

Speaking the Universal

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What makes a reflection on the future of “philosophy” as we knew it and practiced it (whether it will exist under the same name, separated from other scientific or social practices, etc.) at the same time urgent and confused, is among other reasons the fact that it is frequently reaching us through considerations on the *geohistorical* status of the association between the discourse and the institution.¹ More precisely two sides of what the Latin Medieval tradition called *universitas*: the system of academic disciplines and their transmission, and the representation of the universe as a totality. They are indeed a counter-effect of the progressive relativization of the “culture” which has, if not invented, at least refined and widespread the university-form for the development of knowledge, and conquered the world in the name of “universal” values and techniques, namely *the West* (whose “boundaries” as we know are not fixed, and above all are debatable). That philosophy should be a typically “Western” discipline or project, and therefore involve an intrinsic contradiction between its very *particular* (“local”) mode of thought and its *universal*, “*global*” Finally, what seems to complicate any reflection on the *topos* or “site” of philosophy is the fact that its project of developing a universal discourse on the universal—what I will take the liberty of calling here in a comprehensive manner: *to speak the universal*—within the “universalistic” institution *par excellence* (the University or the Academia) was never unchallenged. Not only had philosophy “rivals,” but it was through the confrontation with its rivals that it gained the certainty that it spoke the universal in its proper, autonomous, “philosophical” way. We recognize here the problem that Kant formulated in his *Streit der Fakultäten*, around the time in which our disciplines were acquiring their modern status (1798). Philosophy is presented by Kant as a “junior” discipline, which finds itself in competition with theology, law, and medicine for the definition of the “ends” or ultimate questions of mankind (whose list was given in the First *Critique*: What to know? What to do? What to hope or expect?). But since according to him it is the only discipline which derives its discussion of such ends from purely rational principles (as distinct from revelation, authority, or empirical practice), it is philosophy that will assign their limits of validity to the ends offered by the other “senior” faculties (the salvation of the soul, the rights and duties of the citizen, the healthy life of the individual), by developing within itself a “region” where these ends are critically considered in a universally acceptable manner. As a consequence, philosophy will not stand above the other disciplines in the sovereign way in which theology used to “reign” in medieval universities,⁴ but it will indirectly determine their theoretical and practical *boundaries* (which is crucial also for their *public* recognition). More recently, we have to acknowledge, the “conflict of the faculties” has not ended, but taken other forms, where the “antagonistic” position with respect to philosophy has been occupied by various disciplines, from mathematics and logic to linguistics, from history to economics, sociology and anthropology, from physics and biology to psychology. Sometimes it would seem that philosophy keeps its singular place only because other paradigms of knowledge combat among themselves to set the standards of “essential science.”

What makes these conflicts so difficult to solve but also so significant for the renewed interest in the

problem of universality that I am trying to account for (and the *re-definition* of its content) is the fact that the *boundaries* are never obvious (but neither were they in the case of theology, law, or medicine in the early modern era). Or it is never possible to decide uncontroversially whether philosophy is the discipline that (in a transcendental manner) reflects on the principles, the semantics, the foundational problems, the practical destination of other disciplines, etc., or it is any one of these universal forms of knowledge which provides philosophy with questions and reasoning models, or *uses it as an instrument* for its own conceptual clarification. In other words, from the point of view of philosophy, whether its essence is *in se* or *in alio*. Which in both cases may allow us to understand its specific (and privileged) relationship to the enunciation of universality, but with totally different styles and contents. Again, if we look at the recent past, we can agree that Heidegger, Sartre and Bertrand Russell, or Freud, Weber and Quine were all philosophers, but clearly not in the same immediate sense (or only a very trivial one: they sought and wrote “abstractions”). I see no reason to believe that such conflicts or confrontations between different discourses *sub specie universitatis* or different “enunciations of the universal” represented by disciplinary models, where philosophy is both judge and jury, will cease to influence its own conception. But we cannot ensure that their discussion will take place within the limits of the University, or that they will be settled in the form of an articulation (and in practice a hierarchy) of academic disciplines.

To give this discussion a more specific form, and make its practical import more apparent, I want to compare *different strategies* that have been imagined to elaborate the paradoxes involved in the enunciation of the universal (how to speak it? where to speak it?). They indeed have roots in the history of philosophy itself, but they also represent permanent “critical” attitudes. I will try to give a summary account of three of them, which I find in some sense indispensable. Probably they are not the only ones, but I select them here because of their sharply different orientations. This is because, basically, I don’t believe that it can suffice for philosophy to examine how it came to claim for itself the function of speaking the universal, and was institutionally legitimized in this function (albeit never without problems), or to speculate on the contingent elements involved in this situation and their possible reversal or “ending.” What is most challenging for philosophy in this situation, it seems to me, is the *self-legitimizing* trope that it displays. The *conceptual* difficulties of this trope, but also its productivity, its openness to continuous developments and realizations, call for a new philosophical examination, in order for philosophy to prepare itself for other intellectual adventures, to already transform itself in order to be able to continue in different epistemological, social, and cultural contexts.

