The Irresistible Power of Weak Thought

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Abstract: The following article presents a reconstruction of “weak thought” against the background of Italian philosophy after the Second World War and specifically in relation to the philosophical schools that were active and influential in Turin. At that time, Gianni Vattimo belonged to a tradition that was influenced by the religious consequences of existential philosophy (above all the thought of Luigi Pareyson): a tradition that links Vattimo with Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche. All these elements – highly generic in character as they often were – came together to produce the notion of “weak thought,” which soon came to be seen as a response to the positivist and anti-religious philosophies of the period (e.g. the neo-Enlightenment movement that was represented by Nicola Abbagnano, Norberto Bobbio, Ludovico Geymonat). Vattimo challenged these traditions not through recourse to a set of theoretical principles, but through a different style of thinking altogether, and this is the true (and ambiguous) strength of weak thought.

In a recent interview published in Iris, when he spoke about the origins of “weak thought,” Gianni Vattimo was kind enough to mention an essay in which I had once used the expression “weak reason.”¹ I had almost entirely forgotten about this myself, and I certainly did not recall the matter when I was writing Va’ pensiero. Others then draw my attention to this coincidence of language to which Vattimo alludes in his discussion. I do not think that I deserve any particular credit for alighting on this characteristic expression, nor for playing any role in the genesis of weak thought, since the epithet “weak” was already part of the philosophical jargon of the time. But there is a destiny which has a life of its own beyond the realm of memories, for irrespective of any possible complicity on my own part, I did end up writing on weak thought, and was perhaps amongst the first to do so. I was probably induced to write on this question less because of the coincidence which has been mentioned than because of my familiarity with the particu-

lar philosophical background of this development, in which, between Turin and Milan, one could still hear the voices of individuals from the generation immediately before my own—thinkers who had been specific points of reference for my generation—and still register the repercussions of events which had been witnessed at close quarters. But I also wished to amuse myself a little, and the collection of essays offered a suitable opportunity for this on account of its rather bold and candid character: basically, it was supposed to provoke a little laughter, and in Italian culture of the time, not to mention in Italian philosophy (and perhaps not only in Italian philosophy), there was no place for laughter, or indeed even for a smile.

I offered the first of the pieces in *Va’ pensiero* to the journal *Rivista di Filosofia*, and I can still vividly remember the embarrassment of Norberto Bobbio, who could hardly have taken to my text. He did not explicitly say so, but his countenance was eloquent enough: Bobbio was a greater master of linguistic tact than he was of facial expression. He confined himself to remarking that it would have been preferable if I had proceeded by way of traditional argument; but he did not insist on the point, and the response on the part of the Editorial Board of the journal was rather muted. The *Rivista di Filosofia* had a specific section in which the shorter and less important contributions were published, and unlike the major articles these could sometimes be rather more unorthodox in character. It was Paolo Rossi who suggested that my own intervention should form the opening piece of the relevant issue, and this may have provoked a certain perplexity on the part of his colleagues even if it was not explicitly voiced. This proposal was accepted, and the piece also subsequently appeared, largely thanks to Giulio Bollati, in a little volume published by Einaudi. As one might expect, there were many who disliked the book, clearly because of its own manifest intrinsic defects, but the few who did welcome it put me in an embarrassing situation since they interpreted it a defence of “strong reason.” Yet I imagined that I had made it clear that weak thought was still too strong for my own taste!

In his interview Vattimo rightly points out that *Va’ pensiero* emerged from a background of fairly ordinary academic affairs and circumstances, but also in the context of the turbulent years that followed after 1968. The events of 68 had begun in Turin with a student rebellion against the government’s plans for university reform; then the academic teachers and staff became involved, some of whom had disapproved of the student protests and supported the resulting crack down, while others had dissociated themselves from the government measures and initiatives. At least one section of this latter group, dissatisfied with the Italian university system, with the excessive influence exercised in this system by a very limited number of academics, and with the way in which university teaching was organized, regarded the reforms
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being proposed by the government as inadequate. As he himself points out, Vattimo found this first phase of the events of '68 rather remote, and only really felt engaged when the movement started, at least in Turin, to move from the world of the university to the factories, and thus to involve workers and citizens more generally. The association of university teachers, who were pathetically and somewhat condescendingly described as “democratic” in inspiration, or at least of some of them, had begun before 1968, when they had already attempted to introduce some changes to the traditional structure of the university. They had naturally been opposed by conservative colleagues, but also by some of their progressive colleagues who were interested in changing many things, but elsewhere. According to Vattimo, those who wanted to modernize the university were dazzled by an American mirage, were contemplating something on the lines of the university system in the United States, and looked upon science as the genuine model of knowledge.

