The Adventures of Praxis

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The adventures of praxis in Italy, from their outset to their denouement, are convoluted indeed. In order to see this, we must retrace, at least in outline, the genealogical path by which both the modern concept of praxis and the *filosofia della prassi* came to be established and developed. In Italy, as I hope to make clear, the history of praxis must be traced along a way of several turns.

The publication of Marx's *Thesen über Feuerbach* is the event that founds—if indirectly—Italy's *filosofia della prassi*. The Theses are brief, somewhat cryptic, and do not lend themselves to exact paraphrase. For now it is enough to mention that their overall purpose is to criticize the shortcomings of Feuerbach's materialism, particularly in regard to its failure to conceive of thought as a practical, as well as a critical, activity. Beyond this immediate concern, the Theses hint at an application of the mechanism of the Hegelian dialectic to a materialist foundation. The success of such an enterprise would remedy the defects of both materialism and Hegelian idealism.

In the course of the eleven brief Theses, the term "praxis" comes up no less than seven times. This is not surprising, since it is this concept, more than any other, that provides the center of gravity on which the Theses' theoretical substance balances. For Marx, praxis properly conceived, coupled with an accurate comprehension of praxis at work, could correct materialism's narrow focus on contemplation as the source of right knowledge about the world. Accordingly, the proper grasp of the constitution and role of praxis would correct what Marx saw as idealism's near-mystical adherence to the primacy of the theoretical. Thus in the First Thesis we see praxis presented as the antithesis of the "theoretical attitude" ("das theoretische Verhalten"), or defined in terms of "human sensuous activity" ("menschliche sinnliche Tätigkeit"), or similarly, defined in the Fifth Thesis as "practical human-sensuous activity" ("praktische menschliche-sinnliche Tätigkeit").

The standard English translations of the Theses render "praxis" as "practice," although this near-equivalence gives an incomplete sense of the meaning and connotations that the word actually carries. "Practice" denotes the executive, physical side of activity: the perfor-
mance or application of appropriate movements on the one hand, or the repeated exercise that is essential to acquiring executive competence on the other. “Practice” does not necessarily signify human goal-intending behavior—though “praxis” does. Thus it seems to me that the translation of “praxis” by “practice” restricts the horizon of intelligibility within which the meaning of praxis actually functions. This is not to deny that practice does make up an aspect of human goal-intending behavior. “Practice” might well describe the movements that are performed under the interpretive description of an appropriate content state, for instance; or perhaps at a level accompanied by a less fully articulated (if any) content state, “practice” (or “practices”) might signify those habitual competent behaviors performed “unthinkingly.”

Left unnoted by the translation of praxis by “practice,” however, is the cognitive dimension of praxis-as-purposive activity, which is to say that motivational or explanatory content in relation to which an agent intends activity. Yet such cognitive content is an essential dimension of the meaning of praxis. Praxis is not simply purposive, i.e., goal-directed, activity, but purposive activity the purpose of which is known to the actor under the description of an occurrent belief-desire content. To qualify as praxis, then, an action must be determined not only by the movements of which it is comprised, but by the way in which those movements, as well as the motivation for their having been undertaken, are present to the actor. This is what is meant by praxis, and for this reason I will leave the term untranslated.

Marx, of course, was anything but the inventor of the term. We need go no further than the opening line of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* to encounter a reference to *praxis* (I.i.1.). The original meaning of praxis encompasses such notions as action, fact, deed, business, and so forth: in general, practical activity. But as Aristotle uses it, praxis implies a kind of guiding knowledge, or cognitive self-presence, that is bound up with a specifically human consciousness and is not to be found in the behaviors and movements of, for instance, the non-human animals. As an illustration of the specifically human, cognitive dimension of praxis, Aristotle states that sensation (*aesthesis*) alone cannot originate praxis since animals, presumably motivated by sensation, are not capable of praxis. This is not to say that Aristotle’s praxis performs the same theoretical function, and has the same conceptual makeup, as Marx’s praxis. For although Marx’s concept of praxis, like Aristotle’s, is built around the notion of purposive, rational activity, Marx’s concept, unlike Aristotle’s, presupposes the direction and movement of the Hegelian dialectic. And this presupposition is only strengthened, not diminished, by the subsequent thinking of Italy’s *filosofia della prassi*, as we will see. For all practical purposes, in fact, it would not be too much to say that the *filosofia della prassi* is the philos-
ophy of dialectics.

The First Turn Toward Meaning

Antonio Labriola was the first Italian to write of a *filosofia della prassi* in connection with Marx. In his *Discorrendo di socialismo e di filosofia*, which appeared in 1898, Labriola stated that the core of Marx’s historical materialism consisted in a philosophy of praxis. For Labriola, the defining problem of historical materialism therefore did not concern the formal aspects of Marxism, but rather consisted in apprehending things in which these forms are immanent. The resulting “new philosophy”—which is how Labriola referred to historical materialism—must therefore return thought to things, and beyond that, constitute itself as a philosophy that is itself immanent in things as a kind of “pensando in atto.” It is important to note, too, that Labriola was especially drawn to Engels’s *Anti-Dühring*, specifically the thirteenth chapter entitled “Negation of the Negation.” This chapter, with its simultaneous critique and explication of the dialectical dynamic, sets out in a particularly elaborate manner the language and mechanics of the dialectical triad.

With his own writings on dialectical philosophy, Giovanni Gentile continued to develop the line of thought Labriola had begun. In his study entitled *filosofia della prassi*—which appeared very soon after Labriola’s *Discorrendo*—Gentile declared his purpose to be the further articulation of historical materialism. And in the same way that, as an appendix to his *Discorrendo*, Labriola had provided a translation of part of Chapter 13 of Engels’s *Anti-Dühring*, Gentile in *filosofia della prassi* presented the first Italian translation of the Engels edition of the Feuerbach Theses. (We must remember that although Marx wrote these notes on Feuerbach in 1845, they did not appear publicly until Engels edited and published them, in 1888, as an appendix to his own *Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie*.)

