

Critical thinking, skepticism and the special nature of Philosophical Education

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ABSTRACT

In the present paper we attempt to determine the distinct character of teaching philosophy by revealing the distinct character of critical thinking which is unique in philosophical reflection. We describe the problems of determining the subject matter of philosophical thinking by providing an analogy with art and by sketching a brief outline of the different metaphilosophical conceptions in the history of philosophy. Furthermore, we refer to an additional problem of determining the subject matter of teaching philosophy, that is, the ambiguity of the notion of teaching. In the fifth section, we argue for the central role of critical thinking in the educational process. Despite these difficulties, we argue that we can determine the distinct character of philosophical critical thinking by appealing to the notion of skeptical tests. We employ Hegel's argumentation in order to reveal that while all genuine philosophical thinking includes skeptical tests, genuine philosophical thinking does not necessarily end up at skepticism. We conclude that the application of skeptical tests is an essential feature of philosophical reflection, and therefore, of teaching philosophy.

KEYWORDS

Critical thinking, skepticism, Philosophical Education

RÉSUMÉ

Dans le présent article, nous tentons de déterminer le caractère distinct de l'enseignement de la philosophie en révélant le caractère distinct de la pensée critique qui est unique dans la réflexion philosophique. Nous décrivons les problèmes de détermination de la matière de la pensée philosophique en faisant une analogie avec l'art et en esquissant un bref aperçu des différentes conceptions métaphilosophiques dans l'histoire de la philosophie. En outre, nous évoquons un problème supplémentaire de détermination de l'objet de l'enseignement de la philosophie, à savoir l'ambiguïté de la notion d'enseignement. Dans la cinquième section, nous défendons le rôle central de la pensée critique dans le processus éducatif. Malgré ces difficultés, nous soutenons que nous pouvons déterminer le caractère distinct de la pensée critique philosophique en faisant appel à la notion de tests sceptiques. Nous utilisons l'argumentation de Hegel afin de révéler que si toute pensée philosophique authentique inclut des tests sceptiques, la pensée philosophique authentique n'aboutit pas nécessairement au scepticisme. Nous concluons que l'application de tests sceptiques est une caractéristique essentielle de la réflexion philosophique, et donc de l'enseignement de la philosophie.

MOTS-CLÉS

Pensée critique, scepticisme, éducation philosophique

INTRODUCTION

A number of influential theories on the interpretation of learning raise concerns over the wider educational practice and individual teaching approaches to various subject matters. In this context, a kind of ill-at-ease feeling towards a problem of method in the school learning framework very often occurs. The question is: whether and to what extent an educational intervention is allowed to demarcate the scope of a subject matter. These concerns deepen when they are reflected in the teaching process with regard to the cognitive content of a subject matter, the definition of which cannot be taken for granted as it is conditional on a diversity of subjective conceptions. This implies that such subject matter not only allows but also stimulates several approaches and interpretations. In the present paper, the general term 'philosophy teaching' is warranted in the same manner as is the case with teaching approaches in other areas. The term 'philosophy teaching' refers to a whole range of approaches, requirements, plans, techniques, and methods. The problem which arises pertains to the pursuit of a specific learning process consistent with the teaching of various philosophical topics. As revealed by the way in which philosophical questions and issues are put forward (and by their very own nature), an approach searching for open forms of dialogue should be advocated. We are seeking, therefore, the meaning of the term 'philosophy teaching' in the dynamic of a discourse that is constantly posing questions. This quest spotlights the diversity, the complexity, and, for this reason, the relativity of any didactic approach. Namely, a theoretical approach that is open to a very broad scope extending to a variety of cultural facets and aspects of social life as well (Vaos & Mouriki, 2016)

Delving deeper into our study, we encounter learning theories that allow multiple views for addressing the teaching of philosophical knowledge, converging on a common ground of teaching applications and educational goals. The possibility of adopting critical thinking and the reflective power of judgement within the scope of the educational process constitute the common factor of the following theories.

