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Towards a Philosophy of Least Violence

By

Daniel Ambord

Claremont Graduate University

2022

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Approval of the Dissertation Committee

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Daniel Ambord as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religion.

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Abstract

Towards a Philosophy of Least Violence

By

Daniel Ambord

Claremont Graduate University: 2022

Gianni Vattimo is often regarded as a purely negative, eliminativist thinker, defined by the weak thought that he articulated over the course of his storied career. Our temptation to read him in this way is encouraged, not only by an extensive and growing body of secondary literature in the Anglophone world, but by Vattimo's own consistent focus on weakening as represent an alternative to the strong and violent metaphysical systems that have defined much of the philosophical legacy of the Christian West. What often go unacknowledged, therefore, are the positive elements in Vattimo's work. Indeed, weakening is, from the start, a politically motivated project, tied up in an effort to reduce (not to say eliminate) violence. This political motivation, in turn, is not merely about reduction but is instead tied to an ethico-aesthetic-religious complex, a vision of the world in which the barriers to community are broken down, in which the previously silenced might call for justice and organize against injustice, and in which we are no longer chained to the necessities of a harsh and repressive metaphysical order but are instead free to pursue voluntary associations in the spirit of love and charity. At stake in this alternative reading of Vattimo is, naturally enough, his utility as a social, political, and religious thinker and his resistance to the concern that his thought leads to a counterproductive quietism, at best, and to a destructive relativism, at worst.

Once we have engaged with both the temptation to read Vattimo in a purely negative way and with the reasons to resist this temptation in favor of a more positive reading, it is important to reckon with the never-unproblematic character of the latter effort. Indeed, we cannot simply integrate the positive and negative moves we identify into a coherent and solid whole without reinstantiating the sort of totalizing and violent metaphysics that Vattimo critiques. Rather than succumbing to the temptation to seek such closure, we instead can recognize the (productive and interesting) tensions between the positive and negative elements in Vattimo's thought and, in so doing, recognize that there is no radical escape from metaphysics or from violence offered here. Metaphysics is weakened, and yet persists, and violence is reduced and reconfigured, but not banished altogether. Part of the project of weakening, perhaps the most vital part, is precisely this willingness to occupy positions of discomfort or, put another way, a willingness to proceed speculatively and to take risks in confronting the problems that face our shared world.

In the spirit of this sort of willingness to proceed speculatively, we advance, at last, to the final section of the work, which seeks to take Vattimo beyond his own limits. We examine, firstly, the implications of the positive reading of Vattimo for religious thought, putting Vattimo into discourse with his mentor Luigi Pareyson to examine what role religious institutions and religious practices have to play in a world defined by a weakened metaphysics. Proceeding from that particularity, we confront Vattimo's own situatedness in a particular cultural position and attempt to address the question of the utility of his thought for cross-cultural discourse and, relatedly, for resistance to systems of oppression. Finally, we place our speculative reading of Vattimo's thought into discourse with thinkers such as Donna Haraway, Catherine Keller, and Michael Marder to consider the implications weak thought holds for the discourse of the more-than-human world.

Dedication

To my Grandmother Liz, my Aunt Patty, and my Mother Kathleen for shaping my paired journeys of faith and scholarship for which this work is but the latest waypoint. To my sisters Caitlin and Paige, who ceaselessly inspire me with their achievements, while encouraging my own. Finally, to Meredith Jones, for helping me, if not to untangle my thoughts, then at least to tangle them in a productive direction.

Acknowledgments

This work meditates at length upon our arising from contexts and being tied to, and seeking to do justice to, origins, traditions, and legacies. It is therefore fitting to begin with a recognition of those without whom the current work would not have been possible. To begin, I must acknowledge the professionalism of the staff of the department of religion of the Claremont Graduate University's School of the Humanities (and, prior to that, to the University's School of Religion) and of its current chair Professor Tammi Schneider. Likewise, the staffs of the Libraries of the Claremont Colleges and of the Claremont School of Theology were instrumental in allowing the research found within these pages to take place.

The present work likewise owes its existence to various intellectual collaborators and influences. I should firstly acknowledge Professor Brian Treanor of Loyola Marymount University for introducing me to Vattimo's work and for contributing, along with Professor Brad Elliott Stone, to my early interest in Catholic postmodernity. The social and political dimensions of the work are marked indelibly by the late Professor Anselm Min, whose guidance in the early stages of outlining and writing helped to keep the work focused on the concrete realities that it seeks to confront. I hearken back to a still earlier influence for the section of chapter 7 devoted to plant life: my late father, Mark Ambord, a botanist by training and inclination whose lifelong fascination with the peculiar lifeways of plants has remained a living part of me. The broader concern of Chapter 7 with a more-than-human world owes a great deal to Professor Brianne Donaldson of the University of California at Irvine, whose excellent work at the intersection of

animal studies and theology I was fortunate enough to encounter in its formative stages at Claremont Graduate University.

A special thanks must be extended to the members of my dissertation committee, Professors Kevin Wolfe, Silvia Benso, and Roland Faber. Professor Benso's excellent work in furthering Italian philosophy in the Anglophone world and elsewhere contributed immeasurably to my interest in and understanding of the topics considered here and shows a particular influence on the sections comparing Vattimo with his mentor Luigi Pareyson. Professor Wolfe's eye for detail, enthusiasm for the project, and timely concern for the question of revolutionary violence helped to provide much needed nuance, particularly to the work's early sections. Finally, my most profound gratitude must be extended to my dissertation director, Professor Faber, who first acquainted me with process thought and its intersection with philosophical postmodernity. His outstanding scholarly work, patient mentorship, and tireless support over the course of my studies at Claremont Graduate University have shaped me as a scholar and this work would not have been possible without his guidance.

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Introduction

The Claim: An Alternative Way of Reading Vattimo

When we look at his work as it relates to the question of violence, it would be easy to allow Vattimo's negative gesture, that of an emphasis on the unmasking of the sacrality of all absolute, ultimate truths, to eclipse the more positive (and risky) moves with which it is inextricably intertwined. Indeed, the violence with which Vattimo is principally concerned is the metaphysical violence of an assertion of [T]ruth¹ understood as the assertion of sameness against difference, of singularity against plurality. Faced with the horrors that, historically, have accompanied this species of violence, it is tempting to engage in a sort of intellectual scorched-earth strategy, turning the weapon of criticism against any hint of metaphysics in an effort to starve the fires of intellectual cum political totalitarianism of their fuel. Even Vattimo's own words encourage us somewhat in this: "The wellsprings of metaphysical authoritarianism never run dry," after all, and so "the task of unmaking all absolute, ultimate truths is necessarily an ongoing one."² It is perhaps understandable, as a result, that much of the critical literature on Vattimo treats him as an eliminativist thinker.

¹The careful reader will observe, over the course of this work, several distinct uses of the word "truth." [T]ruth here has the meaning of the absolute Truth of metaphysical systems, a "Truth" with a capital "T." In contrast, truth with a lowercase "t" refers to the localized, particular truths situated within diverse perspectives or, alternatively to truth understood as a product of consensus. Finally, Truth (capital "T" but without brackets) represents Truth understood as irreducible and inexhaustible (particularly in the sense discussed by Pareyson).

²Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), xxvii.

Our inclination to regard Vattimo as a negative thinker must come, in no small part, from the appeal of the negative move in his thought, a move that is very much concerned with arresting the historical and contemporary excesses of the metaphysical structures that have characterized the Plato-to-Kant canon. For Vattimo, metaphysics represents any of the notions of a “way the world is” that have historically characterized Western intellectual history. These notions represent unquestionable, ultimate [T]ruths: reality is that before which all discussion comes to a halt (insofar as it is that which we are obliged to accept without further discussion). As a result, metaphysics is, for Vattimo, inextricably connected with violence, since the aforementioned cutting off of discourse is itself a violent move. Historically, absolutism has long been used to justify political, religious, and social violence due to the cultural primacy ascribed to [T]ruth. However, the cutting off of discussion too can ground these varieties of violence, insofar as they are precisely what emerges as a means of dispute resolution once the ideal of discourse has been abandoned (as is evident in the myriad identitarian struggles of our postmodern era). Hence, the calling into question of metaphysical structures carries with it a political and ethical weight that can (and does) easily lead into a reading of Vattimo as a “thinker of the end of metaphysics” or even as a “post-metaphysical thinker” engaged in the struggle to banish a species of thought productive of violence and to guard ceaseless against its return. And what a *romantic* notion that is: the vigor and heroism of violence turned against itself (and thereby preserved, suspended perpetually in a state free of all the messy consequences of violence that we wish to avoid!) in an ascetic gesture par excellence.

Other Readers

This reading of Vattimo is given weight by his treatment in much of the critical literature. Thinkers critical of Vattimo, such as Thomas Guarino, Frederieck Depoortere, and Anthony Scigliano build their critiques on Vattimo's weakening of the Christian tradition through what they take, in their particular ways, as a selective reading/appropriation of scripture and of theologically suspect impulses at the periphery of Christian thought (e.g. Joachim of Fiore) towards the end of grounding eliminative postmodernity. More positive commentators like Marta Frascati-Lochhead praise Vattimo principally for his employment of the intellectual resources of Christianity in helping to break down socially problematic identity categories, paving the way for a social and political emancipation understood principally in a negative light (however compatible it might be with the corresponding reconstructive moves of other thinkers). Even Vattimo's late interlocutor Richard Rorty tends to focus on the negative move in Vattimo's thought, gesturing towards any corresponding constructive impulse only in a very general way: if we break down the metaphysical, violent structures that once held us down, this allows us to look forward to a community in which "love is pretty much the only law,"³ but the question of how this community should arise and function is left vague, the community itself serving as an object of apocalyptic hope (an echo of Caputo's similarly weak, similarly negative "hope for I know not what"), rather than a concrete, achievable objective.

