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Martin DOMINIK*

Interpretive injustice

The moral dimension of understanding

Abstract: This article explores the moral dimension of understanding, focusing on the concept of interpretive injustice. Drawing on work on epistemic injustice, it examines how language and interpretive practices reflect and perpetuate dominance and oppression. Two forms of interpretive injustice are defined: ignorance and misinterpretation. Ignorance arises from a lack of engagement with minority hermeneutical resources, while misinterpretation involves the misattribution of meanings by dominant groups. The article argues that interpretive injustice causes both epistemic and moral harm. It also challenges the emphasis on macro-level power dynamics, suggesting that interpretive injustice can also be done to members of dominant groups. Interpretive injustice need not be systematic to constitute a moral wrong. The refined definition of the notion recognises that interpretive injustice occurs when an utterance is interpreted using the hermeneutical resources of a different sociolinguistic group despite relevant differences between these resources.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Epistemic injustice, Interpretive injustice, Virtuous hermeneutics, Hermeneutical injustice

Introduction

Every literate English-speaking person understands this sentence. It is such a simple task that a child can do it. However, if this seemingly unproblematic practice is thoroughly examined, it turns out that it raises, among others, moral questions.

Meaning is a product of social interaction. It is a matter of certain social institutions, and its defining inferences are at least implicit in a language game. The foundation of the language game is a public practice. Public interactions of agents are saturated with power relations; language and interpretation make no exceptions. There is a working of power in interpretive practices. Discourse is intertwined with relations of dominance and oppression and can be unjust and harmful.

In this article, I discuss the moral dimension of understanding. I draw on works by Fricker, Medina, Pohlhaus, and others on epistemic

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injustice, especially *hermeneutical injustice*, and apply them to interpretation. I am more concerned with hermeneutics as an art of understanding and not so much with the transfer of knowledge, so I make a particular shift in perspective. I focus on injustice that may occur even in cases where there is no intended or unintended transfer of knowledge, for example, when the speaker asks a question or lies. To avoid confusion and obscuring the difference, I use the term *interpretive injustice*. However, I believe that it can be conceived as a hermeneutical injustice in a broad sense of the term.

The article is structured as follows.

In the first section of the article, I explore the concept of hermeneutical injustice, a type of epistemic injustice that involves the marginalization of social experiences due to a lack of appropriate linguistic or conceptual resources. Initially focusing on Fricker's insights, I delve into the expanded framework that includes hermeneutical domination, hermeneutical ignorance, and the structural factors contributing to this form of injustice. I will examine how hermeneutical injustice operates across various domains. My exploration emphasizes the practical and experiential consequences of hermeneutical injustice. I discuss how the denial of epistemic trust leads to a lack of self-trust, affecting autonomy and self-worth. Beyond its epistemic ramifications, I argue that hermeneutical injustice is fundamentally a moral transgression, disrupting the core of individuals' identities. Drawing a connection to Young's conceptualization of oppression, I explore how hermeneutical injustice parallels the dynamics of oppression by curtailing one's capacities and embodying forms of cultural imperialism and marginalization.

In the second section, I aim to expand the considerations to the field of hermeneutics. My investigation begins with an examination of interpretation within the dominant framework. While maintaining the perspective of the wronged party, I wish to highlight an additional dimension, not extensively explored by Fricker or others, called interpretive injustice. I preliminarily define the notion and consider two types of it: ignorance and misinterpretation. Ignorance occurs when the dominant group lacks hermeneutical resources, either unconsciously or deliberately disregarding those of the minority. It manifests as an inability to comprehend the inferences and implications of concepts used by the minority, rendering them void for the interpreter. On the other hand, misinterpretation occurs when the concepts are present in the dominant group's sources but carry different content and connotations. This leads to the attribution of meanings not intended by the speaker, causing frustration, and undermining the speaker's subjectivity and recognition within the community. The resultant harm mirrors that of hermeneutical injustice, encompassing both epistemic and moral dimensions.

Later, I explore the aspects of interpretive injustice, challenging the focus on domination in the context of oppression. Contrary to the prevailing literature, I argue that both epistemic and moral harm can occur even among members of a dominant group. By expanding and generalizing the concept of interpretive injustice, my aim is to apply it to general hermeneutics, not solely within linguistic interactions involving dominant and marginalized groups. I posit that employing one's inferential background, diverging from the speaker's, is epistemically non-virtuous, hindering knowledge acquisition and harming the speaker, regardless of her group affiliation. I emphasize that interpretive injustice need not be systematic to constitute a moral wrong, urging attention to micro-level power dynamics. The refined definition of the notion acknowledges that interpretive injustice occurs when an utterance is interpreted using hermeneutical resources from a different socio-linguistic group, despite relevant differences between these resources.

1. Hermeneutical injustice

1. 1. Description and scope

As Fricker pointed out, there are different kinds of epistemic injustices (Fricker 2007, 6). Among these, the hermeneutical injustice stands out. It is the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding because of hermeneutical marginalisation (Fricker 2007, 158). The marginalised group cannot express their experience due to a deficit in hermeneutical (linguistic) resources. They simply lack concepts. For instance, Fricker highlights how women faced difficulties expressing specific unpleasant experiences before the concept of *sexual harassment* was established. According to her, hermeneutical injustice prevents social understanding and deprives the subject of self-understanding (Fricker 2007, 149).

Other scholars have built upon Fricker's framework and extended it because it was considered too limited (Dotson 2012, 25). One significant extension is the exploration of hermeneutical domination. In this context, the dominant group imposes a supposedly collective understanding on everyone (Catala 2015, 428). The failure of dominant knowers to learn and incorporate marginalised epistemic resources has also been scrutinised (Posey 2021, 46). This investigation seeks to understand how dominant groups neglect or dismiss valuable insights from marginalised communities. Scholars have questioned whether hermeneutical marginalisation is a consequence of injustice rather than its cause, diverging from Fricker's account (Catala 2015, 429). Epistemic exclusion has also become a focal point of research (for example, Petherbridge 2023, 41), defined by Dotson

(2012, 24) as an infringement on the epistemic agency of knower that reduces her ability to participate in the epistemic community. The link between hermeneutical injustice and the theory of recognition has also been explored, especially the relation between epistemic injustice and withholding mutual recognition of the subjects.¹ Hermeneutical injustice is viewed not merely as an isolated occurrence but as connected to broader dynamics of power and privilege in society.

In addition to hermeneutical lacunas, scholars have examined other situations. One such scenario involves the deliberate exclusion of the progressive vocabulary used by a subaltern group from broader collective epistemic schemes (Giladi 2023, 138). This form of exclusion can be termed hermeneutical ignorance (Medina 2017, 43), suggesting a wilful or active disregard for the linguistic and conceptual contributions of marginalised communities (Pohlhaus 2012, 729; Medina 2013, 39; Posey 2021). In the words of May (2014), this practice creates a situation where the minority, or subaltern group, essentially speaks into a void. Their expressions, experiences, and language are sidelined or dismissed, leading to a significant gap in understanding and social recognition. This aspect highlights the importance of acknowledging not only the absence of certain concepts but also their exclusion.

Hermeneutical injustice is often attributed to structural factors (Fricker 2017, 54), as public practice and institutions can systematically disregard and invalidate the epistemic labour of certain groups and cultivate ignorance around them (Sertler 2023, 173). The roots of hermeneutical injustice are intertwined with and reinforced by relations of dominance and oppression (Pohlhaus 2017, p. 16). This form of injustice is seen as a manifestation of power and privilege, perpetuating social inequalities (Tuana 2017, 126).

The practical implications of hermeneutical injustice extend across various fields. For example, individuals dealing with illness often experience hermeneutical marginalisation (Fricker 2017, 58). Health providers, acting as authorities in their field, may unintentionally cause epistemic injustice (Steward and Freeman 2023, 304). This can occur when their perspectives and interpretations overshadow or dismiss the experiences of patients. Hermeneutical resources, including the knowledge and perspectives of indigenous communities, are frequently marginalised (Petherbridge 2023, 48). The experiences of asylum seekers are often inadequately understood (Sertler 2023, 174). This lack of accurate understanding can have significant consequences for the rights and well-being of these individuals. Hermeneutical injustice can also manifest within family settings. Specific experiences, such as marital rape, may be subject to hermeneutical injustice before the recognition and acknowledgement of such issues in broader discourse (Sullivan 2017, 206). Parents and teachers, too, can reproduce

ignorance and contribute to the perpetuation of injustice within educational settings (Medina 2013, 146). Even within the academic discipline of philosophy, there may be contributions to epistemic injustice (Pohlhaus 2017, 14). This could involve the neglect or marginalisation of specific philosophical perspectives, particularly those arising from individuals or groups traditionally underrepresented in the field. Experts may contribute to this injustice by ignoring or blocking inquiries into marginalised experiences.

Note also that some struggles and forms of injustice remain publicly invisible, yet they persist (Honneth 2003, 120). Generally, the oppression and following injustice may be based on (perceived) race, sex, gender, origin, class, age and others.

Hermeneutical injustice aligns with Young's conceptualisation of oppression, manifesting in two distinct dimensions (Young 2011, 40ff). In its most general sense, oppression curtails individuals' capacity to develop and exercise their inherent capabilities while stifling the expression of their needs, thoughts, and feelings. This parallels the dynamics of hermeneutical injustice, where those affected find themselves impeded from articulating their worldview, expelling them from useful participation in social life. Secondly, hermeneutical injustice embodies a form of cultural imperialism. The dominant meanings embedded in mainstream discourse act as agents of exclusion, rendering the perspectives of marginalised individuals invisible (Young 2011, 59). Their worldviews are overshadowed and, in effect, suppressed by the prevailing cultural norms. This dual impact underscores the nature of hermeneutical injustice within the broader context of oppression.

1. 2. Moral and epistemic harm

The ramifications of epistemic injustice, including its hermeneutical variant, extend beyond theoretical concerns to impact on individuals at a practical and experiential level. While epistemic injustice can lead to legal, economic, or political injustice (Nielsen and Utsler 2023, 75), my primary focus is on the harm it inflicts at an epistemic and moral level.

Epistemic injustice has bad consequences for the self and others, but mainly, it is characterised by its intrinsically undignifying nature (Congdon 2017, 243). It is important to stress that “injustice” in theoretical language is experienced as social injury by the affected (Honneth 2003, 114). This emphasises that the harm is not merely an abstract or conceptual concern but is rooted in the lived experiences of those who encounter obstacles to their recognition and understanding. The core of the problem is not theoretical but primarily practical.

The epistemic transgression encompasses, among other things, the omission of novel knowledge. The knower's vantage point significantly shapes both the content and the manner in which knowledge is acquired (Tuana 2017, 126). Those belonging to marginalised groups often possess unique insights or perspectives distinct from the dominant group. Failing to recognise and incorporate these perspectives creates a hermeneutical gap, limiting the potential breadth of knowledge accessible to society.

The individual subjected to epistemic injustice suffers, as a knower, harm in their rational capacity—an essential facet of human value (Fricker 2007, 45). This harm manifests in the form of silencing, misunderstanding, or marginalisation (Medina, 2017, 43). Individuals from marginalised groups are frequently treated as lesser beings (Fricker 2007, 136) and unfairly characterised as intellectually inferior (Medina 2013, 27). Such depictions not only perpetuate prejudice but also lead marginalised individuals to internalise negative attributes wrongly ascribed to them, fostering a negative impact on their self-perception and self-trust (Honneth 2023, 19). This erosion of confidence in one's own cognitive abilities represents a diminution of the individual's autonomy and self-worth.

Hermeneutical injustice transcends mere epistemic ramifications; it is fundamentally a moral transgression. Its impact reverberates through the core of individual's identities, disrupting the very constitution of subjectivity. Engulfed in this injustice, individuals grapple for recognition, striving to assert their existence in the socio-epistemic landscape.²

Hermeneutical injustice is harm done to the flourishing of the human organism (Sullivan 2017, 205). The moral gravity of this injustice is compounded by its involvement in a form of epistemic misrecognition, perpetuating wrongful assessments of individual's knowledge and experiences (Mikkola, 2023, 199). Furthermore, it represents a rejection of the status of full partnership in social interactions (Fraser 2003, 29). The refusal to accord recognition becomes an act of disrespect that inflicts harm (Honneth 1995, 131). This denial diminishes individuals' agency, impeding their ability to fully participate in and contribute to the collective construction of meaning within society. In extreme instances, hermeneutical injustice can lead to what is termed “hermeneutical death” (Medina 2017, 41).

2. Interpretive injustice

Fricker and other scholars associate hermeneutical injustice with the experiences of marginalised groups. In public spaces, these groups encounter oppression manifested through acts such as being overlooked, denied space, or having their voices dismissed. They frequently lack access to key institutions where shared meanings are constructed, ranging from

academic and media realms to political arenas. Marginalised individuals are often unjustly perceived as intellectually inferior, stripped of authority, and deemed less credible based on characteristics like background, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, or health.

Hermeneutical injustice, at its core, inflicts both epistemic and moral harm. The harm is evident on both ends of the relationship—the speaker and the listener. For the listener, the loss of knowledge is apparent, as they miss out on understanding the lived experiences of a significant segment of society, hindering their ability to collaborate effectively. The more impactful consequences are borne by the oppressed, and they create a basis of investigation for contemporary literature (Medina 2013, 3). Hermeneutical injustice engenders a stifling silence, impeding the expression and comprehension of their experiences. This forces the marginalised to expend significantly more energy and resources merely to articulate their thoughts (Posey 2021, 2). The disproportionate epistemic burden is akin to deprivation of resources, a scenario where one is unable to communicate crucial aspects of their existence. This limitation extends to self-awareness, creating a situation where doubt creeps in about one's cognitive abilities, eroding the fundamental aspects of human capacity. This self-doubt is exacerbated when others dismiss one's perspectives, diminishing one's subjectivity and relegating them to the status of a less rational or complete person. Exclusion from the broader social practices of meaning-making and sharing denies them the ability to contribute their experiences to shared resources, rendering those experiences non-existent for the dominant group. In essence, they are stripped of the agency and capabilities afforded to full subjects within the community.

2. 1. Distinction and extension

Fricker's focus is on the subject's inability to articulate their experience due to a deficiency in hermeneutical resources. Put simply; the person lacks access to appropriate words because her situation lacks significance to the dominant group, which controls the discourse. There exists a linguistic void, such as the absence of a concept like *sexual harassment*. However, I want to examine different situations. Consider a scenario in which there is no hermeneutical lacuna: the speaker has an appropriate concept that is available in the language of a particular group. In this case, the members of the group have modified a word that already exists in the language, introducing semantic changes by adding or removing certain inferences. This is not unimaginable; take, for example, the concept of *demagogue*, originally devoid of negative connotations.

When the speaker articulates a sentence incorporating a reformed concept, her intention is to convey content including novel inferences.

However, these new inferences, and consequently the content of the concept, may not be universally accepted by all language users. If the interpreter is not from the same group and applies her own background inferences, she fails to grasp the intended content. In this situation, it is not a deficiency in resources on the part of the speaker but a distortion on the part of the interpreter. The listener misses an opportunity to gain new information and understand the true nature of things.

A parallel situation arises when members of a particular group introduce a new concept. Consider, for example, the term *sexual harassment* coined by feminist groups. In the not-too-distant past, if the interpreter was a member of the dominant group, perhaps a man, and applied his own background inferences (or lack of them), he would fail to grasp the intended content.

In the scenario of inducing a semantic change, initial misunderstandings may occur, which could be viewed as interesting phenomena rather than a problem causing harm. However, consider a situation where one group holds dominance in a society and opposes the linguistic change of shared resources. This dominant group refuses to accept the reformed meaning in general public discourse, using its power to prevent members of the minority group from expressing their experiences. This can be described as wilful hermeneutical ignorance (Pohlhaus 2012, 715). In this context, an alternative schematisation is available but is deliberately ignored by the dominant group. Simultaneously, through this practice, the dominant group ensures the preservation of its position of power. The minority is unilaterally reinterpreted and incorporated into the "correct" framework, with its life experiences acknowledged only at the margins of society as something odd. This situation may be a correlate of hermeneutical dominance (Catala 2015, 425) or epistemic exclusion (Dotson 2012, 24).

In what follows, let us consider a more straightforward situation where we are not dealing with a nascent concept. The inferences of the concept are presumed to be already fixed within a particular (marginalised) discourse.

For instance, consider a society where a dominant group shaping the mainstream discourse is inherently rational and atheistic. In this context, imagine a member of a religious subgroup discussing concepts like grace and virtue in an attempt to convey understanding and encourage conversion. The majority, interpreting within their dominant framework devoid of religious inferences, might fail to grasp the inferences related to tranquillity, God, and their consequences from the speaker's perspective. As a result, the intended information would not be effectively communicated. If someone from the majority attempted to summarise the speech, even with good intentions, the content would likely be significantly altered. It

becomes challenging to provide an accurate account of religious discourse in purely secular terms. This alteration of the original message could lead to frustration for the speaker, who may feel unrecognised and unaccepted within the community, potentially fostering group hostility.

The instances of interpretive injustice described involve an epistemic harm akin to that of epistemic injustices. In the last scenario, the interpreter misses out on new information, irrespective of its truth value. The crucial point is that the assessment of the veracity of the information can only occur after the utterance is understood. Even if a statement is false, it still conveys information, and the interpreter cannot dismiss it without due consideration.

Moreover, the situation encompasses a moral wrong. The marginalised utterer is effectively prevented from effectively communicating her experience or beliefs. She is excluded from the essential practices of meaning-making and meaning-sharing. This exclusion leads to the perception of the speaker as less rational, as the interpreter applies her own inferences that she deems more sensible. This denial of alternative perspectives constitutes a moral wrong against the speaker, impeding her from being a fully participating member of the human cooperative community. The failure to appreciate her point of view during deliberation can result in psychological harm and undermine her recognition within the community. This diminishing of subjectivity and the treatment of the utterer as an object are morally objectionable and constitute an injustice.

2. 2. Preliminary definition and forms

A preliminary definition of interpretive injustice, based on the above considerations and examples, can be articulated as follows: It occurs when the expression of an individual from a marginalised group is interpreted using dominant hermeneutical resources, even in the presence of significant differences between the resources of the dominant and marginalised groups.

This conceptualisation implies at least two distinct types of interpretive injustice: ignorance and misinterpretation.

Ignorance refers to scenarios where the hermeneutical resources of the dominant group have deficiencies. Conversely, within the discourse of marginalised groups, resources are available but are disregarded. Ignorance can manifest unconsciously, stemming from inherent blindness, and may even be institutionally protected. Alternatively, it can be a deliberate choice to overlook and consciously remain unaware of the hermeneutical resources of the minority (cf. Pohlhaus 2012, 729). In interpretation, it manifests itself as ignorance of all the inferences and implications of the used notion. It renders the concept void and nonsensical for the interpreter.

Misinterpretation differs from ignorance in that, even within the hermeneutical sources of the dominant group, the concepts are present. However, these concepts carry different content, inferential connections, and connotations. In the case of this form of interpretive injustice, the application of majority resources to a speech from the minority results in the interpreter attributing meanings or commitments that do not align with the speaker's inferential framework. Notably, the speaker did not intend to convey the interpretations ascribed to her. When this practice becomes systematic, speakers experience frustration, as the interpreters consistently attribute meanings that the speaker does not desire. Moreover, it remains unclear to the speakers where these interpretations originate, as they do not align with their inferential framework or hermeneutical resources.

Misinterpretation also carries an element of arrogance, as it involves a claim to comprehend another's experience and its articulation better than the individual who underwent it. This not only diminishes the speaker's capacities but also degrades her, portraying her as less rational and resourceful. The consequences and harms of such practice were explained earlier, highlighting the impact on the speaker's subjectivity, knowledge transmission, and overall recognition within the community.

In instances of interpretive injustice, the harm mirrors that of hermeneutical injustice, encompassing both epistemic and moral dimensions. Once again, there is a loss of knowledge concerning others and how things are, constraining the expansion of cognitive horizons. The epistemic friction crucial for knowledge enrichment is nullified. On a moral plane, interpretive injustice reflects an imperfect recognition of the other. Similar to testimonial or hermeneutical injustice, the speaker is harmed in her capacity as a knower and full member of a meaning-sharing community. It is an instance of cultural imperialism, unjust hermeneutical domination, and disrespect.

2. 3. Second extension and its consequences

Until now, I have linked interpretive injustice with the context of oppression and marginalisation. However, it is essential to investigate if members of marginalised groups can also misinterpret or ignore individuals in dominant positions. The question now revolves around whether the utilisation of one's inferential background, when not shared with the speaker, constitutes epistemic and moral harm even when directed toward a member of a dominant group.

Contrary to the prevailing emphasis in contemporary literature on power dynamics and domination, I posit that moral harm can manifest even in members of a dominant group. This challenges the presupposition that harm is tied to situations involving hermeneutical marginalisation. I argue

that while situations involving hermeneutical marginalisation are indeed the most harmful and problematic, they are not the sole instances. Building on Dotson's (2014, 116) insight that epistemic injustices and oppressions are not solely reducible to social and political factors, my aim is to expand and generalise the account of interpretive injustice. This broader perspective allows for the application of interpretive injustice to general hermeneutics, encompassing every act of understanding. For the time being, I abstract from political factors, which I take to be a frequent reason for injustice but not an essential feature of the concept of interpretive injustice itself.

Employing one's inferential background when it diverges from speaker's is generally non-virtuous. When the interpreter applies her own background and misinterprets the utterance, she risks overlooking new knowledge, thereby impeding the flow of information in society and undermining cooperation. At an individual level, this practice harms the speaker in her capacity as a knower, mirroring the consequences of epistemic injustice discussed earlier. Importantly, these consequences remain regardless of whether the interpreter is from a marginalised or dominant group, as both scenarios result in a loss of knowledge and injury to the speaker.

In the scenario where the utterer holds a dominant position and the interpreter is marginalised, moral harm is also inflicted. The utterer is hindered from effectively communicating their experience or knowledge. At that moment, the speaker is perceived as less rational by the interpreter, who applies her own inferences that she deems more sensible. This constitutes a momentary denial of full participation in the cooperative community—a one-time refusal of reciprocal recognition of the other. Communicative, including interpretive, relations established in epistemic interaction must be reciprocal to be just and morally sound (Medina 2013, 93). It is inconsistent to demand recognition of subjectivity and knowledge from a member of the dominant group while simultaneously denying her the same recognition. Such a situation represents a form of distorted recognition and is arrogant.

Interpretive injustice does not need to be systematic or enduring to constitute a moral wrong. Even a single act of (mis)interpretation can be considered harmful. Moral wrongs, in general, do not necessarily require a systematic pattern. Just as a single instance of physical assault is morally wrong and inflicts physical and moral harm on the victim, a singular act of interpretive injustice is morally problematic.

