

DIALOGUES

Reading Balbi: theoretical notes

RENATO PROIETTI, ANTONELLA PUZELLA

ATC, Association for Cognitive Therapy;
“Multiverso” Psychotherapy Centre, Rome, Italy
email: antonellapuzella@gmail.com

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In the clear and exhaustive paper of Juan Balbi (Balbi, 2008) the development of the post rationalistic model of psychotherapy is well synthesized, starting from its origins in behaviour therapy and cognitivism. From an epistemological point of view, Balbi emphasizes both the steady reference to the development of neurosciences deeply influencing the elaboration of this new theoretical framework for psychotherapy, and the noteworthy congruence with the so-called “motor theories” of the mind, that put the individual at the centre of his own way of constructing knowledge, going beyond the traditional representationist paradigm. Every single act of knowledge moves from concrete problems met at the interface with “the world that is there” (Mead, 1996); it is built up by means of the perceptive and emotive structures and explained by means of upper cognitive faculties, but it is never endowed with a univocal sense or information.

Furthermore, the role in the construction of knowledge of both emotions and language is well defined: perhaps the paper leaves in shadow, when the neurophysiologic studies go towards the isolation of the single elements, the functional, circular relationship between the tacit and the explicit domains of knowledge. There is

a little doubt or not at all that, as shown by Trevarthen (1998), the emotions – genetic equipment of the species – play a fundamental role in regulating every mental activity even before the ontogenetic appearance of language; nevertheless, the appearance and the progressive use of the spoken language allows further regulations and developments transforming the “self awareness” in the more and more complex “self consciousness”, rendering possible inter-subjective changes unknown to other animal species (Eccles, 1989).

It is possible to state, in a hypothetical hierarchical organization, that the emotions are the first *immediate* level of acquaintance: only in a subsequent moment the upper cognitive faculties allow us to recognize, modulate and render consistent with our own coherence, in a semantic narrative re-ordering the emotional experience. We cannot imagine a level without the other (Polanyi, 1966)

This way of conceiving the reciprocal regulation between emotion and cognition leads toward a therapeutic approach that particularly emphasizes the emotions of the patient and how these constraint his/her thoughts, sense of self and personal history with the aim of preserving a full and continuous sense of personal identity, recollecting in this the constructivist heritage of Heinz von Foerster (1987) making own the theories of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1980) on the biological organisms as autopoietic structures and drawing cognitive sciences, through the comparison with the concept of *narrative identity* of Paul Ricoeur (1990), near the field of the hermeneutics. The most tightening innovation introduced in the

field of the cognitive psychology is however the renouncement to any persuasive role of the therapist that, remaining “the expert of the matter”, has not any prompt delivery solution or technique for the overcoming of the symptoms, but helps the patient leaving from the focusing of its emotional world, widening his/her narrative abilities in terms of flexibility and articulation.

It can be asserted, in conclusion, that the constructivist development in cognitive sciences, going beyond any old-fashioned dualism, puts into practice the complementarity of the scientific approach in first and third person: this approach does not renounce to scientific issues, but at the same time conceives the therapist-patient relation as one who must be focused “step by step” on the patient. This issue recalls the ethical objective of psychotherapy, always in agreement with von Foerster (1987) who remembers the need for promoting an increase in choice capability of the patients rather than one in control of their behaviour.

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