The first strategy is a Spinozistic-Wittgensteinian one. To be sure Spinoza and Wittgenstein are widely different thinkers (some attempts, though, have been made at “reading them together,” not only on technical points such as the identification of truth with singular propositional contents, but from a more general perspective, particularly concerning their rejection of “methodological” and “metalinguistic” considerations in philosophy, their common idea that there can exist no “super-concepts”). But with respect to the question of the universal, they seem to me to have in common a typically *dualistic* way of understanding it, which means that they distinguish between a “theoretical universalism” and a “practical universalism,” whose languages are in a sense radically incompatible. One of these speaks a language of explanation and representation (or depiction), the other speaks a language of norms, effects, and uses. It is the task of philosophy, no doubt, to connect them. But since in this conception there is nothing like an *external* (ideal, or transcendental) What gives this analogy additional relevance (and makes it intellectually exciting) is the fact that both Spinoza and Wittgenstein have been led by the vicissitudes of their philosophical lives to *writing*

separate books, each of which with a different style and intention displays one form of universality from its own point of view (or in its own language), therefore proving unable to give an idea of the other, except in the aporetic form of an *internal limit*, or a point of escape, whose meaning can be only described in a *negative* manner. To be sure, this is an unpleasant situation, especially for philosophers who want to be systematic, and we should not be surprised that they tried to resolve or dissolve it by setting up mediations (by “translating” one problem into the language of the other: in the case of Spinoza, it was apparently the problem of practice that was ideally translated into the language of theory, in the case of Wittgenstein ultimately the problem of theory into the language of practice, but this was always only a first step). Rather than discussing the mediations (i.e. the “systems”), however, I want to draw attention to the aporia itself, which is, I think, the most decisive aspect here.

Spinoza wrote the *Ethics*, which is basically the construction of an intellectual form of life based on the understanding of causal relations existing among natural individuals (including humans themselves), in secret, and (albeit anonymously) he published the *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, which is a historical and philological discussion of the possibility to liberate the political community from its dependence on a specific form of religious faith, and ground it on free contributions of the various creeds to the practical recognition of the common good or utility. Wittgenstein published the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, which is an attempt at defining the “logic” or “language” (*Sprache*), which is common to all descriptions (of which the most precise are the scientific descriptions) of “the world” as the totality of “facts” (*Tatsachen*), or really existing connections among things; and he privately wrote (or worked on) the *Philosophical Investigations*, in which the object of reflection is no longer the logical form identically present in the connection of empirical states of affairs and in their linguistic image or depiction (an idea that bears striking analogies with what has been called the parallelism of things and ideas in Spinoza), but the infinite variety of language games in which, following tradition but also inventing new rules derived from practice, “public collectives” (i.e. in a very broad sense communities, however lasting or transitory, constituted around the possibility of sharing some meanings or interpretations) teach themselves how to give life an expression, or transform experiences into words.

The theoretical universal in Spinoza is called *Deus sive Natura*, and it is explained in terms of the *infinite chain of causal (or “productive”) relations among things* (including the ideas themselves), and the impossibility of contingency (see *Ethics*, I, prop. 28-29). In Wittgenstein it is called the “general form of the truth function” (*Tractatus*, Prop. 6 sqq.), and it is displayed (“shown”) in terms of the complete system of operations which make the truth of a proposition, or its correspondence with reality, depend on the truth of others with greater or lesser probability (in the limit-case: certainty). The practical universal in Spinoza is called “free state” or “free republic,” and it is defined as the possibility that heterogeneous (even incompatible) doctrines or beliefs (rooted in different ways of *imagining* the situation of humans in the world and assigning their *purposes*) subjectively contribute to reaching a common goal, or provide subjects with singular *motives* for their reciprocal utility. In Wittgenstein it emerges in a more virtual manner in the way in which the “language of everyday life” (which is nothing else than the sum total of all uses) can practically work as a condition of possibility for the establishment of “conventions,” in particular to regulate heterogeneous, or even conflictual, forms of life.

Conceptually, we notice that the two universalities are following opposite schemes : one is following the scheme of the ideal unification of the multiplicity of experiences (even if it is in the form of an open, infinite or expanding unity, such as the one designated by the concept of *nature* in Spinoza), whereas the other is following the scheme of the practical equivalence established by convention

