A DISCUSSION ON ASSUMPTIONS AND CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The notion of *assumption* plays an important role in the literature on critical thinking. However, the critical imperative of revealing one's assumptions forces one either to follow some predefined scheme in which they are defined—in which case it restricts thinking and runs counter to the critical ideal—or to recognise that one cannot know those assumptions—in which case it is impossible. In this paper I firstly argue that assumptions made in/by a set of beliefs or sentences are relational in that they arise out of the relation between differing beliefs systems. Secondly, I attempt to describe the way in which that scope is crafted in critical conversations within a community of inquiry, hence establishing a relation between the community scope and that of the beliefs systems of individuals. Thirdly, based on this analysis, I present some elements which characterise the ways in which conversations can be critical, thus enhancing [or diminishing] the scope of the individuals' beliefs systems, and therefore also of the community of inquiry. And lastly, some questions and issues concerning the [lack of] completeness of the analysis given are discussed.

Keywords: assumption, critical thinking, systems thinking, space of possibilities, individual scope, community scope, interpretation, critical conversation, addressing, decentering.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is rather common nowadays to hear or read the critical imperative "make your fundamental assumptions explicit!" as a prescription for good quality inquiry, argumentation, and/or conversation. One reason behind this prescription seems to be that the disclosure of the assumptions would allow their validity or correctness to be questioned, and with it that of the rest of the claims being proposed. Or, in more relative terms, knowing the assumptions would allow one to place limits to the validity of some set of claims, theory, or whatever is the case. This suggests that the validity or correctness of the assumptions is taken to be essential, or at least important, for accepting the rest of the claims in a justified way. But what kind of linguistic entities are *assumptions* and how does one know whether one has got them all and right? One's answers to these questions are necessarily related to each other, for what one is looking for when looking for assumptions determines what it means to have got them, and to

have got them right. But these answers are not self-evident or immediately visible to everyone. They will be determined by some form of theorisation usually at the level of philosophical reflection. Indeed, different approaches, usually labelling themselves *critical*, have suggested different ways of addressing the problem of revealing the assumptions made in/by a theory, argument, or set of claims—in short, a *piece of knowledge*.

In this paper I am interested in a general feature that seems to cover most critical approaches; namely, the idea that for every piece of knowledge, there is a special kind of sentences on which its validity or meaningfulness rests. Criticality would thus be related to the ability to determine and make explicit those sentences so that they can be questioned. This seems to imply in turn that, even if for some authors reality is obscure, mysterious, and unknowable as a totality, language can become transparent and knowable, and its sources revealed, by means of critique. Indeed, it would seem that [at least part of] knowledge is reducible to frameworks or schemes! Furthermore, in this picture, to determine the assumptions underlying some piece of knowledge is a way of providing a final interpretation of it, one that leaves its core naked in its partial and limited essence. And this could be done once-and-for-all, in a systematic way.

In this paper I will firstly present a proposal for regarding assumptions as limits to the space of possibilities considered by whoever proposes a piece of knowledge. This proposal draws from a holist doctrine of meaning and beliefs as it emerged in the philosophy of language, which I will also briefly explain. This will be done in section 2. Based on this discussion, I intend to argue further that assumptions are best seen dialogically rather than monologically; that is, as existing in the relation between differing beliefs systems that are brought into conversation. This suggests that there is no such a thing as the set of assumptions made in/by a piece of knowledge, and that therefore the question of whether one has got them all is simply a bad question. The mistake in believing that there might be such a set is derived, I think, from a reductionistic understanding of knowledge and meanings. Section 3 of this paper will be devoted to this topic. In section 4 I will discuss the way in which the act of interpretation of someone's sentences by someone else, can be a source for the disclosure of assumptions that may arise in the interaction between an interpreter and a speaker. In particular, I will examine the dependence of interpretation on the interpreter's own beliefs system. With all this, it will now be possible to examine the relation between the scope of an individual's beliefs system and the conversational interactions that occur within a community in which some inquiry takes place. I will construct that relation through a notion of *community scope*. In particular, as I will try to show, the limits of the scope of some individual's beliefs are established in the act of interpretation that occurs in conversation, from a set of different beliefs systems. This locates an act of critical disclosure of assumptions in the particular community in which one's conversations take place. I will discuss this in section 5. From this analysis, some elements characterising the types of conversational interactions that may take place between individuals can be identified as influencing the way in which individual scope is or is not translated into collective scope, and vice versa. Therefore this matter, examined in section 6, is one of how the emergence of certain properties at the individual level is influenced by certain more relational properties at the level of interactions. I will describe some aspects of what can be characterised as *critical conversations*. The concluding section is then devoted to advancing some questions and formulating some problems about the ideas of critical conversations and individual and collective scope.