The present paper is an attempt to determine the distinct character of teaching philosophy by revealing the distinct character of critical thinking which is unique in philosophical reflection. In particular, our argumentation will take the following course: In the next chapter, we sketch a brief outline of the different metaphilosophical conceptions in the history of philosophy. In the third section, we refer to an additional problem of determining the subject matter of teaching philosophy, that is, the ambiguity of the notion of teaching. In the fourth section, we argue for the central role of critical thinking in the educational process. In the next section, we claim that the distinct character of philosophical critical thinking consists of skeptical tests. In the sixth section, we employ Hegel's argumentation in order to reveal that while all genuine philosophical thinking includes skeptical tests, genuine philosophical thinking does not necessarily end up at skepticism. We conclude that the application of skeptical tests is an essential feature of philosophical reflection, and therefore, of teaching philosophy.

THE METAPHILOSOPHICAL BABEL

The difficulty of determining the subject matter of philosophy is revealed if we take into consideration the wide range of metaphilosophical perspectives found throughout the history of philosophy. By 'metaphilosophy' we mean "the investigation of the nature of philosophy, with the central aim of arriving at a satisfactory explanation of the absence of uncontested philosophical claims and arguments" (Lazerowitz 1970, p. 91). This definition implies that, unlike other cognitive activities such as the empirical sciences or mathematics, philosophy lacks consensus concerning a set of fundamental principles. It also lacks consensus about what exactly is the task of philosophical activity. This kind of metaphilosophical pluralism becomes obvious if we take even a quick glimpse at the history of philosophy.

For instance, in the Aristotelian work we can find the following twofold metaphilosophical conception. On the one hand, Aristotle claims that "[t]here is a kind of science whose remit is being *qua* being and the things pertaining to that which is *per se*. This science is not the same as any of the departmental disciplines. For none of these latter engages in this general speculation about that which is *qua* that which is. Rather, they delimit some section of what is and study its accidental features (a prime example is mathematics)" (Aristotle 1998, 1003a). This science is first philosophy (or merely philosophy as we may call it today). On the other hand, Aristotle (1998, 1026a) suggests that philosophy 'deals with things that are separable and are remote from change', that is, with supra-sensible things. These two definitions may look divergent or even incompatible with each other from a modern point of view. However, within the context of the Aristotelian teleological universe, there is no conflict among them.

Despite the general anti-Aristotelian attitude of philosophers during the Scientific Revolution, the conception of philosophy as the study of the supra-sensible part of the world (God and soul) survived in the rationalist philosophers of the 17th century, like Descartes and Leibniz (Friedman, 2001, p. 8). Perhaps Descartes' (2017) *Meditations on First Philosophy* is the most characteristic instantiation of this tendency. In this text, Descartes provides his famous ontological schism between the material (*res extensa*) and the thinking (*res cogitans*) substance.

In the 18th century, Kant's 'Copernican revolution' created a major metaphilosophical turn. According to Kant, philosophy is essentially a transcendental inquiry, and he renders as transcendental all cognition [...] which occupies itself in general, not so much with objects, but rather with our mode of cognition of objects, in so far as this is supposed to be possible a priori'. Towards the same direction, Hegel states clearly that philosophical activity takes no external- to-consciousness-object as its subject matter. 'Philosophy as such is the thought or νοῦς that brings itself to consciousness, that occupies itself with itself (Hegel 1840/1995, p. 219).

During the mid- and late 19th century, the emergence of positivism led to the underestimation of the traditional a priori conceptual analysis as opposed to the empirical (i.e. scientific) investigation (Harré, 2003). However, 19th century positivists also used to understand philosophy mostly as epistemology.

In the 20th century, Western philosophy was marked by the schism between the analytic and the continental traditions. In the analytic tradition, the logical empiricists, influenced by Wittgenstein's (1961) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, undertook the task of the logical analysis of language. According to Wittgenstein's (1961, p. 4.112) well-known aphorism: "Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations. Philosophy does not result in 'philosophical propositions', but rather in the clarification of propositions". On the contrary, in the continental

tradition, many philosophers, influenced by Martin Heidegger's work, took as philosophy's primary task the study of being, that is, ontology.

