

WHAT NEED, WHAT METAPHYSICS?

Gianni Vattimo

A spectre is haunting the (late industrial) world: the new (or old) need for metaphysics, for absolute truth, even for eternal life. First of all, I suggest asking whether there really is a (be it new or old) need for metaphysics. In a world where both the control over the lives of citizens and security policies are more and more oppressive, it seems that the absolute truth of traditional metaphysics is exactly what one does no longer need. What we need is rather a critical attitude, which should abandon the absolutisms of the past together with all their tragic social implications.

As Martin Heidegger taught us in *Sein und Zeit*, in order to answer a philosophical question, we should begin by wondering *who* is asking the question. Hence the provocative meaning of the title I gave to my paper, as it is not clear where the new or old request for metaphysics is coming from. What is immediately clear is that the request for secure and unquestionable certainties, upon which our social and individual life is supposed to be funded, is brought forward by the *auctoritates*. As an Italian, I cannot avoid recalling that the call for fixed “structures,” that is, to non-negotiable values, is a constant theme of the Pope’s teachings in Rome. However, through a different authority and meaning, something similar occurs with the claims coming from the laws of economics and in general from those values politics ought to aspire to. We are repeatedly told, for example, that democracy must be imposed in the entire world through wars even if the traditions of other populations are violated. The so-called “international community,” constantly evoked in these cases, presumes to have the obligation and right to “take down dictators” (such as Gaddafi or Assad) or to intervene wherever they believe that human fundamental rights have been violated. Although this seems to be an indisputable argument, we must admit that it has been too often used to cover the imposed ideological interest of certain groups. The same goes for the so-called “economic laws” which are often presented as objective, that is, as “natural” as the law of gravity, as if they were the results of “scientific” studies by allegedly neutral subjects.

Perhaps, it is precisely in relation to the science’s claim of neutrality, and in particular in relation to economics’ claim of neutrality, that we can talk about a “new” need for metaphysics. In this case, the term “metaphysics”

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should primarily be intended as emphasizing the *meta* (“beyond”) in its Greek literal meaning: feeling the need for something “beyond” physics, that is, beyond scientific certainty. Once again, the need for metaphysics in this sense can have different origins. If we think about the Church and the religious authorities that assume they are founded on “revealed” and transcendent certainties and/or in the “natural” constitution of the human being and the world (this latter justification applies equally for “human rights”), then the term “beyond” refers to a knowledge that is much more valid than the one provided by scientific reason and also feels superior to it. We are facing here a sort of conflict between two claims of absoluteness: that of the Churches, say, and that of the so-called “scientific community;” a dispute that recalls the clashes between the Papacy and the Empire in Medieval Europe. Remembering this remote analogy is interesting because it allows us to see how in modernity the position occupied by (the secular) reason of the Empire was actually taken up by science. Science can therefore be regarded as being the incarnation of the recent “secular” power that used to face the “traditional” power of the Church and the *auctoritates* founded on transcendence. This hypothesis is not extravagant if we think of how modern science arose side by side with political and economical power: scientists today require very expensive and complicated machines and laboratories that force them to count upon private or public funding which they must somehow justify—for instance by directing their research towards a certain terrain rather than another (weapons instead of medicines, drugs for common diseases of wealthy populations rather than poor ones).

