

Interview with Annalisa Coliva

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by Delia Belleri

Annalisa Coliva (University of California, Irvine), visited our ERC group on June 23rd, 2017. Delia Belleri got to sit with her and ask about her recent work in epistemology, its relationship with relativism, and other current topics revolving around academic philosophy.



In your recent book *Extended Rationality* (Palgrave MacMillan 2015) you advocate a form of “Hinge Epistemology”. This view has something to say with respect epistemic relativism. How would you describe your stance in this regard?

I do not advocate a form of epistemic relativism. Hinge Epistemology can be developed in different ways and my own version differs from the versions that other fellow philosophers – for instance, Duncan Pritchard and Michael Williams – have put forward (but they are no relativists either!). There is a discussion among hinge epistemologists as to what we can count as “hinges”. My view is that hinge epistemology has the highest chances of success when it focusses on very general hinges, which are supposed to ground the acquisition of any type of knowledge in any area. So, the kinds of propositions that I consider to be hinges are, for example, “There is an external world”, “There are other minds”, or the principle of uniformity of nature. In my book, I also speak about “social hinges” or “testimonial hinges”: I maintain that the practice of testimony rests on the assumption that people do not generally provide misleading information. Now, if these are the hinges, I think it would be extremely difficult to come up with epistemic systems that feature radically different and opposed hinges which are nevertheless compatible with human experience, justification and knowledge. In this sense, I am not a relativist. If, by contrast, by “hinges” we understand more specific propositions, things change, and we can at least witness individual or group variability. Yet, mere variability is not enough to give rise to a relativist view. What is needed, on top of that, is some requirement of incompatibility – either in the form of disagreement or of distance – between these viewpoints and also an admission of their “parity”. Thus, the path from hinge epistemology to relativism is not at all obvious and I myself am not inclined to follow it.

It remains that the relationship between hinge epistemology and epistemic relativism may be further explored by those who believe in this program, in order to clarify what

the available options are and where we want to position ourselves. A further, important element is this: my version of hinge epistemology could be read as a form of relativism because I am an anti-realist regarding hinges. That is, I do not believe they reflect facts that are given independently of us. They are background assumptions of our epistemic practices which cannot be established independently of the practices themselves. It would be epistemically arrogant to proclaim oneself a realist about their truth. So in this sense, my position could suggest, and be developed in the direction of, a form of relativism. Again, this is not my considered view on the matter, but others may be inclined to take hinge epistemology in this direction.

Do you think philosophical relativism – as stated and articulated by professional philosophers within academic institutions – could be responsible for other forms of relativism as expressed in certain public debates? I am thinking here of forms of opposition to what seems to be “established knowledge”, ranging from anti-vaxxers to climate change deniers.

I think that in this respect one should try more precisely to identify what the “public opinion” is. If we are talking about the public opinion of a specific country it is one thing, if we move to another national context, it is another. My impression is that in the United States there is not much contact between what academic philosophers do and public debates. Or at any rate, the contact is not as direct as it could be in other countries where, for sociological reasons, philosophy has a different role: for instance because it is taught in schools, or because it is constantly present in the op-ed sections of newspapers. I think in Italy there is much more continuity between academic philosophy and public opinion. Much of the philosophical debate that was “popular” between the seventies and the eighties in the last century, and whose echoes we can still hear today, was certainly informed by relativism. First of all, in the background there was the Kantian idea to the effect that reality is not immediately given, but it is rather at least partially constructed through our categories. This was often put in linguistic terms: the languages in which we phrase our experiences shape the experiences themselves. This was a theme running through academic philosophy at the time, as well as other disciplines like semiotics as it was developed by Umberto Eco. Once these assumptions are endorsed, the step towards relativism is almost inevitable: perhaps the initial position is a form of conceptual relativism, but it soon turns into an epistemic relativism. For employing certain concepts and certain words sooner or later affects the very conceptual resources we employ to express and transfer knowledge. Secondly, and again in the Italian context, Nietzsche is an unquestionable influence; journalists and public intellectuals are presumably all familiar with the Nietzschean idea that there are no facts, only interpretations. This may have epistemological repercussions, for the focus is shifted from the inquiry into facts to a hermeneutical task which implies that reality is approached from a certain “standpoint.” This can lead people to doubt that there are any absolute truths as to whether, e.g., vaccines cause autism or not. These observations seem to me to apply to the Italian context, or at least to some areas of

