Abstract: In this paper I examine the intuition that underpins Vattimo’s thesis that thought is weak. It is the intuition that our ways of thinking depend not just on what there is, but on our activities, including the activity of interpretation. The following then seems to follow naturally from this: If we cannot factor out the contribution that the activity of interpretation plays in delimiting the very structure of thought, the idea that thought can sometimes operate as a transparent window on how things are becomes problematic – thought is weak. That conclusion can seem obvious and well-grounded. In this paper I argue that it is not. I argue that the thesis that the contours of thought are in part a function of what we do does not mean that our concepts cannot be assessed with respect to the plain truth about how things are.

Vattimo says that there are no facts, only interpretations. Thought is weak, for it has lost the option for foundation in objective truth and can only be assessed in the ongoing hermeneutics of interpretation. Of course, he worries that this appeal to the weak measures of thought through practices of interpretation rather than the objective measure of facts might threaten relativism. Rather than pursue that worry, I want to examine the opening intuitions that suggest that the role of interpretation undermines the toughness of thought in the first place. I think that is a mistake.

The underlying intuition at work here goes something like this: what to think and, indeed, the very ways of thinking depend not on what there is, but on what we do. And the range of things we do includes the activities of interpretation. Our activities cannot be factored out as a contribution to our ways of thinking and our notion of what to think in a way that could leave our concepts and our beliefs as structures that were resultant simply on the facts. Something like this can seem obvious. It’s the same thought as that com-

monly expressed by saying that there is no way to factor out our contribution to our take on the world so that our take on the world could be something simply taken from the world, rather than something that includes, in a way that we can never fully specify, a contribution from us. And that contribution is, in a nutshell, a function of our activities.

What is significant here is the idea that the contribution we make, as it were, clouds our ways of thinking so that they cannot be taken as transparent windows on the world. And the contribution we make comes from what we do; it is our activities that, in part, shape concepts. Therefore, we cannot assume that the shape of our concepts is a simple function of how the world is. And if we cannot factor out the contribution our activities make to the shape of concepts, we cannot have a secure foundation for evaluating concepts for their representational veracity. Of course, the fact that we cannot have a secure foundation for evaluating the representational fitness of concepts does not mean that they are not representationally fit. The lack of secure foundations – the lack of certainty – does not mean that the fitness of our representations is undermined. For present purposes, however, I do not propose to explore further that way of stopping the argument for weak thought. I want to challenge the very idea that because the shape of concepts is, in part, a function of our activities we are thereby doomed to treat concepts as not assessable with respect to how things are. I think that is simply false. In short, I want to acknowledge the idea that the shape of concepts is in part a function of what we do (there is a truth to constructivism about concepts) and show how this can be epistemically and ontologically harmless. I start by distinguishing two levels of activity that bear upon the shape of concepts.

So, consider what I shall call level 1 activities that bear upon conceptual formation. Level 1 activities are those activities by which we co-ordinate our behaviour with the causal properties of the environment. These are activities in which we direct behaviour to match (not be recalcitrant with) the causal powers of things. For example, when confronted with something solid that impedes our motion we might change direction, or push harder, climb over, walk around the solidity that is in our way. The co-ordination of behaviour to the causal powers of things does not require the deployment of concepts. It is important to realise that a form of purposefulness is available to creatures like ourselves in terms of which we modulate our behaviour in response to how things lie around us. We can experiment with our engagement with things without that experimentation being treated as a full-blooded conceptual experimentation of thoughtful enquiry. The experimentation I have in mind can be simply the ongoing dynamic modulation of our engagement with the causal powers of things around us.

It is important to note that this co-ordination of behaviour is acknowledged in Wittgenstein’s account of language learning. Many commentators
fail to remark on the clear distinction Wittgenstein draws between ostensive training and ostensive definition. The latter is a form of teaching of words that requires of the learner that they be able to ask what the name is.\(^2\) The activity of asking questions is an activity that is conceptually structured. It is the activity that comes from grasping the grammar that supplies the “station” for the word in language and exploiting that grasp of station in asking what the name is. But the activity involved in the form of learning that Wittgenstein discusses at §§ 6–9 of the *Philosophical Investigations* is simpler than that. The builders of § 2, whose primitive language is generalised at § 6, require a capacity for directing their behaviour with respect to the causal properties of blocks, slabs, pillars and beams, but they do not require a conceptual selection of these differences. Indeed, they cannot have a conceptual directedness with respect to these objects, for subjects of ostensive training (as opposed to ostensive definition) cannot ask what a name is: they lack the conceptual resources for this.

There is then a good case for acknowledging a form of activity that consists in a basic ability to direct behaviour with respect to the causal properties of things where that capacity is not yet a conceptually structured one. There is also a case for saying that Wittgenstein saw this.\(^3\) It is important that the capacity for activity here is a capacity to direct behaviour to things; it is not merely the capacity to respond to the causal properties of things. Let me explain the difference.