between a multiplicity of convictions or beliefs, while testifying by the same token to its irreducibility to any simple or univocal *representation*, and which can be conceived only as practical itself (i.e. a *contingent*, fragile or reversible result of the joint actions that it makes possible, a feedback effect which does not deprive it from its reality, but rather makes it a dynamic, self-sustaining process). Finally we notice that the pathway from one type of universality to the other, in Spinoza as in Wittgenstein, remains paradoxical and in fact can be described only in terms of negative presentations of one of them within the language of the other. This involves a profound *sceptical* element, no less real in Spinoza than in Wittgenstein although probably less often recognized (since it was Wittgenstein who explicitly reversed his first “dogmatism” into a seeming “relativism”, while Spinoza in the *TTP*, for those who had been informed of his “esoteric” philosophy, was supposed to have “spoken for the multitude” in its own inadequate language). And, to no surprise, this is also where the greater difficulties concerning the representation of the subject or the agent emerge. It is said (perhaps ironically) to constitute a “mystical” element in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* because from the point of view of an “adequate image” of the material world it can only feature as an unspeakable correlate of the totality of the logical language. But this *mystical* element is also *practical*, it coincides with the “gesture” of showing (*zeigen*) the logical form, therefore it has an equivalent in the analysis of “rules” and “games” in the *Philosophical Investigations* that is not mystical at all: on the contrary, it belongs to the everyday experience of learning (since the operations of logic form a language-game themselves, they *have to be learnt*, they belong to the realm of custom or culture, which is not to say that their content is itself conventional or flexible). In Spinoza, I would suggest that the problem becomes unavoidable at the end of the *Ethics*, when the figure of the “wise man” (*sapiens*) is framed, as a thinking capacity which, having completed the progression across the three kinds of knowledge, is now free from the illusion of freewill and able to refer each singularity (including itself, as body and mind) to a causal necessity. But in *which world* does such a wise man live or exist? Since Spinoza does not believe in “other worlds,” it cannot be outside this world, but nor can it be in the social world where trans-individual relations are based on language and imagination. Unless we suppose (an oblique solution suggested by the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*), that the wise man is able to represent his science or wisdom with its anthropological conclusions in the form of a *vera religio*, a “true religion” or a “universal faith” where *Natura* is “translated” again as *Deus* (an operation that Spinoza, like many of his contemporaries, believed to be identical with the isolation of the social and moral principles common to all historical monotheisms). This is a hypothesis rather than a demonstration, and in my opinion it leads to insisting on the unsurpassable *equivocity* of the concept of the universal.

But isn’t this equivocity what constitutes the great interest and strength of such constructions (which have other replicas in philosophy: Spinoza and Wittgenstein, whom I singled out for clarity of exposition, both clearly derive from a certain averroist tradition of “double truth” theories)? Even their sceptical element is important here. They do not tell us to abandon the idea (and the ideal) of universality—much on the contrary, they show that it can be vindicated both theoretically and practically. But they deprive us of the illusion that we could derive “universal forms of life” from the scientific knowledge of the world, and indeed from any doctrine or theory, or that the rules of equivalence among “subjectivities” (therefore coexistence, shared action, production of a “common good,” practical resolution of conflicts) could be anything other than conventions or institutions. But this also means that *universal institutions*, at least as a tendency, are a meaningful political project. This can prove a useful therapeutics against apocalyptic convictions.

I want now to briefly describe a totally different strategy, which also aims at demonstrating that the paradoxes of universality have an intrinsic character, although locating them at a different level, and

pushing us towards very different conclusions. I will call it the *Hegelian-Marxist* strategy, because it was elaborated by Hegel (mainly if not exclusively in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, since on these issues his later works speak a very different language) in terms of “consciousness” (and figures of consciousness) and “antagonism” (or conflictual recognition), and was later reformulated by Marx in terms of “ideology” and “ideological domination.” Each of these terminologies allows it to emphasize some of the implications of this problematic (which belongs originally to the realm of “German Idealism,” with its dramatic political and theoretical reversals, but has a much wider relevance, and brings to the fore some of the deepest problems of the dialectical tradition in general). To put it in its simplest form, it seems to me that the underlying idea is the following: there can be no universality in the realm of ideas or representations (which here also includes actions and practices, since there can be no human or historical practices without a representation, not only “for others” but “for themselves,” *für sich*) if not *in the form of a domination over other ideas and representations* (which can be thought as being suppressed or made minoritarian, pushed into the subaltern or excluded condition of the “particular,” not to say the “tribal”). Therefore, universality and hegemony become equivalents, and conversely no ideology (system of representations, figure of consciousness) can become “universal” unless it becomes also dominant, more precisely works as a process of domination, a “dominant ideology” (*herrschende Ideologie*). This is indeed a very *critical* theory, which has been resented as such (and for that reason violently objected to, particularly on the side of “dogmatic” philosophers and thinkers who advocate *absolute universalistic discourses*). Let me start with what we might call “Hegel’s Paradox” concerning the Universal: the idea illustrated all along the *Phenomenology* that, by an intrinsic limitation or rather internal contradiction, *it is impossible to speak the universal without transforming it immediately into a particular discourse (or representation)*. The universal must be actually spoken (or enunciated), even if this is only in an internal or self-referential dialogue, it is by nature a discourse or a moment in the development of discourse, and it has to be spoken by someone (i.e., some *one*). Hegel, as we know, is a resolute adversary of the idea that there could be “unspeakable” or “inexpressible” ideas and experiences (what the first chapter of the *Phenomenology* mocks as the myth of *das Unaussprechliche*): which is not to say that everything can be said at once, or in the *same* discourse by *any one*. On the contrary there is a formal constraint—inherent in language—that makes it impossible to express universality without subjecting it to the determinations of time and place (making it the expression of the limitations of *this* time and place), but above all enclosing it within the horizon of a certain *viewpoint* inherent in this situation. A historicist reading of this thesis will recall Hegel’s own later formula (in the *Philosophy of History*) that “no one can jump beyond his time” (and probably also not beyond his environment: but for Hegel environments are meaningful only inasmuch as they represent successive “sites” for the development of the *Weltgeist*), as a “factual” proposition which reflects the finitude of historic individuality. But the originality of Hegel is to ground it at a deeper ontological level, by describing it as a consequence of the structure of consciousness, in other terms by thinking universality as a category of conscious representation as such (just the opposite of Spinoza or Wittgenstein, let us note in passing). “Consciousness” as it is described “phenomenologically” by Hegel, starting with *perception* (which can be attributed to an individual or an isolated consciousness) and ending with the collective, historical figures of *spirit* (today we would rather say *culture*, with its institutional and political dimensions, structuring the constitution of communities), is this thinking capacity (and also immediately, in Hegel’s description, this speaking capacity) ⁵ that builds *totalities of meaning* and confers upon them certainty (*Gewissheit*) and truth (*Wahrheit*), in short universality (). But it can do so only from a specific point of view, particularly because it makes it possible for a plurality of individuals to share the same subjectivity (or for the individual and the collective subjects,

