

“Weak Thought” and Its Discontents: Engaging the Philosophy of

Gianni Vattimo

Santiago Zabala (ed.) *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo.*

Monteal & Kingston; London; Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007.

ISBN 978-0-7735-3142-0 (bnd) ISBN 978-0-7735-3143-7 (pbk)

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According to Manfred Frank, Gianni Vattimo is “the man whose name occurs immediately to one and all when someone calls for the leading Italian philosopher and intellectual.”¹ While much of Vattimo’s work has been translated into English (he is perhaps best-known for the book *The End of Modernity*²), there has been little critical reaction to this work. Finally, a volume of critical essays has become available in English with the publication of *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*. The volume is edited by Vattimo’s “disciple” Santiago Zabala, who also provides an excellent introduction to Vattimo and his philosophy of “weak thought” (*pen-*

siero debole), containing much biographical background not previously available. The contributors are all distinguished philosophers and theologians in their own right, and among those well-known in the English-speaking world are Umberto Eco, Charles Taylor, Hugh J. Silverman, Reiner Schürmann, Richard Rorty, Manfred Frank, and Jean-Luc Nancy. (Zabala explains in his introduction that Jacques Derrida was also invited to be a part of this project, and was keen to write an essay for his "friend Gianni," but was sadly prevented from doing so by his failing health (34)). The chapters are collected in three sections: "Part One: Weakening Metaphysical Power" (On Vattimo's philosophy of weak thought generally); "Part Two: Weakening Metaphysical Methods" (on hermeneutics and the problem of method); and "Part Three: Weakening Metaphysical Beliefs" (on religion). The book also contains a concluding essay by Vattimo, and an extensive bibliography of writings by and about him compiled by Zabala.

The subtitle of the volume was originally planned to be "*a Festschrift for Gianni Vattimo on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*." The reasons for the change are perhaps obvious from a publishing perspective, but the rejected subtitle gives a clearer indication of the nature of the collection. The essays collected here – most specially commissioned for the occasion – are offered in tribute to Vattimo. Tributes can take many forms, and not all of the essays collected here in fact address Vattimo's work directly, or in a sustained and engaged way. Many of those which do engage Vattimo start from the author's own philosophical position, and then stake out the differences of Vattimo's position to their own. This is perhaps partly explained by the fact that the contributors are high-profile academics, with their own habits and patterns of thought well-established, and their own positions to defend. Thus, while the volume is very effective as a tribute, and the inclusion of many "big-name" academics helps establish the stature of Vattimo's own philosophical profile, the volume also has its drawbacks considered as a collection of secondary texts *on* Vattimo. It is of course only fair to assess the book as it was intended (i.e. as a tribute), but many English-speaking readers may well approach it wanting to learn more about Vattimo's own philosophy and its place in the contemporary critical scene, and it is therefore worth noting its limitations in this regard. It is also notable that while the contributors typically express the highest regard for Vattimo's philosophical achievements, most of the essays which engage with his work directly argue quite strongly against one or more of his conclusions. Some of these criticisms are pertinent, while others miss their mark. In what follows, I will chart my own interpretive thread through the volume, picking up and addressing arguments in some chapters while passing over others entirely, in order to bring out what I believe are some of the most in-

interesting points on which Vattimo's philosophy of weak thought is critically engaged by the contributors to this volume. Firstly, however, since Vattimo's philosophy remains largely unknown in the Anglophone world, I will give a brief introduction to this philosopher and his distinctively original thought. Vattimo's work is syncretic and multifaceted, but since the most interesting engagements in *Weakening Philosophy* take place around hermeneutics, I will emphasise this trajectory of his philosophy in the following comments.

Gianni Vattimo was born in Turin in 1936. He completed doctoral work on Aristotle at the University of Turin with Luigi Pareyson, before studying at the University of Heidelberg with Karl Löwith and Hans-Georg Gadamer. He is currently Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at the University of Turin. Vattimo served a term as a member of the European Parliament from 2000-2005, and is widely known as a politically-engaged public intellectual and cultural critic. Vattimo's philosophy takes its bearings from "the Holy Trinity of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gadamer."³ Vattimo has spent much of his philosophical career reading and developing radical interpretations of the two leading critics of modernity, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. During his time at Heidelberg he translated Gadamer's *Warheit und Methode* [Truth and Method] into Italian, and he has been largely responsible for disseminating Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics in Italy.⁴ In 1983, he and Pier Aldo Rovatti (who also contributes a chapter to *Weakening Philosophy*) published an edited collection of essays entitled *Il pensiero debole* [Weak Thought],⁵ and this term has become central both to his own work, and to a general trend in Italian philosophy. Weak thought has sometimes been characterised as a kind of Italian deconstruction (see for example Rainer Schürmann's chapter), and shares many thematic concerns with French "post-structuralism" and philosophical "postmodernism" more broadly. As with deconstruction, post-structuralism, and postmodernism, the iconoclastic philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger are of central importance to Vattimo's weak thought. As Jean Grondin suggests, however, it is the influence of the hermeneutic tradition (and Gadamer in particular) on Vattimo's thought which gives it its distinctive character (Paul Ricoeur aside, hermeneutics has never been well-received in France).⁶

