

A Short Stirring to Meekness

Steven Connor

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This paper forms part of a shorter work. When I first began thinking of what I might be able to say to you today, I had a plan that I might speak of the implicit, that is to say, of ways of getting to know things which were more intimate and inward than some accounts of the epistemological process might suggest. I wanted to speak about my interest in humble, intimate, unregistered things – above all my interest in *things* - and to suggest that our rather somewhat telescopic ways of speaking about how we get to know such things were neither very good at accounting for these modes of knowing, nor very good at improving them.

Such a talk might still be given and perhaps one day even by me. But, though traces of this original intention may cling in wisps to what I am about to say, it is not what I have found myself having written. For, the more I thought about this topic, the more taken up I became, not in conditions of nearing, vicinity and implication, but in processes of explication, prolongation, propagation, exteriorisation. As you will see, what I have to say will concern outwardness.

I will argue that there knowing always involves exteriority, a going out, that, following Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:/Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;/Selves--goes itself'. There are two aspects to this going out of knowing. I will first of think about the idea of intentionality as defined in the phenomenological tradition, to move towards the idea that knowing is not an accumulation of ideas or understandings, but a repertoire of goings out, so that we are not so much filled up with knowledge as riddled with knowingness. Knowledge departs us, evicts us. In knowledge we take leave of our senses. But this propagation is not possible without objects, and much of what I have to say will be summed up in the proposition that *only objects can free us from and into knowledge*.

The second phase will be to consider what happens when knowledge begins to go beyond the reach of the knowing self that it began by enlarging, that is to say when it is no longer possible for us to coincide with our knowledge, or, as Ted Hughes puts it, to coincide with it very queerly:

What am I doing here in mid-air? Why do I find
 this frog so interesting as I inspect its most secret
 interior and make it my own? Do these weeds
 know me and name me to each other have they
 seen me before do I fit in their world? I seem
 separate from the ground and not rooted but dropped
 out of nothing casually I've no threads
 fastening me to anything I can go anywhere
 I seem to have been given the freedom
 of this place what am I then? And picking
 bits of bark off this rotten stump gives me
 no pleasure and it's no use so why do I do it
 me and doing that have coincided very queerly

Inside Knowledge

Let me distinguish two senses in which the phrase 'inside knowledge' might be taken. The first advances the claim that we might be able to get on the inside of knowledge itself, knowing for sure and in intimate detail its workings and its powers. Knowing our knowledge through and through is equivalent to knowing it, as we say in English, inside out. If we could get thoroughly inside knowledge, so that none of its mysteries were hidden from view, we would know it, as we say in English, inside out. To be inside knowledge would be to strive to know the things of our thought under conditions in which we would know in advance what was possible or not possible to be known. Getting on the inside of knowledge would then perhaps be a way of wearing it or wielding it as an outside – like a glove, a weapon, an implement. Getting inside knowledge would abolish its inwardness, peeling it back like an eyelid to expose to view everything about its workings. It might be a way of getting knowledge outside us and outside itself, and therefore perhaps cognate with the many ways in which we are currently striving to exteriorise and autonomise cognitive actions.

The second form of inside knowledge would be a way of knowing that tried to get on the inside of things, that tried to get *in on* things. This prospect has been much in evidence in the papers I have read and listened to in this workshop, and is in accord with a generalised (and, I say, false) conviction that knowing in the conventional sense distances us from the world, reducing that world to mere, dead objects of knowledge. Our common understanding of knowledge is that knowledge from the inside is better than merely external knowledge. This is because knowing only the external features of something is reductive, and therefore does a violence to it. For this reason, it is held to be important to know something in its own terms, knowing it in the way in which it might know itself, knowing its way of being for itself. Objective knowledge, knowledge that will not let its object

be more than an object, is routinely denounced for effecting this violent reduction.

I will want to continue to urge the claims of the object, even in the fact of these deeply-sealed presumptions.

Intentionality.

Some years ago I pretended to invent a form of critical writing I called 'cultural phenomenology'. No doubt I was obeying rather than initiating a shift in opinion, a softening towards the tradition of phenomenology, which had previously endured such rough treatment at the hands of the post-structuralists. But now it seems that, where the word 'phenomenology' had been, for about three decades, a form of philosophical curse, fewer and fewer people nowadays have a bad word to say about it. What people seem to mean by phenomenology is a new leniency extended to 'experience', or to talk of it.