the “I” and the “We,” to exchange their places: “I that is We, and We that is I”).⁶ As a consequence, what consciousness in each of its figures aims at is not “the world” as such, but “its world,” “a world,” or a common worldview, whose coherence comes from its intention of projecting over the totality of experience some principle of certainty or truth (which can be epistemological, moral, aesthetic, religious, juridical ...), which in fact is exclusively valid “for itself.” And the general idea that you cannot speak *sub specie universalitatis* without immediately particularizing the universal that you enunciate (or transform it into its logical opposite), comes from the fact that every discourse or enunciation of the universal is subjected to the law of conscious representation, or there is no “universality” if not *for a consciousness* in this broad sense. And there is no consciousness without its intrinsic *limits, or conditions of possibility*.

It is not difficult to read here a generalization of Kant’s notion of transcendental consciousness as a *a priori* form of organization of the experience, but also a ruthless critique of its pretension to stand above experience itself. However the argument cannot become identified with a “relativism.”

Consciousness and the language it speaks (for example the moral language of responsibility and duty, or the scientific language of causality, or the juridical language of liberty and equality) organize experience from inside (from within its own “history”), therefore they must fuse (or confuse) the opposites, the particular and the universal. There is no way of escaping this constraint, except the understanding of the necessary transition from one figure of consciousness to another, or the principle of *historicity* that is immanent in their limitation (which is not a new figure of consciousness, or another representation of the universal, but a self-reflection or a *naming* of this transition).

It is not difficult either to understand how this description of consciousness and its paradoxical relationship to language—at the same time particularizing and universalizing representations—could give rise to the Marxist notion of ideology. To be sure, the Hegelian “figures of consciousness” cover a wider range of experiences and meanings (not only social discourses, or discourses that can be associated with certain historically dominant forms of society and politics, but other types of worldviews: the mechanistic “laws of nature,” the religious “revelations,” etc.), but the Marxian interpretation of the communitarian dimension of representations (or their mediating function between “I” and “We”, individual and collective subjectivities) as the expression of historical class struggles, draws our attention to the essentially *conflictual* nature of universality in its Hegelian determination, which is a *general characteristic*. In fact what Hegel wants to describe is not simply the fact that to speak the universal forces the speaker(s) to give it a particular figure, but that it means asserting a certain universality against another one, thus depriving the latter from its own universality, effectively denying that it can itself be universal. Not only does the universal represent a paradoxical unity of logical opposites, but it exists only in the form of *conflicting universalities*, where the terms of the conflict (which can be also understood as embodying antagonistic interests, referred by Hegel to a broad concept of life and spirit, and by Marx to a more specific concept of social production) struggle to assert their domination.

But what does it mean to assert one’s domination? It means that one discourse “relativizes” the other, or sets the standards, defines the norms after which the other can be granted a limited value and function, qualified or disqualified—a hierarchical relationship which in some cases will appear reversible, as is notoriously the case in the Master/Slave dialectic, where in the end the worldview of the Slave, based on the universal value of Labor, will overturn the primacy of the Master’s worldview, based on the universal value of Sacrifice, reversing the negativity into positivity and opening the possibility of the development of culture. But above all it means that a dominant discourse is one that Again, there is a sharp critical element in these philosophical constructions. I don’t read them,