Running from Friedrich Schleiermacher to Wilhelm Dilthey to Heidegger to Gadamer, the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics had its prehistory in the problem of how to interpret biblical texts, developed with the problem of how to interpret written texts in general, and finally became a hermeneutic *ontology* which concerns itself with the interpretation of all of reality. While he has published a book on Schleiermacher,⁷ Vattimo's mature philosophy develops a hermeneutic ontology influenced primarily by

Heidegger and Gadamer, and which also – significantly – takes Nietzsche seriously as a hermeneutic philosopher.⁸ Jean Grondin's chapter ("Vattimo's Latinisation of Hermeneutics: Why Did Gadamer Resist Postmodernism?") explains how Vattimo develops his own "postmodern" hermeneutics by applying Nietzschean and Heideggerian ideas to Gadamer's hermeneutics, ideas Gadamer himself would never have accepted. Vattimo's interpretation of Gadamer turns around the famous phrase from *Truth and Method*, "Being that can be understood is language."⁹ Vattimo chose to translate this phrase maintaining the commas of the original German omitted in the English translation, so that the phrase is effectively: "Being, that can be understood, is language."¹⁰ This choice allows a reading which radically identifies Being with language (rather than the demarcation of a limited sphere of Being which can be understood through language). As Grondin explains, Gadamer always believed that while language was central to interpretation and understanding, what gets interpreted *through* understanding is in some sense the meaning that things-in-themselves have. Vattimo develops and radicalises his interpretation of Gadamer's hermeneutics, however, by applying Nietzsche's famous aphorism: "There are no facts, only interpretations."¹¹ In effect, Vattimo subjects Nietzsche's radicalised Kantian thesis – that we have no access to things-in-themselves, only to appearances – to a "linguistic turn," courtesy of Gadamer's (suggested) thesis about the relation of language and Being. For Vattimo, Being *is* language – our linguistic structures are that which gives meaning to beings (entities), that by virtue of which they appear as what they appear to be.¹² Thus, we can have no facts about things as they supposedly are in-themselves; things *are* what they are only by virtue of language and interpretation.

Furthermore, Vattimo subjects Gadamer's hermeneutics to what may be seen as a Heideggerian correction. Gadamer has often been criticised as a conservative apologist for tradition. Such a view arguably rests on an interpretation of his work which sees history as an objective and unchanging given, the true meaning of which is to be gained through interpretation. Vattimo, however – picking up on Heidegger's influence on Gadamer and exploiting the dialogue with *Being and Time* which takes place in *Truth and Method* – insists that hermeneutics must see history as the history of the epochs of Being (*Seinsgeschichte*). That is, beings are revealed as what they are by virtue of particular "disclosive openings" or events of Being, openings which change through historical time and which Heidegger calls "epochs." The meaning of history is thus never given once and for all, since as we move through historical time the changing nature of the disclosive opening in which we ourselves live governs the parameters of our interpretations

of the past. Thus, the past is never given once and for all, as objectively factual, and the inheritance of tradition implies a necessary *critical interpretation* from the perspective of our current situation. Thus, in Vattimo's hermeneutic ontology, Gadamer's idea of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* [effective history] is amalgamated with Heidegger's *Seingeschick* [destiny of Being] to overcome the danger of a conservative historicism.

Vattimo radicalises hermeneutic ontology by reading Gadamer, Nietzsche, and Heidegger together in this unconventional way. For him, Being itself *is* language; that is, beings are what they are by virtue of their appearance in disclosive openings formed from the transmission of linguistic messages handed down to us through tradition. Vattimo gives a further original twist to his reading of these philosophers by contending that the term "nihilism," used critically by Nietzsche and Heidegger, may be recuperated to give a *positive* meaning to their own philosophical positions. Nietzsche suggests an epistemological form of nihilism with his statement "there are no facts, only interpretations." Heidegger suggests an ontological form of nihilism in his story about the forgetting (or oblivion) of Being in the history of metaphysics. Vattimo argues that we should embrace nihilism positively in both these senses: it means that there is very little of Being left in the metaphysical sense; that is, considered as an objective and eternal structure. Instead, Being is dissolved in the history of interpretation, in which there are no facts, only more or less cogent interpretations. As such, Vattimo thinks that nihilism is a term which can and should be embraced positively; it indicates the disclosive opening in which we find ourselves today, and it describes the hermeneutic ontology he proposes, which he believes goes a long way in overcoming the problems of metaphysical thought identified by Nietzsche and Heidegger. Vattimo's positive construal of nihilism is arguably his most provocative gesture, and, as we shall see, a point on which his interlocutors often feel some discontent.

