

ABOUT POSTVERITÀ E ALTRI ENIGMI,

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According to the authoritative opinion of the Accademia della Crusca, “post-truth” is a word which describes “a pseudo-truth based on emotionality and personal convictions, as opposed to objective facts” (Biffi, 2016). ‘After-truth’ means ‘the overcoming of truth’, meaning the loss of the importance of truth. The Treccani Dictionary too stresses the emotional aspect as the defining element of post-truth: “Argumentation characterised by a strong appeal to emotionality which, being based on widespread beliefs rather than verified facts, tends to be accepted as true, influencing public opinion.” The *Oxford Dictionaries*, which – as is widely known – proclaimed “post-truth” the word of the year in 2016, state that it is a term “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Dictionaries.com. 16 November 2016).

One of the defining features of post-truth is that it presents the truth in terms of “alternative facts” (Vaccaro, 2018, pp. 210-214), aided by unintentional Nietzsche’s famous statement: “Against that positivism which stops before phenomena, saying ‘there are only facts,’ I should say: no, it is precisely facts that do not exist, only interpretations” (Nietzsche 1990, p. 299). Instead facts do exist, Salvatore Vaccaro observes, “but not in any objective univocality, so much as in a reciprocally alternating doubleness, whose determination can be neither deduced from a neutral position such as might guarantee objectivity, nor opened to a more or less convincing hermeneutical narrative; it is open only to a position of *power*, which affirms *that* “alternative fact” which is held to be true.” (Vaccaro, 2018, p. 211). As Humpty Dumpty puts it in *Through the Looking Glass*: “The question is [...] which is to be *master*, that’s all” (Carroll, 2005, p. 60).

The first thinker to suggest the idea that facts *are* interpretations is Protagoras. According to Sextus Empiricus, Protagoras “asserts that all sense impressions and opinions are true and that truth is a relative thing inasmuch as everything that has appeared to someone or been opined by someone is at once real in relation to him” (fr. 80B1, M. Bonazzi, 2007). Diogenes Laertius reports that according to Protagoras “there are two sides to every question (*pragmatos*), opposed to each other” (80A1.51, Bonazzi, 2007). This outcome was implicit to the relativist perspective that underscores Protagoras’ philosophy as a whole; the idea of man as the measure of all things reinforces this point of view. “Man is the measure of all things (*panton chrematon*), of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not” (80 B1, Bonazzi, 2007). Sextus adds that what Protagoras meant by ‘measure’ the standard of judgement (the criterion) and by ‘things’ facts. For an age dominated by the pursuit of truth, Protagorean philosophy represented a real revolution (Jellamo, 2018, pp. 255-271), not unlike post-truth today.

While Protagoras was the first to regard facts as interpretations, the first to grasp the power of words was Gorgias: “The word (*logos*) is a great sovereign (*dynastes*), who by means of a tiny and invisible body performs the most divine acts” (*Hel.*, 8 = fr. 82 B11.8, Bonazzi, 2007). Words perform the most divine acts through their capacity to persuade (*peisas*) and deceive (*apatesas*). However, precisely the *Encomium of Helen* brings into focus the problematic, rather than mutually exclusive nature of the relationship between words and truth (Bona 1973, 6-33; Serra 2012, 121-132, 253-268; Giombini, 2012). Words act upon the soul, moulding it and directing it towards desired outcomes; they excite and confuse it. This is what deceit (*apate*) consists in.

Lies presuppose the existence of truth. Not so deceit. Even their divine genealogy points to this difference: Hesiod (Esiodo, 1994) presents Apate as the daughter of Night, and Pseudea as the daughter of Eris, strife (*Theog.*, pp. 224-230). Apate is deceit, Pseudea lies. Unlike lies, deceit implies an altered relationship with reality. In the *Ajax*, Athena deceives Ajax: his reality becomes distorted; in the *Agamemnon* it is Clytemnestra who deceives Agamemnon, by welcoming him as a devoted wife: Agamemnon’s reality too becomes distorted. Tragedies tell of acts of deceit, not of lies. “In order to be able to perceive the irrationality of things, which the concept of *apate* implies, it is necessary to have a way of thinking that unravels the dark knot of reality, to bring out irresolvable contrasts” (Untersteiner, 2008, p. 173). Even those who deceive may be deceiving themselves without being deceived by others: they may become victims of an altered perception of reality which they then transmit and spread as unwitting deceivers – as is the case with post-truth.