In this way we are approaching a variety of meanings of the need for metaphysics that always have a lot to do with relations of power. The question that occurs immediately is: isn’t there also a more “genuine” need for metaphysics that does not have anything to do with *metaphysics itself*? The first example that comes to mind, probably because it is the most classic and emblematic, is that of the French Revolution, which we all regard as the historical source of modernity. The Enlightenment and the thought of the *philosophes*, which are at the basis of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen that guided the revolution, also wanted to be a metaphysical position; the *philosophes* pretended to affirm universally valid truths for every human intellect. But even these truths were affirmed for reasons of power, or better, for reasons of “lack of power.” The French Revolution, and the many revolutions that throughout centuries have claimed universal human rights against the demands of monarchs or dominant classes, were not enacted for the love of the universal truth of these principles. In some sense, the groups or entire populations that came to support these principles have “discovered” them because of their own dispossessed condition. As we all know, this is the classical thesis (obviously still metaphysical) of Marx, who argued that the proletariat, who is dispossessed of all his goods, holds a right to revolution because, not being blinded by any propriety interest, knows and embodies the truth of human essence. What difference is there between the metaphysical need affirmed by the *auctoritates* that regret the loss of civil and religious morality generated by the post-modern “nihilism” and by a spread multiculturalism, that is, by an excess of freedom, on one hand, and the need for metaphysics of the French revolutionaries, or of the rebellious American colonies of His British Majesty, or of all those revolutionaries who feel legitimized by universal “human rights”, on the other?

The difference, as we can easily see, lays in the fact that some invoke metaphysics to preserve the *status quo*—the traditional family values, the sacred power of religious hierarchies, the “objective” validity of official science, or simply the indisputability of mainstream opinion of the big newspapers and TV networks; while others appeal to metaphysics as a truth that critically opposes the *status quo* and wishes to change it. A statement by a great American thinker (and friend) who recently passed away comes to mind here: “Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself”.¹

In this sense, the “need for metaphysics” is not something new, as it has the same history as that of humanity—or at least of the *homo sapiens*, the *homo politicus* who lives in a society and must face the relations of power. Obviously, the mythical animal of the primitive woods, if it ever existed, in the age of *bellum omnium contra omnes*, did not need metaphysics to legitimize its own power claims. If today there actually is a new need for metaphysics, it is because, in a paradoxical way, we are again in the condition that used to belong to the mythical primitive man: this idea can be expressed with Nietzsche’s aphorism with which he begins the first

volume of *Human, all too Human*: “Almost all the problems of philosophy once again pose the same form of question as they did two thousand years ago”.² But this occurs, as Nietzsche indicates in so many other pages of his writings, because we live in a society characterized by an “Indian wildness” (the capitalist society that was already flourishing in his years), where—and this is the meaning of nihilism we refer to when we talk about post-modernism—the supreme values are devaluated and where a polytheism of values, as Max Weber called it, spreads around, one in which nothing functions anymore as a definitive point of reference and in which we must recognize that it is impossible to talk of universal truths from a divine point of view. Even the different meanings, as I have suggested, that the need of metaphysics can assume, express the polytheism of values which are made possible by the event of nihilism.

To sum up: the need for metaphysics characterizes all the history of the civilized man—who in the community in which he lives requires legitimations both in relation to his fellows and his own moral conscience (which has interiorized the community’s expectations and towards which he feels responsible). Today this request is felt in a much more overbearing and urgent manner because the same conditions of civilization within which we live have directed us towards the polytheism of values or to the so called (following Nietzsche) school of suspicion: we no longer trust the universal claims because in the modern world, more and more globalized, different cultures and “metaphysics” have come forward. This has also occurred because the universalism of European and Western philosophy has been (practically) questioned by the revolts of the so-called primitive populations who have come forward with their own demands. In this situation, the need for metaphysics is felt only in two formulations irreducible to each other: either the formulation of the *auctoritates*, which are interested in conserving the order that also guarantees their power (be this authority that of the Popes, or that of the scientific communities authorized and financed by governments or corporations); or that of the dispossessed who wish to change the *status quo* and try to legitimize their own projects. The *meta* (“beyond”) of “metaphysics” has therefore two meanings: either a truth beyond the visible and the common knowledge which is owned only by the *auctoritates*, or a projected “truth” which is not grounded on facts and “data,” but rather on the power of the project of the discharged.