This is something of a relief and certainly not a bad thing in itself. But it is not what interests me most in phenomenology, or strikes me as the most interestingly unfulfilled of the many unfulfilled things about the phenomenological enterprise. For me, that is the possibility it holds out of paying attention to new things, and paying attention to old things in new ways, including to the act of paying attention. For the most important insight or impetus given by phenomenology is the doctrine of intentionality

Intention comes from Latin 'intendere', the primary meaning of which seems to be to draw a bow, thereby directing oneself at a target. In philosophical usage, particularly that of the medieval Scholastics, 'intentionality' has this meaning of 'directedness', rather than 'purposiveness'. Intentionality is the condition of having an aim or object, not meaning to do something. So the '-in' prefix at the beginning of the term 'intentionality' does not indicate a movement of the mind inwards on itself, but rather a movement 'into' something else. An 'intention' in this sense is like an 'inquiry' or an 'inquest' – a going into some matter or other. The 'in' has something of the same ghost motion about it as the motion-towards of the Latin 'ad', thus making intention closely equivalent to 'attention' (to attend is to 'ad-tend', to bend, tend or strain towards). That the word intention is often misunderstood is due to the fact that, in ordinary usage, it has come to mean something like the opposite of this. To be 'intense' is to be powerfully concentrated or coiled in on oneself – to be focussed, with the idea of convergent lines that metaphor embodies. An intensive course is one which condenses a great deal of material in a short space of time, while an extensive course is one that is wide-ranging and spread out over time. To *be intent on* something mingles the medieval and

modern takings of the term: the ‘on’ being required to turn the otherwise inward-facing intensity outwards on to its object.

The revival of the principle of intentionality is one of the distinctive founding moves made by the philosophers who became known as phenomenologists. Franz Brentano is usually credited with being the first modern philosopher to maintain, in his *Psychology From An Empirical Standpoint* (1874), that all mental acts are intentional, that is, they are all ‘about’ something, that they all have objects. ‘There can be no pure thought, only thought about things. ‘Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired, and so on’ (Brentano 1995, 88-9).

The principle of intentionality is even more emphatically sustained by Edmund Husserl, the first great systematic phenomenologist:

We understood under Intentionality the unique peculiarity of experiences “to be the consciousness *of* something”. It was in the explicit *cogito* that we first came across this wonderful property to which all metaphysical enigmas and riddles of the theoretical reason lead us eventually back: perceiving is the perceiving of something, maybe a thing; judging, the judging of a certain matter; valuation, the valuing of a value; wish, the wish for a content wished, and so on. Acting concerns action, doing concerns the deed, loving the beloved, joy the object of joy. In every wakeful cogito, a “glancing” ray from the pure Ego is directed upon the “object” of the correlate of consciousness for the time being, the thing, the fact, and so forth, and enjoys the typically varied consciousness of it.... (Husserl 1931, 242-3)

However, having affirmed the principle of intentionality, or, in the terms he invented, the indivisibility of the noetic and the noematic components of any act of mind, he then sees it off, via his famous ‘reduction’. According to this principle of reduction or bracketing, we are supposed to set aside the question of what kind of existence the objects of thought might have apart from in the mind, in favour of a scrutiny of acts of mind alone. Hence the glum fact that the very philosophy that might have opened up a way of understanding the necessary directedness of minds to the worlds of which they take cognizance gets a well-deserved reputation for a maundering immersion in the ways of the mind, sustained by a dubious faith in its givenness to itself through introspection – all of which makes it a fish-in-a-barrel target for its critics and objectors. The advantage of the

phenomenological reduction, for those who turn out not to be interested in intentionality at all, is that it enables intentions to be thought of, not as issuings or aimings or orientations of the mind, but as contents of it. This accounts for the two great sterile preoccupations of the philosophy of intention: the problem of referring to non-existent objects (sooner or later, it seems, every philosophical discussion of intentionality will start having headaches about what exactly is going on when one thinks about unicorns), and the problem of referring to one and the same object in different ways (how do we then know that we are talking about the same thing?)

Nearly all philosophical discussions of intentionality rapidly leave behind the sense of tending towards, of aiming (even of straining), that is there in the word 'intendere', and get caught up in the problem of precisely what it means to have a picture of something in one's mind – especially if that picture is of something which does not exist in the world. Owning a picture is very different from aiming at an object.