Another defining feature of post-truth is that it is difficult – at times impossible – to verify its content, owing to the fact that such content is spread through the Web. And the Web makes everyone potentially and simultaneously a producer and a consumer of news, as well as a commentator and more generally an “expert” in all fields: vaccinations, diets, food intolerance, skin rashes, even actual diseases and unlikely treatments for them. The words of experts drown in this sea of “experts”, and there arises the risk of confusing the two. No doubt, “recourse to expert knowledge” presents certain problems in itself, and experts often disagree. However, I find it very reductive to rank the knowledge of experts among beliefs and preferences, or to assimilate a scientist’s opinion to that of a magician (Maddalena, Gili, 2017, 25). It is precisely experts, after all, who address the countless problems posed by fake news (Garattini 2017; Erzegovesi, Rocco di Torrepadula, Bosaia, 2018; Burioni, 2018).

I agree with what Giuseppe Cannata writes when, discussing the state of our times, he emphasises how post-truth poses a problem that transcends that of so-called fake news (Cannata, 2018). I agree with him first of all because of the “clarity” of the latter compared to the former: whereas fake news are, at least from a political perspective, purposefully false news items that have been invented in order to mislead public opinion and orient it towards a sought-for outcome, post-truth presents an underlying ambiguity – it is vague, elusive. According to Anna Maria Lorusso this is partly due to its polysemic use, and partly to the ‘post’ suffix: “Does post mean *after* the age of truth [...] or beyond truth, which is to say *beyond* this category, in an epistemological sense?” (Lorusso, 2018, pp. 6-8). It must also be said that fake news presents some interesting aspects that are juridically relevant, so much so that it has been suggested that the news published online be regulated after assessing its accuracy (Frosini, 2017, V-X; Magnani 2018, 1-47; Zanon 2018, pp. 12-17). By contrast, post-truth constitutes a cultural problem: it marks a shift of horizon. Post-truth impacts our certainties and modifies our paradigms of reference, bringing about not just a change but what Ulrich Beck would define as a “metamorphosis of the world” (Beck, 2017).

Post-truth is the the topic of Maurizio Ferraris’ dense book *Postverità e altri enigmi*, the focus of the present *Notas y Discusiones*. The title of the volume echoes that of a well-known book by Michael Dummett, *La verità e altri enigmi* (Dummett, 1986). It does so intentionally, because Ferraris believes “that post-truth offers a privileged means to clarify a few enigmas, starting from what we mean by ‘truth’” (pp. 10-11).

The author indirectly answers the question raised by Cannata concerning the state of our times: the state of our times is precisely post-truth. “I believe that post-truth is a

new and important concept, and that its emergence [...] defines certain crucial features of contemporary public opinion” (p. 9). Building upon this premise, Ferraris takes post-truth as his focus of enquiry. He explores its ideological and cultural background and suggests an approach to deal with and overcome it.

The volume is structured into three dissertations, each dealing with a specific topic: the first is devoted to the roots of post-truth, the second to the transition from capital to documeriality; the third dissertation bears the evocative title *Dalla postverità alla verità* and discusses what Ferraris describes as “mesotruth” (“mesoverità”).

In the first dissertation, Ferraris presents post-truth as the outcome, and “possibly a degenerate one”, of postmodernism. The word entered philosophical debate with the publication of Jean-Francoise Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge* (Lyotard, 1981). According to Lyotard, the term “postmodern” describes the contemporary age as the age of delegitimation of the philosophical and ideological perspectives which, from the Enlightenment onwards, inspired Western cultural values. It is defined by a multiplicity of pragmatic discourses, which aspire to have only contingent and hence instrumental validity.