Italian public opinion (generally the intellectual leftist), but, to repeat, we ought to distinguish which public opinion we are talking about. My impression is that in several contexts where we witness the rise of “alternative facts” there is very little philosophical motivation behind it. These opinions seem to stem more from ignorance and lack of trust in the experts, often motivated by feeling entirely at their mercy and thus diminished in one’s autonomy and in one’s relevance in a given society.

You have defended views in various sub-areas of epistemology. One of these concerns self-knowledge. In your recent book *The Varieties of Self-Knowledge* (Palgrave MacMillan 2016), you maintain a form of pluralism about how we acquire knowledge about ourselves. What is the impact of your position on the current debate on the topic?

This position leads to a reconfiguration of the debate and allows us to rehabilitate a number of positions that are considered antithetical as equally valid, to the extent that these capture only partial aspects of what self-knowledge is. By self-knowledge we mean knowledge of our mental states, which normally gives rise to self-ascriptions of psychological properties, like “I feel sick”, “I feel happy”, “I think that Vienna is pretty”, “I intend to take my son out for lunch”, “I am in love”, “I am brave”. The point is to understand how we come to know these mental states. I contend that these self-ascriptions of psychological properties are essentially divided into two classes: one of self-ascriptions of dispositional properties and the other of self-ascriptions of either current sensations/emotions or current non-dispositional propositional attitudes. Once this distinction is drawn, it is possible to see that a number of positions that seem in opposition are in fact compatible: for example, the inferentialist account of self-knowledge (whereby a self-attribution of knowledge is the result of an inference to the best explanation) and an anti-inferentialist account. The inferentialists are ultimately right with regard to our knowledge of dispositional states. How do I know I am brave? Not because I am currently experiencing a courage-like feeling, but because, at least in some cases, I consider my overt behavior to date and infer to its likely cause. The inferentialist is, however, wrong to extend her account to our knowledge of the pain we are currently experiencing in a certain situation. To make another example: Moran’s deliberative theory is offered as a comprehensive account of self-knowledge, but this is clearly inaccurate, since this theory is best applied only to our self-attributions of beliefs and other propositional attitudes. In a pluralist setting, this theory need not be seen as in contrast with an expressivist option, which is best suited as an account of how we self-ascribe our ongoing sensations and emotions, like our ongoing pain or fear.

Now, my position is slightly more articulated than this and I myself take a critical stance towards some of these theories, so it is not the case that “anything goes”, by my pluralist lights. My general goal was, however, to show how a form of pluralism can help re-frame the debate. The view also gives rise to some interesting methodological results. When we think about how we arrive at a first person self-ascription, this is not

exclusively the upshot of an inference to the best explanation (as urged by inferentialists like Ryle or, more recently, Quassam). There is a variety of other methods which have not been sufficiently studied: simulation, testimonial knowledge, or hermeneutics. In general, pluralism allows us to acknowledge and assess a cognitive and epistemic domain that is far more variegated than one may expect.

You wrote a book on Moore and Wittgenstein (*Moore and Wittgenstein: Certainty and Common Sense*, Palgrave MacMillan 2010) and generally give great importance to the historical aspects of analytic philosophy. How do you think analytic philosophers should approach their tradition?

