trápos • anno IX • numero 1 • 2016 – ISBN 978-88-548-xxxx-x
DOI 10.4399/97888548xxxxx4 – pag. 45-62 (giugno 2016)

The Dialogue of Experience

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abstract: In "The Dialogue of Experience," Dorthe Jørgensen presents Gianni Vattimo's understanding, expressed in his *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, of what it means to be a philosopher. According to Jørgensen, Vattimo's work as a philosopher is an example of 'world–engaged philosophy' as distinct from 'school philosophy' or 'applied philosophy.' The concept of 'world–engaged philosophy' is associated with Jørgensen's concept of 'world poetry': that the immanent world is ambiguous; it occasions experiences of a surplus of meaning, traditionally called beauty. Furthermore, both concepts are associated with her concept of 'basic experience' and with her understanding of it as characterized by an immanent 'dialogue' between sensation, faith, and comprehension. According to Jørgensen, all experiences are rooted in sensation, faith, and comprehension; art, religion, and thought, or aesthetics, theology, and philosophy, are thus interrelated. 'Experience' and 'dialogue' also play crucial roles in Vattimo's understanding of philosophy, and recent works such as *Hermeneutic Communism* confirm that his thought continues to be world–engaged. Jørgensen's philosophy of experience allows for a development of the systematic consequences — for the relationship between aesthetics and philosophy, for instance, and in terms of the possibility of understanding theoretical thinking as a practice in itself.

keywords: philosophy of experience, the philosopher's vocation, dialogical conversation, basic experience, world–engaged philosophy.

Without language, there would probably be no philosophy, for the concept is the medium of philosophical thought. But philosophy is produced in various languages and is therefore subject to varied conditions. The specific languages open different perspectives and set individual limits on what can be conceived. In German, it is possible to distinguish between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, and this distinction can be translated into Danish using the words 'oplevelse' and 'erfaring.' In English, however, both *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* are referred to as 'experience.' Since the concept of experience is central to philosophical hermeneutics, this lack of distinction is a problem for anyone who wants to speak in English about hermeneutics, and perhaps even wants

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to think in a hermeneutic way in this language. It is necessary to manipulate the English language, develop its philosophical terminology, to approach the degree of precision which is much more easily reached in German and related languages [200B?][200B?]such as Danish. One might, for example, choose to abstain from using the word 'experience' to designate something that is just an *Erlebnis*; find another term for *Erlebnis*, for instance 'impression,' and distinguish systematically between 'impression' and 'experience.' This problem concerning 'experience' is just one of several problems that appear when philosophical thought worded in German (or Danish) is to be translated into English. But in the present context it is the most relevant example, because 'experience' is an important word in my work as a philosopher, and because experience also plays a major role for Gianni Vattimo, both in his philosophy as such and in his book *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, which is the point of departure in what follows.

For many years I have been engaged in developing a *philosophy of experience,* at the core of which one finds the concepts of religious and aesthetic experience, and the relationship between theory and practice. I believe that theory, understood as thought, is a practice in itself — it is an *art* — and that we are not attentive enough to the art and craft of thinking beautifully. Since the 1980s I have published numerous monographs focusing not only on the philosophy of experience, but also on, for example, the theory of modernity, philosophy of history, the intellectuals, philosophy of beauty, philosophical aesthetics, hermeneutic phenomenology, the philosophy of religion, and educational philosophy. These publications have led to extensive collaboration with theologians, artists, teachers, politicians, dramaturges, and education researchers, among others. In this presentation, I will mention some of my books, especially *Beautiful Thinking* (Den skønne tænkning) from 2014, and I will apply some of the concepts I have coined in these books, including my concepts of 'basic experience,' 'the intermediate world,' 'world poetry,' and 'world–engaged philosophy.'[1]

1. Contingency and Necessity

"[O]ne isn't born a philosopher," Gianni Vattimo writes in *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, "it's something one becomes" (Vattimo 2010: 112). The process of becoming a philosopher is a random one, so the profession of the philosopher is also associated with contingency. Since the philosopher could have become something else, the connection between him and his

1. *Beautiful Thinking* was published in Danish, but contains an English summary (pp. 947–965). See also footnote 4 for a description of the aim and the contents of the book.

employment is not inevitable. It would not ruin his life were he to practice another profession. But that does not mean that nothing matters, for as Vattimo also writes: "Fortuitous circumstances, though, are mostly just the start of a trajectory that is driven much more by necessity, in form and in detail, than it may appear to be at the outset. There is a *contingency* in every professional vocation that transforms in part, or may transform, into *necessity*. For example there is a certain determinism in the affinities that one goes on to discover, or forge" (Vattimo 2010: 112).