It appears that the emphasis on power relations and the exclusive focus on marginalised groups may not be warranted for the broader concept of interpretive injustice. Instead, what remains essential is the disparity in hermeneutical resources between groups, stemming from their distinct social positions that influence the knowledge of their members.

This recognition implies the existence of a variety of alternative hermeneutical resources, which do, in fact, exist (Dotson 2012, 31). When employed in the interpretation of others, these resources have the potential to result in epistemic and moral harm, thereby constituting interpretive injustice.

The general reflections and loss of political dimension and marginalisation have to be reflected in the definition of interpretive injustice. A refined definition can be formulated as follows: Interpretive injustice transpires when the utterance of someone from one sociolinguistic group is interpreted using hermeneutical resources of different sociolinguistic group, despite the existence of relevant differences between these resources.

Conclusion

In this article, I have first dealt with hermeneutical injustice, exploring its various aspects and extended scope, including hermeneutic domination and ignorance. In considering its practical implications, I have highlighted the damage it does to marginalised communities, for example in health care and education. I emphasised its impact on self-confidence, autonomy and self-worth. I argued that hermeneutic injustice is a moral transgression that disrupts the core capacities and subjectivity of the individual.

Later, I turned to hermeneutics. I focused on situations where the lack of hermeneutical resources within the dominant discourse results from a failure to engage with existing relevant resources. The investigation started by examining interpretation within the dominant framework and introduced a concept of interpretive injustice. I identified two types of interpretive injustice: ignorance and misinterpretation. Ignorance occurs when the dominant group lacks hermeneutical resources, while misinterpretation occurs when concepts of the dominant group have different meanings to those of the minority. Both result in epistemic and moral harm.

I then shifted my focus beyond macro-level power dynamics, arguing that both epistemic and moral harm can occur even to members of dominant groups. I broadened the concept of interpretive injustice, extending its applicability to general hermeneutics, not limited to interactions between dominant and marginalised groups. By highlighting the negative effects of using an interpreter's own inferential background, I argued that such practices hinder knowledge acquisition and harm speakers regardless of their group affiliation. Furthermore, I claimed that interpretive injustice need not be systematic to constitute moral wrong and called for attention to micro-level dynamics. According to the refined definition, interpretive injustice transpires when the utterance of someone from one

sociolinguistic group is interpreted using hermeneutical resources of different sociolinguistic group, despite the existence of relevant differences between these resources.

Merely acknowledging the existence of interpretive injustice does not change anything. Injustices, by their very nature, demand rectification. Various scholars have proposed distinct approaches to address similar issues of epistemic injustice. Fricker advocates for rectifying testimonial and hermeneutical injustice through testimonial (2007, 86ff) and hermeneutical virtue (2007, 169ff). Medina (2017, 49) proposes disobedience and insurrection as means of rectification, while Dotson (2012, 34) emphasises the need for individuals to be aware of different hermeneutical resources to navigate them appropriately. Catala (2015, 432) suggests that expertise-based epistemic trust can undo testimonial injustice and, consequently, hermeneutical domination.

Given the specificity of interpretive injustice, I believe that we should generally interpret in a way that not only facilitates the acquisition of knowledge from the perspective of the interpreter, but also prevents harm to the utterer. This approach might be called *virtuous hermeneutics*. It should mitigate the effects of social prejudice against marginalised groups and contribute to the inclusion of their perspectives in societal deliberations. By recognising the social dimension of hermeneutics, a virtuous approach can contribute to the creation of a more just society that recognises everyone equally as a subject. To facilitate the goal of just and virtuous interpretation, intervention at the individual level is necessary. Given the structural dimension of injustice, this may not be enough; there must also be social resistance to injustice.

Notes

¹ For a representative sample of contributions in this direction, see Giladi and McMillan 2023.

² For an exhaustive treatment of the struggle for recognition and its individual and social aspects, see Honneth 1995.

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Gabriel HĂLĂNDUȚ*

Problemi interpretativi sulla fede negli scritti di Cioran. Un tentativo di superare gli abusi attraverso l'*equità* ermeneutica

Interpretive questions about faith in Cioran's writings.
An attempt to overcome abuses through hermeneutical *equity*

Abstract: The aim of this article is to look in a new light at the writings of Emil Cioran in which he deals with the question of faith and religion. An author known mainly for the controversies raised by his scandalizing aphorisms, Cioran could be better understood if his writings were passed through a hermeneutic filter that would take into account the criteria of the principle of equity proposed by G.F. Meier. However, bearing in mind the fragility/difficulty/sensitivity of any interpretation, it emerges that any passage to another level of understanding is by no means a purely intellectual effort, but rather implies the assumption of the existential transformation that each text produces.

Keywords: interpretation, principle of equity, Cioran, disbelief, God.

Introduzione

Il tema del presente articolo è il tentativo di analizzare il fenomeno ermeneutico, sottolineando non tanto il processo in sé, ovvero le tappe e la tecnica di un'interpretazione corretta, ma soprattutto gli effetti che ogni atto interpretativo porta inevitabilmente con sé sull'intendimento di un testo. Più che un esercizio di analisi tecnica, quindi, cercherò di presentare le conseguenze che la lettura, e soprattutto l'atto interpretativo di un testo, porta con sé sul piano esistenziale.

Per evidenziare la tesi secondo cui nessuna interpretazione è neutra, e ancora di più, l'idea che alcune di esse sono compromesse già dall'autore del testo, farò riferimento ad alcuni frammenti dagli scritti di Emil Cioran in cui egli affronta la questione della religione. Essi, nella loro maggioranza sono stati interpretati abusivamente oppure considerati dalla critica come interpretazioni abusive della fede proprio da parte dell'autore. Secondo me, tali interpretazioni non solo ci allontanano dalla verità, o dall'onestà che

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dovrebbe caratterizzare ogni testo, ma essi hanno anche un grande potenziale di (auto)rovescio.

Partendo dalla premessa di Umberto Eco, che nel *Lettore in favola* descrive l'interpretazione nei termini di una *scelta* che il lettore (oppure l'interprete) opera in modo libero, ma anche limitato¹ (Eco 2016, 178-183), cercherò di proporre una nuova via interpretativa che, da un lato, sarebbe in grado di smascherare alcune accuse di abuso mosse a Cioran, cioè di mostrare alcuni limiti imposti artificialmente al suo testo e dall'altro di proporre una nuova chiave ermeneutica più adatta a questo tipo di scrittura, che permetterà una lettura libera dei vecchi pregiudizi. In altre parole, cercherò di mostrare quali *scelte* ci sono già dietro le interpretazioni attuali e quanto siano giuste.

L'imperativo dell'interpretazione

Brevemente, l'ermeneutica ha radici antiche, già dall'alba della storia e della cultura umana. Fin dall'inizio fu legata all'esercizio religioso di mediazione che il *sacerdote* svolgeva a favore della comunità che serviva. Sia che si trattasse dell'interpretazione dei segni della natura (simboli) (Ricoeur 1986, 30), sia che si trattasse della spiegazione e dell'aggiornamento dei testi sacri, rivelati all'uomo dalla divinità in varie forme, lo *hermios* «portava alla compressione» significati oscuri per tutti gli altri (Cornea 2006, 54).

Un altro momento importante, fondatore della scienza ermeneutica attuale, è stato l'imperativo etico di stabilire una serie di regole interpretative chiare, affinché un testo venga decifrato correttamente e non a guadagno di qualcuno o di un'idea. Quando la questione viene posta in questi termini siamo già in piena Modernità, quando il mondo ritiene di vivere in un'epoca dell'*illuminismo*, ma che, paradossalmente, preferisce rimanere ancora attaccato a diverse pratiche parareligiose o magiche. Perciò intendono urgente la necessità di sviluppare una *scienza* dell'interpretazione.

Per comprendere gli abusi fatti in riferimento all'opera di Cioran (o di cui lui stesso è stato accusato) sui temi della fede o della religione, penso che valga la pena sottolineare anche brevemente il rapporto tra ermeneutica filosofica, esperienza religiosa ed ermeneutica teologica.

P. Ricoeur vede l'ermeneutica religiosa come la parte speciale dell'ermeneutica generale, ma allo stesso tempo riconosce nell'ermeneutica filosofica lo strumento formale a disposizione dell'ermeneutica teologica, stabilendo così un legame formale e materiale tra queste discipline. Questa mossa della filosofia verso la religione si intreccia con la teologia, che trova nel processo ermeneutico una condizione originale per lo sviluppo dell'esperienza religiosa (cristiana). Inoltre bisogna dire che l'approccio interpretativo è importante anche per la costituzione dell'identità. La religione fornisce alla filosofia la materia su cui può svolgere la propria

attività di ricerca ermeneutica finalizzata alla ricerca dell'identità di sé, ma allo stesso tempo la religione riceve dalla filosofia gli strumenti metodologici attraverso i quali può strutturare una propria e originale comprensione dei suoi testi, stabilendo ancora una volta una circolarità ermeneutica dialettica di tipo *chiamata-risposta*. Pertanto, l'incontro tra i due campi ermeneutici può essere visto anche come un rapporto fertile tra *convinzione* (religiosa) e *critica* (filosofica). La convinzione è costretta dalla critica a non arretrare di fronte all'esigenza di andare più in profondità, e la critica è spinta a oltrepassare i confini di un razionalismo restrittivo, per aprirsi al mondo del simbolo e dell'inconscio (Sgoi 2006, 32-33).

Dall'abuso all'*equità* ermeneutica

L'ermeneutica non è mai stata pensata come una scienza in sé, ma più spesso come uno *strumento* oppure un'*arte*. Il «gioco» delle interpretazioni impone alcune regole che devono essere rispettate. L'esperienza, però, ci insegna che ciò non avviene sempre automaticamente.

Ecco perché occorrono alcune meta-regole che governino le regole interpretative. Nata in ambito tedesco, questa preoccupazione porterà all'imposizione del termine tecnico di *Billigkeit*, presso dall'ambito giuridico, dove denota l'atteggiamento di ammansire o temperare le disposizioni giuridiche del diritto positivo. Kant teorizzerà questo concetto dicendo che l'*equità* (*Billigkeit*) non può essere contenuta nel diritto positivo, ma che appartiene all'attenta valutazione che solo il tribunale interiore dell'uomo è in grado di fare. Pertanto, l'*equità* non può essere raggiunta con la semplice applicazione meccanica di alcune disposizioni (Kant 2006, 69-70).

Entrato nel campo dell'ermeneutica, il principio di equità designa la tendenza di un interprete a considerare veri quei significati che meglio corrispondono alle perfezioni del loro autore, fino ad una prova contraria. Georg Friedrich Meier, importante teorico di questo concetto, afferma che l'*equità* è un'*arte* più che una scienza, e che questo significa che l'interprete afferma se stesso attraverso le sue capacità come protagonista di questo esercizio. Inoltre, Meier propone diversi principi per una giusta ermeneutica. I più importanti principi ermeneutici sottolineano l'osservazione dell'intenzione dell'autore, cioè il tentativo di dedurre significati quanto più vicini possibile a quelli dell'autore. Puoi, la necessita d'individuare il contesto in cui è stato scritto il testo che viene interpretato e, in fine, il principio di chiarezza e coerenza interna del testo, ovvero la proposta di una lettura che non diventa contraddittoria in sé stessa (Bühler e Madonna 2001 42-47).

Successivamente, per il filosofo Friedrich Schleiermacher, considerato il fondatore dell'ermeneutica moderna, il principio di equità ermeneutica diventa importante in quanto limita lo slancio di chi vuole

comprendere l'autore di un testo meglio di quanto l'autore abbia compreso sé stesso. L'applicazione di questo principio presuppone la conoscenza della vita interiore ed esteriore dell'autore (Schleiermacher 2001, 42-47). Friedrich Nietzsche si allontanerà infatti da questa tradizione e correlerà l'interpretazione con la volontà di potenza, fatto reso possibile dalla costituzione plurale delle cose e della volontà di potenza (Bondor 2008, 23-26).

In conclusione, l'interpretazione ha bisogno di regole chiare, ma resterà sempre un'arte. Questa attività è grandissima perché è sempre alla ricerca di nuovi significati. Siccome non abbiamo accesso alla cosa in sé del testo, ci sarà sempre qualcosa che sfugge alla nostra comprensione. Ma questa ricerca deve tenere conto delle raccomandazioni formulate dal principio di equità ermeneutica, altrimenti cadrebbe in un uso erroneo, oltre i limiti, diventando un abuso.

Cioran: l'abuso porta verso la miscredenza

Secondo il teologo Flacius Illyricus (Dilthey 1992, 88-89), le fonti di un'interpretazione viziata possono essere due: l'errore e la disonestà. Penso che nel caso delle interpretazioni fatte sull'opera di Cioran si possano riscontrare entrambi questi tipi di abuso. Cominciando con l'accusa di *insincerità*, ricevuta già durante la sua vita in diverse occasioni, aggiungiamo poi l'*errore* di interpretazione che lo portò a essere considerato un miscredente o, addirittura, un ateo. Di seguito mi propongo di superare queste accuse mostrando come, applicando i principi di equità ermeneutica già enunciati sopra, possiamo trovare un significato più profondo e, soprattutto, una coerenza interna negli scritti di Cioran e un vissuto esistenziale che è più che «un ateismo regionale», concetto spiegato da G.-I. Robu (Robu 2024, 138).

a. Cioran, un semplice beffardo

Cioran è stato accusato più volte di insincerità. Coetanei della sua generazione, amici o critici, lo hanno rimproverato in una serie di occasioni ad essere un bugiardo che affronta temi mai sperimentati oppure che gli ha presi da altri scrittori o addirittura che gli ha inventati. Rimane famosa l'accusa sulla questione del suicidio. Come può qualcuno che si prendeva così tanta cura della propria salute essere considerato uno dei più grandi teorici del suicidio? Ma questa accusa va oltre e abbraccia tutta la sua opera. Si diceva che fosse un autore che non creava nulla, che non diceva nulla di valore. Il suo unico merito era lo stile. Al contrario, io penso che si possano superare queste accuse dimostrando che nel lavoro di Cioran più importante del contenuto sia l'esercizio che lui praticava tramite ciò che lui scriveva.

Direi che una lettura attenta e oggettiva degli scritti di Cioran ci lascia una forte impressione di sincerità. Si può vedere come l'autore non faccia alcuno sforzo per mascherare, cambiare o truccare le esperienze che lui viveva applicando «cera» sulle crepe della sua vita². Non tenta nemmeno di interpretare l'enigma della vita umana attraverso teorie razionali, sistemi scolastici o credenze religiose. Per Cioran la vita, così come gli viene consegnata, esprime il massimo grado di naturalezza senza alcun'altra aggiunta. Ecco perché le pagine dei suoi libri lasciano intravedere un esercizio costante che l'autore pratica per scoprire e comprendere meglio la propria vita.

A volte tendiamo anche a descrivere la nostra vita con i colori più scuri, ci lamentiamo delle condizioni in cui viviamo e ci disperiamo davanti alle cose brutte che ci accadono, ma non è vero che siamo sempre disposti a riconoscere il reale stato delle cose. Preferiamo sopportare o lamentarci, per orgoglio o convenienza, a seconda del contesto. Al contrario, Cioran parla della vita così come gli viene affidata: con tutte le sue ombre, mancanze e problemi. Guarda la vita senza filtri e indipendentemente dagli schemi che la società e la cultura del tempo cercavano sempre di imporre. La sincerità che traspare dalle sue battute è l'espressione di ciò che ha sperimentato e vissuto fino a quel punto che sa che nessuna malattia può essere curata se i suoi sintomi sono nascosti. Inoltre, questo approccio non è nuovo nella cultura europea. Possiamo citare solo due esempi classici della letteratura, le *Confessioni* della fine dell'Antichità di sant'Agostino e le *Confessioni* della Modernità di J.J. Rousseau, che hanno gettato le basi per la scoperta dell'autenticità (Nica 2022, 98).

Anche se non nascondeva le sue riserve su ciò che la Modernità portava come novità nell'ambito dello stile di vita, è ovvio che nell'Europa del XX secolo non era più possibile vivere in una botte o andare in giro per le strade tutto il giorno con una torcia in mano (Hadot 1998, 135-138). Tuttavia, mantenendo le proporzioni, penso che, a grandi linee, Cioran godeva la vita di un Diogene moderno (Necula 2005, 35). Il disprezzo provato di fronte all'impostura in cui la maggior parte delle persone trascorrono la loro vita diventa nel suo primo libro, *Al culmine della disperazione*, l'occasione per prendere posizione.

Qui parla apertamente dell'esperienza della vita al culmine della disperazione. La differenza è che ciò che Cioran scrive sotto forma di grido e sospiro, la gente comune preferisce sussurrare; gli affetti che espone con disinvoltura, le persone comuni tendono a mascherare. La fedeltà alla verità è radicale, non accetta mezze misure. Tutto ciò che viene aggiunto o mascherato è un'abdicazione timorosa dalla verità. Di fronte alla verità della vita, Cioran sembra essere il pubblicano che «non osava nemmeno alzare gli occhi al cielo, ma si batteva il petto», mentre la gente adotta il comportamento del fariseo che «stava in piedi» e ringraziava la divinità di

non essere come gli altri (*Lc* 18,9-14), sentendosi giustificato dalla propria condizione sociale, educazione o cultura. Visto così, il nostro Diogene, come il pubblicano della parabola biblica, sembra aver capito che l'onestà e la civiltà sono spesso sproporzionali (Necula 2005, 35-37). Così, consapevole che le crepe aprono la strada verso l'autenticità, Cioran preferisce la via del cinico, rifiutando e criticando la cera che la società contemporanea gli impone.

Negli scritti di Cioran la sincerità prende la forma lirica. «Lo stato lirico è al di là delle forme e dei sistemi. Una fluidità, una scioltezza interiore mescolano in uno stesso slancio, come in una convergenza ideale, tutti gli elementi della vita dell'anima per creare un ritmo intenso e pieno. Rispetto alla raffinatezza di una cultura anchilosata che, costretta in forme e cornici, camuffa tutto, il lirismo è un'espressione barbara. Qui sta appunto il suo valore: nell'essere solo sangue, sincerità e fiamme» (Cioran 2019, 18).

Quindi la sincerità ha a che fare con la fluidità, l'interiorità, l'intensità e perfino con le barbarie, con il sangue e con le fiamme. Cioè con tutto ciò che è più intimo e naturale nell'uomo. E tutti questi vanno oltre il quadro formale del sistema. Perciò, la scrittura cioraniana s'inscrive nell'ambito culturale rumeno interbellico, marcato dalla figura del professore Nae Ionescu che ha avviato quasi una generazione (*Criterion*) (Rotiroți 2007, 17-28) alla critica del sistema, aprendo la strada all'avanguardia del gruppo *Alge*, movimento il cui intento era proporre un'alternativa sociale e culturale nuova (*Ibidem*, 113-130).

Aveva ragione Constantin Noica quando scriveva: «quanto facile, quanto comodo sarebbe [per Cioran] il vivere problemi presi in prestito. E poiché non lo fa, poiché non vuole fingere - come tanti altri - mente» (Noica 1998, 48-49).

Perché non ha scritto Cioran secondo le usanze del suo tempo? Una possibile risposta ci ha lasciato proprio Cioran nei suoi *Quaderni*. «In un'epoca come la nostra, che ama l'oscurità a ogni costo, i miei scritti non presentano alcun interesse: sono troppo chiari... Ma quest'epoca facile non può immaginare che lotta io abbia sostenuto, prima contro di me, poi con la lingua, per raggiungere quell'apparenza di chiarezza che viene tanto disprezzata nel mio ambiente» (Cioran 2001, 437-438). Poi continua: «se i miei scritti non hanno praticamente alcuna risonanza, è perché non corrispondono ai bisogni dei miei contemporanei. Sono troppo soggettivi, ossia inopportuni. Io non seguo la corrente, appartengo alla nostra epoca solo quanto a frenesia. Inoltre, non sono portatore di illusioni; ma non ci si raccoglie intorno a un messaggio lucido fino alla distruzione» (*Ibidem*, 521).

In questi brani sembra che Cioran chiede ironicamente perdono per aver osato andare oltre le regole e per aver mescolato le righe dei suoi libri con il sangue delle sue esperienze. Poiché non tace, l'espressione diventa un'accusa. La sincerità lo trasforma in un perdente del suo tempo o in un

profugo dell'epoca (Dobre 2008, 50-52). È da qui che sorge la domanda retorica: «a essere sincero, dovrei dire che non so perché vivo, né perché non cesso di vivere. Con tutta probabilità, la chiave risiede nell'irrazionalità della vita, la quale fa sì che questa si mantenga senza ragione» (Cioran 2019, 48). Vale questa come spiegazione?

Analizzando con massima lucidità la disperazione vissuta tramite le notti d'insonnia, Cioran arriva alla domanda centrale di ogni esistenza: perché la vita e non la morte? Inizia così un dialogo drammatico con sé stesso, nel quale sonda il valore di ogni esperienza che un uomo può fare. E quanto più è onesto con sé stesso, tanto più penetra nella profondità del suo interiore. Ed è interessante che l'adozione di questo atteggiamento passa agli occhi degli altri come qualcosa di antiestetico. Ma tutta la tensione imposta da questo dialogo drammatico si trasforma in una terapia che lo rende più desideroso di vivere e perfino capace di *cantare* ciò che sperimenta. L'uomo che sceglie la via della sincerità davanti alle questioni essenziali della vita comincia a percepire a poco a poco il senso di ciò che vive.

Ma forse che ancora più bello è il fatto che quest'uomo può essere felice anche nella relatività della sua vita e che non deve ubriacarsi con una gioia illusoria presa dalle bugie fabbricate. Nessuno, pertanto, deve scandalizzarsi del fatto che l'essenziale gli sfugga o che non riesca a padroneggiarlo così come vorrebbe (Pătrașcu 2014, 31-32).

«Non so che cosa è bene e che cosa è male; ciò che è permesso e ciò che non lo è; non posso elogiare né condannare. A questo mondo, non c'è un criterio accettabile né un principio solido. Mi stupisce che certuni si preoccupino ancora della teoria della conoscenza. Per essere sincero, dovrei ammettere che non m'importa un bel niente della relatività del nostro sapere, giacché questo mondo non merita di essere conosciuto. Talvolta ho la sensazione di un sapere integrale che esaurisca tutto il contenuto del mondo, talvolta non capisco niente di tutto ciò che mi succede attorno» (Cioran 2019, 61).

Dopo questa valutazione della sincerità cioraniana, bisogna ricordare il prezzo che essa richiede. Il "frutto" non può variare molto dal terreno in cui cresce questo albero raro della sincerità. Si tratta di diverse accuse d'insincerità apparse dopo la pubblicazione del libro *Al culmine della disperazione*, così come di altre espresse durante il suo periodo francese (Liiceanu 1994, 113). Prenderemo in considerazione due esempi suggestivi.

