

Values through others.
*Being weak in a world
of cultural pluralism*

Santiago Zabala

“Whoever does not succeed in becoming an autonomous interpreter perishes, no longer lives like a person but like a number, a statistical item in the system of production and consumption.” (Gianni Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, 2004.)

One of the few things most continental philosophers agree upon today is that cultural, political, and religious achievements are not measured in relation to objective truths, but rather in relation to other people. But how is possible to relate to others when our beliefs are often anchored to hard principles supported by historical facts? Most contemporary hermeneutic philosophers believe dialogue to

be the solution. But this dialogue is not a simple exchange of views where one of the two interlocutors becomes convinced that the other is right; it is a process wherein both change together. However, the problem is not how or whether this change will actually take place, but rather if we are willing to accept the interpretative nature of our existence, that is, our weakness. In order to share values in a world of cultural pluralism, it is necessary to be weak. But what does such weakness mean?

382 The aim of this paper is to *outline the hermeneutic constitution of the individual* who has liberated himself from metaphysics. This individual is the “*Übermensch*”, in other words, that person who is capable of living the end of metaphysics not only without resentment but also with irony toward his own beliefs. Although Friedrich Nietzsche is the first to have used this expression, he did not systematically explain its constitution. The only place he indicated its meaning is in a very famous fragment of “European Nihilism” where, responding to the question “who will be the strongest once the will to power will conflict between each other”? He affirmed that the strongest will be the

most moderate, those who have no need of extreme articles of faith, who not only concede but even love a good deal of contingency and nonsense, *who can think of man with a considerable moderation of his value* and not therefore become small and weak: the richest in health, who are equal to the most misfortunes and therefore less afraid of misfortunes—men who are sure of their power and who represent with conscious pride the strength man has achieved.

As Gianni Vattimo explains, the meaning of the “*Übermensch*” can only be fully realized through hermeneutics,

that is, after the destruction of metaphysics set in motion by Heidegger, because this ironic weakness is a direct consequence of this destruction. The “*Übermensch*” can be exposed and justified through the hermeneutic nature of ontology because, as we will see, interpretation is at the center of Dasein, that is, human existence. In order to outline the weakness of human existence, I will first expose the ontological constitution of the *Übermensch*, then its interpretative nature, and finally its relation with truth.

Hermeneutics philosophy situates itself after Heidegger’s destruction of metaphysics, that is, after the description of Being as “*parousia*” or “*ousia*”, which ontologically and temporally means “presence [*Anwesenheit*]”. According to this metaphysical perspective, knowledge 383 is nothing other than the correct apprehension of “something objectively present in its pure objective presence [*Vorhandenheit*]”, which, as Heidegger explains in *Being and time*, “Parmenides already used as a guide for interpreting Being”.¹ As we can see, it was at the dawn of Western European thinking that Being was determined by time as presence, allowing it to be thought exclusively in terms of its relation to beings and their cause. This left the difference between Being and beings, the ontological difference, obscured, limiting Being to a conception exclusively in terms of its relation to beings, as their cause: Being is only the permanent nominal presence determined as ob-

1. M. Heidegger, *Being and time*, trans. J. Stambaugh, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1996, p. 22-3.

jectness. In this condition, Being has been forgotten in favor of what is called “the condition of the possibility”, the rational ground of beings, creating a metaphysical-scientific way of looking not only at the world but also at its artistic production. But where is mankind situated in this aesthetic relation?

384 Heidegger, in order to avoid the traditional tripartition of man into body, soul, and spirit—that is, in order to avoid locating its essence in a specific faculty, in particular that of Reason, of the rational animal—coined the term “Dasein”, which is not the world, nor the subject, nor a property of both, but the relation, the in-between, which does not arise from the subject’s coming together with the world but is Being itself. The central feature of Dasein, along with “thrownness” and “fallenness”, is “existence”² because it has to decide how to be. It is this essential characteristic that makes Dasein not a rational being but, more profoundly, a relationship to Being through which humanity must decide if it wants to exist as “a metaphysical describer of objectivity” or a “post-metaphysical interpreter of Being.” The best example of a describer of objectivity can be found in Descartes, for whom the world consists of objects that

2. “Thrownness” refers to the fact that Dasein always finds itself already in a certain spiritual and material, historically conditioned environment; hence, in the world, in which the space of possibilities is always historically limited. It represents the phenomenon of the past as having-been. Dasein’s “fallenness” characterizes its existence in the midst of beings that are both Dasein and not Dasein. Existence means that Dasein is potentiality-for-being, “*Seinkönnen*”; it projects its being upon various possibilities, especially the phenomenon of the future.

are already there *as such* even before they are investigated, that is, as if Dasein could only “understand its own being in terms of that being to which it is essentially, continually, and most of all closely related—the ‘world’ (...) in terms of what is objectively present”.³ If this were the case, our thought would only have to re-present objects in order to find objective accounts, but such a philosophy would imply that we all have an impossible God’s-eye view for which the truth of things exists in the form of a timeless presence. This is why metaphysics can be defined as the “age of the world picture”,⁴ where the world is reduced, constituted, and presented as images.

