Interpretation and Demythologisation:
The Problem of Truth in Luigi Pareyson's Hermeneutics[1]
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Abstract

The present contribution begins by analysing the oscillation of Pareyson's hermeneutic theory between arguments inspired by 'ontological difference', which deal with the tragic separation between the truth and the person, and his persistent attempt to smooth over its radical character by appealing to personalism's ethically and religiously optimistic approach, which insists on the intimate link between truth and the person. Secondly, the article criticises the most fundamental assumption of Pareyson's hermeneutics, which, affirming the exclusive interpretability of the truth, unintentionally establishes this affirmation as an absolute and uninterpretable truth. Finally, having analysed Pareyson's relationship with Schelling, Heidegger, and Barth, the article describes a fundamental problem underlying the difference between 'revelatory thought' and 'expressive thought', which Pareyson treats as an unquestionable 'ontological criterion' for distinguishing between true and false. If such a criterion is true in itself, it is unable to include and differentiate itself from the truth of revelatory thought, and so risks allowing the same truth to be divided illogically into the 'greater' truth of the containing criterion and the 'lesser' truth of the contained truth; nor is it able to deal with the falsity of expressive thought, and so risks admitting a truth which has the false dwelling within it. The ontological criterion is thus inevitably degraded to become a mere demand for distinction. And, once the 'ontological difference' is put in question, the very possibility of formulating a theory of interpretable truth — that is, of an ontological hermeneutics — becomes problematic.

Ontological personalism: irrelativity and relationship

The work of Luigi Pareyson begins from the Kierkegaardian assumption that man is an individual only if he is placed in relation with God, but declines this theme in a personalistic manner. Unlike Kierkegaard, for whom man is himself negative and a sinner, Pareyson sees man as 'insufficient', open to Being and transcendence. He is an 'ontological person'.

Similarly, Pareyson takes from Karl Barth the concept that God is absolutely irrelative and other, but chooses to relativise himself and build a relationship with man. Pareyson adapts this theme, once again, in a personalistic direction. Unlike Barth, for whom irrelativity is so predominant that it relegates the entire human world — ethics, history, religion — to mere 'human greatness' and nullity of meaning, Pareyson considers Being to offer itself inexhaustibly and positively to

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[1] This essay presents and elaborates with variation, arguments first put forward in a presentation on Pareyson at the conference, *Parola e Scrittura* (Word and Writing), at the Pontificio Ateneo Sant' Anselmo, 7th October 2015, which was then composed as an essay: *Interpretare e demitizzare: il problema della verità nell'ermeneutica di Luigi Pareyson*. In: E.L.T. García, P. Nouzille, O.M. Sarr, ed., Parola e Scrittura. Studia Anselmiana, Roma, 2017.

interpretation, whilst nevertheless remaining irrelative and different: this generosity on the part of Being guarantees that man will be able to relate to it, in an ethical and religious fashion.

In this way, existence becomes both a personal expression that is historically and temporally placed, and an interpretation of truth, a living perspective on Being.

The tightly-meshed interweaving of ontology and religion in this 'first' phase of the Pareysonian investigation mirrors the distinction between 'Christian existentialism' and 'anti-Christian existentialism'. The first, confirming the 'ontological relationship', interprets man in the light of transcendence. The second, on the other hand, by denying the ontological relationship, does not give an interpretation but rather an idolatrous mystification. This distinction, as we shall see, clearly foreshadows the differentiation between 'revelatory thought' and 'expressive thought'.

Ontological perspectivism: the problem of conciliation between unity and diversity

It is necessary to note immediately that Pareyson's hermeneutical approach desires to keep the concept of truth together with the plurality of its interpretations, avoiding however the relativisation of truth. As we will see, 'ontological perspectivism' consists in the belief that truth is unique and inexhaustible while at the same time lending itself to interpretations which know how to reveal it.

Pareyson argues in *Verità e interpretazione*[2] that interpretation is original and universal because it structures the 'person', understood as an 'ontological relationship'. This relationship, based on an assumption Pareyson always considered one of the fundamental, enduring cornerstones of the philosophy of existence, is a combination of auto- and hetero-relations, relations with oneself and relations with Being. It concerns every human activity. As Pareyson writes,

> every human relation [...] always has an interpretative character. This would not occur if interpretation were not in itself originary: It qualifies that relation with in which the very being of humanity resides; in it, the primordial solidarity of human beings with the truth is realised. [...] [T]o interpret means to transcend, and one cannot speak authentically of entities without simultaneously referring to Being. In a word: The originary ontological relation is necessarily hermeneutic, and every interpretation necessarily has an ontological character. (Pareyson, 2013 [1975], p. 47, translation modified)

As should be clear, Pareyson accepts the Heideggerian assumption of the 'ontological difference'. But he combines it inextricably with themes that, as we

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[2] Quotations have been taken from an English translation of *Verità e interpretazione,* entitled *Truth and Interpretation,* published in 2013, by Robert T. Valgenti. These are cited as '2013 [1975]' in the in-text references. Please see the Bibliography for full details of both the original and the English translation.

shall see, he felt Heidegger had wrongly neglected: personalism and the possibility of an ethics.

We cannot fail to note that, while Pareyson speaks of a Being that transcends the entity, and of a necessary transcendence of the entity that takes place when it is interpreted by man, he immediately qualifies man's relationship with the truth (synonymous with Being) in terms of a 'primordial solidarity'. And, to hint at a problem even Pareyson himself will eventually acknowledge, at least in part, nor can we pass over the perplexity which derives from the encounter with a transcendence that is already and immediately involved in a sympathetic bond with man.

However, the criticism directed at Heidegger on this point could also be turned against Pareyson himself, who, despite the perfectly noble intention of joining together the infinite transcendence of Being with its immediate closeness, had some difficulty in avoiding and even ameliorating the radical problems involved in such an interweaving of ontological and ethical difference, of the transcendence of Being and the person.