A self-correcting mechanism would not be an example of the sort of capacity for activity that I have in mind. That would be the behaviour of, e.g., a machine that automatically matches its performance to the ongoing causal behaviour of things in the environment. Call this simple-adaptation. This is when a causally structured item modifies its behaviour in lawlike ways in response to the causal impacts of the environment. There is not really an activity in such cases, just the ongoing causal interaction between the properties of the item (subject) and the environment. Contrast this with a directed-adaptation. This is applicable in cases in which a subject has some capacity to direct itself with respect to recalcitrance in its causal encounters with things. This requires that the subject have some capacity for noticing recalcitrance – when things don’t go as expected, the subject has some awareness of this. This noticing of recalcitrance occurs when the thwarting of expectations is salient for them. In turn, such subjects then have some capacity for directing their

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behaviour with respect to such saliences. This is a basic form of probing or interrogating of the environment. There is a sense in which the subject makes an effort to match with the environment. It is not something that simply happens to them. It is something they do.

I think it plausible to suggest that directed adaptation is a prerequisite for concept acquisition. But without arguing for that point, I want to suggest that directed adaptation is not concept involving, for one can direct behaviour with respect to a salient recalcitrance without having a conceptual way for picking out the salience. To allow that this is possible is to allow for a central and basic agency for the subject and, furthermore, an agency that is implicated in their ability to go on and acquire concepts that enable thought about the things to which they direct their adaptation. But the agency involved here is not yet an agency organised by conceptual structures. It is, I suggest, an agency implicated in the very individuation of the concepts whose acquisition it makes possible. Although I cannot argue for the point here, the obvious and plausible hypothesis is that such basic activities are central to the business of concept acquisition. The subject who directs their behaviour with respect to the basic causal properties of things has the basis for beginning to name those properties and acquire concepts for them. Directed adaptation tracks properties such as the softness, hardness, toxicity, etc. of things in the immediate environment and provides a structure of activities suited for the construction of concepts. But there is no good reason for thinking that the concepts so acquired are anything other than ways of thinking that provide windows on the way the world is. There are two core reasons for accepting that concepts constructed in the light of our activities as thus far sketched are concepts that track the ways of the world.

First, suppose that concepts such as hardness are in part constructed in a way that is dependent on our activities. They pick out patterns of types of things in virtue of the way those things impact on our activities. But the activities in question are activities individuated by our ongoing engagement with the environment. The activities in question that frame the concept are activities that are world-involving. They are not abstracted activities belonging to a pure hermeneutic realm. They are worldly activities that have the form they have because of how the world is. Given the world-involvingness of the activities on which the concept is constructed, there is no good reason not to take the concept as a window on the causal ways of the world. Second, it is, of course, possible to object that we have no certainty that these activities are genuinely world-involving. But it is unclear why we should need to resort to such hyperbolic sceptical doubts in order to make the case for the “no facts, only interpretations” thesis. If the argument for the idea of weak thought has to resort to such premisses in order to get going, it is far less interesting than one thought. And besides, appeal to hyperbolic scepticism at best only shows
that we don’t know that the activities in question are world-involving; it
doesn’t show that they couldn’t be or that they might not individuate concepts
that are factual in the way they represent things.

Level 1 activities therefore give good ground for thinking that a construc-
tivism about concepts in which the form of concepts is shaped by our activities
is compatible with the idea that our concepts can be used to report on facts
and not just interpretations. But it might be objected that these level 1 activi-
ties are not the sorts of activities that hermeneutic philosophers have focussed
on. Of course the activities by which we track the causal properties of objects
are activities that can usefully frame concepts that cleave the world at its real
factual joints rather than at the whim of our interpretational interests. But only
those prepared to endorse an extravagant relativism might ever have thought
otherwise. So, let us extend the analysis thus far to level 2 activities.

By level 2 activities, I mean those activities by which we co-ordinate not
with the causal patterns of the natural environment, but with the patterns we
find in the human environment. These will include social, cultural, historical
patterns and many others besides. Of course, one might say that the patterns
that structure the human environment are patterns based on interpretation and
so now it is too easy to conclude that there are no facts, only interpretations. But
to rush to this conclusion is to take as an assumption one of the alleged results of
the radical hermeneutic claim that there are no facts, only interpretations. The
issue here concerns the source of the patterns that structure the social world.

