

**Being Is Conversation:
Remains, Weak Thought, and
Hermeneutics¹**

Santiago Zabala

The answer to the question, “What is philosophy?” consists in our corresponding to that towards which philosophy is on the way. And that is—the Being of being. In such a correspondence we listen from the very outset to that which philosophy has already said to us, philosophy, that is, “philosophia” understood in the Greek sense. That is why we attain correspondence, that is, an answer to our question, only when we remain in conversation with that to which the tradition of philosophy delivers us, that is, liberates us. We find the answer to the question, “What is philosophy?” not through historical assertions about the definitions of philosophy but through conversing with that

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1. Forthcoming in J. Malpas and S. Zabala, *Consequences of Hermeneutics*, eds., Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2010, p. 161-76.

which has been handed down to us as the Being of being. (Martin Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?*, 1956.)

Among the most important consequences of Heidegger's destruction of Being as presence, in addition to the overcoming of metaphysics and the elevation of hermeneutics to the center of philosophical concern, is the weakening of Being to its own remains. While few Heideggerian scholars consider the German master's philosophical destruction as a weakening of Being, most contemporary hermeneutic philosophers agree that he is the first to have given ontological import to hermeneutics. For such authors as Ronald Davidson, Ronald Dworkin, and Nancy Holland, philosophical interpretation has become not only a philosophical problem in itself, but also the ground to start overcoming the division between analytic and Continental philosophy. While most contemporary analytic philosophies (such as that of J. Searle) continue to restrict ontology to a scientific focus from the empiricist tradition, and Continental philosophers (such as J.-L. Marion) firmly maintain the objectivist intentionality of their phenomenologist tradition, today, half a century after the publication of Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, hermeneutics has the opportunity to leave aside these traditional metaphysical aspirations for indubitable knowledge.

Philosophical hermeneutics should no longer be presented as another variation of Continental philosophy against analytical philosophy, but rather as the disso-

lution of such divisions among disciplines, where language is not used to represent reality but to help break “the crust of convention of the epistemology industry,” as John Dewey would say. While a new interchangeable framework already has begun to take shape in the fusing together of problems from both traditions by such authors as Karl-Otto Apel, Ernst Tugendhat, and John McDowell, this same framework will not become the thought of the twenty-first century until it overcomes metaphysics in a productive way. However, if hermeneutics can present itself as the post-metaphysical thought of the twenty-first century, it is not only because its best practitioners (Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Nietzsche) have broken ground for it while others from both traditions (Thomas Kuhn, Michael Theunissen, and Rüdiger Bubner) have developed it, but rather because it has become the most appropriate response to Heidegger’s destruction of metaphysics. However, this has occurred only because hermeneutics has left its conservative focus on dialogue and become a progressive conversational philosophy where success, as Rorty pointed out, is measured by “horizons fused rather than problems solved, or even by problems dissolved.”² More than a philosophical position in search of Being’s origins, hermeneutics, through Vattimo and

2. Richard Rorty, “Being That Can Be Understood Is Language,” in *Gadamer’s Repercussion: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Bruce Krajewski, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 29.

Rorty, has become a system of thought that aims to discover Being's effects.

The goal of this essay is to demonstrate that Heidegger's destruction of metaphysics together with the ontological effects of hermeneutics will result in "conversation," that is, in something "weak," as Rorty explained, "in comparison to scientific inquiry."³ But in order to demonstrate that Being is conversation, it is first necessary to outline the remains of Being that Heidegger's destruction exposed and the ontological effects that interpretation implies. "Conversation" will become not only the most appropriate result of Heidegger's destruction of metaphysics but also, as Vattimo has emphasized, "what interpretation can generate," that is, "Being, new senses of experience, new ways for the world to announce itself."⁴

Before venturing into the remains of Being, it should be pointed out that Reiner Schürmann and Jacques Derrida are among the few philosophers who have granted destruction the central role it deserves in Heidegger's thought. Derrida practiced deconstruction as his post-metaphysical system, and Schürmann indicated that such practice may only occur in the "absence of foundations." Although they are both original interpreters of Heide-

3. Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005, p. 68.

4. Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. L. D'Isanto, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 67.

gger's destruction of metaphysics, only Vattimo and Rorty have inherited its ontological consequences and, through hermeneutics, used them as a way to overcome metaphysics: the first by interpreting destruction as the weakening of Being into its remains, and the second by indicating the conversational nature of such Being.⁵ Both Vattimo and Rorty not only radically developed Heidegger's destruction into "weak thought," but also followed the German master's most innovative request: to "work out Being for itself anew."⁶ Having said this, it should not come as a surprise that these are among the few interpreters of Heidegger who tend to reject the so-called turn that the German master supposedly went through after the publication of *Being and Time*, that is, from an analysis of Dasein's being to a consideration of the history of the epochs of Being. Those interpreters who emphasize this turn also tend to consider *Being and Time* the only text where Heidegger produces innovative philosophy, when in fact the analysis of Being is a constant throughout his writings.

However, Heidegger's philosophy of Being was also a progressive development that allowed him to respond to the destruction he imposed on Being. A confirmation

5. A complete recapitulation of the consequences of Heidegger's destruction can be found in the second chapter of my *The Remains of Being: Hermeneutic Ontology After Metaphysics*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009.

6. Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. G. Fried and R. Polt, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 90.

of this can be found in his preface to the seventh German edition (1953) of *Being and Time*, where Heidegger claims that for an elucidation of the question of Being “the reader may refer [to] my *Introduction to Metaphysics*.”⁷ While this text is only a lecture course he delivered at the University of Freiburg in the summer semester of 1935, it is also the first one Heidegger chose to present for general publication in 1953. This is not only the most significant of Heidegger’s texts after *Being and Time* but also the essential explication of *Being and Time*. If in the 1927 magnum opus the central concern was the question of Being, it is in this text that this same question is finally “elucidated.” Also, the destruction did not begin in *Being and Time*, but rather in his courses in Freiburg and Marburg of 1923 entitled *Ontology—The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, which continued throughout his volumes on Nietzsche and in his notes in *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*. Throughout these texts, Being was both a constant problem and a progressive response, adapting not only to its own destruction but also to the new fundamental questions this brought about, as I will show. In sum, “destruction” is not an isolated word within Heidegger’s works; rather, as Vattimo has emphasized, it stands for the totality of a path to follow: the history of the weakening of Being.

7. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, New York, State University of New York Press, 1996, p. xvii.

Heidegger probably borrowed the term *Destruktion* from Luther's *Heidelberger Disputation* of 1518, where the church reformer used it to dismantle institutional theology in the name of the authenticity of the evangelical message. Nevertheless, contrary to the theologian's intentions, Heidegger was not looking for authentic or original Being but rather seeking to free it from too objective an interpretation, which limited its existential possibilities through excluding binary polarities such as Being vs. nothingness, truth vs. error, or mind vs. matter. These polarities arose from understanding the objects of the world independently of our existence, that is, as things in themselves. However, if this were the case and we only had to re-present these objects in their timeless presence, that is, give scientific objective accounts, then our Being would become an object as any other. Instead, as Heidegger immediately explained in *Being and Time*, we have a relation to our Being that is called "existence" because it is a self-relationship, hence a Being-relationship: the "ontic Dasein distinction of Dasein lies in the fact that it *is* ontological."⁸ From the start destruction was not a matter of finding the true Being, but rather of venturing into a historico-theoretical inquiry of the Being of beings.

A confirmation of this comes from Heidegger's criticism of the conception of truth as correspondence—*veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*—since it presuppos-

8. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

es the idea of an original Being that would work as an insurmountable first principle. Although this traditional theory of truth is already a consequence of the metaphysical interpretation of Being, that is, where the distinction between the essence and existence of things went forgotten, Heidegger did not criticize it in order to find a truer theory but rather because, as Otto Pöggeler explained, he was looking for a “different conceptual platform.” Pöggeler was the first to notice this and recalls how already “in his first lectures Heidegger put forward the demand to take into account the practical and religious truth together with the theoretical one.”⁹ This is why Heidegger’s understanding of truth as disclosedness was not meant for a particular discipline or cultural paradigm but rather for thought in general, that is, for the forgotten space between Being and beings: the ontological difference.

