

Learning from Gregory Bateson. Reflections on the Role of Emotions and Humour in Scientific Knowledge and Everyday Life

Marianella Sclavi^{*}

Gregory Bateson, in his approach to body and emotional language and the role of humour in the relationship between emotions and knowledge, owes much to an author he had read from a very young age, an author who had been appreciated by his parents – namely Samuel Butler. I believe that the knowledge of Butler could help to better understand Bateson, I will start from here.

Samuel Butler and the Relationship between Knowledge and Consciousness

Gregory Bateson called Butler “an important metaphor in my life and of my life” ¹ and considered this author – along with his father William Bateson, who was the founder of the genetics as a discipline – as the precursor of that point of view that today is known as the cybernetics of cybernetics or second-stage cybernetics, which investigates the dynamics of learning in the complex, self-reflective and circular systems.

When he was twenty-four, Butler, to avoid the pressures from his family to pursue a religious career, emigrated to New Zealand where he became a sheep farmer. But he took a copy of *The Origin of the Species*, by Charles Darwin (1859) with him, that had just been published.

When he returned to England, in 1872, Butler published the book that made him famous – *Erehwon* (“Nowhere” written backwards) a kind of prototype of the science fiction novel, in which he criticizes the reductionism and materialism of Darwin’s explanations (who thinks that the evolution is the result of casual genetic mutations and of the survival of the fittest) and proposes an original definition of the concept of the mind, that would be the basis for theories and researches on evolution. These ideas were further elaborated in the 1878 long paper: *Life and Habit*.

In these writings, Butler questions the meaning of “knowledge”, and the cognitive processes.

“Shall we say...that a baby of a day old sucks(which involves the whole principle of the pump and hence a profound practical knowledge of the laws of pneumatics and hydrostatics, digests, oxygenizes its blood (millions of years before Sir Humphey Davy discovered oxygen), sees and hears – all most difficult and complicated operations, involving a knowledge of the facts concerning optics and acoustics, compared with which, the discoveries of Newton sink into utter insignificance? Shall we say that a baby can do all of these things at once, doing them so well and so regularly, without mistake, and at the same time not know how to do them, and never have done them before?” ²

The fact that the processes of development of the embryo are all unconscious and automatic means that at birth we have an “un-conscious memory”. That is the crucial link that connects evolution and the mind. These are the inherited memories, that make us think of mental forms that transcend the singular organisms and which we should investigate. A typical Butler-style aphorism is: “A hen is only an egg’s way of making another egg”

Butler claims that the scientific knowledge, which was to be the new asset of power for the industrial and capitalistic society, only analyzes the insignificant and secondary things. It doesn’t study the most important thing – what we are already able to do.

To overcome the opposition between theology and materialistic biology is possible if we start analyzing what we put in action in automatic and imperceptible ways, our habits. With his idea of “habits”, Butler turns the dominant conception of the relationship between knowledge and conscience upside down, since he considers the core of knowledge to be the unconscious and preconscious learning of the “savoir faire”, the ability to do things, without knowing how. “To know

– said Butler – is, first of all, a matter of acting with facility, without the need to consciously think”.

Butler differentiated between deeper “habits”, which we are less aware of, like the digestive and circulatory processes that originated in our invertebrate ancestors and less unconscious habits, over which we exert a greater control, like drinking, watching, breathing; and then others that are learnt after birth, like talking, standing, the arts and sciences. His writings are full of observations on the role of the unconscious and the preconscious in playing piano, writing, reading, walking and breathing. He concludes that the more familiar an action is to us, the less we are aware of it when we put it in action. When we have already learnt to read, we no longer notice letters, but only the general meaning of the words, unless there is a misspelling or unless this error is unconsciously corrected.

The unconscious mind (which should not be confused with the Freudian unconscious) controls an array of extremely complex processes and it is therefore crucial to analyse these forms of unconscious communication and learning. How do these deeply rooted habits – that we take for granted, and that transcend the individual existence – take shape? How do we learn them and according to which dynamics do they change?

The entire field of conscious knowledge must be radically revised since that knowledge appears to be necessary only when a particular attention is required, in the case of doubt, uncertainty and suspense. The conscious thought appears only with novelty and doubt.

All of this implies that we should give a crucial role to surprise, which means to the being taken aback in terms of knowledge and that the study of conscious knowledge has to be seen in relation to the preconscious and the unconscious.

Metonymy, Metaphor and Play: The Formal Dynamics of the Body Language

Samuel Butler said that he had learnt the most important things by closely watching his communication with his own cat.