In his critique, Ferraris sets out by portraying postmodernism in terms of Bacon’s four *idola*: the *idola tribus*, “to be understood as the blunders of the philosophical tribe, which at the time could be summed up as: reality does not exist, only the language through which we describe it”; the *idola specus*: “brought up to respect the truth as an essential element of every humanistic or scientific education, the postmoderns have fallen under the spell of the very opposite, the power of falsehood”; the *idola fori*, the errors of the public arena and of language: “where ‘realist’ is often take to mean ‘supporter of a Realpolitik and hence reactionary’”; and, finally, the *idola theatri*: “the most seductive of which was Nietzsche’s principle, ‘there are no facts, only interpretations. This was a powerful and promising statement, because it afforded the most beautiful illusion of all: the illusion of being always right, under any circumstance, and independently of any proof to the contrary from history or experience” (pp. 19-20).

The 20th century – Ferraris goes on to argue – gave rise to two streams of thought, the hermeneutic and the analytical: Nietzsche and Heidegger’s heirs are the hermeneutic philosophers; Wittgenstein and Russell’s heirs are the analytical thinkers. The former conceive philosophy as a critique of Power, Capital, the Unconscious, and the Alienation of metaphysics; the latter develop ideas that are incomprehensible to anyone outside the “analytical circle”. Ferraris begins his critique with the hermeneutic thinkers. He criticises the tendency of this intellectual current to bracket words like truth and

reality – “as though they were improper or comical notions” – along with its challenging of scientific objectivity and its understanding of reason as a source of domination or trickery, in opposition to desires and emotions. As Aristotle writes, the passing of judgement is influenced by emotions – by feelings of pain or joy, friendship or hatred (*Ret.*, I,2.1356a). Already in his *Manifesto del nuovo realismo* Ferraris had argued for the need to rehabilitate objectivity, reality and truth against the idea “that objectivity, reality and truth are an evil” (Ferraris, 2012, p. 20). In his new book, he further develops and reinforces this criticism: “It is difficult not to see post-truth as the outcome of a conservative strand which has found its philosophical legitimation in postmodernism, and a means of political circulation in populism” (pp. 24-25). Another criticism that Ferraris directs against postmodernism concerns the “return to order”. Ferraris writes that the annoyance that postmodernists feel at any appeal to truth, and to the pursuit of truth, may be attributed to the question of the “return to order”. This question touches upon the very cornerstones of postmodern thought, which Ferraris sums up in three fallacies: the transcendental fallacy, the power-knowledge fallacy, and the accept-as-certain fallacy. The first fallacy consists in conflating ontology and epistemology; the second consists in regarding knowledge as a form of will to power; finally, the third consists in the idea that seeking to ascertain the truth means accepting it. As an example of the transcendental fallacy the author considers the case of Bruno Latour (the *proton pseudos*, as Ferraris calls him). In a work published in 1998, Latour – precisely by conflating ontology and epistemology – argued that Ramses II could not have died of tuberculosis because the tuberculosis bacilli were only identified by Koch in 1882. The power-knowledge fallacy is based on three key words: “the first is *ironising*, i.e. the idea that taking theories seriously betrays a kind of dogmatism [...] The second keyword is *desublimation*, i.e. the idea that desire as such constitutes a form of emancipation, since reason and intellect are forms of domination [...] The third keyword of postmodernism is *de-objectification*, i.e. the assumption that friendly solidarity should prevail over objectivity, the latter being in any case false (for there are no facts but only interpretations) and hence violent” (pp. 38-39). The ascertain-accept fallacy leads postmodernists to reject any “return to order”. Ferraris notes that if what we mean by return to order is a Caesarist government, Caesarism affirmed itself precisely through postmodernism and its evolution into populism and post-truth, insofar as the delegitimation of knowledge entails the reaffirmation of *imperium*. This holds true for both the United States and for Russia, which currently have a Caesarist leadership based on populist legitimation, but also for the Roman pontiff. “It is easy to see how the way in which the pope takes power