But, in spite of these difficulties, it is here that we can see the strength of Pareyson's approach, and the originality of his hermeneutic project. He was in no way unaware of the 'drama' concomitant with difference — or rather, of the dramatic implications of a Being which could, precisely by virtue of its transcendence, free itself from the world of the human. Indeed, interpretative failure is not just a dramatic possibility that Pareyson will often consider; he claims even more strongly that it can characterise whole epochs. Arguing against a Hegelian 'objective metaphysics' which imposes a univocal, triumphalist direction on history by identifying the absolute with the finite, Pareyson claims that Being, while it does not 'denounce' historical events in a metacultural state of permanence, 'abandons those who betray it, and thus whole epochs remain devoid of truth' (ibid., p. 37).

All this means that we have immediately to confront the well-known and much-discussed 'formula' in *Verità e interpretazione:* 'This means that *of truth, there is only ever interpretation,* and that *there is no interpretation, lest it be of truth'* (ibid, p. 47).

With the first proposition, Pareyson cuts short any form of dogmatism or 'metaphysical rationalism', his definition of the claim — idolatrous and mystifying, in his opinion — to be able to give a supposedly unitary, definitive, and impersonal formulation to an objective, specular representation of the truth. On the other hand, truth cannot be grasped as an entity, an object, because it is unobjectifiable and transcendent. Nor is it possible to escape from one's own situation, which if anything constitutes the only proper place of truth, and the only point of view from which it may be perceived — as a consequence, truth has to be interpreted. Here, Pareyson is also trying to close off all forms of 'weak' hermeneutic relativism: it is indeed truth which is given in interpretation, rather than many truths, or many

interpretations without any truth.[3]

If we stopped here, we would have an adequate, faithful reconstruction of the formula, but we would not have problematised it. Pareyson — and, it is tempting to think, a good part of the hermeneutics inspired by his work[4] — did not altogether confront the many problematic consequences which might be derived from such a formulation. If it is the case, as many advocates of hermeneutics aver, that the truth can only be interpreted, this claim itself asserts that it is not an interpretation. To use the oldest possible logical rejoinder, which is still perfectly valid: an assertion affirming the absolute interpretability of the truth does not subject itself to what it asserts. In other words, it arises as the 'form' and theory of a content to which it does not itself belong, to which it is not subject, and consequently from which, despite its intentions, it emerges as the sole, absolute, and uninterpretable truth. The problematic implication which this assertion encounters cannot be evaded. If truth, understood as a cogent and unitary 'form', is distinct from the declared truth, understood as an infinitely varied and changeable 'content', how are we to reconcile the asserting form with the asserted content? The greatest possible division and dysfunction arise between them. But form is such only insofar as it is the form of a particular content, and vice versa. Here, on closer inspection, we find ourselves

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[3] Pareyson vehemently attacks the relativisation of the truth, its infinite plurality dissolving itself and depending on a subject which glides over itself: 'this way, interpretation would be limited to the realm of the arbitrary and approximate: the indifferent relativity of the realm of the debatable on the one side, and the shortcomings of a superficial and distorting knowledge on the other' (Pareyson, 2013[1975], p. 50). Importantly, he also refused the spiritualistic, intimist interpretation of Augustine's doctrine of truth's interiority to the human mind, in favour of its 'ontological interpretation' (ibid., p. 224n).

[4] Pareyson's position nonetheless stands out precisely for its originality in proposing to join interpretation to truth. Gianni Vattimo, for instance, encountered 'in Pareyson's relationship with hermeneutics the concern that it looked too much like a philosophy of culture, based solely on the fact that everything is interpretation, everything goes' (Vattimo, 1996, p. 47). Impatient with hermeneutics as a 'vague', overly 'friendly' discipline lacking 'substance', Vattimo emphasised: 'The thing that makes me think about all this is the question of the drama of the interpretive act in Pareyson, and of the apparent or real drama of this act in other hermeneutic theorists I have read' (ibid., p. 48). For instance, Gadamer (and others) do not theorise the dramatic possibility of the failure of interpretation. According to Vattimo, such failure is crucial, 'a sign of a more general situation, that hermeneutics, thus translated and urbanised, may have betrayed one of its basic reference points, which was not only the dispute over *Natur* and *Geisteswissenschaften*, but also its existentialist origins. Existentialism does not seem to resonate in today's hermeneutics, in the sense of that philosophy of authenticity, of choice, of alternatives, of the distinction between true and false, good and evil, in short positive and negative which existentialism contains and which Pareyson preserves' (ibid., pp. 49–50). Roberto Sega has argued that the 'disconcerting fact' of Pareyson's almost complete absence from the most 'authoritative and credible' accounts of the history of hermeneutics, and his very low profile among the non-specialist public, is highly symptomatic: 'This state of affairs probably depends on the underlying character of Pareyson's speculative proposal — a thought which proclaimed existentialism and yielded nothing to fashion or to passing trends, which was anything but easy and accommodating because it was harsh, resolute, clear in its positions, and foreign to 'every irenic attitude and/or spirit of conciliation'' (Sega, 2000, pp. 69–70).

with 'two' truths, separated from one another by a chasm. But truth is not divided into two truths, that of form and that of content, and it is certainly not divided into two truths which are opposed to one another.

And if truth is 'unique', as Pareyson claims, how can we avoid precisely the thing he most wanted to avoid — that is, truth's multiplication and subjectivation, its fragmentation into interpretations that succeed one another *ad infinitum*? The problem is particularly acute because Pareyson speaks of truth as both 'unique' and 'inexhaustible'. Importantly, we find the same idea phrased in the following terms: '*There is only ever revelation of the inexhaustible, and of the inexhaustible there can be nothing but a revelation*' (ibid., p. 20). It is as though the substitution of 'unique' for 'inexhaustible' were simply a matter of using different words to designate the same concept, rather than implying grave problems and a profound irreconcilability. Finally, if truth is 'transcendent', how are we to reconcile the 'fact' of its formulation with that of its 'incarnation'? It is no accident that 'fact' is the word deployed at this point: the depth of the paradox emerges here at the theological level whilst also causing problems on the ontological plane — this latter is the level to which Pareyson wants to restrict speech, and here there are no 'facts' the possibility of which should not be critically investigated.