however, as purely negative (an interpretation which pushed to the extreme gives us the idea of a “negative dialectics”, where the universal only features as the “fetish,” the “abstraction,” or the “denial of the contradiction,” which would prevent us from thinking in terms of concrete singularities), but rather as *conceptual constructions of the universal*, which show its internal tensions or conflicts. And this is what leads me to adding a final consideration. In Hegelian-Marxian terms (or in terms of this Marx who continues and displaces the phenomenological moment in Hegel) the *conflictual character* of universality is not a lack, or failure of universal discourses, but rather a *criterion* which allows us to identify those which truly deserve this name, by displaying their capacity of representing their “other” (or their adversary, their “enemy”: Hegel describes “superstition,” as it is viewed by the Enlightenment, as its *Feind*) within themselves, as the negative element which they need for their own development, or to become self-conscious. In this sense, not only there is always conflict where there is universality (or a self-assertion of the universal), but the conflict is always *asymmetrical*, uneven, with a dominant, repressing, and a dominated, repressed, element. But here diverging interpretations are possible, which clearly do not lead to the same practical conclusions. I will formulate them in quasi-tactical terms for the sake of simplicity (which seems also justified by the fact that most examples in Hegel as in Marx refer to historical or transhistorical conflicts between antagonistic worldviews): if one discourse of the universal *dominates another one* (call it consciousness to emphasize its capacity to shape subjectivities, or ideology to emphasize its social function), this can mean that the dominated discourse is forced to retreat, to express its difference, or its resistance, within the “logic,” the categories, the rhetoric, of the dominant discourse, i.e. becomes “alienated”. As a consequence any opposition or resistance will only *reinforce* the dominant discourse, which is a very effective manner of understanding the equivalence between “hegemony” and “universality.” It is not that the universal is not “situated,” has no *real exteriority*. However this exteriority remains *inaccessible* for the dominated discourse (as the *Ding an sich* was inaccessible for the Kantian consciousness), *as if* there were no real otherness. But this interpretation can be reversed: one can understand rather that what “universalizes” a given worldview is only its having to internalize resistances, oppositions, and objections. One can even go one step further and suggest that it is only the “negative element” secretly at work within a dominant ideology, which reflects the irreducible presence of an other (its “ironic” element, as Hegel puts it in the case of *Antigone* and the Greek city, or *Le Neveu de Rameau* and bourgeois morality), that provides a discourse with a universal power to shape our experiences of the world, beyond the *limited* consciousness of its inventors and speakers. In the end, we will get to the hypothesis that what makes a “dominant ideology” is not a generalization of the values or opinions of the “dominant,” but rather of the “dominated,” subjects. This is not an easy idea, but it is certainly one that haunts the interpretations of the Master-Slave dialectic, and without which Marxian (and post-Marxian) discussions concerning the universalistic character of the “bourgeois ideology” could not make sense, particularly when it comes to the persisting equivocity of the notion of “human rights.” The idea has been long defended that the *universality* of human rights derives not only from their proclamation, but from the fact that all resistances and objections against the dominant order (call it capitalism or liberalism, if you will) must become formulated themselves in terms of vindication or extension of abstract human rights in order to acquire legitimacy. But it is at least equally sustainable that the dominant ideology basically invokes human rights (or humanism, admittedly the typical form of secular universalism in the moral, juridical, and political field) because this is the general language in which insurrections and emancipatory struggles aiming at equality and freedom, and challenging the ruling order of privileges, are carried on. Which would mean that the key to the understanding of universality as hegemony resides in a quasi-lacanian trope: “dominants receive their

language/consciousness from the dominated in inverted form.” This is indeed an interesting way to retrieve the paradoxical nature of the enunciation *sub specie universitatis*: the “place” where the universal as discourse is located, and which particularizes it, is never directly “its” place, it can be only the place of its internal other, or where its internal other can *come*.⁸

However crucial these two ambitious strategies for the enunciation of the universal might be considered—the one based on a scheme of Double Truth (theoretical univocity vs practical equivalence), and the one based on the conflictual relationship between a Sovereign discourse and its internal Other—they don’t seem to me to exhaust our problem. In view of many current debates about the heterogeneity of cultures, the possibilities that its recognition opens, but also the obstacles that it raises before a universal institution of the universal, it seems now necessary to think of the paradoxes of its construction not only in terms of difference or conflict, but in terms of *translation*. The debate (or perhaps we should say rather the *new debate*) on the nature and the effects of translation has been running for several decades now, mainly in the realm of “cultural studies.” But nobody doubts that it has a philosophical dimension (in which in some sense the orientations and future status of philosophy are at stake).⁹ Conceptions of translation with different philosophical backgrounds (logical, structuralist, hermeneutic) are also constantly involved in debates about universalism and communitarianism or multi-culturalism, which shows that theories and concepts immediately acquire a political meaning. I want to briefly sketch the way in which I think that another strategy to “speak the universal” is involved here (a *divided* one admittedly, whose intentions are at stake in its own development), and which traditional metaphysical issue it should lead us to revisit (namely the problem of individuality and individuation). It will have to be, of course, considerably simplified.

Discussions about translation often begin with recalling a “paradox” which has become kind of a *lieu commun*, namely that translating is *impossible* (or an impossible *task*) while nevertheless performed everyday on a large scale, i.e. *real*.¹⁰ This indeed becomes compelling only inasmuch as the “ideal” notion of translation on which it relies is shown to be intrinsic (as norm, or instrument, or obstacle) to the activity of translation itself. What is said to be impossible is a *perfect translation* in which interlocutors or readers belonging to separated linguistic universes (or using autonomous languages to understand others and themselves, or to read texts) would nevertheless attach the same meanings (and possibly also the same poetic values, the same images and affects) to different words and phrases. While most theorists agree that such a correspondence (or equivalence of languages) is never reached in practice, except perhaps in very limited and highly artificial cases (where the notion of a language only refers to a specialized code), they may nevertheless refer to it as an ideal type. This is clearly the case in W.V.O. Quine’s celebrated doctrine of the “indeterminacy of radical translation”, developed in his essay “Meaning and translation”¹¹, where the initial thought experiment (a scene supposedly taking place *before* any previous translation, in the moment of a “first encounter” between a missionary, or an ethnographer, and an indigenous native who ignore each other’s language, and have no mediator or interpreter at hand), demonstrates that actual processes of translations, if they take place (and they certainly do take place), never provide the certainty that words refer to the same objects or that sentences convey the same meaning. Such a conviction can only derive from shared learning processes and – at a higher level, through “semantic ascent” – from the fact that different languages become used as different interpretations or non-isomorphic models of a single axiomatics. For Quine, languages are like “theories” with which speakers explain the physical experiences, which can be tested only locally, or partially, therefore have only a *relative* truth. Needless to say, there is no question here of defending a positive concept

