Rethinking Individual Formation Through a Critical-Problematicist Rereading of Irony

Chiara Carletti
Università di Firenze

Abstract

Our society is called on to face challenges of planetary scope that are inevitably redefining the role of education, which has to reconsider the traditional model of *anthropos* in light of a conception of existence meant as *project* and *Bildung*. To this end, the categories of Problematicism, such as *difference*, the *possible* and the *utopian*, can be useful if reread through irony. This enables us to become aware of social conditionings and take that leap in quality that is indispensable for prompting change and giving sense and direction to our existence. Each subject will thus find him or herself wearing new lenses through which to observe and interpret the world, offering a glimpse of new places of the possible. This implies a change of perspective. As such, *irony* is an important pedagogical device whose potential can be grasped through critical and Problematicist rethinking.

La nostra società è chiamata ad affrontare sfide di portata planetaria che ridefiniscono inevitabilmente anche il ruolo dell'educazione: questa deve riconsiderare il tradizionale modello di *anthropos* alla luce di una concezione dell'esistenza intesa come *progetto* e come *Bildung*. Per farlo si rivelano utili le categorie del Problematicismo, quali la *differenza*, il *possibile* e *l'utopico*, rilette attraverso l'ironia. Questa ci consente di prendere coscienza dei condizionamenti della società e di avviare quel salto qualitativo indispensabile a innescare il cambiamento e a dare un senso e un orientamento alla nostra esistenza. Ciascun soggetto si troverà a indossare nuove lenti attraverso cui osservare e interpretare il mondo, con la possibilità di intravedere nuovi luoghi del possibile. Ciò implica un cambio di prospettiva. In questo senso l'ironia rappresenta un importante dispositivo pedagogico da ripensare – in chiave critica e problematicista – al fine di coglierne le potenzialità.

Keywords: formation; education; complexity; Problematicism; irony

Parole chiave: formazione, educazione; complessità; Problematicismo; ironia

1. Introduction

For over two years, humankind has been dealing with a global health catastrophe, responsible for an economic as well as political, educational, social and cultural crisis whose consequences remain to be seen (Morin, 2020). Human beings are being placed before all their impotence. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, our post-industrial, postmodern or hyperrealist society had been called upon to tackle an epoch-making challenge: that of education. These days, education has to imagine new formative models that can encourage the development of complex and *capacitating* thought (Nussbaum, 2013), leading to the acquisition of the competences needed for a *planetary citizenry* (Morin, 2011). This demands the ability to live in pluralism as well as openness to comparison, dialogue and encounter, while overcoming the various forms of belonging, closedness and prejudice.

In the 1980s, globalization – of both markets and culture – led to the worldwide spread of the perverse logic of consumerism, adding to the exponential growth of economic and social inequalities. At the same time, the diffusion of means of mass communication – now the possessors of information and knowledge *par excellence* – played a crucial role in the standardization process that made thought *single*, flat and manipulable. The upshot was the institutionalization of a nomadic, precarious, decentred subject involved in an inexorable drift in sense. In the face of this risk of a halved and standardized humanity, education has to find new ways of being *human* (Vattimo, 2000) within an increasingly complex and contradictory society.

This directly calls into question paradigms that have marked the developments of Pedagogy, as well as its theoretical and methodological growth. One of these is the Pedagogical Problematicism of Giovanni Maria Bertin (1912–2002). This can offer us categories, such as that of *difference*, the *possible* and the *utopian* (Bertin & Contini, 2004) which – if reinterpreted and reread in light of current transformations – can produce original epistemological and methodological contributions and foster educational practices aimed at developing plural, reflective, critical and metacognitive minds, fundamental for the formation of responsible, autonomous and free subjects.

Since Problematicism creates opportunities for change, Pedagogy is also called upon to re-evaluate its scientific aspects and redefine its educational operations in an ethical and political key. For Pedagogy, the principle of Problematicism proves to be fundamental precisely in order to highlight the ever-open field of theoretical and operational models. Indeed, Pedagogy is the *science of the possible* (Bertin & Contini, 2004; Baldacci, 2003). Hence, through *pedagogical nihilism* it should contrast and deconstruct all those theoretical and practical approaches that prove ineffective in responding to the needs of the *postmodern* subject (Erbetta, 2007).