We should now turn to the second proposition within Pareyson's formula, the consequences of which are even more subtle and dramatic than the first.

As further evidence of Pareyson's wish to exclude all relativism, he says that every human act, practical or theoretical, 'humble' or 'high', has the same character: whether he betrays it or 'witnesses' it, whether he accepts it or refuses it, man is always 'faced with' the truth. This is the bluntly paradoxical aspect of a truth which is unique, immeasurable, and ungraspable, but which nonetheless exists and acts in a radically normative, cogent, and exclusive form. Its interpretations may be infinite, but none will ever escape the bond of ontological necessity, which had previously displayed showed only its character of sympathetic affinity but now appears as an inexorable judge, fatally declaring interpretations to be true or false. Nor will any interpretation ever finally succeed, even one that pretended to deny the foundation, or to escape it. The hermeneutic link between person and truth is ontological, and this determines both its originality and its indissolubility: 'there is no interpretation except of truth'.

Since the second proposition leads to the same problems as the first, which we need not revisit here, we should emphasise the striking drama and originality of Pareyson's conclusion, which, having taken the interpretability of the truth as a premise, does not shy away from a consequence that is far from obvious, peaceful, or comforting, regarding man's 'constraint' in the face of it. From this point of view, Pareyson's 'ontological pluralism', instead of concluding, easily and peacefully, with a free and ultimately indifferent interpretation, 'binds' this freedom to the foundation, to the 'necessity' of being free without being arbitrary. More precisely, it binds the will to the foundation; the will deceives itself into thinking that it can escape from this.

Expressive thought and revealing thought: revelation and denial of the ontological relationship

It is through the analysis of this formula — its depth and the problems underlying it — that the genuine core of Pareyson's work may properly be addressed. This is the clear, categorical distinction and contrast between 'expressive thought' and 'revelatory thought'. The distinction is made not just on the level of speculation, but — in line with the assumption of the universality and co-essentiality of the two terms of the hermeneutic/ontological relationship — with every act. It

> constitutes a dilemma that faces human beings in all of their activities. Human beings must choose to be history or to have history, must choose to be identified with their own situation or to make it a means for obtaining the origin, must choose to renounce truth or to give it an unrepeatable revelation. (Ibid., p. 14)

Based on this passage, we might conjecture that both possibilities — including the renunciation of truth — are 'before' the truth. 'Before' the truth: this is where the profound drama of Pareyson's position plays itself out. But this necessarily implies that, if both possibilities, revelation and of renunciation, lie before the truth, then the truth will find itself before them. From this we arrive at the consequence already noted, and to which we shall return: the truth that is 'before' us, to be revealed or denied, risks losing the transcendence, uniqueness, and difference that are supposedly characteristic of it, and assuming the status of an entity — or, rather, as 'identical' to the entity which it 'faces'. Only an entity can indeed be affirmed or denied. If we want to argue that Being is enclosed in the 'mystery' of the singular entity, we also have to admit that every entity contains within it the same Being and the same mystery. With this we lose not just the entity's uniqueness and singularity, along with the mystery we were trying to preserve, but also Being itself, which is now forced to be identical in everything. This identity leads inevitably to one of two mutually exclusive consequences: either Being is the 'identical', which refuses to be enclosed in a fact or in infinite facts — in which case entities disappear — or else entities are such that Being is a mere word.

This dilemma, Pareyson argues, is resolved through a free choice. Freedom has a 'very special nature' — the investigation of which he has 'only deferred' for now — which characterises both man's being and his relationship with Being. The person, originally rooted in Being, can see in his own situation a merely historical position, a fatal limitation and an inexorable boundary, or else a metaphysical position and a means of access to the truth. Truth, Pareyson argues, is not that which is found and discovered by a subject overlapping with it; nor is it what the person disappears into in an impossible attempt at depersonalisation. It is not self-sufficient and absolutised egoism, because the means of access becomes an

impediment and obstruction; nor is it the disappearance of the person, because the person is the only means of access. The deformation, covering-up, or alteration of the truth will not be seen in the person to whom it is entrusted; the truth will surrender and reveal itself to precisely the same measure in which it too, as the person's only 'revelatory organ', is expressed and exposed. As Pareyson writes:

> Thought that starts from this originary solidarity of person and truth is at the same time ontological and personal, and therefore at the same time revelatory and expressive. Such thought *expresses the person in the act of revealing truth and reveals truth to the degree that it expresses the person.* (Ibid., p. 15)

He concludes: 'The complete harmony that reigns over saying, revealing, and expressing therefore characterises revelatory thought — saying is, at the same time and inseparably, to reveal and to express' (ibid., p. 16). The truth of the ontological relationship is preserved by speaking 'revelatory thought', which, avoiding the opposing reefs of complete explanation and ineffable silence, is neither infinitely distant nor exhaustive, making itself guarantor and guardian of the paradox of the infinite transcendence of ontological truth, whose presence is always grasped as ulterior and different. As further proof of this, the ambiguous oscillation between the truth that the ontological relationship is in itself, and the truth to which it refers, while intentional, runs the logical risk of flattening and confusing the two truths (assuming we can legitimately speak of two truths here).

If, on the contrary, the person does not recognise the radical difference of ontological truth, or disregards the ontological relationship, the person ceases to be its guarantor or guardian and inevitably degenerates into a mere historical product, destined only to 'express' its own time without being able to 'reveal' it.