In his introductory remarks to the Theses, Gentile quotes approvingly Engels’s assertion that although Marx had not originally intended them for publication, the eleven Theses contained “il germe geniale della nuova intuizione del mondo.” From this seed, Gentile intended to cultivate a new way of philosophizing which, consistent with the Feuerbach Theses themselves, would entail the synthesis of Hegelian dialectic with materialism. In terms of Gentile’s model, it is worth noting here that he, no less than Labriola, admired Engels’s *Anti-Dühring* for its statement of the principles of historical materialism.

Gramsci drew on the precedent provided by Labriola and Gentile when he began to formulate his own version of the *filosofia della prassi*. On the one side, he credited Labriola with having recog-
nized Marxism as an independent, original philosophy. By virtue of this, according to Gramsci, Labriola avoided the errors of the neo-idealist on one side, and the vulgar materialists on the other, and in that regard, Gramsci resolved to continue to develop Labriola’s position. On the other side, Gramsci, like Gentile, found the sources of the new philosophy in the Feuerbach Theses, which he thought restored to wholeness the two essential sides of philosophical life: materialism and the spirit. As expressed in Marxism, Gramsci thought, this wholeness, or totality, would develop along with the auto-development of social relations. It is for this last reason that Gramsci defined the *filosofia della prassi* as the concretization and identification of philosophy with the historical process.

Two points are worth noting in regard to these formative manifestations of the *filosofia della prassi*. The first is the relative unorthodoxy of the positions taken by Labriola, Gentile, and Gramsci. Perhaps it would be an anachronism to call the new *filosofia della prassi* revisionist, but that, in effect, is what it was. The second point provides the basis of the first, and concerns the *de facto* status of the *filosofia della prassi* as a philosophy pointing in the direction of a theory of interpretation rather than in the direction of a theory of political action.

In terms of the first point, Labriola’s attitude toward the sources of historical materialism is exemplary. For him, the writings of Marx and Engels—and particularly of Marx—did not constitute a canonical, or indeed even a finished, body of work. “Marx,” said Labriola in *Del materialismo storico*, “fu incompleto.” Labriola’s judgment was hardly his alone. When faced with an inquiry about the availability of his collected works, Marx himself is supposed to have answered that they had yet to be written. It is no wonder that for Labriola, and for his immediate successors in the Italian philosophical tradition that he helped establish, Marx’s philosophy was not a ready-made, received corpus, but rather a series of fragments and suggestions in need of assembly, development, and expansion. Thus Labriola not only held the opinion that Marx was incomplete, but that he had not given adequate expression to the tendency he epitomized. In a telling footnote to *Discorrendo*, Labriola felt compelled to respond to criticisms that he was either too much or not enough of a follower of Marx. Labriola simply replied that he accepted historical materialism, and tried to develop it as the present state of science would allow. Besides, as we have seen, Labriola was just as likely to turn to Chapter 13 of Engels’s *Anti-Dühring* for the proper interpretation of historical materialism. In any event, Labriola asserted that Marx was trying to press “idee già vecchie” into the service of a new way of thinking. Gentile, for his part, prefaced his translation of the Feuerbach Theses by quoting Engels’s disclaimer regarding the unfinished state of the Theses as he, Engels, found them. In so doing, Gentile only emphasized the Theses’
fragmentary nature, and their unreadiness for the publication that Marx himself apparently did not intend.

Thus it is in light of the relatively unconsolidated character of historical materialism that we can read Gramsci’s criticisms, in his prison notebooks, of the “marxisti ufficiali” who attempted to blend Marxism proper with elements drawn from non-Marxist philosophies. While Gramsci agreed with Labriola’s position that Marxism was itself an independent philosophy, he thought that its study and articulation would require the “massimo scrupolo di esattezza” proper to a philosophy that had yet to be presented in a coherent fashion.

What is most remarkable about the filosofia della prassi, however, is the interpretive turn that it took from the beginning. Because of its focus on the synthesis of materialism and dialectic, the filosofia della prassi developed into a philosophy concerned with the concrete, dialectical grounding of knowledge. But in fact it is not too much to say that the Theses themselves are, if not a prolegomenon to a future hermeneutic, at least a prolegomenon in embryo. In essence, they raise the question regarding the proper grounding of human interpretation of the world. They do so, however, in a particular way. Because they look to a dialectical interpretation of the world, the question of the ground is presented as a series of problems manifested as instances of non-identity, or perhaps more accurately, as instances of identity not yet established. For example, we can find condensed presentations of the dialectical contradiction between part and whole (Theses IX and X); between universal and particular (Theses VI, VII, and IX); and between ideological mis-representation and the actual state of affairs obtaining (Theses IV and VII).

But it is the posited inadequatio of thought to thing that provides a point of entry into the question of the ground. This is set out in the very first of the Theses. In Gentile’s translation, it is formulated as a problem arising from a state of affairs in which “il termine del pensiero, la realtà, il sensibile, è stato concepito soltanto sotto forma di oggetto o di intuizione.” This is to say that the thing is grasped through contemplation (“intuizione,” which is Gentile’s translation of “Anschauung”), and known under the description of an idea. Again, the problem is one that arises from a mode of contemplation that necessarily divides “gli oggetti sensibili dagli intelligibili.” (Here, “intelligenti” is Gentile’s rendering of the original “Gedankenobjekten.”) This is an old problem that can be posited in terms of a dichotomy between percept and concept, or between object and idea. It is not simply assumed that thought has missed—or perhaps has “overshot,” as Adorno would have it later—its object, but that thought has founded itself on a kind of anti-object in the form of the concept. What the concept represents can be characterized as an object correlate structured
like a set, the real-world extension of which is comprised of the objects whose membership is determined on the basis of a similarity and difference in relation to given features. This “intentional set” represents a type of knowledge—or better yet, a type of interpretation—in which a state of affairs is generalized, and superficially, at least, rendered independent of situations of use or engaged activity. Thus as a quasi-independent intelligible, the articulated concept presents the interpretation of the discrete elements of various experiences in terms of more or less decontextualized features understood as constants.