While Heidegger’s ontological difference can be interpreted as an outcome of the destruction of metaphysics, it is not something introduced by the philosopher in order to arrest the investigation;¹⁰ rather, as he specified

9. Otto Pöggeler, “Heideggers logische Untersuchungen,” in *Martin Heidegger: Innen- und Aussenansichten: Forum für Philosophie Bad Hamburg*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1989, p. 75-100.

10. There is an interesting testimonial by Gadamer that shows how, for Heidegger, the ontological difference was not something produced by the philosopher: “I still recall,” says Gadamer, “quite clearly how, in Marburg, the young Heidegger developed this concept of the ‘ontological difference’ in the sense of the difference between being and beings, between *ousia* and

in *Being and Time*, it is the “point of departure for the ontological problematic.”¹¹ This is why Heidegger explained in 1956 that the meaning of philosophy should not be sought in

historical assertions about the definitions of philosophy but through conversing with that which has been handed down to us as the Being of being. This path to the answer to our question is not a break with history, no repudiation of history, but is an adoption and transformation of what has been handed down to us. Such an adoption of history is what is meant by the term “destruction.” (...) Destruction does not mean destroying but dismantling, liquidating, putting to one side the merely historical assertions about the history of philosophy. Destruction means—to open our ears, to make ourselves free for what speaks to us in tradition as the Being of being.¹²

As we can see, Heidegger’s destruction was not meant to discover the ontological difference but rather to move us into such difference, that is, into the thought of Being. But what does such thought imply? First of all, that philosophy since Plato has not only been a “forgetfulness

on. One day, as Gerhard Krüger and I accompanied Heidegger home, one of the two of us raised the question of what, then, the significance of this ontological distinction was, how and when one must make this distinction. I will never forget Heidegger’s answer: Make? Is the ontological difference something that must be made? That is a misunderstanding. This difference is not something introduced by the philosopher’s thinking so as to distinguish between being and beings.” Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Beginning of Philosophy*, trans. Rod Coltman, New York, Continuum, 2001, p. 123.

11. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 397.

12. Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?*, p. 71-3.

of Being” but also an expression of Being’s remains. If Heidegger repeatedly insisted that “*es gibt Sein*” (there is Being) and “*nous sommes sur un plan où il y a principalement l’Être*” (we are precisely in a situation where principally there is Being), it is because Being is an event that overcomes all metaphysical or, which is the same, descriptive inquiries that would eventually fulfill our needs.¹³ For this reason, rather than the truth of Being, we are left with the remains of Being, since to “remain,” explained Heidegger, means “not to disappear, thus, to presence”; in other words, remains are those worn-out fragments that are not only left after use but also survive.¹⁴ In this way, the enduring Being for Heidegger is not the strongest but, on the contrary, the worn-out, weakest, and vaporous word of which there is nothing.

A confirmation of this consequence of destruction comes from Heidegger’s lecture delivered at Freiburg in the winter semester of 1941. In section 11, entitled “Being Is the Most Worn-Out [*abgegriffen*] and at the Same Time the Origin,” we find the following statements:

We need Being because we need it in all relations to beings. In this constant and multiple use, Being is in a certain way expended. And yet we cannot say that Being is used up in this expenditure. Being remains constantly available to us. Would

13. Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, Cambridge, Eng., Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 251.

14. Martin Heidegger, “Time and Being,” in *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 3.

we wish to maintain, however, that this use of being, which we constantly rely upon, leaves Being so untouched? Is it not Being at least consumed in use? Does not the indifference of the “is,” which occurs in all saying, attest to the wornness of what we thus name? Being is certainly not grasped, but it is nevertheless worn-out and thus also “empty” and “common.” Being is the most worn-out. Being stands everywhere and at each moment in our understanding as what is most self-understood. It is thus the most worn-out coin with which we constantly pay for every relation to beings, without which payment no relation to beings as beings would be allotted us.¹⁵

Heidegger, in this significant passage, by indicating that “Being remains constantly available to us,” is not only foretasting its condition (“wornout”) but also specifying how the thought of Being, that is, metaphysics in general, cannot be overcome, *überwindung*, but only surpassed, come to terms with, *verwindung*.¹⁶ While *überwindung* refers to a complete abandonment of the problem, *verwindung* instead alludes to the way one surpasses a major disappointment not by forgetting it but by coming to terms with it or, as Heidegger said, “what happens when, in the human realm, one works through grief or pain.”¹⁷ While this is not the only passage where

15. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Concepts*, trans. G. E. Aylesworth, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 51-2.