As Pareyson writes, 'the truth disappears, leaving thought empty and unanchored, and the person also disappears, reduced to a mere historical situation'. Pareyson claims that speaking expressive thought, which expresses without revealing, here manifests a latent function of mystification and concealment: 'The harmony among saying, revealing, and expressing breaks, and all relations become distorted and profoundly altered' (ibid.). The harmonious, almost 'magical' balance between expression and revelation that characterises revelatory thought is so perverted and corrupted in this case that it can lead to a genuine 'divorce' between the truth and the person.

Incidentally, expressive thought is clearly analogous to what Pareyson defined in *L'Ontologia della libertà* (*The Ontology of Freedom*) as 'mythological thought', the type of expression which conceptualises and eternalises mere historical and pragmatic manifestations, giving them the appearance of timeless, absolute and abstract universality. This operation in fact arises from a free denial of the truth, an 'act of bad faith' by which a person refuses to recognise the truth and claims to rise above it. It should however be noted that this divorce implies the

possibility of a final parting; since the ontological relationship is indissoluble, it would have been more appropriate to speak of 'separation'. On the one hand, Pareyson wants to preserve truth's power to free itself from the human world; on the other, he also wants the person to be understood as the site of the advent of truth, whether in revelation or expression, good or bad, and bind the person to the truth just as much as truth is bound to the person. The obvious danger of this approach is that the two will become indistinguishable.

The unsaid between the implicit and the insinuated

Pareyson notes that in both types of thought there exists a gap between the said and the unsaid. In the case of revelatory thought, however, 'the word reveals much more than what it says'. It is revelatory and eloquent, in that it speaks the truth that resides eternally within it: 'here *legein* [saying] is *sēmainein* [meaning or signifying]' (ibid., p. 19). It is rooted in and nourished by a single source, which constitutes an incessant radiation of meaning, so that the unsaid is present in the word itself as an inexhaustible, implicit element that can be infinitely interpreted (and not demythologised). In expressive thought, by contrast, the interval between said and unsaid is a concealing one: 'the word says one thing but means another' (ibid., p. 18). Speech presents itself as a transparent conceptual construction, with the unsaid lying outside of it. It is the disguised expression of a merely historical and personal situation: the *legein* of the expressive thought is a *kryptein* and the word does not 'illuminate' but covers up and hides an insinuated element — not an implicit one — which is to be demythologised rather than interpreted, and this is achieved by offering a complete coherent explanation of it. On one hand the unsaid refers to the implicit inexhaustible to be interpreted, while on the other, it refers to the insinuated and merely historical, personal situation to be demystified.

Expressive thought, finally, inevitably lends itself to instrumental purposes, and Pareyson identifies it with 'ideology'; it is for this that the corrosive theoretical approach of the 'masters of suspicion' can, and indeed must, be reserved. If the understanding of an ideology is limited to its deconstruction, or to the discovery and unmasking of the *insinuated*, of *unconscious bases* and *hidden expression*, then the understanding of a philosophy will amount to an infinite interpretation that 'consists in the unending deepening of a *discourse rendered inexhaustible by an infinite presence*' (ibid., p. 99).

Ultimately, it is the person who decides between ideology and philosophy, between expressive and revelatory thought — a choice which presents itself as a genuine 'existential dilemma'. The person can freely decide whether to affirm his original ontological openness and its constitutive opening up to Being, or, vice versa, to deny that he constitutes a relationship, thus elevating himself to a closed, self-referential ipseity. *Truth is entirely in the hands of human freedom.* But, as Pareyson points out,

the act through which freedom decides for or against Being is also the act by which it decides to either confirm itself or deny itself because it is a matter of confirming or rejecting the ontological relation that constitutes the very being of the human beings. Freedom is so tied to Being that freedom validates Being through its own decision for or against it, and it affirms it, albeit in the form of a betrayal, even when it rejects it, thereby negating and destroying itself. (Ibid., p. 43)

'There is no interpretation if not of truth': the act of confirming or negating Being is constituted by the act of confirming or negating one's own being. The ontological-hermeneutic relationship is indissoluble because the two acts of acceptance and rejection, revelation and expression, both serve — if only *sub contraria specie* — as witnesses and even protagonists with respect to the truth to which the relationship is inexorably connected and to which it refers. Failed interpretation, then, is a much more dramatic sign than a mere 'failure': exercising this freedom is connected to the possibility of error and evil, the *positive reality of whose negation* Pareyson argues for. He emphasises once again ideology's characteristic denial of the ontological and of truth — evil is willed intentionally, in its paradoxical and terrible, positive reality. For Pareyson, 'this is a point where the philosopher must abandon any irenic intention and cooperative spirit' (ibid., p. 124); he attacks those

> well-known theories aimed at making error and evil disappear, as with a roll of the dice, either because they would be dialectical moments necessary for truth and the good, or because they cannot sustain themselves, and should be in some way supported by truth and goodness, if only by taking on their appearance or assuming their intent because it does not seem seriously probable that human beings could consciously and intentionally want evil and error. At this point, one could begin a discussion on the reality of error and evil that would in itself require an endless treatment if it were to be sufficient, let alone exhaustive. (Ibid., p. 124)

Freedom and Evil: The contradiction of foundation and founded

The endless discussion of evil is 'deferred', just as that of freedom was. We have to wait for *L'Ontologia della libertà* for Pareyson's treatment of these topics. In the meantime, Pareyson opposes those interpretations which see error and evil as mere dialectical moments, necessary for truth and goodness, arguing instead that the 'positive outcome that they can have is completely external to their character of falsehood and wickedness and is in no way either the result of some internal process or the coherence of a logic immanent to them' (ibid.). Further, the fact that the human formulation of the true and the human practice of the good presupposes the possibility of error and evil, is the most general sign of

that situation of *insecuritas* [uncertainty], precariousness and risk, that comprises the essentially tragic nature of the human condition, *which realises the positive only within an act that contains the constant and effective possibility of the negative*, to the point that *the suppression of the possibility of evil would not be possible if not as the suppression of freedom itself,* that is, as the suppression of the unique source through which human beings are capable of realising the good and being worthy of praise. (Ibid., p. 125)