Vattimo's own particular reading of his main influences can tempt us in the direction of an eliminative reading of his work. Vattimo's key move beyond his teacher Pareyson is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in his departure from the latter's continued emphasis on Truth understood as a reality accessible by, but not reducible to, human intellectual cum cultural

³ Richard Rorty, "Anticlericalism and Atheism," in *The Future of Religion* by Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 40.

activity. For Pareyson, Truth represents an inexhaustible ontological richness always expressed in the play of discursive practice, whereas for Vattimo truth becomes precisely reducible to “an affair of consensus,” something produced by, rather than merely manifest in, discursive activity (one can picture the anti-relativists of our day cringing at the suggestion). More explicit still is Vattimo’s reading of Nietzsche, with his triumphant emphasis on the death of God (and what else can this mean but the death of all metaphysical totality?), of the real world becoming a fable, and of the revelation that there are, after all, no facts but only interpretations (this last utterance marking the dawn of a new era: an age of interpretation). Vattimo’s Nietzschean reading of Heidegger as remaining “faithful to Heidegger even against the letter of his writings,” consists precisely in a reading the overcoming of metaphysics as representing an abandonment of the traditional conception of Being as ground.⁴

The Stakes in the New Reading

At stake in these readings of Vattimo is nothing less than the political efficacy of his project. Ours is, of course, an era in which political violence is once again a prime item of intellectual concern, with the resurgence of ideologically-motivated violence by both state and non-state actors flaring against the darkening backdrop of a world increasingly defined by economic inequity, social instability, environmental damage, and technological change.⁵ Viewed strictly as a negative thinker, Vattimo risks running afoul of the seeming political impotence of which post-

⁴Gianni Vattimo, *Dialogues with Nietzsche* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 194-195.

⁵As we shall see, environmental destruction, economic and social injustice, and the like are themselves no less significant, and metaphysical, forms of violence than more overt political repression or inter-group strife.

Heideggerian leftist thought has been (not altogether unjustly) accused since at least Foucault.⁶ No less real is the danger that a negative reading of Vattimo's thought could ground totalitarian excesses of its own, whether in the form of a validation of neo-imperialism in the name of a sanitized, market driven pseudo-pluralism or, as with Nietzsche, a reading of the end of strong metaphysics as giving license to the worst excesses of the will to power.

We hardly need spend too much time considering the bearing out of these concerns in our present era. The looming specter of environmental catastrophe, the rapid growth of economic inequality, the return to prominence of racist and religious and political totalitarianisms of various stripes, the dominance of the new form of the Capitalist mode of life (with all of its resulting imperialism, both subtle and gross), all form the atmosphere that defines our thought and behavior (if in a sometimes-unacknowledged way). This background also gives weight to seemingly theoretical questions like those engaged by Vattimo. It is important for us to give serious consideration as to the extent to which theory can facilitate the sorts of political practice that will allow us to better (that is, more productively) navigate the treacherous social and political waters in which we find ourselves at this moment in history. Vattimo himself is intimately aware of this and, accordingly, his life story is no less defined by activism and political action as by theorizing (Vattimo is one of those rare figures in history who is both an

⁶Alessandro Carrera not only reads Vattimo's later thought as a principally negative philosophy of political disillusionment written from the comfort and safety of tenured Academe, but goes so far as to ascribe a similar (if more charitably framed) reading to commentators like Pier Aldo Rovatti and Alessandro Dal Lago. Alessandro Carrera, "The Many Challenges of Italian Theory," in *Italian Critical Theory, Annali d'italianistica*, Volume 29 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2011), 18. This characterization scarcely does justice to either thinker. See Pier Aldo Rovatti, "Weak Thought 2004: A Tribute to Gianni Vattimo" in *Weakening Philosophy*, edited by Santiago Zabala, translated by Robert T. Valgenti (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2004), 144 and Peter Caravetta, "Introduction," in *Weak Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 30.

accomplished theorist and a successful political figure, working as an activist throughout his young life and later serving terms in both the Italian and European parliaments). Vattimo goes so far as to say that perhaps the one mechanism by which we can gauge the value of a given reading is precisely its suitability to the historical and cultural circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Similarly, on a theoretical level, it is important to confront the question of theory itself. Certainly, it might be supposed that theory is merely baggage to be swept along by the tide of particular material interests, not only in the sense recognized by almost two generations of critical theory, that is, as influenced or produced altogether by said circumstances, but in the even more deflationary sense of being merely incidental to those interests. It may be that philosophy and theology are, after all, not that powerful, that people merely struggle for the same old material or base psychological reasons for which they have always struggled and bring their ideologies “along for the ride.”⁷ Vattimo’s rootedness in the tradition of Italian Marxism puts this question in a position of importance within his thought and, accordingly, we will find ourselves addressing his approach to it at greater length later.

Approach to Establishing the Claim

In opposition to the impulse to read Vattimo as purely negative, we shall explore the positive, even constructive elements that are often passed over in his thought. Further, we shall consider the positivity that dwells beneath the surface of (or perhaps, tangled up with) Vattimo’s negative moves. If Vattimo problematizes the sacrality of all absolute, ultimate truths (a seemingly negative move), he does so precisely to reduce violence. Violence, in this instance, takes the

⁷I owe this insight and this formulations to my discussions with Professor Anselm Min.

form not merely of the grounding of intellectual and political violence against persons and groups but also, and more fundamentally, in the establishment and policing of barriers to discourse that inescapably function as barriers to community. The violence of metaphysics is precisely the violence of saying that discussion must stop at such and such a point (hence, it also takes the form of an unquestionable status quo in which barriers to or corruptions of social relations are the norm).⁸ Once this particular violence is robbed of its strength, new forms of community become possible.

Following his teacher Luigi Pareyson, Vattimo's notion of interpretation consists of far more than merely problematizing violent intellectual structures. On the contrary, it further entails a corresponding establishment of an ever-expanding community of discourse. Surprisingly, this envisioned community is founded (again, as with Pareyson) on a sort of truth-directedness. For Vattimo, this takes the form of the very recognition of contingency and of our corresponding elevation to the status of interpreters (the dawn, as it were, of the "age of interpretation" and the establishment of hermeneutics as the new *koine*; both themes Vattimo explores at length).⁹ Further, it takes the form of a recognition of and commitment to the communitarian implications of that new intellectual reality. Vattimo notes that, concealed though it may be beneath (obsolete and increasingly unconvincing) metaphysical trappings, we already see this commitment alive

⁸Already we come across an apparent contradiction: does the view of metaphysics as enclosure itself represent a form of enclosure? As we shall see, Vattimo's thought is not allergic to some level of circularity. A perhaps more constructive answer (likewise, discussed at greater length later) is that metaphysics cannot be done away with, so the process of weakening is itself metaphysics. Hence, the discussion of metaphysics as representing violent enclosure is not a cutting ourselves off from metaphysics (in favor of what?) but rather, a breaking open of metaphysics, or a forcing of metaphysics to confront anew the connections of which it is always-already composed.

⁹Anthony C. Scigliano Jr., "Contesting the World and the Divine: Balthasar's 'Trinitarian' Response to Gianni Vattimo's Secular Christianity," *Modern Theology*, Volume 23, Number 4, October 2007, 526.

and well in secularized democratic institutions, in the (admittedly uneasy and risk) embrace of cultural pluralism, and in new approaches to academic disciplines. He writes that truth becomes “an affair of consensus,” a shared understanding or set of understandings constantly being examined, questioned, expanded, reinterpreted, all with a view towards the maintenance and expansion of the community of interpreters.¹⁰ If older, metaphysical ways of thinking could be likened to competitive sports in which a particular worldview sought victory over opponents (through complete dominion, through the subordination of human beings and the more-than-human world to its principles), the truth-directedness that Vattimo places at the core of his community instead resembles the schoolyard game of catch, in which the ball is thrown back and forth between an ever expanding group of individuals, with no winners or losers, but a mere desire that the game continue, expand, and include as many players as possible.¹¹

With our goals thusly held in mind, we proceed to a consideration of our motives and methods. Continuing with the imagery of games, we have already noted that Vattimo’s recognition of the neurotic persistence and resurgence of intellectual absolutes entails an ongoing process of problematization, which evokes an image of the weak thinker as playing an endless game of intellectual “whack-a-mole” in which metaphysical conceptions are “hammered down” as they “pop up.” It is therefore important that we recall that the very ineradicability of metaphysics does not afford us the luxury of such a ceaseless struggle, as a definitive movement beyond metaphysics would entail precisely the sort of objectivity that is both so dangerous and so untenable in the very systems we would criticize. We cannot step outside of metaphysics to a

¹⁰Silvia Benso, “Review: From Veritas to Caritas, or How Nihilism Yields to Democracy,” in *Human Studies* Volume 29, Number 4 (New York: Springer, December 2006), 503-508.

¹¹For a productive meditation on this imagery, see James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games* (New York: Free Press, 2013).

safe space from which to disrupt metaphysical systems as they arise without positioning ourselves within a new absolute to which we no longer have critical access. Nor could such a position ever be innocent of connection to the metaphysical systems that we seek to disrupt. Indeed, the resources we have are the complex, interrelated networks of metaphysical conceptions that compose the social and political realities into which we always-already find ourselves thrown and we cannot simply dispense with these once we realize that they are not objective realities but “human, all too human” constructs. In favor of what could we abandon them? Even the language of metaphysics persists, as Vattimo, parting with Derrida, notes that the language of a synthesis of plurality into unity still serves to mediate our navigation of the plurality in which we find ourselves through an acknowledgment of the (always-problematic) interconnectivity and mutual constitution of cultures, spheres of life, and so on (to borrow a Whiteheadian phrase, deployed in the correct way, it allows us to avoid “thinking in watertight compartments”¹²).¹³ Hence, for Vattimo, we can but twist metaphysical systems from within rather than moving beyond them in an absolute sense; in a word, we can but *weaken* them (in the Heideggerian sense of *Verwindung*). Our refusal to view metaphysical systems in an absolute, closed-off way not only diminishes the capacity of these systems to ground (act as justification for) violence (on behalf of a supposed ultimate [T]ruth) but, more fundamentally, forestalls the

¹²Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: Corrected Edition* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 10.

¹³We should note here a tension that will recur throughout our inquiry: Vattimo proceeds in a broadly dialectical fashion, apropos of his being influenced by Marx (hence Hegel) and Gadamer (we shall discuss, later, the importance of the notion of the fusion of horizons) but resists viewing this process as unproblematically proceeding towards an end (teleology) or as being itself governed by inescapable principles of action (preferring instead to regard it as a risky, volition, and, yes, *personal* move).

closing off of discourse and the corresponding stifling of community embodied in any supposed principle before which all discussion must come to a halt.