This extremely concise and inevitably incomplete anthology of metaphilosophical perspectives reveals the divergence and incompatibility between the different conceptions on the nature and the task of philosophy. At this point, one may argue that the special subject matter of philosophical education is exactly the totality of the divergent philosophical conceptions. After all, as Sellars (1968, p. 1) puts it, "[t]he history of philosophy is the *lingua franca* which makes communication between philosophers, at least of different points of view, possible. Philosophy without the history of philosophy, if not empty or blind, is at least dumb". Of course, no one would deny that an acquaintance with the history of philosophy is an indispensable part of any possible philosophical education. However, the general appeal to the history of philosophy cannot solve the problem of polysemy insofar as the subject matter of philosophy is concerned, and hence, it cannot be a strict guide for teaching philosophy. The reason is twofold. First, different metaphilosophical conceptions evaluate in different ways what is most or least important in the history of philosophy. This results in quite different curricula concerning the history of philosophy. For instance, until thirty years ago it was very difficult for Hegelian or Heideggerian texts to find a place among the syllabi of courses in departments oriented towards analytic philosophy. Second, no reading of the history of philosophy is 'innocent' or neutral. Reading past philosophical texts, especially those written in a completely different era, presupposes the principle of charity. Nonetheless, this principle can be applied in many different ways by varying philosophical and also metaphilosophical standpoints.

AN ADDITIONAL PROBLEM: THE AMBIGUITY OF THE NOTION OF TEACHING

Goodman, referring to the field of art, accepts the possibility of multiple considerations and interpretations while shifting the question of 'What is art?' from its explicit definition to the framework of its practice. Goodman (2006, p. 378) raises the question about art, implying the difficulty of defining its content by dogmatic declarations on art. He wonders 'When does art exist?' instead of 'What is art?'. Raising a similar question in relation to philosophy moves us away, in equal measure, from the content of dogmatic (or essentialist) attempts to define its subject matter. The relevant educational intervention is disengaged from the application of a rigid framework of philosophical education. Adopting this approach does not lead us to uncertainty or absolve us from critical evaluation; on the contrary, it introduces us to the particularity of philosophical thinking and practice. Hence, we can ask the question: 'When do we think philosophically?' instead of 'What is philosophy?' Or, more specifically, 'What does philosophical thinking *mean*?'.

Along the same lines, we may research for a similar attitude which allows the developing person to take a critical look at the multiplicity of different approaches and develop their own independent thought. The value of this approach lies in the shifting of interest from the study of the subject matter of philosophy itself to the stimulation of the intellectual activity. It underlies the critical attitude as constitutive of philosophical thinking while highlighting the primarily questioning nature of philosophical reflection (Vaos, Sotiropoulos, & Berthoud-Papandropoulou, 2014).

According to Mialaret (1966, p. 41-50), learning is defined as the process during which the student acquires knowledge and skills, adopts behaviors, and internalises values by being exposed to educational material and applying cognitive processes. Notwithstanding that the term 'learning' denotes the learning process, it often determines its outcome as well. Teaching is shaped into a set

of plans, processes, practices, and methods, which enable a teaching goal to be put into practice. Furthermore, examining the teaching process launches debates about the discipline, the more general context of education, the specific learning process, the role of educators and, ultimately, the development of the learner. If we accept that the purpose of teaching is to impart knowledge, the discussion that surrounds teaching is not so much centered on a formal question; nonetheless, as the essential purpose of teaching is imparting knowledge, however obvious it may seem, without the dissemination of knowledge there is no learning, and the question must be addressed: What is this knowledge? More specifically, how could we determine whether this knowledge is circumscribed as regards certain activities such as philosophy or art, where the determination of the subject matter seems inevitably subjective?

In the quest for a learning theory capable of establishing the sort of critical thinking that the nature of philosophy requires, we encounter Immanuel Kant's position on education. Kant defines the learning process as an art, the practice of which must be constantly improved in the course of many generations. And, he continues, each generation, having been equipped with the knowledge of the previous ones, can increasingly focus on an education capable of building upon, by analogy and thoroughness, all inherent natural qualities of human beings so as to guide the entire human race to its destination. Man is the only creature that needs to be educated. The human race ought to bring progressively to light, by its own efforts and by itself, the sum total of all inherent natural qualities of human beings (Kant, 1998, AA, VIII, 18-19). The broad range of complex and multiple interactions in an essentially timeless framework as implied by Kant can only be practically understood if the learning process is defined on the basis of critical thinking.