It is clear that in Turin all of this could be associated with the so-called “neo-Enlightenment” philosophy of the time, a movement that had enjoyed some success after the end of the Second World War, and had brought together the two extremely different personalities of Abbagnano and Bobbio, who also came with very different historical backgrounds. Abbagnano had once pursued vitalistic and irrationalist issues, had shown sympathy for aspects of empiricism and pragmatism, and had made a name for himself as a sort of existentialist. Bobbio, who had been educated under the influence of Gioele Solari, from whom he learned a philosophy that was partly Hegelian and partly Kantian in character, regarded existentialism as a decadent form of thought, loathed Nietzsche, an author dear to the fascists, and in whom Abbagnano by contrast had shown considerable interest, and considered Croce to be a model intellectual, even if he criticised certain aspects of his political philosophy, whereas Abbagnano thought ill of Croce in almost possible respect. And it was from this rather improbable encounter between Bobbio and Abbagnano that the neo-Enlightenment movement was born, one that had very little to do with the actual historical Enlightenment, with which in fact neither author was particularly familiar. But we know of course that revivals and resurrections of this kind are always a kind of pretence. In reality, both writers had to come to terms with their own pasts. Neither of them had been “idealistic” in philosophical orientation: Abbagnano had been a fascist, while Bobbio, who had been a friend of anti-fascists, had not expected the events of 1943, the establishment of the fascist Italian Social Republic, and had already become involved in the anti-fascist movement during the war, when he was closely associated with Guido Calogero.

After the war Abbagnano had rapidly transformed his earlier existentialism, and attempted to harmonize it with Deweyan pragmatism and neo-positivism.
This was effectively an acknowledgement of American culture which had now assumed a hegemonic character. For neo-positivism too was understood more as an American affair than as a central European movement. And Bobbio also had problems and difficulties to settle, for the “Partito d’azione,” which he had joined, had been dissolved, and he found himself caught between the Christian democrats on the one hand and the Communists on the other. For both Abbagnano and Bobbio the neo-Enlightenment movement represented the search for a distant refuge, the end of a journey undertaken in order to escape from the kind of clerical regime that was beginning to emerge, and a certain cultural-ideological regime, in part real and in part anticipated by a Left in its quest for hegemony. The neo-Enlightenment programme was simple and generic. It involved the political role of philosophy, although the latter was not supposed to become an ideology, the rejection of metaphysics, the recognition of the importance of scientific knowledge, a particular attention to methodological questions and a defence of the plurality of forms of knowledge. This last point seemed to sit rather uncomfortably with the orientation to neo-positivism which proclaimed the ideal of rigorous methodological unity, but the version of logical positivism proffered by the neo-Enlightenment movement was light and generic, for it simply maintained that one could correctly formulate the theoretical foundations of any academic discipline, while acknowledging the specific irreducible identity of each of them.

The neo-Enlightenment movement had a rather short life. Abbagnano continued to work on his well known History of Philosophy, and also put together a Dictionary of Philosophy which also proved rather successful: in both works he basically attempted to resolve the traditional problems of philosophy through a sort of via media that eschewed extreme philosophical doctrines of any kind, endorsing instead a kind of moderate historical common sense that he identified with rationality generally, and that would only have encouraged him to produce philosophical essays in popular form. Bobbio soon tired of pursuing logical subtleties as well, and he returned to his principal area of interest, which was politics, launching himself into an often rather acrimonious dialogue with the Left, although he eventually became something of a mentor to the latter. The other members of the neo-Enlightenment group soon went their various ways. In short, the ambitions of the defenders of Catholic culture to conquer Italian life, and the schools of thought associated with them, had actually been frustrated, and the ideological monopoly of the Italian Communist Party, with its combination of loyalty to the Soviet Union and to the heritage of Gramsci, was showing itself to be less impermeable and monolithic than it had earlier seemed. The range of ideological options thus now appeared more open, and called for more than the sober neo-Enlightenment movement had to offer.
The field of humanistic studies had begun to recover from its Italian isolation and from the dominance of idealist philosophy. For their part philosophical studies had not really profited from the best things provided by Croce and Gentile, who had never been that influential in the philosophical schools within the universities. As far the idealism of Gentile was concerned, this ended up with the dominance of the Catholic “spiritual” faction, especially after the alliance between Fascism and the Church which was confirmed by the Lateran Treaty of 1929. The philosophical teaching had inherited from idealism an obsessive concern with demonstrating the superiority of “spirit,” and a constant sense of rivalry with the culture of science, the limits of which they never tired of emphasising. They hardly cared to notice that the modern sciences were radically transforming our conception of nature, convinced as they were that nature represented an inferior sort of reality in comparison with that of mind and spirit. In its own way, idealism had originally been an attempt to modernize Italy, whereas the Catholic spiritual philosophy in question pursued the opposite goal, and was essentially concerned with recuperating the tradition, and pre-eminently the philosophical tradition.