Il primo riguarda il sospetto d'insincerità suscitato fuori del paese, nel periodo in cui si trovava a Parigi. Un giorno, racconta Cioran, facendo una visita medica, il dottore gli chiese: «Lei pensa veramente quello che dice, è sincero? Cerco di dimostrargli che la sua domanda non regge: „Che interesse potrei avere a mentire? Chi dovrei ingannare? Non ho lettori, quindi non sono schiavo di nessuno. Scrivo per me. E d'altronde non mi

considero uno scrittore”. È chiaro quanto l'uomo di penna sia sospetto e disprezzato. In ciò che fa si vede solo un esercizio. E così la letteratura viene assimilata al giornalismo. Forse, per dare l'impressione della sincerità, non si dovrebbe pubblicare niente da vivi» (Cioran 2001, 274).

Se in questo caso, che abbiamo intenzionalmente ricordato per primo non rispettando l'ordine cronologico, è lo stesso Cioran che si difende, nel prossimo caso, che riguarda invece la sua giovinezza passata in Romania, uno dei suoi migliori amici, Constantin Noica, risponde alle accuse d'insincerità che la critica letterale aveva avanzato subito dopo la pubblicazione del libro *Al culmine della disperazione*. Vale la pena di riprodurre l'intero paragrafo: «Ho sentito più volte parlare di falsità, rispetto all'atteggiamento di *Al culmine della disperazione*, e sono rimasto stupito. Come può essere una farsa il caso di un uomo che rifiuta ciò che ha di meglio per avventurarsi in un atteggiamento pieno di rischi? E questo è il caso di Emil Cioran. Un uomo che ha trascorso gli anni della facoltà in biblioteca e solo lì; che, forse, non ha lavorato sistematicamente e con fogli, ma che ha letto enormemente e fervidamente; che potrebbe in qualsiasi momento scrivere un libro su qualsiasi cosa o un libro con citazioni e riferimenti per il gradimento di tutti – ma rifiuta tutto ciò che ha guadagnato e se ne libera. E gli altri dicono che sta mentendo. [...] Ciò che può essere rimproverato è solo la sua grande sincerità. Quanto semplice, quanto facile sarebbe stato per lui vivere con problemi presi in prestito! E perché non lo fa? Perché non vuole simulare – come tanti altri. [...] Quando uno studente stupido del liceo che è stato bocciato si suicida, i nostri cuori si rattristano. E quando un uomo rimane vuoto di fronte alla vita e alla morte, tormentando la sua anima come fossero dieci suicidi – diciamo che mente. Non fa niente, Emil Cioran, menti. E puoi continuare a mentire. Io ti credo» (Noica 1934).

Riassumendo, Cioran ha praticato la sincerità nella sua vita, scegliendo di presentare il mondo entro i suoi limiti, con la sua monotonia, senza ricorrere all'invenzione per costruire teoricamente immagini belle e attraenti, ma mancante di consistenza. La prova della sua sincerità è probabilmente il fatto che quando parla della vita, non può fare a meno di parlare anche della morte. Credo che la sincerità non sia qualcosa di spontaneo. Più naturale è probabilmente il contrario, la tendenza a presentare agli altri solo le esperienze belle e i momenti positivi. Per non cadere preda di questa tentazione, l'uomo ha bisogno di praticare costantemente, innanzitutto con sé stesso, l'arte sottile ma compromettente della sincerità. Tutto questo impegno non può nascere da altro che dalla cura di sé, una cura che persegue l'autenticità e non l'apparenza (Pătrașcu 2014, 45).

Credo quindi che in questo caso il principio di equità imponga l'interpretazione dell'opera cioraniana partendo dal presupposto che la

scrittura è innanzitutto un *esercizio spirituale* e non la semplice trasmissione di un messaggio. La scrittura è una terapia attraverso la quale l'anima si libera dal peso insopportabile della disperazione che ha conosciuto. E il fatto che certe esperienze non siano espresse in modo semplice, in un linguaggio comune, non significa che siano abusi o menzogne.

b. *Il coraggio della miscredenza*

Comprenderemo meglio la questione della sincerità se la applicheremo a un tema molto discusso degli scritti di Cioran: la fede religiosa. Per ciò che disse e scrisse su Dio e sulla fede, Cioran fu ricordato come un miscredente, un bestemmiatore o addirittura un ateo. Cercherò in seguito di dimostrare che questa interpretazione può essere sbagliata. Sebbene lui stesso si considerava un non credente, penso che una giusta interpretazione ci lascia intravedere una *ricerca* genuina e, addirittura, una *fede* autentica.

La domanda che potrebbe orientare l'atto ermeneutico compiuto nel campo della fede nel caso di Cioran sia se egli abbia effettivamente vissuto esperienze mistiche. Secondo Eugen Simion, Cioran non conobbe l'esperienza mistica direttamente, ma attraverso le testimonianze lasciati dai grandi mistici (Simion 2014, 200). Nei *Quaderni*, però, si può leggere: «Qualche volta mi sono avvicinato a quel “glorioso delirio” di cui parla Teresa d'Avila per indicare una delle fasi dell'unione con Dio [...] tanto tempo fa, ahimè!» (Cioran 2001, 57). Certo, non si tratta di una prova sicura di un'esperienza mistica nel senso stretto del termine, ma già l'uso di termini propri della mistica spagnola utilizzati per descrivere una fase del rapporto con Dio può essere considerato un segno per la teoria che alcune esperienze mistiche della sua giovinezza (Cioran 1995, 218-220) sono state vere esperienze religiose. Sebbene si tratti di estasi incomplete o anticipazioni estatiche, come le descrive nel libro *Lacrime e santi*, la frequenza di queste esperienze lo conducono ad una certa intimità con Dio (Modreanu 2005, 28). Influenzato anche dalle letture dei grandi mistici del cristianesimo, Cioran rilegge le sue esperienze spirituali e le descrive nei seguenti termini: «L'esperienza del vuoto è la tentazione mistica del non credente, la sua possibilità di pregare, il suo momento di pienezza. Ai nostri confini un dio sorge, o qualcosa che lo sostituisce» (Cioran 1984, 106).

Seguendo le orme di santa Teresa d'Avila, Cioran afferma che dopo l'estasi mistica non rimane più nulla. Tutto ciò che sperimenta è una grande sofferenza, come la delusione in una storia d'amore, segnata dal sentimento del nulla, tanto che gli è impossibile seguire altro che la follia (Idem 2019, 14). Gli effetti di queste estasi segnarono profondamente l'esistenza di Cioran e potrebbero costituire l'inizio della sua incredulità. In altre parole, l'incredulità inizia durante una forma di accesso mistico.

Se proseguiamo l'analisi delle bestemmie e delle invettive che lanciava con disprezzo verso la fede cristiana, noteremo paradossalmente un altro punto in comune con la mistica: la disillusione. Nel *Lacrime e santi* Cioran confessa esplicitamente di essere stato *tradito* da Dio. Possiamo quindi credere che all'origine della sua miscredenza ci sia un'estasi vissuta, cioè un momento privilegiato che ha lasciato in lui un desiderio insaziabile di possedere per sempre l'attimo di luce divina sperimentato solo di passaggio. Cioran offre la seguente descrizione: «Desidero infinitamente estasi luminose, eppure allo stesso tempo non ne vorrei, perché ad esse fanno inevitabilmente seguito le depressioni. Vorrei invece che un bagno di luce scaturisse da me e trasfigurasse il mondo intero, un bagno che, lungi dalla tensione dell'estasi, conservasse la calma di un'eternità luminosa» (*Ibidem*, 31-32).

Seguendo questa nuova chiave ermeneutica e stando attenti a non cadere nell'altro estremo dell'interpretazione abusiva, cioè nella pretesa di comprendere l'autore meglio di lui stesso, penso che si possa vedere il non senso della vita e le accuse rivolte a Dio, come manifestazioni di insoddisfazione per non poter possedere Dio immediatamente e pienamente e come frustrazione perché il lato luminoso della mistica gli era stato negato. Di fronte a questa delusione, la religione non rappresenta più alcun aiuto, e la figura divina diventa solo la proiezione del proprio fallimento.

Pertanto ritengo che le esperienze mistiche vissute da Cioran nella sua prima giovinezza siano fondamentali per poter arrivare ad una giusta interpretazione della sua (non)credenza. Potrebbe quindi essere utile soffermarci un po' sul libro *Al culmine della disperazione*. Nonostante non abbia una struttura ben organizzata, e il passaggio da un tema all'altro sembri fortuito, penso che possiamo leggerlo attraverso la chiave ermeneutica dell'estasi che funziona come nucleo unificante e rivelatore. Fin dalle prime righe Cioran individua la premessa fondamentale per un'apertura al trascendente. Egli fa qui l'apologia del lirismo, che esprime la condizione di non poter restare «chiusi in noi stessi» (*Ibidem*, 15). In altre parole, *essere lirici* significa essere aperti all'esperienza del trascendente, che può essere raggiunta solo attraverso un'autentica interiorizzazione, o tramite esperienze cruciali della vita, accessibili solo ai pochi uomini privilegiati.

Secondo Cioran, per una persona del genere, la visione della vita non può rimanere come prima. Inoltre, appare la sensazione di non poter più vivere. In questo contesto l'assurdo diventa l'unico modo per non cadere nel nulla: «vi sono esperienze alle quali non si può sopravvivere. Al termine delle quali si sente che più nulla potrebbe avere un senso» (*Ibidem*, 19). Anche se in un primo momento non li definisce nella loro essenza, Cioran si ferma a descriverne gli effetti. Si tratta principalmente della necessità di ritirarsi dal mondo, perché dopo tali esperienze si sente separato

da tutto, perché la vita è troppo limitata per poter sopportare queste tensioni. È chiaro che Cioran parla di estasi religioso e la conclusione non può essere diversa da quella dei mistici: «Tutti i mistici non ebbero forse, dopo le grandi estasi, il sentimento di non poter più vivere?» (*Ibidem*, 21). È questo il contesto in cui lo scrittore proclama la sua convinzione che, di fronte a esperienze che portano al culmine della disperazione, l'unica soluzione è la «passione dell'assurdo».

Ma cosa significa l'assurdo? Potrebbe essere definito come elemento mistico o religioso? O sia soltanto una soluzione di uscire? Al di là del pessimismo che si intuisce dietro il titolo del suo primo libro, il fatto che l'autore parla anche di «una via di salvezza», è la prova che l'assurdo può essere inteso come una modalità di purificazione e di trasfigurazione (religiosa) (Rotiroti 2015, 68).

1. «Vi lamentate che gli uomini siano malvagi, vendicativi, irriconoscenti o ipocriti? Vi propongo il metodo dell'agonia, con cui sfuggirete temporaneamente a tutti questi difetti. [...] se solo potessi portare il mondo intero all'agonia, per purificare le radici stesse della vita! Le incendierei con fiamme ardenti e insinuanti, non per distruggerle, ma per dar loro una linfa e un calore diversi. Il fuoco che appiccherei al mondo non porterebbe alla rovina, ma a una trasfigurazione cosmica, essenziale. Così la vita si abituerebbe alle alte temperature, e non sarebbe più un ricettacolo di mediocrità» (Cioran 2019, 26).

L'estasi, quindi, è quel momento che apre la porta al nucleo interiore dell'esistenza. Ma c'è anche un momento rischioso: l'assoluto resta sconosciuto, il che costringe il protagonista a una ricerca sisifica dell'assoluto. Ma non è questa anche la condizione di Dio che si rivela al suo popolo in visioni beatifiche? Ricordiamo Mosè o il profeta Elia, essi riescono a vedere solo le «spalle» di Dio (*Ex* 33,23), rispettivamente avvertono la sua presenza sotto forma di «il sussurro di una brezza leggera» (*1Reg*, 19,12). Sono proprio l'inquietudine e l'incertezza a diventare terreno di ricerche ardenti che portano all'estasi, non l'incontro diretto o la certezza di vedere il volto di Dio. Così, tutti gli insulti e le accuse rivolte a Dio, tutte le dichiarazioni di incredulità e il linguaggio proprio di un *demonio*, diventano espressioni di questa via di ricerca e di accettazione del mistero incomprensibile.

Per descrivere il percorso completo proposto da Cioran per un'interpretazione che comprenda tutti gli elementi presentati dall'autore, devo evidenziare anche *le luci* di questa strada, che, paradossalmente, sono meno evidenti e più rapidamente trascurate dai lettori o dai critici. Restando al suo primo libro pubblicato, ricordo innanzitutto l'immagine del «bagno di fuoco» (Cioran 2019, 58), così vicina al linguaggio dei mistici occidentali, come modo di esprimere l'assoluto. Un'altra via luminosa sembra essere

quella della *grazia* espressa come «un distacco da ciò che è di questa terra, un'elevazione al di sopra del nostro cieco attaccamento alla vita». Afferma Cioran: «solo la *grazia* permette un distacco che non interrompe il contatto con le forze irrazionali dell'esistenza, perché essa è un salto inutile, uno slancio disinteressato in cui il fascino ingenuo e il ritmo confuso della vita conservano tutta la loro freschezza. Ogni grazia è uno slancio, una gioia dell'elevazione» (*Ibidem*, 71-72).

Ma forse ancora più sorprendente è la conclusione del libro che mette in primo piano la bellezza come modo di sperimentare «l'assoluto nella forma». Dice Cioran «la bellezza non salverà certo il mondo, ma avvicinerò più facilmente alla felicità quanti s'incammineranno sulla sua strada» (*Ibidem*, 135).

Conclusione

Se volessimo riprendere il filo di quanto detto in senso opposto, dovremo ammettere che la miscredenza negli scritti di Cioran è un tema molto complesso e che necessita ancora approfondito per essere ben compreso. Un tale lavoro, compiuto all'ombra dei principi di equità ermeneutica sopra presentati, porterà alla superazione dei pregiudizi su cui i lettori, così come gli interpreti, si fermano spesso. La maledizione e la bestemmia non sono solo peccati, ma dobbiamo ammettere che possono essere anche espressioni della preghiera di un non credente che non riesce ad accettare la sua condizione.

Oltre a ciò, possiamo dire che la lotta di Cioran con Dio non mira a distruggere la divinità, ma è un tentativo tramite il quale cerca di contenerlo e di dominarlo. Una lotta che non porta alla distruzione, ma, paradossalmente, ad un'apertura di orizzonti, a una migliore e più profonda conoscenza dell'uno e dell'altro. D'altro canto, tutti hanno da guadagnare dagli insulti di Cioran: la religione attaccata è costretta ad autoanalizzarsi e a rispondere a Cioran attraverso i suoi esponenti (sono esemplari i casi di Steinhart o di Țuțea). Poi, praticando la scrittura come *esercizio spirituale*, Cioran conosce meglio sé stesso, sopporta la sua vita, anche se non riuscirà mai a trasfigurare la sua esistenza come avrebbe voluto.

Alla fine, questa analisi sull'impatto dell'ermeneutica mi ha fatto riconoscere ancora di più i limiti e la fragilità di ogni interpretazione, ma anche la responsabilità che l'interprete si assume. Ancora una volta, si verifica il fatto che dalle nostre letture comprendiamo solo ciò che sappiamo o vogliamo sapere, e il passaggio verso un nuovo livello di comprensione comporta una trasformazione non solo intellettuale, ma soprattutto esistenziale. La direzione che prende l'interpretazione è già frutto di una scelta.

Notes

¹ L'interpretazione è limitata proprio dal testo che si legge, dalle possibilità che l'autore sceglie di dare al testo, ma è libera perché il docente sceglie quanto peso dare a ciascuna parola o espressione. L'interpretazione è una sorta di equilibrio tra la rigida univocità del testo e la plurivocità dei significati messi in gioco.

² Con sincerità non voglio intendere veridicità, questa distinzione è un problema classico della filosofia che presenta sfumature impossibili da presentare in questo lavoro. Si faccia allora riferimento al significato primario della parola, così come ci lascia intendere la sua definizione etimologica: *senza vernice* (senza *liscio*, senza *maschera*) oppure *interamente puro*. Questa definizione ribadisce una antica versione nella quale l'uomo sincero è quello che è in grado di realizzare un vaso oppure una statua senza nessuna correzione o aggiunta che si applicava mediante la cera. Vedi «Sincero» in *Dizionario etimologico online* (etimo.it).

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Empathy and virtue

Abstract: Empathy is widely considered to be a valuable trait, and yet some dimensions of it have been argued to be incompatible with virtue. More concretely, the nature of virtue seems to preclude virtuous agents from empathizing with their vicious or weak-willed fellow humans. This introduces a tension in the idea of virtue, as we would seem to necessarily have to sacrifice something of genuine value in order to become virtuous. I argue that this tension can be avoided if we reconsider the affective and motivational profile of the virtuous agent.

Keywords: empathy, understanding, virtue, vice, motivation

More than two hundred years after the British Sentimentalists had put *sympathy* at the center of their moral philosophy (Smith 1982 [1759]), it has become almost a commonplace to claim that *empathy*, a modern descendant of the former, is a good thing to have and strive towards.¹ Empathizing with others is valued as fostering emotional communion, mutual understanding and caring. Naturally, heightened attention to the virtues and usefulness of empathy has also led to a counter-reaction which has sought to articulate the negative consequences of too much empathy (Prinz 2011, Bloom 2016). From a philosophical perspective, however, the most interesting kind of tension which has recently been the topic of debate is that between empathy and virtue. If it is an ideal to have both broad and deep empathetic capacities and yet these are, beyond a certain point, incompatible with being virtuous, then we have on our hands a puzzling tension between two plausible normative ideals.

In order to grasp the nature of this tension, we need to answer two questions. Firstly, why and how is it that virtuousness limits our capacity for empathizing with others? Secondly, why is this something to be bemoaned?

I shall start with the first question. On a widespread understanding of empathy, empathizing with someone involves imaginatively sharing their perspective on a given situation, complete with that perspective's affective tonality.² More concretely, it involves imaginatively sharing their feelings towards a particular object. For instance, if you hate having your name mispronounced, my empathizing with you involves two things: imagining

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having my name mispronounced and having an emotional response towards this that matches yours. This account of empathy is not universally shared, and it also raises further questions that will not be attended here, such as what exactly is an (imagined?) emotional response to an imagined situation. I shall nevertheless circumnavigate these issues for the sake of having enough space left to articulate my point and leave the reasonableness of my decision to the judgment of the reader.

Let us suppose that this preliminary articulation of what empathy is, is correct. How and why does it collide with virtuousness? On a plausible conception of virtue of character, one which has its origins with Aristotle (Aristotle 2014) and has recently been revived by John McDowell (McDowell 1979) among others, having a virtuous character involves having a particular affective make-up which translates into tendencies towards specific emotional responses to specific circumstances. These emotional responses themselves amount to instances of evaluative perception. For instance, the affective make-up of the courageous will be such that she responds to certain circumstances with fear and to others with fortitude, some circumstances will seem to her dangerous and others harmless: if one is brave, one will not fear a mouse and will be unable to perceive it as dangerous. Plausibly, with this inability comes the inability to even imagine “responding” to the sighting of a mouse with fear. And here is where the incompatibility with certain instances of empathy comes in. If my friend George is afraid of mice, empathizing with him involves imagining a mousy encounter as a dangerous one, having an imagined emotional response to that encounter (fear) which matches George’s reaction. If I am brave, however, it is in virtue of this that I will not be able to imagine such a thing as being afraid of a mouse and so I will not be able to empathize with George.

So much for the answer to the first question. In its most general form, the answer is that the more virtuous one is the less will one be able to empathize both with less-than-virtuous and vicious people. This is so because the specific emotional dispositions of the virtuous will make it impossible for them to achieve the necessary emotional matching with the non-virtuous emotions that empathy requires. To put this somewhat more dramatically: it seems that the ladder of ascent to full virtuousness is also one which takes me further and further away from the possibility of empathetic communion with my less-than-virtuous neighbor.

Let us suppose, then, that there is an intrinsic incompatibility between virtue and empathy. Why should this be a problem? Why should those who strive at virtue be worried by the impact this would have on empathizing with less-than-virtuous emotional reactions such as George’s fear of mice? Isn’t the very point of these reactions that they are flawed and that one should be happy not to have them, and even happier not to be *able*

to have them? Adam Morton (Morton 2011) and Olivia Bailey (Bailey 2021) have both provided powerful arguments for why it is actually bad news for the virtuous that they have become unable to empathize with non-virtuous perspectives. I shall briefly present both arguments and then focus on Bailey's and what I think might be a successful reply to her.

The main "vice" that Morton finds with the loss of empathetic breadth which pertains to the virtuous (in his telling language: the "decent") is their acquired incapacity to understand less-than-virtuous motivations and actions. According to him, the virtuous will find it difficult to *identify imaginatively with important parts of human possibility* (Morton 2011, 1). More precisely, the connection that Morton sees lies between (1) the fact that the decent have internalized norms that keep them from even imagining doing things that violate these norms while (2) empathy with the in-decent who find such actions attractive requires exactly this. Therefore, a large part of human motivation is bound to remain inscrutable to the decent. This Morton aptly calls the *blinkering* effect of decency. Though Morton's use of words comes with other connotations and plausibly rests on other psychological models, his argument parallels the point made above about how the affective make-up of the virtuous keeps them from being able to imaginatively embody other affective perspectives. Importantly, this is not a matter of the bad consequences, of too much or too little empathy, it is on account of their nature that virtue/decency and broad empathetic capacities are incompatible. On the normative level, this turns out to be an incompatibility between two ideals: broad knowledge of *human possibility* on the one hand and human decency on the other hand, with the latter involving the incapacity to even consider vicious, indecent or atrocious courses of action.³

With Bailey, the issue is another one, its location even closer to the core of what it means to be virtuous. According to Bailey, and building on McDowell's theory of virtuous perception, part of what it is to be a virtuous agent is to reliably apprehend the world in a particular "emotional light": to acknowledge and be attracted to the things which one ought to do and be indifferent to or repulsed by those which one should not do. This emotional perspective is what one imaginatively recreates when one empathizes and so, for the reasons already mentioned, one cannot empathize with vicious or weak-willed or merely continent perspectives.⁴ This is, in its turn, bad. Firstly, it is bad because (1) we often need to be empathized with even when our emotional perspective is less-than-virtuous, as being empathized with offers relief from a particular form of suffering. Secondly, it is bad because (2) a virtuous person is one who effectively ministers to other's needs.