2. ASSUMPTIONS, SCOPE, AND SPACES OF POSSIBILITIES

Let me start with the claim that knowledge of any one thing entails and is entailed by knowledge of many other things, and that holding a belief is necessarily dependent on holding many other beliefs. This is a basic postulate of the doctrine that has come to be known as holism of knowledge and meaning[1]. According to Rorty's account (1979, see also 1991), one main pillar of the holist doctrine is Quine's attack on reductionism in meaning—or the idea that the meaning of any [synthetic] sentence can be translated into elements of sensory experience which would confirm or infirm it— (see Quine, 1953). Another one is Sellars' argument against givenness—or the idea that there is some kind of entities which are given to the mind; i.e., which are known in an incorrigible and non-inferential way, and independently of any other knowledge— (see Sellars, 1956). Yet a third one is Davidson's rejection of the scheme-content distinction—or the idea that knowledge is constituted by some operation on experience as performed from/by an organising scheme— (see Davidson, 1974a). This holistic and relational nature of beliefs and meaning implies, in turn, not only a large degree of coherence in the beliefs of any language speaker, but also that most of them are true (see for instance Davidson, 1973, and 1998).

A belief is a sentence held true by someone, which specifies what is thought to be the case. For the purpose of this paper, among the beliefs entailed by any one belief, I am specially interested in those that specify what is not the case; that is, those beliefs in which possible alternatives are declared wrong. Indeed, it is part of understanding a sentence expressing a belief, to recognise alternatives which are believed not to be the case. One particular instance of this is, as Quine has put it, that "we cannot know what something is without knowing how it is marked off from other things" (1969, page 55).

Given the above, a claim can then be understood as a choice from among a set of alternatives; or, in other words, as an answer to a question, a question about which of those alternative possibilities is right. A claim is, then, an act of narrowing down the selected options from a larger space of possible options. In a broader sense not limited to individual claims, this idea represents a fundamental insight as suggested by Gadamer: Any piece of knowledge is the answer to a question, and a question presupposes the existence of different possible answers. Because of this, "it is the essence of knowledge not only to judge something correctly but, at the same time and for the same reason, to exclude what is wrong. Deciding the question is the path to knowledge" (Gadamer, 1986, page 364). Interpretation is therefore about the recognition of the question, the alternative answers for it, and the one finally chosen.

> Interpretation always involves a relation to the question that is asked of the interpreter. To understand a text means to understand this question (....) We understand the sense of a text only by acquiring the horizon of the question—a horizon that, as such, necessarily includes other possible answers. (Page 370)

I will call the range of those alternatives, a *space of possibilities* for the question. For the sake of clarity, let me point out that these alternatives do not necessarily have to be finite or susceptible of being counted, and one does not have to have them all present in one's mind when interpreting the claim and the question; they are, nevertheless, present in the sense that they are entailed by the claim.

In the simplest case, an assumption is an unstated or untested sentence in an argument that, if valid, would warrant the validity of a claim or at least some aspect of it. That is, it would therefore warrant the validity of the selection of a smaller space of feasible options—as represented by the claim—out of the larger space of possibilities for the question[ii]. This presupposes, however, that the question and its space of possibilities are to be accepted, and that what the problem consists in is to provide a right answer to the question.

But a question should not always be answered, for it may simply be a bad question. That is, a claim might be rejected not only because it is believed to be false, but because it is considered to be an answer to a bad question. Or, in other words, because the space of possibilities considered may be too small or simply badly conceived. In such a case, one would say that the question is too restrictive, or perhaps irrelevant, or maybe even meaningless, and that the space of possibilities should be broadened to include other alternatives. But let us notice that for an interpreter to think of the question in this way is for her/him to have envisaged possibilities beyond the space originally conceived in the claim; that is, to have recognised what s/he sees as the limits to that space of possibilities. The setting of those limits is, effectively, the *assumptions* made in/by the piece of knowledge in which the claim was produced, and the volume of space they delimit its *scope*.