The crisis of rationality and the end of the *metanarratives* of modernity (Lyotard, 1979), including enlightenment, idealism and Marxism, has inevitably called this set-up into question. Nevertheless, it can still act as a warning against new forms of conformism, determined by those cultural and economic paradigms which, under the premise of efficiency and technology, are leading to new forms of standardization and domination. Undermining the very bases of democracy, these tendencies are intensifying social inequalities and paving the way for irrational and populist drifts and, in some cases, even fascist nostalgia.

However, with the end of the modern era's typical claim to a single way of the world, we have had to learn to live with diverse points of view. The reality is difference, variety and multiplicity. While on one hand producing greater cultural wealth, on the other it places us before the danger of exposure to excessive and misleading simplification. The risk, in turn, is that of producing a deficit of knowledge and giving more importance to interpretation rather than reality.

Against these new forms of dogmatism, human formation can be led towards the perhaps utopian, but definitely necessary horizon of sense concerning *educating to reason* in order to give young people the critical, constructive and deconstructive tools allowing them to inhabit the complexity of the outside world.

This is the only way in which Bertin's Problematicism can be embraced and rethought. In other words, we have to assert a new, more mobile and open model of pedagogical thought that is able to dialogue with the contradictions of a society in continual transformation, while at the same time striving to retain its democratic nature. Therefore, today's individual is called upon to establish a dialectical relationship with the surrounding reality, so that he or she can accommodate all the biological, cultural and anthropological variables that condition it. These inevitably also influence the formative process which is, by nature, tensional, restless, open, critical, conflictual and dialectical (Mariani et al., 2017), as well as being laden with expectations, obstacles and questions to which we are not always able to offer definite answers.

Hence, education is tasked with promoting an existential projectuality, capable of going beyond the antinomy between the subject's *desire* and *necessity* to build his or her existence. This makes education a problematic event, calling upon the individual to find a balance in the tension between these two poles. It is an ethical-pedagogical undertaking that guides the individual to overcome his or her limits, pointing him or her in the direction of the category of the *possible*. In this process, Pedagogy holds a socially and universally engaging role, giving the *subject-individual-person* the tools to assume a critical focus, pointing both inward and towards the background culture. The self-building process hence features aspects of choice and engagement. These dynamics require constant relaunching, depending on the transformations and prompts given by the historical and cultural context of belonging.

Therefore, every person must reduce his or her condition of *throwness*, the Heideggerian term borrowed by Bertin and Contini (2004) and move in that *space of the possible* that determines the subject's passage from what he or she is to what he or she could be. Education crosses this space, allowing the individual to make choices and change direction in order to achieve full self-realization. Hence, education is a dynamic process which – while taking account of our limits – steers towards increased emancipation compared to the human being's initial condition. To be freed from conditioning and accept change means opening up to that horizon of the possible dear to Bertin. We must know how to interpret, activate and govern this horizon through education, rethinking its structures starting from the triad of *education-instruction* and *formation* (Dalle Fratte, 2004).

Beyond the necessity for Pedagogy to define itself as an autonomous discipline, and have its theoretical and pragmatic status acknowledged, below I hypothesize an educational model in which the teleological and the methodological proceed hand in hand. It is a model that considers *irony* a pedagogical category which, if used

within the formative process, is able to foster an original view of the world, aware of the different points of view and therefore capable of embracing a horizon of possibility.