In Italian philosophical thought, the history of philosophy had always enjoyed considerable prestige, above all on account of the high professional standards of those who pursued it, and this too was a legacy of idealism which always possessed an exalted conception of history, and of the importance of Croce and Gentile who were significant historians in their own right. It was not that the historians were immune from preconceptions of their own, but they had a way of treating these conceptions, of endorsing some and challenging others, which appeared more moderate and judicious, and allowed the fundamental presuppositions at work to appear with particular clarity. Everything is relative, and this impression is perfectly explicable if we compare this approach with the more generic, undifferentiated and extreme positions of doctrinal philosophers: one only had to observe what Croce and Gentile themselves achieved when they exchanged one hat for another. And then there was philology. Innocent virtues were hardly to be expected here either, for the philologists are also specialists in exploiting or forcing their texts; but one could go some stretch of the way with them, and discuss matters frankly and openly. Historians who are more or less scrupulous from the philological point of view were (and are) often willing to put themselves at the service of particular philosophical doctrines, ready to fall for the extremely strong temptation of dusting down historiography as laudatio. The more theoretically oriented philosophers, on the other hand, have almost always worked with the mere cuttings of the history of philosophy, often culled from the standard manuals, putting up with the proximity of historians precisely because they resigned themselves to acting as docile doxographers and water-carriers for
the weary creators of the philosophical doctrines themselves. But in exploit-
ing the resources of historiography, and especially the philological ones, it
was possible to steal some cards from the game of the theoreticians and sub-
vert the framework which they employed in order to formulate their own
philosophical proposals. More than in any particular doctrine or in the fabled
appreciation for scientific knowledge, one could find something of the neo-
Enlightenment movement precisely here, in the taste for somewhat unusual
and more impartial historiographical interpretations, in the aspiration to pur-
sue intellectual inquiries in which the premises were not simply concealed
anticipations of the conclusions to be reached, and the path between initial
assumptions and the eventual point of arrival was a little adventurous. For
some historians of philosophy the philosophical tradition was the first thing
to be attacked and dismantled. Since it is always well to acknowledge the
merits and achievements of others, it is a pleasure to mention some of the
things that were specifically accomplished in this regard: a study of the intel-
lectual culture of the Renaissance, from literary humanism to Francis Bacon,
which focussed on the scientific revolution, a re-examination of the supposed
modernity of Vico’s philosophy, and a reconstruction of historicism that was
not simply presented as a triumphant progress from Berlin to Naples.

In the meantime, in spite of the brief episode of the neo-Enlightenment
movement, the Turin “adventure” with Heidegger was actively pursued. Where-
as Abbagnano, after having attempted to “transfigure” his earlier existen-
tialism into a positive philosophy, and after having deployed this existen-
tialism as a counter-position to philosophical idealism, had moved further
and further away from his original perspective, Pietro Chiodi continued to
uphold his own interpretation, emphasizing the difference between the ear-
lier Heidegger and the later. But people had already begun talking about
Heidegger’s thought in Turin a while before this, from the moment in fact
when it was grasped, in the circle associated with Annibale Pastore, that
Heidegger’s philosophy was a variation of Husserlian ontology. And then
Augusto Guzzo, one of the leading representatives, with Armando Carlini, of
the Catholic appropriation of Gentile’s idealism, had regarded existentialism
as a farewell to idealism that was indeed so undramatic that one could dis-
cover the premises of this development in a sort of pre-existentialism already
implicit in idealism itself, as Guzzo’s student Luigi Pareyson would argue at
length. In all of these developments no one had paid very much attention to
Nietzsche, who enjoyed a dubious reputation in post-war Italy since he had
been one of the authors the fascists liked to read, all Übermensch and “will
to power,” something that appealed to the Black Shirts. And Bobbio cou-
pled this interpretation of Nietzsche with his interpretation of existentialism
as an expression of decadence. But there was a student of Heidegger’s who
had offered a much less perverse interpretation of Nietzsche, and enjoyed a considerable reputation in Italy: Karl Löwith had placed Nietzsche alongside Marx and Kierkegaard, as a mark of the crisis of classical German Idealism, of its optimistic perspective, of its philosophy of history. This formulation of the problem associated Nietzsche with the cause of reason, claiming that he was capable of detecting the snares and illusions of philosophical romanticism; he may have overturned and re-evaluated values, but his thought was a welcome exercise in demystification, in the wake of which it was possible to undertake the work of reconstruction. This historiographical appropriation of Nietzsche appealed to Abbagnano since it allowed him to interpret the German thinker as a perceptive interpreter of his own time, albeit a slightly too edifying one, with his fervour to propose new values in place of those he had overthrown.