If the question concerning the filosofia della prassi is whether and how “al pensiero umano pervenga la verità oggettiva”—to quote Gentile’s translation of the beginning of the Second Thesis—the short answer is that contemplative thought, with its conceptualization, will not do. Superficially, the matter of the inadequacy of contemplative knowledge would seem to turn on the nature of the conceptual understanding produced by contemplation. Yet this is not so. The question is one of the ground, rather than the form or the content, of contemplative understanding.

The question of the ground becomes especially pressing in the context of a dialectic that is supposed to be materialist. If the end toward which dialectical movement leads and in which it culminates no longer is conceived of as a fully developed, self-rectifying world-correlate—that is to say, as an Idea of the world—then the operative problem does not consist in the question: How is Thought totalized? but rather: On what ground does one bring thought and object into mutual agreement? Historical materialism’s answer, as it is set out in the Second Thesis on Feuerbach, is that the grounding, or “proof,” of thought is in praxis.

By asserting that it is through purposive activity that we can bring thought back to things—or discover it there, as might also be asserted—the Feuerbach Theses suggest that objective knowledge is immanent in the world. We can interpret this in either of two ways. The first interpretation would propose an empirical *adequatio* of concept to percept in which the concept would attempt to capture the autonomous movement of things. Here, nature would be thought of as moving dialectically in itself, and it would fall to thought to find itself immanent in such movement as a prerequisite to understanding that movement. Such a position is consistent within the framework of Engels’s dialectic of nature, and need not concern us here, at least insofar as the filosofia della prassi moves away from certain of Engels’s tenets. For not only does Gramsci detach the filosofia della prassi from Engels, but he also establishes it along the lines of the second possible interpretation. Under his influence, the filosofia della prassi becomes a theory of meaning.

When discussing electricity, for example, Gramsci writes that as a
natural force in itself, it certainly exists prior to its incorporation into human production. But to the extent that it exists only in itself, it is not historical, which is to say that it has not been incorporated into the context of human projects. In order to become part of history, electricity, and indeed anything that is purely in-itself, must function “come elemento di produzione dominato dall’uomo.” It must, in other words, be transformed from something that is in itself into something that is for-us: it must, in other words, be made meaningful. For meaning is such only on a relational basis: it is a relational worth, or constituted value. In the context of the filosofia della prassi, the meaning of objects is in a sense the index of their being for us; that they are for us is therefore their truth.

The meaningful object, as an object-for-us, is such by virtue of its human-constituted intelligibility: its truth in this sense comes to it through the specifically human dimension of intelligibility. Gramsci thus turns the philosophy sketched in the Feuerbach Theses into a theory of truth qua meaning-fulness, and in effect denies the validity of attempts to grasp the object world in itself. His example of the historicization of electricity bears this out. Before it exists for us in our projects, electricity is a fact, but as a purely natural fact that is in-itself, it is meaning-less. To say that it is meaning-less is to say that it has not been constituted as a worth in relation to our projects: its intelligibility has not been established on the basis of its being-for-us.

It is important to note too that in regard to the filosofia della prassi, human being is the being on the basis of which objects are constituted as meaningful. Thus when Gramsci emphasizes the historical nature of the truth of the filosofia della prassi, he means that meaning comes into being through the agency of a historical subject in pursuit of its ends. Thus we see that meaning, as the humanized dimension of truth, is a specifically subjective dimension: it is truth for the historical subject. Once again, this is borne out in the status of meaning as a relational worth, or alternately, imputed value. It is through purposive, expressly human, activity that we can impute meaning to things, and thus conceive of reality subjectively, that is, as being for the subject in terms of that subject’s engaged activity. The subject, as a historical actor, grounds meaning by virtue of its activity.

With this emphasis on subjectively constituted meaning, the filosofia della prassi declines the pursuit of absolute truth. The adequatio of thought to thing is not to be grounded in the correspondence of thinking to things in themselves, but to the grasp of objects as being for us in the course of our activity. One can, of course, conduct dispassionate investigation into natural phenomena, but from the perspective of the filosofia della prassi, the laws, hypotheses, and theories that comprise the scientific truths so derived are simply local truths contained in the overall meaning of scientific activity as such. This mean-
ing is grounded in the status of scientific activity as a purposive
human activity, or praxis. In other words, scientific activity, by virtue
of its making natural phenomena the objects of purposive action in the
world, imparts a human dimension to those phenomena, and in so
doing, makes them meaning-ful. Phenomena scientifically understood
are understood through their human dimension—their being-for-us—and
thus the truths to be obtained from scientific inquiry are contained
within the larger, human, truth of meaning-imparting activity in the
world.

For the filosofia della prassi, then, the solution to the problem of
the ground of thought is not a matter of fact, but of grasping things as
meaning-ful. If, from this perspective, there is a problem with concep-
tual thought, it is not due to its form or content. It is instead due to its
forgetfulness of its ground in the human activity that gives rise to it,
and in terms of which its truths are meaning-ful. It is forgetful, in
other words, of its subjective constitution.

But if we are to remain within the dialectical framework, with its
posited opposition of subject and object mediated by a dynamic of
negation and subsumption, we must restrict the understanding of
meaning to a notion of instrumental worth, or value. As with any
activity, of course, the environment broadly understood has an instru-
mental meaning for the engaged agent acting in it and on it. The envi-
ronment is a now enabling, now passive or resistant presence which
must be modified or which must be made to accommodate modification.
The instrumental nature of the environment’s meaning derives from
its constitution as a tool or site in relation to the agent’s present pro-
ject, which is intended to have a certain effect on the environment.
Within the framework of the dialectic, though, instrumentality arises
as an outgrowth of a specifically ontological opposition arising from
the fundamental and irreducible division of subject from object. The
dialectic’s ontological commitment is to the being of the subject and
the being of the object, which can meet only subsequently on the field
of meaning constituted by praxis. This meaning is a meaning-for-us, as
we have seen. But the effect of this state of affairs is that instrumentali-
ty results from such dialectical grounding of meaning in the subject.
The relation of opposition in which the rule of negation consists
requires the subsumption of the object’s resistance to the subject, and
that subsumption will take the form of an instrumentality by virtue of
which an approximation of the subsuming interest is attained.