and the way in which he exercises it are identical to those found in the Roman Empire [...] The pope shares the emperor's omnipotence [...] The pope shares the emperor's complete rejection of the democratic system" (pp. 45-47). Things could hardly be any different. As Kelsen noted, Christianity is incompatible with democracy, if for no other reason but the absolute inequality that exists between rulers and ruled: all differences among men "are irrelevant compared to the fundamental difference that exists in their relationship with God" (Kelsen, 1998, p. 331). It is worth paying attention, in my view, to Ferraris' observation that democracy without truth constitutes not a step forward but two steps back: "the populism of recent decades has benefited precisely from the divorce between democracy and truth, although the postmodernists had affirmed it for other, antithetical purposes" (p. 41). This overturns Vattimo's thesis that "wherever politics searches for the truth, there cannot be any democracy" (Vattimo, 2009, p. 25).

As regards populism, I would argue that Aristotle's warning with regard to rhetoric – which "dons the mask of politics" (*Ret.*, I.2.1356^a) – remains valid: whenever the mask of politics is worn in order to sway the masses according to an orator's whims, we have a demagogue – an obsolete word which speaks of populism and populist legitimation. As Laura Bazzicalupo observes, the populist mechanism avoids arguments and rather expresses itself through catchwords or the image of a flesh-and-blood person who is both captivating and impossible to define (Bazzicalupo, 2010, pp. 369-381). Ferraris' statement regarding the split between democracy and truth conveys the need to re-establish *facts* as facts, to restore an objectivity that might act as a bulwark against post-truth. The point is that bidding the truth farewell has devastating consequences. "On the one hand, one loses the only possibility of restraining the human will, which knows no limits, and of providing conclusive arguments [...] On the other hand, bidding the truth farewell strips humanity of the only barrier against those who are most capable of taking advantage of the remarkable indifference of human beings towards cognitive values" (p. 43).

The second dissertation, which outlines the features of documediality, starts with a twofold criticism: hermeneutic thinkers are criticised because they refuse to acknowledge the existence of post-truth; analytical thinkers because they consider post-truth to be philosophically irrelevant. Ferraris argues that post-truth is actually an indicator of a technological, social and anthropological revolution. Instead of interpreting the world from the standpoint of capital, we must interpret it from the standpoint of documediality. Here begins an analysis that constitutes the backbone of this dissertation: the transition from capital to documediality. Documediality "is the union between the

constructive power immanent to documediality and the power of diffusion and mobilisation that becomes actualised the moment in which every receiver of information can be a producer, or at least transmitter, of information and ideas [...] This connection between documents and media has transformed our lives as much as capitalism and mediocracy, only in a swifter way and by involving a far larger number of actors” (p. 69). Ferraris argues, therefore, that documediality describes contemporary social ontology better than capital and mediality, which is to say communication society, but also that it reveals how capital, mediality and documediality have a common foundation in documentality.

The transition from capital to documediality is a process whereby capital is replaced by social objects: namely, documents. Ferraris suggests that capital must not be considered as the ultimate yardstick of social reality, but rather as a historical form of documentality, which may be seen as the “genetic condition” of all forms of human organisation, including capital: “without documents and their intrinsic normativity, no capitalist development is possible” (p. 72).

Capital, mediality and documediality are historical manifestations of documentality (Ferraris, 2009, 2016); in each of them – Ferraris notes – the law whereby Object = Recorded document is reproduced. “On the basis of this law, documentality emerges as the foundation of social reality: it is at work before capital, constitutes its foundation, and continues to be in force even after capital has given way to mediality and documediality” (p. 73). What Ferraris means when he speaks of “recording” is that every social object is the product of a social act whose defining feature is the fact of being recorded on a medium – on paper, in people’s minds, on the Web. Because this act necessarily involves at least two people, its accomplishment requires individual intentionality; at this level, documentality emerges as the necessary yet not sufficient condition of social facts. At a second level, however, it also becomes the sufficient condition of society, insofar as it is necessary for the transition from the individual to the collective: “Documentality constitutes a principle rooted in nature which opens up the path leading to culture and knowledge” (p. 74).