So, ultimately it would probably still be a problem if a philosopher could no longer practice philosophy — for example, because of increasing difficulties finding the right words to use. He might have become something else, but has now become one with thought. Thinking has become his way of being in the world, and if it were taken from him, not much else would be left. However, I am not referring to the philosopher's vocation as a professional philosopher, his position as an employee at a university. On the contrary, I am referring to philosophical thinking and the way of life associated with this thinking. It is not the profession, but this thinking and this being in the world that become constitutive of someone who ends up as a philosopher. That is what becomes necessity, even if it started in contingency.

And even the philosopher's *profession* is associated with necessity. Not in the sense of the duties imposed on professors as university employees, but in the sense of the commitment permeating their performance of these duties, provided they are 'intellectuals'. 'Intellectuals' is Edward W. Said's designation, in *Representations of the Intellectuals*, for people who think about things, ask questions, and side with the weak in society; such is the responsibility of the intellectual. In contrast, 'professionals' is what Said calls academics who prioritize their careers, value their competence more highly than universal values [200B?][200B?]such as truth and freedom, and cultivate a postmodernism that is nothing but one big concession of their own "lazy incapacities, perhaps even indifference" (Said 1994: 18). For the sake of their careers, professionals are busy "not rocking the boat, not straying outside the accepted paradigms or limits, making [themselves] marketable and above all presentable, hence uncontroversial and unpolitical and 'objective'" (Said 1994: 74). According to Said, this mentality has spread from academia to the media and to the cultural sphere, where we are presented with positivist knowledge and subjective opinions, but no reflection on key issues. Much would be gained if more people refused to do as expected, and asked why one does what one does, and whom it benefits. If it were not the need to bask in the limelight that made their mouths run, but "love for and unquenchable interest in the larger picture, in making connections across lines and barriers, in refusing to be tied down to a specialty, in caring for

ideas and values despite the restrictions of a profession" (Said 1994: 76).

Whereas Said's book is about the responsibility of the *intellectual*, Vattimo's is about the *philosopher's* responsibility; but expressed in Said's terminology, Vattimo speaks precisely as an *intellectual* when he speaks of the teaching and communication that are part of his job as a *philosopher*. "I have to perform well as a philosophy professor, because it's my job," he writes. "But ultimately 'because it's my job' just means: because I am of service to someone" (Vattimo 2010: 102). His occupation involves more than the job, and is actually not work, but doing, which expresses itself in his way of understanding and managing his job. The job, his position as a philosophy professor, is contingent, but the doing is necessary, and it serves the salvation of others, rather than of himself — that is, of the students, the general public, the European community. His doing is not for the benefit of the institution or his career, but for something larger that demands *dialogue* and *thinking*. "Actually, in my considered view, there is no difference between what I do when I am teaching in the university, and what I do when I write a column for a newspaper," he says (Vattimo 2010: 101). And as a teacher and columnist he does not only educate, he also engages in *Bildung* (formation), for "in philosophy I believe that some political good is always at stake, some question of political community. That is what justifies philosophy as teaching, philosophy in the newspapers, and philosophy in politics too" (Vattimo 2010: 105).

2. The Importance of Dialogue

Vattimo thinks of "the philosophical vocation as profoundly grounded in the *polis*," from which the hermeneutical idea of [200B?][200B?]the importance of dialogue was inherited (Vattimo 2010: 107). Socrates is the classic example of the conversational philosopher who, in dialogue with other people, explores questions aroused by wonder, and to whom conversation is the medium for his thinking. Here, we find the source of the idea that not only does thinking take place *through* conversation, but also that thinking *is* conversation — an idea that has taken on various forms throughout the course of history. Socrates had conversations not only with his fellow citizens, but also with both the goddess Diotima and with himself, his own daemon. As a writer of philosophical dialogues, Plato was in conversation with both the historical Socrates and Plato's literary manifestation of Socrates, and thus also with a whole gallery of other people. To Christian philosophers, thinking has unfolded as a conversation with God, and for this same reason it has been difficult to distinguish it from prayer. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that not only religion, but thought, too, got into trou-

ble when philosophers such as Immanuel Kant reduced prayer to foolish monologue (Kant 2005: 186). The conversation became one that was based on the premises of the modern sciences. Previously, it was characterized by a desire for religious and philosophical insight; now it took the form of a quest for scientific knowledge, and the art evaporated from the art of conversation, as it turned into knowledge sharing.

The foregoing development was not only applauded, but also thwarted — by the early German Romantics, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche, among others. To them, Socrates was not necessarily exemplary, but their philosophical forms of presentation were related to Plato's, thanks to the literary devices they made use of. Since then, especially the philosophical hermeneutics of the 20th century has tried to save the art of conversation, in hermeneutics through the dialogue with tradition in particular, about which Martin Heidegger and Hans–Georg Gadamer were concerned, which they practiced, and whose importance they also articulated. However, in recent years the academic world has been unfavorable to hermeneutics. Professorships in philosophical hermeneutics are being discontinued in favor of something that is often of an analytic philosophical or cognitive–scientific character. At the same time, hermeneutics is also being discredited in other humanistic disciplines, for example by literary scholars who — misled by polemicists such as Hans–Ulrich Gumbrecht — reject it on the basis of a reductionist understanding of what hermeneutics is.[2] They see hermeneutics as 'passive reception' — as distinct from the creative practice in the form of 'creative writing,' for example, which they regard as the opposite of hermeneutics, and which they believe should be prioritized in the curriculum.[3] The students do not need to interpret texts or other phenomena, but to express themselves — no matter how they are to become good at this, including having something to say, if they do not learn how to 'read the world.'