The Existential/Phenomenological Turn

At this juncture, new problem comes up, and it is this: how do
we ground the object-for-us in such a way that ontological alienation
is eliminated? This is precisely the problem that Pietro Chiodi address-
Chiodi's comments are not specifically directed toward the *filosofia della prassi*—they are instead intended as a critical evaluation of Sartre's then-relatively new *Critique de la raison dialectique*. They are particularly applicable to the similar, dialectical model of praxis inherited by the *filosofia della prassi* from its Hegelo-Marxist sources. It is worth remarking that Chiodi's critique of the ontology implicit in dialectics is an outgrowth of Italy's own school of positive existentialism—an existentialism that explicitly presented itself as a maturation of the "negative" existentialism exemplified by Sartre's *L'Etre et le néant*. If this latter work could be seen as negative, it is because so much of the structure of its ontology is derived from Hegel, and particularly from master-slave dialectic. By the time of the *Critique de la raison dialectique*, the problem of alienation is treated from a self-consciously dialectical perspective that focuses on the subjective reappropriation of the world. Sartre's book was intended as a correction of those dialectical approaches that neglect the role of the subject; in this respect, his work is comparable to that of the *filosofia della prassi*. Thus Chiodi's remarks in regard to Sartre are in many respects of great interest to our discussion of the *filosofia della prassi*.

Chiodi's criticism of the subjective dialectic is best summarized by his assertion that the *Critique's* explicitly Hegelianized existentialism embodies an alienation of subject and object that is "metaphysical, and thus ineliminable." It is precisely the irreducibility of the ontological categories of subject and object, and their basic relation of negation, that produces this alienation—an alienation, Chiodi asserts, that cannot be overcome, but can only be "suppressed." What is especially problematic for Chiodi is the status of human subjectivity. Given the dialectic's implicit commitment to an ontology of alienation, Chiodi asserts, human subjectivity becomes the basis on which the "connections of objectivity" must be founded. Such a relation, Chiodi states, must result in the subject's suppression of the object through interiorization of the object; once again, meaning as valorization comes at the price of an instrumentalizing subsumption. This problem is no less pressing for the *filosofia della prassi*, for it is one that arises out of the grounding of meaning in a transcendental subject.

In his own meditation on the meaning and function of praxis, Enzo Paci continued along in the direction of the *filosofia della prassi*’s response to the problem concerning the grounding of cognition. This is a problem that Paci, as a direct descendent of Labriola as well as of Husserl, inevitably inherited. For Paci, the question of praxis comes down to a matter of dialectical reappropriation in which human being returns to itself in the meaning-content of its acts. Such reappropriation both embodies and reveals the subjectivity that is the "meaning of historical truth." The truth content of history, Paci implies, consists in
the subjective reappropriation of the totalizing processes of history, and this reappropriation is nothing less than the realization of the human meaning that derives from praxis' subjective dimension. With this emphasis on subjectivity, Paci explicitly acknowledges the influence of Labriola, who, Paci reminds us, spoke of human being as that which can act as "we,"38 which is to say as a self-presence acting under its own descriptions and cognitive of itself as doing so. In accordance with Labriola's position, Paci approvingly cites Gramsci's dictum that human being is the "active principle" of history,39 producing itself even as it produces its milieu.

Paci thus holds that the dialectic must traverse human subjectivity in order that rationality, as the directing force behind human intentionality, be understood in its true nature as praxis.40 What Paci is getting at here—by way of the precedents provided by Labriola and Gramsci—is the need for praxis of any and every variety to carry a kind of self-awareness through which the engaged actor, regardless of the field of activity in which he or she is engaged, will be mindful of the status of that activity as having come into being in order to fulfill human needs, and as having been directed toward humanly-constituted ends. Notably, Paci interprets the Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach in light of the interpretive revelation afforded by the grasp of human intentional activity in its self-awareness. In the Sixth Thesis, Marx takes Feuerbach to task for not having grasped human essence as concrete. Feuerbach's failure, Paci suggests, is the outgrowth of his failure to conceive of human being as an historically-situated, practically-intending being. It is because of this latter failure, Paci states, that Feuerbach conceived of human being as a purely natural phenomenon. Instead, the essence of a situated, practically-intending being must be understood as Marx described it in the Tenth Thesis: socially. For his part, Paci defined the social essence of human being in terms of its telos: that is, as a movement and direction on the way to becoming fulfilled in the consciousness of history's unfolding.41 It is precisely this telos that Paci thought separates human society from purely natural aggregations and activities.42

The subjective reappropriation of history coincides with the unfolding revelation of history in its humanly-meaningful dimension. Reappropriation is in a sense a point of arrival that is just as much an arriving-toward as an arrived-at, which is to say that it is destining process as much as destination. Practically speaking, the process of reappropriation is embodied in the intentional actions and motivated behaviors that comprise the history that will be reappropriated. Accordingly, it is this behavioral aspect of meaning that Paci chooses to emphasize. This he does to the extent that he, in keeping with the tradition of the filosofia della prassi, understands the humanly meaningful dimension of history as having arisen from the real and concrete
actions of situated agents acting in the world.  