Here, again, an assumption as seen by an interpreter is an unstated and untested sentence that narrows down the space of feasible options from a larger space of possibilities. In this second case, however, this larger space of possibilities includes the alternative options envisaged by the interpreter, that the speaker had left out from the original question. But to see an assumption as narrowing down a larger space of possibilities by selecting some, suggests that all the possibilities were available for choice from the start. However, if the speaker had not previously been aware of the assumptions s/he was making, then their pointing out by someone else will effectively produce an expansion of the space of possibilities considered by her/him; that is, an expansion of the scope of her/his beliefs system, and particularly of the piece of knowledge in question as reformulated in the light of this process.

Importantly for this discussion, the disclosure of those assumptions can only be made if the interpreter can envisage some possibilities lying beyond the space originally considered by the speaker's question. This dependence on being able to imagine possibilities suggests that, as Delin et al have remarked, "assumption seeking (…) would involve creativity at least as much as logic" (1994, page 118).

While an expansion of scope and the disclosure of assumptions may make one abandon some aspects of one's original piece of knowledge, it does not necessarily have to always be this way. For instance, one may still accept having made an assumption, but consider it a valid one; in this case it ceases to be an assumption and becomes incorporated in the beliefs system. Or one might then restrict the validity of one's original claims to certain contexts. Or perhaps one might take the assumption as defining a certain aspect of whatever is the object of one's piece of knowledge (what it is about), while acknowledging the existence of other aspects. But the decision of what to do in the face of the newly disclosed assumptions is just part of the inquiry, like anything else. That is, the decision of what to do depends on the same careful consideration of reasons that inquiry should always involve, and not on some theorisation at a philosophical or meta-level.

These considerations are perhaps made clearer by an example: For some interpreter, someone trying to find the most appropriate punishment for a student who has cheated in an

assignment, might be seen as assuming that *every* case of cheating should be punished, or that for that case it should. That is, s/he will see the question "what punishment is most appropriate for the occasion?" as assuming that punishment should always follow an act of cheating, and thus the space of possibilities for that question as limited by this assumption. The possibilities that s/he can envisage and which lie beyond the original space would consider other actions [that s/he thinks] suitable for some cases of cheating. Or, similarly, perhaps some other interpreter might take the whole idea of *punishment* as used in the statement, to be unintelligible or confused because, say, s/he sees it as based on wrong ideas about human agency and responsibility. In this case, the interpreter sees the question as assuming some [false] idea of punishment, and the space of possibilities as one that cannot include correct options because conceived in a bad way. A third interpreter might also take with some reserve the very idea of *cheating*, for seeing it as the result of bad ideas about, say, the whole educational project. In all these cases, the possibilities considered by the interpreters lie beyond the original space and thus define limits to it, which we take to be assumptions made in the system of beliefs supporting the original claim. They do not do it in the same way, though.

Perhaps it should be noted that Delin et al (1994) have similarly argued, based on a somewhat psychological analysis, that assumptions are not intelligible when taken as entities, propositional or otherwise, and have suggested that they are best thought of "as being, not a positive proposition, but some sort of *limitation* or *circumscription* of the thinking process, or the field that the thinking process concerns itself with" (page 117, my emphasis).

3. THE RELATIONALITY OF ASSUMPTIONS

I chose to present the cheating student example above in a way that suggests that assumptions could be formulated in different ways, even if it is granted that not every way will appear meaningful to any interpreter. However, the critical imperative of making one's fundamental assumptions explicit seems to take it that they constitute not only a finite set, but also a reasonably small one, and that they can be discovered in a systematic way. If so, then, which are the fundamental assumptions whose disclosure is particularly significant? In most cases—but not all, though—critical approaches will be based on some theorisation which will specify the assumptions to be revealed, and which will furthermore argue why they are the fundamental ones.

But *fundamental* in what sense? With a rather mild approach one might suggest that an assumption is fundamental for some piece of knowledge if the validity or meaningfulness of the latter depends on that of the former. However, that is simply part of what it is to be an assumption in general, which takes us back to the original question of how to discern from a multiplicity of possible assumptions. There has been some discussion in this respect in the area of informal logic, with varied opinions as to the meaning of assumptions, and the possibility of exhausting them (see for instance, Ennis, 1982; Delin et al, 1994; Levi, 1995; Plumer, 1999; and Gratton, 2000). In this case in particular, assumptions are related to an ideal structure of an argument. They are taken to be unstated or tacit premises that can be recognised as *gaps* or *missing elements* of a certain kind in the argument. From here, the fundamentality of an assumption would then be relative to the argument in which it is embedded, being a property of the role that the sentence plays in an argument. Nevertheless, in this paper I take a notion of assumption that is wider in that it does not need to be limited to

an ideal type of an argument. This can be seen in that even if an argument is complete in some sense—e.g. all the elements of the ideal type are there—an interpreter might still suggest that the speaker is making some further assumptions which allow for the meaningfulness of the notions used.