For Vattimo, this move against violence is an ethical (and we should further note that the ethical, for Vattimo, cannot be strongly separated from the aesthetic or from the religious) one arising from Vattimo's own historical situatedness. A part of that is certainly his position as a European of an era marked indelibly by the bloody legacy of fascist, communist, and imperialist violence: Vattimo was himself targeted by the Red Brigades¹⁴ early in his career.¹⁵ No less significant is his embeddedness in the European Catholic intellectual tradition and in his desire to redeem that tradition by way of constructive readings and reappropriations. Roman Catholicism, philosophical hermeneutics, and emancipatory political leftism form an overlapping and intertwining nexus of forces within Vattimo's thought, from whence he derives his particular motivations: that we are called to love one another,¹⁶ that this love is borne out best in the reduction of violence and in the corresponding project of emancipation, and that we similarly have an obligation as bearers of our traditions and cultural/intellectual resources to future generations (not least through our appropriation of such resources in service of the aforementioned emancipatory ends).¹⁷ Notable among the resources appropriated by Vattimo is an ideal of a community in which "love is pretty much the only law"¹⁸ and, beyond even that, in which we are as free as possible to pursue the aesthetic goal (understood as the *perfection* of love

¹⁴Friederiek Deporteere, "Christianity and Politics: A Biographical-Theoretical Reading of Gianni Vattimo and Alain Badiou," in *Between Philosophy and Theology: Contemporary Interpretations of Christianity*, edited by Lieven Boeve and Christophe Brabant (Farnham: Ashcort, 2010), 197.

¹⁵Gianni Vattimo, *Not Being God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 81.

¹⁶We shall see that love, here, itself is connected to a rejection of boundaries, a desire to transgress limits.

¹⁷Dario Antiseri, *The Weak Thought and its Strength* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1996), 115.

¹⁸Rorty, "Anticlericalism and Atheism," 40.

and, correspondingly, in a lightheartedness in which our myriad relationships and collaborations can manifest no longer as competition or even as struggle but as *play*¹⁹) of our lives as an end to which any ethics, even an ethics of love, can only ever be a means.

Vattimo acknowledges that the inescapability of metaphysics, which is to say, our radical situatedness in our particular social and political and intellectual contexts, in turn entails that our motivations for our encounters with our contexts are no less contingent than the contexts themselves. In other words, Vattimo is careful to acknowledge the contingency of the origins of and motivations for his own encounter with the tradition. The inevitable question of “why be violent rather than non-violent?” cannot be unproblematically answered for Vattimo and he correspondingly acknowledges the possibility of the intrusion of violence²⁰ into his own thought. He notes, however, that this possibility is far from absent in absolutist metaphysical systems and that, by recognizing the contingency of his own preference for non-violence, by leaving the situation perpetually in a state of unease, he creates a posture in which the assumption of violence becomes more difficult because it can never gain the destructive momentum afforded it by a grounding in an unproblematic, absolute justification.

¹⁹We find a shared resonance here with the Kantian observation that dogmatism, deprived of its totalizing character (for him, by the critique, and for us, by the process of weakening), transitions from war to playful sparring: “There is accordingly no real polemic in the field of pure reason. Both parties fence in the air and wrestle with their shadows, for they go beyond nature, where there is nothing that their dogmatic grasp can seize and hold. Fight as they may, the shadows that they cleave apart grow back together in an instant, like the heroes of Valhalla, to amuse themselves anew in bloodless battles.” Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Adam A. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A756/B784.

²⁰Understood as metaphysical enclosure, but also as the more explicit violence of an imposition upon plurality.

It is here that we confront most explicitly the connection between aesthetics and ethics in Vattimo's thought. For Vattimo, the ethical implications of our unease at being in a position of inescapable contingency breaks open an intuition that has characterized even avowedly metaphysical ethical systems since Aristotle: ethics is haunted by the notion that there is something problematic about it relative to other types of discourse. One does not solve an ethical problem in the same way, that is, with the same definitiveness, as one solves a mathematical one. Ethical discourse, even in systems in which ethics is held to follow from universal ethical principles, more closely resembles *persuasion, appeal, or exhortation*. Shorn of its traditional metaphysical baggage, ethics becomes explicitly that which it has long been implicitly: a function of what Rorty would term "cultural politicking."²¹ Our contingent opposition to violence, then, persuades, rather than proves, and it does so, appropriately, by recourse to that other contingency, the vision of the ideal community. Vattimo looks to the tradition from which he emerges and from it pulls the elegance of ritual (his own nightly praying of the Latin Breviary), the harmony of community, and the placing of hope in a love "that surpasses understanding"²² to form a vision, not of truth but of beauty, not a dictation but a provocation and invitation towards which we move not out of necessity but desire.

The Catholic tradition, read in a certain way, carries within it the beginnings of a move from the primacy of the [T]ruth to that of community, a reversal of the classic formulation "*amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas*." It opens the way to a conception of truth not as an absolute before which discussion comes to a halt (an imposition that, per the Nietzschean and late Heideggerian critiques to which Vattimo is heir, is itself always a manifestation of

²¹Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²²Ephesians 3:19 (NIV).

authority), but as a product of consensus (an honoring of our call to love one another), or as a reappropriation of emancipatory elements within our traditions (an honoring of our situatedness within traditions, of our being “products of an initiative not our own”).²³ For Vattimo, the social and political move towards pluralism and secularism correspondingly arises out of (we might say long-sublimated) elements of that tradition: the self-emptying of God in the Incarnation carries within it the seeds of the calling into question of absolutes of all stripes, even as the elevation of the disciples to the status of “no longer slaves [but] friends” corresponds to our own elevation to the status of active interpreters rather than disempowered subjects buffeted about by unquestionable [T]ruth.²⁴ The realization of the universalizing vocation of the Catholic tradition, then, is not to be found in the (impossible and undesirable) global imposition of absolute [T]ruth. Rather, it is to be found in a continued and global emphasis on the weakening of absolutes, the opening up a space for discourse and the broadening of that space so as to allow heretofore silenced groups to finally be heard (and here we see again the double gesture of the weakening of the political and intellectual totalitarianism that has characterized the tradition historically and the corresponding reconstructive gesture of positive reappropriation of the tradition for emancipatory ends).

Vattimo’s care in acknowledging his rootedness in the tradition does not have the function of positioning him on secure ground. On the contrary, he acknowledges a certain circularity: his motives are the contingent function of his particular cultural background and his volitional engagement with it (and here we see some productive echoes of Pareyson’s personalist

²³Martin Vasek and Andrea Javorska, “Weak Thought and Christianity: Some Aspects of Vattimo’s Philosophy of Religion, Confrontation with Otakar Funda,” *Religions* 6, No. 3, (2015): 969-987.

²⁴John 15:15 (NIV).

approach to hermeneutics), even as the tools he employs are those of his tradition. However, he notes that an opposition to circularity is itself an artifact of metaphysical thinking: What, after all, would an escape from circularity look like if not a flight into an objective “view from nowhere,” overcoming in the sense of *Überwindung*? To seek security through the rejection of circularity would simply be to deny our own situatedness, thereby blinding ourselves to its effects upon us and upon our thinking (and proving again a Freudian insight that the late Heidegger was astute enough to identify at the core of postmodernity: that what we cannot see or refuse to see is what twists us, that what is repressed always returns as *neurosis*). If our position within this condition of circularity makes us uneasy, then it is with an unease that we should welcome, for it is one that prevents our contingent identity categories from ossifying into structures no less totalizing and violent than the universalizing claims that they replace.

The breaking down of barriers to community allows for and, indeed, necessitates the reconfiguration of previously metaphysical concepts. The recognition that the concept of [T]ruth as a structure before which all discussion must come to a halt is intellectually untenable and ethically undesirable forces our reappropriation of the concept. Vattimo reconfigures the classical biblical wisdom that “the truth will make us free” to mean “whatever makes us free is truth.”²⁵ This freedom consists in the transformation of truth from an impediment to the establishment of community (through its permanent forestalling²⁶ of discussion) into a means by which communities form and establish the shared standards that allow them to persist and to

²⁵Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, xxv.

²⁶We use “forestalling” in place of “prohibition” here in recognition of how easily a conditional forestalling can become a permanent one (and here we see the subtle and often unacknowledged violence and absolutism that persists even in a Rawlsian liberal attempt to bracket or set aside metaphysical discussions in the interest of an allegedly neutral public sphere).

function in as nonviolent a manner as possible. Truth becomes “an affair of consensus,” with the projects of science, philosophy, and theology no longer being regarded as means of attaining a greater understanding of objective reality but rather as manifestations of *collective projects of interpretation*.²⁷

Ethics too finds itself reconfigured by the opening up of a space for community. Rather than being a function of absolute principles, it becomes “charity plus the traffic laws.”²⁸ To unpack this formulation somewhat, we need first consider the question of charity. Vattimo characterizes his project as embodying a passage “from *Veritas* to *Caritas*” and notes a reversal of Aristotle’s classic sentiment “*amicus Plato sed magis amica veritas*.” We can certainly see in this emphasis on charity and love the mark of Vattimo’s Christian heritage. There is, however, also a more fundamental hermeneutic insight at play here. Once we have problematized ethics understood as adherence to absolute metaphysical principles, we are left with our recognition of our own situatedness in the world, with all of its corresponding contingency. This situatedness represents a being-in-the-world that is always a being-with-others, a socially-conditioned being. Hence, the relationship with others, our capacity for ongoing social life, assumes a foundational character: to our interaction with others (among other things) we owe our particular constitution as subjects, as well as the social and intellectual resources we use to engage with social, intellectual, and ethical questions. Indeed, for Vattimo, if any directedness towards truth is possible at all, it is so precisely in light of the social, through our recognition of our embeddedness within cultures and groups and by our engagement with others through discourse in the establishment of consensus. Thus, the Christian imperative to love and, further, to regard

²⁷Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

²⁸Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, “Weak Thought and the Reduction of Violence,” *Common Knowledge* Vol. 8, Issue 3, Fall 2002, 457.

love as perhaps the highest good, is borne out in the hermeneutic recognition of the (never unproblematically) foundational character of sociality as such. After untold ages of subordination to epistemological questions, the preservation of the social through the ethical assumes (through Vattimo's configuration) a heretofore unimagined primacy.

This, in turn, motivates our establishment of standards of conduct reflective of our compassion for others, of our need to make safe the space of the social. We establish and accept things like traffic laws out of desire to look after the safety of our fellows, rather than out of a belief in some absolute principle underlying them (a difference that, as we have already considered, guards against the ossification of these standards into dangerous absolutes). The truth of these measures becomes a function of their efficacy within and suitability to the community in which they arise. Absent the metaphysical force previously ascribed to rules of all sorts (and perhaps, in particular to law), these measures can likewise be re-evaluated with sober eyes and adjusted as social and material conditions change, surely an attractive prospect in a world in which metaphysical conceptions of law all too often have the effect of slowing or stalling legal reforms in the name of this or that absolute principle.

