

# (Un)learning to *be*. The adoption and transmission of knowledge, from their ontological/epistemological implications to their political consequences

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## Introduction

This article aims to provide a framework for the thematic axis of this issue of the journal through a reflection that, based on ontological considerations, may show an epistemological overview that offers a position from which researchers, professors, and teachers, may revise critically their links with their knowledge, especially considering the methodological options through which they generate and transmit knowledge. These options can only be vitally conditioned by ontological-existential assumptions that are often adopted uncritically, in a maneuver that both threatens the supposed objectivity claimed to be sought and has direct repercussions on considerations of the political role assumed by *the truth* and *its transmission*.

## The *truth*

Educating involves – traditionally – transferring some knowledge, which is somehow equivalent to transmitting a *truth*. The fact that in this very moment thousands of educators and researchers around the world may be transmitting or applying the same theory regardless of their particular geographic, political and social contexts is possible precisely because it is assumed that there are *truths* that go beyond their transmitters (or repeaters), their receivers, and their contexts of enunciation/discovery. Thus, education would seem to be an enterprise in which educators, through a privileged access to a set of *truths*, would then make them known, explain them, teach them like missionaries full of a fervent evangelizing faith, sent to the four corners of the world to give witness of the *truth* and the way to have access to it.

The institutionalization of education, which brought with it the consolidation and development of modern States, may overshadow the fact that at a not very remote moment in history, which very probably came to an end in a process characterized by violence, there was not a truth. *Truths* are not anything as universal as we have been presenting them: to the contrary,

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such universality is the result of the violent and totalitarian imposition of a will and a way to signify *life* and the *world* over others. Wars of conquest and civil wars blend into the very history of mankind, its empires, its nations and institutions, so much so that in that opposition between incompatible wills Hegel (1968, 2010) – and all the historical materialist library that rests on his shoulders – saw the very *engine* of *History*. This philosophy of history – which may very probably be one of the most *totalitarian* ones generated by Western philosophy, in the sense that it *totally* encompasses and exhausts the explanation and definition of *being*, *history*, and *life* – mobilizes the course of events in a teleological scheme whose realization is *a priori true*, and *advances* thanks to these dialectical oppositions that are always resolved through the overcoming negation of a stage by another, in an unstoppable march ahead (Gialdino, Mallimaci, Reyes Mate, 2018).<sup>1</sup> Beyond the universalization of the dialectical opposition between ways of *signifying* and *inhabiting* the world, our *History* is confused in effect with the violent step implied in the triumph of one side over the other. It is a rare modern State which has not had at least one bloody civil war, which denotes that there were *at least* two perspectives that interpreted differently the aim of the State, that there was no place for both of them at the same time, and that through bloodshed one of them prevailed and the other was, if not exterminated, at least subdued (Gialdino, 2019a). Sooner or later, the winning sides will *invent* the State, thus universalizing the partiality they pursued through the fight they won thanks to the vagaries of war. This does not take away from the immediate bio-political consequences stemming from the legitimacy with which the winners impose their *universals* for the control, the government, and the *use* they make of the world and the people who inhabit it (Gialdino, 2021a).

For the time being, we must understand that the *universalization* of a type of theory and its transmission through education can only be the result of the *universalization*, at the same time, of one possible and accidental way of learning about, understanding and giving meaning to the experiences through which mankind has created abstract concepts such as *world*, *normality*, *justice*, *truth*, *progress*, *history*, *good*, and so on.

We mention the *phenomenological* aspect because, even before the concepts, the hegemonic education that is supposed to represent a content of *true* knowledge implies discarding a huge multiplicity of phenomena that affect consciousness but are not regarded as linked to the *truth*, as is the case of the states generated by dreaming, art, love, faith, feeling one with the Earth, and so many other experiences that are not admitted to participate in the select group of that which is linked to *the universal truth*, its production and its *re*-production.

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<sup>1</sup> Marxism would add that a *superstructure* through which the bourgeoisie universalizes its values – the State, *grosso modo* – could at least slow down and delay such dialectic negation, which is why it is necessary that the working class arrives at its greatest material and ideological contradiction vis-à-vis the capitalist mode of production so there can be a violent dialectic revolutionary negation, the only way in which history can *advance*.

## Universalization

Although this is an ontological and epistemological discussion, the result of the imposition of *one type* of truth that is *universalized* can always be seen in its pragmatic consequences; that is, in the outcomes this truth imprints on the bodies of people and the world that they inhabit, beyond the fact that *body* and *world* are themselves concepts inherited from a very concrete tradition of thought. It is worth keeping in mind that the split between transcendent subjectivity and immanence, or in other words of the *self* from *being* and/or *nature*, responds to one of the most specific characteristics of Western thought, which through such a *tragic* dualism manages to conceive of *itself* independently from any exteriority, when, in the case of the deeper *Americas*, such a jarring split of life could not take place because there was not nor was there any point in reflecting on *being* from an alienness to that *existence* in which they *were* already *being* (Kusch, 1962).