16. Since “worn” is the participle of “wear,” meaning “affected,” “exhausted,” or “spent” by long use or action, “worn-out” means something that has been used until threadbare, valueless, or useless.

17. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, trans. William Lovitt, New York, Harper and Row, 1977, p. 39.

Heidegger exposes the state of Being after metaphysics, it does indicate that it is not what Being is but how it remains that is essential for philosophy after its destruction.¹⁸ In other words, the end of metaphysics blends with the end of the search for Being's presence since philosophy, after having retrieved the question of Being through a destruction of its tradition, recognizes that we are left with only its remains. In this condition, the excluding polarity of Being vs. nothingness in the traditional question of metaphysics ("why are there beings at all instead of nothing?") finishes by favoring Being since, as Heidegger said, it is Being that first "lets every Being as such originate. Being first lets every Being be, that means to spring loose and away, to be a Being, and as such to be itself."¹⁹ Philosophy after the destruction of metaphysics does not depend anymore on the possibility that one choice in a polarity might be correct but rather on the condition, state, or remains of Being. But in order to think of Being without regard for metaphysics, hence without beings, in its actual worn-out state, it is necessary to reformulate the traditional metaphysical question in such a

18. In his volumes on Nietzsche, Heidegger specified how "within metaphysics there is nothing to Being as such" (Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 3, trans. D. F. Krell, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1991, p. 202), and in *Off the Beaten Track* how the ontological difference "can be experienced as something forgotten only [...] if it has left a trace" (Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge, Eng., Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 275).

19. Heidegger, *Basic Concepts*, p. 52.

way as to question Being's condition. This is why in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* Heidegger formulated the following question: "*Wie steht es mit dem Sein?*" which I think translates best as, "How is it going with Being?"²⁰ Heidegger specifies:

As the fundamental question of metaphysics, we ask: "Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?" In this fundamental question there already resonates the prior question: how is it going with Being? What do we mean by the words "to be," Being? In our attempt to answer, we run into difficulties. We grasp at the un-graspable. Yet we are increasingly engaged by beings, related to beings, and we know about ourselves "as beings." Being now just counts as the sound of a word for us, a used-up term. If this is all we have left, then we must at least attempt to grasp this last remnant of a possession. This is why we asked: how is it going with the word Being?²¹

20. Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 35. The translators add a note explaining that the expression "*Wie steht es um das Sein?*" "could be translated more colloquially as 'What is the status of Being?' or even 'What about Being?' We have kept the German in order to preserve Heidegger's various plays on standing" (p. 35). It is important to notice that Heidegger, on pages 25, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32, and 70 of the original German edition, uses "*Wie steht es um das Sein?*" and on pages 26, 56, 153, and 154 uses a different formula: "*Wie steht es mit dem Sein?*" Both versions have been translated as "How does it stand with Being?" Although I agree with them that there is not a big difference in meaning between the two formulations, I've decided to translate both versions as "How is it going with Being?" because it better captures the post-metaphysical formulation of the question, hence the fact that Being has gone through destruction.

21. Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 77.