Freedom is a tragic experience because it is constitutively 'double', a closely-woven indissolubility of good and evil which, in its negativity, is always, if not absolutely, a positive and effective exercise. Evil and error have a 'parodic, simulative' character. They are counterfeits and caricatures of truth and goodness. Evil's character makes it more accessible and 'familiar'. Pareyson warns that this

> still depends on the tragic character of the human condition, which is expressed in the ambiguous and contradictory nature of the human being, caught between opposites and strained between extremes [...] human nature is ambiguous in itself, able to [...] even *turn not only good into evil* [...] *but also evil into good,* as when the overwhelming power of conversion reveals and announces itself right in the soul of the most obstinate sinner, or as when, speaking in Barth's terms, one finds ecstasy in the trivial. (Ibid., 125–6)

It is only in *L'Ontologia della libertà*, however, that Pareyson regards freedom as the originary principle, rather than Being, as is the case in *Verità e interpretazione*. But this does not solve every problem; more will emerge, with serious consequences. To mention just one of these, already present in the passages quoted above: while Pareyson senses that a privative conception of evil leads only to a softening that smooths over its scandal and dread, and affirms against tradition that evil understood as a necessary 'part' or 'moment' of the good becomes itself a good, he does not see the problem of claiming both good and evil in their existing, positive reality.

From this point of view, good and evil can be differentiated empirically but not at that ontological level on which one existing, positive reality is indistinguishable from any other, save axiologically. It is no accident that the dialectical and implicative structure of this freedom becomes not only necessary from this point of view — it is free to choose good only when the freedom to choose evil is present — but, problematically, it reveals itself to be founded on what it should itself be. Indeed, it cannot serve as a foundation by itself, but only on the basis of evil. It is only the implicative, dialectical foundation structuring it that enables it to call itself a foundation. It thereby becomes 'structure', not freedom, declining from a foundation into something founded — or rather, like evil, it is as much foundation as founded.

It is no accident that we have spoken here of evil, rather than good: the good achieves reality only insofar as it vanquishes and overcomes evil, which as an inevitable consequence seems to acquire a complex logical priority. This is not to defend any sort of trivial, foolish 'supremacy' of evil, but only to point out the logical danger threatening both freedom and evil, both of which are established, contrary to Pareyson's intention, as both foundation and founded. Importantly, the suppression of evil may be obtained only by suppressing freedom, and the positive is achieved only when the negative is conquered.[5]

Importantly, Pareyson goes on to argue that choosing truth implies — against any contemplativism that allegedly follows from the derivative distinction between theory and practice, objectivity and subjectivity — a genuine 'ethics of testimony' (Pareyson, 1975, p. 107) by which a person's original act of accepting Being may be transformed into life and action. The undoubted theological and religious significance of this phrase is accompanied, on the side diametrically opposed to it, by another. Pareyson declares that inauthentic thought is 'still susceptible to a *speculative redemption'* (ibid., p. 104). As we have said, error and evil are constitutively negative statements of the same truth aimed at by the good.[6]

Yet in spite of this eventual redemption, Pareyson is unwilling to allow any compromise between philosophy and ideology.[7] Indeed, he emphasises that the contrast between them is 'metaphilosophical', serving as a metahistorical and ontological point of distinction. Pareyson rightly rejects the demand for criteria to specifically distinguish the one from the other as 'pseudophilosophical':

> One cannot expect that from a definition — let's say a definition of art — there automatically follows a division between beautiful and ugly works, or successful and unsuccessful ones. This distinction, possible only on a case by case basis, is a single act of judgment, whose responsibility is not

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[5] For a more thorough discussion of these issues and related criticisms, see Bellocci, 2012.

[6] Incidentally, Pareyson seems to be thinking here of Schelling's remarks on error, which he understands as a voluntary distortion of the truth, present and traceable enough that it can be redeemed:

> Error is not something indifferent, no mere lack; it is a distortion of knowledge, it belongs to the category of evil [*male*], malaise [*malattia*]. If error were simply false — that is, without any truth — it would be harmless [...]. There is always something respectable in error, always something of the truth; but this deformation, this distortion of the truth, these traits of the original truth which are still recognisable, or at least obscurely perceptible in the most terrible of errors, give error its characteristic atrocity. (Schelling, 1974, p. 222)

[7] Pareyson recalls Dostoevsky's frequent use of the term 'idea', which designates two opposing realities: in one case, 'seeds of other worlds', in the other, the products of man, errant and fallen. *Demons* should be considered the genuine 'tragic novel of ideology; as such, it cannot be overlooked by anyone who takes the problem of ideology seriously from a philosophical point of view' (Pareyson, 1975, p. 170).

attributable to a *definition assumed as a criterion,* but to the person who makes the judgement. (Ibid., p. 116)[8]

'Mystique of the ineffable' in Heidegger and 'ontology of the inexhaustible' in Pareyson

Before examining the problems which arise from these remarks, we should come back to something mentioned at the outset of this essay: that all of Pareyson's writings take Heidegger (and Hegel) to be among his major 'adversaries' as well as his privileged interlocutors. By identifying Being and nothingness, Pareyson argues that Heidegger fell into a form of 'ineffability', denying that the truth could be reached positively. If, with good reason, one denies that truth has the nature of an object standing open to view, this does not mean that one has to keep silent about its natural site. We have already seen how Pareyson claims a revelatory character for the person and the word; while 'attentive' to their speech, he believes he must continue 'beyond the impasse of negative ontology into which he [Heidegger] has unfortunately and hopelessly forced it' (ibid., p. 117).