Kant, in his *Transcendental Dialectic of the Critique of Pure Reason* (AA, VII, 127), meets the requirement of an education, the subject matter of which is, directly or indirectly, the achievement of freedom. Kant emphatically adds that there may be various organizational forms of education. Nevertheless, freedom remains the purpose of and a precondition for education. Without providing us an unequivocal answer to the question of the purpose of freedom in education, he heightens the reflective dimension of educational practice on the basis of its liberating role. Freedom is the goal of education in Kant's philosophy (Sagriotis, 2016). Kant describes an act of teaching where the concept of freedom is schematized in the critical reflection of judgement which has the power to liberate the intellectual process. Freedom considered as the goal of education also becomes the common factor of education itself that determines the possibility of philosophising. The teacher, Kant tells us, is 'an artist of Reason' (AA, III, 542), while elsewhere he calls the philosopher 'an ideal teacher' (AA, III, 542). What we should learn is to exercise the philosophical activity, that is, to 'exercise the gift of Reason by complying with its general principles in specific attempts' (AA, III, 542). As Kant stresses the connection between education and freedom, consequently, according to his view, critical thinking is a key objective of education and hence of philosophy teaching inasmuch as it encompasses multiplicity, ambiguity, and even contradiction as its starting point.

Another perspective which adopts the assumption that the teaching practice is not designated by the definitions of the subject to be taught is Vygotsky's (1896-1934) approach. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development is considered to be one of the most innovative psychological theories of the 20th century for putting learning into a framework of educational practice that is organized with reference to cultural and social factors. His theory is essentially based on the assumption that culture plays an important role in the cognitive development of the developing person. Educational practice is put under scrutiny within the changing boundaries of the wider community and the system involving the individual. Therefore, it places the developing person into a multiplicity of views and positions, integrating into this

framework the dynamic contribution of adults in accordance with the 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978).

The *Movement of New Education* (Mialaret, 1966), which was very sharply critical of the 'actual' school of thought (from which the book derived its title), regards as a necessary and sufficient condition of the educational process the relationship of the developing person with the adult, i.e. the bearer of knowledge. Through this relationship *New Education* interprets the connection of a person to the wider social web. Therefore, by promoting the reform of man and society, a new teaching and learning atmosphere is designated. Such an educational intervention would favour participatory dialogue between teacher and student and take into account the student's interests, needs, and developmental level. Education pertains to reflection of the broader social dialogue. In this framework, Bruner points out that the intervention of the adult must aim at providing children with 'cultural amplifiers', namely practices and techniques mastered by culture and society (Bruner, 1997).

By extending our brief reference to eco-systemic theories, we notice a focus on complex systems of human interaction that goes beyond the individual's control of the immediate situation. Constant change, exchange, and transition to the wider societal and environmental frameworks give to the individual the opportunity to overcome the restrictions of individuality. Engagement with the complex interactions and interconnections of wider environmental frameworks during an individual's lifetime expands the boundaries of the educational process. Teaching intervention turns out to be a process of autonomous options through a web of complex interactions. An individual conceives the notion of personal and practical freedom by adopting a critical attitude.

According to the eco-systemic theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), we are involved in multicomponent systems of human interaction. In fact, it could even be said that we attempt to draw conclusions on the individual based on the collective processes. We are looking at an educational framework that reinforces the developing person's intellectual freedom; a pedagogical approach that triggers the philosophical activity and also the individual's thinking and reflection. Thus, the abovementioned theoretical approaches converge on the idea that the teaching intervention, and hence knowledge, always take places within a framework of multiplicity, i.e., a framework which accepts the polysemy of things. Accordingly, this idea accepts critical thinking as a capability of the developing person to determine his or her mindset in this area of human civilization in one's own personal way.