In a second and more radical sense, an assumption is said to be fundamental if it belongs to a special *kind* of sentences which constitute the necessary grounds or starting points for the rationality or meaningfulness of a piece of knowledge to be possible, but which in themselves are not based on any other sentences for their own justification, rationality or meaningfulness. Otherwise, the argument goes, there would be an endless regress of criteria. Apart from playing this constructive role of allowing thinking to occur, fundamental assumptions would also have a more negative function of limiting it as a whole, its possibilities, and perhaps also its validity. In this sense they would also represent limits, or sources of partiality, and their disclosure would be important insofar as deception about their validity is to be avoided. In particular, a number of authors have used the idea of a *system* as a conceptual tool for determining those limitations, in what has been called boundary critique (see Ulrich, 1983; and Midgley et al, 1998), but this is not the only option. In general, the set of those assumptions is sometimes referred to with expressions such as *conceptual framework*, *conceptual scheme*, *worldview*, or *context of meaning*, among others, and to them would belong criteria of rationality, ontological and epistemological assumptions, basic a priori judgements, and so on[iii] (see for instance, Checkland, 1981; Ulrich, 1983; Elgin, 1989; and Fuenmayor, 1990).

There is, however, something problematic about this notion. Assumptions, just like the claims they support, are assertive sentences specifying what is or should be the case. And, according to the discussion in the previous section, understanding what is being asserted by an assumption implies locating it in a space of possibilities, as constituting a choice. Suppose an interpreter postulates that a certain speaker is making an assumption. As mentioned before, doing so means that s/he envisages some possibilities lying beyond the space considered in the piece of knowledge espoused by the speaker, and represents her/him as having made a selection. Additionally, the assumption attributed to her/him by the interpreter will represent a choice between the possibilities in the original space and those in the space envisaged by him/her. In doing so, the interpreter is effectively considering a new and perhaps broader space of possibilities, and locating in it the assumption made in the speaker's piece of knowledge. Now, another interpreter—perhaps the speaker her/himself—may regard that new space of possibilities as being restrictive or badly conceived in some way, and therefore possibly the assumption as wrongly formulated. And here one may well ask: What happens then with that assumption originally attributed to the speaker by the first interpreter? Is it still sensible to claim that s/he was making it? Very possibly not, at least according to the second interpreter.

An example will serve to clarify this. In systems thinking it is common to distinguish hard systems thinking from soft systems thinking; but this distinction came to be used in particular when the latter was being developed. Among the proponents of soft systems thinking, Peter Checkland has provided a description of hard systems thinking as being based on certain assumptions. One of these assumptions is that *systems* exist out there in the world. He contrasts this idea with an alternative one, which is more used in his own approach, that *systems* exist as constructions in the mind, or in the *world of ideas* (see Checkland, 1981 and 1995). But the attribution of this assumption to hard systems thinking and its contrast with the alternative option used in soft systems thinking, are in themselves based on some body of

knowledge with which one may or may not agree. For instance, it can be argued that the distinction between things out there and mental constructions is only meaningful if one takes knowledge to be representational (see Rorty, 1991). Not accepting representationalism might imply that one may redescribe or reinterpret the differences between hard systems thinking and soft systems thinking in a different way. But could this description of Checkland's position as representationalist be, in turn, wrong? Of course, and that is still part of the conversation. The point is, let me emphasise it, that when an interpreter postulates that some assumption is being made by/in a piece of knowledge, this postulation is dependent on what s/he believes about the object of inquiry. By pointing at an assumption made in/by some piece of knowledge one is not revealing its essence in any deep or transcendental way; that is, one has not really changed to talk at a meta or philosophical level. One is simply participating in the conversation and pointing out what are, in one's view, some implications of the other person's adopted beliefs.

It might be said, of course, that an interpreter may sometimes get things wrong when revealing assumptions in a piece of knowledge. But let us notice that this critical act of revealing assumptions was supposed to help us deal with the inherently problematic nature of the way we understand the world, of the way we read reality. But then in what sense is the act of revealing assumptions different from knowing reality such that the former can help us deal with the problematic nature of the latter? That is, is critique any less problematic than reading reality, or philosophy any less problematic than the other areas of culture and knowledge? My answer is that it is equally problematic, and the reason is that the interpreter's critical act of revealing assumptions depends in a deep way on her/his own reading of reality.