The humanist rejection of hermeneutics is fatal to the Humanities. This rejection has been facilitated by too little and too poor dialogue between professional philosophers and other humanist scholars, but it cannot be explained solely with reference to philosophical introversion. The rejection is also due to a general contemporary humanist aversion to genuine philosophical thinking, and that is why it is dangerous. The Humanities can do without philosophy as a discipline, at least in principle, but they cannot

2. Gumbrecht's polemical–reductionist approach to hermeneutics disfigures his *Production of Presence*. See my discussion of Gumbrecht in the chapter "Presence and Somaesthetics" (Nærvær og somaæstetik) in my book *Beautiful Thinking*. See also footnote 4.

3. E.g., B.M. Thomsen's contribution, "Arts as Cultural Studies — a Humanistic Angle," at the conference "Cultural Studies at Arts — Identity and Strategy" at Aarhus University, December 14, 2015.

do without philosophical thinking. Besides wonder, philosophical thinking requires the creation of a connection between the part and the whole. Without an eye for the universal in the particular, it is not possible to gain insight into what things mean to us; one is confined to simply registering what is before us. Insight requires interpretation, and interpretation demands the gaze that both Vattimo and others have described as characterized by totality understood as an orientation towards the whole.

3. The Orientation towards the Whole

"[T]he life of the spirit is a unity that specificates in the individual vocations and yet maintains a certain continuity," Vattimo writes, referring to Wilhelm Dilthey and Luigi Pareyson (Vattimo 2010: 110). Whatever one does, one expresses all one's spirituality, and thus the task is to "maintain the unity of the spiritual life while knowingly accepting one's own finiteness, and therefore choosing and accepting one's own specialization" (Vattimo 2010: 110). However, in extension of this, Vattimo also writes that: "It is sometimes said that the characteristic of philosophers is that they have a certain rapport (which may even be critical) with totality. Georg Simmel depicted the philosopher as 'he who possesses an organ that perceives and reacts to the totality of Being' [. . .] the philosopher has 'a sense for the wholeness of things and life'" (Vattimo 2010: 111–112).

Vattimo's statement that one is not born a philosopher probably concerns not only the profession, but also this sense of wholeness. So, no one is born thinking holistically, but one may learn to think like that, and that is why the activities of teaching and communication associated with the job of a philosophy professor are so important. The task is not just to share one's knowledge with others, and to make sure that they acquire more knowledge of the things about which it is possible to have knowledge, for example the history of philosophy, the characteristics of various positions, the meanings of concepts, and the use of logical formulas. The task is also to help others to develop their ability to think holistically, so that they can connect varied knowledge rather than just archiving what they know, and so that they can interpret their knowledge rather than resorting to subjective opinion–making. And to this I add that if the point is not only to educate but also to form, it must be because there *is* something to form — to cultivate. There *is* something that is innate — and this is true of not just some, but all — namely, the *possibility* of becoming someone who knows how to think holistically, also called a philosopher.

It is the afore–mentioned possibility that is being ignored by the 'professionals.' The intellectual not only masters a profession, but also manages

to rise above the knowledge she gains through her profession, and therefore she is not limited by her knowledge, but is able to use it to serve the common good. As a cultural–analytical literary scholar at an American university in the 1990s, Said could not refer to intellectuals as *philosophers*, and probably could not see them in this light either. However, this shortcoming is merely an expression of historical contingency. If he had been living a century earlier in Central Europe, his vocabulary would have been different, but the object would have been the same: holistic thinking, without which we are only producers of knowledge and opinion makers. Vattimo expresses this clearly when he writes that "nobody can seriously 'specialize' unless they are permanently alive to the totality of spiritual life: that is what's 'philosophical' in every human life" (Vattimo 2010: 113).

According to Vattimo, the desire to practice the kind of thinking made possible by the sense for wholeness, and to pursue the goals it implies — namely, to focus on the salvation of others, to side with the weak — is what motivates the philosopher, and according to Said, it is what drives the intellectual. This desire is not only the precondition of philosophical thought, but also what justifies it: "[. . .] I believe that, in any case, if you forget what drew you into your field, if you forget the political interest that spurred you, the religious interest, the emancipatory interest in general, you end up reproducing 'the crisis of the European sciences'," Vattimo writes. That is, "once again theory can't (in the best of cases) be anything more than a simple literary exercise, or artistic–philosophical experimentation, or (more commonly), an exercise in individualism for its own sake, serving private interests and power" (Vattimo 2010: 108).

