change of the way of teaching philosophy at school – particularly the problematization of the history of philosophy and taking into consideration the historicity of philosophical problems (Gaiani 2014: 251) – which, however, he still considers as marked by certain undesirable elements from a didactical point of view.

In the field of philosophical didactics, research about the teaching of philosophy cannot, therefore, continue to regard the current directions as unquestionable and pay attention only to implementation aspects (p. 13); rather good disciplinary didactic research should seek options to the current institutional frameworks, if judged to be the case. In particular, the mixture of pragmatic considerations along with a Gentile-style actualism (p. 17f.)[2] has given way to a blend of historical and problematic approaches, authors, and themes. The criticism concerns the question of the canon (p. 23), the implicit idea that there are "indispensable" elements in teaching, although authors and philosophical works remain central. References are made to the unquestionability of the importance of particular themes or authors who are claimed to have authorial formative value inscribed "in their own name", something like an "authorial dictatorship", according to Gaiani's description (p. 27). Gaiani's diagnosis leads to the suspicion that the issue lies precisely in a way of thinking about the teaching of philosophy which would lead to an abandonment of the teaching of philosophy as an autonomous school subject.

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[1] Quotations from Gaiani's books in the text are translated from Italian by the author.
[2] Giovanni Gentile was an Italian philosopher and Minister of Education in Fascist Italy until 1924; he made reforms to the Italian school system in 1923 by introducing the "*riforma gentile*".

One may ask how this could ever happen? Philosophy must proceed to *conceptually* legitimize itself as an autonomous discipline. This seems to be the challenge for philosophy if it does not want – for political or pedagogical reasons – to be expelled from school, attached to other school subjects or replaced with social sciences. The diversity of philosophy's status within educational institutions can be seen as a symptom of philosophy's recurring need to legitimize itself. The thesis advocated in what the author of the book calls a "didactics by or through words" (It. *didattica per parole*) is a response to this difficulty, with the proposal to understand the distinctiveness of philosophy as conceptual knowledge (p. 13, It. *sapere concettuale*) that takes history into account, that is, proceeds to "place under scrutiny some concepts meaningful *to us*" (p. 14). Thus, concepts which are meaningful to us should be taught at school.

I will not explore here the question of the justification of philosophy as an autonomous discipline in school aimed at the development of a critical sense (Chapters 2-5). This revolves around the question "Why do we need to teach philosophy in school?" (Chapter 2), and various arguments, objections, and alternatives are presented. The cultural argument contends it is necessary for a good culture; the ethical-political argument asserts it is learning a way to think that puts us in a position to have authentic and responsible relationships with others; the logical argument contends we can learn to think for ourselves (Chapter 3). This leads to the discussion of philosophical competencies (Chapter 4). Instead, I will focus on the proposal of "philosophy as conceptual knowledge" (Chapters 6-7) and a "didactic by or through words" (Chapters 8-9). It seems that in these chapters, Gaiani develops a possible fourth argument. I call it "the philosophical argument itself". Delineating philosophy as conceptual knowledge seems to be an attempt to remind philosophy of its critical aspirations even in the educational field, but without reducing philosophy to argumentative capacities. It deals with principles (p. 89), provides clarity, investigates presuppositions, and defines boundaries (p. 88), redetermining the concepts themselves (p. 90), and delineates itself as "a knowledge (It. "*sapere*") that puts concepts under scrutiny and, at the same time, explicates itself through concepts" (p. 95). If we ask how conceptual knowledge is to be understood, it seems that the Gaiani, in addition to the acquisition of conceptual capacities, demands that philosophy produce its own knowledge: "to do philosophy is to handle concepts and to produce a form of conceptual knowledge" (p. 82) and this through the productivity of language that goes through a "didactics by or through words".

I am not so sure that philosophy can produce "knowledge" but it certainly can question conceptual claims. Perhaps it is time to clarify the value of some terminological issues for philosophical discourse. Reading a text in Italian, working in German, and writing in English, we are faced with questions of how to understand not only the concept of "Fachdidaktik" in the philosophical sphere but also the question of how to understand current notions in view of a common philosophical discourse. This would maybe change the possible role of philosophical didactics for criticizing questions about the teaching of philosophy by making intelligible conceptual choices, exploring options, and by generating genuinely philosophical research about meta-scientific visions guiding the scientific practice. One can translate "Fachdidaktik"

as "disciplinary didactics" which may be a common understanding, but this may not be helpful enough when it comes to focusing on clarifying and questioning the preoccupations and questions that underlie (historical) delineations of notions and to discussing them. Reflection on a philosophy as a form of conceptual knowledge tries to do this kind of disciplinary-didactical research and to generate a form of philosophizing in a more technical way for the purposes of philosophical teaching. Unlike pedagogical didactics, philosophical didactics are concerned with the practices and attitudes of thinking, and the two didactical perspectives should not be confused. In philosophy, the concepts that notions bring with them are not obvious, and by taking a position regarding them, we decide a great deal about what is or is not being thought about in a lesson. According to Gaiani, in philosophy we are dealing with "strange concepts" that create conceptual tensions about the way we think about something. On the one hand, it is a movement that helps the familiar to become strange and, on the other hand, what sounds strange becomes familiar.