And Nietzsche would return once again in Turin, in the school of Pareyson, and this time in the footsteps of Heidegger himself. This was no longer the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, but the later Heidegger, the Heidegger who was rediscovered after the eclipse he had endured on account of his support for the Nazis. The military defeat of Germany had not changed his views that much, for he continued to regard the Nazi war as a form of resistance to Russian communism, and the salvation which Hitler had failed to bring to Europe was now expected from “a god.” But he was much concerned with Nietzsche since the latter had anticipated him with a critique of knowledge that inspired the *Rectoral Address* of 1933 in which he solemnly declared his allegiance to Nazism. Heidegger’s speech was full of will of power, and it differed from Nietzsche only because Nietzsche had never emphasized German science. But then Nietzsche was not a Rector of the university, and could not have imagined the Nazi Revolution. Now Heidegger came to settle accounts with Nietzsche in his own way. The latter had denounced the established view of knowledge in his own time, without proposing another one, generating the danger of nihilism only because he was himself a child of the world that he rejected. Nietzsche signalled the end of traditional metaphysics, which from the days of Plato onwards had concealed the “being” of which it claimed to speak, behind the screen of the mode of being of things, but Nietzsche himself had remained the prisoner of the fading knowledge that he denounced. With Heidegger, the Nietzschean iconoclasm could be turned on traditional metaphysics that was constructed by the rationalizing intellect which, as Hegel had recognized, is not truly capable of thinking at all. Nietzsche had conceived the idea of the “Overman,” that was such an embarrassing prefiguration of the Nazi cult of power, trapped as he was in the cage of traditional metaphysics; but now the Overman, rather than smashing idols or crying out in despair, could learn to await the god who is to come, could learn to hearken to being itself.
And in Turin, in the school of Pareyson, who had now dropped the
notion of a pre-existentialist idealism, people began to hearken to being too.
Notwithstanding the fact that silence is often salutary, since background noise
can prove so distracting, the Heideggerean hearkening in Turin was actually
rather garrulous: while they awaited signs and messages that failed to arrive,
the earnest listeners began to chatter away, and their chatter soon found its way
into the ideological marketplace in the years after 1968. To read Heidegger,
one would naturally receive the impression that “being” as he understood it
would encounter considerable obstacles to its arrival, whereas these new fol-
lowers of his philosophy seemed to imagine this was a fairly easy matter, given
that traditional metaphysics was so oppressive, with its rather formal preoc-
cupations and its obsession with the most rigorous and demanding forms of
knowledge, such as mathematics. After Nietzsche one thing was clear: nobody
really knew what “being” itself might have said, suggested, or proclaimed, but
we could now bid farewell to the prison cell of exact knowledge.

From the times of Moses and of oracles, the divine language has never
been particularly clear and has always required its interpreters, who unfail-
ingly appear whenever we are confronted with mysterious signs, hints, and
traces. When we have to deal with such matters, it is necessary to take certain
risks and resort to creative measures, even if we must not exaggerate, because
the work of interpretation moves between the banal and the arbitrary, and for
this reason must be exercised with modesty and caution. But interpretation
is also an art of adaptation and manipulation, and one in which the inter-
preters of oracles and sacred books excel: Livy has written exemplary pages
on the way in which the Roman soothsayers sought to reconcile the divine
signs with military knowledge and demands. This art has acquired academic
status in those artistic, literary, and historical disciplines where it is neces-
sary to translate texts from one language to another, adapting and manipulat-
ing them in the process. Hermeneutic philosophy, that originally sprang from
reflection on the manipulative practices characteristic of the commentators on
Biblical texts, has turned this into a model for literary and historiographical
investigations, thereby claiming the superiority of manipulative interpola-
tion over knowledge. This thesis derived from the conviction that all knowl-
edge already presupposes some interpretation, and that there is no objective
knowledge in which the object would assume any primacy over the subject.
Interpretations which are disguised as thoroughly reliable and objective forms
of knowledge are actually the least credible, whereas those forms of knowledge
which are accompanied by the highest degree of subjectivity are precisely the
most authentic and acceptable interpretations. The true and adequate object
of hermeneutic practices of investigation are sacred texts, works of art, litera-
ture, and history, or in general everything in which “tradition” is somehow
preserved and transmitted. And while we wait for the arrival of a god, or some
sign from a god, we can abundantly help ourselves to the resources of the tradi-
tion, and place the latter at the disposal of the ideological market.

If we already possess a key, it may not be difficult to interpret the signs, as
they come to occupy different places in the same system, circulating inside it
as coded messages. But if we must interpret blindfold, as it were, and turn back
from the message to the key, then things become more difficult, as always hap-
pens in matters of espionage. For the philosophers of interpretation, in con-
trast, everything merely became easier. From time immemorial philosophers
have regarded language as the direct expression of the soul. The logicians too
were fascinated by language, believing that they could purify it from possi-
ble errors and ambiguities and produce a restricted but more precise version
of language instead. Philosophers had been disappointed by the inadequate
resources of language, but they thought again and developed a more generous
and capacious image of language which could embrace almost anything, from
historical languages to the language of fashion, from the most fanciful symbols
to formalized languages – an extensive field that could be explored from top to
bottom and back again. There was no need to worry about the opposite prob-
lem of discovering the code from analysis of the messages for one could always
invoke the hermeneutic circle which is already in play between the interpreter
and what is interpreted, or appeal to a general theory of signs that provides the
handbook for deciphering messages and communications of whatever kind.