Paci’s emphasis on the behavioral simply results from his earlier emphasis on the status of human being as an active, history-producing agent. In a sense, Paci recasts the problem of the cognitive ground in behavioral terms, and pushes to the foreground a reworked dialectic of meaning-product and meaning-production. This dialectic does not posit as its motivating opposition a contradiction between an ideal form (or concept) and the object or object world it is meant to describe and explain, but instead involves an opposition between a meaningful world-correlate as a product of human intentional activity, and the production of that world correlate in relation to goal-intending activity. Thus for Paci, the site on which this unfolding will take place, and in which it will be revealed, is the Lebenswelt, or network of historically contingent meanings in which any historical agent is situated. That these meanings are historically contingent only means that they are the products of human activity transpiring in time in a world made humanly meaningful by that activity. This is to say that the Lebenswelt, as the site of praxis, is the product of praxis as well. As such, the Lebenswelt, as a network of meanings, is a kind of supervenient artifact of human intentional behaviors.

As with Gramsci, Paci is concerned only with the world for us. But Paci radicalizes this aspect of Gramsci’s thinking. Here the key is in Paci’s background in phenomenology, with its concept of the social aggregate understood as an interpreted environment of common meanings. For the Lebenswelt is nothing if not the aggregation of the world as it is interpreted for us and before us. Thus Paci can further attenuate the pure and independent ontological claims of the object-world by asserting that the network of meanings (in which we as situated, historical agents find ourselves) pre-exists—and in fact conditions and constitutes—the ontological concepts through which we encounter the environment around us. This attenuation is further supported by Paci’s reformulation of the dialectical dyad in terms of subject and situation rather than in terms of subject and object as such. The object is no longer the object that simply stands against a subject, but is an object situated within an encompassing network in which its meaning structures it from within. With this radicalized conception of the world-for-us as a Lebenswelt, Paci effectively brackets out any question of the need to reconcile the object world as such to an alienated, interpretive correlate.

And yet alienation is not entirely banished from this dialectic. Indeed, the dialectic structure, even when applied to the way we exist the Lebenswelt, requires such alienation. The network of meanings, though produced by human activity—the Lebenswelt is, Paci reminds us, “formata da operazioni originarie”—stands as the site of the negation of the very human agency that made it. In terms of content,
Paci suggests that the *Lebenswelt* is experienced as need, the meaning of which is human lack embodied as necessity. Structurally, though, the relation between human being and its surrounding network of meanings must be posited as being one of negation as well. At a fundamental level, we might say that if the meaning of the world is embodied as lack, it is because the world as meaning has been alienated from the agents that produced and continue to produce it. They cannot recognize it as their own. Thus this network of meanings is experienced only as exteriority; the relation between human being and human meaning, as aggregated in the *Lebenswelt*, is one of subject and objectified subjectivity. Considered dialectically, the *Lebenswelt* functions as the externalized signification of human agency: whether these significations originate in the activity of a single subject or a macro-subject (such as, for instance, "i gruppi e i nuclei intersoggettivi"), they stand outside of and against the producing subject as the subject’s alienated meaning. That the *Lebenswelt* is prior to any particular actor only reinforces its status as an alienated object: it is as if the actor must come to a body of preconstituted meanings into which creative entry is forbidden. This negation reaches forward from the past to reinforce the quasi-ontological alienation of human being from the meanings it has called into being in its activity, and it is only at some point in the future, through the decisive break of the dialectical Aufhebung, that those meanings can be reappropriated.

From the inevitability of this prior alienation arises the specific profile of Paci’s concept of the *telos* of dialectical reappropriation. If the alienated *Lebenswelt* is (mis)recognized only as an exteriority, overcoming this misrecognition is the purpose toward which history must move. The reappropriation of the *Lebenswelt* is precisely the recovery of alienated meaning by the discovery of the human dimension that forms and informs the *Lebenswelt* to begin with. Human being must reveal the *Lebenswelt* as humanly meaningful, and thus negate the negation of itself by its alienated product; thus accomplished, historical alienation would be canceled and overcome, and subsequent history established on a higher plane. The truth content of history would be simultaneously revealed and established by the *Aufhebung* of negation in exteriority. That, for Paci, is the overriding goal of praxis: its auto-recovery as the ground and developing producing force behind meaning.

For Paci, then, the dialectic of praxis is recast as a dialectic of interpretative discovery, with an emphasis on the reappropriation of meaning as revelatory moment of truth. Paci’s own *filosofia della prassi* can thus be understood to have taken a pronounced turn toward hermeneutics. Within this dialectical hermeneutic, praxis functions as the engine driving the emerging coming-into-awareness of situation as humanly meaningful. Interpretation itself qualifies as a kind of praxis,
of course, since it is a directed activity developing in the service of a specific telos. Thus the dialectic of interpretation is embodied as a goal-directed behavior intended toward the reconciliation of subject and situation as sharing a community of being brought into being by the humanized truth of meaningfulness. Praxis, as the futural movement and direction of human activity, reveals the meaningfulness of situation as it plays out its part as the "active principle" of history. Paci's dialectical phenomenology thus further elaborates the interpretive tendency of the filosofia della prassi by focusing attention on the situational, interpretive, constitutively prior basis of meaning. In effect, Paci's insistence is on the status of the product of praxis not only as meaningful, that is, as having a worth arising in relation to the active human modification of the environment, but as a developing interpretation immanent in activity and making itself (increasingly) present to activity as well.

The Weak Turn

The developing self-presentation of the basis of interpretation, however, can only be realized at the price of the refusal of the dialectical negation and Aufhebung. Certainly, this is an at least paradoxical contention in regard to a dialectical philosophy. But such is the view of Vattimo, and it is worth examining as the logical outcome of the impasse at which a dialectics of negation arrives. Vattimo fully recognizes his own position as an inheritor of the dialectical tradition; what I would like to do is show how this position of inheritance is realized in Vattimo's attraction to the notion of Verwindung. For it is through Verwindung that we can see an effective turn from the understanding of history as a futurally postponed telic reaching, to the imagining of interpretation as a historico-cumulative tradition. This, as we will see, entails the substitution of method for praxis as the organizing constant of the interpretive equation.

