

EDITORIAL

Philosophy and the sciences of mind. The importance of the interdisciplinary dialogue for the progress of both theoretical and practical scientific activities

MASSIMILIANO ARAGONA

Editor, *Dialogues in Philosophy, Mental and Neuro Sciences*
editor@crossingdialogues.com

It is with real pleasure that I present the first issue of *Dialogues in Philosophy, Mental and Neuro Sciences*. First, without sounding unusual, I want to start with a thank you to the association for intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogues “*Crossing Dialogues*”. All this could not have been done without the fundamental and enthusiastic support of its members Daniela Cardillo, Ilana Bahbout, and Alessia Pizzimenti. It is thanks to their great professional aid that this cultural adventure may now begin its history. I would also like to thank the authors that believed in this project and sent their important contributions to the journal.

Dialogues in Philosophy, Mental and Neuro Sciences is an open access online journal conceived to give a significant contribution to the developing field of philosophy of psychopathology and related disciplines (about this see my “An introduction to Philosophy of Psychopathology”, which is available online at: <http://philosophicalpsychopathology.blogspot.com>). In a landscape made of so many ultra-specialized journals it is one of the few that tries to put in connection authors working within

different specialities that are nonetheless dealing with related problems, such as those characterizing the sciences of mind. This is why we called “*dialogues*” a section dedicated to commentaries, which are open to anyone without any deadline (a distinctive characteristic of this journal). Unlike other journals, in *Dial Phil Ment Neuro Sci* dialogues are not restricted to invited authors and, above all, they can continue as long as there is something to discuss; our hope is that authors will take this chance to increase the quality of the interdisciplinary dialogue. Another characteristic of this journal is that qualitative and theoretical research is welcomed, because we think that theoretical problems are at the basis of any scientific enterprise, and that often scientific problems are only apparently empirical ones, while often they are wrong questions (due to the way the theoretical nucleus of the discipline shapes the matter and the “correct” ways to investigate it). Another point of theoretical interest is that although we value evidence based research, nevertheless we are aware of its conspicuous number of limits. One of them is the well known lower rate of

publication of negative experimental results. This is theoretically surprising because in science negative experiments are as important as those discovering something positive, because (leaving aside Popperian falsificationism) they indicate to researchers which ways are not to be pursued, or at least appear to be less promising (information of this sort are crucial in research planning). Critics of the evidence-based approach stress that this reduced number of published negative results is mainly due to theoretically-external influences of those groups of power that need to show the efficacy of their research while covering their failures. This interpretation is very often correct, but the consequence is usually the rejection of the entire scientific activity; instead of joining to this “destructive” way to advance critiques, we chose to make something concrete to reduce this bias without rejecting the entire evidence-based work. Accordingly, a section is specifically dedicated to “*negative experimental results*”. This will not resolve fraudulent cases of researchers deciding not to publish their results because they are problematic (e.g., negative results could indicate that their research program is weak, and this would lower the possibility of the program to be re-financed; or a pharmacological trial showing that a drug is inefficacious would be negatively evaluated by the pharmaceutical industry that sponsored the trial). However, any experienced researcher knows that this is only part of the problem, because even when researchers send their data to a journal, negative results are more likely to be judged negatively by peer reviewers and thus to be rejected. A section specifically dedicated to negative experimental results will thus improve the situation at this level.

Finally, we believe that the common peer-review has enhanced the quality of scientific communication, and for this reason our journal is a peer reviewed one. However, we are also conscious of an important limit of this procedure: being evaluated by peers of the same discipline, the author’s ideas are as much likely to be published as they are in line with the common view of that speciality. This is part of an implicit dogmatic way of functioning which is

normal in science and that is usually helpful (Kuhn, 1963), although sometimes it turns out to be an impediment to needed radical changes. In order to facilitate the emergence of new viewpoints a section called “*new ideas*”, deliberately excluded from the peer-review process, is here dedicated to those authors whose work follows original lines of research that otherwise would have encountered significant difficulties to be published. Whether these ideas will be forgotten as unimportant or will be acclaimed as new discoveries or important theoretical turns depends on the readers’ free judgment. What is most important here is that our journal will help authors to express their position, thus avoiding some common pre-print selective biases of the most original research activity.

This issue is opened by a fundamental work of Bill Fulford and Giovanni Stanghellini. In their paper they illustrate the rapid progresses made in the last years by the “Philosophy of Psychiatry” movement in the context of international psychiatry. Its importance for every field of psychiatry (research, clinical activity, education, service organization) is now unquestioned at the point that, they suggest, we are in the presence of a Third Revolution in contemporary psychiatry. It is a great merit of Bill Fulford’s long lasting work to have reported *values* at the heart of psychiatric debate, and the article presented herein insightfully stresses how values work in psychiatric practice, being unconsciously present in every activity (even the most “objectivist” ones, like labelling with a DSM diagnosis a state of mental sufferance). I would like to emphasize here three important aspects of Fulford and Stanghellini’s contribution: first, they show how philosophy can march together, and not against, science; accordingly, they “believe [...] that it is vital to build on rather than rejecting twentieth century advances. But we also believe that it will be essential to combine rigorous empirical methods with equally rigorous philosophical methods if we are to draw successfully on the new neurosciences” (p. 12). Secondly, after one Century of almost complete impermeability between the two major philosophical schools of

