

ON ETHICAL REVOLUTION IN PHILOSOPHY

By articulating their voices, first human beings exchanged words for the first time. The world of representation was then actually born. Hominid populations had previously devoted billions of years to build lithic tools. Such work had modified in the ages the peculiarities of our land, our vision, our brain circumvolutions, our general body posture and so on. In the collaborative action, what George Herbert Mead called “gesture conversation” started to consolidate and to enlarge. Giambattista Vico had already talked about the “body’s action” and an original native, social link expressing primitive passions such as astonishment, fierceness, imagination and fancy.

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The speech is a self-reflected and self-referential sign made possible by the peculiarities of our voice. It echoes for everyone, even for who utters the sounds, who associates to it common replies. He can talk to himself, acquire a conscious knowledge of his action and learn to answer as the others do, becoming, really only now, the real member of all the beings the voice gives life to: being everybody being one of the whole. The utterances corresponding to our verbal gestures set up our first wealth and the first common treasure of mankind. Such patrimony won’t cease to increase any more organizing the world in objects and reflecting men’s conscious projects into human conscience. This patrimony, besides, is with us even now drawing representations of the world and forms of individual and collective self-consciousness.

However, since the origins of life, verbal speech was characterized by mingling with what we are used to call writing. Studying the forms of language in the abstract is linguists’ task; bringing the speech back to the substance of its

expression, to the objective situation evoking and communicating is philosophers' task. Since the origins, as Vico had perceived speech talks in our body and to the body that is to say is one thing with its emotions and expressions. The word is a whole with gesture and rhythm, it is a sort of dance and music (what the Greeks called *mousiké*). The interior representation deriving from it inspires new writings which already use the body as a support of graphic signs: tattooing, colouring the skin, ornaments, clothes and so on. Such writings of a body lengthening in another one outside the living body itself are the permanent secret of science and technique: nothing mysterious and opposite, as is often, on the contrary, misunderstood, to human beings' nature and to what is called spirit. The whole process of human knowledge is nothing but a work (the ideal prosecution of the time manufactures the hominid produced). Such work is the making of remains according to which living experience is articulated, translated, manipulated, generalized and transcended.

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In this way writing means producing virtual effects: written stuff production, unlike voice, remains there as a possibility of infinite reincarnations, and new contextualizations. Besides, as I supported in my book *L'Uomo, la macchina, l'automa* (2009) this is the deep reality of the automaton: what moves starting from ourselves. The automaton is, in this way, the entire process of human culture with its machines extending outside the living body: a walk, we might exemplify, which goes from papyrus to computer, from the book to what Charles Sanders Peirce called world-sheet. Their walk starts from the effects produced by writing infinite virtual realities which coincide with the living body projection (Husserl would say the *Leib*) we call human spirit: epic of a planetary civilization and of its history.

Understanding this process, getting rid of superstition and prejudice, coincides with the political and social destiny of democracy, not by chance triggered by that particular kind of writing represented by the alphabetic writing created by the Greeks and the Romans. Thanks to the alphabet, knowledge does not belong to professional closed ranks and to aristocratic minorities any more, but ideally and potentially to everybody. Anybody can become aware of his own personified biography and translate it into the autobiography of the collective story, origin and destiny. The issue is however complicated and needs specific closer examinations.

Treasuring the studies of the so-called "oralists", particularly those by Eric Havelock, it is possible to show the deep differences between cultures which do not know the use of a language capable of reproducing words and the so-called "historical" cultures originated by the spreading of the Greek alphabet. It is not

a question of simple transcription of the spoken language into the written one, as it is commonly thought. The silent voice that appears in the alphabetical writing is not the same voice of the so-called oral communication (Derrida too remained blind on this matter).

Oral culture is obviously unaware of being such, as orality is a notion which is the simple reflection of the practice of alphabetical writing applied backwards. The so-called oral voice speaks in a context always affected by life practice, which includes – as we have already said – gestures, the body etc. Here knowledge is preserved by means of the living memory and the formulary of mottos, proverbs, epic poetry etc.