The picture of the virtuous as, among other things, one who can effectively minister to other's needs, is certainly a plausible one, especially

provided that those needs are legitimate and important ones. And that such needs – to be empathized with even when one’s emotional state is far from virtuous – are *sometimes* both legitimate and important can hardly be denied. Jealousy, envy, laziness, Schadenfreude, anger, sadness at losing something one did not rightfully own – such feelings and many others like them are often unavoidable for us mortals and can make our life more bitter than we would like. To this, our sole consolation is often “that relief which nothing can afford him but the entire concord of the affectations of the spectators with his own. To see the emotions of their hearts, in every respect, beat time to his own.” (Smith 1982 [1759], 22)

From this purview, it seems like we have a puzzle on our hands which is even more challenging to our conception of virtue than the one proposed by Morton – not because the intuitions behind it are stronger but because it touches upon something which is even more internal to virtuousness than knowledge of “important (albeit vicious) parts of human possibility”. At least on our contemporary, moralized conception of virtue – one which the author shares – it would be highly counterintuitive to expect progress in virtuousness to be necessarily associated with regress in our capacity to “be there” for others by empathizing with their less-than-virtuous emotional reactions. Indeed, we know ourselves to be capable of more than a little jealousy, laziness, anger, envy or Schadenfreude and we also believe to know ourselves to be needful of the very same consolation Adam Smith so eloquently describes in the quote above.

Should there be any chance of escaping this conundrum and avoiding an incoherency at the very heart of the concept of virtue, I contend that this chance must lie in a closer examination of the nature of our need to be empathized with precisely in connection to our imperfect or problematic emotions. The best place to begin with is a closer look at what Olivia Bailey, the very proponent of our dilemma, has to say about this.

Essentially, Bailey argues that we have a basic need to be understood, one connected with the need for a certain intimacy which becomes impossible when understanding is lacking. This need for being understood is itself related to the basic fact of the normative intelligibility of our emotions for ourselves: Even when we refuse to endorse our laziness or our Schadenfreude, in being gripped by these emotions they will appear to us as intrinsically intelligible reactions to adverse circumstances. It is the failure of the virtuous to appreciate this intelligibility, to *get it*, which becomes a failure to *get us*, and as such a breaking down of the intimacy which only mutual understanding makes possible. In small doses, this can be tolerable, but where it repeats itself or where larger life-events are in play, this can lead to genuine suffering – a suffering which often fails to materialize in real life because we are lucky enough not to be surrounded by hyper-virtuous friends.

Let us suppose, to build on Bailey's own example, that I find myself in a situation in which I have a duty to tell the truth but where doing so would come at a great personal cost. For instance, suppose I have come upon evidence that there is egregious corruption going on at the governmental agency I am working for. I have been working here for only a year and have just managed to settle into a modicum of financial stability in which I feel I can afford to even consider fulfilling my dream of starting a family. However, I cannot simply let this pass: the scale of corruption is such that it affects innumerable people who are themselves in a much more precarious situation than me. I know what my duty is, but the cost of fulfilling it means that I am greatly tempted to forego doing the right thing. Sharing my situation with a friend, I certainly don't expect any encouragement to pursue the self-interested course of action. But I do expect – and sorely need – some understanding for the difficulty of my choice. Alas, my friend is virtuous and in her virtuous perspective on the situation she fails to grasp my dilemma. For her, telling the truth and exposing corruption in this case is clearly more important, and thus more attractive, than remaining silent. Remember that to be virtuous is to have one's affective responses attuned to the normative aspects of the situation, and so the virtuous will naturally want to do the right thing. And so, I am left alone with my troubles – convinced, perhaps, of what I should do and *that I will do it*, but still alone and misunderstood in my plight.

The case seems strong for the incompatibility of being virtuous and being capable of intimate communion with the non-virtuous and of “ministering” to their very needs of such intimacy. And yet, I believe that a closer look at the psychological profile of the virtuous and at the needs of the less-than-virtuous will show us that things are not as dire as they seem.

Firstly, one of the main obstacles to understanding according to Bailey is the fact that the virtuous, on the now classic McDowellian account, cannot find the non-virtuous course of action attractive at all. According to Bailey, the virtuous will simply be uninterested in the bad course of action and will certainly fail to be pained by the fact that she may not pursue it. For my part, I am skeptical about some of these assumptions concerning the moral psychology of virtue. I see no reason why the virtuous should not be saddened by the prospective loss of material well-being. Indeed, I am somewhat inclined to suspect that an implicit “stoic” picture of the virtuous is in play here, one on which the virtuous only cares about virtue itself or moral value and duty. Otherwise, one must assume that the virtuous agent would normally care about their material comfort, but that they miraculously stop caring when something morally more weighty hangs in the balance.

However, the weightier objection against this picture of virtue seems to me the following. We have, I take it, as part of our cultural

heritage, a model of perfect virtue that both aims to surpass in normative ambition anything offered by Greek philosophy and is obviously less rigoristic in its ethics of affect than Bailey and McDowell would accept. It is the biblical portrait of Jesus Christ in the garden of Gethsemane praying “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” (Matthew 26:39 NIV) The fact that this is generally perceived not as a sign of weakness and lack of virtue on behalf of Jesus Christ but as a sign of humanity that is compatible with his perfection shows something important about our intuitions concerning the nature of virtue. It shows that we do not expect of the virtuous to be indifferent towards their losses, towards what they must give up considering the circumstances. But if they need not be themselves indifferent to their losses in order to be virtuous, they can just as well empathize with our own plight. Just as I do in my weakness, they can *also wish* that they would not have to suffer and give up central aspects of their well-being. Ergo, they can empathize with my own wish.

There is, I believe, a further root to Bailey’s skepticism about the empathetic possibilities of virtuous agents. It is not only my attraction towards the morally inferior course of action which I need my friend to empathize with, it is my failure to be adequately attracted to the good. Even as we need not conceive the virtuous as failing to be saddened by her prospective loss, we certainly must imagine her as sincerely preferring the moral course of action, as being more attracted by *that*. And yet...

Somewhat unexpectedly, the very example of Jesus’ prayer in the garden seems to disprove this assumption as well. Jesus is supposed to be perfect, a model of virtue the likes of which the world has not seen. And yet, there he is, expressing a clear preference for an outcome which, as the whole story presupposes, is normatively inferior: the outcome in which he does not suffer and die on the cross. Again, I take it that we are not meant to understand this as a moment of falling away from virtue, of temptation which reveals imperfection. The point of the story seems to me that Jesus *does not waiver*, but he nevertheless experiences a moment in which the good he is striving towards is somehow eclipsed by the suffering which awaits him. I take it that the very point of the story and the crowning of his *human virtue* is that he remains loyal to his good mission despite this goodness being temporarily hidden from view.⁵ I believe this too fits our intuitions about virtue and shows how it is possible for the virtuous to empathize with less-than-virtuous emotional perspectives. It is possible for the virtuous to be steadfast in their commitment to do good and yet fail to be immediately moved by and fully aware of the goodness of the right course of action – indeed to be, on a certain level, more moved by what they are in danger of losing. Because this state is not incompatible with virtue, myself being in

this state of feeling more attracted to the self-interested course of action is not incompatible with being empathized with by my virtuous friend.

In introducing these claims, do we run the risk of completely erasing the distinction between the motivational profile of the virtuous and that of the non-virtuous? At least one distinction does seem to remain just by looking at our examples, namely that of steadfastness. The virtuous appreciates the value of what she is about to lose in acting virtuously and wishes she did not have to lose it but at no point does she consider straying from the virtuous path. In other words: she may be torn emotionally – she will still be attached to what she is about to renounce – but she is not torn practically. In ours and Bailey's example of non-virtuous motivation, on the other hand, we may freely acknowledge the possibility of both ways of being torn. We are torn on the emotional level because we fear and loath giving up our material well-being and we are torn on the practical level because we are actually wavering between the two options: the whistle-blowing option of making our knowledge of corruption public and the self-interested option of keeping quiet. The crucial question is whether *this latter* component of our situation is one we need others to empathize with, lest we suffer of being lonely and not understood. To my mind, this is not the case, and certainly nothing that Bailey writes seems to me to commit her to this position. Moreover, if the distinction drawn above is correct, namely between being emotionally torn – something which the virtuous can empathize with – and being practically torn and wavering, then it follows directly that the latter state cannot be object of empathy since it is not an emotional state at all.

To sum up: there are more things the virtuously motivated can empathize with than might have been initially apparent. This is because the virtuous is not someone whose emotions immediately home in on the right thing to do and remain indifferent to everything else. On the contrary, they might even prefer doing something else without losing their virtuous steadfastness. This is possible on account of a fact which I believe has not been sufficiently appreciated by theorists of virtue: the fact that, while the virtuous will remain steadfastly attached to the good, the *goodness of the good* will not always be immediately and fully apparent. It may be eclipsed by suffering and regret or simply be temporarily absent. Seeing such a state as an essential dimension of human virtue as opposed to a mark of imperfection might be connected to intuitions about the value of humanity which are themselves eclipsed if one remains too tied to an Aristotelian framework of thinking about these matters.

Notes

¹ See for a forceful and recent defense of the value of empathy, Bailey, Olivia. “Empathy with Vicious Perspectives? A Puzzle about the Moral Limits of Empathetic Imagination.” *Synthese (Dordrecht)* 199, no. 3/4 (2021): 9621–47.

² See, for instance, Bailey, *Empathy with vicious perspectives* and Morton, Adam. “18 Empathy for the Devil.” In *Empathy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

³ We are reminded here of Bernard Williams’ critique of utilitarianism as involving *one though too many*, i.e. as being indecent. The critique appear at the end of the paper *Persons, Character and Morality*, in: Williams, Bernard. *Moral Luck : Philosophical Papers, 1973-1980 / Bernard Williams*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

⁴ On the distinction between virtue and mere continence, see McDowell, John (1985). Values and Secondary Qualities. In Honderich, Ted, and J. L. Mackie. *Morality and Objectivity : A Tribute to J. L. Mackie / Ed. by Ted Honderich*. London [u.a: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985: 110-129.

⁵ I take the culmination of this hiding from view to be Jesus cry on the cross “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46 NIV)

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Fabian PITRETI *

La narrazione nelle religioni**

Alcune ragioni sul linguaggio narrativo nella fede cristiana e nella ricerca di se stessi

Narrative in religions
Some reasons on narrative language in Christian faith and self-searching

Abstract: This article investigates the profound role of narrative language within religious contexts, particularly Christianity. Starting with Nietzsche's metaphor of humanity as a "rope" stretched between the animal and the Übermensch, the article explores the human identity as inherently narrative and dynamic, constantly woven and reshaped through storytelling. The article questions why religions, despite the modern dominance of visual media, continue to emphasize narrative language over more precise or logical forms of communication. Drawing on thinkers such as Paul Ricoeur and Umberto Eco, it argues that narratives uniquely construct meaning, facilitate identity formation, and transform human understanding of self, God, and the world. Biblical and religious narratives are highlighted as paradigmatic examples, serving not only to reveal divine identity but also to profoundly affect and reshape human identity. Ultimately, the article proposes that narratives remain essential because they bridge temporal, existential, and spiritual dimensions, providing coherence, healing, and transformative insight to human existence.

Keywords: narrative; religion; interpretation; identity; Ricoeur; Eco

Friedrich Nietzsche, all'inizio del suo saggio *Così parlò Zarathustra*, mette sulle labra di Zarathustra in interessante metafora: "*Der Mensch ist ein Seil, geknüpft zwischen Tier und Übermensch – ein Seil über einem Abgrunde*", cioè "l'uomo è una corda tesa tra l'animale e il superuomo — una corda sopra un abisso". Quasi a dire che l'uomo è una corda, cioè un tessuto, un tessuto che è sempre teso verso il suo destino. Potremmo dire, in altre parole, che l'uomo è un tessere il suo io, la sua identità che lo orienta, che lo tende verso l'animale e verso il superuomo. Il suo essere, il suo io, la sua identità, in altre parole, non è un'identità già data e fissata una volta per sempre ma è un'identità in evoluzione, è un'identità che cambia in base alla tessitura della

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corda e alla direzione di senso della corda, è un'identità narrativa (Ricoeur 2009, 93-104), come direbbe Paul Ricoeur, che tesse sempre se stessa e che la tiene sospesa verso il suo compimento.

Con questa metafora molto suggestiva di Nietzsche vogliamo entrare nella nostra riflessione cercando appunto di chiarire cosa significhi questo essere sospesi e cosa possa significare questa corda su cui camminiamo e su cui tessiamo sempre la nostra identità. E alla luce di essa cercare una risposta alla domanda perché le narrazioni e i racconti sono così presenti quindi sono così necessari alle religioni, alla fede e, in fondo, alla nostra vita? Perché la fede non può nascere altrimenti se non tramite la narrazione, tramite la predicazione come direbbe San Paolo (Rm 10. 17). E ancora di più, perché la narrazione è uno dei linguaggi più scelti delle religioni quindi implicitamente dalla fede cristiana? Perché le religioni non comunicano solo attraverso delle immagini o tramite delle rivelazioni mistiche o soltanto tramite dei gesti? Perché non usano il linguaggio della logica o un altro tipo di linguaggio? Il linguaggio di Dio, si diceva nell'epoca moderna con Galileo Galilei e Newton, è la matematica quindi, perché non usano un linguaggio più esatto rispetto a quello della narrazione? Sarà forse la narrazione una specie di "corda", come suggeriva Nietzsche e come, tra l'altro, tutte le religioni ritengono di essere? (Benasayag 2013, 14)

Queste domande conquistano attualità se consideriamo che noi viviamo in un'epoca dominata dalle immagini e dalla fruizione rapida dei contenuti. La nostra percezione del mondo è ormai mediata in gran parte da dispositivi visivi e interattivi, dai social media ai video brevi su piattaforme come TikTok, dai messaggi visivi immediati su Instagram e dalle *story* che scorrono velocemente su Snapchat. In questo scenario, l'immagine è diventata quasi la lingua universale del nostro mondo, il *touch* il mezzo privilegiato e lo *scrolling* un atto naturale e quasi involontario. In uno scenario così, sembra che la "corda" della nostra vita o si dissolve perché perde consistenza, perché marcisce o si spezza perché si irrigidisce. Siamo immersi in un flusso continuo di immagini che affievoliscono sempre di più il nostro impegno riflessivo e volitivo, condannandoci lentamente e tacitamente ad una vita rassegnata e intrecciata di "sentimenti tristi" ((Benasayag 2013, 14), ad una vita che forse non sa più "tendersi" verso il suo compimento come suggeriva Nietzsche.

Se da un lato però l'immagine sembra dominare il nostro quotidiano, dall'altro la parola, specie nella sua forma narrativa, se pur marginale, rimane uno strumento essenziale per costruire senso, per articolare le nostre esperienze e per organizzare il nostro pensiero. La narrazione, infatti, non è un semplice canale comunicativo, ma è una via che intreccia il tempo e lo spazio, il sacro e il profano, per dare forma e direzione alla vita umana. Per guarire e per riorientare la natura umana. Infatti, una delle realtà più impregnate di narrazioni e di parola, è proprio la

fedele cristiana come paradigma di tutte le religioni, una fede che, lungo i secoli, è stata ed è, tuttora, la via per la salvezza umana.

Nel quadro delineato fin qui, siamo chiamati a porci una domanda rilevante: in un contesto così radicalmente trasformato dai media visivi e interattivi, a cosa servono i racconti? E, in particolare, a cosa servono i racconti nelle religioni, dove le storie non sono semplicemente forme di intrattenimento, ma veicoli di significato e di verità su Dio, sul mondo e sull'uomo? Infine, perché le religioni tesoreggiano e, possiamo dire, si intestardiscono a parlare al mondo quasi esclusivamente attraverso il linguaggio narrativo e non tramite altri tipi di linguaggio? Non dovrebbe essere, come inizialmente annunciava San Agostino, che "Dio e l'anima - e null'altro di mezzo- comunichino"? Come giustamente si chiede anche Joseph Ratzinger nel suo saggio *Introduzione al cristianesimo*, "non dovrebbe essere che ogni uomo abbia accesso a Dio se la religione è tassativamente una realtà che interessa tutti e ciascuno, e se ognuno è egualmente chiamato in causa da Dio?" (Ratzinger 2003, 60).

Il presente articolo si propone quindi di rispondere a queste domande e, in questo modo, di esplorare il significato della narrazione, riflettendo in particolare sul ruolo che i racconti giocano nelle religioni e nella vita dell'uomo. Analizzeremo come i racconti, pur sembrando in contrasto con la predominanza dell'immagine, possano aiutarci a riprendere consapevolezza che siamo, come suggeriva Nietzsche, "una corda tesa e sospesa", una corda che, se è vero che ci tende verso l'io e il superuomo, è altrettanto vero che ci tende verso Dio e verso noi stessi perché, come diceva papa Francesco, noi siamo dei tessuti (Papa Francesco 2022, 6), siamo tessuti dalla parola del nostro io, ma siamo tessuti anche dalla parola dell'altro, quindi dal nostro fratello ma anche dalla parola di Dio che con il suo *logos*, con la sua grazia, con il suo amore che continua a tessere la nostra vita e il nostro destino, continua, forse, anche ad attirarci a lui.

Narrazione o racconto?

Entrando in merito della nostra riflessione, dobbiamo innanzitutto chiarire i due termini che useremo in questo articolo e che saranno, in fondo, i due concetti a cui ci rifaremo lungo la nostra indagine.

Il termine "narrazione", nel linguaggio comune, viene spesso sovrapposto al termine "racconto" cosa che faremo anche noi, se pur ammettiamo che sono termini distinti.

Con il termine "narrazione" intendiamo un atto più ampio e strutturale che riguarda il modo in cui gli eventi vengono organizzati e interpretati per costruire un senso. Filosofi come Paul Ricoeur hanno sottolineato come la narrazione sia un processo di *mimesis*, ovvero di configurazione della realtà attraverso il racconto (Ricoeur 1983). La

narrazione, quindi, non è solo una descrizione di eventi, ma una modalità con cui gli esseri umani danno ordine e significato alla loro esperienza temporale. In questo senso, possiamo dire che il racconto, a differenza della narrazione, è l'espressione circoscritta di essa. Il racconto, detto altrimenti, è il prodotto specifico della narrazione, con una forma definita (orale, scritta, visiva, ecc.). Se la narrazione è il processo, il racconto è il risultato oppure l'artefatto narrativo. Il racconto è il testo o il discorso che narra, che da forma concreta alla trama narrativa.

Roland Barthes, nel suo saggio *S/Z* suggerisce che la narrazione sia una struttura sottostante che permette la realizzazione di vari racconti, ciascuno dei quali rappresenta una realizzazione parziale o un'interpretazione di quella struttura (Barthes 2022, 22). Lo stesso anche Gerard Genette, uno dei massimi teorici della narratologia che ha sviluppato un'analisi approfondita dei meccanismi della narrazione attraverso concetti come il "tempo narrativo", la focalizzazione e l'ordine degli eventi, nel suo libro *Figures III*, sottolinea come la narrazione sia distinta dal racconto (Genette 1972, 10). La narrazione, secondo lui, si occupa della relazione tra l'autore, il narratore e il lettore, mentre il racconto si concentra sulla presentazione di eventi in un testo finito (Aristotele 2019, 1450a). Dunque, possiamo osservare che Genette distingue tra la narrazione come atto che organizza gli eventi, e il racconto come una serie di eventi raccontati in un ordine narrativo, un procedimento che fa parte di un discorso narrativo complesso.

Pur tenendo presenti queste distinzioni, nella nostra riflessione useremo questi due termini come sinonimi, poiché, a nostro parere, la narratività si manifesta sempre tramite un racconto e il racconto è sempre, sostanzialmente, una narratività, anche se specifica e con un dato concreto. Guardando, per esempio, alla fede cristiana, è vero che ci sono vari racconti ma, in fondo, tutta la fede cristiana¹ è una narrazione.

La narrazione, una corda per ritrovare se stessi

Una prima risposta agli interrogativi iniziali potremmo dedurla da un'esperienza molto comune che tutti noi facciamo: quando qualcuno ci chiede chi siamo, non gli facciamo vedere una nostra fotografia, non proiettiamo un ologramma con la nostra identità ma, di solito, cominciamo a raccontargli qualcosa di noi, un pezzo della nostra storia. E raccontando quella storia riveliamo, appunto, chi siamo. Quasi a dire che la narrazione è il dinamismo non solo dell'espressione della nostra identità ma addirittura della costituzione oppure della costruzione della nostra identità.

È interessante notare, ancora, che nel raccontarci non riferiamo ogni attimo dello scorrere della nostra esistenza ma facciamo delle scelte, selezionando non solo alcuni episodi della nostra vita ma anche delle parole

e delle frasi per raccontarli. Quasi a dire che il racconto della nostra vita non è un semplice scorrere degli eventi o di ricordi passati ma è uno scegliere e un comporre, come intuiva Aristotele nella *Poetica*, 1450a, certi eventi e certi ricordi del passato per tesserli in quella storia e quindi in quella risposta.

Anche le narrazioni bibliche o religiose, ad uno sguardo più attento, come le nostre narrazioni, sono delle composizioni, sono delle composizioni che mostrano Dio o mostrano noi stessi (Wacker 1981). Quasi a dire che l'identità di Dio non è un qualcosa che qualcuno ha visto, ha fotografato e per poi consegnarcela, piuttosto l'identità di Dio emerge dalla trama del racconto biblico, dalla selezione di alcuni fatti della storia vissuta dal popolo eletto oppure di alcuni personaggi che vengono legati, tessuti quindi raccontati in un certo modo. È bello infatti, e forse sorprendente, che anche il Dio giudaico-cristiano si comunica, si rivela, sempre per via della narratività. Egli comincia a parlare al suo popolo... comincia a rivelarsi tramite la parola che diventa racconto. Gli evangelisti stessi rivelano l'identità divino-umana di Gesù raccontando alcuni fatti tramite alcune parole o alcune frasi che diventano paradigmatiche (Rusconi 2017).

Tuttavia, se il racconto è ciò che rivela la nostra identità, il racconto è anche ciò che investe la nostra identità e la modifica. Infatti, nessun racconto su Dio è fine a se stesso... tutti i racconti, tutte le narrazioni, vengono raccontate per inserire l'uomo nella storia di Dio. Per conquistare l'uomo a Dio; per pescare l'uomo da Dio. E questo è uno dei principali effetti del racconto e, in particolare, delle narrazioni religiose. Infatti, tutte le volte che Dio parla all'uomo, la sua parola lo tocca, la cambia, lo conquista. La sua parola è come una spada a doppio taglio (*Ebrei* 4,12). Pensiamo alla commovente scena del libro dell'Esodo in cui il popolo ebraico trovandosi gravato dagli egiziani, grida a Dio, gli racconta il suo dolore e Dio, ascolta, accoglie il suo grido, addirittura, si commuove (cf. *Es* 3, 7-10).

Un'altra scena biblica significativa, e forse ancora più paradigmatica è il racconto che il profeta Natan fa a Davide dopo il suo peccato: la storia di un uomo che, pur avendo tante pecore, è andato a prendersi l'unica pecorella di un povero pastore per preparare un banchetto al suo ospite. Quindi, nonostante quella storia non parlasse di Davide, egli si sente interpellato, si sente fuso da quella storia, al punto che quando il profeta gli rivela che quell'uomo malvagio è proprio lui arriva non solo a riconoscere di essere peccatore, ma anche a sentirsi tale. Il racconto lo punge. La sua identità viene colpita, viene forata e drammaticamente trasformata dalla storia e dalla sentenza del profeta. Come, per dare un altro esempio, succede ad Edipo o ad altri personaggi che si sentono attratti e trapassati dalla parola dell'altro.