Gregory Bateson takes him seriously and develops this idea in the following way:

“When your cat is trying to tell you to give her food, how does she do it? She has no words for food or for milk. What she does is to make movements and sounds that are characteristically those that a kitten makes to a mother cat. If we were to translate the cat’s message into words, it would not be correct to say that she is crying “Milk!” Rather, she is saying something like; “Mama!” Or perhaps still more correctly, we should say that she is asserting “Dependency! Dependency!” The cat talks in terms of patterns and contingencies of relationship, and from this talk it is up to you to take the deductive step, guessing that it is milk that the cat wants. (...) What was extraordinary – the great new thing – in the evolution of human language was not the discovery of abstraction or generalization, but the discovery of how to be specific about something other than relationship.” [3](#)

Acting as a kitten the cat stages a relational “frame”, in which the interlocutor is implied as “mum”, who is aware of the needs of her baby and who is in the position to guess that it is asking for milk. It’s not a summation of moves and gestures, but the putting in action of a real and autonomous communicative code that operates in a situated and metonymic way (the part evokes the whole).

The cat’s movements are representative of a class (those behaviours that we describe as “care of the other” or “maternal”) which is built by putting the partner in a condition in which “to play the game” it is a possibility that is already in action. This is a type of abstraction that plays on the concreteness and contingency of a situation, rather than abstracting from that concreteness and contingency.

The organism communicates by “placing itself” in a context, and rooting in it, compromising its body and its credibility on the assumption that the other will play the game. Therefore a different behaviour (for instance, if I react by kicking him...) will not only hurt the cat, but it will “hurt its feelings”. The cat compromises herself by creating a certain frame and I displace her from that

frame. I don't recognize her protagonism or her authority.

Non-collaboration in body language is always to some degree traumatic, it is something that puts us off-balance. Even if I expect to be punished or attacked and that doesn't happen I suffer a trauma, though in that case I should be glad to suffer it. The problem is to understand through which dynamics that trauma can be elaborated in a non-traumatic way. Here is another example that shows how Gregory faces this question:

“In our family we had a Keeshond bitch and when she finally became a mother I had the privilege to witness the weaning of one of her puppies. It happened as for all the canine: the mother presses her open mouth on the back of the head of the puppy that is pushed on the ground. If at that point the puppy asked again for milk, it was pushed down again. Up to this it was only a question of conditioning that operated with a negative reinforcement and could have fit perfectly into any psychology manual. But the next step was almost a battle, that became an affectionate game between mother and son. The puppy attacked the mother's mouth with its mouth and then the two started playing with their mouths. In other words, the learning context was woven inside a global relationship and it didn't have the sharp prominence of an isolated accident. It was not only “learning not to ask for the nipple”, but a more complicated affair inside a overall texture that was woven by love relations” [4](#).

They are playing, that is they show that they are being able to practise the dynamics and the displacements that come with the passing from one frame to another with lightness and a sense of the complexity.

Gregory sets out to describe the dynamics and the modes of classification (that is, the language) that correspond with the joyous transformation of frames or dances we take for granted and to which at the moment we don't see an alternative. Another ingenious scholar of the complex systems, Kurt Lewin, creator of the “field theory”, said that any significant change requires three stages: to defrost, to change and to freeze again. Bateson wanted to determine the formal dynamics of these three stages.

The Role of Paradoxes in Human Communication: the Architecture of the Play Frame and Humour

Humour and the play frame are two models that allow us to give a more adequate and less reductionist description of the specific communication which occur whenever a change of frame is happily managed.

The most thorough text which helps us to understand the approach of Gregory Bateson to these subjects is a study by William Fry, called *Sweet Madness: A Study of Humor*. Its first edition was published in the States in 1963 and has only recently been translated in Italian [5](#).

Fry was one of the members of Gregory's team during the 1950s, who worked on the project “The Role of the Paradoxes of Abstraction in Human Communication”. The team was to study this theme within psychoterapy, and particularly within the communication of the schizophrenics, within theatre, ritual, humour, oriental philosophy and above all within Zen philosophy. Fry “specialized” in the dynamics of the humour and pursued that research in close collaboration with Gregory.

The two questions at the center of Fry's study are: what is necessary for play to be playful and what is necessary for humor to be humorous. In the first case (play) the answer is: the enactment of negative reflexiveness. Actually the “architecture of play”, as Fry-Bateson worked it out, is the purest and effective representation of “negative reflexivity.” Let's analyze it.

It is through bodily play cues that the play frame is constituted. The words “Let us play” not accompanied by pertinent bodily, non-verbal play cues are confusing, they are not capable to set up the play frame. These body messages can be translated in words such as: “Be a part of this unreal relationship”. “Be a part of this unreal dance”, or: “Co-operate with this unreal dance”.