In the book, we are faced with the delineation of "philosophy as conceptual knowledge" and the question of "a didactic by or through words". Thus, the way in which "didactics by or through concepts" shapes the notions involved in a philosophy lesson remains to be clarified. According to Gaiani, "starting from the idea of philosophy as conceptual knowledge, the teaching of philosophy has to focus on some known words in order to try to make them known through the reading and study of some important passages of Western philosophical reflection" (p. 155). How can one put together a perspective that rejects the authorial dimension of conceptual knowledge with an investigation of the history of philosophy? At the conceptual level, the question of the canon is relativized. If texts, authors, problems, and themes are figures of thought with whom we "conphilosophize" (It. "*confilosofare*" means a dialogical approach to texts and authors), that is, we think along with them, the criteria also become conceptual, that is, they concern the formative potential of what we read. Gaiani formulates it as such: "Here there is not only the study of the argumentation of others, but one is called upon to expound one's own arguments" (p. 139); "Words become centers of organizing paths in which authors retain an important role but take a back seat" (p. 171). In Gaiani's opinion, this way of teaching philosophy would have positive implications. One among them is that of giving teachers confidence and allowing them (within the limits of ministerial programs) to exploit what they know best and for which they feel most suited. The process of questioning what we think is known, criticizing the words we use, "in which we live", becomes central. What image results from this teaching of philosophy? The possibility of conceptual divergence opens up, we can conceptualize differently. As attested by Gaiani, "we are not in the situation of having to buy one product among others: either you take it as it is, or you reject it and take another. One can try to go down a different route" (p. 130). The route is one of mediation, not a choice between two or more fixed conceptual perspectives. This can also find reflection in the teaching perspective, in the possibility of creating points of convergence that conceptually organize different issues: "Teaching by or through words is an attempt at mediation that seeks to ensure the opening of channels of communication and collaboration between different teaching models

and styles of thinking, where (often fictitious) separations blur and points of convergence are highlighted" (p. 130).

The last chapter of Gaiani's book sets out to discuss objections to the author's proposed teaching of philosophy (Chapter 9). I will limit myself to two points. The first concerns what Gaiani calls an "exceptionalist" conception of philosophy, that is, the belief that the "conceptual knowledge" of philosophy is entirely special (p. 146). When philosophy thinks of itself as uniquely authorized to deal with concepts, the risk is either to fall into intellectualism, or alternatively into a certain absolutisation of actuality (p. 135). At this point, it is a matter of seeing philosophical reflection not as a necessity but as an opportunity, as an inquiry itself regarding the very concept of philosophy. Notably, Gaiani finds himself having to avoid a short-circuit that would destroy his own proposal. The chosen path seems to be to have recourse to the "school of today" to ensure the vigor of his proposal through contingency. Thus, one does not accept an approach to teaching that relies on nods or allusions because this would destroy the proposal to teaching philosophy as presented in the book, and this is because it would not suit it in the school. As Gaiani puts it:

> What is at issue here is precisely a way of teaching philosophy [...] At the level of secondary education, it is worthwhile to cultivate this reflexive side of us in anticipation of the formation of individuals capable of questioning the assumptions on the basis of which they conceive of themselves and of reality and on the basis of which they act, choose, and decide. (p. 150f.)

On the other hand, we should consider whether the author's proposals are of interest for rethinking how philosophy is taught (along with our didactics), and whether intellectual suggestions might help to develop a critical lesson in people. Gaiani argues that "didactics by or through words" would be a matter of "moving behind the aspects examined by the different theories of concepts" (p. 148) and an opportunity to be accepted, criticized, amended, or rejected (p. 156). For my part, however, I find the suggestions to be very helpful for the field of didactics, and I can derive three in particular from my discussion for philosophical teaching: placing conceptual practices at the center of the teaching activity; mapping out a training path that enables the transition to a new conception of philosophy lessons; and developing the teachers' ability to rethink didactical directives.

From a practical point of view, Gaiani wants to highlight how the proposal is not "subversive" (p. 159). It is about modifying the teachers' directive action both in terms of directives received from guidelines and those put into practice, that is, modifying certain expectations implicit in the profession. The teacher could and should be prepared to manage the spaces of freedom, build a relationship of institutional trust based also on criticism, have the ability to construct their own manual with which to teach a lesson. From my perspective, I would suggest that when it comes to a teacher's didactical preparation, it's not about figuring exactly the "way of doing philosophy in school" (p. 142) but – from the point of view of philosophical didactics – the way of thinking about philosophy lessons and about their conceptional cogency. What Gaiani calls helping "a good number of people learn how to "purify" (it. *fare pulizia*) their thoughts and

make clarity in the use of words" (p. 154) seems to me to be the right direction, and philosophical didactics would aim to virtually generate a critical image of conceptual knowledge by discussing it, thus, developing the intellectual sensitivity of teachers. This seems to me a possible figuration of philosophical didactics for conceiving teaching: finding one's own lesson through fields of conceptual tension in an intelligible manner. Nothing we encounter in philosophy can be regarded as ready-made; to accept this is to fail to traverse conceptual tensions or to give them up.