Un altro motivo per cui le religioni scelgono probabilmente il linguaggio narrativo è la sua funzione taumaturgica. Per molti secoli e,

nonostante la secolarizzazione, ancora oggi, le religioni hanno sempre avuto un tratto taumaturgico molto pronunciato. Al di là del possibile intervento soprannaturale della grazia, il linguaggio narrativo è un linguaggio che guarisce, come attesta l'esperienza che è possibile fare nell'ambito del colloquio psicoterapeutico. La psicanalisi, come ricorda Massimo Recalcati, ci insegna il "peso delle parole" ma, forse ancora di più, ci insegna il peso della narrazione che fa sì che le parole siano in grado di "spostare le vite delle persone, che lascino segni, accendano entusiasmi e ricordi, aprano i cuori, armino le mani, sentenzino, liberino, incatenino, sconvolgano, sospingano all'odio o all'amore, aprano o chiudano i mondi"².

Durante le sedute e gli incontri di cura, l'analista raccoglie dei frammenti di vita, pezzi a cui il paziente non è in grado di dare un senso, forse per paura o incapacità, e prova a mettere insieme quei frammenti, secondo una certa logica e provando a cercarne un senso e glielo restituisce. Questo testo di vita ricomposto, quindi il racconto, però, da una parte, opera uno spostamento esistenziale nel lettore cioè nel paziente perché fa sì che egli prenda distanza da se stesso; quindi, dagli eventi che lo hanno segnato, dai suoi traumi dal suo passato. E da un'altra parte, lo inserisce in un nuovo orizzonte di vita, cioè in un nuovo racconto, cioè nel racconto che lo psicanalista restituisce al paziente, affinché riconosca il senso ipotizzato dall'analista o ritrovi egli stesso un nuovo senso nelle cose" (Piccolo 2020, 9). Ritrovando quel senso, egli sente una specie di benessere, di liberazione: si sente guarito. Dunque, il racconto serve per trovare un filo narrativo, per legare i pezzi della nostra vita. Ma, contemporaneamente a questa felice ricerca, esso ci sposta, ci distanzia dal nostro passato, dai nostri ricordi, dal nostro io ferito. Ci sospende in attesa di una nuova trama³, di una trama che non è frutto di un passato ignorato, dimenticato o cancellato ma tutto il contrario: è frutto di un passato riletto, reinterpretato quindi raccontato in una maniera nuova. Il racconto, dunque fa esistere il passato in modi nuovi. Il passato non è soltanto ciò che è accaduto ma viene sempre trasformato attraverso i nostri racconti. Ecco, dunque, che il racconto ci mostra che il raccontare ha un potere generativo e non solo descrittivo del passato.

Tuttavia, questo processo di comprensione di sé e di guarigione del sé non è così immediato e così semplice. Chi ha vissuto la difficoltà della depressione o dello smarrimento spirituale sa quanto è ardua questa esperienza. Infatti, tornando all'esempio dell'analista e del paziente, non basta che lo psicanalista confezioni un racconto e lo consegni al paziente ma bisogna che il paziente ci si ritrovi, cioè si identifichi, si immedesimi, si riconosca nella trama costruita. Bisogna, in qualche modo, che la trama di quel racconto non sia costruita più soltanto dallo psicanalista ma che sia costruita insieme allo psicanalista.

La storia che Sant'Ignazio (Ignazio di Loyola 2015) racconta nel suo libro autobiografico, *Il racconto del Pellegrino*, riporta in terza persona la sua vicenda, in particolare il momento, chiamiamolo di conversione, in cui, costretto a una lunga degenza a letto, chiese di avere dei libri da leggere e gli furono dati l'*Imitatio Christi* e alcune biografie di santi.

La lettura di quei libri però lo portò a sperimentare una cosa particolarissima: si accorse per la prima volta che i suoi stati d'animo cambiano, sia come intensità sia come permanenza. Sperimenta che i racconti che legge, in verità, lo leggono, e leggendolo lo portano a sentimenti diversi perché il suo immaginario è diverso, perché egli stesso si immagina in maniera diversa (quando leggeva libri con cavalieri si sentiva un cavaliere quando invece leggeva libri con la vita dei santi si sentiva, si immaginava come san Francesco e allora sperimentava degli stati d'animo di bene). Dunque, ogni racconto ci interpella. Ogni racconto tende a conquistare la nostra mente e i nostri affetti, ma non ogni racconto ci fa bene. Non ogni racconto è un bene per la nostra vita. E questo lo deduciamo, direbbe Sant'Ignazio, dagli stati d'animo che permangono dopo esser stati fusi dal racconto.

Infine, un ultimo insegnamento, secondo me molto importante, che il racconto ci consegna consiste in una distinzione tra il reale e la realtà (Lacan 2001, 152; Lacan 2011, 87): Davide è un personaggio reale, l'adulterio e l'omicidio da lui commesso è reale ma lui vive in una sua realtà, una realtà che cambia soltanto con la storia raccontata dal profeta Natan. Lo psicanalista è un personaggio reale, il paziente sempre un personaggio reale ma il lavoro che loro svolgono, la terapia che essi percorrono è una realtà. Ma in questa distinzione vi è uno zoccolo duro: se la realtà può, diciamo così, crivellare il reale, il reale buca, traumatizza sempre la realtà. Il reale mette sempre in crisi la realtà. La verità è sempre determinata, delimitata, definita, non dal lettore, che è il protagonista della realtà ma dal reale, dai fatti e non dai racconti. Questo è un insegnamento molto importante per il realismo filosofico.

Il racconto come “tessuto”

Come è possibile però che il racconto operi ciò? Cosa è questa tessitura “magica” che investe il racconto? Come sono fatti i racconti, come è fatto il mondo e come siamo fatti noi da comportarci così, da essere trafitti dalle storie che sentiamo, come Davide, da essere guariti dalle storie che raccontiamo? Come funzionano le religioni? Il filosofo Gaetano Piccolo e lo psicanalista Massimo Recalcati, sulle scie di Jacques Lacan, direbbero che siamo “fatti di parole” (Piccolo 2025), che siamo fatti proprio di racconti. I racconti sono la nostra culla e il nostro vestito intimo. Ma come

sono fatti i racconti? Di che cosa oppure in che modo sono plasmati, di modo che riescono a narrare qualcosa?

La tessitura della corda oppure la semantica del racconto: Paul Ricoeur

Secondo Paul Ricoeur, il racconto è come una scena teatrale tragica (Pitreti 2024, 75). Infatti, egli, in *Tempo e racconto*, riflette sulla tragedia greca di Edipo Re discussa da Aristotele, in cui vengono dati alcuni criteri per farne un buon racconto. E per Ricoeur, come per Aristotele, il racconto per essere un buon racconto, deve generare la *mimesis*, o meglio, deve permettere la *mimesis* quindi l'identificazione dello spettatore o del lettore con la trama del racconto⁴. Il fulcro del racconto, secondo il filosofo francese, sta nel suo potere mimetico. Esso genera una fusione fra lo spettatore, fra il lettore o l'ascoltatore e il *mythos* del racconto, quindi la trama del racconto. Il racconto opera una "fusione d'orizzonte", che è molto più che conoscenza mentale o intuitiva perché tocca le emozioni, le paure, l'immaginario e di conseguenza gli stati d'animo del lettore. Infatti, l'abbiamo sperimentato tutti, dopo uno spettacolo, dopo una storia letta o sentita oppure dopo un film che ci ha commosso, che ci ha toccato, non si è più come prima. Ci ritroviamo feriti, cambiati, ci ritroviamo con altri stati d'animo.

Ma torniamo ancora una volta alla domanda specifica: come avviene la *mimesis* oppure come è fatto un racconto perché operi questa trasformazione?

Secondo Ricoeur, la *mimesis* è strettamente legata al *mythos*, quindi alla trama o all'intrigo del racconto. È risaputo infatti che Aristotele nella *Poetica*, intuisce un legame di interdipendenza fra la *mimesis* e il *mythos*. Egli sostiene infatti che "*mimesis* dell'azione è l'intrigo"⁵. Ma intendere che la *mimesis* è un effetto del *mythos* significa riconoscere che le due componenti della narrazione "sono da intendere non come 'strutture' ma come 'operazioni', cioè come un processo di costruzione di intrighi rispettivamente come processo attivo, dinamico di imitazione o rappresentazione d'azione" (Pitreti 2024, 75).

Questo passaggio porta Ricoeur ad allargare il concetto aristotelico di *mimesis* e ad interpretarlo in maniera circolare e ternaria, arrivando a parlare di "triplice *mimesis*" (Ricoeur 1983, 88).

Il primo stadio della *mimesis*, manifesta tre aspetti per Ricoeur: i tratti strutturali, i tratti simbolici e i tratti temporali. Innanzitutto, questo primo stadio della *mimesis* si manifesta come una precomprensione del mondo dell'azione, grazie a cui il soggetto interagisce con il mondo: "se è vero che l'intrigo è una imitazione di azione, è indispensabile una competenza previa: la capacità di identificare l'azione in generale mediante i suoi aspetti strutturali (...) se imitare vuol dire elaborare una significazione espressa

dell'azione, si richiede un'altra competenza: la capacità di riconoscere quelle che chiamo le mediazioni simboliche dell'azione (...) cogliere i tratti temporali dai quali derivano più direttamente la capacità stessa dell'azione ad essere raccontata e forse il bisogno di raccontarla" (Ricoeur 1983, 88).

Il secondo momento della *mimesis*, cioè *mimesis* II, viene chiamato da Ricoeur momento "configurativo". Esso consiste in una ripresa dell'azione, che viene collocata all'interno di un "mythos", all'interno di un disegno narrativo, dunque molto più di un semplice mettere ordine o dare linearità all'eterogeneità.

Mimesis III è il momento della rfigurazione del lettore che avviene come effetto dell' "l'intersezione tra il mondo del testo e il mondo del lettore o dell'uditore" (Ricoeur 1983, 109). Per rfigurazione si deve intendere quindi l'incontro effettivo del lettore e del racconto ma soprattutto l'effetto che tale incontro produce, o, come direbbe Gadamer, l'atto di applicare l'orizzonte del racconto a sé stesso (Ricoeur 1983, 109).

Cercando di "tradurre" in parole più semplici questa teoria della *mimesis* di Ricoeur, possiamo dire che gli scenari che emergono nell'immaginario del lettore non sono prodotti dall'autore del testo oppure dal testo stesso ma si realizzano nell'interazione del lettore con la trama del testo (*mimesis* II), e questo in base a tre elementi: le attese del lettore – *mimesis* I (precomprensione del lettore - Io leggo un certo testo oppure mi avvicino ad un certo oggetto, animato da una certa attesa e mi aspetto certe cose o certi effetti. Ma io ho certe attese perché io e il testo partecipiamo ad un senso comune, perché riconosco una sequenzialità temporale, ecc.), gli spazi vuoti disseminati nel testo, e ai condizionamenti culturali. Quindi, grazie a questi elementi, la *mimesis* genera una *catharsis*, quindi una trasformazione emozionale e morale del lettore (*mimesis* III), come nel caso di Natan e degli altri esempi che abbiamo visto, che non è ancora né una trasformazione etica, né concettuale, ma di animo, esistenziale, di veduta del sé e del mondo. È una modificazione degli stati proposizionali direbbe Donald Davidson, quindi ciò che tu spera, ciò che tu credi, ciò che tu senti non è più come prima (Davidson 2003, 122).

Al cuore di questo processo mimetico si colloca, secondo Ricoeur, il lavoro di due meccanismi che operano nell'animo del lettore, due meccanismi già colti e discussi da Kant: lo "schematismo trascendentale" e l'"immaginazione produttrice" (Ricoeur 1983, 106-107; Kant 2004, 25). Sia l'uno che l'altro, ribadisce Ricoeur, sono "categorie dell'interazione tra l'operatività della scrittura e quella della lettura" (Ricoeur 1983, 116). Sono due "aspetti complementari che assicurano la continuità del processo che unisce *mimesis* II a *mimesis* III" (Ricoeur 1985, 106)⁶.

Ma oltre al funzionamento effettivo di questi due meccanismi, è importante per questa ricerca sottolineare un particolare colto da Kant e

forse non abbastanza enfatizzato né da Ricoeur né da altri filosofi, che ultimamente comincia ad essere di interesse: Kant nota che lo “schematismo”, e l’immaginazione produttrice” è “un’arte celata nel profondo dell’anima umana” (Ricoeur 1985, 75). Detto altrimenti, noi siamo fatti per narrare e siamo nati con il bisogno di narrazioni. Noi siamo come una “corda tesa” tra noi stessi e il nostro sé.

Dunque, per Ricoeur l’“immaginazione produttrice” è da intendere come immaginazione ma non come una facoltà di tipo psicologizzante bensì trascendentale e lo schematismo come ciò che “regge l’intelligenza narrativa” nel senso che “permette delle devianze” (Ricoeur 1984, 35) e che viene prima dell’esperienza oppure permette l’esperienza. Non meno importante è cogliere questa necessità di ordine, di coerenza narrativa che abita l’uomo in maniera innata. Infatti, lo schematismo e l’immaginazione funzionano come una ricerca d’ordine, come una ricerca di coerenza, quindi di narratività, per mezzo di nessi secondo somiglianza. E la neuroscienza attuale conferma questa tesi di Kant e di Ricoeur.

Senza entrare nei particolari, Noam Chomsky mostra che il nostro cervello nasce con una specie di cablaggio neuronale che non soltanto realizza la narratività ma esige la narratività (Chomsky 2011, 264). Che il nostro inconscio è da intendere, potremmo dire con J. Lacan, proprio come una grammatica, come un linguaggio ancora non parlato, non articolato, come dei frammenti ancora non infilati in una trama. L’essere stesso, il *dasein*, direbbe Heidegger, si dà nel linguaggio. Per questo, il nostro cervello si ammala quando manchiamo di un senso quando non riusciamo a cucire gli episodi della nostra vita in una trama. Dunque, secondo Chomsky, il nostro cervello nasce con un *setting* per una grammatica universale, cioè per la narratività (Chomsky 2011, 264).

I fili della corda oppure la grammatica del racconto: Umberto Eco

Continuando la nostra riflessione, se con Ricoeur abbiamo detto che questa fusione di orizzonti tra il lettore e il testo avviene grazie a delle attese del lettore e a dei vuoti disseminati nel testo che aprono certi scenari immaginari, che questa interazione fra testo e lettore si realizza grazie ai due meccanismi trascendentali dello schematismo e dell’immaginazione, con Umberto Eco, filosofo che forse è più conosciuto per i suoi romanzi che per la sua filosofia, la prospettiva cambia leggermente e, forse, diventa ancora più interessante.

Umberto Eco, da linguista e da uomo puntiglioso, fa un lavoro un po’ più mirato e arriva a dire che questi effetti, questi *ballo* di senso che il racconto genera nel lettore o che il lettore costruisce nella sua mente alla luce del racconto, non hanno niente di magico o di particolare perché, in

verità, non sono altro che gli effetti della grammatica di quel testo. Che non sono altro che dei “filli” semantici, quindi dei “filli” che generano una “corda” di senso.

Cosa è la grammatica? La grammatica è, in poche parole, l'articolazione, la struttura della frase, e riguarda l'abbinamento delle parole in una frase. Dunque, secondo Eco, ogni racconto ha una specie di “struttura aperta” (Eco 1962, 33), oppure, potremo dire con J. Lacan, un inconscio, una *langue* come direbbe De Saussure (2005, 21). Ogni racconto ha un inconscio, una grammatica grazie alla quale traccia dei sentieri o dei “filli” di senso che permettono o che realizzano certe connessioni mentali e quindi certi scenari mentali o dei *frames* con i lettori, che, a loro volta, generano nel lettore dei “mondi possibili” (Eco 2016, 130). In questo modo, sostiene Eco, il testo è il lettore cooperano nella formazione del significato:

«il testo è [...] intessuto di spazi bianchi, di interstizi da riempire, e chi lo ha emesso prevedeva che essi fossero riempiti e li ha lasciati bianchi per due ragioni: anzitutto perché un testo è un meccanismo pigro (o economico) che vive sul plusvalore di senso introdotto dal destinatario [...] E in secondo luogo perché, via via che passa dalla funzione didascalica a quella estetica, un testo vuole lasciar al lettore l'iniziativa interpretativa». (Eco 2016, 52).

Da questo punto di vista, Umberto Eco immagina il racconto come un Dizionario, come una Enciclopedia, come un Labirinto e, infine, come uno Rizoma⁷. Senza passare per tutte queste immagini che, in un certo modo, rappresentano anche una trama di sviluppo del suo pensiero filosofico, possiamo dire che per Eco, il racconto è sempre aperto, cioè si dà per essere letto ed interpretato, anzi, come direbbe J. L. Nancy, “prega di essere letto” (Nancy 2021, 13), ma, nonostante questo, dice Eco, l'interpretazione dipende, da una parte, dalla vastità dell'enciclopedia del lettore e, da un'altra, dall'enciclopedia o dal labirinto tracciato nel testo. Anzi, il racconto quindi chiede di essere letto e interpretato. Ma nel suo darsi alla lettura, esso mette dei limiti cioè chiede di essere letto a modo suo perché è segnato da certe strade, da certi percorsi interpretativi. Esattamente come fa un dizionario o un'enciclopedia. Ti permette, anzi sostiene certe interpretazioni ma nello stesso tempo limita altre possibili interpretazioni con i dati che offre.

Il dizionario o l'enciclopedia, come il testo, *offre delle istruzioni* per la produzione di un dato ‘comportamento’ verbale e/o non verbale (Eco 2016, 23). Per questo, Eco parla di “passeggiate inferenziali”, cioè di percorsi, di tentativi di senso e di scenari di senso che devono essere confermati, man mano che la lettura va avanti, dal testo. Dunque, secondo Eco, da come un racconto è fatto, noi possiamo capire che il narratore si

concentra su alcune parole e su alcuni gesti del personaggio costringendo in questo modo il lettore ad immaginare certe cose e a sentire quelle cose. Detto altrimenti, secondo Eco, l'autore di un racconto dissemina nel testo delle "strategie testuali", costruisce dei "lettori modello" in cui si identificano i lettori reali. "Lettore Modello", deve esprimere l'idea che "generare un testo significa attuare una strategia di cui fan parte le previsioni delle mosse altrui" (Eco 2016, 54). È l'autore di un testo che predispone, che orienta, che genera un certo orizzonte della percezione visiva per il lettore. Tramite le parole e la connessione dei fatti, egli stabilisce cosa egli dovrebbe vedere e cosa no, cosa dovrebbe sperimentare e cosa no. Egli dipinge, potremmo dire, l'orizzonte che travolgerà il suo lettore tramite le parole che usa. Egli costruisce delle "corde di senso" su cui il lettore si "aggrappa". Infatti, la nostra vita, la nostra vita profonda, è intessuta di parole e quindi sono le parole a tratteggiare le nostre scene mentali e le nostre precomprensioni che filtrano la nostra visione su noi stessi e sul mondo, esattamente come avviene quando si partecipa a una scena di teatro o si legge un racconto. Infatti, vedere 'mentalmente' una scena è vivere dentro di essa⁸. Per questo, il racconto ha la forza di portare il lettore dove vuole. Il racconto, tramite una sua ossatura, oppure tramite una sua "tessitura" condiziona l'interpretazione dello spettatore anche se gli dà la sensazione che il protagonista dell'interpretazione sia lui (esattamente come nel caso dello psicanalista e del paziente).

Il racconto che ci legge e ci infiamma

Cercando di concludere questa nostra riflessione, possiamo affermare che la scelta del linguaggio narrativo da parte delle religioni in generale, e della cristianità in particolare, più che sorprendere, conferma un aspetto intuito da vari filosofi lungo la storia a cominciare da Platone e Aristotele e continuando con Sant' Agostino fino ai tempi moderni e quelli più recenti con Kant, Ricoeur e Umberto Eco: l'uomo è fatto di parole perché le parole, intese come parole che narrano, sono un prodotto dell'animo umano, direbbe Aristotele (*De interpretatione*, 16a, 3-8), sono lo strumento per rileggere e riassetare l'animo umano, direbbe San Agostino (1994), sono una disposizione dell'animo umano direbbero Kant e Ricoeur, così come abbiamo notato lungo questa riflessione. Tutte posizioni riprese da papa Francesco nel suo *Messaggio per la Giornata mondiale delle comunicazioni sociali* del 2020, dove afferma che noi, umani, "non tessiamo solo abiti ma tessiamo anche racconti". Per non smarrirci, continua il papa, "abbiamo bisogno di respirare la verità delle storie buone (...) nella confusione delle voci e dei messaggi che ci circondano, abbiamo bisogno di una narrazione umana, che ci parli di noi e del bello che ci abita (...) che racconti il nostro essere parte di un tessuto vivo (...) che riveli l'intreccio dei fili coi quali

siamo collegati gli uni agli altri e insieme a Dio” (Papa Francesco 2022, 7). Se è vero, dunque, quanto osserva Michel Foucault, cioè che la narrazione è uno strumento di potere, nel senso che chi controlla la narrazione dominante (storia, discorso pubblico, media) controlla la percezione della realtà, la narrazione è anche il potere attraverso cui Dio ci raggiunge, Dio ci parla, e ci consegna un senso. E nello stesso tempo, è il potere attraverso cui l’uomo grida, parla, prega Dio quindi interagisce con il suo creatore. Le religioni quindi, in particolare la religione cristiana, rivelano e invitano a credere ad un’esperienza di un Dio dialogante, di un Dio che non è soltanto ‘Lògos’ ma che è anche ‘dià-lògos’, non solo mente e pensiero, ma anche colloquio e parola scambiata vicendevolmente fra interlocutori (Ratzinger 2003, 143). Dunque, possiamo dire che le religioni tramite la preferenza per il linguaggio narrativo intuiscono uno dei tratti indelebili di Dio e dell’uomo, cioè che sono uniti non solo dall’essere, come intuiva San Tommaso ma che restano legati uno all’altro tramite la narrazione perché siamo stati fatti e plasmati dal suo soffio, dal suo *logos*, quindi dal suo desiderio di relazione profonda, di donazione profonda e totale.