Before going on to explain some details of how this dependence occurs, I would like to point out one further consequence of adopting this picture of fundamentality. If one declares some sentences as belonging to that special kind of *fundamental assumptions*, then this implies that one takes the *fundamental* question which defines the space of possibilities from which the assumption was selected, to be transcendentally valid; that is, essential for thought and rationality while at the same time exhausting all possibilities. Moreover, it also implies that one takes these questions to represent "perennial, eternal problems—problems which arise as soon as one reflects" (Rorty, 1979, page 3). But one may well have reasons for thinking that even those *fundamental* questions may be restrictive or badly conceived. For instance, one may think that one does not need a metaphysics (as Dewey thought, see Arcilla, 1995), or an epistemology (see Rorty, 1979), or that criteria of rationality or laws of logic are not so much rules that we try to follow, but descriptions of what we *presently* do when thinking (as Goodman thinks, see Rorty, 1994). To get to the point, the impossibility of there being something fundamental comes from the fact that both the assumptions and the questions they are answers for are discussable. If they are discussable, then that means that those questions cannot be ultimate, representations of problems that appear "as soon as one reflects". Moreover, their discussion would bring in issues from beyond the question itself. The question, then, and its possible answers, have to depend on something else. And here is, again, the holism of meaning and beliefs.

Assumptions made in/by a piece of knowledge are revealed, then, not by means of a systematic reflection guided by some philosophical theorisation provided by a critical approach, but by the actual practice of study into whatever is the object of inquiry. What enables their disclosure is not a meta-theory, but theories which differ from the piece of knowledge in question. And the different differences will enable the disclosure of different assumptions, as they will produce different descriptions of the limits of the spaces of

possibilities as considered in the piece of knowledge in question. All this implies that there cannot be such a thing as the set of assumptions of a piece of knowledge, something to be discovered once and for all. Instead, there are interpretations of it in which it is described as unwarrantedly setting some limits, and reinterpretations in which it will be described differently and which may as well conflict with the previous descriptions. Assumptions are in this sense relational: They exist only inasmuch there are alternative pieces of knowledge considering different spaces of possibilities. While still attributable to individual pieces of knowledge, assumptions exist in their relation with alternative ones[iv].

4. INTERPRETATION AND CONVERSATION.

If assumptions are relational, then it is in the encounter between differing pieces of knowledge that they can emerge and be revealed; that is, in conversation. In a conversation, different individuals holding different previously acquired sets of beliefs interpret each other, and on the basis of this interpretation they may also challenge, offer solutions, ask questions, point at problems, and do innumerable other things about their own and the other person's beliefs. My intention now is to see how the scope of someone's set of beliefs is related to the kinds of conversational interactions that one takes part of.

One first point to make is that one's beliefs play an important role in interpretation of other speakers. This has been discussed by Davidson (see mainly 1973, 1974b, and 1988), and one conclusion of particular importance for my purposes here is that "interpreting others is a matter of using (not looking at) my own values and thoughts, my norms and my rationality, to understand someone else's" (1999, page 600). This conclusion comes from first asking the question of what one could know, that would enable one to interpret another person's sentences. A problem appears from noticing that in doing this, one cannot assume knowledge of the way the other person attaches meanings to her/his sentences, nor of what her/his beliefs are, but nevertheless one has to determine both at the same time. As LePore has put it, "we cannot hope to discover interpretation first, and then read off beliefs and *vice versa*" (1986, page 18). One the one hand, if one knew the meanings, then one would be able to determine that person's beliefs; on the other, knowing what the other person believes one might get to know the meanings of her/his sentences. But how to determine both at the same time? To solve this problem—and therefore to interpret—one has to rely on the application of the charity principle: to take the other person to be right—to hold true beliefs—*as far as it is reasonable* (see Davidson, 1973 and 1974b; also Ramberg, 1999). By doing this, one fixes *some* of the other person's beliefs, and can more easily solve for meaning. But how does one know which beliefs are true so that one can make use of the charity principle? In the only way one can: taking as true those beliefs one strongly holds, and which most other people seem to agree with; there is nothing outside of one's beliefs that one can take to be true. However, it should be noted that the charity principle does not imply a total agreement with the other person; what can be concluded instead is that for disagreement to make sense, a lot of agreement has already had to be determined. It is also important to see that the charity principle should be understood neither as a tool whose use is optional, nor as a principle of sympathy or solidarity based on some moral concern. Instead, it is a requirement for interpretation to be possible at all.