We must avoid the 'blind alley' into which philosophy has been led by Heidegger's proposal of 'a solely negative ontology and by rejecting the totality of Western philosophy from Parmenides to Nietzsche' (ibid., p. 5).[9] Heidegger thereby ended up concluding that

> *philosophical discourse disappears in silence* [...] *the possibility for an ethics is denied* [...] the rejection of all of Western thought becomes an invitation to total revolution rather than a solicitation to remember that *at each point of the historical process there exists an alternative between positive and negative, and that the most important thing is freely to make the former*

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[8] No wonder such an approach is inconceivable to those who stay within the remit of classical ethical intellectualism. This position is exemplified by Giovanni Santinello, who argues that the distinction between the two attitudes 'can be sustained at the level of philosophies, not at the level of meta-philosophy; otherwise, we would have to radicalise the problem, admitting that we can deliberately choose error, with the aggravating factor, of course, of also knowing what the truth would be' (Santinello, 1972, p. 182).

[9] Ugo Maria Ugazio clearly identified the gap between the two thinkers which already existed at the very beginning of Pareyson's thinking: 'When Pareyson grasped the specificity of Heidegger's existentialism in the distinction between existential and existentiell, he simultaneously grasped the point at which the path he wanted to take diverged from Heidegger's' (Ugazio, 1989, p. 100).

> Pareyson proceeds from a modern point of view, and so does not need to set aside modernity and the history leading up to it in order to access the germinal point of existence [...] because in modernity he already recognises the effort to keep the relationship with the transcendent open [. . .]. Heidegger, however, did not recognise this new beginning of thought in modernity, and so had to defend the originary against the whole history of thought, particularly against modern thought and therefore inevitably also against Christianity. (Ibid., p. 101)

> *prevail over the latter* [...] *ignoring the personalistic aspect that is inseparable from a genuine ontology*, he ultimately alters the relations between Being and time, between the atemporal and history. (Ibid., p. 5)

The spiritualistic character that marks Pareyson's personalism is all too visible here — the very same thing that will always mark a radical, perhaps deliberate distance from Heidegger's thought. This should not be misunderstood as a sort of sickly-sweet moralism; Pareyson quite consciously accepts some of the fundamental requirements of Heidegger's thought: for instance, he embraces the Heideggerian critique of Being conceived as value:

> *Understanding Being as value turns everything upside down:* Being is then subordinated to human needs and human beings are released from the service of Being; as a result, *Being depreciates and falls into oblivion, whereas human beings are degraded and consigned to the negative.* [...] [W]hen humanity strives to make itself super-human [*superuomo*], its destiny is to become nothing but sub-human [*subuomo*]. (Ibid., p. 36)

In the same way, Pareyson proposes his own Heideggerian conception of 'ontological difference' — 'to interpret is to transcend' — whose true precursor was Karl Barth, in Pareyson's early reading (God as distinct from the greatness of the world, and indeed distinct from himself and in himself).[10] But the eternal crushes time conceived as its fatal, inexorable betrayal and oblivion. Pareyson's project is, once again, to show how the difference between Being and entity in Heidegger emphasises the first of these to such an extent that the second disappears, rendering ethics impossible. Pareyson's polemical reading of Heidegger should be understood from this point of view — a reading which, leaving aside the question of the intention driving it, is clearly not just questionable but in many ways unacceptable. What sense does it make, from a Heideggerian perspective, to

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[10] Pareyson, 1943/2002. Pareyson claims in this essay that God's primary characteristics are irrelativity and absolute transcendence. In this moment God is everything, and 'facing' him, man is only nothingness, because nothing can be contemplated outside of him. Yet God chooses, with a 'gift', to become relativised, part of the ontological relationship which man consists in. Pareyson warned, ambiguously, that if God, as something relative, seemed to be a comforter and completion of the human world, in his contrasting irrelative character, the latter disappeared; the person who stopped at this secondary moment of relativisation would be mistaken in thinking they could grasp God, for in truth they are capable only of attaining a merely 'human greatness'. This was a highly consequential point because, on closer inspection, it did not just bring into question the spiritualistic God, but pointed out that the relative God was derivative of a first moment where, faced with the absolute, nothing could subsist. Of course, while in Barth the irrelative, free, arbitrary God is relativised through a dialectical modality, appearing as the God of good and evil, anger and mercy, in Pareyson he is relativised so as to appear in a much more placid, reassuring mode. But Pareyson certainly made the distinction between the two moments. Importantly, it re-emerged just after his discovery of Schelling; Barth's dialectical God came on the scene in *L'Ontologia della libertà*.

reproach him for having neglected or made impossible the need for a foundation of the person, an ethics, and a consequent division between the positive and the negative in history? From this Heideggerian point of view, these remarks would belong to the very 'humanism' which Heidegger set himself to criticise from the very beginning. Heidegger's concern was to put the question of Being and its meaning at the centre of philosophical attention because he considered it to have been forgotten, especially by humanistic discourses. An ethical and personalistic conception would once again make it subordinate to man's needs. But Pareyson's distinction between 'revolution' and 'tradition' must precisely be understood in the light of the personalist concern to find a different way of conceiving ontological difference. The revolution Heidegger brought about is located, with respect to tradition, on an ontic, secondary, and derived level:

> First of all, revolution wants to start again from the *beginning*, whereas tradition is a continual recovery of the *origin*. The true object of a revolutionary stance is the *past* as such, whereas in tradition it is above all *Being*. Revolution longs for a new beginning *in time*, whereas tradition refers to the origin when only a regeneration *of time* can come. (Ibid., p. 42)

'Ontological renewal' belongs to tradition, which is placed between time and eternity, 'at the heart of the temporal advent of Being' (ibid., p. 41). Because of its proximity to Being, tradition is 'perennial regeneration', and it should not be confused, Pareyson emphasises, with 'conservation' or 'historical durability', because 'truth is neither effective nor recognised in the human world, and evil is often more popular and successful than the good' (ibid., p. 36) — 'whole epochs remain devoid of truth'. Moreover, the Heideggerian conception conceals ontic differences and levels out historical epochs onto the same plane of forgetfulness, involuntarily leading to a return to precisely that absolute knowledge which he had apparently eradicated: 'The philosophical exaltation of mystery, of silence, and of the cipher, risks being a simple overturning of the rationalistic cult of the explicit and preserving all of the nostalgia for it' (ibid., p. 23.