First of all, they should pay more attention to the history of philosophy – and not simply to the history of analytic or Western philosophy, but also to that of, for instance, Eastern traditions. This is a burgeoning trend that we are witnessing in the United States. Building bridges between the past and the present and between different cultures allows more people to feel interested in philosophy and included in its practice. Secondly, and going back to analytic philosophy specifically, there is a number of authors whose influence is everlasting: I worked on Wittgenstein and Moore, but Frege and Russell are two undeniable pillars of the tradition. It would be impossible to understand what is going on in today's debates in the philosophy of mathematics, for instance, without having at least some basic acquaintance with Frege's logicist program. Analytic philosophy thinks of itself as theoretical philosophy, and hence as operating outside of time and history, but in fact it could only benefit from an increased awareness of its historical roots, or even of its possible connection with other traditions. These include, for instance, American pragmatism, phenomenology and perhaps also non-Western traditions. Conversely, it is somewhat curious to note that those who do confront their history, in the analytic camp, end up assuming the exclusive role of historians of philosophy. This is particularly evident in the Wittgensteinian tradition, where scholars of Wittgenstein also tend to think that nothing could be added to what he already said in his works. This is absolutely deleterious, if anything because it would entail the irrelevance of all that has been said since Wittgenstein's death – which happened around seventy years ago! Instead, I believe Wittgenstein's ideas could be a source of inspiration for new views, to be formulated and developed in the contemporary debate. I think this very clearly applies to hinge epistemology. Wittgenstein had a linguistic conception of hinges, but this feature need not be inherited by more modern versions of the theory. He believed that there is an incredibly high number of hinges, but this can be debated. So, if the history of our own philosophy is known to us but is not taken as the ultimate horizon of philosophical practice, it can provide us with valuable stimuli.

What about the relationship philosophers have with their present – and, perhaps, their future? Many interesting philosophical questions seem to emerge in connection with the digital world. What is the role of epistemology in this area?

I think applied social epistemology can lead to extremely interesting results here. We acquire a massive amount of information from the internet – not only about current topics, but also about history or science. How testimonial knowledge in digital environments is possible becomes a pressing question. Many philosophers have already produced highly interesting work on this topic, which illuminates problems that had never been experienced before the rise of digital media. Most of the times, in face-to-face communication we are acquainted with the person who is conveying their message to us. Hume was convinced that people do not regularly lie, not so much out of compliance with some abstract norm, but because, facing another human being, they would be embarrassed to be caught in a lie. Written testimony does not put the informant in a situation of potential embarrassment, but being the author of a text still implies “owning it” and being responsible for the truth of its contents. With the rise of digital media, authors can afford to disappear; embarrassments can be avoided completely. And yet, the information that goes online could never have been spread as widely as it can be spread today. We should therefore start to ask in which circumstances we can and cannot trust a digital source. Reflection on the notion of trust acquires a new significance when epistemology becomes involved with the internet. There is also a variety of other more technical and interesting questions connected with the algorithms used by search engines and social media to filter and display information. An interesting idea that has recently emerged in the epistemological debate is that the ranking of pages performed by search engines like Google is essentially link-based. So the page that is presented first is the page that is linked by the most epistemically “weighty”, or authoritative, websites. There have been attempts to model this phenomenon by means of, for instance, Condorcet's jury theorem: if more people link a certain page rather than another, they are linking the epistemically more reliable page. This might have interesting repercussions. Every time a new major technological resource appears on the scene, whose functioning we as laypeople do not master, this generates a sort of mistrust, the feeling that we might be deceived or manipulated by someone who is more expert than us. This risk is to an extent real, however, once we take a closer look at the way these systems work, our fears may be at least partially soothed. So it is important, also for social reasons, to clarify matters in this domain.

Apart from epistemology applied to the digital world, what would you say are the most exciting research trends in this field?