thought (namely, the Analytic and the Continental ones), Fulford and Stanghellini suggest a way to integrate these approaches in order to provide powerful tools both for psychiatric theory and practice. I am sure that this position is intriguing for many philosophers while others could be more sceptic on this possibility; both contributions, above all if opened to a dialogical interplay, would be greatly appreciated. Third, Fulford and Stanghellini clearly show that values are always operating but they emerge only when there are different values in conflict. I think that this dynamic can be generalized to other areas as well, e.g. the emergence of underlying ideological, theoretical/philosophical and methodological differences when empirical “facts” conflict with our expectations.

The second paper presented in this issue is the very interesting Juan Balbi’s epistemological discussion on the theoretical bases of constructivist psychotherapy. His contribution follows the historical development of this psychotherapeutic approach from its diversion from behaviourism and rational cognitivism. Doing so, he challenges the idea of a linear progression of discrete successive periods (first, computational - second, connectionist - third, constructivist - fourth, narrative or hermeneutical). Instead, Balbi stresses that “the so-called “Cognitive Revolution” was not initially oriented towards a computational perspective of the mind. In fact, it can be affirmed that it was constructivist in its beginnings” (p.18). This original constructivist nucleus was then obscured by the successive “informational” turn, which deviated research activities on the “Information-Processing Paradigm”. It seems that only in the last decade cognitive scientists have significantly revalued the originary study of active processes of meaning as a key point of scientific programs. Balbi shows that in constructivist psychotherapies this process is much older, thanks to the work of Vittorio Guidano who based his post-rationalist cognitive therapy on some of the most advanced contributions of the physical and biological scientists of the time as

well as on the work of leading philosophers of science and psychologists. Accordingly, he highlights the importance of some theoretical key topics in the development of this approach, such as: a) the prevalence of abstraction and tacit activity of the mind; b) the notion of self-organization and orthogenesis of complex systems; c) evolutionary epistemology; d) the analysis of intersubjectivity and the role of emotions in the organization of knowledge; e) Bowlby’s attachment theory; and f) the systemic relation between affective processes and personal identity experience. All these points are thoroughly discussed in this paper, nevertheless they are theoretically so important that any of them would merit further specific analysis. Moreover, I suppose that other researchers could be interested in enriching the discussion by noting other theoretical influences on Guidano’s thought, while psychotherapists working with different theoretical models might open an inter-theoretic discussion. Finally, although I agree with Balbi’s remark that epistemological reflection is more customary among constructivists, nevertheless I think that a similar work of disclosure of the philosophical bases of the discipline is needed in general (in the case of other psychotherapeutic schools as well as in any other operative context, biological research and neuroscience included). All this because it is still substantially valid the old statement that “if anyone thinks he can exclude philosophy and leave it aside as useless he will eventually be defeated by it in some obscure form or other. From this springs the mass of bad philosophy in psychopathological studies” (Jaspers, 1964, p.770).

The third paper is Gilio et al.’s negative experimental result showing that cortical excitability in focal epileptic subjects is, contrary to current theoretical expectations, significantly lowered than that in the non affected hemisphere as well as that of normal controls. The authors, that used repetitive Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation to test this hypothesis, clearly discuss possible practical and theoretical limits of their experiment. Nevertheless, this finding appears very interesting and if not a direct

refutation of current theory, it is yet an important contribution to re-discuss it. In particular, it suggests that neurological events of this sort should be explained taking into account the complexity of neuronal functional connections, thus introducing the important concept of “balance” between excitatory and inhibitory circuits of several areas, some of them being rather far from the epileptic focus. Another point, which should be of interest especially to philosophers, is that in this article the effect of ethical considerations in the “factual” results of the experiment is very clear. In his comment, Barrella extends the discussion by further stressing the role of complexity in neurophysiological explanation and concluding that a simple model of “defective” neuronal functions generally applied on illness of brain seems to be definitely surpassed. This conclusion, together with his example of cases of cortical hyperactivity leading to blocked functions instead than “positive” symptoms is particularly interesting when compared with some naïve psychiatric conceptualizations of “positive” psychiatric symptoms as due to brain hyperfunction and “negative” symptoms as due to lesion or impaired function.

Finally, de Marchis and Zaratti’s new idea explores the possible effects of the new communication style introduced by the massive use of the Internet Web.

Their work starts from sociological and anthropological research suggesting that man could have entered a “Third Phase” of his cognitive history. On this basis they question how this could influence not only the superficial communication style but rather the way people constructs their sense of being-themselves and of internal coherence through time that characterize personal identity.

They conclude on the possible effects of this on the emergence of psychopathology; it is particularly interesting because it clearly suggests a new field of research for psychopathologists and, above all, in doing this it challenges the appropriateness of old methods, thus inviting to a methodological discussion. Future research will probably tell us whether this scenario is prefiguring the world in which we will effectively live in the next future or if, on the opposite, the essential parts of human feeling and thinking will not be changed so dramatically.

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