Indeed, *irony* cultivates the subject's more human dimension, helping to develop a harmonic and conscious self that is both critical and flexible and suited to living the complexity of the world (Cambi, 2010). Now, if formation has to be designed around complexity, young people need to be offered formative experiences based on openness, dialogue, comparison and reciprocal understanding. In this direction, irony can provide a consciousness, *forma mentis*, and cognitive and practical attitude of *self-care* that can lead to the formation of that *planetary* human being (Balducci, 2005) capable of multiple forms of belonging and therefore able to live within a condition of pluralist cultures, faiths, opinions and interests (Callari Galli, 1996; Cambi, 2006a). In this condition, dialogical, open and *ironic* communication is a crucial tool to learn to take different perspectives into consideration. This is the role that irony can play in developing the reflexive, metacognitive, critical and self-critical, divergent and creative mind needed by the *postmodern* individual in order to live in a society with plural ideas, points of view and needs; a society requiring a broadminded, non-judgemental subject who is open to comparison and willing to call him or herself into question.

2. Rereading the categories of Problematicism – *difference, the possible and the utopian* – through irony

The condition of Problematicism is given by a series of problems involving the various fields of experience in which individuals find themselves acting and which, inevitably, condition them: standardization, conformism, frustration, discrimination, stereotypes, forms of exploitation, and so on. They are facts that all subjects passively undergo until they gain awareness of their being-in-the-world and, above all, begin to think in a critical and self-critical manner. This is the only thing that enables us not to sink into standardization and to be freed from the cages of *pensée unique*. Therefore, education must reconsider the traditional model of *anthropos* in light of a conception of existence meant as a *project* and *Bildung*, oriented towards forming individuals with mindsets capable of thinking and acting critically in order not to be overwhelmed by mass culture. This is the only way in which the individual can build an active citizenship, moved by cultural and civil values that are fundamental for cultivating a new humankind (Nussbaum, 1997). In so doing, the categories of Problematicism, such as *difference*, the *possible* and the *utopian* (Bertin & Contini, 2004), prove to be particularly useful if reread starting from the pedagogical category of *irony* (Cambi, 2006a; 2010; 2018; Cambi & Giambalvo, 2008). Pluralism is the code of contemporary society. As such, it should be seen as an opportunity, a resource that can open us to the other, while seeking to sum together our and other people's differences.

This requires a certain fluidity of thought and a serenely detached attitude towards ourselves and the surrounding reality, which can be subject to criticism, dissent and more or less marked forms of resistance.

The starting point in order for individuals to recognize each other has to be dialogue. This is the first and most important tool that we have in order to exchange ideas and points of view. Dialogue can go beyond belonging, prejudices, cultural and social barriers. It opens a plural space of socialization capable of redefining both identities and *differences*. Indeed, if we are to answer the claims of democracy, we must promote attitudes oriented

towards acceptance, listening and comparison that can guarantee «individual people's different qualities» (Bertin, 1969, p. 4) and enhance them.

This pedagogical space needs to be built, cultivated and strengthened, since encountering the other can spark contradictions, tensions, clashes and incomprehension. It is both a physical and inner space regulated by dialogue that opens to *difference* through deconstruction (Derrida, 1978). If we deconstruct our visions and certainties, as well as our prejudices and cultural benchmarks, especially if we are from a dominant culture, we can gain a listening mindset and end up sharing certain *Weltanschauungen*. From this point of view, irony helps us to regain a complex vision of humankind, its thinking and acting, while leaving room for *difference*.

Meant as a style of cultural intelligence, irony develops within open and complex societies which, as such, require an agile, critical and autonomous manner of thought (Cambi, 2006b). Within these now mature cultures, irony acts as a disruptive force which uproots certainties, calls into question and looks for alternatives. In the West, irony has asserted itself as a liberating power that rails against dogmas and accustoms subjects to exercising doubt and reflection. As such, it also assumes a metacognitive role, outlining a critical, mobile and restless mind. Hence, creativity, play and divergent thought come into action and accompany the subject's formative path, along which irony can be used as a category capable of enhancing openness to *difference*.

Indeed, this plays a central role in both human communication and the process of building the individual self. In both cases, it gives us a complex vision of the subject as well as the reality and dynamics that cross through him or her. And so, we come directly to the second category, namely the *possible*, implying the capacity of the subject – called upon to inhabit the complexity of our era, with its needs and contradictions – to choose and accomplish self-determination. Within this scenario, one model able to put the human being and the human mind back in the centre is *Bildung*. Precisely because the subject is in crisis, a dual commitment is required: self-cultivation on the part of the human being and teaching us to take care of ourselves, others and the things of the world on the part of schools.