We must again note that a particular religious circularity or self-containedness leaves its mark indelibly upon each of these positive moves. The Christian emphasis on charity motivates our reading of Christianity as carrying within it the seeds of the self-weakening of the Western metaphysical tradition, while this reading in turn allows for a reconfiguration of ethics and community in which charity, rather than [T]ruth, assumes pride of place. Vattimo is well aware of this circularity and is at pains to point to the details of his own intellectual and cultural roots as influencing his thought. Leaving aside, for the moment, the previously addressed observation that opposition to circularity is itself a relic of metaphysical principles we can no longer find

tenable, there is, for Vattimo, also a sense in which the Christian message in particular leads us to a sort of circularity. To wit, Christianity, understood metaphysically or not, claims a certain situatedness within history and demands, as an ethical imperative, the application of its principles to the various situations in which (Christian) believers find themselves. Even within scripture, this process is understood as being an ongoing one and one that is, all too frequently, fraught with risk. For Vattimo, then, Christianity necessarily entails an uneasy condition of being embedded in such and such a set of circumstances and in working from within those circumstances to live life in a Christian way. Shorn of necessarily arbitrary and violent metaphysical limits, the fluid nature of this process and the dizzying plurality of its never-static and highly particular potential outcomes bestow an irreducibility to the faith (and to similar cultural inheritances) that leaves it as a wellspring of potentiality that we have a responsibility to take up and to pass down to generations still to come.²⁹

It has been remarked that a characteristic feature of contemporary Italian hermeneutics, one very much alive in the thought of both Vattimo and his teacher Pareyson, is the apparent lack of concern with definitive resolutions to intellectual problems. Indeed, Vattimo is more inclined to *maintain* productive tensions than to try to banish them. We have already seen this impulse at play in his treatment of the issue of circularity. We should note, in a preliminary and speculative manner, that this impulse can be configured in different ways within Vattimo's thought. On the one hand, the maintenance of tensions carries with it a certain ascetic character, a turning of power against itself no less tied to Vattimo's Catholicism than his (related!) discussion of *kenosis*. However, Vattimo's Nietzscheanism is strong enough for him to recognize asceticism as

²⁹It is here that truth as consensus gives way to Truth (with a capital T) in a Pareysonian sense: Truth as irreducible, Truth understood as representing a superabundance of meaning.

itself a metaphysical temptation, a hidden effort at an absolute, if mystical, validation for his project from which he (like Pareyson before him) is obliged to turn away. Vattimo can at least concede, as in his discussion of circularity, that tensions keep us from becoming overly comfortable, with comfort here having the meaning of a lapse into an essentially violent position of certitude. But Vattimo is no less wont to characterize this position as embodying a sort of playfulness, a refusal to take ourselves too seriously. In full recognition of the seriousness of the problems facing the world, Vattimo recaptures a spirit of joy and hope that is no less a living part of his tradition than the focus on suffering and *askesis*.

Having examined the different facets of Vattimo's constructive move, it is therefore appropriate to pause yet again to examine two more productive tensions within Vattimo's thought, centered this time on two of his most explicit items of concern: metaphysics and violence. The first tension we shall consider returns us to our initial temptation to view Vattimo as a negative thinker. Indeed, Vattimo's work is often grouped, somewhat unhelpfully, along with a number of other projects under the broad heading of anti- or post-metaphysical thought. It is true that Vattimo is critical of the absolutism of metaphysical thinking and associates metaphysics with the violence that he is concerned with avoiding. For the sake of clarity, we must further note that Vattimo makes a (late Heideggerian) distinction between metaphysics (understood as the instantiation of ideas before which all discussion must come to a halt) and ontology: there is a sense in which the recognition of the contingency of our cultural and intellectual contexts is, for Vattimo, a coming into relation with Being, an ontological insight that avoids the totalizing and violent character of metaphysics. This ontology, of course, is itself of a weakened variety, manifest in our encounter with our own situatedness in our traditions,

rather than in a more robust, content-laden intrusion of the transcendent into history (or, perhaps more correctly, an *imposition* of the transcendent *upon* history).³⁰

This distinction, while important, in a sense only forestalls the question of the metaphysical character of Vattimo's project. Indeed, a recognition that we exist within contingent metaphysical systems does not remove us from those systems or allow us to pull altogether new and metaphysically uncontaminated resources from "elsewhere." On the contrary, we are still in the uneasy position of having to work within the systems in which we always-already find ourselves. Not only does this reality confront us with the Nietzschean realization of our own finitude (our concepts, our language, our very existential possibilities, are delimited by the circumstances in which we find ourselves), but also with the risk that even the principle of weakening itself might become violent and totalizing. Vattimo himself concedes that weak thought is "in danger of hardening into a metaphysics, and when it does it fits very nicely with things like the imposition of freedom and democracy by way of armed intervention."³¹ Weak thought must then remain self-critical, guarding against such impulses by recourse to an emphasis on pluralism and to a trajectory of social organization that encourages it to flourish as free from constraint as possible (with love becoming "pretty much the only law").³²

Another, more subtle metaphysical attribute carried on (if in a weakened form) by Vattimo from his tradition is a concern, not just for the establishment and maintenance of his community, but for its expansion, an impulse that everyone and everything possible be saved. If

³⁰We will see later that Vattimo is not averse to the idea of emergence of novelty into history *as such*, but rather, to such emergence as it is often configured in absolutist approaches to religion (revelation understood as absolute and unproblematic, as an injection of universally-accessible and unquestionable meaning into history).

³¹Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, xxviii.

³²Rorty, "Anticlericalism and Atheism", 40.

Vattimo is, after all, engaged in a universalizing project, it is appropriate that we consider carefully whether and how it differs from the absolutist projects that he is wont to criticize. In another sense, however, Vattimo's thought cannot be constrained by the cultural atomism that characterizes a certain sort of multiculturalism: the opening up of space for discourse requires interventions, breakings open, callings into question of barriers to discourse wherever they may appear. Indeed, scandalous though the claim may appear, the well-intentioned efforts of violence-averse multiculturalism would, from the perspective of weak thought, themselves represent an insidious collapse into the sort of violence of greatest concern to Vattimo if they become neurotically concerned with avoiding cross-cultural violence through the suspension (as if such was ever possible) of cross-cultural contact. In the spirit of weak thought, we cannot but array ourselves against such an impulse and in support of a community modeled on and lured by a Divine love defined precisely by its willingness to *transgress* boundaries.

Hence, if Vattimo's project is *metaphysical* (insofar as there can be no move beyond metaphysics into a discursive space in which metaphysics no longer *is*, and insofar as the resources of the traditions in which we find ourselves are metaphysical through and though), so too is it *confrontational* or *provocative* (and here we are perhaps well served by recourse to terms that allow us to avoid the troublesome language of "constructive" and "destructive" forms of violence) in ways that themselves are never free of the risk of a collapse into violence. While, as we have already noted at some length, a large part of Vattimo's positive move involves an orientation towards community, he is careful to caution that community alone is not sufficient validation. That is, communities can be dysfunctional, can rest upon violent foundations and incorporate or embody violent principles (here again we bump up against troubling linguistic boundaries: non-violence and the capacity for communitarian openness are, after all, intimately

connected in Vattimo's thought, such that one can ask whether, for him, a violent community is truly a community at all). Vattimo is understandably reluctant to say that we must become latter-day imperialists, carrying the banner of weakening to such communities in order to save them from themselves, but he similarly is unwilling to surrender to the temptation to suppose that communities (any more than cultures) can or should be left to themselves. A willingness to provoke actively, no less than a capacity to invite passively must therefore remain an option, if one that recognizes fully an accompanying danger of violence and imperialism: provocation can only too easily instantiate failures of charity, collapses into mockery and dehumanization, or it can serve to mask more traditionally metaphysical efforts to "educate" or "enlighten" through propagandistic efforts of various sorts. Like other tensions we have explored so far, this risk is one that weak thought forces us to accept with an accompanying productive sense of unease.

Having considered the often-unacknowledged positivity within Vattimo's thought, it is incumbent upon us to echo that positivity by considering applications, points of expansion, and connections waiting to be made. While he does not spill much ink on the subject, Vattimo acknowledges that different cultures are always-already entwined in systems of mutual interpretation (the person of Christ is an interpretation of Judaism; and a fruitful one for all the violence to that tradition entailed thereby) and we might constructively assert that the breaking up of ossified metaphysical structures is precisely what is needed in order to allow us to see this and to form ever-newer patterns of interconnectivity and community. Obviously, certain forms of violent appropriation are a concern within such a framework, but these too need to be restrained, not only by self-criticism of the kind described above, but precisely by the communitarian establishment of standards and practices that encourage pluralism and interaction while keeping that interaction *as non-violent as possible*. And here too we would need to acknowledge that the

process by which such discourses could be established would itself be nothing but another form of violent imperialism if it consisted of the colonization of (never entirely-)other traditions or by way of an establishment of conditions for entry into shared spaces that would represent a version of the same process.

But what is to motivate the participation by other cultures in such a shared enterprise to begin with, given that Vattimo's ethical/aesthetic motivations are themselves the product of his situatedness within his tradition? Appropriately, we have no strong answer to offer, but rather a weak one: the weakening of the Western Catholic intellectual tradition not only prepares the way for that tradition's intersections with a broader world, but also stands as an invitation to all traditions to seek similar resources within themselves whereby emancipatory outcomes might be sought and new cross-cultural discourses made possible. More specifically, the self-weakening of the Catholic tradition is a provocation to other traditions, a bearing out (writ large) of the Franciscan imperative to preach the Good News by example, rather than by words: if a tradition so steeped in metaphysics and totality could stand revealed as containing within itself the dramatic emancipatory potentials Vattimo attributes to it, what heretofore untapped resources for human flourishing might yet exist in the myriad other religious and cultural institutions of the world? On a more fundamental level, the calling into question of the very possibility of arguing theology in the traditional manner, as a question of who is right and who is in error, opens the possibility for a return to a far more fundamental Christian social and political project of encouraging love by being loving, of encouraging hospitality by being hospitable, and so on. Put into this context, dialogue stands as a call, an invitation to engage with the never-fully-other and to encounter thereby the possibility of growth and change (and here too we find echoes of Pareyson's Universal Philosophy).