Although Vattimo borrows the term Verwindung from Heidegger, as an explicitly central concept it is more important to Vattimo than to Heidegger. To judge from the infrequency of its occurrence and the lack of overt attention and elaboration given it, Verwindung is a minor element in Heidegger's vocabulary. With Vattimo, things are quite different. Not only does Verwindung occur more often in Vattimo's writings than in Heidegger's, but Vattimo explicitly meditates on the possible meanings, nuances, and implications of Verwindung and the relation it signifies. As we will see, this relation provides the conceptual matrix within which to situate Vattimo's thought vis-à-vis twentieth century metaphysics—and particularly dialectics.47 I therefore feel that it is appropriate to discuss as Vattimo's own the content of Verwindung—at least to the extent that Vattimo has come to articulate
Vattimo’s reading of Verwindung, perhaps best stated in an article entitled “Verwindung: Nihilism and the Postmodern in Philosophy,” is multifaceted. The basic meaning of the word, however, is fairly simple. Verwindung means “distortion,” while the verb verwinden means “twist,” or “to get over.” Verwindung is predominantly employed as a technical term in the context of engineering, its sense being that of a warping or torsion of material. On a more figurative—but still relatively fundamental—level, Verwindung yields “transformation,” or more generally, a change of state. Vattimo derives this meaning from the evidence of Verwindung’s occurrence in Heidegger’s Überwindung der Metaphysik, but both noun and verb function in similar conceptual roles in Identität und Differenz and “Der Spruch des Anaximander.” The English translators of these latter two works give Verwindung as “surmounting” and “transformation,” respectively, while the translation of verwinden in Identität und Differenz is “turn.” But what interests Vattimo the most about Verwindung is the sense, extrapolated from verwinden, of surpassing and/or recovery (in the sense of recovering from an illness) and more important still, an accepting resignation. This deeper implication of acceptance derives not only from Vattimo’s reading of the contexts in which Heidegger sets the term, but from its other nuances, particularly those regarding health.

Verwindung, like Aufhebung, is a term describing a relation to an antecedent state or condition. Also like Aufhebung, the state arising from the antecedent state is a changed state in which something of the previous state is preserved. It is interesting to note that while Vattimo likes to emphasize Verwindung as a convalescent recovery, his use carries the force of recovery as a gathering in or salvaging of a thing that is attenuated or broken. Thus if Verwindung is a transformation, it is one that conserves as it transforms, while nonetheless managing to distort that which it transforms. (What comes to mind here is another colloquial meaning of verwinden, which is “to get the better of.”) Yet the temporal outlooks implicit in the two concepts vary enormously. It is not simply that Verwindung demands a certain attentiveness to the past—although this it does, as Vattimo is quick to assert. It is that Verwindung, unlike Aufhebung, temporalizes on the basis of the past rather than on the basis of a future that has yet to be. This difference in temporal constitution becomes especially obvious when we contrast the interpretive stance of Vattimo’s Verwindung to that of Paci’s dialectic.

By definition—and by explicit formulation as well—Paci’s dialectic of interpretation reaches toward a state of resolution postponed until some moment in the future. The reconciliation of subject and situation in the recovery of meaning is something that is to come; its attainment signifies the end of history not only in that it terminates
history as a kind of obscure groping toward concealed meaning, but also in that it provides the goal toward which history's groping reaches. It is break and completion, destining and destination, all at once. The moment of revelation is at the same time the moment of *Aufhebung*: of the cancellation of the past and its internal negations, and the establishment of the point of rest and completion at a higher level. Yet the future as the site of reconciliation represents not so much the fulfillment of hope as it does an index of the alienation of the present. The dialectic's redemptive eschatology has been let out to play in the field of meaning. In effect, one looks to the future to provide the discovery of that which already is, and in terms of which the future itself is intelligible (as, it must be added, is the past).

Under the terms of Vattimo's *Verwindung*, the site of the source of the discovery of meaning moves from a more or less distant and as yet ungiven future, and back to a past that, on the contrary, is indeed given. By moving the site of the source of discovery from future to past, the weak hermeneutic eliminates the structural need for a reconciliation that would in turn surmount and harmonize conflicting antecedent elements. The antithetical relationship itself is substantially reconfigured as a second order phenomenon arising from a prior intelligibility. It is no longer a matter of an after-the-fact reconciliation establishing a common footing for negatively related (and irreducible) modes of being, but rather of a recovery of the prior constitution of the meaning-fulness of those modes of being. Accordingly, the temporal structure of the weak hermeneutic is proleptic, in that it brings forward into present concerns the prior background of the given set of behavioral/interpretive dispositions, beliefs, and narratives. It is this given that comprises the content of tradition. With its commitment to a proleptic temporalization, the weak hermeneutic can claim to replace the eschatology of the dialectic with the recovery of tradition.

Coda

If we consider the completion of a tradition to arrive with its articulation and administration, then Vattimo's weak hermeneutic effectively completes that of the *filosofia della prassi*'s dialectical philosophy. This it does by providing the filosofia della prassi with a meta-narrative. For if the coherence of a tradition is afforded by the higher-order discourses—the narratives—that comprise and characterize it, its tending and management come in the form of a meta-narrative. (Here, I am using "narrative" to mean an ordered representation of articulated practices and problems characteristic of and defining a practical field or tradition.) This meta-narrative is a meta-narrative to the extent that it is a later, more highly articulated, and partly transcendent narrative that takes as its object the procedures and habits
that give the tradition’s narratives their peculiar collective profile. Thus to some extent, the administration of a tradition entails the elaboration or codification of its background, albeit at a remove. For it is the function of a meta-narrative to articulate, that is, to investigate and bring to expression in a narrative of its own, the conditions of possibility implicit in the tradition’s structures and instantiations. Such articulation takes the form of an explication of the predominantly implicit rules and dispositions forming and informing the tradition in question. To administer in this sense is to tend to or at-tend to in an attitude of dis-cover. What is dis-covered are the habits of thought and the corresponding ontological outlook woven into the texture of the tradition’s narratives.