Vattimo's philosophy is called "weak thought" precisely because it eschews the primary ways in which metaphysical thought strives to be "strong" or rigorous: that is, by formulating concepts or propositions thought true by virtue of their correspondence to an independent and objective reality. Instead, weak thought takes the form of an ontological hermeneutics as just outlined; it strives to interpret both written texts and the world in a way which will be convincing (or at least plausible) to other members of a dialogical community, but which recognises itself as "only" an interpretation. As such, it is an attempt to develop a "postmetaphysical" form of philosophising which avoids the problems of metaphysics identified by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others. The preceding is a necessarily brief outline, indicating some of the main points of Vattimo's philosophy. In what follows, I

wish to take up in dialogue some of the authors who contribute chapters to *Weakening Philosophy*. First, since in his conclusion Vattimo chooses to clarify his own position rather than respond to the contributors' essays, I wish defend him from several criticisms that I believe are misplaced. I will then turn to some of the more apposite critical engagements in the volume.

The leading article of the anthology (after Zabala's introduction) is by Vattimo's long-time friend Umberto Eco. Eco was one of the contributors to the book *Il pensiero debole*. He notes here that that book was conceived as a critical discussion concerning the prospects for a "weak thought," but was taken by some (whom, Eco quips, probably prefer just to read the titles of books rather than the books themselves) as a manifesto. Consequently, Eco was lumped together with the apostles of weak thought, despite the fact that his chapter was in significant disagreement with Vattimo and Rovatti's provocation. In his contribution here, Eco seeks to distance himself from weak thought by setting out the difference between Vattimo's position and his own. The crux of this difference is indicated by the title of his chapter: "Weak Thought and the Limits of Interpretation." Eco takes it as well-established and commonly accepted in contemporary philosophy that the relationship between the world and the mind is interpretive (rather than representational, as in the image of the mind as a mirror of nature criticized by Rorty¹³); that there are no facts free of interpretive frameworks. However, he proposes that there *are* limits to interpretation, so that while we may well say that there are an indefinite number of valid interpretations of a text (or the world), there are also identifiable *misinterpretations*. In other words, Eco believes that there are *constraints* on interpretation, while construing Vattimo's position as one which rejects such constraints. After quoting Vattimo's metaphor of Being in the contemporary era as "moth-eaten," Eco writes:

Even if being were moth-eaten, there would always be a fabric whose warp and web, confused by the infinite holes that have eaten into it, still subsist in some stubborn way (55).

And, even more evocatively:

Being says no in the same way a tortoise would say no if we asked it to fly (55).

Eco's argument, in a nutshell, is that there are *objective conditions* which constrain our interpretations of the world; conditions which mean that tortoises are the kind of beings which cannot fly, and which mean that a small stick with its tip covered in cotton is a better tool for cleaning one's ear than a screwdriver.¹⁴

This may seem quite reasonable. Underlying Eco's criticism of Vattimo, however, seems to be the assumption that for Vattimo there are *no limits to interpretation*. Now, this seems to me to be a misinterpretation of Vattimo's texts (whatever warrants such a claim). For Vattimo, interpretation *is* always limited; not by supposedly natural and objective conditions, but by *historical* conditions. Specifically, in the epoch we are in, nihilism itself acts as a guiding thread and limit to interpretation (such that we ought to prefer nihilistic interpretations over non-nihilistic ones). Vattimo expresses this same idea in different terms when discussing biblical interpretation: the only limit on such interpretation, he argues, is charity, the central value and only core meaning of Christianity (as he sees it). Now, these may be very minimal limits on interpretation, and a good deal of critical work could be done on this problem.¹⁵ The point, however, is that Eco's criticism misses the mark. Eco seems to insist on *ahistorical* and *objective* limits to interpretation (there is something about the objective structure of the real which makes *x* a plausible interpretation and *y* a misinterpretation, etc.). Since Vattimo's limit is a historical one and nothing more, Eco discounts it. Another way of seeing the issue might be this: Eco thinks that for Vattimo there are no limits on interpretation because from a God's eye perspective Being is subject to any and all transformations (it is infinitely malleable). But this is precisely the position Vattimo rejects; we are in history and constrained in our interpretations by the history of interpretations. From this perspective, we must even understand the interpretation of Being as "moth-eaten" as itself an historically relative interpretation. What Eco refutes is an objective thesis about Being, perhaps quite reasonably. But this thesis is not Vattimo's own.

Another criticism which I see as misplaced is made by Wolfgang Iser in his chapter "The Human – Over and Over Again." Iser's leading question of Vattimo is, "Did the author of *The End of Modernity* depart from the modernist way of thinking, or does he remain its partisan?" (87). Iser defines "the modernist way of thinking" as given by what he calls the anthropic principle, or what is more commonly known as humanism. Its fundamental axiom was formulated by Diderot in 1755: "Man is the unique concept from which one must start and to which one must refer everything back."¹⁶ After a survey of various major thinkers and schools in contemporary philosophy (including, notably, Nietzsche and Heidegger) which characterizes them as essentially humanistic, Iser concludes that the entire hermeneutic tradition, and Vattimo with it, also remains humanistic, thereby failing to overcome modernist thinking. Vattimo's hermeneutic ontology is modernist, on Iser's reckoning, because the meaning of things is thought to be given by language, itself a human product. Iser argues

that there are good reasons for desiring to overcome the modernist, humanistic mindset. One of these is that it is dogmatic,¹⁷ and another is that it is self-contradictory. On this second point, Welsch argues that modernist thinking

maintains that all our understanding is determined by our physical, cultural, social, etc., parameters and contains nothing capable of reaching beyond them. But a determination and limitation of this kind could in any case be stated only from a position outside these parameters, from the perspective of a God's-eye view. Otherwise the assertion would be itself subject to the same restrictions and thus could itself be at best only relatively valid and hence unable to serve as a binding principle. But according to the modernist position, precisely such an overview is unavailable to us (97).