4. The Experience of Beauty

As a consequence, the thinking of the intellectual is *philosophical*. That is why she takes political responsibility — because she thinks holistically, not the other way round. And it is this responsibility, that is, the responsibility of the *intellectual*, which the philosopher exhibits when he not only fulfils his function as a professor, but also thinks philosophically. Philosophical thinking, whose orientation towards wholeness and political responsibility the philosopher and the intellectual thus share, may be understood as a *dialogue* — and as a conversation not only between two, but between several participants. Thinking is a conversation with the daemon in the individual, which Christians may find meaningful to perceive as God's voice, also called 'the conscience.' But thinking is also a conversation with the collective of other people that, in the written expression of the individual's thoughts, is manifested as the imagined reader who co–writes the text. And in addi-

tion to these two dialogues, there is also a third dialogue of significance to thought, namely, 'the dialogue of experience.' I am not referring only to the conversation *about* experience that philosophy is to hermeneutic philosophers, but to a conversation *in* the experience: a dialogue between different aspects of the experience, without which both the conversation with the daemon and the conversation with other people would be unthinkable.

In order to describe the dialogue in the experience, I will now introduce my concept of 'basic experience' and its three–fold structure. The concept of 'basic experience' is from my book *Beautiful Thinking*: it comes from the book's religio–philosophical implementation of philosophical aesthetics, hermeneutic phenomenology, and the connections between aesthetics, phenomenology, and hermeneutics.[4] In order to introduce the concept of basic experience, I must also explain what I mean by words such as 'aesthetics' and 'aesthetic.' This is necessary because of a widespread tendency to confuse philosophical aesthetics with the philosophy of art. In brief, the central topic of philosophical aesthetics is not art but the aesthetic experience, and the aesthetic experience is not identical to the experience of art. Instead, it is the experience of beauty that is the epitome of aesthetic experience, but not understood as an experience of something nice and neat, and not understood as an experience that only art can occasion. On the contrary, beauty is everything that has a value in itself, and philosophical aesthetics is about our experience of this 'having–a–value–in–itself.'

Philosophical aesthetics was introduced by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, and conceived within the framework of a philosophy of abilities. Therefore, I have updated aesthetics based on a way of thinking inspired by phenomenology and hermeneutics, among other approaches. So I do not think of the experience of beauty as something that we ourselves have (that is, 'do'), but as something that happens to us, the source of which is not to be found in ourselves, in specific abilities, but in the encounter between us and the occasion (not the object) of the experience. In Baumgarten's work, the so–called lower cognitive abilities are the subjective source of

4. The overall aim of *Beautiful Thinking* is to develop, with a point of departure in philosophical aesthetics and hermeneutic phenomenology, a philosophy of experience for all kinds of experience of transcendence (aesthetic, religious, and metaphysical experiences). At the same time, the ambition of the book is also to provide a basis for theological aesthetics with a proper philosophical grounding, i.e., theological aesthetics that is well rooted in philosophical aesthetics and not just in, for example, art theory. *Beautiful Thinking* thus provides detailed interpretations of both older and newer theorists, especially A.G. Baumgarten, Immanuel Kant, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, but also, for example, Hans–Ulrich Gumbrecht, Hermann Schmitz, Gernot Böhme, Wolfgang Welsch, Martin Seel, and Richard Schusterman. Furthermore, the book contains a comprehensive religio–philosophical implementation of aesthetics discussing other theorists, including Jean–Louis Chrétien, Eugenio Trías, K.E. Løgstrup, H.U. von Balthasar, Eberhard Jüngel, Klaas Huizing, Mark C. Taylor, Hannah Arendt, Hans Joas, and Dieter Henrich.

the experience of beauty. In *Beautiful Thinking* I translate Baumgarten's terminology into 'feeling, sensation, and presentiment,' and I also have a new interpretation of the topic, according to which it is no longer about a subject's sensitive abilities, but subjectivity in the sense of sensitivity. The experience of beauty happens in this sensitivity, that is, at a level at which subject and object are not yet constituted. Therefore, the experience of beauty may be categorized as neither purely subjective nor purely objective; on the contrary, it transcends such distinctions. For the same reason, I do not understand the experience of beauty as an experience of something *specific* having a value in itself, let alone as an experience of *what* value that something is supposed to have. On the contrary, I interpret the experience of beauty as an experience of the very fact *that* anything at all may be valuable in itself.