Yet at the same time, to tend to is in a sense to care for, or to serve (ad-ministrare), which is to say to be engaged with that which one approaches in an attitude of attention. (Not so curiously, perhaps, this shading of administration harmonizes with the nuance of Verwindung that particularly attracts Vattimo: that of the recovery from illness.) This should not be construed to mean that the administration of a tradition ideally or necessarily remains subordinate to those prior narratives now being administered. In any event, we might remember that to administer to a patient is to serve that patient for the purpose of bringing about a change in state. Here, attending to and serving are prerequisites for transformation.

This last observation holds as well for the hermeneutic meta-narrative, which effects a shift in tradition by making explicit the tradition’s historico-cumulative character, which is to say its status as a contingent accumulation of meanings couched in interpretive and narrative structures. These meanings and structures project themselves forward as the set of problems that form the nucleus of the narrative’s intersection with its practically-conceived environment. If, in effect, a tradition’s narrative is the elaboration of the problems given in its environment, the meta-narrative is the articulation of the interpretive conditions that allow those problems to arise as they do, in the peculiar forms that they take. By articulating those conditions, the formulation of meta-narrative brings to a tradition the sense of denaturalization proper to a second-order awareness of contingency. What in a tradition may once have seemed natural and of a timeless constitution admitting of no beginning or end no longer does, or even can.

The second-order perspective of hermeneutics presupposes its object to be a construction of interpretive conventions. This quite naturally leads to a grasp of that object as a generative matrix of figures—and it is with the figurative dimension of tradition that weak hermeneutics is particularly concerned. Thus in The End of Modernity, Vattimo discusses a phenomenon he describes as the fabulization of the world—a fabulization that simply is the other side of reification.
Such fabulization arises from the absorption into language (or, more broadly, narrative) of our access to the world.\textsuperscript{55} It is here, in its consideration of modes of narrative as encompassing fabulized constructs of the world, that the weak hermeneutic recovers a key aspect of dialectics, and thus of the \textit{filosofia della prassi}. For dialectics is nothing if not a fabulization of the world—a quasi-mythic way of making intelligible the movement and works of purposeful human behaviors directed toward alleviating need. The entire language of contradiction and negation, which functions as both a subordinate and constitutive figuration relative to the crowning trope of \textit{Aufhebung}, is itself an elaborate play of metaphor. This becomes apparent when we recall that dialectics characterizes all relations between entities as negation, when in fact those relations may span a range encompassing opposition (being positioned over against, though not necessarily in conflict), contemporaneous coexistence, temporal succession, sequential development, and of course, outright conflict. This list does not exhaust the possibilities of relations between \textit{relata}, but does show that universally posited negation, as a kind of figurative transposition of the law of the excluded middle, not only reduces \textit{relata} to two (negatively) opposing modes of being, but also reduces the range of possible relations between \textit{relata} to a struggle ending in mutual annihilation and transposition to a purportedly higher state. The ontological reductiveness of this figurative adaptation of the language of logic is only underscored by the complex trope of \textit{Aufhebung}, which is to say by the so-called negation of the negation, which brings on the supercession of irreducible elements by the higher state that cancels them.

With the substitution of \textit{Verwindung} for \textit{Aufhebung}, weak thought simply underlines the organizing role of the latter concept. For the figurative constitution of dialectics turns on the weighted metaphor of \textit{Aufhebung}. This concept—itself highly figurative—carries the normative force needed to make the dialectical triad cohere. Indeed, as the third term of the triad, it is the triad’s coherence in an essential way. Vattimo himself has remarked on the normative coherence that \textit{Aufhebung} brings to dialectics.\textsuperscript{56} The need for a specifically normative coherence becomes particularly apparent when we consider the eschatological constitution of the dialectical triad.

The underpinnings of the weak hermeneutic, of course, are no less figurative than are those of dialectics. The difference lies in the weak hermeneutic’s apprehension of itself as figurative, and beyond that, as having been given its specifically figurative shape on the basis of its position as administrator of a particular metaphysical inheritance. Vattimo himself has acknowledged that the weak hermeneutic is conceivable only if one assumes the dialectical inheritance.\textsuperscript{57} In fact it is weak thought’s status as a meta-narrative that allows it not only to
substitute *Verwindung* for *Aufhebung*, but to convert the *filosofia della prassi*'s concern with the subjective agency inherent in praxis into a preoccupation with the enabling conditions put into practice by method.

From the perspective offered by the administrating meta-narrative, method is not simply a procedure, but a complex of interpretive/interpreted skills and techniques that stands in relation to a particular way of being situated. This is so since method is bound up with the demands of the successful performance and integration of competent activity, and therefore presupposes a certain horizon or multiple horizons of usage that constitute a given way of proceeding with which method, in order to be valid, must be in accordance. Method is not simply a way of doing things; it is a way of doing things in an established manner, or in relation to an established manner, since it is through method that channels of transmission are kept open in their characteristic ways.

To say that method is a way of doing things in relation to an established manner is to emphasize the largely improvisational nature of procedural repetition and reproduction. To some extent, this kind of methodological improvisation—which always takes place within limits—provides the conditions of possibility out of which meta-narrative can arise in the first place. Method thus implies a degree of conventionalism—not in the sense that it is formed and therefore restricted by a kind of circumscription by consensus, but in the sense of an interpretation of an ethos that frequently is not brought to complete expression at the level of explicit reflection, theorization, and commentary.58

Here I would like to assert that interpretation by no means is limited to, or even primarily, a phenomenon dependent on language, or even the occurrence of conceptual or intentional-semantic contents.59 By the time one’s access to the world has been absorbed into language, one already has embodied and lived it in terms of one’s knowing how to get by in an environment one’s competent actions reveal as intelligible. There is here an executive competence “known” as a presence to self as an assured, self-referential causality independent of the explicit regulation to be had in terms of occurrent content states. One frequently employs method without necessarily being aware of the fact: like the network of meanings in which we inevitably are situated, method often is conspicuous by its seeming transparency. For in fact one is in a field already knowing how to function within it, whether or not one has explicitly articulated one’s place, or indeed, the content of the field in which one finds oneself. And it is through such behaviors, embodied in method, that one identifies oneself as being within an interpretive matrix, or tradition.