As Charles Guignon rightly noted, this “question has a colloquial, almost slangy ring to it,”²² which confirms that Being now appears as something weak “from out of which stem all beings and even their possible annihilation.”²³ Although in *Introduction to Metaphysics* one cannot find the term “worn-out,” Heidegger does comment that Nietzsche is “entirely right when he calls the ‘highest concepts’ such as Being ‘the final wisp of evaporating reality.’”²⁴ Being is no longer a present-at-hand fact but “the fundamental happening, the only ground upon which historical Dasein is granted in the midst of beings that are opened up as a whole.”²⁵ This text is a confirmation that Heidegger’s destruction of metaphysics does not imply the end of metaphysics, that is, of the relation of thinking to Being or of subject to object, but only the admission that when “we determine how Being and thinking stand opposed to each other, we are working with a well-worn schema” that we cannot overcome.²⁶ Heidegger concluded *Introduction to Meta-*

22. Charles Guignon, “Being as Appearing: Retrieving the Greek Experience of *Phusis*,” in *A Companion to Heidegger’s Introduction to Metaphysics*, ed. R. Polt and G. Fried, New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 2000, p. 34.

23. Heidegger, *Basic Concepts*, p. 52.

24. Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 38. Heidegger is here quoting Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, section 4, “‘Reasons’ in Philosophy.”

25. Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 216.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

physics by calling for philosophy to “work out Being for itself anew” because after its destruction Being cannot be found or discovered but must be retained as long as possible, that is, incorporated, appropriated, or interpreted.²⁷ This is why several years later Heidegger in “Time and Being” would clarify how a “regard for metaphysics still prevails even in the intention to overcome metaphysics. Therefore, our task is to cease all overcoming, and leave metaphysics to itself.”²⁸

Although Heidegger gave several names for this task (*An-Denken*, dwelling, appropriation), they all belong to the new fundamental question of philosophy (“How is it going with Being?”), which is an invitation to continue to think after metaphysics. The word “after” does not only allude to the German term *Nachdenken*, the “thinking that follows,” but also to “following upon,” to the “follower of Being.” To engage in *Denken*, “thinking,” is not to analyze but to attend to or remember Being since the *Bauen*, “to build,” which comes after the destruction of something, does not point to the notion of a novel construction but to *Hegen*, conservation, preservation, and custodianship. This is why philosophy after the destruction has become a response, an answer to the history of the various events of Being that have been handed down to us through the language of Being. In contrast to the Cartesian attitude, which holds as the task of the phi-

27. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

28. Heidegger, “Time and Being,” p. 24.

philosopher grasping what is in front of him, the post-metaphysical philosopher becomes a listener, a respondent to the remains of Being in order to establish a relation of “audition.” Instead of a philosophical description of the origin, presence, or truth of Being, philosophy after the destruction of metaphysics becomes an interpretation of Being’s remains.

While Heidegger never named hermeneutics as the thought he was trying to articulate after the destruction of metaphysics, there are several indications in his writings that expose it as the appropriate candidate. For example, in the course of 1923 he explained that hermeneutics is not meant to achieve knowledge about things “but rather an existential knowing, i.e., a Being.”²⁹ In this way, the philosophical problem for hermeneutics is not to describe Being as accurately as possible but rather to guard, hold, and interpret its remains. This is also why Heidegger believes that hermeneutics is not a philosophy at all but rather the interpretation of Being, “which has fallen into forgetfulness before today’s philosophers for their well-disposed consideration.”³⁰ In addition, discussing *Being and Time* with Tezuka in the 1950s, Heidegger continued to regard hermeneutics as the thought that could call man to his essential Being, that is, “to bring

29. Martin Heidegger, *Ontology—The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, trans. John van Buren, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999, p. 14.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

together what is concealed within the old.”³¹ As we can see, Heidegger’s interest in hermeneutics went beyond the traditional theories of interpretation that provided the criteria for understanding what a text, event, or author really meant; he was interested in its ontological effects. But what are these ontological effects?

Heidegger would probably respond differently to this question, but I believe that the ontological effects of interpretation consist in Being, that is, generating further remains of Being. But how can interpretation generate Being if, as I said earlier, “*es gibt Sein*,” or “*il y a de l’être*” always already? Actually, it is just because Being is already there that it can be generated through interpretation and not created from a void. After all, the ontological difference allows us to understand Being as the horizon within which we live instead of an independent realm to grasp. More than a philosophical position in search of Being’s origins, hermeneutics has become the post-metaphysical thought that Heidegger was looking for to “work out Being for itself anew.”