If Vattimo gives us an entrance, however indirect, to the prospects of his thought for cross-cultural discourse, still more constructive must be our efforts to apply that thought to the relationship between the human and more than human worlds. Here again, the application of the negative move in Vattimo's thought is fairly clear: we can problematize the totalizing barriers between human and non-human, or nature and artifice, and with them the intellectual force behind the modernist and dominionist efforts to impose human control upon the more than human world. Less clear is how the incorporation of the human and more-than-human worlds into a community might look. This effort would do with some help from without: the recognition that, as with culture, the narratives of the human and more than human worlds are always-already mutually constituting. Further assistance is provided by Vattimo's emphasis on love over [T]ruth, and not just any love, but a love modeled as closely as possible on Christ's love; a transgressive love, a love that "surpasses understanding."³³ Love, no less than Truth, cannot be a fixed point around which we move (lest it too become a dangerous absolute) but must continually grow, adapt, expand apace with the various interactions and needs of beings and, understood in this way, the broadening of our sphere of consideration to include the more than human world function as an outgrowth of the intra- and intercultural manifestations of compassion that Vattimo addresses more explicitly throughout his work.

Further, it is worth considering the implications of Vattimo's thought for religion itself. Certainly Vattimo's motivations veer towards a desire to redeem his own tradition through his unique emancipatory reading of it and his corresponding desire to bear out, in admittedly unexpected ways, elements of its ideal vision of the world (that of a community governed first and foremost by love). This sort of creative rereading is only possible when one recognizes the

³³Ephesians 3:19.

contingency of the tradition and is thereby able to come into a positive and constructive relationship with it. No less significant for the life of faith is that, in recognizing the contingency of particular religious traditions and rendering a plurality of readings possible, one adds unique value to one's affirmation of the tradition itself. We no longer cleave to our traditions out of necessity (our need to believe that which is [T]rue) but instead out of an affection for those traditions, a desire to truly explore how they are capable of being in and enriching the world in which we find ourselves. Indeed, for Vattimo, the weakening of strong structures frees us for *pietas*, in that our relationship with our tradition becomes volitional and motivated by an affection for the tradition, a recognition of our indebtedness to it (understood as situatedness), and a desire to carry it forward to the next generation.

The implications of Vattimo's thought for the institutional Church, by contrast, require a bit more constructive effort on our part. Vattimo does frequently note the oppressive character of the Catholic hierarchy and offers an interesting critique of its current preoccupation with certain metaphysical trappings (teachings on sexuality and the role of women, for instance). Vattimo, accordingly, notes that his return to religious questions and his efforts to do justice to the tradition do not entail an acceptance of the hierarchy or of official Church teaching. So what, then, might a weakened Church look like? Vattimo's response to Papal pronouncements on topics such as sexual morality and his applauding of the resignation of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI tends to point towards an approval of a subtractive gesture by the hierarchy: resignation and productive silence are precisely what is called for. Vattimo is less confident of the ability of things like Sacramental theology to weather the calling into question of metaphysical structures, speculating that the Church may be forced to adopt Protestant approaches to such questions. However, the focus on community that remains very much a living part of the tradition, to which

Vattimo himself points, may well allow reconfigurations even of more traditionally metaphysical structures such as the hierarchy and the sacraments: we might imagine a weakened hierarchy that, rather than issuing metaphysical pronouncements, stands as a lure of community and a sign of continuity with a shared past (a role which the celebrated status of recent Popes, to which Vattimo himself frequently points, seems to suggest), while the sacraments might yet be reconfigured as the expression of God in cultural practices (for where else would God become manifest in this Age of Interpretation?).

Chapter 1

The Intuition of Vattimo as a Positive Thinker (and Why It is Not the Only One)

Section 1: The Productive Temptation

Our enterprise here begins with the consideration of a temptation. Here already, in using this term so richly saturated with religious and cultural association, we are following Gianni Vattimo's lead: In *Of Reality*, Vattimo defines our inclination towards realism as a temptation which "as with true temptations... is something that returns and torments us."³⁴ We barely begin and already we are confronted with a reminder that a temptation is not something to be exorcised altogether but rather is something that recurs, changes form, and re-emerges elsewhere, something that demands an ever-renewed engagement. Are we to begin, then, on a defensive footing? The Rule of St. Benedict would have us regulate our inner lives and guard against temptations, and should they arise, we "dash them immediately against the rock of Christ!"³⁵ However, and here even the saint might agree with us, let us not be so quick to regard this as a negative enterprise, for the recurrence of temptation is a principle no less vital than dangerous, forcing our constant engagement, response, reconfiguration. And why be so afraid of temptation itself, when surely the great unmasking of our inner lives by decades of psychoanalytic thought allow us to reclassify even temptations as cracks through which we might at least begin to penetrate our tragic opaqueness to ourselves? Let us, in short, begin with this hope held close: that temptations (and our ongoing engagement with them) too can be productive.

³⁴Gianni Vattimo, *Of Reality*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

³⁵Benedict of Nursa, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, translated by Timothy Fry (Washington: Liturgical Press, 1981), 6.

Gianni Vattimo is perhaps best known in the English-speaking world as the architect of *pensiero debole* (“weak thought”), an association which, all by itself, carries with it the seeds of a reading of Vattimo as a negative thinker. Weakness, after all, is regarded as a negative quality and weakening, correspondingly, functions as a negative enterprise. Weakening is a breaking down, ever to be opposed to the building up, the positivity and vitality associated with strong thought (thought, that is, that makes firm claims upon which we can build robust systems or from which we can derive clear principles of political and social action). Weakness seems to face the related dangers of being either purely negative (and hence of limited intellectual and social utility) or, in fact, merely a disguised form of strength. Even the ambiguity introduced by a religious exaltation of “weakness” (in the guise of humility, piety, charity) surely rings false to us, carrying, as Nietzsche so rightly observed, an element of bad faith, a trickery in the face of strength which masks a strategy of overcoming, a reading not unsupported by elements of scripture: “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”³⁶ This work seeks to engage critically with this negativity. In order to do that, however, this section will consider Vattimo’s contexts and influences, engage with the more explicit negative moves in his thought, and review the writings of commentators inclined to view Vattimo as a negative thinker in order to determine whether and to what extent Vattimo can be considered a negative thinker and what role negativity plays in his thought.

Of course, negativity itself can be a slippery term, and it is worth considering briefly how it is to be used in this work. What I have in mind here is the negativity associated with the constellation of broadly compatible projects in which Vattimo often finds himself placed,

³⁶1 Corinthians 1:25. Even in a passage near and dear to Vattimo’s thought such as Philippians 2:7 we find what seems to be a reciprocal relationship between positive and negative; Christ self-empties, but is exalted to the right hand of the Father.

grouped under the rubric of postmodernity (sometimes as “eliminative postmodernity” to distinguish it from more constructive projects³⁷). Negativity here has the meaning of critique and interrogation of established structures and institutions, a weakening or breaking down of said structures. This negativity stands in contrast with the positivity of constructive intellectual efforts that seek to build up and establish intellectual and social structures as a means of realizing objectives. For our purposes, it is also contrasted (as we shall explore later) with the un- or precritical acceptance of intellectual and social establishments and, more broadly, with the acceptance of a metaphysical “way the world is.”

To begin, we can say that an element of this perceived negativity, comes from our quite understandable desire to read Vattimo through a particular set of historical circumstances and formative influences. Anglophone readers, after all, confront Vattimo as a peculiar figure who

³⁷While Vattimo’s object of critique is notably broader than suggested by the term “postmodernity” (encompassing as it does the intellectual heritage of the Christian West, along with that heritage’s prevailing impulses), it is worth consider what is meant here by postmodernity. For this purpose we can do worse than Thomas Guarino’s summation, given in the context of one of his several critical works on Vattimo’s thought: “In general, the term ‘postmodernism’ refers to the continually growing critique of Enlightenment construals of rationality. Modern rationality is understood as attempting to pin down reason to the limited canons of empiricism, positivism, or some equally narrow form of thinking and knowing. Modernity is equated with a reductive attempt to reduce truth to methodology, particularly those methods and canons associated with scientific inquiry, leading inexorably to the detriment of philosophical wonder, to the rise of rationalism, and to the equation of thinking with mere *techné*. Postmodernity’s contemporary ascent, then, is fueled by its opposition to modernity’s simplistic trust in scientism, its devaluation of the truth mediated by the arts and by tradition, and its marginalization of religion under the banner of the Enlightenment claim that science has unmasked faith as little more than superstitious mythology. Postmodernity argues, in fact, that modern forms of rationality are now in deep retreat. The rationalization thesis itself, that God would eventually disappear in the face of continuing education, has been entirely discredited. And rationalist approaches have hardly solved the intractable problems of human suffering or global warfare. In general, then, modernity’s colonization of the world by a luminous, scientific reason now seems a misguided and constricting utopian dream.” Thomas Guarino, “The Return of Religion in Europe?: The Postmodern Christianity of Gianni Vattimo,” *Logos*, Volume 11, Number 2, Spring 2011, 17.

has somehow managed to break through the relative obscurity of Italian philosophy to achieve a wider recognition internationally. While the reasons for the status of Italian philosophy in general are well beyond the scope of this work, it is worth noting, with Giovanna Borradori (a figure who made a not insignificant effort to introduce contemporary Italian thinkers to the Anglophone world) that Italian philosophy has, since at least early modernity, been defined by a spirit of cultural and historical rootedness. This historical specificity perhaps contributed to the insularity that produced the marginalization of the Italian thought of the period relative to that of France, Germany, or the Anglophone world. Borradori writes “Whereas France elected itself the land of rationalism, England the cradle of empiricism, and Germany the guardian of metaphysics, Italy, with historicism, withdrew into an imaginary past, abandoned the role of cultural catalyzer that during the Renaissance had placed it at the center of the European koine.”³⁸ Certainly, the historical impulses underlying this move are not hard for us to access (the troubled formation of what was to become the Italian state, the confrontation between Catholicism and modernity, the tumult of an uneven and inequitable economic modernization, and so on) but in this move we find a line to Vattimo’s own hermeneutics and, notably, one already marked by a certain negativity: Vattimo’s thought, as we shall discuss at length later in this work, struggles no less than Italian thought in general, to resist a collapse into an isolating and smothering historical particularity.³⁹

³⁸*Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy*, edited by Giovanna Borradori (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 17.