According to Heidegger, humanity did not yet know, or no longer knew,
how to think “being,” and did not know how to speak of it in an appropriate
way, except perhaps in certain cases of poetic exaltation. The hermeneutical
philosophers were less extreme in their approach, and inclined to content
themselves with art in general. If they wished to participate in the cultural
struggles of the 1970s, when original philosophical proposals were prolifer-
ating on every side in order to repair old ideologies or construct new ones
and the philosophers became – at one and the same time or successively –
Marxists,structuralists,adepts of the Frankfurt School,Maoists,Lacanians,
and so on, then it was necessary provide something suitable for immedi-
ate use. All of this activity sprang from the notion that we could now free
ourselves from inhibiting restrictions that had been taken too seriously in
the past. Marcuse announced the hard times of surplus repression, a legacy
of the early modern age, were coming to an end: the post-modern era had
begun, utopia had become a real possibility, fantasy and imagination could
come to power at last. Some may have attempted to point out that there
are no “free lunches,” but there was no need to pay any attention to them;
indeed, in those years, one could simply stifle or suppress such voices. And
in the meantime we witnessed the emergence, especially in the local centres
of power, of a political class that hailed from the Left, and was discovering an opportunity for its first experience of government in the peripheral areas of administration. These were often people who had been educated in the school of Gramscian thought and of Soviet philosophy as this was interpreted in the Italian context, a school that was now in crisis. Philosophers flocked to visit the centres of local power with their own philosophical novelties on offer. Wittgenstein, Heidegger, revamped psychoanalysis, literary and artistic avant-gardism, angels and theophanies of one kind or another were bestowed on mayors and local councillors who did not yet encounter the problem of public debt because they were busy creating it, while they were happy to live with inflation and guaranteed salaries.

When the book *Weak Thought* appeared, the season of ideological revels and of terrorism was fading, and the collection of essays seemed to capture everything that been going on during these years. Apart from some minor contributions, it was a faithful epitome of the things which had effectively represented leading tendencies of the time. But what was it that actually united these contributions? Vattimo now finally seems to be asking himself the same question. He ascribes a considerable role to Rovatti in promoting this particular enterprise, perhaps even in choosing the title of the collection, while Eco seems to have been relatively indifferent to the appeal of weak thought, for all the infatuation with the world of signs that rather misunderstood by Vattimo, and by his teacher Pareyson. Perhaps it is the novels of Eco, rather than his philosophical and semiological writings, that can most plausibly be linked to the spirit of weak thought, on account of those little results and consequences in which great events and developments find their resolution in ways that appear laden of symbolic significance.

I do not think that weak thought was actually held together by principles, beliefs, or common methods and procedures. It was more a question of cultural styles and tastes, and perhaps above all, in the final analysis, by a set of rejections and repudiations. It is here, in this last feature, that we should perhaps seek the characteristic impulse behind the idea of weak thought, and the motivation for this specific choice of title. One would not have said that the epithet “weak” was the right word to publicize the enterprise in question, either because it seemed rather humble, or because it enjoyed a technical rather than intuitive meaning in philosophical usage, and appeared to evoke a cer-

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tain renunciation insofar as a “weak” theory seems to suggest a retreat from a “strong” one. From this perspective, to invoke the notion weakness may confer some argumentative advantage here: if the strong version of a theory, that is, a more powerful and extensive theory, generates a number of problems, then a weak version could perhaps expand the area of possible agreement and render the theory in question compatible with other apparently rival theories. Yet it seems to me that none of the authors of *Weak Thought* wished to suggest anything of the kind, since, as far as we can see, they regarded weakness as a value in its own right; what they were expressing was not a weakened form of a stronger theory, but an opposition to any strong theory whatsoever, where “strong” however had lost all reference to any actual identifiable theories.