Now, there are several problems with Welsch's reading of Vattimo here. First, Vattimo's own definition of the defining trait of modernist thought differs from Welsch's, and Welsch makes no attempt to take this into account or debate Vattimo on this issue. For Vattimo, modern thought is defined by the taking of the *novum* (the new) as a central value. This valuation of the new is linked to the ideas of progress and of overcoming, where the new is thought to overcome or surpass the old in a way which contributes towards the march of modern culture toward the *telos* of emancipation.¹⁸ From a Vattiminian¹⁹ perspective, Welsch would appear to remain thoroughly enmeshed in the modernist mindset precisely because of his desire to overcome humanism. Secondly, the problem of the self-contradictory nature of modernist thinking that Welsch notes here is in fact a well-known problem with many naïve formulations of relativism. However, Vattimo's thinking is not so naïve. He recognizes that it would be self-contradictory for hermeneutic ontology to claim the primacy of interpretation as a *fact* about the world, and insists that hermeneutic ontology is itself only an interpretation, one which is moreover not warranted by any supposed conformity with the objective nature of things, but one which has become available in the contemporary world precisely because it has been handed down to us through the historical transmission of interpretations. (In other words, Vattimo's hermeneutic ontology finds its validity-conditions not in supposedly extra-interpretive facts about the world, but in the history of hermeneutics itself, as it has been handed down from Schleiermacher to Gadamer.)²⁰ To illustrate this point, Vattimo emphasises what he sees as an essential caveat to Nietzsche's famous statement about facts and interpretations: "There are no facts, only interpretations, *and this too is an interpretation.*" While Vattimo's position brings with it its own attendant difficulties – some of which

Welsch also correctly notes, and to which I shall turn shortly – his rejection of the possibility of hermeneutic ontology presenting itself as a “fact” (in Welsch’s terms, presenting a position from a “God’s-eye view”) means that it successfully avoids the charge Welsch makes against modernist humanism.

Taking up a further misplaced criticism – in relation to Nancy K. Frankenberry’s chapter “Weakening Religious Belief: Vattimo, Rorty, and the Holism of the Mental” – will also allow discussion of a theme to which Vattimo has more recently turned, and to which a third of *Weakening Philosophy* is dedicated: religion. It is notable that in his book *The Weak Thought and Its Strength* (one of the few other books on Vattimo available in English), Dario Antiseri spends much time trying to argue that Vattimo’s weak thought would indeed be compatible with religious belief, and chastising him for remaining an atheist.²¹ Since the writing of that book, Vattimo has taken a “theological turn,” marked perhaps most famously by the conference organised, and subsequent book edited, with Derrida: *Religion*.²² Vattimo has developed a surprising interpretation of Christianity which makes it compatible with his own Nietzscheanism, by seeing Christianity itself as the impetus behind secularization. He equates Nietzsche’s pronouncement of the “death of God” with the death of Christ on the cross, and the secularization process with the theological theme of *kenosis*, the self-abasement of God through his incarnation in Christ. The incarnation is understood as a handing-over of power from God to humanity, and a change in the relationship of the divinity to humanity from one of “Father” to one of “friend.” The kenotic theme may be understood as confluent with secularization because they both enact a weakening of metaphysical power. Moreover, Vattimo argues that the strong reasons for being atheistic which were proposed as part of the Enlightenment critique of religion as superstition have now themselves been undermined (with the critiques of reason, of progress, etc.). Ultimately, Vattimo defends a version of Christianity in which metaphysical beliefs (such as the notion that the Godhead is composed of a Trinity, etc.) are reduced to the point of having little or no significance, and what survives is what he sees as the central value of the Christian tradition, *caritas* (love or charity).²³

Frankenberry, quite reasonably, comments that once Christianity has been reduced in this way “...one can question whether there is any longer any reason to talk about Christianity if we can more simply talk about love. If everything said in terms of the Christian belief system could equally well be communicated in the vocabulary of existentialist humanism, one language or the other would seem to be superfluous.”²⁴ The implied answer to this question is that religion meets certain human needs, helping people

confront the contingency or arbitrariness of existence.²⁵ However, Frankenberg faults Vattimo (and Rorty) for supposedly subscribing to a functionalist explanation of religion which explains religious beliefs as a *function* of certain human needs (284-5; 295, note 39). Referring to influential critiques of functionalism as a method of explanation in the social sciences (such as Carl Hempel's²⁶), she argues that functional explanations do not increase our understanding because "[n]eeds – even the deep human need for meaning – do not explain anything. *Needs are what need to be explained...* What exactly is shown? Are the purported needs any less obscure than the religious phenomena they are supposed to explain?" (285).