of *semantic universality*, not even in the logical-scientific domain, a critique which goes along with a more general critique of synonymy and meaning. Universality is the paradise lost of the human mind. Interestingly, the single essay perhaps equally influential in contemporary philosophical debates about translation, Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" (*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*), albeit coming from a totally different tradition (not logical, but philological and hermeneutic, tracing back to the romantic ideas on language developed by Schlegel and Humboldt) and aiming at an almost opposite conception of translation (not the equivalent expression of everyday experiences, but the transference of poetic forms and aesthetic values from one written language into another)¹³, seems to involve certain common prerequisites. Benjamin would consider the communication of information (*Mitteilung*) – what for Quine is ultimately impossible – as fairly possible inasmuch as a "fact of the matter" is involved, but rather inessential to the art of translation. What this (literary) art really concerns is the continuation of the aesthetic effect produced by a linguistic creation from within an original language into another one, what he describes as a living development of a "seed" (*Samen*), or a potentiality of migration/metamorphosis always already given in (great) works of art. Poetic writing is effective not only inasmuch as it has *transformed* the original language whose expressive qualities it has displayed and complemented, but also inasmuch as it has the capacity to recreate other languages, by becoming transferred (*übertragen*) and translated (*übersetzen*). The "intention" thus manifested by translation is that of reaching a "pure language" (*eine reine Sprache*) where there would not exist an equivalence of codes but a complementarity, better said a "harmony" or "affinity" (*Verwandschaft*) with respect to their expressive power. It therefore does not designate a substitutability but a community, or *common achievement* of languages, grounded in their irreducible diversity. Such an achievement however (to which Benjamin ascribes a "messianic" function of ending history, although it arises from purely historical practices) remains inaccessible, it works as a "regulatory idea" within each effort of translation.¹⁴

Nothing can appear wider apart than a pure cognitive and a pure poetic concept of translation. However there is a common idea underlying Quine's and Benjamin's reasonings: that of a language that is (or must be considered) initially as *closed totality*, both in the sense of displaying an internal relationship among its elements and of being associated with a *community of speakers* (and listeners, writers, readers) "belonging" to it or to which it would "belong," whether empirically constructed through the experiences of shared learning (in a behaviorist mode), therefore appearing as conventional, or supposed to pre-exist as a "living" collective individual, with its own dynamic of transformations, which would ascribe to individual subjects their horizons of meaning (in the Humboldtian tradition). To be sure, this common prerequisite was also basically accepted by 19th and 20th century linguists (including structuralists), who made it the starting point for their enumerations, typologies, and systemic analyses of languages (*each language*, or in this sense, idiom, having its *proper name*, such as "English," or "Arabic," or "Mandarin Chinese," or "Yiddish," its specific *rules* or *grammar*, its *words* or *expressions*, its *history*, etc.), and, as a consequence, being the *given totality* from which the problem of translation arises. There is no question of denying the effectiveness of this representation, both in terms of transcendental (or quasi-transcendental) constitution of our experience (with the idea of a linguistic totality which forms the symbolic bond of a community, there comes also the possibility of applying criteria of mutual comprehension and incomprehension, recognition and misrecognition, the drawing of linguistic *borderlines*), and in terms of institutional norms and practices (which are not only exclusionary, since they precisely made the translation, the "interpreting," necessary and in fact essential practices in our societies). It would be simply grotesque to assert that it has entirely lost its relevance in today's "post-modern" globalized

world. But it has also become impossible not to take into account the amount of facts concerning languages, translations, and cultures, that highlight the *historical* nature of the linguistic-communitarian doublet, or contradict its dominant representation.¹⁵ I don't think either that these facts deprive the grand philosophical problematics of Quine or Benjamin of every interest, much the contrary. But they might lead us to assigning their limits, and reversing our use of such regulatory ideas as "radical translation" or "pure language", in order to see them not so much as ideals towards which an enunciation of the universal as translation is hopelessly striving, than internal obstacles with which it is struggling.

To put it in telegraphic manner, the historical character of the relationship between language as totality or system and community as horizon of mutual understanding (or inter-comprehension, recognition through dialogue) illustrates the fact that it is always a *political reality*, however general and abstract the notion we put under this category. For several centuries (albeit never without exceptions and resistances) it has been associated with the dominant representation and institution of languages as national (or quasi-national: "ethnic", "civilizational") languages, and communities as peoples (present, past, or future), with or without a sovereign State. This fact, when it is taken as an absolute a-historical, or trans-historical, necessity, tends to reverse the actual relationship between translation and the normative character of national languages, blurring the fact that many languages which have become "autonomous" entities are actually the result of (institutional) practices of translation (including the scientific and literary, but also pedagogic, legal, commercial translations, etc.), and not the reverse. And it tends to create the illusion that a process, or an effort of translation, To speak the universal as translation therefore is not simply to advocate translating (or translating more), but it is to translate again, otherwise and elsewhere, for other groups and individuals who will thus gain access to the labor of translation. And if translating practices have produced (and keep producing) political communities, to reflect on the possible transformations of these practices is eminently a *meta-political*, a philosophical task (in the sense of returning to the elements, the very *stoicheia* of politics, which allow us to understand its alternatives, its powers, possibilities and constraints.) Allow me to add three final indications on this point, which indeed would deserve fuller developments.