It is not only the principle of charity which is involved in interpretation, of course. Other considerations of context might as well play a part in it, and particularly knowledge of

possible *sources of deception* or *mistake*. That is, it seems more plausible to attribute the other person a false belief—in one's view—if one can account for an explanation as to why the other person is mistaken or has been deceived. It may not be necessary all the time, but it certainly forms part of the interpretation process.

The main important point for this discussion, however, is that the use of the principle of charity in interpretation shows that the latter depends in a fundamental way on the interpreter's beliefs. The use of the charity principle entails that the interpreter will in some sense compare her/his beliefs with those that s/he considers for potentially attributing to the speaker; and this comparison will determine points of agreement and points of disagreement. Points of disagreement will not only include claims which are explicitly contradictory, but also differences in spaces of possibility considered; that is, differences in the kinds of questions asked, as related to differences in other [perhaps] unstated beliefs.

Because of this, the very process of interpretation has the potential of critically producing the emergence and disclosure of assumptions, and the expansion of scope of those engaged in conversation. In it, the interpreter will have delineated the scope of the speaker's set of beliefs, as seen from hers/his; that is, s/he will have discovered the limits that the speaker is setting to the space of possibilities s/he is considering, or, in other words, will have revealed the assumptions made by her/him. Rorty has examined a very similar issue in his discussion of what he calls a rational reconstruction of the ideas of authors from the historical past. In reinterpreting such an author from the vantage point of one's present-day state of thought, one may claim that s/he *really* held some doctrine even if s/he did not explicitly expressed it. This would mean that "in an imagined argument with present day philosophers about whether he should have held certain other views, he would have been driven back on a premise he never formulated, dealing with a topic he never considered—a premise that may have to be suggested to him by a friendly rational reconstructor" (Rorty, 1984, page 252)[v]. In an actual conversation, if this interpretation or reconstruction is made explicit and particularly the newly revealed assumptions, the speaker may come to recognise her/his own position in the interpretation, thus coming to know something about her/himself that s/he had possibly not been aware of before; perhaps a little like Molière's character, who came to learn that all his life he had been talking in prose.

Of course, it may also happen that s/he does not recognise her/himself in the interpretation of the other. Perhaps a "hard systems thinker", to take the example already used above, may not see the difference between her/his and Checkland's uses of models as one between *representations* on the one hand, and *epistemological devices* on the other—for example if s/he does not take the distinction between *things in the world* and *things in the mind* as a meaningful one— (see Checkland, 1995). That would simply take the conversation even further beyond the limits set by the original interpretation.

Whether or not the interpretation is accepted, a dialogue is formed if it is followed by a commitment to answer to the new questions or to seriously consider the new spaces of possibilities revealed. In conversation, more generally, different individuals holding different readings of reality might reinterpret their conversational partners' beliefs, thus defining their scope in relation to their own beliefs. When a participant accepts an interpretation of her/his knowledge and the assumptions revealed in it, s/he will see its scope as having been expanded as a result of the interaction. This does not mean that interpretation takes place once and then the conversation can continue. Interpretations are commonly partial results which may be modified in an ongoing process that still takes place as the conversation unfolds.

5. COMMUNITY SCOPE

If the picture above is correct, the claim might be advanced that the scope of an individual's sets of beliefs will be determined to a large extent by the previous conversational interactions s/he has had with other people, who together may be taken to constitute [part of] a community of inquiry. This means that in the long run the beliefs system of particular individuals will be largely constituted as answers to [at least some of] the particular questions raised by the conversational encounters with some of her/his partners in the community. And from here a notion of *community scope* might be constructed, as the range of questions and spaces of possibility which are brought forth in the interactions between its members, or which at least are available for such interactions. Can the community scope be the same as an individual's scope? In practice this is impossible, as individuals could not possibly engage in serious critical conversation with all the members of the community, or perhaps with all the alternative beliefs systems they somehow hold. But also because their other sources of knowledge—the situations other than critical conversations in which their beliefs are formed—will also be necessarily different. In general, I take it that this distinction between individual and community scope is specially useful to maintain if one wants to examine how the former might be actually or potentially modified in relation to the latter.