In other words, the subject needs to be given new lenses through which to observe, evaluate and interpret the surrounding reality, offering the chance to glimpse new places of the *possible*, understood as an open and evolving horizon. According to Bertin's thinking, humankind is responsible for reality: we help create it through our (non-)actions. As a result, we have to make this projectuality ethical and rational in order to build an open society in which all the reasons for frustration preventing its full development and alienating it from itself disappear (Bertin, 1969). It is an *ethic of commitment*, warning us to prevent the gap between a poor-uncultured humanity on one hand and a rich-cultured one on the other and the transformation of the individual into a *mass-subject* or *subject-thing* (Gennari, 2001).

This shows the urgency to educate in *authenticity* (Bertin, 1969), while recognizing the Problematicism of existence and – at the same time – freeing the subject from impositions, suggestions and every form of dogmatism. Hence, it becomes important to form human beings who can teach the subject to understand before passing judgement (Bertin, 1969).

It is the prerogative of an ironic mind to be able to call ourselves into question, serenely accept our limits and push beyond our *comfort zone*, in order to welcome the possibilities that only change can offer us. All this casts

doubt on the capacity of rationality to overcome the problematic condition of existence and opens us to the category of the *possible* (Baldacci, 2003). It reveals its paradoxes and, by flipping the point of view, enables us to observe reality from new perspectives. This is a fundamental passage, as learning to adopt a *farsighted vision* and divergent thinking enables us to break down problems and approach them with a critical, but in some aspects playful attitude. All of this generates what Cambi defines as a *point of escape*. In other words, it indicates the route towards the subject's liberation and emancipation, while forsaking customs and gaining a renewed critical and curious way of thinking that looks towards research and discovery.

The irony that has developed within western culture is expressed as a critical spirit. It has a de-constructive role that interprets and produces *dissent* (Lyotard, 1979). Indeed, it is a form of expression typical of complex and sophisticated cultures learnt within those social spaces able to appreciate its value, both through creative and divergence-friendly communication and by frequenting ironic subjects able to support a playful, open and dialogical style (Cambi & Giambalvo, 2008). It guarantees a prejudice-free way of being together which is solidaristic, anti-dogmatic and consequently democratic. As such, irony seems to be linked to a *utopian* vision of the world which places the *I* in crisis in favour of a *We*. What is cancelled is not the subject's individuality but his or her more self-referential and egocentric dimension. Each individual becomes a person who perceives him or herself in a more conscious and autonomous manner, in an awareness that demands comparison with the other. This gives rise to a game that implies plural points of view and allows participants to communicate in a playful, empathetic and free manner, tending towards active listening so as to create a social space that becomes a community. The ironist traces new pathways, centring social relations around new rules which enhance communication among individuals, creativity and listening.

The ironic mind is an errant and restless *forma mentis*, which deconstructs and reconstructs, and hopefully projects new values. As such, an ironic *consciousness* could help to promote a more communitarian model of society which is freer from prejudices, dogmatisms and intolerance, and open to diversity and the encounter with the other (Cambi, 2006a; Rorty, 1989; Jankélévitch, 1964). It is a *utopian* vision of the world, thanks to which human beings see themselves as the bearers of an idea of change and social hope and show themselves to be more pragmatic, tolerant and liberal. Indeed, the ironic person believes in a more solidaristic but also more empathetic and – if I may – *aesthetic* society, in the manner that Marcuse (2005) thought of it, namely dominated by creative imagination, understood as a model of a non-repressive civilization.

In this process, the subject is placed within a community where each person is called upon to act responsibly, but also to show forms of *dissent*, for example, by shifting away from standardization processes. This model therefore seems to move in the direction of emancipating the individual, since it promotes a form of *education in freedom* whose task is to guide towards the conquest of the subject's own self, while providing accompaniment in the complex and problematic process of personal development.