I realize that this account might look “dangerous” and not “philosophical” enough to be presented in a scientific/academic venue. Nevertheless, even this account may be related to positions of distinguished philosophers of the past: Nietzsche as the theorizer of the completed nihilism; and Heidegger as the critic of metaphysics conceived as the pretension to mirror “reality” (the Aristotelian essences, Plato’s ideas, etc.) to the point of constituting a norm for human behavior. When Nietzsche writes that God is dead, and has been killed by his own believers, he simply means what we intend when we talk about post-modernity: it is the progressive integration of the world under the pressure of political and technical powers of modernity that determines the end of the values of polytheism in which there is no possible universality. To the announcement that God is dead, Nietzsche also adds an invitation: now we want several gods to flourish. The (imperialistic, colonialist, technical-scientific, and also metaphysical) unity of modernity dies; and with it dies the possibility of peace—which so far was assured by the unity of a dominion (Empires, transnational powers, Churches). Now, that unity can be reached only by acknowledging the many metaphysics and by creating the conditions under which they can negotiate with one another. The universal truth is not at the roots and at the beginning of everything; it can only be reached at the end, through free consensus.

It goes without saying that in the alternative between the metaphysics of *auctoritates* and the metaphysics of the dispossessed, it is the latter that this paper recognizes and invites everyone to choose as the good “metaphysics”; not only for a love of the dispossessed, not only for a certain sympathy for the (still metaphysical) thought of Marx, according to which those who are expropriated, and therefore have no ideological veils, can see the true truth. At the basis of my preferred choice, there is an idea of Being and philosophy that comes first and foremost from Heidegger, who in *Sein und Zeit* (at least as I see it) has definitively criticized the idea that Being is a given and stable structure that thought ought to adequately mirror and respect as norm. It is metaphysics conceived in this way that is, at the end, a metaphysics which excludes freedom, historicity, and the open structure of existence. Heidegger formulated this critique in the 1920’s, not only for theoretical reasons; together with the

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artistic and intellectual avant-gardes of the time, Heidegger acknowledged that objective metaphysics had ultimately produced the universal objectification of the human being and had paved the way for what the Frankfurt School later called the society of total *Verwaltung* of the totalitarian rationalistic dominion. For him and the existentialist thought of his time, it was a matter of opposing to all this a new ontology, that is, a conception of Being that rendered freedom and future imaginable. As for Heidegger at the beginning of the past century, similarly what appears to us as a new need for metaphysics is not inspired by theoretical reasons; we need metaphysics, a “beyond,” because in the meantime the *Verwaltung* has become even more total - with the difference that today it is also infinitively more visible. Almost no one still believes in “universal” metaphysical truths. For with Nietzsche’s Death of God, the new gods, or simply a new God in which we can hope, can no longer be the God of classical metaphysics, the one that Pascal called “the God of the philosophers”. Thus, the metaphysical need we feel can no longer be thought as a need for a necessary given, universal truth. The tragic damages produced by the universalistic claims of Western thought (religious persecutions, colonialism, and fundamentalism of every kind) are now visible to everyone. This is also why traditional forces (Churches, States, official science, ethics) invoke metaphysics; they are losing their credibility, and wish to control consciences (now faithful to “many gods”) once again through unifying and absolute principles. Against these traditional forces, there is a call for a metaphysics that, as Rorty’s quotation above suggested, favors freedom over objective “truth,” which always needs an absolute power to value itself. Even the action required to make possible a society where different metaphysics may freely confront themselves, negotiating accords that force none of them to annul itself in the name of an absolute truth, demands a “metaphysical” commitment. May I suggest that a similar commitment has more to do with a (not exclusively Christian) religious precept of charity, rather than with a search for ultimate principles that guarantee peace by forcing all of us to recognize them as *the* truth?

NOTES

1. This is a quote from Richard Rorty, which is also the title given to a volume collecting some interviews with Rorty. Cf. Richard Rorty, *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty*, ed. by Eduardo Mendieta [Eds].

2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, 12 [Eds].