As the scope of the beliefs systems of individuals can expand as a result of engaging in conversational interactions with others in a community, so can the community scope. That is, the questions and answers emerging from these conversations may become part of the very pieces of knowledge that individuals hold true, and that will be brought forward into further interactions in the future, with other members of the community. The answers to these questions will in that sense become [part of] the beliefs systems that these individuals will hold. As this takes place, these questions will have to be answered by many more persons in the community, and hence also the spaces of possibilities associated to those questions will have to be considered. This suggests that in general, individual scope can be enhanced by the potentiality of the community scope, as an individual engages in conversation with different members of the community and in so doing addresses the existence of possibilities that are within the community scope, and therefore also the questions that define them. At the same time, the community scope can expand if the spaces of possibilities considered by the individual becomes part of the publicly available knowledge; that is, if her/his beliefs become engageable for other members of the community.

6. CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

Not every conversation, however, will lead to an enhancement of both the individual and the community scope. Many considerations at the level of structure will affect the way scope is transferred from individuals to the community, and vice versa, and certain ideas used by some critical approaches about institutionalised mechanisms of *silencing* or *repression of voices* are also relevant here; however, they are not within the scope of this paper. Other aspects at the more local level of the conversation will also be important in this process, and it is those which I will refer to in what follows. Firstly, let me call a conversation a *critical conversation*

if the assumptions of pieces of knowledge (limits to spaces of possibilities) arising in the relations between the different beliefs systems brought in by those participating in it, are made explicit, and their validity taken as an object of inquiry. From the discussion above, some aspects that characterise critical conversations in a constitutive way can be pointed out, and in particular I will mention two of them. It should be noted that I do not claim that these exhaust all that would define a critical conversation.

A first element corresponds to the fact that a disagreement, even though it already involves some appraisal as part of the process of interpretation itself, is not the same as having settled the issue or taken a clear decision about it. As mentioned before, in interpretation one produces a theory of meaning—which, as Davidson has shown, is also a theory of truth—for the other person's speech, which can be modified as the interactions between interpreter and speaker in the conversation go on. Postulated disagreements can then be clarified in terms of differing claims or assumptions, and their defining questions formulated, according to—of course—an interpretation. Taking the other person—the interpreter—seriously as a partner in conversation implies that the questions raised according to her/his interpretation of one's position be *addressed*, as well as the assumptions attributed to it. Because of this, I will call this essential aspect of critical conversations, *addressing*. It has some relation with what Romm has called *discursive accountability* (1994), but let us notice that here I am not pointing at a mechanism making an action possible, but at the action itself.

To accept *addressing* as a fundamental element for conversational interactions of inquiry to trigger an expansion of scope of a set of beliefs, is to accept the claim that criticality does not appear from different positions being simply spoken up, but from the ongoing conversation in which the questions appearing in conversational interactions are addressed. Addressing them does not necessarily mean providing an answer to them, for the question itself might not be considered meaningful by one of the parties in the conversation. One case in which this can happen is when one person presents an interpretation of another person's position and suggests a certain assumption is made, but the latter does not recognise her/himself in the interpretation or the assumption. The point is that addressing a question is not ignoring it; and this implies to take it as an object of inquiry so that in some cases one attempts to give an answer to it, and in others one rejects the question altogether on grounds of it not being meaningful or intelligible—this claim could then be formulated as a disagreement of a different kind.

The second element refers to the degree of symmetry or asymmetry in the production of questions that are posed in the encounter between sets of beliefs by different persons. That is, the extent to which the conversation of inquiry is *centred* or *decentred* in terms of the sets of beliefs from which critical questions that are aimed at revealing assumptions are formulated. When a question is asked in a conversation of inquiry, it is asked by someone who has produced a certain interpretation of her/his interlocutor's actual or potential position; and, given the dependence of interpretation and beliefs, the question carries with it some of the interpreter's beliefs about what is relevant, true, correct, etc. If the formulation of questions is centred on a particular source set of beliefs, then this means that only the target set of beliefs might expand its scope as the person holding it is pushed to address those questions. This means that some part of the potential contribution to the community scope will be lost, given that no questions are formulated from it. Apart from its influence in scope, a process of asking questions centred on only one beliefs system—which is the source of those questions—can constitute a different problem: In this case, as noted by proponents of some critical approaches, the source beliefs system might remain untouched by the interaction by not being

pushed to address questions that might point at hidden assumptions. The target beliefs systems, instead, would bear the *burden of proof* for any disagreements. One manifestation of this is what happens when cultural knowledge on which everyday decisions are taken, end up not taking into account the beliefs systems of particular groups or individuals, and with them the concerns they embody. The burden of proof would have to be spread if such decentering is to be achieved.