Consequently, seeking to provide an initial answer to the question, 'Which educational practice makes possible the exploration of philosophical knowledge?' we come across the question of whether or not to accept the need for a systematic organization of the knowledge offered. Nevertheless, the question remains open: Is philosophical knowledge a field of knowledge which is clearly defined? And furthermore: Does any cognitive deviation, which a teaching intervention may potentially entrain, disturb the coherence of the discipline? We could argue, in light of the Kantian vision for education, that the identity of method and subject matter is fulfilled through the intellectual function of philosophical activity (Kant, 1998, AA, III, 542). In this case, the educational requirement for the student's fruitful engagement in philosophising is met precisely by virtue of the sort of critical thinking that entails the guarantee of one's intellectual freedom. Therefore, the educational act we are looking for is already materialized in the identity of method and content. The nature of philosophical knowledge and its reflective attitude are put into the framework of a cultural, social, and developmental exchange. If this is true, we can see that a liberating intellectual function is inherent in the ability to philosophise, satisfying at the same time both critical thinking and reflective reason.

EDUCATION AND CRITICAL THINKING

In this respect let us underline the fact that critical thinking should not be equated with any specific set of philosophical beliefs. A similar approach is already encountered in the era of Socrates' philosophical education. The access to a clear domain of some philosophical 'truth' does not imply consolidating positions of strict acceptance but rather engaging with a sequence of constantly raised questions. In this context, such a so-called 'truth' determines a personal attitude towards the subject matter of philosophy.

Kant stresses the potential of education when freedom is the overarching goal. Nonetheless, as John Dewey acknowledges, education should not have an external aim, that is, an aim which transgresses the reality of the educational context. The aim lies in the present; it is not an abstract concept. The developing person lives in the present. School education must be life itself, not a prerequisite of life. Education is a means for social progress and change (Dewey, 1934). In light of these two statements on education, the educational process shouldn't violate the terms of a free intellectual process both with regard to its content and pedagogical method. Philosophical pursuit may lead to a wide range of directions, individual or collective, in the context of various learning conditions even beyond any educational specification or restriction.

Mialaret's view, in line with the position of 'New Education', stresses the need for an educational practice which supports democratic society. More specifically, learning occurs by reference to democratic society, in which a person is not anonymous, but a whole personality, capable of influencing the general decisions taken at the level of the broader social life (Mialaret, 1966). Educational action is thus associated with the life of a person as a citizen and the societal engagement of the developing person as well. This perspective justifies the pursuit of an educational practice and method in areas where critical thinking is extended equally to both the acting subject in general and the subject of philosophical research.

Hence, the potential of education should be considered in light of the possibility of ensuring autonomous thinking. In such a case the performative nature of the educational process is aligned with the improvised function, which completes each pedagogical intervention, since the educational action cannot be fully pre-determined. In a field which is governed by the logic of subsumption, i.e. the field of teaching applications, we seek to broaden the reflective power of critical thinking.

PHILOSOPHY AS SYSTEMATIC SCEPTICAL ACTIVITY

K. R. Popper's notes about the critical method in philosophy: "[T] here isn't any particular method in philosophy. In fact, philosophy as a whole is the result of a single philosophical method, i.e., the critical debate on a topic. And this is not used only in philosophy. Therefore, if we would define it more precisely, we should say that it is the formulation of a problem and the critical examination of the various solutions to this problem" (Popper, 2005, p. 27-37). However, one may wonder how it is that that process differs from the thinking process which is systematically followed in other disciplines, like mathematics or the empirical sciences? Why should we attribute critical thinking exclusively to philosophy? The history of science is full of debates in which we can find excellent examples of deep and rigorous examples of critical thinking. Undoubtedly, critical thinking is not an exclusive privilege of philosophical thinking. It is part of each and every activity that presupposes rational exchange.