3. Human unfinishedness: irony as a practice of care

«Human beings are not born finished, terminated, complete, but are a living nucleus called upon to go beyond their situation; as such, they have to make themselves, seek their form» (Mortari, 2006, p. 1). This is the main

prerogative of education: a never-ending task that has to guide individuals through their existence (Zambrano, 1996). Among the main human needs is the integral formation of the *subject-individual-person*, unique and unrepeatable in his or her multiple values, affections, social and cognitive dimensions, which have to find expression within his or her life project. Indeed, human beings are involved in continual projectual realization, within an open and plural condition, to build their own subjectivity. Bertin considers formation specifically with reference to building the personality, which takes shape through the subject's relationship with the outside world. As such, «formation concerns the process that *gives shape* to that relationship» (Baldacci, 2003, p. 122). Since human beings are always a *project* (Heidegger, 2012), a pedagogical model that can make individuals the protagonist of their own existence needs to be promoted, while taking account of broader horizons of meaning and action. It is a mission that in some ways becomes utopian, aimed at guiding the subject towards achieving an authentic life. Indeed, *Bildung* is a «slow, gradual process of *clarification*» (Pagano, 2013, p. 49). In other words, it is a lengthy process of *giving shape*. It takes time: the time for being, thinking, living and inhabiting complexity.

It is a time of rebirths, each of which gives the subject a new identity (Mortari, 2019a). All of this demands awareness, autonomy and intentionality on the part of the individual in order not to simply become what the surrounding environment would like him or her to be. It implies making the subject responsible, the author of his or her own action, or own maker (Ardoino, 2000). This does not only presuppose intentionality, but also implies that the subject is inspired and guided by values. As such, it is culture's task to offer the human being under formation a series of practices necessary for self-cultivation. This constantly seeking self must be aware of the possible gap that there could be between his or her expectations and reality. Reality must be approached and listened to in order to «meet up with its truths» (Contini, 2013, p. 101). However, the individual's task is to try to deconstruct it, and free it from the prejudices, customs and superstructures that risk preventing its in-depth understanding.

Formation is based on the category of *care* (Mortari 2019a; 2019b; Cambi, 2010; Cambi & Orefice, 1996), without which the individual's realization and constitution, or *taking shape* would not be possible. This is linked to the unfinishedness and fragility which make human beings need care from birth onwards. When growing up, care becomes indispensable for human beings' full realization. It is only starting from care of the self that individuals can then take care of others and the things of the world (Fadda, 2002) and lay the foundations for a really inclusive and sustainable society. It is fundamental to reflect on ourselves, our behaviours and actions, as well as our thoughts and states of mind, and to take care of our bodies and souls, so that we can be interested in what surrounds us.

These *habitus*, mental forms or practices – starting from awareness of our own emotional experience – allow the subject to build a new space of reflection able to give rise to a richer and more balanced, conscious and human self. If individuals are subjects in formation, involved in a continual process of self-construction, the possibility of forming an individual and social, aware and participatory self will depend on the category of *care*. Including conversation and dialogue, these practices can be accompanied by the exercise of irony, which is important to achieve the formation of a more conscious and self-regulatory *self*. It allows us to reflect on ourselves

and on the other, exalts the subject's openness, arouses doubt and opens up to pluralist opinions and refined intelligences.

The ironic individual can make use of a plural mindset, which can also catch itself out (Cambi, 2010). All of these characteristics are needed to inhabit the current historical moment which demands plural ways of being, communicating and thinking. Herein, irony can be both a practice and a regulatory principle within the process of human formation and self-formation.

If the new *Bildung* requires practices that aim to cultivate the *subject-individual-person* by promoting *care of the self* and enhancing the person's creative, imaginative and critical predispositions, schools will have to adopt new pedagogical styles and models (Mariani & Sarsini, 2006) able to make room both for divergent and creative thought and the emotional and relational aspect. At the same time, this process of renewal can also find room for the pedagogical category of irony.