It is true that Vattimo's thinking about religion and secularization has an important debt to Nietzsche's analysis of religion, which might be seen as functional (metaphysical beliefs provide a sense of security, etc.). However, Vattimo would certainly not endorse an approach to religion which purports to be a model of *explanation*. In the hermeneutic tradition, an important distinction is made between *explanation* and *understanding*, where the former is the goal of the natural sciences (and, arguably, social sciences which [mistakenly?] adopt methodologies from the natural sciences), and the latter is the goal of the human sciences.²⁷ Frankenberg seems to conflate explanation and understanding. Significantly, understanding is that which is arrived at through interpretation, and discussion of religion as a function of needs should be understood as an *interpretation*, not a causal explanation (nor a matter of deductive logic in which needs and religious beliefs might be established as independent terms before a relation is established between them, a demand which seems to be implicit in Hempel's critique). As an interpretation, the view of religion as answering human needs yields a great deal in understanding, since it can displace an entire worldview – from a world which includes the objective existence of metaphysical entities (seen as the best way to understand religious belief), to a secularized world which has a scepticism towards the existence of such entities (because alternative interpretations of the phenomenon of religious belief are available). As such, Vattimo's implicit justification of continuing to talk about the Christian tradition because it meets certain needs is far more defensible than Frankenberg supposes.

The preceding arguments made by Eco, Welsch, and Frankenberg may all be seen as displaying what Jean-François Lyotard called a *differend*: a dispute in which the two parties cannot agree on a common criterion for settling the dispute.²⁸ This is perhaps not surprising, since what are often being disputed in these critical engagements with Vattimo are the criteria for validity themselves. Vattimo's philosophy provocatively calls for a

“weakening” of such criteria, transposing them from the supposed objectivity of the world to the fluidity of the history of interpretation. As with all philosophers who innovate on such a profound level of thought, a special difficulty arises as to how to judge the validity of their claims. Either we can apply previous tests for validity, tests which the innovator is not likely to live up to because they rely on a framework for thought which have been explicitly rejected, or we can try to assess the innovator’s work on its own terms, testing it for internal coherence and freedom from “performative contradiction.” Perhaps ideally, we can combine both approaches, offering both an “internal” and an “external” reading to help us get a clearer picture of the value of a radical thinker’s thought.²⁹ The problem with many of the perspectives expressed here, however, is that they do not sufficiently take the “internal” perspective on Vattimo’s work into account, and the result is that we often simply have a differend; an assessment of Vattimo’s work in terms other than his own, and terms he has explicitly rejected. The result is that many of the engagements here risk being an unproductive disagreement, an impasse, rather than a genuine dialogue *with* Vattimo.

Nevertheless, there are also many engagements with Vattimo’s thought in this large volume which are made in terms internal to his own problematic. Turning now toward some of these, we can identify at least two points on which important objections to Vattimo are made: his *description* of the ontology of the current situation, and his *prescription* of the form of postmetaphysical thinking appropriate to it.³⁰ On the first point, we can return to Frankenberg, as well as turning to Giacomo Marramao and Paolo Flores D’Arcais. To some extent (the exact extent is debatable), the cogency of Vattimo’s philosophy depends upon his description of the ontology of the current situation as nihilistic. That is, the legitimacy of weak thought relies on the supposition that “God is dead,” that Being is in decline, that metaphysical beliefs have largely lost their purchase, and so forth. But several contributors to this volume question this interpretation of the current situation. For a start, Vattimo’s description of our epoch may be challenged on directly “factual” grounds. For example, while Vattimo’s interpretation suggests a widescale weakening of metaphysical beliefs in contemporary culture (the result of secularization), Frankenberg points to empirical studies of religious belief which suggest that belief in supernatural entities and metaphysical principles abounds in the contemporary world (and is particularly high in the U.S.A., it seems) (282). Of course, Vattimo would not consider his interpretation of our epoch to be a “factual” description of an “objective” situation; it is self-consciously an interpretation, and only an interpretation. Nevertheless, at the very least, empirical studies such as those cited by Frankenberg suggest alternative interpretations, ones which Vat-

time and the partisans of weak thought cannot simply ignore without being accused of upholding their own preferred interpretations on purely arbitrary grounds.