However, with regard to critical thinking, there is a crucial difference between philosophy and other rational activities. In those other activities critical thinking is always exercised upon a specific subject matter which is other than the critical thinking itself. Philosophy, on the other hand, from the very beginning, is concerned with critical thinking *per se*, that is, with the formal ways of the possible critical examination of any possible statement. Maybe the most characteristic example of this kind of critical thinking is the so-called skeptical modes. Take, for instance, the five modes of Agrippa as they are described by Sextus (Annas & Barnes, 2000, §164-169): The more recent Sceptics offer the following five modes of suspension of judgment: first, the mode deriving from dispute; second, the mode throwing one back *ad infinitum*; third, the mode deriving from relativity; fourth, the hypothetical mode; fifth, the reciprocal mode. According to the mode deriving from dispute, we find that undecidable dissension about the matter proposed has come about both in ordinary life and among philosophers. Because of this we are not able either to choose or to rule out anything, and we end up with suspension of judgment. In the mode deriving from infinite regress, we say that what is brought forward as a source of conviction for the matter proposed itself needs another such source, which itself needs another, and so *ad infinitum*, so that we have no point from which to begin to establish anything, and suspension of judgment follows. In the mode deriving from relativity as we said above, the existing object appears to be such-and-such relative to the subject judging and to the things observed together with it, but we suspend judgment on what it is like in its nature. We have the mode from hypothesis when the Dogmatists, being thrown back *ad infinitum*, begin from something which they do not establish but claim to assume simply and without proof in virtue of a concession. The reciprocal mode occurs when what ought to be confirmatory of the object under investigation needs to be made convincing by the object under investigation; then, being unable to take either in order to establish the other, we suspend judgment about both.

As it is clear, these logical modes aim to build a logical network which can be applied to any possible statement in order to reveal its logical unsoundness. The application of the modes is not confined to a particular subject matter or to a particular range of subject matters. In this sense, they are concerned with critical thinking *per se*.

At this point one may object that while it is correct to claim that skeptical modes are concerned with critical thinking *per se*, there are other examples of philosophical thinking which deal with specific subject matter, like knowledge or ethical virtue. In fact, the most part of the critical thinking that we conventionally consider as philosophical today are more of this type rather than of the type of skeptical modes. Therefore, it seems that we are entrapped in an unwanted dilemma. Either our claim that philosophy has a special affinity to critical thinking is unsound or we have to admit that the only genuine philosophical thinking is that provided by scepticists. It seems that we have to either identify philosophy with skepticism or deny the possibility of determining philosophy's distinctive character through critical thinking. However, we suggest that we can avoid this unwanted dilemma if we take into consideration Hegel's conception of skepticism.

IS PHILOSOPHY DOOMED TO BE SKEPTICAL? A HEGELIAN ANTIDOTE

Hegel's critique of skepticism is unique since he neither ignores skeptical threats nor seeks for a safe foundation, which is supposed to be untouched by the destructive force of skepticism (Cherry & Robison 1977; Forster 1989). The Hegelian conception embraces skeptical logical modes as an indispensable part of philosophical reasoning. Nonetheless, contrary to the customary use of these

mode, Hegel's aspiration is to annihilate the central aspiration of skepticism, which is no other than the 'suspension of judgement' (*ἐποχή*) that leads to tranquillity (*ἀταραξία*) (Annas & Barnes, 2000, §8).

Hegel distinguishes between different kinds of actual skeptical attitudes that occurred in the history of philosophy and the detection of the purest form among them. He opposes modern to ancient skepticism, considering that the latter alone is 'of a true, profound nature' (Hegel, 1840/1983, p. 331). Hume's empiricist skepticism, Descartes's rationalist methodological skepticism, and more thoroughly Schulzean skepticism are charged with dogmatism: "The turning of skepticism against philosophy, as soon as philosophy became dogmatic, illustrates how it has kept in step with the communal degeneration of philosophy and of the world in general, until finally in these most recent times it has sunk so far in company with dogmatism that for both of them nowadays the facts of consciousness have an indubitable certainty, and for them both the truth resides in temporality; so that, since the extremes now touch, the great goal is attained once more on their side in these happy times, that dogmatism and skepticism coincide with one another on the underside, and offer each other the hand of perfect friendship and fraternity. Schulzian skepticism integrates the crudest dogmatism into itself, and Krug's dogmatism carries that skepticism within itself likewise" (Hegel 1802/1985, p. 330)¹.

In contrast to modern, ancient skepticism, according to Hegel, is more radical and philosophically genuine. However, not all kinds of ancient skepticism are equally valuable to philosophical thinking. We have to keep in mind that there are major differences also among the ancient skeptical schools.