If one treats these patterns as given, as structural features of our experi-
ence of the social world, then one reifies them into things over and above the
activities of individual agents. That might be the correct position to hold, but
note, if so, then there is no argument on offer for the claim that our ways of
thinking are dependent on what we do, including the activity of interpreta-
tion. The reification of the patterns of the social, e.g. the sort of blanket appeal
to the rule-governed nature of activity one finds in Winch’s work, means that
the claim that concepts are dependent on activity is analytically true, for the
only sort of activity available is that already found within the patterns of rules
that are given. It is no longer a substantive claim to say that those patterns are
a function of activities, when the only activities left in play are those made
available by the existence of those patterns. Furthermore, one then delivers by
stipulation the loss of the notion of a rational unitary subject in favour of the
reification of the given patterns of social life. So even if this were all correct,
we would have been offered no argument in support of it, but mere stipulation.

Suppose then that, whether or not it amounts to a rationally unitary subject,
we allow the idea of the active subject, an agent whose activities are, in part at
least, constructive of ways of thinking. Suppose then that we continue to sup-
pose that there is some truth in the core constructivist claim that our ways of
thinking are in some measure a function of what we do. In that case, rather than
taking the inherited patterns of culture, history and society as reified givens,
what other account might be available of how these come about and how, in
the way they contribute to our ways of thinking, they do so as a function of
our activities? There is no obvious reason why we should not extend the sketch
I provided for level 1 activities to level 2 activities in answer to this question.

Level 2 activities are the activities by which we direct behaviour to match
(avoid recalcitrance with) the patterns of interaction between agents. These are
the activities by which we co-ordinate behaviour with the patterns of activity
of others – the patterns of social interaction. Now, the patterns of interaction
between agents are not merely causal patterns. Directing behaviour to match
such patterns is a different matter to directing behaviour to match the causal
properties of the natural environment. The patterns that level 2 activities match
are patterns that are a function of the purposes and directedness of agents. These
patterns are not stable. They shift over time as the agents whose interactions we
try to match themselves adapt to one another. That is not a problem, it is simply
a distinctive feature of the social environment that contrasts it to the natural
environment. In the social world the patterns we try to match are patterns of
others also trying to match with us and with others. Everyone is, potentially, on
the move. But that does not mean there is no sense to the idea that there is such
a thing as directing behaviour to match (avoid recalcitrance with) the patterns
of interactions between agents. It just means that it is difficult to get right. But
there is still such a thing as getting it right. Although, of course, what counts as
getting it right tomorrow may differ to what counts as getting it right today for
the banal reason that the world has, literally, moved on.

Any account of the activities by which we direct behaviour to match the
patterns of interaction between agents needs to be complex, rich and detailed
if it is capture a fraction of the reality of the phenomenology of everyday
life. But even in the short compass available in this discussion, we can at least
sketch something of the principles and illustrate why the construction of ways
of thinking and of what to think with respect to the social world can still be
answerable to facts, not interpretation.

Because the patterns to which one responds in the social environment are
already the patterns of activities of agents, there is no obvious simple analogy
to simple-adaptation. This can seem a surprising claim, for one might think
that the habitual acculturation into the habits of one’s tribe, class or culture
would be a candidate for this. I think that mis-places the deep role that level 2
activity plays in constructing concepts. So let me sketch a very simple scenario
that is too simple to convince, but nevertheless illustrates that the issues about
activity and the construction of concepts are much more complicated than
most hermeneutic philosophers admit.
Consider a case where the actors have some concepts, but not concepts for the patterns of behaviour to which they are adjusting. Suppose Antonia suggests to Bella that they go get a drink. Bella agrees. They have a shared project. In understanding that they have a shared project they are concept users, but are not necessarily yet users of concepts for the ways in which people manage shared projects. They know enough to know that when someone agrees to a suggestion for a shared activity, that they can expect the other’s behaviour to contribute to that shared activity. But that is no more than to understand the opening gambits of asking and agreeing to things.

In young children these basic moves can occur without even the conceptual resources required for making suggestions and eliciting verbal agreement. It seems plausible to suppose that a lot of co-ordinating activity takes place simply in virtue of the capacity to recognise directed affective attitudes in others. Having a powerful affective attitude towards an object, e.g. wanting to move a large toy that is too big to move by oneself, can suffice in tandem with recognition of a similar attitude in another to produce co-ordination that involves some sense of common project. Much has to be negotiated to achieve this, including a reckoning of whether or not the other is a competitor for the desired object rather than a potential ally. And taking a line on that issue will doubtless be informed by an appreciation of the sorts of affective attitudes witnessed in the other on previous occasions. This need not be a conceptually structured appreciation, but a more primitive capacity for recognising individuals whose affective attitudes do not clash with one’s own. All of this already requires quite complex activities in which one moderates behaviour to match the patterns of behaviour in others. So there is scope for a considerable quilt of activities (level 2 activities) already at play before conceptualisation takes place. It would take too long to try to map out in any detail the sorts of complexities that might be available for understanding the mechanisms of basic forms of social co-ordination. But for the purpose of sketching the way that such activities can shape concepts, this need not matter. So I shall return to the case where our actors have sufficient concepts to make suggestions and express agreements.