In such cultures no critical subject is to be found: truth coincides with tradition, therefore it is true what it has always been believed and because it has been believed. Things are reversed in the world the alphabetical practice has opened. The repeated antiquity of a belief is not necessarily evidence of its truthfulness. The very notion of truthfulness and subject are deeply modified, the same happens to the idea of justice: just is not anymore what the aristocratic tradition, interpreter of the Gods' words, has always stated; just is giving every-one his due, with the evident emerging of "every-one", i.e. of the subject democratically meant.

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The alphabetic practice, we've said, does not translate spoken language into written language. It works isolating and distracting the voice from its 'pathic' experience therefore depriving it from its global sensible body and coating it with the conventional body of letters. The alphabet neither imitates nor reproduces the voice into something visible, how could it? The alphabet classifies because of its simultaneous act of stripping and conventional covering. This way, the letter takes the meaning of a sign that applies to every and each "a" or "b" etc. This way, mental abstraction was born, making possible the experience of the reader, his capability of analytic control over the enunciation and original forming of new enunciations. This way the western subject was born, endowed with critical mind and universalistic vocation. The universality of the written truth is the same truth of the logic, i.e. of the *logos as it is written* and of its ultra-sensible voice, and this is the foundation of the rising of European science: grand cultural project that is nevertheless prone to misunderstand the meaning of its social work, taking its efficiency for an absolute truthfulness of things. Alphabetical culture does not become aware of the fact that producing universal, which is precisely its way of writing, is the consequence and the expression of a cultural peculiarity and not the perfect embodiment of truth. Simultaneously, the same dual character of the alphabetical writing (prearranged signs to convey pure

meanings – what Plato called ideas) imposed the dualism of body and soul, matter and spirit, “*res cogitans*” and “*res extensa*” (“*mental reality*” and “*physical reality*”) in the Western world. This dualism still troubles not so much the very scientific practice born from the Galilean revolution – which was based on mathematical writing – as a widespread scientific mindset, incapable of getting rid of its Cartesian prejudices (see *Etica della Scrittura*, 1992).

My studies on the alphabetical practice have triggered a wider reflection on the very notion of practice. The “thought of practices” has permeated my mature research and is still permeating it. Its premises are certainly in Hegel and Marx’s notion of praxis, in pragmatist idea of habit and in the urgency with which Peirce pointed to practical consequences as mark of the truth, in Husserl’s idea of theoretical praxis, in Nietzsche’s perspectivism and in Wittgenstein and Foucault’s discursive and linguistic practices.

What characterizes the subject is its being always caught by the concrete exertion of a practice of life and abilities. In general terms: being able to do, being able to say and to write. Long before being the subject of a practice, the subject is subject to a practice, actually to a web of numerous practices that define and also condition him.

The symphonic orchestra conductor, for instance, is totally involved in his own conducting practice: the music execution is, so to say, the “transcendental” aim of his action. Such action couldn’t be exercised without the “empiric” concurrence of the motor skills of his adult body; likewise, the orchestra players could neither exercise nor conceive themselves without the practices which forged their instruments and governed their long studies, or without the writing practices and the paper mills which made their scores possible and by them the birth of a written and polyphonic music thought. Equally without the practices which produced chairs, microphones, the sound proof hall, the orchestra, the audience seats, the organizing and economic steps that regulate the life of public concerts and so on.

Talking about the sense of a music composition or of an execution regularly forgetting what mentioned above is a very idealistic abstraction. At the same time there is always a guiding practice which, thanks to its intentional interest centre, subdues other practices to its own “material” condition in a movable net of senses and occasions. One thing is the director’s practice, another one is the music critic’s and one more is that of the company organizing seasonal concerts and so on.