³⁹Another way to configure this particular problem, and one, admittedly, beyond the scope of this work but worthy, at least, of mention, is to characterize Italian thought as at an uncomfortable nexus between historical and cultural particularity, on the one hand, and a zeal for grappling, in particularly risky, experimental ways, with (allegedly) universal themes. Understood in this way, the real puzzle with Italian thought is its *untimeliness*, rather than its particularity per se: “Whether we are considering biopolitics, nihilism or the vicissitudes of post-Christian subjectivity, recent radical Italian thought confronts us with a parallax view or

Moving forward to Vattimo's own era, our theme of negativity finds fresh manifestations. Beginning his more intensive studies of philosophy in Turin in the 1950s, Vattimo found himself immersed in a cultural and intellectual environment that was itself defined by a certain negativity. The horrors of the Second World War and of the social and cultural chaos that both preceded and succeeded it had, of course, produced an anti-fascism that echoed no less in Academe than in the streets. As Vattimo describes the environment of the era:

A common idea was the need to get out of the cultural isolation that fascism created. That meant no more focusing on Croce and Gentile, no more idealism, and instead developing an interest in Anglo-Saxon philosophies...⁴⁰

We must note here that, by Anglo-Saxon philosophies, Vattimo means the range of deflationary projects of that era, such as those of the Vienna school, positivism, and even the American pragmatism of figures like Dewey (and here already we see the seeds of Vattimo's later productive collaborations with Rorty). Paradoxically, that moment in history, the era of world wars, fascism, and Stalinism, at once produced an adventurous, experimental spirit, and a spirit of caution, suspicion, and critique: the confrontation of existing institutions and structures opened up the thought of Vattimo's place and time to the influences of figures like Wittgenstein

disjunctive synthesis of national and conjunctural idiosyncrasies, on the one hand, and a series of potent theoretical abstractions that have a remarkable capacity for 'travelling', on the other. At the level of its international impact, the combination of a strong tendency to epochal periodisation (as applied to the notions of biopolitics, nihilism or Empire) and a proliferation of meta-political subjects or figures (*Muselmann*, refugee, multitude, exodus, up to the tourist),⁶ mainly forged in a period of political retreat or defeat, have allowed the theoretical 'laboratory Italy' a remarkable capacity to speak—frequently through the medium of radical misunderstanding—to a bafflingly disparate set of situations. It is all too easy to imagine a Reading Agamben in Bogotá, a Reading Negri in Tehran, a Reading Vattimo in Beijing, a Reading Esposito in Seoul" Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano. "Introduction" in *The Italian Difference*, edited by Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano, (Melbourne: Re.Press, 2009), 5.

⁴⁰Silvia Benso, *Viva Voce* (New York, SUNY Press, 2017), 107.

and Dewey, but it also rendered urgent the need to address thought to particular historical circumstances.

Constructive projects were certainly present, and Vattimo's own orientation never fully departed from the poles (or perhaps Vattimo shows us they do not fit so easily into a dichotomy!) of Marxism on the one hand, and Neo-Scholasticism on the other. However, these themselves stood as prospective antidotes to the poison of fascism (in the Marxist case) or to a broader modernity that could not be uncoupled from the still-ongoing totalitarian excesses of the age (in the progressive Catholic case). Vattimo allowed these projects to shape and guide him but never embraced them fully, opting instead for the existentialism and hermeneutics of the great Luigi Pareyson. This move too can be read negatively, as a sort of denial. Vattimo of course became involved both in Catholic and Marxist political activism and remained an active political figure for much of his later career but over this reality hangs his disinclination to fully support the street activism of the day, a preference embodied in his recollections of classmates (and, later, students) riding off to play proletarian in his biography and in his memorable recollection that he felt his studies of Heidegger with Pareyson to be more radical than anything occurring at the various marches and protests.⁴¹ Similarly, if Vattimo famously engaged with his native Catholicism throughout his career, it was hardly in a form that advanced either the pious fervor of his youthful activism or the neo-scholasticism in the context of which that fervor initially arose.

If the historical climate from which Vattimo emerges lends support to our inclination to read him as a negative thinker, so too do his various philosophical guiding lights. Even a cursory

⁴¹Vattimo, *Not Being God*, 84-85.

examination of Vattimo's thought, for instance, reveals an indebtedness to a particular reading of Nietzsche. For Vattimo, Nietzsche represents the beginning of what we would surely wish to regard as a negative project. Indeed, Vattimo's Nietzsche is very much the radical figure who reveals to us that "there are no truths but only interpretations" (to which Vattimo would add "and this too is an interpretation") and who exposes [T]ruth as

A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which has been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.⁴²

Certainly, this perspective can be termed a deflationary view of truth. No longer understood as representing an unquestionable "way the world is" or a supervening order to which the world itself does and must conform, truth instead stands exposed precisely as a construction that is never innocent of the human, all too human features of thought.

These features, for Nietzsche (and especially the later Nietzsche), take the form of our desires, our will, our inclinations. The will to power consists precisely of a self-assertion against the absence of the sort of absolutizing meaning to which traditional metaphysics clings. In Vattimo's own excellent summation "There is no longer a 'true world' or, better, truth is reduced entirely to what is 'posited' by the human being, namely 'will to power.'"⁴³ However, "in Nietzsche one cannot separate the pressure of the demands for survival from the pressure exacted by the relations of domination."⁴⁴ So, it can (and, tragically, does) represent a self-assertion in the face of the plurality of perspectives produced, or perhaps more correctly, unmasked by the

⁴²Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in the Non-Moral Sense," *Portable Nietzsche*, (New York, Penguin Books, 1977), 46-47.

⁴³Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, (New York: Polity Press, 1999), 30.

⁴⁴Gianni Vattimo, *Of Reality*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), Kindle.

absence of such an absolute [T]ruth (since, for Nietzsche, such perspectives were precisely at the root of truth projects all along). No less than this, however, it is, for Vattimo, coupled to Nietzsche's robust critique of value and custom, a reading exemplified by Vattimo's discussion of the contingency of our cultural horizons and our corresponding capacity to engage volitionally with these horizons. Put another way, one engages volitionally rather than out of an obligation to some supervening reality, out of an assertion, that is, of the will (and here we have also an echo of Pareysonian existentialism).

Understood in this light, even Nietzsche's notion of the death of God takes on, for Vattimo, the character of the death of a metaphysical conceptualization of the divine (which, alas, neurotically persists in certain religious traditions), as we note that the death of God is no less a disruption of the atheists (who likewise accept this notion of a metaphysical God) than of the classical theists. Vattimo writes that, for Nietzsche, "God is an excessive supposition, who exceeds the limits of thinkability and the creative will of mankind."⁴⁵ In other words, the death of God stands as a symbol for the death of the old metaphysical order, in which God stood as the ground of Being and established and maintained a concrete order of creation. Defiance of "properly understood" reality, therefore, took on the character of sacrilege and this character, of course, survived the secularization of [T]ruth projects that came to define the modern era.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Vattimo, *Dialogues with Nietzsche*, 77.

⁴⁶And here we find an explanation for much of the dogmatic zeal with which the historical Church championed not only strictly doctrinal, theological positions, but also the particular philosophical or even proto-scientific conceptualizations of which it was, historically, custodian.

Nietzsche's thought liberates us from this totalizing view of reality, teaching us "to distrust the very idea of a true ground."⁴⁷

The negative character of this reading has not gone unnoticed by certain of Vattimo's commentators. Thomas Guarino asserts that Vattimo, in fact, weakens Nietzsche beyond the latter's intentions, attempting a sort of Christian rehabilitation. Guarino raises the specter of bad faith in this observation, noting that Vattimo suggests that weak thought may represent something *stronger* than the mere violent and identitarian self-assertion that it critiques, having shed the need for metaphysical constructions that have become increasingly intellectually untenable (and surely one can see a sort of desperation in such self-assertions, particularly as they manifest in religious fanaticisms). So, by Guarino's lights, weakness, echoing the scriptural message, becomes a sort of strength after all (and we can imagine Nietzsche's horror at this recapitulation of the "slave revolt" of morality, couched in his own language!). The weakening of the will to power that Guarino points to is not hard to trace to the Italian antifascist impulse we discussed earlier. Indeed, we must observe that Vattimo notes two things about the Nazi reading of Nietzsche: that it is metaphysical (characterizing Nietzsche's thought as unmasking an originary violence in the world) and that it has a certain legitimacy (tied, for Vattimo, to the reading of Nietzsche as representing a sort of culmination of the Western metaphysical project in the collapse into a society of total organization). Guarino further contends that Vattimo "drags Nietzschean nihilism through the wringer of kenotic Christianity...[f]or Christianity serves to dilute the tendency of nihilism to result merely in a Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes*."⁴⁸

⁴⁷Gianni Vattimo, "Metaphysics, Violence, Secularization" in *Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy*, edited by Giovanna Borradori, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 47.

⁴⁸Thomas Guarino, *Vattimo and Theology*, (New York: Continuum, 2008), 46.

For Guarino, then, Vattimo's reading of Nietzsche robs that thinker even of the possible constructive and destructive potentials alive in his later thought (that is, the thought of *The Late Notebooks*), turning Nietzsche instead into a sort of crypto-metaphysician, a figure embodying the very bad-faith that he (Nietzsche) critiques in others.

Of course, Vattimo's Nietzsche is one always read in the context of a concurrent reading of late Heidegger. Or perhaps more correctly, for Vattimo, Heidegger and Nietzsche stand in a complex, mutually constituting relationship: Modern scholars of one thinker must confront the other, hence it becomes possible not only to speak of Heidegger's explicit commentaries on Nietzsche but also of Nietzsche's "interpretation" of Heidegger (that is, of the possibility of reading Heidegger, as Vattimo does, through a Nietzschean lens).⁴⁹ For Vattimo, Nietzsche's discussion of nihilism (that is, broadly, the negative elements of his thought briefly recapitulated above) provides Heidegger's thought with the essential context that renders it meaningful, the essential motive force that renders it politically and socially relevant: "Without the connection to Nietzsche's nihilism, Heidegger risks being either a simple existential analyst or a neo-Kantian or a negative theologian, as Catholic readers often understand him." This is not to say, of course, that, for Vattimo, Heidegger is the positivity to balance Nietzsche's negativity, at least not exactly. Instead, it notes that Heidegger's reading of nihilism as representing the "flattening out of Being into entities" and the reduction of Being to value corresponds to his later discussion of enframing (and all the positivity attached to it).

Heidegger's focus on the departure of Being corresponds, for Vattimo, with Nietzsche's announcement of the end of metaphysics. Similarly, Heidegger renders explicit, in a way that

⁴⁹Vattimo, *Dialogues with Nietzsche*, Chapter 13.