7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper I have tried to provide an account of what happens in language when an assumption is revealed. The argument I have presented, if correct, shows that assumptions cannot appropriately be taken as existing in claims, arguments, theories, or pieces of knowledge in general, but in their relation with some alternative pieces of knowledge. They would be sentences specifying some limits having been imposed on a *space of possibilities* by the piece of knowledge in question, as described or interpreted from a different perspective; for instance, that of a partner in conversation. The notion of *scope* was then used to examine the more specific ways in which assumptions can be revealed in conversational encounters of inquiry, and the nature of the role that they play in such encounters. A further notion of *community scope* was postulated, which can help make sense of the relation between the scope of different individuals' beliefs systems, and those others which become available for critical engagement in a given community. Taking assumptions as not being properties of pieces of knowledge suggests that the idea of critique cannot be formulated in terms of responding to some previously specified questions and making public those answers, let alone holding some particular beliefs determined in advance by the proponents of some critical approach. Criticality, instead, seems best understood as residing in certain forms of conversations meeting certain requirements. While no systematic exploration of these requirements was made, two of them were described as well as their relation to scope; namely, *addressing* and *decentering*.

Some questions remain which seem to be important for the topic under discussion. I have not addressed the issue of the relevance of *scope* for the improvement of an individuals' beliefs system, and more generally those of the members of a community of inquiry. While an expansion of scope seems desirable in abstract terms, it nevertheless represents a cost in that it requires an effort in different senses. A question that appears is, then, how does an expansion of scope help improve an individual's set of beliefs, in relation to the relative cost that achieving this expansion implies? This question may not be knowable in advance, as it inherently belongs to the realm of conversation; that is, the criteria for determining the relevance of any newly encountered or expanded space of possibilities are precisely what we talk about when engaged in conversation, and cannot be determined in advance by some philosophical theorisation[vi]. And might it be possible to reduce this cost, in the form of methods or techniques for improving critical conversations?

A second question concerns the derivation of a more sufficient set of elements present in conversational interactions, which can help to more systematically determine the conditions of conversational encounters which hinder or promote an enhancement of both individual and collective scope. In some sense, the question is one of whether critical conversations can become an appropriate object of research.

Yet a third question, at a more abstract level, concerns the general problem of the relation between interpreter and speaker. In this respect, the study in practical situations of the two elements proposed in section 6 as elements of critical conversations, might overlap in content with what people actually engaged in a conversation of inquiry talk about, or with what they use as part of the tools to create interpretations of speech of others. This way, for instance, accounts for sources of deception or mistake are already used by those participants in conversation when trying to interpret the others, and any such account by a researcher is therefore located at the same level of conversation. This creates some questions regarding the role of persons in any inquiry into the conditions allowing them (themselves) to improve their own claims, arguments, or theories, or more generally sets of beliefs and their use in practice. The problem pointed at is one of what to do with this latent possibility of disagreement between any participants in conversation—who inquires into whatever the conversation is about—and a researcher—who inquires into the conversation itself. This problem, in itself, is a direct fall out from the interrelation between interpretation and beliefs.

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[i] The whole argument for holism, however, is a long one in the history of philosophy, and its re-creation is not within the scope of this paper.

[ii] There is, of course, some resemblance with Gadamer's notion of *horizon*. But I am not claiming the identity of these two notions.

[iii] Conceptual schemes are not only or necessarily said to be constituted by sentences; sometimes they are referred to as metaphors or sets of concepts and categories, among other possibilities. In that case one is not directly talking about assumptions, although one could do so by a transformation. Metaphors are asymmetrical mappings between two domains in which each correspondence between elements can be expressed as an assertion (see Lakoff, 1992). Concepts and categories can be expressed in terms of their defining predicates; and, noticing that the resulting sentences should not be treated as "true by definition" (see Quine, 1953), they can then be seen as assumptions.

[iv] This situation is analogous to, for instance, that of someone who lends money and in doing so becomes a lender. S/he is only a lender insofar as there is someone else who borrows from her/him, and in that particular relation or those in which he is an actual or potential lender.

[v] In agreement with the claim made here that assumptions and limits only exist in the relation between an interpreter's and a speaker's sets of beliefs, Rorty has said that "rational reconstructions (...) are not likely to converge, and there is no reason why they should" (1984, page 252).

[vi] This implies that the idea, common in the literature, that indicates that different sets of beliefs about some object can be taken as different *aspects* or *perspectives* of that object, is an inappropriate a priori determination of what can only be determined in conversation and not out of it.