The figure of the subject is always internal to the becoming of practices. In fact a subject itself does not exist outside every practice of life and knowledge. The same must be said about the figure of the object: there are no things in

themselves outside practices. The reflection on this issue aims at setting the subject free from its objectivistic ideologies (back again into fashion today as “new realism” or so). These ideologies are mostly triggered, as Wittgenstein knew, by the superstition of speech: the continuous referring to the world by the verbal exercise makes us believe that behind the words there are corresponding things making us blind to the complex, ancient work of interpreting verbalization interwoven with given practices of life and knowledge. As a matter of fact, things walk into words and words walk into actions producing things in an inseparable and every time located weaving. The dogmatic claims of metaphysics and science appear, on the contrary, totally unaware when they think to be able to make clear experience on the basis of questions like; “What is matter?” “What is psyche?” “What is life?” “What is man?” and so on. Actually the things we are talking about and we deal with are always results and internal functions of defined practices always in motion. Inside the running concreteness of practice, lies the peculiar objectiveness of the thing, measured by the same criteria of the practice under dispute. Extracting such things from the concrete exercise of their practice and making them assert even outside the practice itself, as things in themselves, leads to the dogmatic paradoxes which trouble established knowledge. There is no “real being” generally speaking, unless as just particular object of a generalizing practice: for instance the logical definition, the constitution of lemma in a dictionary and similar things.

The thought of practices aims at freeing the subject from its objectivistic illusion, urging him to a genealogical work of reflection on his own constitution. Such always seeing oneself as subject “to” his own practices and not simply “of” his own practices, this repeated living the threshold of one’s own constitution of sense does not restore the dominion of the subject on praxis, also because the genealogical work inspired by the thought of practices is, in its turn a particular praxis defined by its concrete clothing and by its assumptions (first of all by the tradition of philosophy and its conceptual language); it is not a sort of super-practice which would be able to tell the truth about the other practices. The thought of practices is an exercise whose nature is basically *ethic* it is a way to be aware, in theory and knowledge, that theory is a praxis too, a concrete interpreting the world starting from the assumptions of our own history or our own origin: assumptions once more interpreted according to the concrete demands of disengagement.

I call disengagement the occurring of the threshold one belongs to, the way the figure of threshold happens; this way this figure shows an active representation of the subject.

All that brings to the need of a great ethical transformation of philosophy and in broader terms of knowledge. Obviously, this transformation radicalizes the Socratic demand whence the philosophical tradition was born. It is not only the case of thoughtfully urging the established types of knowledge through that *ironic* conscience figure which “knows to know nothing”, it is still before and more deeply the case to make us aware of what our “know to know nothing” is. In other terms, it is a matter of laying the genealogical issue down, that teaches the acting subject (who asks the way Socrates asked, or doubts the way Descartes doubted) is already always inscribed in a complex web of obscure or forgotten types of knowledge, handled in an atmosphere of pre-thoughtful and unaware obviousness; types of knowledge, however, essential and in their way decisive to make possible the practice of asking, doubting, defining etc. Types of knowledge that silently move inside life and speech practices, causing that *common sense* Vico already considered the foundation of human experience and Husserl tried to thoroughly and systematically investigate with his theme of *doxa* and of precatatorial.

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Ethical demand puts philosophic practice to the furthestmost boundary of its current possibilities. As already Nietzsche said, it must decide for an ‘experiment’ with truth: what is the sense of philosophic propositions? In what sense would they be true or truer than others? True of what, for whom and considering what? These questions and their hypothetical answers are primarily crucial; they are therefore unavoidable for any further knowledge – scientific, religious, historic, psychological etc. Crucial whether one knows that or not.