Sextus (Annas & Barnes, 2000, §2) distinguishes between the Academics who affirm that reaching the truth is an impossible task, and the 'Skeptics [or Pyrrhonists] [who] are still investigating'. Pyrrhonists follow a certain line of reasoning, which is characterized by a set of modes (or tropes). Hegel distinguishes between the earlier ten tropes which are attributed to Aenesidemus and Agrippa's modes (see previous section). The former are not logical modes and they simply proceed against common belief (Hegel 1840/1983, pp. 346, 356). The latter express an advanced stage of philosophical thought, 'for they pertain more to thinking reflection, and contain the dialectic which the determinate Notion has within it' (Hegel 1840/1983, p. 357). The purest and hence the most radical form of skepticism does not exempt anything from doubt. It uses as its main logical tool the later tropes in order to achieve suspension.

In order to understand the logical function of the skeptical modes we have to consider the notion of knowledge. According to Hegel (1802/1985, pp. 339-340), 'the essence of knowledge consists the identity of the universal and the particular or of what is posited in the form of thought and of being'. This is a definition of knowledge that consists of triple identities: the identity of the universal and the particular, the identity between thought and being, and the identity of the two identities expressed by the aforementioned disjunction. The central aim of skepticism is the deconstruction of the first identity and consequently the destruction of the identity between thought and being. For instance, take the following example of Sextus (Annas & Barnes, 2000, §20): 'it appears to us that honey sweetens (we concede this inasmuch as we are sweetened in a perceptual way); but whether (as far as the argument goes) it is actually sweet is something we investigate - and this is not what is apparent but something said about what is apparent'. Sextus explicitly rejects the possibility of the assertion, "the honey is sweet". But let us take a closer glimpse at the assertion in question. "The honey is sweet" means that each and every particular instantiation of honey is

¹ Furthermore, according to Hegel, the Humeans exempt from doubt the sense-perception (the feeling) while the Cartesians the content of their own *cogitations*. See Forster (1989, ch.1 §1, especially n. 11).

sweet. This implies that sweetness is a constitutive feature of honey. Something is honey if and only if something is sweet—among other things of course. This also means that skeptics reject the formula “it is” in general, for they reject the possibility of determining constitutive features in general. If Sextus is right, we cannot say “the honey is brown”, “the honey is viscous”, etc. But, if Sextus is right, how can we say “honey” at all? The impossibility of constitutive features leads to the impossibility of bringing together the universal terms and their particular instantiations. This leaves us with the abstract identity between the particular and itself. Again, if Sextus is right, the only thing we can say is “this thing right now is this thing right now”. But then it is obvious that the particularity vanishes. Sextus permits himself to say “honey” at the cost of inconsistency. Hegel (1816/2010, p. 343) points out this kind of inconsistency in *Science of Logic*: “Skepticism did not permit itself to say ‘It is,’ and the more recent idealism did not permit itself to regard cognitions as a knowledge of the thing-in-itself. The shine of the former was supposed absolutely not to have the foundation of a being: the thing in itself was not supposed to enter into these cognitions. But at the same time skepticism allowed a manifold of determinations for its shine, or rather the latter turned out to have the full richness of the world for its content. Likewise for the appearance of idealism: it encompassed the full range of these manifold determinacies. So, the shine of skepticism and the appearance of idealism do immediately have a manifold of determination”.

The rejection of the foundation of a being is the rejection of the possibility of determination of constitutive features. However, at the same time that they deny this possibility, the skeptics implicitly allow themselves a manifold of determinations, which is a manifold of constitutive features. Otherwise, for example, the skeptics wouldn’t be able even to utter “honey”. In short, skepticism rejects as unsound the formula “it is” (X is Y) in general, while it permits the formula “it seems that X is Y”. Nonetheless, as Hegel shows, the latter presupposes the former, and hence one can permit the latter and reject the former only at the cost of inconsistency.