Abbiamo aperto la nostra riflessione con la metafora della “corda” di Nietzsche, desideriamo chiudere con un’altra immagine, così come Gerschom Scholem chiude il suo libro sulla mistica ebraica (Scholem 1993, 353). Racconta Scholem che “quando il Baal Schem, il fondatore del chassidismo, doveva assolvere un compito difficile, andava in un certo posto nel bosco, accendeva un fuoco, diceva le preghiere e ciò che voleva si realizzava. Quando, una generazione dopo, il Maggid di Meseritsch si trovò di fronte allo stesso problema, si recò in quel posto nel bosco e disse: “non sappiamo più accendere il fuoco, ma possiamo dire le preghiere” – e tutto avvenne secondo il suo desiderio. Ancora una generazione dopo, Rabbi Mosche Leib di Sassov si trovò nella stessa situazione, andò nel bosco e disse: “Non sappiamo più accendere il fuoco, non sappiamo più dire le preghiere, ma conosciamo il posto nel bosco, e questo deve bastare”. E infatti bastò. Ma quando un’altra generazione trascorse e Rabbi Israel di Rischin dovette anch’egli misurarsi con la stessa difficoltà, restò nel suo castello, si mise a sedere sulla sua sedia dorata e disse: “non sappiamo più accendere il fuoco, non siamo capaci di recitare le preghiere e non conosciamo nemmeno il posto nel bosco: ma di tutto questo possiamo raccontare la storia”. E, ancora una volta, questo bastò”.

Notes

¹ Intesa come *fides quae* (la fede come deposito oppure come dato rivelato) – e *fides qua* (la fede intesa come adesione personale al dato rivelato). Si veda in questo senso il primo capitolo della parte secondo di Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduzione al cristianesimo* (Ratzinger 2003)

² Recalcati, Massimo, “Il peso delle parole” in [https://www.massimorecalcati.it/images/Massimo Recalcati - La Repubblica - 10 novembre 2024.pdf](https://www.massimorecalcati.it/images/Massimo_Recalcati_-_La_Repubblica_-_10_novembre_2024.pdf) (06.04.2025).

³ Forse per questo, Gaetano Piccolo riconosce nella *mimesis* una forza oppure una capacità di distanziarci dalla realtà immediata e farci accedere per questa via a un livello di realtà più alto (Piccolo 2020, 97).

⁴ Prima di guardare più da vicino la nozione della *mimesis* nell’opera di Platone e di Aristotele, conviene notare quanto osservato da Lidia Palumbo, e cioè che “lo spettacolo teatrale, in particolare per Platone, non era considerato semplicemente un mezzo di divertimento per il popolo della *polis*. Il teatro, in particolare la tragedia, era innanzitutto un’espressione della condizione delle cose terrestri. Il mondo del teatro è riconosciuto nella sua connotazione di mondo *finto*, di scena verbalmente plasmata dal poeta per rappresentare qualcosa, così che è da questo qualcosa che esso intende rappresentare la rispettiva scena. Infatti, la trama poetica, non soltanto appare diversa a ciascun spettatore, ma appare diversa da ciò che l’autore ha voluto rappresentare. La rappresentazione teatrale, detto altrimenti, generava per lo spettatore un mondo possibile, una realtà virtuale che era articolata da una successione di immagini generate attraverso le parole e i gesti degli attori, capaci di assumere per il pubblico uno statuto di realtà. Le rappresentazioni teatrali nascevano infatti come testo scritto, ma trovavano la loro compiutezza nella fruizione intima e comunitaria durante l’esecuzione della trama” (Palumbo 2008, 24).

⁵ Aristotele, *Poetica* (1450 a1). Per Ricoeur è rilevante che Aristotele difenda con forza la convinzione che la *mimesis* non è *mimesis* dei caratteri, cioè dei personaggi, ma dell’azione dei personaggi, appunto del *mythos*. Mentre la *mimesis* platonica “pone, tra l’opera d’arte e il modello ideale che ne è il fondamento ultimo, una distanza di secondo grado, la *mimesis* di Aristotele ha un solo ambito: il fare umano, le arti di composizione” (Ricoeur 1983, 60).

⁶ Afferma Ricoeur “è noto che per Kant il senso trascendentale del giudizio non consiste tanto nell’unire un soggetto e un predicato, quanto nel porre un diverso intuitivo sotto la regola del concetto”. La parentela è ancora più grande con il giudizio riflettente, continua Ricoeur, “che Kant oppone al giudizio determinante, nel senso che esso riflette sul lavoro di pensiero operante nel giudizio estetico di gusto e nel giudizio teleologico applicato a delle totalità organiche” (Ricoeur 1983, 107).

⁷ Nozione coniata da Gilles Deleuze e Félix Guattari con la quale Eco intende un “viaggio nel complesso spazio di un labirinto: il lettore, come il viaggiatore, procederà per congetture oppure realizzando delle passeggiate inferenziali, durante le quali il lettore opera delle previsioni sul percorso e sul risultato degli eventi narrati”. Un secondo tratto caratteristico della nozione è che il rizoma è un tipo speciale di labirinto in cui ogni punto “può essere connesso e deve essere connesso con qualsiasi altro punto (...) Un rizoma può essere spezzato in un punto qualsiasi e riprendere seguendo la propria linea”. Di fatti, come specifica molto bene Eco in *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio*, “nel rizoma non vi sono punti o posizioni ma solo linee di connessione (...) è smontabile, rovesciabile; una rete di alberi che si aprano in ogni direzione può fare rizoma, il che equivale a dire che in ogni rizoma può essere ritagliata una serie indefinita di alberi parziali; il rizoma non ha centro. L’idea di una enciclopedia a rizoma è conseguenza diretta della inconsistenza di un albero di Porfirio”. (Eco, 1984, 112).

⁸ Si pensi ad una scena teatrale oppure della letteratura in cui viene descritto l’incendio di una città (si può pensare all’incendio di Troia). Non c’è nessun incendio vero e proprio, non c’è un fuoco vero, ma neanche uno falso perché le parole e la descrizione dei fatti permette al lettore o al pubblico di partecipare alla visione dell’incendio.

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Communication strategies vs. lexical confusions in RFL (Romanian as foreign language)

Abstract: The didactics of foreign languages offers valuable theories for examining both written and oral productions of foreign speakers. It also provides essential tools to enhance the teaching-learning process. Our article begins with the premise of clearly delineating communicative strategies and lexical confusions, drawing on various scholarly articles to establish a theoretical framework, supplemented by examples from actual oral and written texts. The primary difference between communicative strategies and lexical confusions lies in their impact on message transmission. Communicative strategies serve to maintain the integrity of the message, ensuring that meaning is conveyed effectively. In contrast, lexical errors can significantly hinder communication, as they may lead to misunderstandings by the interlocutor regarding the intended message.

Keywords: *communication strategies in RLS, lexical errors, RLS didactics, oral communication, lexical competence, written communication*

Introduction

In recent years, language teaching has evolved to emphasize elements that introduce novelty into practical modern language courses. New studies are discussing the communication strategies that learners employ to convey their messages, whether in language classes or during assessments. Some of these strategies are often confused with lexicogrammatical errors. The aim of this paper is to delineate these two typologies using a relevant, though not exhaustive, theoretical framework, along with examples drawn from speakers of Romanian as a foreign language. The source corpus consists of 85 written and oral texts, which are also utilized in the study "Linguistic Biography." This includes a generic and cultural approach, as well as texts collected from students in which they describe their families.

The article will be divided into two parts, followed by conclusions. The first part will focus on communication strategies, while the second will be devoted to lexical confusions. Each section will contain a theoretical component followed by examples.

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1. Communication strategies

Communication strategies are the tools L2 speakers use to convey their messages. Jeannette Littlemore (2003) defines them as "steps taken by language learners to increase the effectiveness of their communication," distinguishing two main categories: "compensatory" and "interactional" strategies (Littlemore, 2003). Compensatory strategies are attempts by language learners to address gaps in their knowledge of the target language, while interactional strategies are employed to direct the conversation and facilitate shared meaning.

A few years before Littlemore, Theo Bongaerts and Nada Poulisse (1989) conducted a study focusing on the differences between L1 and L2 communication strategies. They posited that L2 learners often treated referential communication as an isolated phenomenon. Furthermore, while L1 researchers have focused on the cognitive processes underlying referential communication, L2 communicative strategies have generally been categorized based on taxonomies that primarily reflect the surface features of strategic utterances. The current literature on L2 communication strategies has not reached a consensus on what is or isn't L2-specific. However, the study's results indicate that when native and non-native speakers are confronted with the same problem, "L1 speakers and L2 learners solve their referential problems in the same way" (Bongaerts and Poulisse, 1989, 265). In other words, regardless of the language in which speakers formulate their speech and encounter a lexical problem, they tend to apply similar strategies to overcome it.

Soon after, Ellen Bialystok and Maria Frohlich identified five types of communicative strategies: avoidance, paraphrasing, transfer, asking for help, and mimicry. Avoidance involves ignoring or abandoning a topic or response when the speaker's lexical resources are insufficient to fulfill communicative functions. Paraphrasing occurs when a word or construction is reformulated "into an alternative construction acceptable in the target language in situations where the appropriate form or construction is not known or not yet stable" (Bialystok & Frohlich, 1990: 4). The third strategy, transfer, refers to adopting a lexical item from the mother tongue or another known language into the target language. Asking for help involves the learner or speaker requesting assistance from the interlocutor to overcome lexical limitations, while mimicry entails using gestures to convey the message instead of relying solely on verbal communication.

Later, Zoltan Dörnyei and Mary Lee Scott (1997) reviewed important theories on communication strategies, beginning with traditional theories. According to these theories, communication strategies (CS) are "verbal or nonverbal first-aid devices used to compensate for gaps in the

speaker's L2 proficiency" (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997, 177). In this context, strategies are tools for managing difficulties that arise during L2 communication, distinct from other mechanisms such as asking for or providing clarification, which address problems that have already occurred during communication.

Dörnyei (1995) proposed an extension of the definition of CSs, arguing that "since a major source of L2 speakers' communication problems is insufficient processing time, timing strategies (e.g., the use of lexicalized pause fillers and hesitation gambits) that help speakers gain thinking time and keep the communication channel open are also problem-solving strategies" (1997, 178). To encompass a broader range of prior research, Scott and Dörnyei expanded the scope of CS to include any potentially intentional attempt to manage any language-related problem of which the speaker is aware during communication. For these authors, communication strategies represent "the key units in a general description of problem management in L2 communication" (1997, 179).

Another theory discussed by Scott and Dörnyei is Poulisse's model of oral communication realization, which extends Bialystok's and the Nijmegen group's approach of placing CS within a parsimonious cognitive framework. Poulisse's (1993) model conceptualizes communication strategies within a coherent framework of speech production. However, after further studies, Poulisse reconsidered his proposed model, complementing it with a process-oriented taxonomy.

As Scott and Dörnyei rightly point out, relevant authors offer two definitions of communication strategies from different perspectives. The first definition classifies them as problem-oriented mechanisms, indicating that these strategies are intended to repair communication difficulties caused by a lack of vocabulary necessary for fulfilling communicative functions. In this context, three types of problems are distinguished:

- a. *Self-performance problems* that consist in noticing errors in speech, being associated with different types of rephrasing, paraphrasing and correction mechanisms.
- b. *Interlocutor performance-related* problems "defined as something perceived as problematic in the interlocutor's discourse, either because it is considered incorrect (or highly unexpected) or because of a lack (or uncertainty) of fully understanding something; associated with various strategies of negotiating meaning" (Scott and Dörnyei 1997: 183).
- c. *Processing time pressure*, specifically "the L2 speaker's frequent need for more time for processing and planning L2 discourse than would be naturally available in fluent communication; associated with strategies such as the use of fillers, hesitation devices, and self-

repetition" (Scott and Dörnyei 1997, 183). In other words, all the pauses that the speaker makes that can hinder communication become the strategies that the speaker uses in order to convey the message.

The second paradigm revolves around the concept of consciousness (Scott & Dörnyei, 1997, 183), defined as an intentional action taken by the speaker to address potential linguistic problems encountered during the communicative act. However, this term can be ambiguous, leading the literature to alternate it with terms such as intentionality, attention, awareness, and control (Schmidt, 1994). In our opinion, "attention" and "control" are the most appropriate terms, as even in spontaneous speech, L2 speakers tend to be more cautious in their phrasing. They often attempt to find equivalent expressions in their mother tongue or create new lexical items based on their linguistic system—a phenomenon we will explore later with examples from our corpus.

Starting from the idea of awareness, Scott and Dörnyei (1997) classify SC based on three aspects:

- a. *Awareness as awareness of the problem*, which includes only instances of use that address language processing problems that the speaker consciously recognizes as such. (Scott, Dörnyei 1997)
- b. *Awareness as intentionality* (Scott, Dörnyei 1997, 185) explained by the speaker's intentional recourse to SC separates these from certain verbal behaviors that are systematically related to difficulties of which the speaker is aware but which are not done intentionally. For example, in the case of unlexicalized full pauses or stuttering, repeating words, the speaker is usually aware of the difficulty he or she is facing, but uses these devices often without a conscious decision. (Scott, Dörnyei 1997)
- c. *Consciousness as awareness of strategic language use* (Scott, Dörnyei 1997: 185) explained by Scott, Dörnyei (1997) the moment when the speaker realizes that he/she is resorting to a less perfect provisional device or avoiding a lexical problem in conveying the message. It should be noted that the two authors separate literal translation from the mother tongue into the target language, considering this as a mistake to be corrected rather than a communication strategy. We can, however, consider that, in the situation where the translated lexical item has been declined according to the L2 rules, the speaker has used a communicative strategy.

Scott and Dörnyei (1997) inventory over thirty communication strategies, offering explanations and relevant examples for each. Given the wealth of information, we have selected a few types for this article:

- a. Message abandonment - leaving a message unfinished because of language difficulties, which may result in expressions such as *I don't know*, or *I don't remember*;
- b. Approximation - the use of another term from the same lexical sphere (e.g. cup instead of glass);
- c. "Word-coinage" (Scott, Dörnyei 1997, 189) - linguistic creativity by inventing new L2 words based on already existing paradigms (e.g. pixe instead of pix);
- d. Literal translation - taking over expressions and grammatical structures from the L1 without making sense or being correct in the L2 (alt instead of alto - it. alto)
- e. Self-correction - when the L2 speaker manages to correct his/her own speech;
- f. Paraphrase - rephrasing the sentence/sentence to convey the message;
- g. Mimicry - the speaker may resort to nonverbal means in order for the interlocutor to understand the message.

To develop communicative competence, it is essential to practice the language in contexts that closely resemble real-life situations. This approach enables students to understand the different registers of the language and to develop their vocabulary appropriately, without forming incorrect automatism. In this context, pragmatic competence plays a crucial role by integrating communicative exercises with real-life scenarios in the classroom. While communication strategies are beneficial, it is important that as speakers become more experienced, they utilize a broader range of lexical items, thereby reducing their reliance on communication strategies. For instance, at the B2 level, these strategies should not fill gaps that were overlooked at the A1 level.

A similar aspect regarding communicative competence is addressed by Jose Maria Valverde Zambrana (2020), who states that communicative competence encompasses the attitudes, values, and motivations that speakers have about languages, their characteristics, and their uses, while also considering the interrelation of language with other forms of communicative behavior. For Zambrana, learning a foreign language involves not only acquiring grammatical and lexical knowledge but also understanding how to use this knowledge in real contexts. He adds that one of the main objectives of L2 teaching is to foster both components of linguistic and communicative competence. To achieve this, the

development of lexical competence should be integrated with the development of communicative competence.

Later in his article, Zambrana discusses three types of strategies: affective, compensatory, and social (Zambrana, 2020, 87). He describes affective strategies as those related to the emotional aspects of language learning, focusing on how learners manage their anxiety, control their feelings, and maintain motivation. Zambrana believes that through these affective strategies, learners can address and modify factors that impact their learning, such as low self-esteem and anxiety.

On the other hand, compensatory strategies are related to speakers' vocabulary; they "help learners avoid knowledge gaps in order to maintain continuity in communication" (Zambrana, 2020, 87). These strategies enable learners to convey their messages despite gaps in their knowledge. In such situations, L2 speakers can fulfill communicative functions without possessing all the necessary lexical items.

The third typology, social strategies, becomes significant as it fosters increased interaction with the foreign language. These strategies facilitate communication with other learners in a discourse context, allowing learners to engage and learn through interaction (Zambrana, 2020). Social strategies can also be linked to pragmatic competence, where learning occurs through interaction.

Zambrana (2020) encompasses communication strategies under the broader category of elements that facilitate message transmission, communication, and vocabulary development in L2 learning. Thus, communication strategies become part of L2 learning strategies alongside affective and intercultural elements. His study emphasizes how students employ communicative strategies in conjunction with other types of strategies, rather than viewing communication strategies as isolated products.

Regarding Romanian as a foreign language, challenges arise due to various inconsistencies, particularly in plural formation. For example, we observed the use of "omi" instead of "oameni" (Eng. people), a linguistic creation based on the system's possibilities but outside the grammatical norm. Similarly, we find "fructuri" instead of "fructe" (Eng. fruits), "limbe" vs. "limbi" (Eng. languages), and "festiveluri" instead of "festivaluri" (Eng. festivals).

These types of grammatically incorrect forms arise from structural patterns that students memorize and to which they apply analogies when communicating. Such errors most frequently occur in spontaneous speech and, if uncorrected, can develop into noticeable automatisms at higher proficiency levels. As with other forms of confusion, repeated monitoring and practice are necessary to eliminate these errors and ensure proper language acquisition.

Conversely, we noted strategies involving the insertion of words or expressions from L1 or other foreign languages that are more familiar to the speaker. Examples include structures like "a la tele," a Spanish expression used in the sentence "am învățat limba română a la tele," and "mind-blowing" used to describe cases in Romanian. Another example is the word "appearance," which appeared in descriptions of people as in "fața și appearance."

Among the linguistic creations, we identified terms such as "phoneul," which is derived from the English word "phone" combined with the Romanian definite article "-ul." In the linguistic biography corpus (Simina-Suciu, 2024), we found creations like "limba arabică" (Eng. Arabic language) and "limba engleză" (Eng. English language), formed based on the terms in the languages spoken by our respondents and the typical structure of Romanian, where the noun "limba" (Eng. language) is feminine.

2. Lexical confusions

Lexical confusion refers to the use of an incorrect term in place of the correct one to convey a message. The essential difference between confusions and strategies lies in their effectiveness for communication; as we will explore, lexical confusions can hinder, and in some cases even obstruct, the transmission of the intended message.

To delineate the concepts discussed in this article, we also draw on theoretical frameworks from integral linguistics, specifically Ferdinand de Saussure's definition of the linguistic sign. According to Saussure, the linguistic sign consists of a signified (the concept) and a signifier (the acoustic image or the sequence of letters and sounds we perceive). Therefore, lexical confusions represent mistakes that alter the intended meaning of the message conveyed.

In a 1986 contribution, Hana Y. Touchie addresses the issue of L2 errors, categorizing them into performance errors and proficiency errors. According to Touchie, performance errors occur when learners or speakers are tired or in a hurry, arising from inattention. These types of errors are generally minor and can be easily corrected by the learner. In contrast, proficiency errors are more serious, as they reflect inadequate learning and lexical gaps that need to be addressed. This distinction leads to a dichotomy between the term "error," which refers to lapses in performance, and "mistake," which indicates insufficient linguistic competence.

In her paper "Second Language Learning Error: Their Types, Causes, and Treatment," Touchie further differentiates errors into local and global categories. Local errors do not significantly impact communication or meaning, while global errors interfere with communication and disrupt the

intended meaning of utterances. Local errors typically involve grammatical aspects, such as noun-article or noun-adjective agreements, verb conjugation, or plural formation. In contrast, global errors include lexical confusions that completely alter the meaning of a sentence or incorrect word order.

L2 speakers may encounter various types of errors, including phonetic, morphological, lexical, and syntactic errors, largely caused by significant differences between their mother tongues and the foreign language they are studying. For example, common phonetic errors occur among Arabic speakers who confuse the sounds /p/ and /b/, French speakers who mispronounce the letter /h/ or pronounce /z/ instead of /s/ between two vowels, and Spanish speakers who pronounce /j/ as /h/.

Lexical errors often arise from incorrect direct translations from the learner's mother tongue or the use of inappropriate lexical items in the second language. Syntactic errors pertain to sentence structure in L2, heavily influenced by L1. For instance, Russian speakers tend to omit the verb "to be" when introducing themselves, saying "Eu Maria" (Eng. "I Maria") instead of "Eu sunt Maria" (Eng. "I am Maria"). This occurs because, in Russian, the verb "to be" is not necessary in such constructions.

There are many causes of errors, including the impact of L1 and interference in L2, where speakers may rely too heavily on translations between the two languages. This reliance can lead to the emergence of lexical and syntactic elements that make no sense in the target language, resulting in what are known as interlingual or interference errors.

In her article, Touchie (1986) discusses two contradictory views on interlingual errors. The first view posits that interference negatively affects L2 learning, primarily because it can compromise the meaning of the message. The second view suggests that linguistic transfer has become less detrimental and may even serve as a positive, important factor in L2 learning. In our opinion, linguistic interference can be both beneficial and harmful, depending on how it impacts effective communication. For instance, if a translation from L1 refers to a word with a different meaning in L2, this transfer is unhelpful. Conversely, if a speaker borrows a word from L1 and adapts it according to the rules of L2 without significantly altering the meaning of the utterance, we can view this as a positive action.

Another cause of errors is attributed to intralinguistic and developmental factors, which are generally less penalized than those arising from L1 to L2 transfer. These errors stem from the complexities of the target language itself. According to Touchie (1986), intralinguistic and developmental factors include the following:

- a. *Simplification* - "Learners often choose simple forms and constructions over more complex ones" (Touchie 1986, 78)

- b. *Overgeneralization* - "This is the use of a form or construction in one context and the extension of its application to other contexts in which it should not apply" (Touchie 1986, 78). In other words, L2 speakers tend to apply the same grammatical rule to more than one element. An example could be, for Romanian as a foreign language, the conjugation of group I verbs, where learners use cântează (în locul lui cântă = he/she sings), after mastering the form lucrează (=he/she works).
- c. *Hypercorrectness* - "Sometimes the zealous efforts of teachers to correct students' errors cause students to make errors in otherwise correct forms" (Touchie 1986, 78). In support of his claim, the linguist gives as an example the case where the teacher's insistence on the pronunciation of the phoneme /p/, in the case of Arabic speakers, leads to its use even in the case of the words "bird" (Touchie 1986, 78) or "battle" (Touchie 1986, 78), „pird and pattle” (Touchie 1986: 78).
- d. *Poor teaching* - factor related to hypercorrection or the materials the teacher uses.
- e. *Fossilization* - refers to pronunciation errors that persist for a long time and become automatisms.
- f. *Avoidance* - a factor caused by the difficulty of some L2 stucts, which leads speakers to avoid them, replacing them with simpler ones. Touchie (1986) explains this phenomenon by the examples of Japanese speakers of English as a foreign language who generally avoid relativization, while Arabic speakers avoid passive diatesis (Touchie, 1986, 79).
- g. *Inadequate learning* - mainly caused by ignoring rule restrictions or subdifferentiation and incomplete learning.
- h. *Falsely hypothesized concepts* - learner errors that can be attributed to wrong assumptions formed by these learners about the target language. For example, the linguist gives the example that "some learners believe that is is the marker of the present tense. Thus, they produce: *He is talk to the teacher*. Similarly, they believe was is the marker of the past. Therefore, they say: *It was happened last night*" (Touchie 1986, 79)

In addition to rigorously outlining the types of errors, Touchie (1986) offers valuable suggestions for L2 teachers regarding error correction. He asserts that teachers cannot and should not correct every error made by their students. Frequent correction of oral errors, he argues, can disrupt the language learning process and may discourage shy learners from communicating in the target language. In this context, the linguist

provides some general guidelines for correcting errors in L2 (Touchie, 1986, 79-80):

- a. Errors of high frequency and generality should be corrected more often than less frequent errors. For example, verb conjugations are an error of high frequency and generality.
- b. Teachers should place more emphasis on correcting errors that affect a large percentage of their students. This factor is clearly related to the second factor above. Stigmatizing or irritating errors should be given more attention. This factor is related to the sociolinguistic aspect of language learning. Learners from lower socio-economic classes are aware of and very sensitive to ridicule of their informal variety of language by learners from higher socio-economic classes who speak a more formal and prestigious variety of language.
- c. Finally, errors relevant to a pedagogical objective should take precedence over other types of errors. For example, if the lesson focuses on the use of the present perfect tense, the correction of errors involving prepositions, articles and demonstratives in this lesson should not be emphasized by the teacher, because if they were to do so, the students' attention would be distracted from the focus of the lesson which, in this case, is the use of the present perfect tense.