5. The Basic Experience

Intellectually, we necessarily approach the sensitivity in which the experience of beauty occurs from the level of the understanding's subject/object–structured way of thinking. Therefore, to us this sensitivity appears as an *intermediate world*, and in *Beautiful Thinking* I thus give it this name. It is at the sensitive and therefore aesthetic level of experience constituted by the intermediate world that things start to appear. This aesthetic–sensitive level of experience is the precondition making it possible for phenomena to appear as well as permitting the understanding generated by their appearance. Thus, in *Beautiful Thinking* I conclude that what was understood as 'phenomenological' or 'hermeneutic' experience in the 20th century had already been discussed earlier in history, but as 'aesthetic' experience. Furthermore, this kinship not only indicates what hermeneutic and phenomenological thinkers such as Heidegger and Gadamer could not see, namely that their philosophies were not critical alternatives but creative updates of philosophical aesthetics, but is also an argument in favor of considering what I refer to as 'basic experience' as something that is aesthetic in the sense of being *sensitively sensuous*.

When I use the expression 'basic experience,' I am referring to a level of experience, not to any specific experience. It does not concern any particular single experience, but the attentive beginning of all perception, without which we would have no experience, nor would we have any knowledge. The concept 'basic experience' thus denotes our very sensitively sensuous 'being–there–in–the–universe–together–with–whatever–else–there–is,' without which there would be no consciousness. As mentioned before, this existence called basic experience is *sensitive* — in it we sense the exis-

tent: ourselves in our being present, and that with which we are together in this presence. In early philosophical aesthetics it was already explained that sensitive experiences provide cognition, but of a different kind than understanding's logical or pure cognition; therefore I would rather refer to it as 'insight.' And in *Beautiful Thinking* I add that the insight associated with sensitive experience is not only due to its *sensitivity*, but also to the *faith*, in the sense of *trust*, with which we respond to the sensitively provided *insight*. Therefore, the basic experience includes not only the duality of sensitivity and insight of which philosophical aesthetics was already aware. On the contrary, the basic experience is characterized by a three–fold structure, for besides sensitivity and insight, it also includes trust. In *Beautiful Thinking* this is referred to as the trinity of *sensation*, *faith*, and *comprehension*, and it is among these three aspects of the experience that an immanent dialogue unfolds.

Thanks to *sensation* we sensitively comprehend ourselves, one another, and the world around us, and we spontaneously have *faith* in what we *comprehend*: we trust the insight we receive through our sensitive experience. We sense, comprehend, and have faith in what we comprehend when our experience is something that *happens* to us, instead of being something we, ourselves, *do*. This exchange, in which sensation includes comprehension that gives insight which produces meaning because we rely on the insight provided by the sensation — this 'dialogue' in the experience — may be described using the ancient aesthetic concept of 'unity in diversity.' However, such a use of this concept presupposes that we reinterpret the concept so it does not represent a reduction of the different to the same, but an association of something that is and will remain different. Our use of the concept of unity in diversity to describe the dialogue in experience requires that we do not understand unity as a synthesis that eliminates the uniqueness of the individual elements connected by it — instead, we must see unity as a joining of something that retains its uniqueness in the association. For the three aspects of basic experience, that is, sensation, faith, and comprehension, are not in a hierarchical relationship with one another as are the religious, the aesthetic, and the philosophical in G.W.F. Hegel's phenomenology. Sensation, faith, and comprehension are rather equiprimordial, as are attunement and understanding in Heidegger's ontology.

6. World Poetry

According to Walter Benjamin, philosophical thinking is qualified, unlike rational cognition, through its presentation of ideas and interpretation of phenomena. Slightly akin to the idea referenced by Vattimo, that philosophi-

cal thinking is characterized by an orientation towards the whole, Benjamin thought that philosophy strives to present ideas, but without aiming directly at its goal. Instead, philosophy digresses to the phenomena; this is the way it tries to present ideas. The orientation towards ideas, which is thus a contributing factor in philosophy's contemplation of phenomena, means that philosophy is not just descriptive, but interpretive: Its effort to present ideas gives perspective to its handling of phenomena. So, philosophical thinking is oriented towards a different level than those of phenomena and concepts, namely, the level of ideas. However, we should not look for this level somewhere else, in a distant transcendence, but in the phenomenal world, that is, in immanence. The ideas 'inhabit' the phenomena, in which they do not act as fixed entities, however, but as potential for experience and knowledge that must be actualized by philosophy, whose medium is the concept. This is precisely why philosophy's presentation of ideas is both necessary and infinite, and it is also the reason why the presentation elevates philosophy's handling of phenomena from mere description to interpretation that gives insight.

Or to put this slightly differently: "Reality is ambiguous: It has several layers," I wrote in the preface to a book entitled *World Poetry* (Jørgensen 2011: 73).[5] "This does not concern the ancient idea that there is another world to be found somewhere else. On the contrary, this concerns the world here being multidimensional. The sensual world is sprinkled with super–sensual meaning. There is a surplus of meaning for those who seize the moment, when the sun splits the clouds, or the door is left ajar" (Jørgensen 2011: 5). From the preface, it also appears that the experience just described is an experience of a surplus of meaning, and that it is universal to human beings. "It is the experience that something may have a value in itself, formerly called beauty," the preface says. "Art and philosophy are both able to intercept and shape this experience which emerges from the poetic perception of the world. A perception which is important to the individual as well as to community: It induces us to live — in harmony" (Jørgensen 2011: 73).