First, there has been in the recent years a tendency to *broaden and shift* the use of the category of translation, particularly in the work of authors belonging to the "post-colonial" studies (such names as Said, Babha, Spivak, come to mind, and also Butler from a more philosophical point of view), from the idea of *translating languages* (or texts in given languages) to the idea of *translating "cultures"*.¹⁷ In a sense, this is only another episode in the history of the translations of the idea of translation, which the philology and the semantics of Western modernity had restricted to the construction of dictionaries, grammars, and the establishment of parallel libraries of written texts or more recently the dubbing of soundtracks in films, and which becomes again a generalized circulation of informations and creations between heterogeneous communities of sense. But it is also a recognition of the fact that the linguistic inequalities hindering communication and the sharing of languages are rooted in the collective history of the speakers who enter the "public sphere" with their traditions and sensibilities, their ascribed places and statuses, that they are not only *speaking* but also *spoken* (and *written*) subjects. As we know this does not lead necessarily to emphasizing the fixity and exclusivity of traditional cultures demanding their political rehabilitation, rather it leads to associating (politically, aesthetically) the activity of generalized translation with experiences of resistance, hybridity, divided identities, dissemination of texts, performative reversals of names. In my opinion all this only makes sense if "cultures" are themselves conceived as open, evolutionary systems of *phrases, texts,*

speeches, dialogues, rather than monadic “worldviews”, and if the task of the multiple translators (of which there are always more than officially acknowledged, but less than necessary) is seen as embodying a living contradiction, the emergence of *vanishing mediators* who manage to “belong” simultaneously to different cultures therefore entirely belong to none, who are “strangers from within” as it were.¹⁸

Second, the pragmatic categories that seem most relevant to describe the experiences of generalized translation are not only those of speech acts, illocutionary force, use and intention, authority and context, etc., but above all those of *incomprehension* and *differend* which reverse the “impossibility of the translation” into its paradoxical condition of possibility. Zygmunt Bauman for instance uses an idea of the “incomprehension” as the *primary experience* that takes place *inside* and *between* “communities of meaning,” therefore *he defines universality as the result of an activity of translation* (rooted in everyday life) through which the bearers of differences learn “how to go on – to cope with the task of sorting out right, adequate or passable responses to each other’s moves.”¹⁹

²⁰ Here again an element of universality “to come” (as Derrida would say) is practically involved. And in both cases violence and reciprocity are at stake, their equilibrium being bound to remain uncertain. Finally, it seems to me that we can indicate what kind of metaphysical problems are involved in generalizing and radicalizing the issue of translation. They concern the constructed status of individuals. As the institutional, naturalized (not to say fetishized) correspondences between idioms and communities are weakened and become more conflictual, each of the two poles being visibly made of “phrases” which do not spontaneously coincide, whose circularity has to be “enforced” over time by traditions and institutions (which also implies that voices are silenced and resistances are repressed), it is not the case that individuals are released of their trans-individual relations, that they emerge naked as in a “state of nature.” But it is the case that another form of “radical indeterminacy” is brought to the fore, one that does not so much concern the reference to objects than the reference to subjects (or their self-reference). This does indeed match our contemporary experience of the limits of comprehension, in which it is often the case that the standard (in fact mythical) hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion are inverted: for instance it is for “me” (E.B.) much easier to talk and discuss with a colleague in the U.S. Academia in a mixture of international English and French, than with a young *racaille* (“scum”) from the *Banlieues* (as our Minister of the Interior calls them and they sometimes provocatively call themselves), whose words, grammatical patterns and pronunciation I understand incompletely, although they belong to a variety of “non standard” French perhaps mixed with some Arabic (I had less difficulties with the working class of the older generation, because spending 20 years in the Communist Party had given me a code and a training). So which “languages” are *the same*, and which (and whose) are *different*? What practical realities do the official *names* cover? And where does the “translation” process mostly take place, within or across the institutional borderlines? But what is true of class with respect to national languages and communities, whose respective strength may become now reversed with respect to the recent history, might also apply to other dis-articulations of social identities that cross anthropological differences and cultural frontiers (depending in particular on the evolution of our “democratic” educational systems). In any case, the ontological correlate of a world of generalized translations is neither the emergence of the pure individual nor its final suppression, in the name of traditional communities who would universally tighten their grip on communications, and establish themselves as absolute authorities in matters of translations (although this is clearly a risk). It is rather a *problematic individuality*, or a suspended process of individuation and construction of the individual as a “capacity to move” (to transfer oneself) within a *universum/multiversum* subjected to the

contradictory tendencies of increasing standardization and the vindication of differences, of identification with traditions and resistances to normalization. Where to ground the singularity of the individual and how to assess its possibilities to emerge from collective conditions of existence is indeed the common problem of all strategies of enunciation *sub specie universitatis*.