In his opinion, teachers should focus on correcting errors that affect intelligibility—specifically, errors that interfere with the overall meaning and comprehension of utterances. Accordingly, teachers should prioritize the correction of global errors over local ones.

In his article, Touchie provides essential tools for detecting and differentiating errors, along with suggestions for correcting them. We believe it is crucial that the L2 teaching and learning process unfolds optimally, without causing frustration for either the learner or the teacher. Therefore, the guidelines offered by Touchie, as reiterated above, serve as a relevant framework for practical RLS courses as well.

Subsequently, linguist Pilar Agustín-Llach revisits the issue of lexical errors in her 2017 article, "Vocabulary Teaching: Insights from Lexical Errors." She focuses primarily on a theoretical approach to vocabulary teaching, positing that lexical errors are a significant source of difficulties in acquiring English as a foreign language. Agustín-Llach's study emphasizes the didactic aspect, beginning with an inventory of error types based on previous research, supported by examples collected by the author, and concluding with vocabulary teaching strategies that can be effectively implemented in the classroom.

Among the errors discussed by Agustín-Llach are semantic confusions, which she defines as arising when learners confuse two semantically related words in L2 (Agustín-Llach, 2017, 65). One of the most frequent confusions noted in English as a Second Language (ESL) involves the verbs "to be" and "to have." While some instances of confusion can be attributed to L1 influence, others are less straightforward, making it challenging to find a plausible explanation for these errors. Agustín-Llach points out that both semantic and formal confusions reflect varying degrees of word knowledge—typically incomplete or imperfect knowledge.

This raises the question of whether the learner knows both the target word and the incorrect one, confusing them due to their similarity, or if they are unaware of the target word and resort to a close approximation that they do know.

Agustín-Llach also discusses linguistic calques, which occur when a learner resorts to literal translations due to the absence of a term in the target language. While these calques were regarded as communicative strategies in the first part of our article, they are viewed as errors by other linguists. Additionally, lexical borrowing—where an L1 word is inserted into an L2 utterance—falls within this category of mistakes.

Another error highlighted in Agustín-Llach's article, previously considered a communicative strategy, is lexical adaptation—specifically, the process of taking a term from L1 and adapting it to the grammatical rules of L2. In addition to this, the author notes writing errors and incorrect word order in sentences, based on examples collected during her study.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, Agustín-Llach proposes two teaching strategies to address these challenges:

- a. *Vocabulary teaching approach* - a two-stage strategy for addressing lexical errors, beginning with specific errors previously made by learners. In the first stage, these errors are presented and explained to ensure that learners fully understand them. In the second stage, remedial activities are conducted based on the specifics of each error, allowing for targeted practice and reinforcement.
- b. *Learning vocabulary from lexical errors* - in contrast to the first approach, this second strategy focuses on correcting errors as a whole rather than addressing specific cases, serving as a preventive measure against potential student slips. For example, lexical creations, borrowing, and mispronunciations often stem from L1 influence. While the impact of the mother tongue is prevalent throughout the L2 acquisition process, it is especially pronounced in the early stages. Counteracting the effects of L1 can be very challenging, if not impossible; therefore, leveraging it for L2 vocabulary training may be a more effective option. In this context, L1 can act as a scaffold

or support for independent lexical use. Additionally, the author suggests that translation exercises can be a valuable tool in preventing errors.

Although Agustín-Llach's study is pertinent and relevant, we believe that the second proposed activity may create more problems than it solves. In our view, the most effective strategy remains repeated exposure to the language and the correction of specific mistakes, accompanied by explanations, through lexical and communicative activities, without placing undue pressure on the learner.

One of the most common confusions identified in our corpus was between *limbă* and *limbaj*. In English, both words translate to "language," but in Romanian, they have different usages. We observed that many speakers mistakenly use *limbaj* to refer to the Romanian language and their learning difficulties. Additionally, we noted the frequent use of the word *românie* instead of *română* (i.e., "limba românie" instead of "limba română" = Romanian language).

This confusion extends to the use of the adjective *maro* (meaning "brown") instead of *șaten* when describing hair. For example, a learner wrote, "mama mea are pahar păr maro" (meaning "my mom has brown glass brown hair"), where *maro* is applicable only to color, while *șaten* specifically refers to hair color. This confusion arises because Romanian employs distinct terms to express the same color in different contexts.

Regarding the use of the term *pahar* (meaning "glass") instead of *păr* (meaning "hair"), we believe this is due to the phonetic similarity between the two nouns. In the same text, we also observed the use of *mult* instead of *foarte* (as in "mult înalt" for "very tall"). While both words can be translated to "very" in English, *mult* expresses a large quantity, whereas *foarte* denotes a superlative. This error appears to be influenced by the speaker's mother tongue.

In inventorying lexical confusions we also note the following:

- The verbs *a urmări* (to follow) vs. *a urma* (to pursue), influenced by other languages known to the speaker.
- The verbs *a practica* (to practice) vs. *a exersa* (to rehearse), as seen in statements like "nu am practicat limba română" (I haven't practiced the Romanian language), which occurs among several speakers due to the influence of English, where only one verb is used: "to practice."
- The adverb *bine* (well) and the adjective *bun* (good), both translated as "good," as in "studiez bun" (I study good).

- The use of a dative pronoun instead of an accusative pronoun, exemplified in “mi-a ajutat” (he/she helped me), indicating grammatical confusion.
- The confusion between *românie* (Romania) and *românia* (the country) or *română* (Romanian), as seen in examples like “românia este o limbă frumoasă” (Romania is a beautiful language) and “dacă aş fi trăit în românie” (if I had lived in Romania).
- The usage of *scurt* (short in length) instead of *scund* (short in height), both translated as "short" in English. This confusion arises not only from English but also from the distinction between length and height, as both are measurable dimensions.

All the examples above illustrate lexical errors encountered at the A1-B1 levels, reflecting the interlanguage stage where speakers have not yet fully mastered all concepts. During this phase, most system-based creations occur, albeit as deviations from standard norms. As learners advance in their L2 studies and acquire new knowledge, their understanding begins to shift, moving closer to natural language use.

To prevent the perpetuation of confusion at higher levels, consistent practice is essential. This should involve both structural exercises and opportunities for written and oral communication. Furthermore, it is advisable to expose speakers of Romanian as a foreign language (RLS) to a variety of authentic texts. This exposure will help them experience Romanian in diverse contexts, gradually reducing lexical confusion.

Conclusions

We would like to emphasize that our article, while primarily theoretical, aimed to explore aspects of communication in Romanian through two research perspectives: communication strategies and lexical confusions/errors. Although some of the students' slip-ups were initially classified as communication strategies and later redefined as lexical errors, we seek to delineate these two concepts concerning message transmission. Specifically, a communication strategy aids in understanding the message and fulfilling communicative functions, whereas an error, mistake, or confusion distorts the meaning and impairs comprehension for the interlocutor. In our view, lexical confusions and literal translations from other languages should not be categorized as communicative strategies. However, we would not equate them with linguistic creations, as the latter reflect a deeper knowledge of the language, enabling the speaker to integrate these creations into the grammatical framework of Romanian. Furthermore,

we believe that communication strategies turn into mistakes as the language level increases. In other words, what is considered a communication strategy at level A2, for example, at level B1 should be recorded as a mistake. Code-switching errors are also part of the same framework, as they can also interfere with message transmission.

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Where Science Ends...On the (Non)Scientific Character of the Bnei Baruch System of Kabbalah

Abstract: The Bnei Baruch Kabbalah Education & Research Institute is a worldwide organization which popularizes modern version of Kabbalah. Although Kabbalah in its academic interpretation is a mystical branch of the Jewish religion, Bnei Baruch members strongly oppose to associate their Kabbalah with religion in general, with Judaism in particular, and with mysticism as well. Instead, in Bnei Baruch's texts it is commonly argued that this system of Kabbalah is a science and a scientific mode of researching the world. I will examine whether the kabbalistic theoretical terms and conceptions, that Bnei Baruch speaks of, can be given some empirical sense. In my analysis, I follow the standard of methodological naturalism.

Keywords: Bnei Baruch, Kabbalah, spirituality, religion, science, methodological naturalism, mysticism, scientism.

1. Introduction. The Bnei Baruch Institute

The Bnei Baruch Kabbalah Education & Research Institute is a contemporary network of followers of a particular kind of teaching. They represent a group of people who share the teaching of Kabbalah ("the wisdom of Kabbalah") with the entire world (1, 186)¹. The organization popularizes the so-called modern Kabbalah and therefore bears marks of a new religious movement. The Institute's headquarters is in Israel yet there are also large and significant groups in the United States and in Europe. Moreover, thanks to the internet, anyone who is interested can join the organization (real or virtual group) and participate in the Institute's classes or bigger events, such as conventions and congresses. Therefore the Institute has so many students worldwide.

What is absolutely crucial is that Kabbalah is a branch of the Jewish religion: an esoteric, mystical trend in Judaism that has existed since the Middle Ages (the 11th or 12th century) onwards, as defined by scholars in many publications (2, 3); (3, 12); (4, 6, 20); also in dictionaries (5, 42), and Bnei Baruch Kabbalah is not related to this academic scheme. Laitman detaches namely his Kabbalah from religion, and within it from Judaism

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(30, 98, 101); (1, 174); (21, 70, 209, 282); (52³). Traditionally and conventionally, Kabbalah has no meaning outside the context of the Jewish religion and the Hebrew Bible (Tanach). Interestingly, members of the Bnei Baruch Institute do occasionally refer to the Tanach's verses, but simultaneously maintain that Kabbalah has no connection to Judaism or any other religious tradition. Professor Moshe Idel from the Hebrew University, one of the greatest and most renowned Kabbalah scholars, said about Michael Laitman's Kabbalah (Laitman is the Bnei Baruch's founder and main kabbalist): "I don't know what he's doing and I'm not sure anyone really understands it." (7). Surveys that I know about – of Tomer Persico (8), (9), (10), (11), (12), Jonathan Garb (13), (14), Boaz Huss (15) (these authors address the neo-Kabbalah phenomenon in general), Shai Ben-Tal (16), Uri Blau (7), (17), Zeev Kam (18), and Massimo Introvigne (19) – view Bnei Baruch in terms of a new religious movement and/or a kind of "New-Age Kabbalah". The researchers locate the movement in question in the contemporary social and spiritual-religious arena in Israel. My considerations as regards to Bnei Baruch come – to complement the aforementioned valuable findings – from a little different perspective. Personally, I find the Bnei Baruch teaching system worth being in-depth analyzed also from the philosophical point of view, with an emphasis put on the character of its rhetoric: whether – evaluating its accuracy – it is scientific, as the movement claims, or religious, religious-alike, or philosophical. In a nutshell: judging by tacit assumptions underlying the conceptions of science, religion, and Kabbalah, is the doctrine of the Bnei Baruch movement an exemplification of religion (or spirituality) or science (as non-religion)? Is it a religious/religious-alike/philosophical doctrine and method or scientific doctrine and method?

The Bnei Baruch Kabbalah Education & Research Institute was set up in Israel in 1991 by Dr. Michael Laitman (born in 1946), Professor in Ontology and Theory of Knowledge (PhD in philosophy and Kabbalah from the Moscow Institute of Philosophy at the Russian Academy of Sciences and MSc in Medical Cybernetics from St. Petersburg State Polytechnic University – as stated on the organization website (20) and a student of Rabbi and Kabbalist Baruch Shalom ha-Levi Ashlag (Rabash) (1907-1991). Laitman wanted to commemorate his teacher and named the Institute Bnei Baruch, meaning "the sons of Baruch".

Baruch Ashlag was the son and successor of Rabbi and Kabbalist Yehuda Leib ha-Levi Ashlag (Baal ha-Sulam) (1885-1954), who is considered by Bnei Baruch members to be "the greatest Kabbalist of the 20th century." (1, 187), (52, 28; 52, 427). In fact, the frame of the Bnei Baruch system of Kabbalah is outlined by the teaching of Yehuda and Baruch Ashlag (Yehuda was a prominent Lurianic kabbalist), which was compiled, modified, and published by Laitman in many books and articles

and presented in many hours of video and audio lectures and other multimedia formats. The Bnei Baruch Kabbalah Education & Research Institute is then a worldwide network of followers of Ashlagian Kabbalah, although filtrated by Laitman. (To what extent Laitman's Kabbalah is a direct continuation of Ashlagian Kabbalah is another research problem.)

The Bnei Baruch Institute is an interesting and socially important phenomenon. Laitman has had many discussions with scholars and scientists on different subjects, moreover he has always been serious about current social, cultural, scientific, educational, economical and environmental problems, as well as civilizational dilemmas. Having constructive dialogues on extremely important issues has always been Laitman's aim. He believes that Kabbalah is a solution for human problems in every area and aspect of life. Therefore, he tries to familiarize society with Kabbalah teaching as a science that proposes a new paradigm, and within it the answers to contemporary questions.

2. The Kabbalistic "Scientific" Method and its Opposition to Religious and Philosophical Approaches

Bnei Baruch's members claim that their Kabbalah is strictly scientific. Therefore, they call their system of Kabbalah a "science", even an "(applied) experimental science" (21, 224) (22), and a "scientific research of empirical perception." (23, 340).

I will now present only a few examples, but there could be many more: "Since Kabbalah is a true science, it seeks the real attainment of the universe, when no difficult question can refute a hard fact." (22), (24); "In our time the science of Kabbalah is becoming more and more popular, despite the fact that very few people understand what it is, why it is called a science, and why it reaches people in this way." (25); "This is not some esoteric, new age notion, but a scientific, empirically proven fact." (26, 297); "In truth, it is a scientific method that reveals the system behind the forces of Nature governing our world." (27, 10); "Like any other science, Kabbalah also uses exact terms and a completely scientific language." (28, 61). What interesting, one whole issue of *World Futures: The Journal of General Evolution* (29) was dedicated to Bnei Baruch Kabbalah and the explicit conviction that (and how) Kabbalah is connected to science. However, this attitude may suffer from partiality due to the fact that most (if not all) the authors are supporters of the Bnei Baruch Institute. According to Bnei Baruch, in the science of Kabbalah, a kabbalist operates in exactly the same way as a conventional scientist does, thus the knowledge obtained from the kabbalist's research is reliable and empirically proven (23, 340; 30, 115).

Consequently, Bnei Baruch kabbalists firmly distinguish their theses (which are scientific from their perspective) from religious and/or philosophical ones. They also see a difference between their system of Kabbalah and religion and/or philosophy in general. We read, “Kabbalah is a method, and that method is instruction in a process, not instruction in a philosophy or a religion.” (31, 17). In contrast to philosophy and religion, Kabbalah is said to be a “correct and empirical study of nature.” (23, 340).

The demarcation line is made here by the presence of dogmas or experiments: in natural science and in Bnei Baruch Kabbalah we are told to do experiments and verify hypotheses objectively, while in philosophy and religion we are expected to believe in some tenets. The latter disciplines are thought to provide faith, not knowledge. Furthermore, religion builds its convictions using faith, whilst philosophy only asks and consists in divagations that do not contribute much to the fundamental discourse of the meaning of life (in this point likewise religion) – however, as a counterpoint we can quote these Ashlag’s words (32, 84): “Kabbalah deals with the most important question in man’s life.”, which, in my opinion, may directly indicate the philosophical character of Bnei Baruch teaching. It is said that “The Kabbalistic perception of the world includes premises that other religions accept on faith, coupled with a scientific approach. Kabbalah develops tools within us that welcome us into a comprehensive reality and provide means to research it.” (30, 13).

It should be emphasized that the Bnei Baruch Institute separates itself not only from religion in general: “Kabbalah has nothing to do with any religion or any faith.” (30, 55), but from Judaism in particular. Laitman states, “There are others who relate it (Kabbalah – ...) to Judaism, but in truth the wisdom of Kabbalah has no connection whatsoever with mysticism, religion or any other man-made fantasy.” (30, 98); “Many people mistakenly relate the wisdom of Kabbalah to the Jewish religion. In truth, Kabbalah and religion are fundamentally different.” (30, 101); “The wisdom of Kabbalah is not mysticism. It is a science that explores the entire reality, unlike every other science that explores only our world.” (33, 312).

3. Natural Science and Kabbalah Science: Methodologies

Despite the fact that Kabbalah is treated by Bnei Baruch members as a science, it is different from natural science, which explores the material world that is perceived by the five senses. Kabbalah is namely described as “a science that studies what happens *beyond* what our senses perceive.” (34, 23). Thus, something very important emerges. Kabbalah is based on and deals with studying extrasensory reality. Elsewhere we hear that “Kabbalah is the science that explores man’s origins, his purpose in life and the method of achieving a perception of reality beyond the five senses of the body.

While dealing with elements currently beyond our perception, it is actually a very practical methodology that can be implemented here and now.” (35).

Therefore, and because of the statement that “the science of Kabbalah” is similar to all other natural sciences, only its range of perception is broader (23, 341), an important question arises: how can something that focuses its attention on what is, in essence, non-corporeal, non-material, and not sensed/experienced by physical senses, be called science (and compared to natural sciences)? In addition, how is it possible to research this non-material domain scientifically with empirical repeatability and testability, which are the very foundations of science? These scientific and Bnei Baruch kabbalistic methodologies should be compared more precisely presently.

According to the Oxford Dictionary (36), a scientific method is a method or procedure consisting in systematic observation, measurement and experiment, and the formulation, testing, and modification of hypotheses. This has defined natural science since the 17th century. Due to this, with reference to Bnei Baruch Kabbalah we may ask, how can spiritual (i.e. non-material) “objects-forces”³ be tested, measured and observed? How is it possible to combine materialism/naturalism with spiritualism? Is it ultimately justifiable for Bnei Baruch members to use the expression “scientific method”? (as used by Laitman (38, 110) and (21, 446).

Laitman (30, 55) says that the kabbalistic “scientific method” provides accurate, mathematical and measurable tools. What is being tested, discovered, and mathematically measured is what is inside man, not outside him. He states (30, 55): “When I document data pertaining to one state, another Kabbalist can perform the same act – with his or her own tools – and experience the data I was referring to. The wisdom of Kabbalah provides an accurate measurement of human emotions.” This differentiates Kabbalah from conventional science. A kabbalist studies himself: his or her feelings and desires, not an objective part of the visible reality (38, 111).

To be more precise, what is being experimented on, measured, and analyzed in Kabbalah is the so-called Upper Light, the upper force (called the Creator), as it is attained inside a person, and its actions, “no less accurately than in the study of the material.” (22; 23, 341). The external force (the Creator) in its essence is unknowable, unperceivable by people. What people can feel and hence measure is their inner reaction to this force. From this, it follows that human perception can be detected inside people and people are like “black boxes”, dependent on human organs of perception (37). (Incidentally, this concept speaks in favor of the epistemological standpoint of antirealism, and hence is Bnei Baruch’s argument against the epistemological standpoint of realism.)

It is important to know that the Creator (the upper force) in its essence (called *Acymuto* (*Atzmut*)) cannot be perceived; hence, the only thing that can be experienced and tested is the way in which the Creator “unfolds”

itself in human souls, in emotional and spiritual reality. Therefore, the fundamental difference between the kabbalistic mode of research and the ordinary scientific method is that in conventional scientific research one attempts to penetrate the same reality he or she is in, but in Kabbalah the researcher rises above the present level and studies the former, lower level, dressed in human sensations (30, 158).

4. Bnei Baruch Kabbalah as a Science and its Methodology Continued. The Sixth Sense

The scientific character of Bnei Baruch Kabbalah is often highlighted in the Bnei Baruch Institute's interactive online sessions. According to the Institute's instructors, Bnei Baruch Kabbalah is a science, because, as listed in (39):

- 1) there is a teacher (*rav*) – as in school,
- 2) there is something that is being experimented on; there is an idea that has to be taken under the procedure of “falsification” (someone is experimenting on his or her own feelings, thoughts, and desires),
- 3) there is no faith, only “attainment”; there is no believing in God/Creator, but the act of feeling (= experiencing) it; hence Kabbalah is said to be no religion, and no philosophy (40, 99). See Section 2 of this article.

In another lesson (41), we were told that Kabbalah is a science because in science there are laws (for example, the law of gravity) which are observed by the researcher, and in Kabbalah there are laws that are observed by the researcher-kabbalist (the synonymity of scientists–kabbalists occurs for example in Laitman (42)) – however, these are spiritual laws, as Anthony Kosinec (43, 347) calls them, “the upper, governing laws of nature.” In both cases, research is based on experiment, but in Kabbalah, it is an internal experiment, because the measurement tool is the human organism, or more precisely: its soul. In the end, it is believed that it is possible to see the results of Kabbalah “experiments” as in natural science, with the notion that the object of research and the tool of research are different, while in Kabbalah the object and the researcher is one and the same: “me” (41).

To emphasize – the fundamental difference between classical science and the science of Kabbalah is that kabbalists examine the interior (desires and thoughts, which is where the second name of Kabbalah – “the science of desire” (44)), while conventional scientists examine outer phenomena (45).