Ferrari argues that documediality represents the epistemological, ontological and technological absolute of our time; it is absolute in the sense of *ab-solutus*: the Web is free from everything, it is absolute like the power theorised by Hobbes. This absoluteness brings together its many, contradictory facets. It amounts to absolute knowledge but also absolute non-knowledge; it is absolute power – “seeing that outside documediality there is no economic, political or military power” – but it also amounts to

absolute duty – “the categorical imperative, a motivation underlying a mobilisation of resources and energies that finds no precedent in human history” (p. 75). Post-truth would never have existed without the technological conditions ensured by docu-mediality. In analysing the cause/effect relation between docu-mediality and post-truth, Ferraris brings five fundamental factors into play: viralness, which is chiefly characterised by increasingly swift transmission compared not just to newspapers but also television; persistence, by virtue of which documents are pushed outside time, both in the sense that they are generally undated and in the sense that they recur on the basis of docu-medial occurrences; mystification, i.e. the ease with which fake identities are created; fragmentation, whereby the capacity of a source to reach a large number of recipients fragments reception, engendering more restricted discussion communities; opacity, whereby the Web becomes the domain of “it is said”, with evident repercussions in terms of authorship and accountability for the information transmitted. Drawing upon the work of André Leroi-Gourhan (Leroi-Gourhan, 2018), Ferraris argues that technological know-how is “where the leap from ape to human being occurs, not on the level of *Homo sapiens*, of the rational animal, but on that of *Homo habilis*, of the technological animal [...] The path leading from the first tools to the spirit and to culture is a very long one, but this does not authorise us to believe that the spirit, culture and intentions precede rather than follow technology” (pp. 80-81). Ferraris goes on to note that it was modern geographical exploration which created the need for – and hence the concept of – natural law. No doubt, Ferraris is referring here to the modern idea of natural law: for the concept of natural law as such was already present in Justinian’s *Corpus Juris*, and derives from Greek philosophy. It was a widespread theme, viewed from different perspectives: according to Gaius, the concept of *jus naturale* only concerns humans, whereas according to Ulpian it applies to all living beings (Solari, 2013, p. 166). Ferraris goes on to explain that it was the development of manufacturing technologies that led to the emergence of the concept of capital, with the related concepts of alienation, surplus value, utility value, and exchange value. After the industrial and media revolution – Ferraris argues – we now have a third revolution, the “post-truthist” one: capitalism corresponds to the age of production; populism to mediality; and docu-mediality, which is to say recording, to post-truthism. Each category – Ferraris continues – subsumes the previous one(s) at a higher level of generality: mediality brings “the mystery of goods” as social objects to light, while recording manifests the formula Object = Recorded document. Ferraris further clarifies the concept, as it is crucial to his argument: “A social object (a good,

item of news or fake news, a symbolist poem, a document...) is the outcome of a social act (such as to involve at least two persons: a worker and an employee, a buyer and a seller, an author and a reader...) which is characterised by the fact of being recorded on a medium, which might even be the minds of the two social actors” (p. 84). Ferraris extends his analysis by considering the different phases of production, communication and documentality, and enriches it with new formulas, which are also illustrated through schemas: Mediality-spectacle, Documediality-social object; but also Manufacturing-labour, Mediality-consumption, and Documediality-mobilisation, all of which are examined in detail. “It may be argued that the dreams of communism were fulfilled in a different way from what had been hoped for, yet the difference between the ideal and reality is no smaller than what we find in the accomplishment of any utopia, which not only reveals its limits, but better defines its contours” (p. 96). One last point regarding this second dissertation: among the various pairs of “kindred” terms we also find Manufacturing-Sustenance, Mediality-Compensation, and Documediality-Recognition. “Recognition” is an important category: it has fuelled, – and continues to fuel, – philosophical debate, as is shown by the Italian translation of Axel Honneth’s latest book (Honneth, 2019). By addressing a different topic, and hence employing different tools, Ferraris uses this category in a different yet related way compared to Honneth, but also to Habermas and Taylor. The first and arguably main difference is that whereas the aforementioned authors view recognition within a circuit of reciprocity, Ferraris assigns it a sort of atomised unidirectionality. The lack of reciprocity is due to the tool used: the Web. However, the meaning of recognition is the same, namely the human desire to be recognised. Someone who takes a selfie “does so in order to publish it and his/her aim is not self-fulfilment, but rather recognition by as many other human beings as possible” (p. 108).