4. Formative irony: a new didactic-pedagogical proposal

To analyse irony in relation to formation of the subject means taking into consideration both its role in human communication and its function in building the individual self. The ironic subject is, first of all, a *homo communicans*, that is, an individual in continual relation with the other who has to know how to be in communication and build his or her own self in order to live his or her social dimension. Irony finds a place in the formative process as a useful device to give the individual a complex vision of reality. The latter is criss-crossed by contradictions, paradoxes and, in general, often contrasting communication flows that we need to know how to decipher. Hence, the current condition demands the formation of an ironic subject, namely a subject capable of being in contradiction and complexity (Cambi, 2006a), who rereads what happens in reality from different points of view and then projectually, actively and consciously orients the changes underway.

It is no coincidence that irony is among the three useful concepts identified by one of the greatest exponents of the postmodern, the philosopher Richard Rorty (1931–2007), to find our way in society: *contingency, irony* and *solidarity*. The idea asserted at the time was that truth was not a *discovery* but a *construction*. In Rorty's vision, this means that facts that have to be discovered as such do not exist. The world does not possess a language. According to Rorty, all vocabularies are human creations. They do not merely reflect reality but help to create it. Thus, human beings give themselves different linguistic codes, some of which coexist, while others disappear and are replaced by new ones that will give rise to different social practices and new ways of being. Therefore, Rorty paves the way for pluralism, rejecting the idea of the existence of a real language for everyone or a sort of standard that is valid in any case. Hence, a whole series of reflections emerged that also involved philosophy, which in its new acceptation of *edifying* knowledge (Rorty, 1989) has the goal of keeping the conversation open, beyond the claim of seeking objective truths or hegemonic words. It is here that Rorty places the *contingency* of words and introduces the figure of the *liberal ironist*: *ironic* because the subject is accustomed to exercising doubt, therefore, not taking him or herself too seriously; *liberal* because the subject recognizes the contingency and plurality of languages and promotes dialectic comparison without giving in – despite the criticisms in that sense – to a relativistic ethic.

Indeed, according to the US philosopher, *solidarity* is not built through generalization but with attention to detail, nuances, particulars and observation of the other. It is the same attention that the ironist must have when deciding to deliver his or her *quip*. In that moment, he or she makes an effort to enter other worlds and tries to understand them through a game of glances, references and reactions. All of the ironist's thought is therefore anchored to the practice of freedom. In the era we are living in, with its various fanaticisms, fundamentalisms and claims, it could be useful to hope for a new ideal human being who is capable of inhabiting *contingency* and exercising reflective thought that can create the conditions for operating actively within society and thereby contributing to its real transformation.

Thus, this brings us to a pedagogical model based on irony, capable of forming that *determining subject* able to put him or herself at stake and assert his or her being-in-the-world. It is a model that gives rise to spaces of freedom of initiative, wherein the subject can cultivate a personal style and life project (Foucault, 1965). Therefore, if formation is to be *complex, intercultural and pluralist* (Cambi, 2009), young people need to be offered formative experiences that can bring out an attitude of openness, based on dialogue, comparison and understanding the other. To do so, irony must be placed within the school context. As a result, its formative role will be strengthened way beyond technological learning, to become a laboratory of ideas and circular knowledge, guaranteeing scientificity at the same time as individual emancipation and communitarian utopia.

Educational interventions that make use of irony are definitely different to the ordinary and stereotypical canons within which the figure of the teacher is thought. Developing around divergent methods, they lead towards new scenarios which give more value to the well-being of the subjects involved in the educational relationship than the now obsolete teacher-led transmission of content.

Strategies and disciplines such as philosophy are needed to use formative irony, (Nussbaum, 2010). As well as increasing the students' autonomy and inner awareness, they can boost the critical and creative thought needed to tackle the challenges of complexity and prepare the individual for an attitude of openness to change (Cambi 2006a; 2006b; 2008).