Nietzsche perhaps does not, that we exist within embedded networks of historical, cultural, and intellectual circumstances: “Being has a history... the thrownness of Dasein and the multiple languages in which it is articulated are historically changeable.”⁵⁰ We are always-already thrown into our contexts, generally, and, in our contemporary age, we face the additional challenge of a confrontation with the horrors of machination, of the technicalization of thought that cuts us off from being (that is, from the possibility of an authentic and critical engagement with reality) and leaves us stranded in the most crass and paralyzing instrumentalization, in an inescapable avoidance of thought: “Agriculture is now a motorized food industry, the same thing in its essence as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and the extermination camps, the same thing as blockades and the reduction of countries to famine, the same thing as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs.”⁵¹ Here we see starkly illustrated the social and political consequences of the instrumentalization of thought and we can see, correspondingly, the attraction of Heidegger’s thought (and, especially, that of the later Heidegger who grapples most directly with these issues) for Vattimo and, indeed, for a generation of anti-fascist thinkers.

Vattimo notes that Heidegger, even the later Heidegger, does not quite shed the metaphysical residue that drove him into the arms of Nazism. Hence the introduction of Nietzsche’s discussion of nihilism is necessary to prevent the absolutization of contingent historical horizons as a means of escape from the intellectual (cum cultural) dangers that Heidegger correctly identifies. Indeed, in the late Nietzsche’s discussions of the will to power,

⁵⁰Gianni Vattimo, *Of Reality: The Purposes of Philosophy*, (New York: Columbia University Press 2012), Kindle.

⁵¹Martin Heidegger, *In Heidegger, Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1997), 15.

we find (importantly for our own consideration of Vattimo's utility for contemporary thought) the revelation of metaphysics as precisely an expression of the will to power and that it is such whether expressed in the forgetting of contingency manifest in the classical metaphysics of the Plato to Kant Canon or in the self-conscious substitution of such formulations with a violent assertion of one's own contingency (understood as a belonging to a contingent set of identity categories) against all others (which, indeed, was manifest more or less explicitly in certain of the fascist experiments of the 20th century).

It is in this fecund observation that we encounter one of Vattimo's most direct and important influences, Luigi Pareyson. Pareyson correctly observes that the collapse into an inaccessible historical particularity, on the one hand, and into an ahistorical absolutism, on the other, in fact represent components of the same danger. Specifically, Pareyson argues that Truth appears to us precisely in history and cannot do otherwise ("...there is no objective manifestation of truth; rather one must grasp it always within a historical perspective..."⁵²), but never becomes quite reducible even to history *as such*, let alone this or that *particular* history. What occurs when we collapse into historicism or absolutism is that we mask this relationship. This notion of masking leaves an indelible mark on Vattimo's understanding of metaphysics. Metaphysics represents a cutting off, a silencing, a concealment. And what is concealed? For Vattimo, again following (if via a different path) his teacher, it is the very self-disclosure of being as it manifests itself (in the only way it can) through the relationship between historical particularities and our (volitional and critical) engagement with them. The critical move, for Vattimo, is precisely the stripping away of the mask, the revelation of this relationship between Being and the historical.

⁵²Luigi Pareyson, *Truth and Interpretation*, translated by Robert Valgenti, (New York: SUNY Press, 2005), 16.

Absent an understanding of this relationship between being and the historical, our thought collapses into a smothering cultural or historical specificity. Pareyson writes:

What opens up are the way to culturalism, which encompasses all thought within a general history of culture that highlights the expressive aspect alone without any conception of its possible speculative value; the way to biographism, which reduces thought to an incommunicable expression of the situation in which everyone is inexorably immured as if in an inescapable prison; and the way to a more or less extreme historicism, which reduces all thought to a simple expression of the historical situation, denying it the possibility of escaping its own time.⁵³

It might well be our instinct to set up an intellectual dichotomy between metaphysical authoritarianism, on the one hand, and historicism, on the other. Against this impulse, Pareyson observes that these two moves are variations on the same sort of collapse into a precritical metaphysical posture. Indeed, properly understood, metaphysical totalitarianism (and here we see clearly the influence of Nietzsche) is simply the universalization of the particular; the expression of a particular that has forgotten its own particularity. Correspondingly, the focus on the particular, far from avoiding this pitfall, is exposed as having an instrumental and pragmatic character: we despair of any possible confrontation with Being and instead focus on efficacy, on this or that social or political project.

In this way, Pareyson observes, we find ourselves the victims of our own ideas. In a sentiment that his student Vattimo was later to echo, Pareyson observes that our losing touch with being has social and political consequences and that these consequences proceed, as Heidegger observed, towards an end of total organization:

Actually, only powerful ideas, that is, the products of historical and technical reason, can 'properly have success.' They have it, but only on the condition of exerting a power that enslaves humanity... Ideas take possession of humans, subjugate them to the realization

⁵³Pareyson, *Truth and Interpretation*, 16.

of their programs, and reduce them to mere tools, whether as cosmic-historical heroes or as faceless masses.⁵⁴

The instrumentalization of thought ends in Foucauldian subjectification. This critique stands as a powerful negative force within Vattimo's thought, a caution that even a cultural and historical awareness (in the spirit towards which especially the later Heidegger so productively directed the Continental thinkers of the last century) can itself become the vehicle for the most terrifying forms of oppression.

Appropriately, given these living influences, Vattimo's thought does contain a prominent negative current. Showing his Nietzschean and Heideggerian roots, Vattimo offers a critique of the totalizing character of metaphysics as embodying a sort of will to domination:

From the beginning, the metaphysical attempt to grasp the arche, the first principle, was inspired by the will to dominate the totality of things. During the development of philosophy and science through Western history, this will has become ever more concrete and effective: the rational order of the world, which for centuries metaphysical thinkers have presupposed or postulated, has now become real, in principle at least, in modern technology.⁵⁵

The very desire to reach first principles here undergoes a deflationary treatment: it is exposed as representing, not a seeking after [T]ruth but an attempted seizure of the mechanisms of power, or perhaps more correctly, it shows us that these two mechanisms are one and the same. By understanding the world, so the old unspoken and increasingly obscured presumption goes, one can come to a mastery of the world.

For Vattimo, this quest for mastery is both doomed and misguided. In the first sense, of course, there is the Pareysonian suspicion that the search for [T]ruth as a means of domination in fact involves our subjection of ourselves and others to the dangerous power of our own ideas (per

⁵⁴Pareyson, *Truth and Interpretation*, 26.

⁵⁵Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 11.

Pareyson “when man seeks to become superhuman, he is destined to become subhuman”⁵⁶). Our subjection to ideas consists precisely in our adoption of a relationship to them in which it is no longer possible to engage with them critically. The relationship between the technical reorientation of thoughts, its assumption of an uncritical and instrumental character, as noted by Vattimo and by Pareyson before him, perhaps finds no better summation than these provocative lines from Heidegger:

Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology.⁵⁷

The totalizing project of metaphysics leads us to the instrumentalization of thought through which the departure of Being comes into its sharpest relief. Far from being an evolution towards greater understanding of a static and unproblematic world to which we, in principle, have access and about which we, in principle, can communicate effectively, thought (at least Western thought, and here Vattimo makes much of the Heideggerian notion of the West as truly Occidental, a land of the sunset of Being) instead follows a trajectory into what appears to be a striking intellectual and cultural dead end.

Nor is our response to this situation one that seems defined overmuch by positivity. Indeed, we find ourselves situated firmly situated in Vattimo’s critical gesture, confronting what seems to be the coming-to-an-end of the Western metaphysical project and are forced to consider how we might respond. On the one hand, confronted by the varied intellectual totalitarianisms into which metaphysical thought leads us, we find ourselves in a position that demands a certain

⁵⁶Pareyson, *Truth and Interpretation*, 36.

⁵⁷Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), 4.

denial. This denial can take the form of a characterization of life as tragic, that rationality, in leading into the instrumentalization of thought, has altogether failed us and that we should either strike out on some altogether different path or at least abandon our prior efforts at understanding. Vattimo is, of course, quick to note the correspondence of these options with a collapse back into totalizing, metaphysical positions:

The tragic pose is often a prelude to a “leap of faith” (which thus becomes a leap into pure irrationality, a surrender to the dogmatic authoritarianism of churches, central committees, charismatic leader) and sometimes it is just a way of clinging to the pure and simple awareness that “there are no answers,” with the tacit Socratic assumption (but Nietzsche was right to unmask the optimistic rationalism of this stance) that it is better at any rate to know that you do not know.⁵⁸

To these two options, the irrationalism of a renewed dogmatism or the mere abandonment of the rational project in favor of a comforting and complacent skepticism, we might add the third of the embrace of machination itself. Certainly, the Anglo-American intellectual projects (grouped under the rubric of Analytic Philosophy and its satellites) that defined the period in which Vattimo’s scholarly journey began represented a sort of embracing of this sort of instrumentalism, as a relegation, for instance, of the role of philosophy to the provision of a ground for the hard sciences through the clarification of language or thought. The corresponding diffusion of social power through the establishment of democratic norms (the Washington consensus, so-called), the increasing invisibility of the functioning of capital (per Marx, “all that is solid melts into air”⁵⁹), the proliferation of communication and information technology (increasing the availability of information, while making the effects of propagandas both public and private inescapable), and the march of secularization (so important for the later Vattimo), all

⁵⁸Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, xxvii.

⁵⁹Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, (New York: Harvard Press, 1955), 13.

stand as signs of the deflationary thrust of modern thought and the corresponding focus on thought as being concerned with technical, rather than ultimate, questions.

To this denial, then, Vattimo gives a still further (and more strident) one, as we refuse not only the projects of classical metaphysics that lead us to machination, but also the resurgent metaphysical responses to it. This denial is motivated first and foremost by a concern with the violent character of metaphysical totalities old and new. Vattimo roots this observation in his particular reading of late Heidegger:

Heidegger's references to the atomic bomb and the desertification of the world in talks and addresses of the 1950s and later are not merely "occasional," dictated by the good intention of joining his voice to those worried about the future of the human race in the epoch of great technology of destruction. They contain the "essence" of his thought insofar as all the effort of that thought, beginning with *Being and Time*, to "recollect" Being by going beyond metaphysics is motivated by the experience of violence.⁶⁰

Certainly we have already encountered one form in which the metaphysical is violent in the cutting off of critical engagement produced by the instrumentalization of thought, but, as these lines make clear, this cutting off and the resulting intellectual totalitarianism is never unrelated to the political and social totalitarianism that always overshadows the thought of Vattimo and the thinkers of his era more generally.