The theory of intentionality ought to make it uninteresting for us to think and act otherwise than as though things existed outside the mind, because there *would be nothing in the mind but its aimings at things beyond it*. 'The mind', as fabulous as the herds of unicorns it harbours, would appear in nothing but its excursions and curiosities and exorbitances. If human beings have the most highly-wrought consciousness that we know of on this planet, this is to say that we are the least, not the most highly present to ourselves in our consciousness. We consist of our ecstatic, extravagant evacuations of ourselves: the more conscious you are, the less you can exist as pure or abstract 'consciousness'. As Michel Serres asserts, '[t]he more I think, the less I am: the more I am I, the less I think and act' (Serres 1999, 12). Developing consciousness to the highest point, through meditation, argument, experiment, practice or education, does not mean cramming your mind with contents, two by two: it means, as the culture of intoxication has it, getting out of your head. An empty mind would be one that contained no ways out, no possibilities of vocation or vacation. What is more, on those special occasions, like now, when we take the mind and its operations as our objects, we are only finding another way to take leave of ourselves, toward the world. So that whatever is thought to be 'in' the mind, in the form of images, is really in the world. To say that somebody is wrapped up in themselves tells us nothing about the nature of their experience; for it is possible to be absorbed in mental conceptions (calculations, religious contemplations) in a way that is precisely equivalent to the absorption in physical tasks. Becoming addicted to the work of thought is no different, from the point of view of a properly-maintained theory of intentionality, from the passionate cultivation of snooker, origami, beekeeping or needlework. It is not for nothing that we call such things occupations.

For too long, we have thought of education as the work of constituting the mind in its relation to itself. We imagine that we come into the world as animals, who have no secure way of distinguishing their perceptions from what they perceive, and therefore no secure boundary between self and world, and no way to wall off their interiority. We think of the work of education as building this immurement brick by brick, in fulfilment of the Delphic precept 'Nosce te ipsum'. But to know yourself is to develop an intentional relation to yourself, to be able to constitute yourself as part of the world. This big little word 'world' signifies the sum total of what we are able to intend or attend to. As human beings we hunger for world, for the world. We are, as Heidegger might have said, 'weltisch', at once worldly, worlding and worldive: we hunger to constitute the world as world, to give the world to itself as something other than ourselves. Not 'the world is too much with us', but 'we are too much with ourselves'. Michael Serres images the ideal condition of what he calls the instructed, but which we might as well call the 'interested' soul, the one who is *inter esse*, amid things, as being like the goalkeeper facing a penalty kick, who is, for a calm, exquisite interval of tense equilibrium, equally prepared to move in any direction whatever: he is both point and compass, a star of possibility (Serres 1997, 23).

So, although phenomenologists are owed the credit of reviving the principle of intentionality, we must hope that it might get us somewhere else than where it has got phenomenologists, which is to say in detention, in indefinite abstention, among the twilight velleities of the mind, rather than in extension. The doctrine of intention, like so much else in phenomenology, is a failure that points a way far more effectively than any of phenomenology's bruited breakthroughs. It's not that phenomenologists need to worry less about their notion of intentionality, it is that we should give ourselves leave to worry (even) less about their worry.

I want to use the doctrine of intentionality to direct us to the idea of directedness. This should not, I think, lead to naivety, neutrality, or what is usually meant by 'objectivity' (coldness, distance, abstraction, etc). Rather, it should be the kind of impassioned emptying – and emptying towards rather than emptying out – that Keats may have had in mind when he coined the phrase 'negative capability'. What I propose is that one might reduce the principle of philosophical reduction so as to take the principle of intentionality – the principle of the irreducible 'of-ness' or 'aboutness' of mental acts – as a warrant and incitement to something like a properly philosophical account of the objects of thought.

To know an object is not to fix it in place: it is to create an intermediary space of relation between us and it. The world is not a vale of soul-making, not a world of blankly enigmatic exteriors craving the gift of a soul. Rather the world appears to ache after exteriority to itself. Knowing is not only the form in which this excursiveness – this running out – takes in human beings, it is a way of giving a similar excursiveness to objects of knowledge. To know something is to do for it something it cannot do for itself. It is not a mere explication or making plain of something that already exists implicitly, folded inside. It is the making of a difference to that which could not be anticipated or contained in advance, an opening out of something that had no innerness before this opening out, this being put beside itself in knowledge.