If Heideggerian Being withdraws into a purely negative movement, identifying itself with nothingness, Pareyson conceives of Being as a 'shapeless presence', an overabundance of light, a radiation of meaning. This stimulates and nourishes the interpretation it is subject to and with which it even identifies itself, but its infinite, radical difference means that it never exhausts itself in it:

> inexhaustibility is that thanks to which, instead of presenting itself under the false appearance of concealment, absence, or obscurity, ulteriority shows its true origin, that is, its richness, fullness, and excess, through its inexhaustibility: not nothingness, but Being [...], not *Abgrund* [abyss], but *Ungrund* [ungrounded ground]. (Ibid, p. 24)

Pareyson recalls a number of analogies with the work of art, which, 'far from dissolving in a plurality of arbitrary performances, remains the same work while entrusting itself to always newer interpretations that know how to grasp and render it, and while coinciding with them' (ibid., p. 39). As we can see, the theme of truth returns unchanged; remaining unitary, it is also inexhaustible, and preserves its integrity intact across time, incarnating itself in an entity, a 'work', in order then to return to itself. We have already seen some of the problems underlying Pareyson's remarks about 'ontological difference': here we want only to emphasise once more how Pareyson wishes to put himself in a position that is just as original as Heidegger's, while opposing a movement that, according to him, would fatally compromise the possibility of safeguarding Being and entities, ontological difference and the person, ontology and ethics. As we have seen, he says nothing about the very problematic nature of these distinctions

Original freedom in Schelling and ontological personalism in Pareyson

While the character of 'tradition' in Pareyson is emphatically personalistic, it should not be misunderstood as 'traditionalistic'. The proof of this lies in an interpretive, historiographic move that is uncommonly original and innovative. For 'confirmation' of the 'ontology of the inexhaustible' which he has proposed, Pareyson turns to Schelling, whom he interprets as a 'post-Hegelian' and a 'post-Heideggerian' thinker.

Schelling tried to overcome the double danger of, on the one hand, a total explicitation of the truth, and on the other, an avowal of its complete inexpressibility (and so avoid the outcomes of Hegelian and Heideggerian speculation): 'in essence, Schelling wants to avoid both mystical negative ontology and also Hegelian explicated ontology [...]. [T]o such an end, Schelling proposes a dialectic that neither ends with not knowing nor blooms into absolute knowledge' (ibid., p. 143). Above all, in Schelling's Erlangen lectures, there arises 'the demand to transform the concept of the indefinable and the ineffable into that of the originary and the inexhaustible' (ibid., p. 142). Schelling anticipates Heidegger's ontological difference but eludes the impasses of both negative and explicit ontology.

Being is incarnated in history, which it takes as its site. It resides there without identifying itself with it and is therefore able tragically to abandon it.[11] This power of incarnation and disengagement, affirmation and negation, belongs to being

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[11] The positive is given by the freedom 'to be or not enclosed in a form' (ibid., p. 146). See also Schelling, 1974, p. 205. Pareyson notes that Schelling's move is the same as one made by Plotinus, for whom the primordial principle is the 'formless' from which every form derives. Pareyson points especially to the eighth treatise of Plotinus' Sixth Ennead (ibid., pp. 249–50n). Gian Franco Frigo has emphasised how Pareyson's interpretation of Schelling — which is capable of wholly renewing Italian historiography in the direction indicated by Walter Schulz, Heidegger, and Jaspers — transcends 'the scope of pure historiography, becoming a constitutive part of the development of his own thought, with implications of the greatest importance' (Frigo, 1979, p. 473).

conceived along the lines of 'eternal freedom'. But it is only in *L'Ontologia della libertà* that Pareyson will claim Schelling's concept of Being as his own, with all of the consequences that this leads to. (These, as we have seen, are in themselves highly problematic.) He no longer describes it as 'inexhaustible Being', but 'originary freedom': the 'absolute subject' should be understood as 'power', 'will', a freedom which, if truly free, is also absolute, and therefore free not to be free, being able to deny itself. In this lies its Janus-faced, dialectical nature:

> *The subject is, indeed, eternal freedom, but not in such a way that it is not also capable of not being it* [...]. [I]t is pure, absolute freedom itself. *In fact, if it were freedom only so that it could not even become non-liberty, so as to be forced to remain freedom, then freedom itself would be a limitation, a necessity for it, and so would not be truly absolute freedom.* (Ibid., p. 167)

This is a very important clue and 'symptom': since it is clear how the ontological personalism of *Verità e interpretazione* can only incorporate some of these motifs from Schelling, for internal and structural reasons: it evades the tragic themes of negation, contradiction, duplicity — precisely those things which will serve as first principles in *L'Ontologia della libertà*. According to Pareyson himself, it is necessary that Being (declined as we have seen in positive and moral terms) is conceived as originary freedom; only in this way can the negative aspects of reality be traced back to their first roots. It is no coincidence that in *L'Ontologia della libertà* personalism will be completely relegated to the background. Pareyson will maintain that philosophy really can deal with the problem of God, freedom and evil to the extent that it no longer considers them purely philosophical or ethical problems, but looks at religious experience (in particular, Christian experience) as a source, before these problems are present in their reality. Philosophy, then, must be reconceived as a 'philosophical hermeneutics of Christianity'.