It so happens that in order to *know* a truth *other* than the hegemonic one it is necessary, at the same time, to abandon one's concepts, or to give them a different *use*.

Let us consider that the *universalization* of a *true* theoretical background will never be something *given*. *Universalization* is the (hard to imagine as not traumatic) result of a process of denial of that which can be thought as *given*, and this is precisely what diversity and difference are: an *otherness*. Universality is therefore a point of arrival reached by *negating* diversity and difference (Santos, 2008).

Thus, an important element is to understand education not as the transmission of a set of truths but of methods. This would imply that it would be the adoption of a method (or diversity, or its denial) what could lead each person or group to arrive not to an already given and eternal truth, but to one situated in a *particular* context and trajectory.

The ontological scheme, so characteristic of the Judeo-Christian Platonic legacy, implies that truths and their transmission can only be activities ruled by the strict objections demanded by *reproduction* and *repetition*. This is because, taken into the field of pedagogy, this dualistic ontological position cannot but make that *true* content be repeated, a repetition that is legitimized precisely and circularly, because this content is *true*. The same thing happens with contemporary science, which despite its empiricist aspirations takes once again the place of the Platonic philosopher or the member of the clergy: the truth is *one*, and in order to have access to it one must meet the demands that its *knowledge* knows and reproduces. Thus, epistemology ends up as a dimension in which any *creative* exercise is impossible, in the sense that playing with *what is true* does not imply genuinely a *productive* but a *reproductive* task. This must be interpreted in the sense that the knowledge we are talking about rests on an axiomatic foundation that is accepted without revision and on which one can build theories, which are those out of which it is possible to *formalize* phenomena. It is very important to understand that *theories are not constructed based on experiences, but that in order to have anything that may be called "experien-*

ce" a theory is required (Gialdino, 2019b). This implies that the abstract content of a theory will always be previous to its empirical contents, and thus not even in the most rational laboratory is it possible to access the *being in its pure objectivity*. This constitutes one of the richest aspects of Kant (1976) and his influence on phenomenology: one does not have experience passively, but constructs it *intentionally* based on *a priori knowledge*. In this sense, theories cannot but grind always the same grain in a scheme in which they will always be limited by the axiomatic and/or a priori basis upon which all the following constructions and experiences, no matter how *novel* or *empirical* they claim to be, rest.

Faced with, for example, a *miracle*, in the sense of that which science cannot explain, a *hegemonic scientific mentality* could scarcely think that it is *really* a divine manifestation, but will assume that the phenomenon could not be understood *yet* with the knowledge available to science, but that such an explanation does nevertheless not only *exist* but exists respecting and according to other scientific laws which he or she will never be able to contradict. A religious spirit, on the other hand, will hardly be converted to a faith by the presence of a *miracle* (otherwise we could not explain why there are so many millions of believers, except if one thinks, as some do, that *love and/or life* are themselves a miracle), but that experience – which at an empirical level is identical for the two theoretical structures of our example – will rather ratify and confirm that faith that did not need *miracles* to believe, but that in the presence of one the person cannot but see his or her transcendent intuitions confirmed. It is not the experience, but the *theoretical* structure through which that experience is *formalized*, what generates and reproduces *truths* and *knowledge*. The reproduction of knowledge is, for the same reason, essential to any scheme in which we are supposed to transmit and know what is *true* (Gialdino, 2021b). To give just one example, exam grades of children and adults can hardly be understood without this aspect that links what is *true* to its *reproduction*, finding there the value pursued by a possible and hegemonic way to do *education*: in it, what the student repeats will always matter more than what he or she really says. Thus, and no matter what one thinks about *eternal truths*, it is the people themselves who, through repetition and despite their finitude, end up perpetuating ideas inherited through the centuries, emulating *really* the eternity of the theories that are reproduced, in this way, *ad infinitum*.

To this we owe the inescapable influence of ontology not only on epistemology, but also (or for the same reason) on politics. When national States present themselves as essentially *true* elements, all their institutions, from the educational to the repressive ones, will operate obeying the universalization of those notions of *justice*, *progress* and so many other *universal values* upon which that strange and abstract concept of *public good* rests. The liturgy and the ornamental aspect of that eternity worshipped in the classical model with ceremonies and monuments managed, beyond modernity, to adapt perfectly to this novel invention of the State and its human institutions.