So thinking and knowing are never a matter of getting close to things, or getting on their inside. Knowing is always extensive, excursive. We do not reduce things to the condition of objects, we produce them, in the sense in which a geometrician might use that word in speaking of producing or drawing out a line. We draw them forward into the condition of objects, which then reciprocally produce and educate us. The objects of our knowledge are therefore not reified by their being-known; rather, they are released. A thing is not reduced to an object of knowledge: it is disclosed, potentiated, unfinitised – propagated.

We tell ourselves that we prefer open, living process to the reduction of the world to objects of knowledge. But it is precisely the deterrence of objects, of the opening that every object requires, that produces fixity, the petrification of iteration. We think that objects and objectification are aggressive, that without the debasement of objects there would be peace and mutuality; but it is in fact the lack of objects which creates the petrification of iteration, or the condition of war.

Quasi-objects

So, if knowing is not an act of *invit*, or insight into the nature of an object, but the drawing out of that object, perhaps we may not be entitled to speak of ‘inside knowledge’ at all? And yet I think it may still be styled so. For the object that is outed in this way, that comes to be known, must come to be known as an object for us. It is no longer in itself (though it never was); for its outing as knowledge brings it close, as close as it can be, to me, indeed becomes the very way in which I am able to turn myself inside out. In the third space, in which the knower and the known advance, exceed themselves towards each other, there is a mingling, perhaps which Michel Serres has called a mixed body. This is true even and especially in the case of objects that seem like mere things, with nothing in them of reference to me. For

this too is a form of relation. An object is a part of the knower in its very way of being, and remaining, apart from that knower.

Though we have the reputation of appropriating, or making things our own, through objectification, objects are forms of dispossession. Though they may appear to focus, channel or stabilise our actions and intentions, objects in fact multiply and dissipate them. Viewed closely, all interesting objects are in fact ‘quasi-objects’, a term first defined by Michel Serres, and taken up in the ‘actor-network theory’ developed by Michel Callon in economics, Bruno Latour in science, and John Law in social forms. Quasi-objects agitate the serene distinction between subjects and objects, between actors and the objects on which they are thought to act. Serres’s quasi-object resembles Winnicott’s ‘transitional object’. But, where Winnicott’s model explicates the way in which an individual negotiates its relations to the world, Serres’s model concerns the complex interchanges involved in collectivity. For we never intend alone – all our intentions are contentions. What lies between partners in a dialogue, combatants, or opponents, can be thought of like the mobile objects employed in games: the ball in a game of rugby, the parcel in pass-the-parcel, or the ‘furet’ (‘ferret’), used in a French game resembling hunt-the-slipper. Serres explicates the process whereby the rapid, flyflight itinerary of the puck, ball, shuttlecock, furet, fox or greasy pig, both distinguishes and connects, fixes and quickens, the parties to the collectivity and their relative positions

Serres’s concern in the section of *The Parasite* on which I am here drawing is to use the quasi-object to construct a model of intersubjectivity, or collectivity. Most models of intersubjectivity involve the static configuration of distinguishable nodes and connections: sociality as circuit-board or wiring-diagram. In such models, subjects may interlock with other subjects, or move round positions, like chess-pieces on a board, or other invariant ground. In Serres’s model, what lies between the elements of the system is itself volatile, and the whole is held together by what agitates it or keeps pulling it apart and back together:

This quasi-object that is a marker of the subject is an astonishing constructor of intersubjectivity. We know, through it, how and when we are subjects and when and how we are no longer subjects. “We”: what does that mean? We are precisely the fluctuating moving back and forth of “I.” The “I” in the game is a token exchanged. And this passing, this network of passes, these vicariances of subjects, weave the collection... The “we” is made by the bursts and occultations of the “I.” The “we” is made by the passing of the “I.” By exchanging the “I.” And by substitution and vicariance of the “I.” (Serres 1982: 227)

But this intersubjectivity is not a mere thickening of the source of individual subjectivity, an intermittency made continuous. For it is brought into being outside itself, it hangs together only as long as it keeps getting passed on, rerouted, undone. In rugby, Serres's favourite game, at least for the forming of philosophical analogies, one is continuously at risk from being 'sold a dummy', where one stops watching the ball, and wrongly guesses its likely movement from the posture or gesture of the player. One is either left oneself in the condition of a dummy, or holding a useless, inert simulacrum of the ball, the true nature of which is to be the bearer, the former, the operator of potentials.