In order to structure a correct educational environment, practices need to be put together that tend to privilege the exercise of doubt and set value by research, active and cooperative didactics, also through the use of digital technologies (video production, communication through digital media). It is also important to involve students in workshop and creative activities which entail reading texts that make use of irony (Erasmus of Rotterdam, Cervantes, Pirandello, Wilde, Eco, and many more), watching films, listening to radio programmes, organizing theatre activities, as well as interdisciplinary reflections dealing with topics close to students' hearts, such as relationships built online and the form of communication that is created (Mancaniello, 2018). In all these experiences, it is fundamental to allow young people to feel they are in the driving seat as well as to enable them to call themselves into question and reflect critically on all the cultural capital passing before their eyes. Furthermore, some didactic and methodological approaches, such as participation and theatre, peer education, role playing, debate and the *maieutic method* – if reread through the categories of Problematicism in the wake of Franco Frabboni (2002a; 2002b; 2003) – can offer extremely interesting and innovative spaces of action.

5. Conclusions

Beyond the definitions of "postmodern" or "new realism" (Di Carlo & Ferraris, 2012; Corbi & Oliverio, 2013), which are often difficult to nail down within fixed theoretical boundaries, we are living in a moment of history characterized by plural forms, liquid social relations and knowledge, the opportunity for *dissent*, existential precarity, uncertainty about the future, the necessity to open up to the unknown and the challenge of a *new humanism*. We must understand how to move along this horizon. And so, it could be useful to learn to reproblematize, rethink and redefine some paradigms, amongst which Giovanni Maria Bertin's Pedagogical Problematicism.

The transformations underway demand an increasingly critical and *Problematicist* formative culture that is also dialectical and open and adopts the categories of *complexity*, *change*, *commitment* – meant as the subject's coming to awareness – and existential projectuality.

In some ways, we are looking at a *neo-Bildung*, rooted in the subject – in turn involved in building his or her own self – but able to dialogue with *difference*. This difference must be able to orient subjects who are more and more restless, precarious, fluid, in crisis or searching. With respect to Bertin's Problematicism, they require further development: a vision able to look beyond and follow not only new, unknown and unpredictable but also extremely precarious pathways that need to be constantly redirected and updated. Nevertheless, Problematicism helps to take a new slant on some current issues concerning educational practice, namely the choices of approaches, methodologies and models that teachers can use in their educational *operari*, while seeking to combine *loyalty to reason* and *adherence to reality* (Baldacci, 2003, p. 149).

By scaling down Bertin's critical-transcendental rationalism (Banfi, 1973), deemed capable of helping to solve real human problems, it will be possible to form individuals willing to take responsibility for their own choices and actions. This is fundamental for the construction of democratic and *capacitating societies* (Nussbaum, 2013) whose citizens have space for their free initiative, in the sense of freedom and self-determination. And so, this links to the category of *care* (Mortari 2019a; 2019b) which, in the form of ironic dialogue and conversation, is a tool of openness towards the other and the world.

Therefore, the *Self* we are looking at is critical and reflective, plural and constantly engaged in seeking and building itself, according to its own form, but also by opening up to the outside reality. This implies a change in perspective that calls irony directly into question as an important pedagogical device whose potential can be grasped through its re-evaluation in a critical and Problematicist key. Within a plurality of educational models, irony could contribute to forming creative, free individuals with an *open mind* (Bruner, 1986), able to ask themselves questions and adapt according to requirements and events. These are all fundamental capabilities for the subject to achieve his or her own existential projectuality.

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Chiara Carletti (Ph.D) is a research fellow and lecturer in Adolescent Pedagogy in the Department of Educational Sciences and Psychology at the University of Florence. She recently obtained her PhD degree with a thesis entitled "*The Role of Irony in Forming the Adolescent: Towards a New Pedagogical Model to Inhabit Complexity and Support Change*" at the same university. She is a member of several research groups involved in national and international projects and her scientific interests mainly concern the pedagogical approach to adolescent development and methodologies of educational intervention, with a focus on the areas of formal and non-formal education.
Contact: chiara.carletti@unifi.it