There is a growing interest in social epistemology, with topics like testimony, disagreement, reputation, trust and many others. All this is then applied to further areas of inquiry, such as medicine, legal issues, education, gender and racial issues. This is surely a trend for the years to come, and is also connected with the development of new technologies like the digital media. As far as “individual”, non-social epistemology is concerned, there was a moment when the field was dominated by, on the one hand, virtue epistemology theorists, and on the other, by the followers of Williamson's knowledge-first program. There was a lot of attention paid to the modal conditions of

knowledge, as this was a heritage of the long-lasting discussion on Gettier cases. Today, thanks to the work of several people in between epistemology proper and the history of epistemology, “hinge” theories are emerging. These theories are promising in many ways: besides their stance on classical issues, such as the conditions of obtainment for justification and knowledge, the response to scepticism, and so on, these accounts offer interesting applications in social epistemology. One can talk about “testimonial hinges”, “moral hinges”, and ask if and how we know them and what their role is in our reasoning; one can talk about “religious hinges”, or even about “social hinges”, which encode the *Weltbild* of a given society or group with respect to gender and race, thus potentially reaching out to a different scholarly audience. And of course, the connections with relativism deserve to be explored.

You have recently taken up a full professorship at the University of California, Irvine, and you have an extensive international academic experience. What are your thoughts on the philosophy job market today?

I was recently shown by a colleague some interesting data related with the US job market, which is the larger market in terms of number of positions advertised. With regard to the last year, the results are quite impressive: approximately half of the positions are in value theory (ethics, metaethics, political philosophy); there are very few positions – approximately ten percent – available in philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, epistemology and metaphysics. There is an increasing interest in the American market for “mixed” positions which combine different competences, especially as far as non-Western philosophies are concerned. The market seems nowadays open to research profiles that reconcile, for instance, analytic philosophy and Bhuddism; also, a significant number of jobs is devoted to feminist philosophies. This tells us that there is little interest for young academics researching the “big topics” in theoretical philosophy, and I cannot help but be worried by this. One's philosophical training needs to start from the foundations; lack of a solid knowledge of the fundamentals could lead to philosophically shallow outputs. This being said, that a reorientation is happening in philosophy is a fact that needs to be acknowledged. Turning to my area of expertise, epistemology, the emerging topics pertain mainly to social and applied epistemology (as already mentioned before). This is a sign that epistemologists wish to become more and more involved – and possibly make a difference – with respect of a variety of socially weighty issues. Medical epistemology, legal epistemology, epistemology of education, the epistemology of the internet are certainly branches that will be further explored in the years to come. For a young academic, working on these topics might be a good way of investing in their future career.

What's your view on the role of women in professional philosophy? Are we making any progress? Is there a long way to go?

I am not a pessimist at heart, or someone easily prone to giving in to victimism. These

are complex sociological issues and phenomena. We should be looking at them in perspective and we should be asking ourselves: has the percentage of women (and other minorities) in philosophy increased over the last x-number of years? This is an entirely empirical question and deserves an empirical answer. I'm pretty sure there has been considerable improvement in terms of absolute values. In terms of percentage, I actually don't know. But this is the question to ask. Another question to ask is: what areas of philosophy have witnessed the larger increase of female practitioners and why? I'm pretty confident that if we look at feminist philosophy, the ratio is actually in our favor. If we look at hard-core philosophy of logic, I would expect the opposite. My dream is to arrive at parity all across the board. I won't see it in my life time, but that's what I hope to see: more men working in areas of philosophy which seem traditionally just for women and more women working in traditional, core areas of philosophy.

How to get there? Well, like in all social phenomena, by creating a different culture – talking about all this does help – and by exercising power, whenever one can, to redress the balance, both individually and as a group. So I do urge women to seek and accept positions of leadership whenever they have an opportunity – without shying away or hiding behind one's family obligations – and work for parity. It's tough, it's tiring, but, girls, it's extremely rewarding! And I do urge women to get together and think of actions which can be carried out as a group. We are witnessing this already in certain professional organizations, like the APA. We need to do more on that front, though. I do have one piece of advice: use these opportunities to look forward and be pragmatic – that is, goal directed in your thinking. Ideals without action are empty, actions without ideals are blind!