Reservation

Of course, this is not how we tend to think about knowing and its objects. We think of our knowledge as a set of acquisitions or properties. In one sense, we are made of what we know, which confirms our persistence in being. E. Nesbit recognises this, in her remarkable poem 'The Things That Matter', in which an old woman, thinking of her death, mourns not the loss of sensation or experience, but the dissipation of all the things she knows, her knacks and skills and intuitions – her *nous*:

Now that I've nearly done my days,
 And grown too stiff to sweep or sew,
 I sit and think, till I'm amaze,
 About what lots of things I know:
 Things as I've found out one by one---
 And when I'm fast down in the clay,
 My knowing things and how they're done
 Will all be lost and thrown away. ...

O God, you made me like to know,
 You kept the things straight in my head,
 Please God, if you can make it so,
 Let me know *something* when I'm dead. (Nesbit 1905, 3, 5)

A life is indeed a storehouse of knowledge, and much of that knowledge seems not 'Things as folks write and talk about' (Nesbit 1905, 3). But this awareness is dramatised by the fact that, in our world more than ever, there is a gap between this kind of active, practical, tactical knowing and the knowledge that can be stored and retrieved. That is to say, the idea that an individual's knowing could ever coincide with the knowledge of the world (knowledge about the world, and the totality of knowledge in the world) has been revealed to be an impossible fantasy for several centuries.

One response to this is what might be called a culture of reservation, by which I mean the many ways in which our encounters with the various objects of our thought are damped and delayed by many varieties of hesitaion, precaution, and protective prolegomenon.

Our epistemological hygiene assures us that we cannot ever truly know the objects of our knowledge. This coexists with a culture of abstracts, projections and hypotheses, which race out beyond the encounter with the object. We seek, not the meeting with objects, not fascinations, occupations, assumptions, absorptions, takeovers, but guarantees and failsafes and warranties, that are in fact the means of deterring such meeting, in the mode of counter-cession complained of by Lyotard at the beginning of *The Differend*: 'In the economic genre, the rule is that what comes about can only come about if it is already acquitted, that is to say, has already come about. Exchange presupposes that cession is annulled in advance by a counter-cession, the making of a book annulled by its sale - the faster the better.'

Reservation is a way of attempting to coincide with our knowledge, without risking the opening to objects. But we have never coincided with our knowledge, since knowing is always knowing about, knowing of, knowing towards. We feel that somehow the knowledge of the world ought to be constituted as a mode of self-possession, and that the proliferation of our databanks means that we have given away the chance to coincide with, to be inside our own knowledge. But, if I am to be believed, knowing is not a feature of self-realisation, or, if so, only of a thin, preliminary kind. Knowledge is not a concentration of objects or materials, it is a concentration of possibilities, possibilities of dissolution. Nietzsche defined strength as an overflowing. It is precisely as overflowing that I would define what, borrowing a phrase from the fourteenth-century devotional text *The Cloud of Unknowing*, I have called the stirring to meekness, a desire to encounter and undergo the enlarging humiliation of thought.

Universal knowledge would be, not a lifting up of the world into spirit, in which the gap between phenomenon and meaning would be utterly annulled. Rather it would constitute a kind of incandescence, in which man, having brought knowledge into the world, and for some centuries been the warden of that knowledge, would then disappear through, and into it.

Out into

Donald Rumsfeld's famous, widely-derided comments during a Department of Defense news briefing on February 12, 2002, on the problems of knowing have been set out as a poem in the satirical web-magazine *Slate*:

As we know,

There are known knowns.
 There are things we know we know.
 We also know
 There are known unknowns.
 That is to say
 We know there are some things
 We do not know.
 But there are also unknown unknowns,
 The ones we don't know
 We don't know. (Seely 2003)

Actually, this represents an improvement on what Donald Rumsfeld said, which went as follows: 'the truth is, there are things we know, and we know we know them - the known knowns. There are things we know that we don't know - the known unknowns. And there are unknown unknowns; the things we do not yet know that we do not know' (DefenseLink News Transcript 2002). Since Donald Rumsfeld was not writing a philosophical paper (to put it mildly), we can forgive him for omitting the final element of this permutation: for there are also 'unknown knowns', things we know that we do not know we know, or do not how we know.