Thus, when phenomenology comes and proposes to us an *epoché* (Husserl, 1986) based essentially on the suspension of judgement and *natural* attitudes through which we signify our experiences and our *world*, it enables a genuinely philosophical reflection which involves an exercise based on regulations that demand calling everything into doubt and not accepting or considering as valid any statement that has not been argued satisfactorily. Evidently, this cannot but expose its side to creativity, since through these Cartesian doubt exercises we only discover how many *truths* we have held as true, beyond the convictions that support them. Beginning to ask questions is thus the beginning of the end of *repetition and recreation*. In this sense, the question of who is *learning* from an eventual transmitter of knowledge can never be regarded as a nuisance or a display of ignorance, since these questions, coming from an uninitiated consciousness, are precisely those that can call into question the models of ideas *from the outside* of these models. Such an outside look would thus be capable of placing itself at a vantage point from which to observe the axioms, assumptions and limitations of the theoretical models of ideas that no one doubts anymore. Educators often complain about how, with so many questions, students frequently “don’t let us advance with the class”, and forget that perhaps we should ask ourselves if we are indeed *advancing* when we follow a program made *a priori* and which is nothing but a mere transmission that reproduces knowledge often originated in social, political and historic contexts alien to that of our students.

These considerations would call into doubt the position of privilege held by educators over their students, since what is *true* is not confused with a background of abstract universal doctrines which are true *a priori*, whose truth will never be doubted and that will be transferred uncritically, but precisely with a *particularity* from which the same content of ideas may be called into doubt and therefore *actualized, criticized, appropriated*. By the way, we cannot overlook the fact that an exercise of transmission of knowledge in which there is no space for the *doubt* – that is, for *philosophy* – of the addressees of that knowledge, can never genuinely be anything but a unilateral transference of a totalitarian doctrine that must be accepted and revered just as it was presented, and before which questions and refusal to acknowledge can be immediately associated with concepts – of immediate political links – such as *abnormality, insubordination, rebellion, illness, danger*, and so on.

## Otherness

The phenomenological approach – upon which the qualitative methodology does not in vain ontologically and epistemologically rest (Vasilachis, 2009) – would then be not only the one that must be taken into account by the addressees of the knowledge that one wishes to obtain and/or transmit, but also that which allows the researcher/transmitter to call into question, through those outside and different views, the ideas that one wished to obtain and/or reproduce.

*Ethics must precede any ontology* (Levinas, 1995), which in this work leads to several levels. On an ontological level, this means that before any conception on the being of the world and

its inhabitants, and under the risk of totalitarian violence, there must be the *other in his/her difference*, a difference that will always be with respect to a totality from which he/she must stay away and signify without appeal or in contradiction to the categories and identities totalized in the system: without erased or imposed identities, the *being* must be conceived negatively as a participative endeavor of patient recollection, without dogmas and based on respect for all kinds of diversity, which means that no way of inhabiting and signifying may be imposed over others. Totalitarian ontologies, by reserving a pre-established space for identities of othernesses that thus lose any *difference*, are de-legitimized.

This operation also requires an epistemological interpretation of the priority of ethics over ontology, which will lead us to a scenario in which knowledge must be measured in regard not to their own paradigm and/or world of life, but to its capacity to be modified and corrected by the difference of otherness. From this point of view, a *true* discourse will be that which is porous and open to the participation and correction of everything that cannot but be rudely totalized and invisibilized in any abstract discourse.

At a methodological level, truth must be sought and reproduced, in this line that prioritizes otherness over totalities, by appealing to the active participation of the actors of the processes being researched and/or taught, in a dynamic that prioritizes *participation*, in its *difference*, of otherness, so that the so-called *truths* become confused with processes ready to be open to the most varied and diverse perspectives. The other side of the participation of otherness and its difference in the construction of *knowledge* and *truths* is political, since it is always through *knowledge* and *truths* that public policies are oriented and institutions based on *normalizing* ideals are reproduced.

Otherness becomes for the same reason an essential element for epistemology and pedagogy because through that previousness to any ontological narrow-mindedness, and in its difference, it becomes the sphere from which one can call into question a set of knowledge and not just on its outside layer, because a well-oriented doubt can penetrate to the core of the set of truths that support each other to reach all of them with its uncertainty. Thus, otherness allows us to call into doubt the ontology from which epistemologies stem because, precisely, that other is what is not encompassed by the totality when it resists it with its difference, and for this reason it can contest it, defy it and/or expose its arbitrariness, its age, its limit, its error, its violence (Levinas, 1961).

Since it is transmitted, knowledge can run into *othernesses* that do not share those ontological totalities, and that through doubt and particularities can even make their own *teacher* doubt. And if that teacher is a genuine seeker of *truth*, he or she cannot help but wonder at the realization that he/she had been preaching and multiplying a doctrine that, even if it was not wrong and violent, did make him/her at least a transmitter of a totalitarian universalization. Thus, only the *others*, in their *difference*, can be the real teachers.

And so they will be because no one can be sure of having found *the truth*, but we can all be certain that something we believed to be true was *false*, and the falseness of our knowledge can hardly come from it, but we need a *difference* not totalized that, from the outside, manages to penetrate and break the totality from which totalitarian thoughts and policies are self-complacently submitted and reproduced.

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