It should be noted that, in spite of the reference to Schelling, *Truth and Interpretation's* primary conceptual inspiration comes from a youthful, purely Barthian movement. Pareyson never tires of repeating that formless, shapeless truth lies at the origin of the historical and personal formulation he gives to it, and which resides in the 'form' or the shape, coinciding with it whilst not quite resolving itself into it. Interpretation, indeed, takes on the deliberately paradoxical status of 'the possession of an infinite' (ibid., p. 39): it is characterised by its absolute, unstoppable difference.

This is the peculiar dialectic of *Tempo ed Eternità* (*Time and Eternity*), a youthful essay where Barth's influence is particularly powerful: 'as in the essay *Tempo ed Eternità*, the irrelative establishes the relationship and is in the relationship, just as in *Verità e interpretazione*, truth is in interpretation and coincides with it, even if it is not exhausted by it' (Furnari, 1994, p. 145). But Pareyson agrees with Barth that the irrelative which establishes the relationship, and which it enters as one of the two poles of the ontological relationship, does not

coincide with it because, as irrelative, nothing can subsist which faces it.

This concept leads to a series of problems for Pareyson's ambiguous oscillation between the truth that is unitary, with nothing 'before' it, and the truth that becomes part of the ontological relationship. Certainly, the 'two' truths do not coincide; Pareyson himself warned in the essay against confusing them, since this would risk falling back into a spiritualistic conception that misleads us regarding truth's primary nature, and which granted no sympathetic affinity to humanity because it could not even be contemplated.[12]

Indeed, the paradox of unitary, transcendent, inexhaustible truth, which establishes the relationship, coincides with the shape that embodies it, and then either passes into other shapes or, abandoning all shape, returns to itself, finds its greatest depth at the theological level. It inevitably becomes problematic at that ontological level, which is in fact the only one that ultimately interests Pareyson here. Here, it acquires the character of a 'fact' — certainly suggestive, but with no critical investigation about its possibility. It should be explained how it is possible that the unrelative is relativised, that truth is both transcendent and at the same time immanent and 'incarnated'. Finally it should explained how it is possible that truth can be unique whilst delivering itself over to different figures and interpretations.

On the other hand, Pareyson's 'personalistic concern' is to safeguard his own 'ontology of the inexhaustible' against the Hegelian claim to know a complete totality, and against the Heideggerian claim to a negative ontology and a 'mystique of the ineffable' — that is, to safeguard the positive nature and infinite richness of the foundation, keeping person and Being, personalism and ontology together in perfect balance.

It is no accident that the descriptors Pareyson uses for revelatory thought, or for the person who chooses the good and the truth, approach absurdity: 'revelatory lighthouse', 'receiving antenna', 'keeper of the truth', 'tuning apparatus', 'truth-penetrating organ', and so on. Importantly, the terms reserved for the person who 'reveals' match up with those attributed to Being itself: it is 'source and origin', 'stimulus of an interminable explication', 'inexhaustible source of discourses and meanings', 'inexhaustible origin', 'superabundance of light' and 'illuminating richness'.

The danger Pareyson courts is clear: the person acquires the same distinctive characteristics as Being — or, at least, insofar as the person approaches Being, which takes away from him what was supposed to be his primary characteristic, that of being metahistorical and transcendent. From this point of view, the person encapsulates the characteristics which Pareyson rebuked in the idealistic Ego, with its romantic, organicist overtones; in specular fashion, Being tends to appear as an entity, and the ontological difference which Pareyson so valiantly defended is at risk of being lost.

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[12] See note 9 above.

The problem of the distinction between revelatory thought and expressive thought

Furthermore, Pareyson seems not to attend to a fundamental problem underlying the distinction between the two types of thought, revelatory and expressive. The distinction between revelation and expression, as we have seen, is metahistorical and metaphilosophical, an ontological 'criterion' for distinguishing between true and false, good and evil. But if the criterion for distinction is true in itself, it cannot differentiate between and include within itself the truth of revelatory thought, or the falsity of expressive thought. In the first case, truth becomes divided into the greater truth of the criterion and the lesser truth of the revelatory thought contained therein; on this view, Being is both greater and lesser than itself. In the second case, the truth would include the false within itself; on this view, it would still be divided, and would not be truth. The false, in fact, made 'part' of truth, would be true. Yet truth does not distinguish itself into parts, otherwise it would not only be greater and less than itself, but all of its parts would be true. The objection proposed here should not be misunderstood as 'formalistic'. It moves, in fact, on the same ground, that of truth itself. Pareyson in *L'Ontologia della libertà* will argue against those conceptions which make of evil a 'part' and a moment necessary to the achievement of the good, rendering evil itself a 'good'.

This last consideration, logically correct, was neither made as we have just shown on an ontological level of truth. In such a way, Pareyson reveals himself to belong at least partially to the dialectical tradition, which we have seen him criticising elsewhere.

The other option is that the criterion of distinction is neither true nor false. In the latter case, however, it would be a mere requirement and never the ontological criterion, which Pareyson nonetheless established without being troubled by the problems we have seen to infect it to its very roots.

Finally, if what Pareyson claims is true — that truth is available only through personal access to it — this would lead us to conclude that truth is unobtainable, and to what he himself defines in terms of an 'impossibility of comparison', characterising interpretation in general, between truth itself and its formulation.[13] On closer inspection, this problem challenges the very concept of interpreted truth: without the possibility of comparison, how can we trace its nature of truth? By what right can true and false interpretations be distinguished? The distinction between expressive and revelatory thought would be unfounded.

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[13] 'If truth only gives itself within a personal perspective that already interprets and determines it, a comparison between truth in-itself and its formulation within an interpretation is impossible' (Pareyson, 2013 [1975], p 21).

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