I do not mean here to point us towards anything like the unconscious. The point is not that we have imperfect knowledge, but rather that we may not really have as good an understanding as we think, or might wish, of what it means to know. This is true in the banal sense that we use the word 'know' in many different ways.

How do we know what we know? What is it to know? In a remarkable series of recent works, Michel Serres has recently evoked the tending of human knowledge, hugely amplified by new techniques and technologies, towards the condition of the indefinite. Serres argues that human beings are distinguished by their essential indetermination, or lack of defining environment, indeed, their lack of being: 'Man has a horror of being' (Serres 2001, 65). We are in the process of losing our 'archaic finitude' (Serres 2001, 68), becoming undefined by place, genetic inheritance and time. In the process, the earth, in Heidegger's sense, is being transformed: 'The Earth, in the sense of the planet photographed in its global condition by astronauts, takes the place of the earth, in the sense of the acre subject to everyday working' (Serres 2001, 90). Pharma replaces the farm; 'cosmoculture' has replaced agriculture (Serres 2001, 92).

And yet, this is also in a sense an inside knowledge, in the sense that there is increasingly no longer any gap between knowledge and its object. Nature has become what it always was, mathematics. Knowledge and culture begin,

asserts Serres, from the body, or, more strictly, from the body-to-body of different living beings. ‘To know, one must mimic; to set up, one must know; to get the animal to enter the farmyard, one must oneself enter as the counterfeit of the animal’ (Serres 2001, 110). But the intimacies of entering into the condition of different animals, that are essential for all knowledge have been generalised. If the first agriculture effected a domestication of nature, this second cosmoculture creates a second home, a kind of universal niche, or universal body, which Serres names the ‘Biosom’, or ‘a body in the process of encompassing the totality of life. The closed space of cultivation, of domestication becomes the open space of knowledge, a world formed as ‘the sum of all niches’, a ‘totipotence’ (Serres 2001, 106). ‘The Universe has recently become the ‘farm of knowledge’ (Serres 2001, 115).

On the one hand, there is a coalescence, through the veritable inside knowledge that allows the closing of the gap between life and the knowledge of life, since life itself is made up of codings, exchanges of information. Serres calls it ‘carnation’, a being-together that is closer and more immediate even than incarnation, in which indeed ‘verbum caro factum est’, the word is made flesh (Serres 2001, 78-9). On the other hand, there is what Serres, in the work that follows and expands on *Hominescence*, calls ‘the incandescent’ (Serres 2003) . This is something like a second big bang, a massive explosion and propagation of knowledge, and of the human *out into* its knowledge, with which it can no longer in any simple sense converge. If we are to coalesce, to enter into the world (Serres 2001, 146), it will require us to leave our homes, will require a huge propagation, a universal exodus, and loss of all interiority. Our habitat now will be the *apeiron*, the term deployed by Anixamander to name the limitless, undifferentiated ur-principle out of which all the matter in the universe was assembled. We are becoming infinite, unlocated, unconditioned, not in the sense of being free, but in the sense of having no specific nature. For Serres, all this is immanent in the beginnings of knowledge, which is to say, in geometry. The formal space of the geometer is the Earth:

The global sense of the *geo* in the word geometry converges with that of the *apeiron*, our indefinite, open and white habitat, the world without definition of our being-in-the-world. When an indefinite being wanders and dwells in this white space, that is the process of knowledge. (Serres 2003, 112)

This is a remarkable development in Serres’s thinking, which has previously focussed on the power of the undetermined, the multiple and the complex, to exceed the principles of the fixed, the exact and the invariant. It has been easy before this to adjoin Serres’s work to the romanticism of the aberrant,

the exceptional and the displaced to be found in Deleuze and Guattari and many others. Here, though, Serres offers a generalisation of exteriorisation as approaching something like a final horizon, an integral of the multiple. This would make it easy for one who had not read *Hermes*, *Genesis*, *The Parasite* and *Angels* to see this as a simple technological Hegelianism, a disquieting vision of nature exterminated into knowledge. Indeed it is possible to read against the extraordinary audacity of Serres's vision of epistemic incandescence something of the earlier concern with the nightmare side of propagation. Since *The Parasite*, the problem for Serres has always been how to distinguish good Hermes from bad Hermes – as exemplified respectively in the disruptive power of life to exceed definitions and the power instanced in the epidemic. Propagation, for Serres, is not a value, it is a force.