So, how are interpretations of epochality to be validated? Marramao pointedly asks, "according to which criteria and/or experiences can we affirm that historicity and contingency belong to our epoch and not to preceding epochs?" (79). This problem is particularly difficult since the appeal to our epoch as nihilistic is often what does the work of validation *for* weak thought. Vattimo argues that we ought to think weakly because we are living in a nihilistic epoch, but what resources does weak thought have to validate this interpretation of epochality? Clearly, Vattimo does not believe it is an "objective" description, but one which emerges from the history of interpretation itself. That is, Vattimo offers it as an interpretation and "validates" it with reference to a host of previous interpretations, principally those of Nietzsche and Heidegger, but also many others (Dilthey, Theodor W. Adorno, Lyotard, Arnold Gehlen, etc.). According to D'Arcais, however, this move doesn't place Vattimo in a better situation. If the interpretation of (post-)modernity as nihilistic is only an interpretation, a "fable," then there is the problem of choosing between different fables, with no apparent criteria for judgement. D'Arcais argues that "no fable can prove another one wrong: they all co-exist in the limbo of a common undecidability, unless there is a criterion given from a higher level ... " (262). Moreover, D'Arcais notes, Vattimo's hermeneutics appears circular since it validates itself with reference to an interpretation of culture and history which it simply presupposes. He writes that:

only by presupposing modernity as the occurrence of nihilism does this interpretation become more persuasive than that of modernity as an unbridgeable gap or as the totalitarian aberration of the Enlightenment. In the end, the "truth" or greater persuasiveness of hermeneutic interpretation reduces itself to the claim: "I will tell the fable in this way!" (263).

This problem of validating his description of the contemporary situation leads on to the second problematic aspect of Vattimo's philosophy I wish to discuss. This is a problem I have already raised, and the one which emerges most often in the pages of this book: the problem of *relativism*. This is a problem which bears directly on Vattimo's prescription of weak thought. Relativism is of course a constant bugbear for hermeneutics and theories of interpretation generally, and is arguably *the* central problem in Vattimo's philosophy, the one which may cause the most resistance to weak thought. We have already seen some of the objections to Vattimo in-

volving accusations of relativism (Eco, Welsch), and I would simply like to summarise the difficulties weak thought has with relativism via a few further points made by D'Arcais.

Firstly, it should be noted that the problem of relativism, within the purview of Vattimo's philosophy, does not bare on epistemology, at least insofar as it is traditionally conceived in terms of "objective" truth. Rather, it bears on the act of interpretation, and the problem of knowing which interpretations are better than others (and for what reasons). As D'Arcais notes, Vattimo's weak thought is "an *essentially* moral philosophy, or more precisely, an *ethico-political* philosophy." This is because "it is an antimetaphysical, antidogmatic and antiauthoritarian philosophy, where the theoretical purpose (antimetaphysical and antidogmatic) is nonetheless explicitly commanded by a political purpose (antiauthoritarian)" (250). Ultimately, Vattimo's reasons for rejecting metaphysics are not theoretical (problems of system, of closure, of foundation, etc.), but ethical. This is precisely the theme which he chooses to develop in his concluding essay to this volume, "Metaphysics and Violence." Vattimo argues that metaphysics is *essentially* violent, for at least two reasons. While he develops this theme in detail with reference to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno, and Lévinas, the links between metaphysics and violence may be simply put as follows. First, Vattimo gives a specifically hermeneutic account of violence as silencing an Other and excluding them from dialogue (and hence, on Vattimo's account, excluding them from participation in the community and in the constitution of "reality"). In appealing to truth and foundation, the "strong" thought of metaphysics discourages an ethical relation to the Other because one has no reason to engage in respectful dialogue with him or her. If one believes one has the truth (or a method by which to determine it), then one would seem to be warranted in ignoring, or even silencing, those who disagree with either that truth or that method. Hermeneutics appears as an "ethical" philosophy on this count because it encourages respectful dialogue with others, and Vattimo's "nihilistic" hermeneutics particularly so because it rejects claims to ultimate truth or foundation (and thus, rejects strong reasons to close off dialogue with, or actively silence, others).³¹ Secondly, metaphysics – as Heidegger and Adorno both demonstrate in differing ways – is a form of thinking which is fundamentally complicit with the total rational organization of society. That is, metaphysics, as instrumental rationality (Adorno) and techno-scientific *Ge-Stell* (Heidegger), promotes a form of social life in which freedom is diminished and alienation is cultivated.³²

While the desire to listen respectfully to others might appear to lead to a kind of "anything goes" relativism, in which all interpretations are seen as equally valid, Vattimo rejects this "vulgar" form of relativism on the grounds

that it, too, lends itself to violence. If all interpretations are considered equally valid, then there is nothing to determine which interpretations will take precedence except the violent play of competing forces. In other words, no principles would legitimate dialogue, since there would be no way of convincing someone that one interpretation is better than another, and so no reason not to simply impose one's own interpretation through force.³³ So Vattimo seeks a criterion to guide interpretation, to enable the judgement that one interpretation is better than another. As we have already seen, he takes this criterion from his interpretation of history, and suggests that the nihilistic epoch in which we live gives us criteria for interpretation. However, at a deeper level of motivation is the view that the single criterion for guiding interpretation is an *ethical* and *political* one: the reduction of violence. Thus, the reduction of violence is the criterion by which Vattimo might claim that the interpretation of the current epoch as nihilistic is preferable to other interpretations, since it suggests that the violent thinking of metaphysics is no longer appropriate or tenable.