When I wrote *Va’ pensiero*, one of those who were particularly angry about it was Enrico Filippini, who felt that my reflections expressed a culture in thrall to science and technology, and suspected that they had arisen from spending too much time in the environment of Fiat. This second conjecture was without foundation, since weak thought was very welcome to the Agnelli family and their newspaper. What Filippini had picked up on was probably the fact that the defenders of weak thought (though this is not true of all who had been enlisted under this banner) generally regarded “strong” thought as the kind of thought which privileged scientific knowledge. This is what they meant when they spoke of “strong” thought, despite the fact that what the culture of science has actually given us is the idea of systematic doubt, procedures of trial and error, an insistence on independent principles of evidence, an attention to specifiable probabilities. But perhaps this impression is insufficiently precise, for the polemical intent of weak thought was articulated entirely within the context of alternative philosophical positions. For basically it was not the scientists who were to blame here. It was the philosophers who had created the whole problem. Scientists had indeed extended their field of action, had successfully replaced old beliefs with new knowledge, and philosophy had been forced to stop competing in the domain of specific knowledge, a field where the sciences now enjoyed exclusive authority. In Germany, where the remarkable development of modern science and technology had effectively displaced Humboldt’s idea of the universe of knowledge, Heidegger had made every effort to re-launch a German “Science,” or knowledge in the broadest sense, which would advance in a different direction. After this attempt ended in failure, Heidegger repudiated any type of philosophy which would try and compete with the sciences insofar as the acquisition of knowledge was concerned, for this is what had produced the occidental metaphysics that found its proper systematic form in the ontology of Wolff. For here one attempted to speak of being, misunderstood as being in general, in the same way in which we speak of beings or entities, that is, of things.
If we suppose that the authors of *Weak Thought* were principally aiming at traditional metaphysics, interpreted along the lines suggested by Heidegger, then this could represent the strong theory of which weak thought would then be a weaker version. And this might be a useful way to develop the argument, in the manner we have just indicated above. If metaphysics claims to express precisely and in detail what being is, and encounters significant difficulties in the attempt, then why not accept a weaker version, one in which we do not speak of being ourselves, but simply hearken to what it says? I do not know if this was the intention, and I do not know if a weakened claim of this kind could exercise any argumentative power. I believe that no defender of classical metaphysics, an Aristotelian let us say, such as we might find amongst neo-scholastic philosophers, or even amongst analytically oriented philosophers, would be convinced by this approach. For such a thinker would regard weak thought not as a weakened form of metaphysics, but as a real and fundamental repudiation of metaphysics. In relation to metaphysics weak thought presented itself as a liberation from absolutist claims as such, and it renounces the idea of a general and universal form of knowledge that could be constructed by recourse to a limited set of means that are only privileged because of certain antecedent epistemological prejudices. Weak thought wished to promote a tolerant attitude and perspective, one which refused to accept restrictions arising from the fact that this or that type of knowledge was presupposed as the only model, or that some specific method or procedure was regarded as the indisputable criterion of whatever could be thought. All of this was actually not so far from the virtues espoused by the neo-Enlightenment movement that we discussed at the start. Then why the polemic, the ferocious attack on the prestige attached to positive knowledge which the representatives of weak thought set alongside metaphysics, and which the representatives of neo-Enlightenment persisted in trying to secure? Or was all this simply a question of the ways in which certain positions, which were quite reasonable in themselves, were presented and sustained? A question of idiom, or of philosophical rhetoric?

After all these years, this last suggestion does not seem entirely implausible. In conversation with Valerio Verra, I heard him say on more than one occasion that the true heir of Abbagnano was Vattimo. The encounter with Heidegger had a decisive impact on both of them, even if they felt this influence at different times and in relation to different texts. And they both derived analogous conclusions, or analogous distortions, from their reading of Heidegger, conclusions or distortions which were always rather moderate, consoling, and “soft.” Abbagnano had always refused to distinguish radically between possibilities, had refused, above all, to identify some ultimate possibility – which Heidegger himself had identified in a banal way with death. And although Abbagnano
certainly never said that everything is possible (something he regarded as a contradiction), he did believe that many things were indeed possible. Abbagnano the neo-Enlightenment thinker was often suspected of entertaining exaggerated sympathies for science, but this was only because he did indulge in obsessive polemics against science. In reality, he was a rather superstitious person, and believed to some extent in the magical and the supernatural, and in philosophy he refused to defend the primacy of scientific knowledge. As far as Vattimo is concerned, on the other hand, we must concede that in comparison with other philosophers of being, such as Severino, with whom he also has much in common, Vattimo was less monolithic in outlook, entertained a more friendly view of the world, including the realm of technology which for him was certainly something to be feared, especially in intellectual terms, but could also be used with a light and moderate touch.

So what then? Why do we not all endorse weak thought, go out and enjoy life, if there are pathways in paradise? In some ways it was less a matter of philosophical rhetoric, than of a sort of philosophical tourism. For it undeniably created a certain effect if one had to go and visit the enigmatic work-shop of the Black Forest where Scotism and scholastic mysticism was compounded with Gnosticism to produce one version of reactionary 20th century culture. It was an interesting and challenging matter to transform all this anti-modernity into post-modernity, to spread abundant lightness all around, to claim that technology was usable but not believable, but the obsession with passing through such speculations, with continually hearkening to being, was a particularly ugly business. It was true of course that the saving god expected by Heidegger no longer sported a moustache, but the diversions of hermeneutic and semiological chatter which one mistook for expectation were not particularly attractive either. Such chatter reflected the re-emergence of the old German and Italian prejudice that art is a privileged and revelatory form of experience. Pareyson became jaded and imperious in manner when he proclaimed that the uttermost contrasts and contraries can coexist in the work of art, and that this, for example, makes art into something that is at once the most universal and the particular of things. This was a kind of miracle, something we were supposed to witness in his lectures on aesthetics, and which his students were expected to repeat in their examinations. It was somewhat reminiscent of some priest trying to contain divinity in a piece of bread. Even cultured individuals had their doubts with prodigious declarations of this kind, for the romantic idea of the primacy of art had long since faded, and a significant part of contemporary culture was now under the dominant impression that, with the demise of great art in the age of the mechanical production of artefacts, we had entered a period of crisis. Heidegger himself had basically sunk certain roots of his own in this particular terrain. The soft
and conciliatory version of hermeneutics and semiology had rather taken the drama out of these things, for it allowed us to heal the fractures which the dramaturgy of crisis had introduced into history. The world was the world it was, and the advent of technology had certainly created a considerable amount of trouble and confusion. But if scientific theories and technological capacities projected certain closed universes, where it was a simple matter to follow the obligatory routs without possessing any special interpretative key (and was this not a form of alienation?), works of art by contrast were always open to interpretation, and the interpretations furnished the links through which the process of communication could continue to flow. This model of reality was essentially literary in character, something like a text, an encyclopedia, a book, or a collection of books. One could dress up this situation by speaking of a science of signs, or of the hermeneutic circle, but it was still the same old adage that man is made to know himself, or the products of his own activity, better than things themselves, and especially if the products in question are books, ready and waiting to be read. What seemed to be a crisis of artistic and literary practices could thus become a sign of their vitality, of their capacity to capture everything that escapes our ordinary knowledge, to disclose new possibilities of experience, in contrast to the closure imposed by rigorous and grounded forms of knowledge. The latter itself was always in crisis, on account of its need for foundations which do not exist.