Ethical demand at the same time criticizes both the easy and superficial relativism of ‘weak’ hermeneutics (there is not a truth, there are as many truths as there are interpretations) and dogmatic call for a ‘strong’ truth (the figure of the metaphysical being, revelation and religious tradition, scientific naturalism). The issue of truth has no solution if it is not suitably recognized the structural difference between exercising interpretative practices (which suffer from a coessential metamorphic movement) and the disengagement of their event. In such an indivisible relationship, the experience of truth acts in two directions: on the one hand it is individualized in accordance with the *figures* of its practices of interpretation and transcription. In the other hand, nevertheless, it is an uninterrupted encounter with its absolute destiny, i.e. with the being’s undecidable occurring to the world of the living and operating subject. In the first sense the figures of truth coincide with their structurally being mistaken about their occurring event (which they would like to fix once for all); in the second sense this being mistaken is the same experience of the occurring of

truth, of its being constantly case of threshold and metamorphous precipice.

This dual writing of truth can be exemplified with the image of the world-sheet (see *Teoria e pratica del foglio-mondo*, 1997). The figure that stands out on the white of the paper is either held up by its backdrop or vanishing in it as transitional and fortuitous feature. The world-sheet both exemplifies the always open possibility of world representation and its boundless and incessant unfallibility. The world is either the event of its representation on the sheet, or its always laying at the brink of it and beyond it. In fact white and figure, event and meaning are not opposing things or facts, but the intrinsic interweaving of absolute and relative, of eternity and time, of truth and mistake.

These joined relationships show boundless distance and congruity between the truth of the different types of knowledge and the truth of life. Any shape of knowledge, as each specifying of thought (philosophic, scientific, religious, mythic, revealing etc.) is a *matter of transcribing* the meeting of world into those prosthesis that flowing voiced words are.

Representations which become virtual effects in the extensions to the prosthesis of writing and so on. All these transcriptions of writings and knowledge proceed ahead precipitating in their destiny of figures of the living threshold. Figures which are yet at a distance that can't be filled from the provenance of their own event; at a distance and mistaken in respect to the same world which is life eternal transit. In their way figures represent the indeclinable transit of eternal life, transcribed in the circle of knowledge (see *Transito Verità. Figure dell'enciclopedia filosofica*, 2012). This does not mean human knowledge is inadequate or insufficient. Who claims to draw coincidence of knowledge and matter, even though in an infinite walk, consider them in such way. Once drawn such supposed coincidence would be, in reality, the deletion itself and the cancellation of every "experience of truth". Knowledge receives the transit of eternal life in the only way it can and must do it: dissipating in the end in its own comprehension. Such dissipating is the creative work of death whose inscrutable selection and choice create, effectively, signs and occasions for the future, i.e. renovating transits of life.

We have to take into account the political task of the ethical revolution brought in philosophy by the thought of practices. A task which cannot proceed stating universal principles, inalienable rights and so on; this route, covered with obstinacy, brings to nothing concrete. It paves the way to mere rhetorical formulations and leaves, in reality, the field to prejudice and violence. The ethical revolution imposes not to appeal to principles (stated by whom? and according to what?) but to practical consequences. It does not mean, as

they insist on supporting, to impose the dialogue between cultures, beliefs, traditions and so on. Dialogue is a practice and like every practice is not innocent and pure at all. It has its premises, its preconditioned and imposed rules. Of course dialogue is to be preferred to recourse to strength, but only if it is really accompanied by listening. Listening too cannot be imposed to whom does not understand it. What can be done is showing our “own” listening and exhibiting at the same time the capacity which characterizes us for our “critical” culture, to show us in our exercise of autobiography, or genealogy: a genealogy capable of exhibiting consciously our limits and our peculiarities. Exhibiting oneself in an exercise of truth, precisely absorbed in an experiment with “our own” truth, can suggest desire of imitation by other cultures. In such way we exhibit ourselves, according to the beautiful image by Plato, as mimes of truth; we exhibit ourselves, meanwhile, as the only beings capable of so much courage and generous radicalism. If so, in the end, it will be only good and therefore shareable consequences that will derive to move any other culture towards an ethic of listening, constructional and peaceful collaboration.