However, as D'Arcais points out, Vattimo seems to run into a difficulty here. For what validates this very appeal to a reduction of violence? This is *the* metaethical question: why be ethical? Generally, Vattimo appeals to his philosophy of history again here, stating that the reasons for being ethical are not metaphysical absolutes, but have been given to us in the handing-down of tradition.³⁴ But, as D'Arcais rightly notes and as Vattimo himself argues, tradition is itself a matter of interpretation (i.e. we must *choose* what aspects of tradition to accept and what to reject), and the ethical reduction of violence seems to be validated by appeal to a philosophy of history (nihilism) which is *itself* validated by the ethical reduction of violence, and we seem to have a problem of circularity. D'Arcais thinks that Vattimo thus reaches an impasse, where the choice is between a vulgar relativism and a metaphysical principle (the only ways of avoiding this circularity). He writes:

One cannot escape this dilemma: either there exists a criterion by which to choose one interpretation over another, one that avoids the anarchic confusion but supplies a criterion that is (metaphysical) truth and not interpretation, or this criterion does not exist, and consequently everything is really interpretation (including this affirmation) but unavoidably (in its turn a truth, above all!) there is anarchic confusion (which closes the discussion on preference, and entrusts it to the contingent facticity of the battle among wills to power) (261).

One might perhaps reply on behalf of Vattimo and weak thought that the diagnosis of this impasse relies on an insistence on a foundational mode of

thinking: perhaps circularity only appears as a problem if one insists that there must be an ultimate and independently verifiable criterion which guides thought. Perhaps all Vattimo's philosophy requires – and all it aspires to – is a self-consistent interpretation of the world and of thought itself which is able to engage itself as a plausible position in a dialogue, and indeed in such a way that it remains open to other positions because it does not take itself to be a truth, but only an interpretation.³⁵ Nevertheless, D'Arcais' investigation of the problem of relativism in Vattimo's weak thought is something more than simply a misplaced criticism like those we saw earlier, since it is based on a careful internal reading of Vattimo's thought, and brings to light a potential aporia. D'Arcais thus correctly identifies the point on which many are likely to have justifiable hesitations about Vattimo's philosophy. In short, it remains unclear whether Vattimo's hermeneutics can adequately avoid the problem of relativism, and this, I believe, is the central point on which further dialogue and debate around Vattimo's work needs to focus.

Weakening Philosophy stands as a major contribution to the dissemination of Vattimo's thought in the Anglophone world. It perhaps does not always serve as well as it might as an introduction to this important Italian philosopher, and as a critical assessment its results are varied, patchy, and far from definitive – no clear and consistent critical angle emerges from the many varied essays collected here. But this only serves to highlight the multifaceted and provocative nature of Vattimo's work. Ultimately, it is undeniable that *Weakening Philosophy* is an invaluable sourcebook of critical interpretations of Vattimo, which all future engagements with his philosophy must take into account. Engaging with Vattimo's weak thought is important, even for those who could never accept its conclusions, for it represents an important position in the trajectory of postmetaphysical (post-Nietzschean and post-Heideggerian) thought. Arguably, it is this trajectory which still defines the horizon and limit of contemporary philosophical and critical thought, and even those who reject this Heideggerian problematic outright – such as the increasingly popular Alain Badiou and his followers – arguably inscribe its importance in the very desperation and arrogance of their gesture.³⁶ Vattimo's work should also be considered one of the most original and significant (if controversial) developments of Gadamerian hermeneutics, and interpretation-theory in general, which highlights and proposes innovative solutions to problems endemic to this discipline, such as the limits of interpretation and the problem of relativism. Above and beyond the theoretical dimension of his work, however, Vattimo's most distinctive contribution to postmetaphysical and hermeneutical philosophy is perhaps his extension of it into the practical domains of ethics, politics, and lived exis-

tence. This point is highlighted by many of the contributors to *Weakening Philosophy*, and I will conclude with two examples:

Vattimo on more than one occasion has been asked to clarify precisely what he means by [weak thought]. In response, he tells us most emphatically that it is not a weakness of thinking in which philosophy is no longer able to give directions to the *concerns of life*.³⁷

Vattimo's thought always relates to and affects the life we live ... If you read Vattimo and follow his reasoning for part of the way, you will begin to act, judge, and live differently in a number of situations.³⁸

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NOTES

¹ Frank, "The Universality Claim of Hermeneutics" in Zabala, *Weakening Philosophy*, p. 159. All in-text parenthetical references are to Zabala, *Weakening Philosophy*.

² *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*, trans. John R. Snyder (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988).

³ Jean Grondin, "Vattimo's Latinization of Hermeneutics: Why Did Gadamer Resist Postmodernism?" in Zabala, *Weakening Philosophy*, p. 203.

⁴ Grondin writes that "[i]n no other country is Gadamer as celebrated as a major philosopher as he is in Italy today. For this also, we owe gratitude to Gianni Vattimo" (p. 204).