In the science of Kabbalah, we no longer deal with the five corporeal senses (called five “vessels”-*kelim*), but operate with another: the sixth sense (an additional “vessel”-*kli*). However, it should be pointed out that this

sixth sense is presented as something very far from paranormal, esoteric, or mystical. This is another mode of experiencing and, as such, is an organ of perception (or research), but it is spiritual, or “hidden” (46). It is an additional sensory organ (also called the returning light-*or hozer*, screen-*masach* (25), or simply “soul”) used by kabbalists, and Kabbalah is believed to be a method that can develop this additional organ of perception (37). It is said that this sensor, in conformity with the general laws of nature, makes it possible to attain the entire universe (42). Although this sixth sense does not operate in the physical domain (“This organ allows us to see, feel and investigate the part of the Universe that is not perceivable through the regular five sense organs.” (25)), it is maintained that the wisdom of Kabbalah has “empiric, scientific approach (...) based on the same research principles that apply to other fields of research.” – despite the fact that the subject of kabbalistic research “is the higher part of reality.” (30, 182).

The scientific aspect of Kabbalah is believed by Bnei Baruch kabbalists to lie in the existence of the objective spiritual reality that is innerly perceived by kabbalists. Some kabbalists have written about this in their books (because they “were there” – in accordance with the kabbalistic formulas “come and see” and “what cannot be attained cannot be named”; or “the unattainable can have no name” – because a name implies a beginning of some sort of attainment (22); or “Only the true attainment can be described and named. Whatever is unattained cannot be defined by words” (47). Such objective reality is thought to be attainable for everyone with the right knowledge and equipped with the right tool. We are told that “The wisdom of Kabbalah, unlike all other sciences, researches a realm whose existence eludes an ordinary person. To research this realm, one must be equipped with another sense, a sense that perceives the ‘Upper World.’ With this additional sensory ability, one can gather information about the Upper World and experiment with it. Like any ordinary scientist, a Kabbalist can record reactions to actions. Kabbalists are researchers of the Upper World, and as such, they have recorded their findings over thousands of years of research. The collection of their records constitutes the wisdom of Kabbalah.” (30, 92).

To summarize this point, Kabbalah’s scientific approach is understood by Bnei Baruch members to be a way of experiencing, knowing, and understanding the upper force, the law that is said to be behind everything, the Creator. The sixth sense is then used to investigate one’s own feelings, sensations, and desires. Even the study of the material world is believed to be a study of the inner “me”, and therefore a spiritual study. Such inner observations, which are thought of as the outcomes of the scientific mode of Kabbalah, are said to have been conducted and confirmed over many centuries by many kabbalist researchers (48). Kabbalah is also said to be a science because everyone who goes through the same level of attainment

finally reaches the same point, which is presumed to be an indication of the objectivity of science (49). In the philosophy of science, this is known as intersubjectivity. Jaegwon Kim made intersubjectivity one of two main indicators of conventional science (or more strictly: of the conventional wisdom about science). He namely set apart two features (ideas) associated with science in general and these are: science as intersubjective (or objective) – which means that “scientific properties must be cognitively invariant across different perceivers and cognizers”, and science as nomological (or nomothetic) – which means that “scientific properties must be nomic/causal powers.” (50, 95). And Kabbalah is by “the sons of Baruch” taken as an empirical method by which everyone – regardless of race, faith, lifestyle and so on can attain a higher level of reality (51, 60); (52, 19;54); (53, 10).

5. Creator. Seal-Imprint/Root-Branches (Cause-Consequences) Dependence. Inner Examination

As has been shown, the kabbalistic mode of exploration is said to allow a person to “penetrate the level of causes.” (30, 86). Kabbalists are believed to achieve, in their inner sensations, the root level of existence that is the same for everyone. This root level of existence is the Creator, sometimes called God (21, 35; 242; 356), (33, 50; 246; 318), (1, 17), (51, 96), (53, 31), (27, 100; 216), (31, 146).

However, we must be careful, as Bnei Baruch teaching is not theism. If it were, this Kabbalah would immediately, at the very beginning, be disqualified as science, since science does not deal with the theistic, divine, supernatural realm. The Creator in Kabbalah is a set of (in essence spiritual) laws that governs all reality. The Creator is “the design of creation as it is expressed at any level.” (31, 146). It is the root-*shoresb* of all things, it is unchangeable, it is, as kabbalists say, “in complete rest” (meaning it cannot be influenced), and it is called a universal law and a law of existence (27, 58). In other words, the Creator is the “law of cause and effect that influences nature as a whole and every individual in particular.” (27, 35).

It seems to me that the idea of the Creator being equivalent to the (spiritual) laws of nature and the root of all things, but existing only in and for the kabbalist’s inner sensory organs, substantiates the Bnei Baruch teaching of the concepts of the inner “me”, the reality that is perceived inside a person, and of the ostensible outside reality, perceived by five senses (which, at the end of the day, is only a projection of inner attributes). We are told that when the forces that operate behind matter are perceived, what happens to matter is also perceived, since the spiritual forces become

the researcher's (kabbalist's) own domain (30, 158). This is explained in the following way: "The wisdom of Kabbalah describes the actions that originate in the Creator and hang down to our world through all the Upper Worlds. It also describes how they expand through the corporeal reality that we can all perceive with our five ordinary senses." (30, 92).

The corporeality, or material realm, is here a replica, a projection of spirituality (30, 131), and it is studied by science. However, in Kabbalah corporeality is not real (according to Laitman (30, 23), "(...) nothing exists outside of us, but our picture of reality appears *as if* it were outside of us."); although reality manifests itself physically, this manifestation is not full and fully real (25); everything people see only seems real. The world is only a projection, and a product, of human inner sensations as they relate and correspond to the Creator (54, 52). Spirituality in its essence cannot be studied like a physical object, because, as we read, it is unconnected with time, space and matter – it is a force, not vested in a body; spirituality has no contact with materiality, but generates material and sets it in motion (22).

Therefore, the important problem of how the illusionary physical reality can be studied and perceived is solved by a person studying him or herself. Physical, material reality is treated and studied as the projection of a person's own nature and is only a mode in which spiritual reality manifests itself to people's sensory organs. In Bnei Baruch terminology, materiality is an offshoot and blueprint of spirituality. Corporeality is an imprint of the seal: spirituality/Creator (this is an exemplification of the law: "Every spiritual root must touch a corporeal branch." (33, 28)). A scientist observes, measures, formulates, and tests, as does a kabbalist, who studies the immediate projected reality in the same way (seeing, as stated by Laitman (33, 28), that every spiritual origin and force must build its final corporeal manifestation in the physical world). Therefore, the method used by kabbalists is believed to be parallel to that used by scientists: "Just as scientists delve into the structure of materials with microscopes, or probe into deep space with telescopes, so Kabbalists penetrate the thought that surrounds reality using the wisdom of Kabbalah." (30, 86–87).

A kabbalist examines him or herself and gets to know the entirety of reality. He or she perceives the order of forces that works on people, the laws (in essence one spiritual law) of nature, because Kabbalah is said to penetrate to the cause of existence. (Causality is also presented as speaking in favor of the scientific character of Kabbalah teaching, because in conventional science causality is one of the fundamental determinants (55, 335). In order to do so, the researcher (kabbalist) needs to discover the cause of the phenomenon: the root, the Creator - the so-called comprehensive law of nature (56, 20), the all-inclusive force of nature (27, 41). A scientist investigates the cause of something *via* the material world,

while “Kabbalah scientists”/“scientists of Kabbalah” do it through their inner sensations (26, 292), (23, 340).

In Bnei Baruch Kabbalah, there is a conviction that when a kabbalist knows him or herself, he or she knows nature and hence the Creator, because in Kabbalah there is a synonymy of God/Creator and nature/the whole of reality (we can say that it is a kind of pantheism – however an idealistic/spiritual pantheism). The Hebrew word for nature (*ba-teva*) has an identical numerical value (86), in the system of gematria, to God (hebr. *Elohim*), i.e. the kabbalist Creator (30, 179), (57, 265). (Gematria is a hermeneutic system in which every letter and word of the alphabet is assigned a special numerical value. Jewish kabbalists – “Hebrew gematrists” – search for words that have the same values using the Tanach as a baseline, and claim that such words, even whole phrases, bear some relation to each other, which they then try to find. This cryptographic system contains many permutation methods.) Nature is the way in which the Creator affects people, showing them the dependence of cause and consequences. This is why when kabbalists talk about the Creator, they discuss the nature, the way the Creator has an effect on people.

The scientific dimension of Kabbalah is also believed to lie in Kabbalah’s determinism of nature (cause-consequence relationship) (49) – so, as it seems to me, due to the predictable theses that can be proclaimed about nature/Creator. Determinism is the determinant of the scientific character of a hypothesis (i.e. the repeatability of test results due to one pattern of behavior). We should admit that in Bnei Baruch Kabbalah, there is a kind of determinism in nature. Hence, Creator/Nature is a universal law and everything is determined by the cause-effect consequence relationship/order of descent of the upper force, or in the words of Kabbalah, root-branches correspondence (58, 25). However, this determinism comes from (and starts in) the upper force (i.e. spiritual reality), so it does not suit the natural science paradigm, which seeks the explanation of all phenomena “here”, in the natural/physical plane. Furthermore, the kabbalistic idea that “from the lower one can know the upper” means not that every level of spirituality is perceivable. *Acymuto* (“Creator’s essence”) is not (59) (cf. 54, 52); therefore, the whole of reality is not perceivable in Kabbalah, whereas in science it is.

Last but not least, we are told that both ordinary science and Kabbalah discuss the laws of nature. Science looks at what is observed by humans while Kabbalah says that there is something more than what humans can see (meaning there are spiritual laws with one law defining reality in general: the Creator/Nature law). Both approaches are thought to be scientific methods: traditional science is what is observed physically, and Kabbalah is the sensations of the deeper, original reality. However, conventional science observes the laws of nature, whilst Kabbalah *additionally* states that those

laws have a purpose whose origin is in the spiritual domain (60), which is unacceptable by natural science.

6. Bnei Baruch "Kabbalah Science" Versus Methodological Naturalism

We have been told that Bnei Baruch Kabbalah is described by the Institute's members as a scientific methodology, or "science" par excellence. Although science as a whole is defined by Laitman (and Bnei Baruch) as "a research of the surrounding reality, which can be registered, repeated, reproduced" (48), Kabbalah is also shown as something that suits the label "science", due to its assumed empirical base and reproducible results. However, Bnei Baruch Kabbalah cannot actually be referred to as science if we define science as "The intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behavior of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment." (61). Kabbalah deals with spirituality, meaning the inner world of sensations, emotions, and feelings (thus not the natural world), which are then projected onto the physical/natural reality.

Today's science, more strictly natural science, is a discipline that investigates natural phenomena. Science deals with the problem of how nature works. In other words, science does not use supernatural hypotheses, and, as Robert T. Pennock (62, 290) put it, "if we could apply natural knowledge to understand supernatural powers, then, by definition, they would not be supernatural." What is more, theses (or statements) in science must be objectively testable (as Michael Shermer (63, 211) stated, "An explanatory principle that by its nature cannot be tested is outside the realm of science."). Shermer refers to Nobelists' opinions concerning the dispute on whether creationism can be called scientific theory, and whether it is legitimate to speak of a "creation science". Empirical, visual experiments are needed and, therefore, testability is the main criterion for science. This is called falsifiability (best known thanks to Karl Popper).

Kabbalah studies the spiritual world, not the natural one, because the apparent physical world is, according to "the sons of Baruch", in essence non-physical (super-natural). Even members of the Bnei Baruch Institute themselves claim that people cannot *judge* the upper force (the Creator) objectively (37) (what, however, does not contradict the former presented Bnei Baruch's thesis about the existence of the ultimate, objective spiritual reality, attained by kabbalists). For these reasons, Kabbalah cannot be called science, despite the fact that Bnei Baruch members believe that the empirical status of Kabbalah (and precise attainment) is contained in the slogans: "The judge knows no more than his eyes see", "One testifies not according to what he heard, but according to what he saw", and "That which is not attained cannot be named" (23, 340).

There are no reliable empirical tools to measure the kind of experiences which Kabbalah talks about. Despite the fact that Bnei Baruch kabbalists try to encompass the category of experiment in their methodology (see Sections 2, 3, 4 of this article), it is very hard to maintain the assumption that something spiritual or non-material can be examined, observed, or objectively tested, and hence propounded theses can be falsified. If a science experiment is defined through objective observation and fundamentally the use of the five human senses, and in Kabbalah we deal with the sixth, non-physical sense (see Sections 4 and 5 of this article), we cannot talk about Kabbalah (and the spiritual reality it is related to) as the scientific one.

In the last section of our considerations we should point out that there is indeed a big problem with defining “science” in the philosophy of science. “The problem of demarcation” should be mentioned, a label coined by Karl Popper (64, 34), which determines what type of hypotheses should or may be considered (as) scientific and what science actually is (in other words, where the line should fall between science and non-science or pseudoscience). In the history of demarcationism, various orientations have prevailed. Starting in contemporary discourse with fallibilism, we come across the logical positivism and logical empiricism of the Vienna Circle (verificacionism), then Popper’s (65) falsifiability condition (falsificationism). It has even been said that there was a demise of the demarcation problem in contemporary (66, 111–127).

Let’s quote questions put forward by Bruce L. Gordon and William A. Dembski (67, XIX): “(...) shall we say that science is only concerned with giving natural explanations of the natural world and that any *other* sorts of explanations, whatever their merits, are *not* scientific? Or shall we say that *any* rigorous reasoning based on empirical evidence and theory construction is scientific?” Such perspective, which possibly suggests that there is no obligation to give natural explanations of the natural world, is however very rare among contemporary philosophers of science and scientists. When they talk about science, they are obliged to base their considerations at least on one necessary condition. Such a condition should be based on sufficient epistemological criteria. It should be epistemically warranted and accessible to epistemic evaluation. Such a *sine qua non* (condition) is considered to be methodological naturalism by most scholars: (Griffin (68, 8, 11); Craig and Moreland (69, XII); Johnson (70, 59–76); Scott (71, 30–32). The term “methodological naturalism” comes from Paul de Vries (72). Moreover, Larry Laudan (66, 117–118) said that it is not permitted to allow for a non-paradigmatic meaning of science and one should take as scientific what is treated as such by most people.

Putting it descriptively, science is preoccupied with the methodological examination of the objective natural reality. According to this, science only

deals with naturalistic explanations of phenomena. There is no place here for non-natural references and explanations. Simply put, methodological naturalism rejects appealing to God (under any name), some upper force, or some spiritual causality to explain the laws of nature. Here, when talking about the causation of phenomena, science is limited to explaining the world only through natural causes and processes. A scientific researcher cannot refer to any intelligent providence or guidance. Nancey Murphy, for example, writes (73, 33) that methodological naturalism forbids “creative intelligence” when speaking of scientific theories (Murphy is cited by Stephen C. Meyer (74, 113), who also elaborates here that “Methodological naturalism asserts that to qualify as scientific, a theory must explain all phenomena by reference to purely material—that is, nonintelligent-causes.”). In short, “According to this principle of ‘methodological naturalism,’ science is inherently limited to providing natural explanations for the natural world, and it does not (nor can) traffic in supernatural claims.” (75, 84).

Dembski (76, 169) speaks about methodological naturalism as “the regulative principle for science”, which protects it (namely science) from transforming into supranaturalism. Methodological naturalism, also called “methodological materialism” (71, 30–32) is today a crucial part of the definition of science (Thomas H. Huxley in 1892 coined the term “scientific naturalism”, which he used for describing a philosophical outlook that disallowed supernatural causes and adopted only empirical science as the reliable basis of knowledge about the world – “scientific naturalism” is in accordance with methodological naturalism/materialism (77, 62); hence, such a condition was accepted in my analysis of the Bnei Baruch Institute’s assumed scientific mode of Kabbalah.

Although methodological naturalism has a long history, it was Charles Darwin who established that when examining reality, one must consider only the phenomena of this, i.e. material, world. Darwin inserted naturalism into his field of research. As Gordon (78, 25) puts it, “Darwin did more than introduce methodological naturalism into biology, however; he contended that it was an indispensable criterion for any theory to be regarded as *scientific*.” (79, 488). Gordon (78, 25) also quoted William North Rice (80, 608) in this matter: “The great strength of Darwinian theory lies in its coincidence with the general spirit and tendency of science. It is the aim of science to narrow the domain of the supernatural, by bringing all phenomena within the scope of natural laws and secondary causes.” Also Francisco J. Ayala (81, 4), (82, 10033–10039) emphasized that Darwin’s greatest accomplishment was following natural processes in his explanations, without any need to resort to some external, non-natural agent (God/Creator/upper force). Since Darwin, being a scientist means that one is researching this world, is dealing with what is empirically tested in this world, and that explanations of phenomena should come from natural law.

There must be observability and testability of mundane laws and phenomena.

Kabbalah will be the final point which I will turn to. As has been shown, Kabbalah cannot be called science if it examines the inner, spiritual reality (as emphasized many times in this article), rather than physical reality as the ultimate one. However, as was shown earlier too, Bnei Baruch Kabbalah also deals with external reality, as nature is of interest to a kabbalist too – which might seem paradoxical – but Kabbalah (or the kabbalist) takes physical reality only *as if* it were real and as a kind of ephiphenomenon of the unfolding of the spiritual realm. The whole teaching of Kabbalah studies the material reality only as a projection of the inner attributes of a person. Physical reality is not the first, last, or the only domain in the process of explaining the natural world and the laws that govern it. This last statement is crucial. Even though the synonymy of Creator/Nature (as the whole of reality) contains the presupposition that the Creator affects humans through nature, and that nature is the mode the Creator “uses” to show people the relationship between cause and consequences (49), the Creator is in essence a spiritual “being” that is experienced, perceived, and “realized” only through human spiritual sensations. This does not allow us to treat Bnei Baruch’s concepts as the rationale of methodological naturalism. Kabbalistic theoretical terms and conceptions cannot be given an empirical (in terms of physical experiment) sense and hence Bnei Baruch Kabbalah cannot be labeled “science”.

7. Conclusions

In the work above, concerning the problem of Bnei Baruch Kabbalah being a science and a scientific mode of researching the world, I follow the standard of methodological naturalism. From such a perspective, Bnei Baruch’s statement that Kabbalah is a science which uses scientific methodology to research not our world, but the spiritual one, is not correct. The theses proposed by the Bnei Baruch Institute do not fulfil the most common “scientific condition”.

In addition, when determining the scientific character of Kabbalah, something that has to be questioned is: Has anyone made an effort to disprove this claim, or has only confirmatory evidence been sought? (It is one of the lines of demarcation between science and pseudoscience according to Shermer (63, 217).) Have researchers from the Bnei Baruch Institute tried to falsify their claim that Kabbalah is a science? Or do they accept their claim as a “fact”? It seems to me that they only do the latter. As a matter of fact, the alleged scientific (or naturalistic, i.e. in accordance with methodological naturalism) status of Bnei Baruch Kabbalah cannot be maintained.

The system of thought, Weltanschauung of Bnei Baruch, this innovative worldwide contemporary movement, a type of new religious-alike movement, remains then a kind of philosophical and/or religious-alike (or better: spiritual) kind of teaching – not a science. Actually, Bnei Baruch Kabbalah appears not to be far-distant from religious thinking because of the character of God (the Creator), which in both cases is a spiritual/supranatural entity. And therefore we can, as far as I am concerned, call Bnei Baruch Kabbalah phenomenon an emerging new manifestation and form of de facto spirituality.

Although the 20th century abounded in revived kabbalistic thinking and new mystical Jewish schools (present both in Israel and in Europe), Gershom Scholem, a probably most prominent Kabbalah researcher so far, protested over labelling them “kabbalistic”, or more precisely, as a “real kabbalah” (83, 1; 84, 71). His attitude greatly influenced the approach to Kabbalah of succeeding scholars. When it goes about Bnei Baruch Kabbalah, it is crucial to take a position towards Scholem’s thesis about modern Kabbalah. Scholem could not make a stand towards Bnei Baruch Kabbalah (he died in 1982 and Laitman’s organization was established, as said at the beginning, in 1991), but in his line of thought Bnei Baruch doctrine would not fit the category of “real Kabbalah” too – the Institute’s teaching is not the extension of “real” kabbalistic paradigm. It is, of course, its aftermath, includes substantial elements from Jewish mysticism, but deprived by its proponents of religious (Judaistic) context it becomes in fact a spiritual, but philosophical (and not religious in a strict sense) kind of teaching.

Laitman’s and his organization’s members accent on presenting their Kabbalah as a “science” is, as it seems to me, on the one hand a kind of marketing technique to enhance the appeal of the movement to modern humans (perhaps especially secular Israelis) – we live, after all, in a society that to the great extent respect what is explained academically; on the other, however, may be the outcome of the psychological interpretation of this Kabbalah (viz. the crucial concept of the inner “me” and internal psychological/spiritual qualities). Psychology, in a matter of fact, is namely – as a discipline – abounded in naturalists (as stated by Kim (50, 85). Maybe this is also the reason why „the sons of Baruch” insist on calling their Kabbalah a scientific procedure.

At this point it would be worth mentioning that similar to Bnei Baruch’s claims of scientific validity have been a quite common discourse in contemporary new religious movements, New Age movements, and spiritual forms of teaching, so Laitman’s Institute is no exceptional here. One can even say that drawing on the authority of science is a pattern found often in alternative religious movements. Huss (15, 118) recognizes

that the blurring of boundaries between spirituality or religion on the one hand and science on the other, is symptomatic both for New Age movement in general, and for Neo-kabbalistic movements.

Such tendency does not only expose a loss of traditional (in the sense of theistic) religion's power and traditional religious beliefs' plausibility in contemporary society, but is also a mark of modern-day legitimacy and "sacralization" of science. It is in fact an expression of religious attitude and estimation (only the object of the highest meaning differs from that in religion). It looks like a paradox that the "sons of Baruch" try to distance themselves with their Kabbalah from religion, but are not able to avoid such parallel on every plane. Bnei Baruch do not keep away from the sacralization tendency, although they do not sacralize some religious "thing" (God), but something from the apparently opposite dominium – namely science and scientific procedure.

Due to a great number of concepts borrowed from traditional, especially late medieval and early modern era, Jewish Kabbalah – however adapted to modern times – the teaching of Bnei Baruch appears in fact to be a kind of modern mysticism and one whole modern myth. And a science-sacralization tendency that echos from this neo-Kabbalah creates additionally a kind of "science myth".

Notes

¹ Considering the particularities of the sources used by the author, the editors have decided not to change the system of in-text citations and to modify only the bibliography according to the Chicago Citation Style. In-text citations of the type (1, 26) refer to the entry in the bibliography and to the cited page. Final references are placed in the order in which they appear in the text, for a better readability.

² See also Laitman's article: "The Difference Between the Science of Kabbalah and Religion", <http://www.kabbalah.info/eng/content/view/frame/2373?eng/&main> (Mar 17, 2017). All of Laitman's articles, available in electronic version, which I quote come from this site and from this day (unless otherwise specified).

³ Concerning such "objects-forces", Bnei Baruch Kabbalah namely says: "There are no material objects in the Upper Words, just only forces that give birth to the objects of our world and to our sensations." (37). See also Ashlag (32, 111).

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