The power of weak thought lay precisely here, for after descending into the infernal bowels of the declining West, it offered considerable consolation and allowed us to hope that in a sense things were alright as they were. Ontological metaphysics may have gone out of fashion, but in its place there now appeared a numinous philosophy of being that proclaimed its arrival with thunder and lightning, but effectively dissolved into a good-natured acceptance of things as they are, or into a general theory of signs, which was supposedly as rigorous as a formal science, but somehow managed to embrace everything, from aesthetics to fashion to ideologies, and lent itself to the most varied alliances imaginable. All this allowed us to close our eyes to the fact that philosophy had forsaken the path of knowledge, a knowledge which now lay in other hands. One could even say that philosophers were charged with articulating the general worldviews within which particular languages assume their place. I still remember a Faculty Meeting in which a literary scholar inspired his academic colleagues by loudly declaring that “they (and he did indeed say they) possess the knowledge, while we deal with the Weltanschauungen,” as if one should be delighted to have the Weltanschauungen at our disposal. The trouble was that even the Weltanschauungen had changed, and it was their fault. Contemplating photographs of the stars we were supposed to feel nostalgia for Kant’s starry heavens above, which had actually caused many to shudder, given that it has...
replaced the more familiar Aristotelian cosmos. Not to speak of the moral law within, now that the soul has forfeited its general credibility, and everything that makes us human has been located in a tiny difference with regard to the other animal species. Recognition of the inhospitable character of nature has encouraged us to flee to a cultural tradition which seemed to promise consolation, even if earlier philosophies of history appeared to be nothing but simple myths and instruments of oppression. Weak thought revealed an unsuspected power to conceal the difficulties of a philosophy which has lost its capacity to secure or produce knowledge, and has renounced the intellectual paradises of Wolffian metaphysics. For weak thought offered theories and conceptions that were able to guarantee the primacy of interpretations over knowledge and the reciprocal communicability of interpretations, namely the fact that they are addressed to a reality that is already made to be interpreted, and so on and so forth. Heidegger’s anxieties regarding the forgetfulness of being and the decay of the West were thereby transformed into consoling reassurances regarding the primacy of what is interpretable with respect to what is knowable, and the fact that reality is always open and available for the interpretations which arise. All of this sounded rather strange to anyone who was genuinely aware of the serious problems and conflicts to which the philosophers of disenchantment had drawn particular attention, anyone who attempted to identify those places where the promises of the philosophers had been unfulfilled, and who was fundamentally wary of all ideologies and world views.

Philosophers have always sought sustenance in a tradition that is anything but uniform, and has created chains of texts which have often been mistreated and subjected to forced readings. The old formulae of the *philosophia perennis* and of the “eternal” philosophical problems also involved, and effectively ennobled, such manoeuvres. On occasion all of this labour, which is often hidden, has been made quite explicit, and philosophers have pursued their work by analysing and commenting on texts, especially those texts which have come to be regarded as canonic. Western philosophy was originally formed in precisely this way, when the Academy had established the canon of the Platonic dialogues, which already became points of reference for Aristotle, and then the object of detailed commentary, when the chain of philosophical predecessors had been identified from the examination of these texts. And other philosophical schools have sought to repeat this approach in turn. Then commentary became the literary genre for a considerable part of the philosophy of late antiquity and of the medieval period. And the humanistic culture that succeeded that world proceeded in much the same way. With the arrival of the modern age philosophers became ashamed to present themselves as commentators on earlier texts, and now claimed to speak for themselves. Between the essays of Descartes and those of Montaigne we can see the difference that sepa-
rates an autonomous form of discourse from a textual commentary. Every time a certain scholasticism has become established, we witness the reappearance of the commentary and certain texts have again become canonic. The ideological culture of modern times has inherited this way of proceeding, even if this is something that has often been silently ignored. I can still recall my astonishment when I started to hear Marxist intellectuals who constantly referred back to texts by Marx, Engels, Lenin, or Stalin. When this kind of culture became less feasible, it was the texts of Heidegger which became canonic for a while, so much so that one could not even begin to write a piece without starting from some quotation from Heidegger. At a time when the exercise of suspicion and the practice of deconstruction had become an everyday enterprise, an author who had effectively attracted the worst suspicions became the key, became the means for tearing off the veil from everything that had been concealed before. It came to the point where a distinguished Marxian economist, disappointed even by the venerable Sraffa, wished to draw on Heidegger (and not indeed on the weak version, but in the esoteric version of Severino) in order to construct an economic theory that was utterly liberated at last from scientific positivism and the constrictions of the capitalist order.