I certainly have no illusion concerning the perfect consistency of my scheme of reflection. To be sure, I see several ways of organizing the diversity of the strategies that have just been presented: *formally*

Notes

¹ This essay is a revised version of the main part of a paper published in the special Anniversary issue of *Topoi. An International Journal of Philosophy*, 25 (2006) (Springer Verlag), on “What is to be done in philosophy?”. I thank its editor-in-chief Ermanno Bencivenga for asking me to contribute this inquiry.

² To ask whether there are “philosophies” outside Western Culture (which in this case clearly includes the whole Arabic and Persian tradition) is no less circular than to ask whether there are forms of “monotheism” outside the Jewish-Christian-Islamic genealogy (and perhaps the two questions are not unrelated): the category that prescribes the inquiry being precisely at stake in its field. See the interesting book by Kenta Ohji and Mikhaïl Xifaras : *Éprouver l’universel: essai de géophilosophie* , Paris: Kimé, 1999.

³ In a previous essay called “Ambiguous Universality” (reprinted as Chapter 8 in *Politics and the Other Scene*, London: Verso, 2002), I distinguished in an analytical manner three types of universality: as “reality,” as “fiction,” and as “symbol.”

⁴ This sovereign status was approached for some time only with the definition and sacralisation of “Dialectical Materialism” in Socialist Countries from the 1930’s to the 1980’s, in a fairly unproductive manner, which never matched its medieval model, although it raised some nostalgia in the Catholic Church.

⁵ Since the first chapter of the *Phenomenology* (on “sense certainty”), Hegel has endowed “consciousness” with a linguistic capacity, which is the condition for its self-reflective description—an equivalence that Marx tried to derive from materialist premises in the *German Ideology*.

⁶ « Ich, das Wir, und Wir, das Ich ist », *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Chap. IV, Introduction.

⁷ Marx, *Capital*, Book III, chapter 27: “The Role of Credit in Capitalist Production”.

⁸ Which makes also think of Freud’s dialectical formula (in the *New Lectures* of 1932): “Wo Es war, soll Ich werden”.

⁹ On successive concepts of translation in Western history and the “problems of translation » that they involve themselves, see in particular the (long) entry « Traduction » in the *Vocabulaire Européen des Philosophies*, edited by Barbara Cassin, Paris: Seuil/Le Robert, 2004.

¹⁰ This, among others, is Paul Ricoeur's starting point in one of his last essays (expressing a lifelong interest): *Sur la traduction*, Paris: Bayard, 2004.

¹¹ Reprinted as chap. II, "Translation and Meaning", of his main book, *Word and Object*, 1960.

¹² Among many insightful commentaries on Quine and the discussion launched by his essay, I am particularly indebted to Sandra Laugier's *L'anthropologie logique de Quine. L'apprentissage de l'obvie*, 1992.

¹³ Benjamin's essay was first published as a preface for his translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens* in 1923.

¹⁴ Benjamin's idea of the community of languages as an infinite effect of the practices of translation, in which their affinity is not a legacy of the past, but an event forever « to come », has striking analogies with Derrida's concept of « ex-appropriation. » It is all the more surprising that Derrida in his 1985 essay "Towers of Babel" (reprinted in *Psyché*, 1987) so strongly criticizes Benjamin's formulation of the "pure language", apparently misreading his final considerations on the translations of Sacred Scriptures as "literal transcription" (*verbum pro verbo*) as if they were illustrating the same notion. It seems to me they are rather presenting an ironic antithesis.

¹⁵ Much of what follows is loosely derived from notions of linguistic pragmatics and socio-linguistics now widely accepted. A French linguist and philosopher, Jean-Jacques Lecercle, author of *Interpretation as pragmatics*, 1999, has proposed a synthesis of these debates that I found illuminating in his recent *Une philosophie marxiste du langage*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2004.

¹⁶ « Europe as Borderland », The Alexander von Humboldt Lecture in Human Geography, University of Nijmegen, November 10, 2004 (published in *Society and Space*, Volume 27, Number 2 April 2009; French version in *Europe Constitution Frontière*, Editions du passant, Bordeaux 2005).

¹⁷ See Judith Butler: "Restaging the Universal. Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism," in J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Verso 2000, p. 34-37.

¹⁸ It is the extraordinary achievement of Lévi-Strauss in his *Mythologiques* to have shown that the totality of existing (or recorded) Indian myths of the American continent can be considered in a relationship of "mutual translation", since each of them, as a narrative, derives directly or indirectly from any other via the application of certain semantic rules. This idea (which seems to approximate Benjamin's *reine Sprache*) could perhaps be extended to other "regimens of phrases". It does not mention the conflictual dimension of the transformations, though. See Patrice Maniglier: "L'humanisme interminable de Claude Lévi-Strauss", *Les Temps Modernes*, n° 609, juin-août 2000, pages 216-241.

¹⁹ Z. Bauman, *In search of politics*, Stanford, 1999, page 202.

²⁰ J.F. Lyotard, *The Differend. Phrases in dispute*, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, pages 9-10, 12-13, 138-141.