References

Gaiani, Alberto (2014) *Il pensiero e la storia. L'insegnamento della filosofia in Italia*, Padova: Cleup.

Appendix - Italian National Guidelines for teaching Philosophy at school 2010[3]

General profile and competencies

At the end of the high school (it. *liceo*), the student is aware of the significance of philosophical reflection as a specific and fundamental mode of human reasoning that, in different epochs and in different cultural traditions, constantly proposes anew the question of knowledge, of human existence and of the meaning of being and existence; the student should also acquire a knowledge as organic as possible of the nodal points of the historical development of Western thought, grasping of each author or theme treated both the link with historical-cultural context and the potentially universalistic range that each philosophy possesses.

Through knowledge of fundamental philosophical authors and problems the student has developed personal reflection, critical judgment, an aptitude for in-depth study and rational discussion, and the ability to argue a thesis, including in written form, recognizing the diversity of methods by which reason comes to know the real.

The study of the various authors and the direct reading of their texts will have enabled the students to orient themselves on the following fundamental problems: ontology, ethics and the question of happiness, the relationship between Greek philosophy and the religious traditions, the problem of knowledge, logical problems, the relationship between philosophy and other form of knowledge, particularly science, the meaning of beauty, and freedom and power in political thought, the latter node linking to the development of competences related to citizenship and the Constitution.

The student is able to use the vocabulary and categories specific to the discipline, to contextualize philosophical issues different fields of knowledge, to understand the conceptual and philosophical roots of the main currents and problems of contemporary culture, and to identify the connections between philosophy and other disciplines.

The path outlined here may be configured and expanded by the teacher also according to the peculiar characteristics of different high school paths, which may require the focus on particular themes or authors.

Specific learning objectives

Second two-years period[4]

During the two-year period, the student will become familiar with the specificity of philosophical knowledge, learning its fundamental vocabulary, and learning to understand and expound organically the ideas and systems of thought under study. The authors examined and the educational paths taken should be representative of the most significant stages of philosophical research from the origins to Hegel so as to form as unified a path as possible, around the themes indicated above. To this aim, it will be necessary to place each author in a

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[3] This is a translation of the official text published by the Italian Ministry of Education and not of the printed text at the end of Gaiani's book. (p.181ff.) Between the two texts are some small differences. Nevertheless, this may help the reader understand the background of Gaiani's reflections.

[4] During high school there are normally three years of teaching philosophy, the last three years until graduation from high school [s.f.].

systematic framework, reading their texts directly, even if only in part, so as to understand their problems step by step and critically evaluate their solutions.

In the field of ancient philosophy, the treatment of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle should be considered indispensable. Knowledge of the inquiries of the pre-Socratic philosophers and sophistry will benefit the better understanding of these authors. Examination of the developments of thought in the Hellenistic-Roman age and Neoplatonism will introduce the theme of the encounter between Greek philosophy and biblical religions.

Among the representative authors of the Middle Ages, Augustine of Hippo, framed in the context of patristic reflection, and Thomas Aquinas, to whose greater understanding it will be useful to know the development of scholastic philosophy from its origins up to the turning point imparted by the "rediscovery" of Aristotle and its crisis in the 14th century, will necessarily have to be proposed.

Regarding modern philosophy, indispensable themes and authors will be: the scientific revolution and Galileo; the problem of method and knowledge, with reference at least to Descartes, to Humean empiricism and especially Kant; modern political thought, with reference to at least one author among Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau; German idealism with special reference to Hegel. To develop these topics, it will be appropriate to properly frame the cultural horizons opened up by movements such as Humanism-Renaissance, the Enlightenment and Romanticism, examining the contribution of other authors (such as Bacon, Pascal, Vico, Diderot, with special attention towards major exponents of the modern metaphysical, ethical and logical tradition such as Spinoza and Leibniz) and enlarge the reflection to other topics (e.g., the developments in logic and scientific reflection, the new philosophical statuses of psychology, biology, physics, and philosophy of history).

Fifth year

The final year is mainly devoted to contemporary philosophy, from post-Hegelian philosophies to the present day. Within nineteenth century thought, the study of Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Marx will be indispensable, framed in the context of reactions to Hegelianism, and Nietzsche. The cultural framework of the period will have to be completed with an examination of positivism and its various reactions and discussions, as well as the most significant developments in the sciences and theories of knowledge.

The path will then continue with Nietzsche, Freud, and at least three authors or problems of twentieth-century philosophy indicative of different conceptual fields chosen from the following: (a) Husserl and phenomenology; (b) Freud and psychanalysis; (c) Heidegger and existentialism; (d) Italian neo-idealism; (e) Wittgenstein and analytic philosophy; (f) vitalism and pragmatism; (g) Christian-inspired philosophy and new theology; (h) interpretations and developments of Marxism, particularly Italian Marxism; (i) themes and problems of political philosophy; (l) developments in epistemological reflection; (m) philosophy of language; (n) philosophical hermeneutics.