Thus method, properly conceived, turns on the notion of an agent’s being situated in a preexisting field constituted by prior mean-
ings. And it is here that the character of method deviates from that of praxis. For method precedes praxis, and provides the actions that comprise praxis a basis in skillful manipulation. Method is an accumulated inheritance made immediately useful. Even so, as a kind of re-situated, de-subjectified praxis, method recovers something of the original meaning of praxis as a guiding knowledge.

If anything, it is the task of meta-narrative to reflect on the methods it finds ready for use—even as it is guided by them. Method is not only the tool that meta-narrative finds ready for use and accordingly employs, it is also the object of its reflection. With this reflection it naturally follows that the role of the subject as originator of activity will be re-imagined. Rather than being creator and constitutor, the subject instead will be envisioned as having been constituted by the meanings available to it, which well up in the guise of the descriptions under which its activity can be undertaken, and indeed even imagined. To whatever extent a subject can be an originator, it must also be an executor. If the *filosofia della prassi* pushed the role of the subject to the foreground, the meta-narrative of the weak hermeneutic draws our attention to the background: that is, to the situatedness of the subject, apart from which it (literally) would make no sense, and its activities would have no meaning. If praxis is the pursuit of subjectively posited goals, method is what allows such goals to be posited in the first place.

Emphasis on the interpretive background notwithstanding, meaning does not lose its character as a relational worth. It is true, however, that meaning must be rethought as being in relation not to a subject as an autonomous ground of action, but rather to the subject’s environment, which provides the interpretive-interpreted background without which subject and object could not even emerge.

With praxis seen against the background of method, the interpretive project begun with the Theses on Feuerbach comes full circle. Praxis is brought back beyond the *filosofia della prassi*, to Aristotle: for method is the guiding understanding that directs action, and the weak hermeneutic is the meta-narrative that articulates it. The relation of the subject to the environment is mirrored in the relation of praxis to method, and the search for the subjective ground of knowledge takes us instead to the background.

NOTES

1. For the German text of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, see Karl Marx Friedrich Engels *Studienausgabe* in 4 Bänden, Herausgegeben von Iring Fetscher: Band I Philosophie (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Bucherei, 1966), 139-44. This volume contains both the Marx and the Engels versions of the Theses.

2. I have in mind the translations by the Foreign Languages Publishing

3. This is a somewhat simplified characterization of the makeup of the content states constituting praxis. "Desire," for instance, is a general term encompassing an actor's receptivities, more than one of which may be relevant at any one time, and the actor's degree of awareness of which may vary. Similarly, "belief" encompasses doxastic and epistemic contents. Nor does any of this even take into account the various modes of attunement and mental/affective dispositions that color any given act, and influence its chances of successful execution.


5. VI. ii. 2. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the question of whether or not non-human animals act under intentional contents. Suffice it say that the explanation and prediction of the behavior of non-human animals – particularly the higher ones – gain something in coherence if we act as if they do.


8. Labriola, 770.

9. ibid.


11. Gentile, 64.

12. ibid.


15. Gramsci, 424.


18. Labriola, 650.

19. Tucker, xxxix. We must also remember that key works of Marx's philosophical writings did not appear until well after the deaths of both Marx and Engels. *The German Ideology*, for instance, for which the Feuerbach Theses provided a kind of outline, was not published until 1932.

20. Labriola, 768, note 1.


22. Gramsci, 422. Gramsci had in mind Rosa Luxemburg among the official Marxists.

23. Gramsci, 419.

24. There is a problem of the unreconciled universal and particular in the Feuerbach Theses, which is stated in Thesis VI as a problem of human essence and its concretization. This seems to constitute a problem of a some-
what different order than that of the reconciliation of the part to the whole—though it is comparable. What Marx seems to have in mind in the former case is not “the participation of an individual in the totality of which it is a constituent element, but rather the participation of the individual within its encompassing feature (or set) identification. This latter is a problem of instantiation by the individual of general class, or set, characteristics. It is in Thesis X that we find a statement of the problem of “the participation of the particular in the universal as revealed by the particular’s relation to and within the whole.”

27. Gramsci, 444.
28. ibid.
32. Klaus Hartmann’s Sartre’s Ontology (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1966) is a good guide to the Hegelianism of L’Etre et le néant.
33. Chiodi, 135.
34. Chiodi, 139, xi.
36. Chiodi, 100.
38. Paci, Function, 305.
40. Paci, Function, 305-06.
41. Paci, Function, 313.
42. Paci, Function, 316.
44. Paci, Fenomenologia, 21.
45. Paci, Fenomenologia, 26.
46. Paci, Fenomenologia, 25.
47. This is not to say that Vattimo’s thought simply is the function of a reaction to the failure of dialectics. As Giovanna Borradori points out, weak thought is more than a post-Marxist discourse. See Giovanna Borradori, Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1988), 15.
53. Although this is a potential difficulty, and one that Vattimo has acknowledged. In an earlier critique of Vattimo’s position, I emphasized just this problem. See my “There is No ‘No’ There: Contemporary Italian Nihilism and Metaphorical Reason”, *The Stanford Italian Review*, Vol. X No. 2, p. 225-40.
54. Thus it is for good reason that Carravetta states that Vattimo’s notion of Verwindung carries genealogical implications. See Peter Carravetta, *Prefaces to the Diaphora: Rhetorics, Allegory, and the Interpretation of Postmodernity* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue UP, 1991), 231.
58. At this turn I would like to recall Peter Carravetta’s suggestion that the theory-praxis conjunction can be recast in terms of theory-method. See his “Repositioning Interpretive Discourse: From ‘Crisis of Reason’ to ‘Weak Thought,’” in *Differentia* 2, Spring 1988, 111.
59. Vattimo, too, claims that the weak hermeneutic should be more than a “theory of technical interpretation.” Vattimo, “Verwindung,” 14.