This way of proceeding by citation and commentary could simply be a matter of style, but in this practice it was quite possible to recognize manipulative interpretations at work, interpretations which, like the laudatory practices of historiography, serve to construct a tradition within which we can locate precisely what it is one wishes to maintain. At the time when there was considerable polemic surrounding the question of weak thought I said that for the protagonists of this movement words effectively come before things, rather as Berkeley had claimed for “ideas.” I am not sure if this was a well-founded judgement, but in the discussion which ensued the representatives of weak thought themselves recognized their project in this description and were proud to defend their position in this way. Expressed in these terms, it all seemed a rather crude affair. It was easy to argue that the anteriority of words with respect to things is not so unlike the older metaphysics which was itself a verbal construction that claimed to represent the nature of being. But one could have replied that it is things, to which one claimed to attribute anteriority with respect to words, that are the real object of that metaphysics. But this was how everything was understood, and nobody suspected that in invoking the anteriority of things one referred to a reality which is given immediately, that one opened one’s eyes before speaking, or referred to the object of some metaphysics or other.

Many years have passed since the appearance of weak thought, and many other things have happened in the meantime. The world has changed significantly, and the old ideologies are now something to be execrated even by those
who formerly subscribed to them, while it is religions that currently serve to divide human beings and drive them to fight and to hate one another. The ideas that were expressed in that collection of essays continue to exercise a certain influence in philosophy and in the context of general cultural discussion, although some things have certainly changed. Even in those quarters the work of interpretation has shown some signs of exhaustion, and there is now a desire to go beyond the question of interpretation. The same chain of interpretations, endlessly proliferating and turned in on themselves, have provoked certain doubts. Alleviated by dint of hermeneutic cures and the ministration of signs, the being that was yet to announce itself could now assume the forms of an ontology, while from the side of the semiologists too there was a certain convergence with the philosophy of being. When weak thought made its appearance it was widely believed that the philosophers of “strong” thought upheld a conception of truth as some kind of mirroring or reflection of reality. This was all a very philosophical affair, but by and large they were accused of taking truths in a very literal way, when they should rather be treated in a flexible manner since they depend on so many things and attempt to express so many things. Has truth then been rehabilitated with the development of an adequate ontology? It seems so, on condition that it is understood as agreement and is subordinated to the idea of solidarity or charity. There will also be things and propositions where agreement with respect to their truth is not so relevant, or which involve agreements which are not so significant, in spite of all the relativism that is around to challenge the invectives of the Pope or the President of the Chamber of Deputies; but these things and propositions, with the scarce investment that is demanded by stipulating the agreements that make them possible, cannot count for much: whoever chooses a particular alternative because it is true? Did not Hume, even Hume, already point out that the “is” is one thing and the “ought” is another, that knowing is one thing and willing is another. The distrust which the defenders of weak thought and their intellectual heirs feel with regard to truth is comprehensible: it seems nothing to admit that “the sun is out today” can be true or false since it is not such an important matter (it depends …), but if we start like this, we will soon recognize that truths can be more or less stable, easy or difficult to prove, and we end up by saying that there are hierarchies of values, values which are something other than mere preferences that are unstable and subjective. And once we have incautiously admitted that the sun really is out today, we find that we are already enrolled amongst the enemies of relativism.

It is gratifying to observe these disputes from afar, relinquishing the mighty truths, along with the philosophical reasons that enable to show that truth exists or does not exist, or that if it does, it matters a great deal or does not matter that much, along with all those struggles around the True, the Good,
and the Beautiful (written with capitals of course), and holding instead to the little truths, those truths that are hidden in the folds of words and obscured by the chatter of interpretations. These little truths do not warm the heart or elevate the mind, but the denial of such truths is an indispensable ingredient of religions and ideologies. Machiavelli already knew that politics and religion go together, for they both need to pass off false things as true: these stratagems are called “impostures,” and often interpretation is the instrument with which such impostures are constructed. If weak thought has led its own battle against truth, a thought that is weaker than weak thought could content itself at least with identifying some of these impostures.

(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)

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