The ontologies articulated in Benjamin's theory of ideas and in the preface of *World Poetry*, respectively, are interrelated as follows: The kind of

5. This book, whose text is in both English and Danish, was published parallel to an exhibition that carried the same title. The book and the exhibition were the results of my collaboration with a visual artist and of a joint research stay in Damascus (spring 2010). Both book and exhibition consisted of oil paintings and thought–images (in the exhibition written on white banners that hung alongside the paintings). The texts did not comment on the paintings, and the paintings did not illustrate the texts. Both the texts and the paintings were works in their own right, but they communicated with each other thanks to their common starting point in the above–mentioned stay in Damascus and the understanding of reality reflected in the book's preface, which also served as the introduction to the exhibition.

experience that is depicted in the preface is not just subjective, nor is it simply objective. Instead, it is a subjective actualization of objectively given potential for experience — a potential that constitutes a 'more' in the world, and is perceived as a poetic surplus in it. This is precisely why reality is ambiguous. It is both material and immaterial; the material is 'inhabited' by immateriality; the world is packed with potential to experience a surplus, also called beauty. Or rather, the intermediate world contains this potential for experience, and it is also where it is actualized, namely, when those experiences happen which the potential makes possible. Hence, in the intermediate world we are presented with something we ourselves did not create, but to whose appearance and activity we do contribute. We contribute without being subjects of what is happening, for in our susceptibility we not only perceive potential not created by us; this reception is itself productive, as it *actualizes the potential as experience*.

7. World–engaged Philosophy

I will gather together the inspiration from Benjamin and the idea of world poetry in an argument for 'world–engaged philosophy,' which is applicable, I think, to Vattimo's lifelong work as an intellectually responsible philosopher. Today, you often get the impression that there are only two options: 'school philosophy' and 'applied philosophy.' School philosophy clings in a reactionary way to the ivory tower, whereas applied philosophy relates opportunistically to current trends and demands, which it sees as an opportunity to escape the tower. But there is a third option as well: 'world–engaged philosophy,' which is philosophy that honors its own name by unfolding as free, open, and questioning thought, and which practices this *philosophia* in a contemporary way by being attentive to our experiences. World–engaged philosophy engages an exploration of the experiences of oneself and others in a freely reflecting and thus openly questioning way. It tries to find and articulate the universal in the specific experience without losing sight of the uniqueness of what is individual, which requires both that the experience be dwelt on responsively, and the courage to interpret. In this way, world–engaged philosophy contributes the most important thing philosophy can deliver, which is the understanding–seeking actualization of not–yet–actualized potential for interpretation, and the critical perspectivization of the existent — a truism–subversive reflection — constituted by this actualization.

The concept of basic experience contributes to the practice of world–engaged philosophy, however theoretical the concept itself is. The idea of a dialogue between sensation, faith, and comprehension at the level of basic

experience implies that *art*, *religion*, and *thought* are ontologically linked, despite their historical divorce caused by the modernization process. Art, religion, and thought are products of different aspects of a common experiential spring, that is, *sensation*, *faith*, and *comprehension*, which explains why many concrete experiences of a surplus of meaning are often categorized as both religious and aesthetic. It also explains the ease with which not only the beautiful, but also the true and the good, were previously referred to using the same terminology, that is, the terminology of the philosophy of beauty. Indeed, God was not only true and good, but also beautiful; he was the unity of the true, the good, and the beautiful manifested in his beauty, which was thus *not* allegorical. Furthermore, the concept 'basic experience' and the philosophy of experience, within which it is conceived, make it possible to contribute to various disciplines and professions, for example, the study of art, theology, and the philosophy of science, and both practical and philosophical pedagogy, in ways that facilitate dialogue across borders which are otherwise apparently insurmountable. Over time, much power has been wasted on arguing in a hierarchy–producing way for the prevailing status of belief or understanding, compared to sensuality and emotionality, thus fortifying the borders drawn by modernity. In contrast, the philosophy of experience from which I have now lifted the veil a little appeals to an exploration of the dialogue between art, religion, and thought, which human existence invites thanks to the equiprimordial relationship between sensation, faith, and comprehension, and the dialogue unfolding in experience.