Once Antonia and Bella have a shared project, there is still much to learn about the ways in which shared projects are managed and what needs to be done in matching one’s behaviour to the other’s. They have no concepts yet for describing the patterns of behaviour of different types of project partners. So, suppose Antonia and Bella start to move towards the drinks. Before getting there, Bella meets Carlo and stops to talk. The shared project is disrupted and Antonia has the option to adapt her behaviour to the new situation. Here are two simple strategies she could use: (i) she could walk away, the shared project lost; (ii) she could wait for however long it takes Bella to finish her conver-
tion. These are extreme options. We might call (i) the tantrum option and (ii) the slave option. They are extremes for they show little awareness of the fact that the patterns of behaviour of people who have agreed to do something are not like the patterns of exceptionless causal regularities. The tantrum option is extreme, for it treats every agreement to do something as an agreement to act right now regardless of anything else that might occur. The slave option is extreme, for in so attaching one’s behaviour to that of another regardless of the apparent deviation from agreement, the subject fails to recognise that others might adapt to one’s own adaptations. The slave fails to realise that one might need to re-assess one’s own options in the light of deviations rather than investing all of one’s options in simply following the other.

These strategies are extreme because in effect, they treat Bella’s behaviour patterns as exceptionless causal regularities. But Bella’s patterns are, like those of any individual, much more interesting than that. They shape to a variety of factors, most simply, those ways in which affective attitudes are acquired and modulated in moving through social space. If Antonia is to develop any understanding of co-ordination beyond the simple extremes of tantrum or slave, she will have to pick up on lots of small details about the way Bella operates. She will need to register how much attention is paid to her once the project is going, or once an interruption is finished, the frequency of interruptions that Bella entertains, whether this frequency is more or less than in her dealings with others, etc.

The attention to the detail of expectations and thwartings in her affective states that Antonia performs is not unlike the level 1 activity of probing of the causal properties of physical objects considered above in directed adaptation. In this level 2 activity, however, Antonia is moderating her behaviour, in large part in order to monitor and control her affective states, by adjusting her affective states to match the behaviour of others doing the same sort of thing. She is thwarted in the immediate desire to get a drink by Bella’s interruption with Carlo, but if the payback is the later reward of an increased affective response and one that is taken as genuine not feigned, then perhaps Bella’s capacity for dalliance is tolerable in a way that would not be with another. If that is the case, that is because Bella’s patterns of behaviour when engaged in shared projects, although superficially annoying given the tendency for dalliance, exhibit a deeper pattern that is found rewarding and that make her a viable partner for co-ordination. But getting a feel for any of this does not come from simple observation. It requires directed adaptation as Antonia experiments, testing the patterns of affective attitudes in others.

Young children are pretty savvy at working out the reliable partners for co-ordinated activities and much of this occurs without explicit planning, negotiation or agreement in language. There is a complex activity of match-
ing their projects with those of others that lay the ground for sophisticated concepts for these behaviour patterns and the traits and virtues by which we come to name them, but it does not require concepts in order to undertake the activity of directed adaptation.\footnote{My appeal to a level of activity that is pre-conceptual but shaped by affective attitudes draws upon my understanding of the extensive literature in developmental psychology on shared activities, co-ordination. See P. Hobson, \textit{The Cradle of Thought}, London: Macmillan, 2002 for an influential treatment of some of these issues. Quite how much or little of infant thinking should be treated as familiar propositional attitude psychology plus grasp of an elemental theory of mind is, of course, contentious. A good starting point to these discussions is M. Tomasello et al., \textquotedblleft Understanding and Sharing Intentions: The Origins of Cultural Cognition,\textquotedblright \textit{Behavioral and Brain Sciences}, 28 (2005), pp. 675–735.}

If the above brief sketch is anywhere near right, then there are activities that shape concepts – our ways of thinking – and thereby also our beliefs, what we think. But in acknowledging the truth in constructivism about concepts, we do not need to trap ourselves within the hermeneutic circle. The activities of directed adaptation are not activities that are only available to those already within the framework of concepts. The idea of directed adaptation is interesting as a form of activity precisely because it holds out the prospect of an instructive account of concept acquisition and development. But because, in both the natural and social cases, concepts are shaped by such pre-conceptual activities, there is no reason to conclude that the concepts that we develop for describing our cultural, historical and social worlds are any the less factive than those we develop for cataloguing the physical features of the world around us. The social world is different. It is always on the move. But that does not mean that we cannot, with timely interventions and interrogations, pin it down and call it as it is.

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