As we have seen, metaphysics and, more specifically, Descartes’ conception of ontology depended upon the images of the world reproduced by modern science, which aimed at a timeless description and representation of the way the world really is. If Dasein conceived itself on the basis of what is objectively present, this would imply it is finished, determined, and completed as an object; instead, Dasein, as long as it lives, always remains open for the future because it implies “*Möglich-sein*”: being possible, possibilities. Heidegger insisted upon this ontological nature of objects, representing the world not as it is but rather as it could be, that is, by questioning the fact that it exists because, in contrast to the rest of the objects of the world, as

385

3. Heidegger, *Being and time*, p. 16.

4. This is the title of an essay by Heidegger, “The age of the world picture” (1938), in *Off the beaten track*, ed. and trans. J. Young and K. Haynes, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 57-85.

we have said above, Dasein has a relationship with its own Being, called “existence”. It is a self-relationship, hence a Being-relationship.

It is through the destruction of metaphysics that Dasein becomes that “post-metaphysical interpreter of Being”, forced to enter into dialogue with reality instead of recognizing the static perfection that it represents. Heidegger’s destruction of metaphysics, that is, the recognition of the ontological bearing of objects, has not only allowed us to “question the very *fact* of objects”, but has also and especially demanded an *interpretative process* that is required to enter into dialogue with reality. In this process, where reality becomes a point of departure rather than a point
386 of arrival, we can finally stop asking what reality means, what it refers to, or even if it is beautiful, in order to begin asking what it wants to say. But in order to enter into this dialogue, it is necessary to understand the meaning of hermeneutics for ontology, that is, its consequence. Luigi Pareyson delineated these consequences in the early 1950s in two of his major books: *Existence and person* (1950) and *Aesthetics* (1954).⁵ He defined interpretation as the “form

5. Anticipating both Gadamer and Paul Ricœur, whose hermeneutic theses were revealed in the early 1960s, Pareyson had, in the early 1950s, already developed his theory of interpretation. His complete works are currently being published in twenty volumes by Mursia Publisher of Milan and are edited by Giuseppe Riconda, Giovanni Ferretti, Claudio Ciancio, and Francesco Tomatis. Robert Valgenti is translating volume 15 of Pareyson’s complete works, *Truth and interpretation*, for SUNY Press (forthcoming) and has published “The primacy of interpretation in Luigi Pareyson’s hermeneutics of common sense”, *Philosophy Today*, v. 49, n. 4, Winter 2005. Silvia Benso is currently translating Pareyson’s later work, *Dos-*

of knowing in which receptivity and activity are inseparable, and where the known is a form and the knower a person".⁶ Before venturing into Pareyson's theory of interpretation, let us recall where it is situated in the history of hermeneutics.⁷

Although hermeneutics, which today has become the "koiné" of contemporary thought,⁸ has its etymological ori-

toevsky, also for SUNY Press (forthcoming). Existing translations of Pareyson's work are limited to "The unity of philosophy", *Cross Currents*, v. 4, n. 1, Fall 1953, p. 57-69; and "Pointless suffering in the *Brothers Karamazov*", *Cross Currents*, v. 37, n. 2-3, Summer-Fall 1987, p. 271-86. See also H. T. Bredin, "The aesthetics of Luigi Pareyson", *The British Journal of Aesthetics* (1966); M. E. Brown, "On Luigi Pareyson's 'L'estetica di Kant'", *Journal of Art and Art Criticism* (1971).