8. Theory and Practice

After the publication of *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, Vattimo and Santiago Zabala have committed themselves to what they call 'hermeneutic communism.' This commitment does not only show that Vattimo's work as a philosopher remains world–engaged. It also reveals how closely connected theory and practice are to him, and it agrees with my view mentioned in the introduction of this presentation, namely that theory in the sense of thought is a practice in itself. In *Hermeneutic Communism*, Vattimo and Zabala differentiate between 'the weak and those in power,' not between 'the weak and the strong,' for the weak are strong thanks to the 'weak thought' they share with their hermeneutic communist allies. Those in power encompass the owners of capital as well as ruling politicians and 'professionals;' in *Hermeneutic Communism*, the latter are identical to the majority of university philosophers. Those in power lean on the metaphysics they reproduce and refer to in order to legitimize their exercise of power. This metaphysics is the

notion that reality is identical to the given, which epistemologically means that reality is limited to what can be known scientifically. In the perspective of the philosophy of history, it also means that the past could not have been any different and that the future is predictable, as per the 'policy of necessity' and the current absence of alternative future scenarios. According to Vattimo and Zabala, this 'metaphysical realism' is an expression of the fact that the people in power are not *thinking*, as well as being the reason why they are not thinking, for to think is not to act or to describe, but to interpret. However, interpretations change the interpreted, and thought thus has a practical effect — not only as theory put into practice, but precisely as *thought*. Thought changes the world by interpreting it; according to Vattimo and Zabala, it is therefore pointless to criticize hermeneutics for being conservative. Hermeneutics is rather anarchic thanks to the 'recovery' of metaphysical realism that it provides by being interpretive — a recovery that is the 'strong weakening' which hermeneutics shares with the weak, to whom the given is never a matter of course but a constant challenge.[6]

In accordance with this understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, Vattimo and Zabala have not formulated a political program for subsequent translation into political action. Their preparation of *Hermeneutic Communism* is a political act in itself, insofar as the book manifests the hermeneutics it deals with: an interpretive rather than descriptive and thus not conservative but recovering way of thinking. Furthermore, their book is also political in the sense that being a manifestation of such interpretive and, therefore, critical thought, it tries to awaken and release the potential for something similar *outside* the book itself — in its readers and in society. According to *Hermeneutic Communism*, it is also generally the case that the task of thought is *not* to provide programs and action instructions available for a practice which is thus exhibited as thoughtless and 'theoriebedürftig.' On the contrary, the task is to mobilize the political power that thought itself makes out — to mobilize it in favor of releasing the potential for thinking that the practical world offers, incarnated in the weak (understood both as the oppressed groups of society and as that which is overlooked because it is marginalized by the prevailing view). Such a reflexively provided release of the reflexive potential of society is the way to recover metaphysical realism, and this recovery is a prerequisite for being able to articulate alternative future scenarios, and thus also to encourage something else than what is promoted by the policy of necessity. So there

6. Heidegger distinguished between *überkommen* (getting over in the sense of leaving something behind) and *verwinden* (getting over in the sense of coming to terms with it). The latter is translated 'recovering.' According to Heidegger, metaphysics (the predominant ontological structures) will not disappear, but perhaps recover (i.e. recover from itself, from the oblivion of its own essence as metaphysics) (Heidegger 1999: 313 ff.).

is no need for new theory seen as a basis for another practice. But there is a need to think differently — then practice will also change, because thought itself is practical, as said above. Thought is even the crucial practice. It determines the future, because the way in which we think defines the limits of what we can imagine, and thus also of what we do.

9. 'Samtale' or 'konversation'

If the attempt of hermeneutic communism to free the political power of thought is to be truly world–engaged, it is not enough, however, that the hermeneutic thinker conceptualizes this option. He must also listen to the thought expressed in the thinking articulated by the weak. So in order to be world–engaged, hermeneutic communism must be *dialogical*, but that is also the precondition for it being *hermeneutical*. Or as Vattimo writes in *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*: "The only emancipation I can conceive is an eternal life in charity, a life of heeding others and responding to others in dialogue" (Vattimo 2010: 97).

Nevertheless, Vattimo has also opposed dialogue, supposedly fearing that it dominates all conflict thanks to an inherent will to consensus.[7] But it is wrong to link dialogue with harmonism. Literary history informs us that dialogue is related to the philosophical essay, and that they are both distinguished by being polyphonic media for the searching reflection called 'aesthetic' by Kant and Baumgarten. Both the dialogue and the essay are thus open forms that do not just explain what they treat but want to understand it. What they treat is not just described and determined, but explored and interpreted, and as seen above, interpretation is a critical practice. Interpretation is critical both in the sense of the word articulated by Kant — its quest for understanding implies a study of the limits of understanding — and in the sense highlighted in *Hermeneutic Communism*: The interpretation is 'metaphysics–recovering,' which means that it sides with the weak by definition. And when someone sides against those in power, there is *not* just peace and harmony. Understood as a medium of the interpretive practice represented by the common thinking practiced through dialogue, the dialogue challenges the powerful, and it does not only allow for the critical element missed by Vattimo. The dialogue is itself a source of criticism.