The only contemporary philosophers who have conceived hermeneutics as the appropriate system of thought for approaching the end of metaphysics are Rorty and Vattimo. Both philosophers have dismissed their philosophical traditions, that is, analytic and Continental philosophy, not to search for another philosophical position but

31. Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz, New York, Harper and Row, 1982, p. 32.

rather against this same search. What binds them together is not only their common interest in leaving metaphysics aside, as Heidegger requests, but also in transforming philosophy's obsession with truth in favor of a continuation of the conversation. In sum, Rorty and Vattimo have exposed, through their post-metaphysical hermeneutics, that "different conceptual platform" Heidegger was looking for in order to take into "account," as Pöggeler explained, "the practical and religious truth together with the theoretical one," that is: "weak thought."³² "Weak thought" is a term Vattimo formulated in the early 1980s and that Rorty endorsed soon afterward.³³ It invites analytic and Continental philosophers to abandon their metaphysical claim to global descriptions of the world. In this idea, philosophical, religious, and scientific truth are not only circumscribed to their own historical paradigms but, most of all, conceived only as contingent effects of their historical paradigms. The fact that their truth claims are weakened should not be interpreted as a failure but as a possibility for emancipation, that is, for independence from an objectivity that restricts horizons. Vattimo, by suggesting that Heidegger's destruction be read as the weakening of the structures of metaphysics,

32. A detailed history of Vattimo's weak thought can be found in my introduction to *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Gianni Vattimo*, ed. Santiago Zabala, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, p. 3-34

33. Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, Cambridge, Eng., Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 6.

and Rorty, by indicating how the value of philosophy is now “a matter of its relation not to a subject-matter but to the rest of the conversation of humankind,” have not only overcome metaphysics but also emphasized its inevitable continuation in hermeneutics.³⁴ Weak thought is the common position within which Vattimo’s and Rorty’s hermeneutics may operate both without falling back in metaphysics and by generating new Being through its own effects. As Vattimo explains, interpretation

generates Being, new senses of experience, new ways for the world to announce itself, which are not only other than the ones announced “before.” Rather, they join the latter in a sort of *discursus* whose logic (also in the sense of Logos) consists precisely in the continuity (...). Ontological hermeneutics replaces the metaphysics of presence with a concept of Being that is essentially constituted by the feature of dissolution. Being gives itself not once and for all as a simple presence; rather, it occurs as announcement and grows into the interpretations that listen and correspond (to Being).³⁵

As we can see, Vattimo’s ontological hermeneutics is possible only within the remains of Being, that is, as a continuation, not a discovery. While descriptions represent Being, interpretations generate Being. However, this generation is not autonomous but part of the continuity of that metaphysics we cannot overcome. What is made manifest is not Being, but the remains of Being, those effects of Being that spring only from the on-

34. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Cambridge, Eng., Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 129.

35. Vattimo, *After Christianity*, p. 67-8.

tological difference. Although the word “effects,” from the Latin *effectus*, “performance” or “accomplishment,” can be used for various functions, it is here understood against hermeneutics’ traditional search for causes, origins, or truth.³⁶ This is why Vattimo defined hermeneutics not only “as the philosophical theory of the interpretative character of every experience of truth,” but also the only one that is “lucid about itself as no more than an interpretation.”³⁷

It is for these same reasons that Rorty decided to endorse hermeneutics, which he did not consider a philosophical position but rather the “expression of hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled.”³⁸ Just as for Vattimo, for Rorty philosophical hermeneutics is not a defense of human sciences, a challenger of scientific method, or an opponent of analytic philosophy, but rather “what we get when we are no longer epistemological.”³⁹ If hermeneutics were just another discipline or position, that is, the discovery that

36. J. L. Austin has also emphasized the function of “effects” in his theory of “speech acts,” that is, performance utterances. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, ed. J. O. Urmson, Oxford, Clarendon, 1962.

37. Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, trans. D. Webb, Cambridge, Eng., Polity, 1997, p. 7.

38. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1980, p. 315.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 325.

there are different perspectives on the world, it would presuppose a conception of truth as the objective mirror of how things are, which Rorty wants to avoid.⁴⁰ Avoiding this metaphysical notion of truth directed Rorty toward Heidegger's hermeneutics, which, as I have said, is more about the effects than the origins of truth. In the Synergos Seminars at George Mason University in 1982, Rorty declared that hermeneutics is not only linguistic but also essentially anti-Platonic, and therefore capable of overcoming our epistemological tradition. Rorty specified that

what Nietzsche—and, more generally, “hermeneutics”—has to tell us is not that we need a new method, but rather that we should look askance at the idea of method. He and his followers should not be viewed as offering us a new set of concepts, but rather as offering a certain skepticism about all possible concepts, including the ones they themselves use (...) they should be seen as urging us to think of concepts as tools rather than pictures—problem-solving instruments rather than firm foundations from which to criticize those who use different concepts.⁴¹

We can now affirm that Heidegger, Vattimo, and Rorty did not see in hermeneutics a philosophy or an alternative way forward for philosophy to elucidate texts, repre-

40. On this concept of truth, see the discussion in Richard Rorty and Pascal Engel, *What's the Use of Truth?*, ed. P. Savidan, trans. W. McCuaig, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 47-59.

41. Richard Rorty and C. Barry Chabot, *Richard Rorty on Hermeneutics, General Studies, and Teaching: With Replies and Applications, Selected Papers from the Synergos Seminars*, vol. 2, Fairfax, Va., George Mason University, 1982, p. 14.

sent reality, or translate communication but, on the contrary, a thought beyond these alternatives. Against the architects of hermeneutics (Pareyson, Gadamer, and Ricoeur), Rorty and Vattimo have redirected hermeneutics to respond to Heidegger's destruction of metaphysics and its consequences. The aim of weak thought's hermeneutics is to continue generating new words within our language. Although neither Heidegger, Vattimo, nor Rorty ever affirmed that "Being is conversation," this idea responds not only to the destruction of Being as presence but also to the new fundamental question of philosophy: "How is it going with Being?"⁴² In order to justify this thesis, it is necessary to emphasize the difference between dialogue and conversation, in other words, between Gadamer's conservative hermeneutics and weak thought's progressive hermeneutics.

While Rorty and Vattimo gave Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics great significance throughout their writings, they are both much closer to Heidegger's post-metaphysical thought than to Gadamer's hermeneutic theory. This is confirmed in both Georgia Warnke and in Jean Grondin, two distinguished interpreters of Gadamer who have accused Rorty and Vattimo of misreading the German master's hermeneutics. While Warnke

42. Investigations into the philosophical meaning of conversation can be found in T. W. Crusius, *Kenneth Burke and the Conversation After Philosophy*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press 1999; and more recently in Dmitri Nikulin, *On Dialogue*, Lexington Books, 2005.

reminds Rorty that Gadamer does not replace truth with edification but rather “sees hermeneutics as an assessment of validity claims,”⁴³ Grondin goes even further in considering Vattimo’s nihilistic interpretation of Gadamer’s famous thesis (“Being that can be understood is language”) a “form of linguistic relativism”⁴⁴ that cannot be found in the German master. Both Warnke and Grondin are correct, and they find a confirmation of their criticism in Heidegger, who considered hermeneutical philosophy “Gadamer’s business,” in other words, radically different from the existential thought he was looking for.⁴⁵ However, this difference comes not from hermeneutics’ interpretative function, but rather from Gadamer’s inherent metaphysical search for truth through dialogue. While “truth” for Gadamer is a goal that can be reached through dialogue, or “conversation,” for weak thought, hermeneutics is a way to avoid “asking the question of what is or is not real,” that is, truth.⁴⁶

43. Georgia Warnke, “Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences: A Gadamerian Critique of Rorty,” in *Richard Rorty*, ed. Alan Malachowski, vol. 4, London: Sage, 2002, p. 182.

44. Jean Grondin, “Vattimo’s Latinization of Hermeneutics: Why Did Gadamer Resist Postmodernism?” in *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Gianni Vattimo*, ed. Santiago Zabala, Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007, p. 211.

45. Martin Heidegger, letter to Otto Pöggeler, January 5, 1973, in *Heidegger und die Hermeneutische Philosophie*, by Otto Pöggeler (Freiburg, Alber, 1983).