387

6. Luigi Pareyson, *Esistenza e interpretazione*, 1950; Genoa, Il Melangolo, 1985, p. 218.

7. For a complete historical account of the different epochs of hermeneutics, see J. Grondin, *Introduction to philosophical hermeneutics*, trans. J. Weinsheimer, 1991, New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 1994; G. L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics: ancient and modern*, New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 1992; and D. Jasper, *A short introduction to hermeneutics* Louisville, Ky., Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

8. Evidence that hermeneutics has become the common language of contemporary philosophy can be found in G. Vattimo, "The age of interpretation", in *The future of religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala, p. 43-54; G. Vattimo, *Beyond interpretation*; and also in A. Ortiz-Osés and P. Lanceros, eds., *Diccionario de hermenéutica*, Bilbao, Universidad de Deusto, 2006. Recent series dedicated to hermeneutic thought, including Joel Weinsheimer, ed., *Studies in hermeneutics*, New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press; *Hermeneutics: studies in the history of religions*, SUNY Press; *Studies in American biblical hermeneutics*, Mercer University Press; *The interpretations series*, Melbourne University Publishing; and *Hermeneusis*, Anthropos Editorial, make a very large library not only of Heidegger, Pareyson, and Gadamer but also contemporary authors such as J. Grondin, K. Eden, J. Sallis, J. Risser, and others.

gins in the Greek god Hermes, the reputed messenger and interpreter of the gods, it first developed systematically as biblical exegesis and then in a theoretical framework to govern such exegetical practice.⁹ But starting in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, theologians and philosophers extended it into an encompassing theory of textual interpretation in general, regardless of the subject matter, which could be God, the Bible, nature, science, or even art. From the narrow interpretation of sacred texts, hermeneutics moved to the modern concern of interpretation in general.

388 Essential for Pareyson were Friedrich Schleiermacher's and Nietzsche's theories of interpretation. For them there are no things (facts) "out there" that could subsequently receive a certain shape through our (subjective) understanding of them; that is, neither the interpreter nor the interpreted depend on preestablished agreements but only on an involvement that occurs during the natural interpretive process of knowledge. While Schleiermacher recognized how one always understands a work "at first as well as and then even better than its author", Nietzsche instead insisted that "there are no facts, but only interpretations, and this is also an interpretation". Both found in hermeneutics the "ontological dimension" that Heidegger would then transform into the "ontological relation" that I point out above: Dasein as the in-between that does not arise from the subject

9. A fine study on the historical grounding of modern hermeneutics is Kathy Eden, *Hermeneutics and the rhetorical tradition: chapters in the ancient legacy and its humanist reception*, New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 1997.

coming together with the world but rather in a relationship with its own Being. This is why for Heidegger Dasein “is in a hermeneutical relation”,¹⁰ that is, in an involvement in the world that takes the form of an interpretative process. Pareyson, following Heidegger in *Truth and Interpretation*, explains that the “original ontological relation is necessarily hermeneutic and every interpretation has a necessary ontological nature”, meaning “that of truth there is nothing but interpretation and interpretation is only of truth”.¹¹

For Pareyson the work of art is the “perfection of a formation” because the act of forming is “a making that, in making, invents a new way of making”.¹² This theory, which he posited in *Aesthetics*, has been lauded by artists because it recognizes the originality that belongs to each creation and how it cannot be presupposed by any law that could eventually be applied at ease, as Schleiermacher and Nietzsche noted. Pareyson’s theory invites the artist not only to form her work with her own procedures, which will vary throughout the production of the work, but also to recognize how her own making will also generate (invent) new procedures. What Pareyson’s hermeneutics theory underlines is that “making” is nothing less than pure creativity, that is, creating forms during the same act of

10. M. Heidegger, *On the way to language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (1959), New York, Harper & Row, 1982, p. 32.

11. Luigi Pareyson, *Verità e interpretazione* (1971), Milan, Mursia 1985, p. 53.

12. L. Pareyson, *Estetica. Teoria della formatività* (1950), Milan, Bompiani, 1988, p. 59.

making. But is this not common to all human making? After all, even a driver does not adhere precisely to the letter of the traffic laws he is supposed to follow because of traffic situations that must be managed in different ways. These different and new situations will oblige him not only to invent new driving approaches but also to create his own *style* of driving, the sort of creation which is a permanent component of all practices and productions. It is interesting to note that although styles are always recognizable, they are impossible to imitate without falling into mere replications because they always include new variables that make them unique within their own procedures. In fact, “making” is common to all human making, but in art it is more emphasized not only because the formative nature of the whole of human existence comes to light but also because it is not (always) conditioned by moral, theoretical, or utilitarian interest.