⁵ This collection has been translated into English as *Weak Thought* by Peter Caravetta and is forthcoming from Columbia University Press.

⁶ Grondin in Zabala, *Weakening Philosophy*.

⁷ *Schleiermacher filosofo dell'interpretazione* (Milan: Mursia, 1968).

⁸ For Vattimo's argument for this characterisation of Nietzsche, see his essay

- "Nietzsche and Contemporary Hermeneutics," collected in *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
- ⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 475.
- ¹⁰ The German reads: "Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache." Vattimo's translation is discussed by Zabala in his introductory chapter (p. 9).
- ¹¹ *The Will To Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1968), §481.
- ¹² Vattimo writes: "...one should rather say that things are what they truly are, only within the realms of interpretation and language. In other words, a consistent formulation of hermeneutics requires a profound ontological revolution, because ontology must bid farewell to the idea of an objectified, external Being to which thought should strive to adequate itself." "Gadamer and the Problem of Ontology" in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsward, and Jens Kertscher (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), p. 301.
- ¹³ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979).
- ¹⁴ This example stems from an exchange between Eco and Rorty.
- ¹⁵ See for example my own questioning of whether Vattimo's criteria are "thick" enough to establish a cogent political philosophy in my essay "The *Verwindung* of Capital: On the Philosophy and Politics of Gianni Vattimo," *Symposium: The Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* (forthcoming – 2009).
- ¹⁶ "Encyclopédie" in Diderot, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 7, Encyclopédie 3 (Paris: Hermann, 1976), p. 213. Cited by Welsch in *Weakening Philosophy*, p. 87.
- ¹⁷ Welsch writes: "We long have known the answer to every question. It reads, 'it is the human.'" This self-fulfilling certainty suffocates thought instead of allowing it to breathe" (p. 96).
- ¹⁸ See Vattimo's introduction in *The End of Modernity*.
- ¹⁹ This adjective is used by Teresa Oñate in her chapter in *Weakening Philosophy*, "The Rights of God in Hermeneutical Postmodernity."
- ²⁰ See Vattimo's *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, trans. David Webb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), chapter one: "The Nihilistic Vocation of Hermeneutics."
- ²¹ Dario Antiseri, *The Weak Thought and Its Strength* (Avebury: Ashgate, 1996).
- ²² Vattimo and Derrida (eds.), *Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- ²³ Vattimo's most personal statement of his return to religion is his *Belief*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and David Webb (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), while the fullest theoretical development of his position is given in *After Christianity*, trans. L. D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). See also Rorty and Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, ed. S. Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) and John D. Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffery W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). It is worth noting that while Vattimo's in-

terpretation of Christianity might appear eccentric at times, he does draw on historical precedents, such as Dilthey, who also saw Christianity as the origin of secularization.

²⁴ Frankenberg in *Weakening Philosophy*, p. 278.

²⁵ On this point, see also Vattimo's essay in *Religion*, "The Trace of the Trace," and Fernando Savater's essay in *Weakening Philosophy*, "Christianity as Religion and the Irreligion of the Future," p. 301.

²⁶ "The Logic of Functional Analysis" in *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* (New York: Free Press, 1965).

²⁷ This distinction was developed by Dilthey.

²⁸ See *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

²⁹ This is what Rex Butler suggests should be done in the case of Jean Baudrillard. See the conclusion to his *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real* (London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage, 1999).

³⁰ There are also of course many other apposite questions put to Vattimo in these pages which correctly identify potentially problematic areas of his thought; far too many to consider in this review. To give just one example, Giacomo Marramao, in his chapter "Which Ontology After Metaphysics? Conversations with Gianni Vattimo and Richard Rorty," questions the capacity of weak thought, which targets metaphysical beliefs as underlying authoritarian power structures, to adequately deal with the social organizations of power which are no longer distributive or hierarchical, but productive and generative (as theorized by postfeminists and post-structuralists) (p. 81).

³¹ See Vattimo, "Metaphysics, Violence, Secularisation" trans. B. Spakman in *Re-coding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), and chapter three: "Ethics" in *Beyond Interpretation*.

³² See Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London; New York: Verso, 1997); Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973); Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

³³ On this point, see Vattimo's chapter "Disenchantment and Dissolution" in *The Adventure of Difference: Philosophy after Nietzsche and Heidegger*, trans. Cyprian Blamires with Thomas Harrison (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

³⁴ See for example "Hermeneutics and Democracy" in Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, trans. William McCuaig, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

³⁵ For example, Vattimo writes that "[t]he arguments that hermeneutics offers to support its own interpretation of modernity are aware of being 'only' interpretations... Their value lies in being able to establish a coherent picture we can share while waiting for others to propose a more plausible alternative." *Beyond Interpre-*

tation, p. 11.

³⁶ See Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany: SUNY, 1999).

³⁷ James Risser, "On the Continuation of Philosophy: Hermeneutics and Convalescence" in Zabala, *Weakening Philosophy*, p. 185.

³⁸ Welsch in Zabala, *Weakening Philosophy*, p. 98.