It seems to me that we have an image in our handsome and copious documentation for this conference of precisely the intimate relation of the epistemic and the epidemic. Reading one's way through these admirable papers gives one a sense of an almost limitless abundance of arguments and perspectives. Why would one ever want the proliferation of such riches to stop? What would be the point at which one could declare a truce to theory and reflection and argument? At the same time, they are an image of a kind of amicable, omnitudinous all-out war of all against all, a system held together simultaneously by a drive towards saturation and by the shared apprehension of the impossibility of a total or all-inclusive view. It has the force and structure of rumour, a diffusive bruited abroad that expands without ever coming apart from itself, that disseminates without ever splitting into anything like a distinguishable or accountable voice. And this is simply one conference, which seems puny in its parochialism compared with the huge expansion of knowledge and information of which it is a small-scale image. What is one to think of such knowledge? How is one to coincide with, get back in on knowledge on that scale, all those known knowns, and unknown knowns, at once dizzyingly large and oppressively claustrophobic?

Although the kind of knowledge constituted by cultural theory may be a small antechamber to the new world of knowledge seemingly unencompassable by any act of knowing, there is a continuity between them. For contemporary cultural theory has been driven by precisely the same ethic of propagation and exteriorisation as might encourage the kind of universal exteriorisation, through its lexicon of the illimitable. What matters is not truth, which has hitherto been thought to be characterised by rarity, remoteness and inaccessibility, but production. Even the work of reservation is recruited to this logic of expansion, for contemporary cultural

theory is characterised by a proliferation of reservations, a kind of recklessly-escalated precaution.

One form of this escalation of precaution is Gianni Vattimo's 'weak thought' (*pensiero debole*), of which we do not hear quite so much nowadays, but which may have sprung, or seeped, into the minds of some of you at the mention of meekness. Weak thought remains epistemological precisely because it is a way of taking into account or keeping in mind the liabilities or dangers of thought. It is a kind of diffidence, or reservation. When called upon to define his 'weak thought', Vattimo tends to define it as a chastened adjustment to the knowledge of the impossibility of absolute knowledge. Knowing (for sure, I suppose) the absence of God, the absence of absolute grounds, one restricts one's field of operation: the philosopher aims to become gently edifying rather than sternly demonstrative. This diffidence is the strength of the philosopher's weakness. As Vattimo has said in an interview:

In a strong theory of weakness, the philosopher's role would not derive from the world "as it is," but from the world viewed as the product of a history of interpretation throughout the history of human cultures. This philosophical effort would focus on interpretation as a process of weakening, a process in which the weight of objective structures is reduced. Philosophy can consider itself neither as knowledge of the external, universal structures of being, nor as knowledge of the external, universal structures of episteme, for both of these are undone by the philosophical process of weakening. (Vattimo 2002, 453)

Vattimo has distinguished weak thought from relativism, which he regards as possible only for God, since only God would have the view from nowhere that would allow him to weight the competing claims of all different forms of knowledge. But a deliberate holding oneself in weakness seems close to that inauthenticity, since it would claim to know for sure and in advance about the general implausibility of absolutes, and would claim that this gives it an ethical and epistemological edge. We might associate it with the deliberate holding oneself in reserve that is counselled in *The Cloud of Unknowing*: 'see what þee faileth, & not what þou haste: for þat is the rediest getyng & keping of meeknes' (*Cloud*, 15)

I have tried to bring to mind a thinking that would deprive itself even and especially of this privation. The meekness to which we are counselled by *The Cloud of Unknowing* is one that promises that the pride of knowledge will never permit approach to the understanding of God. We will have done well if we can find a way to stir a different kind of meekness, the meekness that

would allow us to accept that we cannot any more be on the inside of knowledge, while not surrendering knowledge to a simple proliferation that would ensure it would be infinitely beyond us. It would be a meekness strongly attuned to the propagating pull of objects, beyond us, beyond themselves.

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