Exposing Heidegger’s ontology and Pareyson’s hermeneutics has finally delineated the hermeneutic constitution of the “*Übermensch*” because it shows how after metaphysics Dasein must institute a relationship with the world that is not just simple acknowledgment of reality as it is but a true re-creative interpretation. This implies the interpretative nature of all existence and, most of all, the moral obligation of Dasein to become an autonomous “interpreter”. But why “moral”? Because it must decide how to be every single time; in other words, Dasein, having recognized its autonomous independence, becomes the only responsible subject of its actions.

As Heidegger explains, Dasein cannot secure its surroundings just by looking for objective accounts of the world, such as God, governments, or even laws. It must engage in interpretative conversations with others because it is not a mirror of reality. This is also why Heidegger insists that we must all choose our own heroes. Although the ontological bearing of existence releases our obligation to depend upon ourselves, this independence also puts interpretation at the center of our existence because, as I have said earlier, reality is a point of departure rather than a point of arrival: we cannot just describe it, we must interpret it. Another reason for the recognition of hermeneutics as the matrix of Dasein is that it depends not on preestablished agreements but only on an involvement that occurs through interpretations that it chooses to undertake rather than being forced to submit to. This is also why Pareyson insists on the ontological nature of interpretation by showing how truth is just a result of interpretation. But what is the meaning of truth if interpretation presupposes a variety of possible outcomes?

391

It is no surprise that the answer to this question comes from Gadamer, who was a direct disciple of Heidegger and an attentive reader of Pareyson. In *Truth and method*, Gadamer brings forward a hermeneuticization of ontology in order to displace the scientific conception of truth and method as the only model for understanding; that is, he removed truth from the exclusive control of method. Although this control was defended by both historicism and positivism, which for decades insisted that the humanities had to work

out proper methods for themselves before they could attain to the status of science, it was a belief based on metaphysical grounds: methods as the sole guarantee and model of validity. But, as Gadamer explained, the fact that we apply certain methods to particular objects does not justify the pursuit of knowledge; in other words, what “method defines is precisely not truth. It in no way exhausts it”.¹³ Method does not exhaust truth because understanding is never an act that can be secured methodically and verified objectively, as science tries to persuade us, but an experience that we must undergo. In this experience we not only understand the object we are confronting but also become better acquainted with ourselves because understanding always
392 brings self-understanding, and therefore a certain circularity, which Heidegger referred to as the “hermeneutical circle”. But the most important aspect of this process of circular understanding is not that it will never yield absolute knowledge (since Dasein is “finite”, that is, conditioned by its historical situation), but that it occurs through the model of “dialogue”. This model not only allows Gadamer to defend the extra-methodical truth of the human sciences, as we have just seen, but also to avoid the danger of arbitrariness because the “question concerning the truth of art is identical with that of the truth of the ‘*Geisteswissenschaften*’, that is to say, with the hermeneutical problem”. This hermeneutical problem came up, as I have explained

13. H-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer in conversation: reflections and commentary*, ed. Richard Palmer, New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 2003, p. 55.

above, once man recognized that he is not “a metaphysical describer of objectivity” but a “post-metaphysical interpreter of Being”, since truth is not something that is already given as an actual present structure but rather an announcement that “demands an answer rather than an explanation”.

As we can see, the dialogic nature of interpretation is at the center of the hermeneutic constitution of Nietzsche’s “*Übermensch*”, of that individual who does not need extreme articles of faith but only recognition of everyone’s weakness. If being weak is nothing less than being aware of the contingency of the world in order to interpret it, then moderation is a consequence rather than the cause of the “*Übermensch*”. As I have said, this moderation can only occur through dialogue because truth is only a result of a conversation where different interpretations face each other. This is why, as Vattimo says, “Whoever does not succeed in becoming an autonomous interpreter perishes, no longer lives like a person but like a number, a statistical item in the system of production and consumption”. In this way, a sense of otherness emerges that is central not just to hermeneutics but also to philosophy at large.

393

In sum, otherness becomes the realm within which we must operate to avoid falling back into metaphysics, that is, those fundamentalist beliefs that obstruct true dialogue. This is why being weak means being not only moderate or tolerant but also capable of considering others’ interpretations of the world without needing to believe their truth. If hermeneutics is the philosophy of the “*Übermensch*”, it is not only because this implies a plurality of interpre-

tations but also because it describes our way of being in a world without foundations. Such a world requires constant dialogue, a dialogue that becomes the recognition that it is only through others that we can overcome our own selves and our most immediate brutal interest. This is why “ethics”, as Emmanuelle Levinas explained, can only rise “by listening and responding to the request for help that the other addresses to us, and not from any rational awareness of what is good or bad”.