When we try to translate the dynamics of this communication into words, Bateson found out,

they turn out to be analogous to Epimenides' paradox: "I am lying." If he is really lying than he is not lying, but if he is not lying, he is lying, in a never ending circular paradox. The bodily play cues set up the whole relationship as unreal including themselves as an integral part of the ongoing process. If the relationship is unreal, so is the cue-message and the situation becomes real. If it becomes real so does the cue-message and the situation is unreal. A circular paradox is quickly apparent. "Play would not be "playful" if it were not for this kind of paradox. The paradoxical alternation or rather once-at-the same-timeness of real and unreal is what makes play what it is. "Let's play" creates a frame around a particular series of episodes which are thus both actual and unreal" [6](#)

The play frame per se can create laughter, happiness, but not a "humorous" laugh. To achieve humour something more is needed.

Humour needs:

— A play frame.

— A story.

— A punch line.

It needs a climax that causes an unforeseen reversal of meaning.

Usually studies on humor – Fry says - focus on the relationship between climax and process as a vital one (on the perceptive cognitive switch), but they take for granted the fundamental importance of the encompassing play frame. It is the play frame interacting with the climax- process relationship, that accounts for humor.

In the process of telling a joke we have already many basic features for understanding "complex autoreflexive systems": teller and listeners get involved in a story which has a common taken for granted, obvious interpretation, but at the same time they know that at certain point something unexpected will come up, a punch line, which will radically change those taken for granted meanings. The simply incongruous or surprising is not funny, it is the encompassing "play frame" typical of humor that gives to the interlocutors the possibility to manage the incongruity in a creative way, to learn something knew not only about the different possible ways to understand "the same things", but also about "taken for grantedness": the dynamics of resistance, identity, authority, belonging, power and imagination. When we understand how it is possible to deal with unexpectedness in a explorative, creative way, we better understand what we do not do, and what we do when we react to similar situations in a difensive-offensive attitude.

The punch line is so related to the ongoing process of which it actually is an integral part that a further circular paradox is precipitated a "vicious circle" paradox which specifically concerns the humor content rather than the relationship and which is itself contained within and is itself affected by the encompassing play frame. The humorous laugh is thus the result of the relationship between two circularly interacting paradoxes: the first inherent to the play frame and the other to the relationship climax-process. In the ongoing process of telling a story that is real-unreal, there comes a real-unreal punch line and a real-unreal switch that upsets the content of the story, the listener and also to some extent the teller. It is a process of "bewildering complexity": content paradox and external play frame paradox that emphasize and potentiate each other along the way. It may remind of the double elix.

Humour is thus a complex form [7](#) that allows us to investigate the dynamics of resistance to change, and the dynamics of identity, authority, belonging, power and imagination.

To understand how it is possible to face the unexpected in an explorative and creative way, it allows us to see with different eyes the things we do (or don't do) when we react to tensions and

conflicts with a merely linear behaviour of defense-offense [8](#).

Strong Emotions, “Thick” Emotions and Humour: A Scene in a Council Houses Neighbourhood in Turin [9](#)

Scene: we finally persuaded the Institute for Council Houses to send on the spot a building surveyor for periodical meetings with the tenants. The surveyor is seated behind a table together with some representatives of the different compounds. A tenant bursts into the room and verbally attacks the surveyor, who hides behind the formula: “It’s not my job”. The tenant becomes more enraged.

The behaviour of the surveyor is not surprising because it is the normal, predictable one for a person that has a role in an bureaucratic institution, but that surely doesn’t favour the creation of a relationship of trust. What is surprising (or should surprise) is that when facing conflict and tension we can only operate on the basis of the same choices the surveyor has, given our former education:

- To take cover in “It’s not my job”. (Technical-professional closure);
- To add: “How dare you?” or “I denounce you to the superior authority” (closure based on the call for authority and power);
- To fight (closure based on the relation of physical power).

In other words we are educated to read conflict and emotions as byproducts of analytic communication, as paralogical steps without an autonomous code.

In the above scene, Barbara, a stair representative with an exceptional savoir faire in the field of creative management of conflicts is also present.

Barbara gets up from behind the table and without hesitation, with a behaviour that at the same time is stern and frowning but also caring, goes towards the enraged big man. She goes to him, almost touching him, and tells him: “You can’t scream here. Now we will go outside and you may explain to me what’s going on”. The big man is puzzled, doesn’t exactly know what to do; then, with some hesitation, follows Barbara outside the room. After a while the two of them are still outside, talking amicably.

That is not to say that everybody can become as good at doing that as Barbara is, once they decided to. But it is also wrong to dismiss the question by saying that it depends only on character and personality.