46. Rorty, “Being That Can Be Understood Is Language,” p. 26.

Although Gadamer did not pursue Heidegger's destruction of metaphysics, he did follow his insistence on language (as the house of Being) in order to specify the fundamental role language plays in our existence. Gadamer pointed out that language is not only the "house of Being" but also a "house of the human being, a house where one lives, which one furnishes, and where one encounters oneself, or oneself in others."⁴⁷ In these encounters language becomes a "we" where we are all assigned a place in relation to one another in order to understand because "Being that can be understood is language." Language is the "element in which we live, as fishes live in water (...) in linguistic interaction we call it a conversation."⁴⁸ However, there is a fundamental difference within this linguistic interaction that must be pointed out.

While literally the German words *Gespräch*, *Dialog*, and *Unterhaltung* should be translated as "discussion," "dialogue," and "conversation," most translators of Gadamer's works have rightly translated *Gespräch* as "conversation." This is not because of linguistic arbitrariness but because of a philosophical demand implic-

47. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Das Erbe Europas*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1989, p. 166-73.

48. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Reflections on My Philosophical Journey" in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Library of Living Philosophers 24, Chicago, Open Court, 1997, p. 22.

it in its meaning. *Gespräch* does not allude to something programmed in advance under the direction of a subject matter, wherein the partners leave aside their particular prejudices; on the contrary, a genuine *Gespräch* is never the one we wanted to conduct but rather one we fall into as it develops. This is why we cannot decide to become involved in a conversation, assume a position of leadership within it, or extricate its truth but must instead wait for these functions to appear on their own; we are always led by the conversation. However, our being always led by the *Gespräch* does not mean that truth will never appear but rather that it will always be a contingent effect of its own unprogrammed factors, which we never have under control. This is why *Gespräch* is closer to what in English we call “conversation” and not “dialogue,” which is a specialized category of conversation aimed at finding truth, as in the Platonic dialogues. In these dialogues both interlocutors not only had the subject matter and its outcome under control but also were interested in convincing its audience of a specific truth. To be in a conversation instead means allowing oneself to be conducted by the subject matter because a conversation does not have a goal. *While truth values are the main issues in a dialogue, contingent, unprogrammed, and interchangeable interpretations are the main concern of a conversation.* Conversation is free from any metaphysics, epistemology, or representationalist modalities, and

this is why Rorty emphasizes it as the “ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood” in his 1979 classic, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

Although it is not explicit whether Gadamer meant conversation or dialogue by *Gespräch*, the fact that truth was significant for him allows us to distinguish his hermeneutics not only from Heidegger’s “different conceptual platform” but also from Rorty and Vattimo’s weak thought. Also, and most important, elucidating this difference allows us to notice how “conversation” is weak in comparison to “dialogue,” where truth is the primary goal and control the necessary condition. However, it is just this weakness that responds not only to the “worn-out” condition of Being after its destruction but also to the new post-metaphysical question, “How is it going with Being?” As I said before, this question was formulated by Heidegger in order to “work out Being anew,” since the working out then does not depend anymore on the correct representation of Being but rather on the condition, state, or remains of Being. As in a conversation, Being is not set apart but simply interpreted in order to allow us to come to terms with metaphysics, which we cannot overcome but must maintain in order to avoid falling into it.

Finally, it should not come as a surprise that Rorty’s contribution to a collection of essays on the analytic and Continental divide in 2003 was entitled “Analytic and Conversational Philosophy” and Vattimo’s latest book

was entitled *Farewell to Truth*.⁴⁹ Both are invitations not only to enlarge the branches of contemporary philosophy through conversation but also, as Heidegger said, to “remain in conversation with that to which the tradition of philosophy delivers us, that is, liberates us”: the Being of beings.⁵⁰

49. C. G. Prado, ed., *A House Divided: Comparing Analytic and Continental Philosophy*, Amherst, N.Y., Humanity Books, 2003. Rorty’s essay was recently reprinted in his last collection of papers, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, p. 120-30.

50. Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?*, p. 71.