Despite this conclusion, Hegel does not consider skeptical reasoning as an enemy to philosophy. He thinks that skepticism is an indispensable part of every genuine philosophical activity: ‘[t]he skepticism that is directed against the whole range of phenomenal consciousness, [...], renders the Spirit for the first time competent to examine what truth is’ (Hegel 1807/1977, p. 50). In other words, skepticism is an irreplaceable logical mechanism against any kind of dogmatism. Therefore, every genuine philosophical activity begins with the skeptical tests against dogmatic presumptions. The problem for skeptics is that they do not recognize anything between dogmatism and skepticism; this is largely the result of the assumption that ‘dialectic has only a negative result’ (Hegel 1816/2010, p. 743). In a word, skeptics mistake the result of the refutations provided by the skeptical tests. They mistakenly believe that they lead to abstract negation while in fact they always lead to a *determinate negation*². Hegel insists on the fact that every skeptical negation is necessarily a determinate one and thus its result is not a pure nothingness, but a new, specific, and progressed form derived by this very act of negation. “This is just the skepticism which only ever sees pure nothingness in its result and abstracts from the fact that this nothingness is specifically the nothingness of that from which it results. For it is only when it is taken as the result of that from which it emerges, that it is, in fact, the true result; in that case it is itself a determinate nothingness, one which has a content. The skepticism that ends up with the bare abstraction of nothingness or emptiness cannot get any further from there, but must wait to see whether something new comes along and what it is, in order to throw it too into the same empty abyss. But when, on the other hand, the result is conceived as it is in truth, namely, as a determinate negation, a new form has thereby immediately arisen, and in the negation the transition is made

² The notion of ‘determinate negation’ is central to Hegel’s philosophy. See Stewart 1996.

through which the progress through the complete series of forms comes about of itself” (Hegel 1807/1977, p. 51)³.

Therefore, skepticism is not the end, or a dead end, of philosophical thought. It is a necessary moment within it. It is necessary if philosophy wants to be genuine philosophy, that is, to avoid dogmatism.

Let us now go back to the relation between philosophy and critical thinking. If Hegel is right, as we suggest he is, then philosophy has a special affinity with formal critical thinking without being identified with skepticism. Every genuine philosophical activity includes skeptical reasoning without necessarily ending up at skeptical conclusions. This means that we can avoid the unwanted dilemma that we described at the end of the last section. This also means that teaching philosophy is first and foremost initiation into the formal ways of exercising critical thinking.

CONCLUSION

If what we argued for is sound, then—despite the metaphilosophical diversity and the lack of consensus concerning philosophy’s subject matter—teaching philosophy is not an arbitrary activity. It is not the case that every kind of critical thinking counts as philosophy. Introducing students to the skeptical testing of their (or others’) argumentation lies at the heart of the educational process and determines the distinct character of philosophical education. As we have already said, critical thinking is not an exclusive feature of philosophy. However, being familiar with the formal ways of critically examining any possible statement is a unique feature of being taught philosophy. These formal ways can be grouped under the label of the skeptical tests which, as Hegel shows, do not necessarily end up at a skeptical conclusion.

To put it in a nutshell, the distinguishing feature of the philosophical education rests on this kind of rational exchange that we called skeptical test. Philosophy teaching makes students gradually acquainted with the skeptical reasoning in a broad spectrum of intellectual problems. This acquaintance does lead the students to embrace any particular thesis concerning the problems in question. It only leads to the mastery of an advanced way of critical thinking.

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³ The following passage is also representative of this line of thought: ‘The one thing needed to achieve scientific progress – and it is essential to make an effort at gaining this quite simple insight into it – is the recognition of the logical principle that negation is equally positive, or that what is self-contradictory does not resolve itself into a nullity, into abstract nothingness, but essentially only into the negation of its particular content; or that such a negation is not just negation, but is the negation of the determined fact which is resolved, and is therefore determinate negation; that in the result there is therefore contained in essence that from which the result derives – a tautology indeed, since the result would otherwise be something immediate and not a result. Because the result, the negation, is a determinate negation, it has a content. It is a new concept but one higher and richer than the preceding – richer because it negates or opposes the preceding and therefore contains it, and it contains even more than that, for it is the unity of itself and its opposite. – It is above all in this way that the system of concepts is to be erected – and it has to come to completion in an unstoppable and pure progression that admits of nothing extraneous. (Hegel 1816/2010, p. 33).

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