The third dissertation starts with a comparison between hermeneutic and analytical philosophers in relation to the question of how post-truth should be approached. Ferraris writes that, as the debate currently stands, there are two possible solutions: to embrace post-truth, knowing that it concerns precisely post-truths rather than truths, or to argue that it does not concern philosophy. The first solution is favoured by most hermeneutic philosophers, the latter by most analytical philosophers. Within this context, the first step is a comparison between hypotruth and hypertruth, terms which Ferraris uses to describe, respectively, the hermeneutic philosophers’ and the analytical philosophers’ interpretation of reality. “I call this perspective ‘hypotruth’ because, although it seems to assign much (positive or negative) importance to the truth, it does not know what to

do with it, and subordinates it to other concepts and objectives such as emancipation, solidarity, class struggle, Christian charity, alternative medicine, nomadism, and creativity. These are very different things, yet (at least from the perspective of hermeneutic philosophers) they all share the fact of bidding the truth farewell” (p. 122). By contrast, the notion of truth developed by analytical philosophers is very strong, hence its definition as hypertruth. It is called hypertruth “because it postulates a necessary correlation between ontology and epistemology, whereby the proposition ‘snow is white’ is true (epistemology) if and only if ‘snow is white’ (ontology) is rephrased as: if snow is white, then it is true that snow is white, so it would be true that snow is white even if there were no human being on the face of the earth (and never had been and never will be any)” (p. 123). With regard to hypertruth Ferraris specifically refers to Diego Marconi’s work *Per la verità* (Marconi, 2007). Talking of truth, Marconi here states: “I do not believe that the truth is ‘the way in which things stand’; rather, the proposition that *says* that things stand as they stand is true” (Marconi, 2007, p. 38).

“Reality is something which is, which exists, independently of there being anyone willing to appreciate it. The truth is something we know, and which is said with regard to something which is” (p. 127). Newton’s laws (epistemology) did not exist before Newton formulated them, but the reality to which they refer (ontology) existed. What Newton did was reveal something that already existed, which shows – as Ferraris goes on to explain – that the truth with regard to planetary motion depends on the technical apparatus available. The truth is something that is made; and technology, insofar as it records existing reality, eludes the concepts of truth and falsehood, although it can engender truth and falsehood.

“I thus define truth as *the encounter between ontology and epistemology accomplished by technology*” (p. 127). This gives rise to the concept of “mesotruth”, which Ferraris sets in contrast to hermeneutic hypotruth and analytical hypertruth. Its defining traits are that it distinguishes between ontology and epistemology, and that it stresses the mediating role of technology. Indeed, the role of technology is the crucial feature of mesotruth. Ferraris writes that whereas hypotruth and hypertruth conceive reality as a one-way relation between ontology and epistemology – for hermeneutic philosophers what we know is what exists, for analytical philosophers what exists is what we know – mesotruth conceives it as a three-way relation, involving ontology, epistemology, and technology. “Up until now technology has not received the attention it is due as a philosophical realm which is as important as ontology and epistemology”: technological functions such as hermeneutics have been attributed to either ontology or epistemology (p. 144).

According to Ferraris, neither hypotruth nor hypertruth are capable of offering alternatives to post-truth; hence the idea of mesotruth, which is not limited to observation, but consists in making. “In the perspective I am suggesting, there can be reality without truth, yet not truth without reality, and truth is precisely what one makes, the sum of true propositions emerging from reality” (p. 148). Making the truth – Ferraris argues – is the exact opposite of the idea of unmaking reality we find in the thesis that there are no facts but only interpretations: interpretations exist precisely because facts exist. This overturning of Nietzsche’s claim confirms Ferraris’ realist position and defines his concept of truth: “truth is only relative to technological means of assessment, but absolute with respect to the ontological sphere it refers to, and to the epistemological need it meets” (p. 130).

The truth – Ferraris concludes – is not violent and dogmatic, but rather “closely connected to the existence and dignity of human beings” (p. 157).

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