The dialogue is the above–mentioned source; it is also a framework for

7. An opinion of this kind was expressed by Vattimo in the discussion following my presentation "The Dialogue of Experience" at the conference "Effetti d'interpretazione" at the University of Turin, March 16–17, 2016.

and a manifestation of critical thought, and it is a critical counter–image: a listening — offering time, ear, and understanding — that does *not* distinguish the current procedural democracy, but without which democracies are not democratic. It is not in dialogue but in conversation and in conversational democracy that the will to consensus threatens to dominate everything conflictual and to blur the power relations. In Danish, the English word 'conversation' can be translated both as 'samtale' and as 'konversation,' and these two words have different connotations. This duality is revealing; it points out both the gift and the risk associated with conversation. It is the term 'samtale' that in Danish is used for serious exchanges between people: schools invite parents to parents' evenings which are known as 'school–home samtaler,' psychiatrists have developed 'samtaler' for the relatives of their patients, and priests offer 'pastoral–care samtaler.' These 'samtaler' fail if they are not dialogical, but the same cannot be said of 'konversationer.' On the contrary, 'konversationer' tend to be monological, regardless of the number of participants, and they become something else, namely 'samtaler', if they become dialogical. As an example of a 'konversation,' one might think of the small talk taking place around a dinner table at which people who are strangers to each other are seated. At such a table there is not only the risk of monological self–promotion, but also of monologue that in addition to being empty and non–committal is also conflict–avoiding. That is precisely the danger of democracy: that it descends into 'konversation.' This risk is not hypothetical but real — it is known from the 'aesthetization' of politics that has blurred the difference between talk show and political debate by staging the debate as a show. In the show the participants yell and use big gestures, they swear, insinuate, and offer lewd comments, but none of them take any of it seriously, and they all cloud the real conflicts. The show is harmless and does not change the world because it is devoid of dialogue and thus of thinking.

10. Democracy as Event

When philosophers are intellectual rather than professional, they practice world–engaged philosophy, not school philosophy or applied philosophy. Intellectual philosophers do not just describe the world but interpret it, and according to *The Responsibility of the Philosopher* dialogue is the way to achieve the kind of emancipation that is driven by interpretation, because interpretation recovers the metaphysical realism discussed in *Hermeneutic Communism*. Dialogues are open and polyphonic thanks to the searching reflection by which they are constituted; so dialogue is the medium of interpretive thinking. But in the words of Kant and Baumgarten, this means

that the reflection unfolding in dialogue is 'aesthetic' rather than 'determining.' Intellectual philosophers think *aesthetically*, whereas the professionals' descriptive monologues simply identify observed phenomena without reflecting upon them.

The foregoing confirms the interpretation of hermeneutics previously alluded to. I am referring to my interpretation presented in *Beautiful Thinking*, according to which hermeneutics is *not* the alternative to aesthetics that hermeneutic philosophers present it to be. Like hermeneutic phenomenology (Heidegger), philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer) is a 'reinvention' of philosophical aesthetics. This statement does not reflect a diminution of phenomenology and hermeneutics; in *Beautiful Thinking*, the word 'reinvention' is not used in a pejorative way. Instead, the point is that the hermeneutic phenomenology and philosophical hermeneutics of the 20th century neither simply dismissed 18th century philosophical aesthetics nor merely repeated it. Phenomenology and hermeneutics actualized aesthetics on the historical conditions with which 20th century thought was presented. According to *Beautiful Thinking*, there is thus greater kinship between aesthetics, phenomenology, and hermeneutics than phenomenology and hermeneutics have recognized and acknowledged; but the book also shows that aesthetics was changed by its reinvention. The latter means, inter alia, that it was in a desubjectivized form that aesthetic thinking had a 'comeback.' Unlike in the 18th century, aesthetic thinking was no longer something done by a subject, but rather something happening to existence: aesthetic thinking was actualized as *experience*, and the experience as *event*.

The responsiveness of the world–engaged philosopher must precisely serve the possibility that the 'event' can happen — that genuine experience can occur, not only for the individual philosopher but also among people. World–engaged philosophers engage in dialogue with the outside world, but not to agree on what is right and wrong. Instead, they seek to hear the thought expressed in that which is articulated by the oppressed and the marginalized. They lend voice to the weak, but in recognition of their strength. Being responsive, the world–engaged philosopher creates space for the event — the happening kind of experience — that thought is if it is beautiful, that is, if it is free, open, and questioning. That is the task of the intellectual of our day: to create such spaces in a society that despite its formal democracy renders beautiful thinking, and thus genuine democracy, impossible because of metaphysical realism. Formal democracy is *not* a guarantee of genuine democracy. But democracy of the genuine and true kind occurs locally and momentarily as people listen in the aesthetic–sensitive way that allows them to hear the idea of [200B?][200B?]what is said, and thus to apprehend the universal (as opposed to the general) that can be shared (because it both exceeds and retains what is individual). World–

engaged philosophers who understand thought as the practice it is, and who therefore listen and interpret rather than applying theories given in advance, draw magic circles around themselves and the participants of the dialogues they engage in. Together they and their interlocutors embody the democracy which is otherwise non–existent, except as a caricature in contemporary media, parliaments, schools, and universities.

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