Barbara learned, trained in and understood some vital points on the management of conflict – that’s how she forged her “personality”. She “knows” that a hostile behaviour starts a dance that has as its subject “we’re a part of a fight”, where it’s possible to cooperate either with some hostile countermoves, or by becoming a victim.

Then Barbara wonders: “How can I displace him? How can I put him in the position of changing the dance he’s offering me?”

If you ask yourself that question, sooner or later you will find some answers, but if you don’t ask it, you will never find them. It is necessary to offer different choices to the ones who attack us, and that means resisting the more natural and obvious tendency to join that kind of dance. It is not a given, we don’t always have to act like that, but we need to know that this chance exists. To widen the possible choice of the other person we must enlarge our own.

Barbara treats the enraged man not as a fool, but as a clever person who deserves to be listened who lets himself become the prey of rage. She doesn’t accept his behaviour, but she respects him as a person. The surveyor, on the contrary, doesn’t accept his behaviour and doesn’t recognize him as a person.

Barbara's behaviour is the opposite of restraint of the emotions (the "positive" and the "negative" ones) and implies the ability to welcome an array of contradicting emotions, that present themselves as incompatible. It implies changing the "strong" emotions into "thick" emotions [10](#). When Barbara creatively manages the tension and the conflict with the enraged tenant, she is at the same time annoyed and curious, stern and dispassionate, hard and sweet, self-assured and worried. The strong emotions trample us, the thick ones make us freer. In other words: it's not a matter of choosing between involvement and detachment, but to practise them together, at the same time.

That's why humour, irony, self-parody, benevolent satire (benevolent in the tones, since in the contents it can and need to be fierce!) are so important, because they are the typical dynamics of involvement and detachment. We need to help the public powers to stop fearing these things and help ourselves to stop considering them marginal, something to enjoy privately or at the movies, or at the theatre or in novels. In a society where the interconnection between different people is growing exponentially, there is no "public space" without a moral and intellectual environment like this [11](#).

* In Claudio Bernardi, Monica Dragone, Guglielmo Schininà (editors/ a cura di) : *War Theatres and Actions of Peace/ Teatri di Guerra e Azioni di Pace* , Euresis Ed. Milano, 2002

[1](#) D. Lipset, Gregory Bateson. *The Legacy of a Scientist*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs (NJ) 1980, p. xii.

[2](#) In D. Lipset, Ibi, p. 9.

[3](#) G. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Ballantine Books, New York 1972 pag. 367

[4](#) G. Bateson, *A Sacred Unity Further Steps to an Ecology of Mind* , 1991 The Estate of Gregory Bateson Rodney E. Donaldson editor; it. tr.: *Una sacra unità*, Adelphi, Milano 1997, p. 492.

[5](#) W. Fry, *Sweet Madness: A Study of Humor*, Pacific Books Publishers, Palo Alto (CA) 1968 (1st publ. 1963); it. tr.: *Una dolce follia. L'umorismo e i suoi paradossi*, Cortina, Milano 2001.

[6](#) Ibi, pp. 134

[7](#) William Fry points out the difference between preconstructed humour (a joke), a situated and an enacted one (a trick on April Fools' Day).

[8](#) The method of ethnographic research I elaborated (that I called "humorous method") is based on the systematical application of those principles to the observation of everyday life. See M. Sclavi, *A una spanna da terra*, Milano, Feltrinelli 1994 2 and *La Signora va nel Bronx*, Le Vespe, Pesaro 2000 2 .

[9](#) This tale is from the introduction to M. Sclavi et al., *Avventure urbane. Progettare la città con gli abitanti*, Eleuthera, Milano 2002.

[10](#) M. Sclavi, *La signora va nel Bronx*, cit., p. 285. Salvatore Veca reminds us that in the tradition of European philosophical thought, David Hume is one of the authors that pointed out the most the central role of emotions in "taking the others seriously" (that is in the ethical dimension). He asserted the primacy of the sympathetic ability over the argumentative. A sentence of his has become famous. "The reason is and must be a slave of the passions". How that could lead to the overcoming of a rational ethics in the direction of an ethics that can welcome the complexity, is still an obscure point. The empathy is indeed a way of being that works well only among peers, in very limited conditions of alterity. Proposing the idea of "thick emotions" along with the creative management of conflict, I think I can show a way out, moving the attention from the justifying of the preconstructed preferences to the joint commitment to create new options. See: S. Veca, "L'evoluzione della dimensione etica della relazione individuo-impresa-società", in Aa Vv., *Il divenire dell'impresa*, Anabasi, Milano 1993. pp 215-53.

[11](#) See M. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Beacon Press, Boston 1995; it. tr.: *Il giudizio del poeta*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1995.