This recognition of the political implications of the constitution of thought communicates only too well the spirit of moral urgency that flows through Vattimo's more politically focused writings. Writes Vattimo,

The hermeneutic way out of tragic and negative nihilism naturally entails the inclusion of many aspects of the latter: we might say, with Nietzsche, that it is not possible to build without destroying. Or again, and perhaps more realistically, that the wellsprings of metaphysical authoritarianism never run dry, so that the task of secularization- that is, the

⁶⁰Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 89.

unmasking of the sacrality of all absolute, ultimate truths-is an ongoing one. Politics, law, and social life continue to supply evidence of this, and not just in Italy⁶¹....

In these provocative early lines of *Nihilism and Emancipation*, we have what seems to be a crossroads between positive and negative, constructive and destructive. Vattimo considers the possibility that creativity necessarily involves destruction, but he seems to back away from this position. Instead, he seems to move away from creation altogether, noting instead that metaphysics is a monster both protean and persistent, constantly changing form and arising anew. The hermeneutic thinker, then, is tasked with a ceaseless vigil against metaphysics and with perpetually breaking it up as it arises. The goal of philosophy, then, is not realistically one of creation, but instead can be likened to a game of critical “whack-a-mole” wherein the thinker merely watches for and strikes out at threats as they appear.

Nor is metaphysics perceived as an external adversary. On the contrary, Vattimo acknowledges that the Nietzschean insight that “there are no facts but only interpretations” must always be coupled to “and this too is an interpretation” in order to avoid ossifying into yet another conceptualization of the way the world is, a vision of a world in which metaphysical conceptions “no longer *are*.” Indeed, Nietzsche’s insight, much beloved of Vattimo, that [T]ruths are merely illusions whose illusory nature has been forgotten (lowercase “t” truths, after all) reveals not only the intellectual and cultural untenability of truth but also the mechanism by which it arises from thought: [T]ruth is a failure of the critical move. Hence, “antifoundationalism itself is at risk of hardening into a metaphysics, and when it does it fits very nicely with things like the imposition of liberty and democracy by means of armed interventions against what President Bush has called ‘Rogue States.’”⁶² If secularization, the (apparent, at

⁶¹Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, xxvii.

⁶²Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, xxvii.

least) decentralization of political power, the rise of science and the like all represent the weakening spirit of the present age, they also show precisely how easily this spirit can instead become a new ground, no less oppressive and dangerous than the more explicit absolutisms that preceded it.

This self-critical gesture carries with it the specter of a potentially self-destructive negativity. Nietzsche, of course, warns of the totalizing character of the turning inward of strength: “here rules a resentment without equal, that of an insatiable instinct and power-will that wants to become master not over something in life but over life itself, over its most profound, powerful, and basic conditions.”⁶³ The life denying character of a self-critical asceticism is found in this collapse into the very neurotic focus on control from which it seeks escape. No less concerning is that the ascetic move does not weigh with equal heaviness upon everyone. On the contrary, it has long been held up as a perhaps unique path to virtue whereby the disenfranchisement of the voiceless has been validated. Indeed, “Vattimo cannot be completely absolved from the fact that he does not give due weight to the negativity that often accompanies the ideal of self-giving love as applied to women”⁶⁴ In this sense, then, an ascetic negativity proves doubly life-denying in that it merely conceals and rearticulates the will to power of the powerful, while suppressing and redirecting that of the powerless.

Vattimo, then, is involved in a bringing to self-consciousness of the impulse of weakening. If the weakening impulse exists within thought, politics, culture, religion, economics, the great contribution that Vattimo makes is the recognition of that impulse and a cautioning

⁶³Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, (New York: Penguin, 2014), III, 11.

⁶⁴Marta Frascati-Lochhead, *Kenosis and Feminist Theology* (New York: SUNY, 1998), 161.

against our inclination to ever think of the process of weakening as finished or as a revelation of a new underlying reality. Certainly the risks associated with treating these various projects of weakening as finished should be only too apparent to us, not only in the wars for democracy to which Vattimo points explicitly (and which, we might do well to observe, are really nothing new), but also in the rise of absolutist scientism or that of any number of skepticisms or advocacies of “free” markets, “free” societies and so on. A focus on weakening must be ongoing and thoroughgoing in order to reduce (not to say eliminate) these risks, and that realization and the exposition of the tools by which it can be borne out in our intellectual, social, and political endeavors, is a vital contribution to the thought of our age.

That being said, let us give vent to the anxieties that must come along with this reading of Vattimo’s project. What, we might ask, could be more negative than all of this? Not only does weak thought stand as an apparent negation of the more positive, ambitious, and dangerous structures of thought that defined the Plato to Kant Canon, not only does it emphasize a need to guard against the return of these structures (in whatever form), but it, at long last, must turn its critical gaze inward to guard against its own darkest impulses. Here, we might say, is a hermeneutics of suspicion run amok, a recapitulation of the old post-Foucauldian critical gesture that would, says the frustrated activist, seemingly have us questioning and interrogating until the stars burn cold. What, after all, can one even *do* with such a thought as this?

Certainly, a number of Vattimo’s commentators share these sorts of anxieties. Guarino, as noted above, can be thought of as damning Vattimo with faint praise in his 2009 work *Vattimo and Theology*, regarding him as an abstract, even spiritual figure. A focus on weakness casts a specter over the very possibility of discourse outside of a small group of likeminded (that is, weak) thinkers, already engaged in a broadly compatible project. Guarino’s reading of Vattimo

suggests that weak thought rules out meaningful discourse with strong interlocutors, except perhaps in the form of criticism of those interlocutors. If the problems of the world continue to be centered, at least in part, on the struggles between strong, metaphysical systems of thought, one can very well wonder what impact a consideration of weakness can ever have in the efforts to solve those problems.

Matthew Edward Harris concurs with Guarino's concerns about the limited audience for Vattimo's weak thought and takes them a step further, arguing that Vattimo focuses on intellectual abstractions and ignores other issues. Harris writes, "Although Vattimo points out that issues in bioethics and sexual ethics have their origin in metaphysical beliefs, that is not the whole of the story and also- with war and famine all-too-real and perennial issues-the only matters with which to be concerned".⁶⁵ Harris unfavorably compares Vattimo to Archbishop Oscar Romero, who turned away from his abstract and intellectual roots in favor of a position that states that the Church needs to confront real world problems. Vattimo's abstraction, says Harris, leaves us similarly ill-equipped to consider the actual substance of our spiritual lives, our lived religious experiences, our communities of faith, and yes even the institutional structures of the existing Church (Harris is of the opinion that Vattimo's weak thought basically has little choice but to abandon the institutional Church altogether, while being powerless to replace it with anything more substantive than a politically impotent and inwardly focused community of weak theorists).⁶⁶

Contemporary theologian Frederiek Deporteere, substantively concurs with this concern, arguing that Vattimo (whom he groups with Altizer, as a philosopher of the death of God) ends

⁶⁵Matthew E. Harris, "Vattimo and Ecclesiology," *Heythrop Journal*, February 2017, 8.

⁶⁶Harris, "Vattimo and Ecclesiology," 8.

up with a Christianity that, having weakened strong cultural and intellectual forces, finds itself exhausted and substantively devoid of content. We are left with an embrace of secularization that is “seemingly without any reservation” and, worse still, one that leaves unclear whether “a positive evaluation of secularism is possible at all.”⁶⁷ He further contends that Vattimo remains too philosophical and too spiritual, meant here as an assertion of Vattimo’s lack of concern with the human person as a physical being and with the concern of what constitutes the human person more broadly (a concern that he shares with Scigliano).⁶⁸ Absent that, Depoortere contends, Vattimo’s thought lacks even the meaningful grounding necessary to apprehend its basic object and instead collapses into vagueness or, worse, platitudinous sentiment. For instance, he argues that Vattimo “[turns] the Biblical story of the kenosis of God in Christ into a narrative double of his own nihilistic philosophy, reducing the narrative particularity of the Bible to a vague and soft message of friendliness”.⁶⁹ Scigliano takes the argument further, observing that Vattimo does indeed reduce his utopian ideal to an aesthetic vision, rather than a coherent political project, while at the same time cutting that vision off from the discursive content (hope in the resurrection and the world to come) that would render it theologically meaningful.⁷⁰ Vattimo is left a figure devoid of both political and theological utility.

We can, of course, answer these concerns by asserting that all such problems are, at their root, metaphysical, that there is no unproblematic materiality outside of metaphysics to which we can point as being a source of or dwelling place for the kinds of social and political problems

⁶⁷Frederiek Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, (New York, T&T Publishing, 2008), 31.

⁶⁸Anthony C. Scigliano Jr. “Contesting the World and the Divine: Balthasar’s ‘Trinitarian’ Response to Gianni Vattimo’s Secular Christianity”, *Modern Theology*, Volume 23, Number 4, October 2007, 534-535.

⁶⁹Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, 30.

⁷⁰Scigliano, “Contesting the World,” 534.

with which Harris is concerned or the lived experience and materiality that Deporteere regards as a precondition for clear, precise thinking, but in a way this merely forestalls the underlying question of how important conceptualizations actually *are*. Is it not possible that our conceptualizations, far from shaping or guiding our social, political, and spiritual lives are merely “carried along” with us into these spheres? After all, political, social, and religious institutions and problems do tend to persist, even as particular metaphysical conceptualizations come and go, and it is an open question as to how many people of religious or social or political commitment have a corresponding internally consistent and consciously held metaphysical position at all.

Section 2: Intuitions

But here we recall that the question of what one can and should do with thought stand behind and dwells within Vattimo’s project. The tumult of Twentieth-century Europe in general and Italy in particular occasioned a calling to account of thought, a reckoning with the intellectual traditions that so shaped the courses and characters of civilizations so recently and horribly gone astray. While it is easy (indeed, too easy) to regard this as the injection of an overdue humility into Western intellectual cum social/political projects, the paired questions of “what, after all, have we done” and “what, now, should we avoid doing” were and are inescapably coupled to the corresponding question of “what can and should we do *now*?” Certainly, for Vattimo the answer to this question cannot be the unproblematic substitution of “contaminated” fascist ideas with “pure” liberal or Marxist ones:

It is useless to think of revolution as the immediate and violent taking of power—capitalism is infinitely stronger than that.... On the other hand, the revolutionary ideal

must be saved from the corruption it has been subjected to in 'democratic' regimes. The history of the European left in recent years, especially in Italy, shows that whenever the left comes to power it fatally loses its transformative energy.... Formal democracy always exposes the opposition to the risk of becoming an accomplice.⁷¹

We note in this observation (of the later Vattimo in whom we find, in productive collaboration with other similarly oriented thinkers, a renewed engagement with what we are to make of revolutionary politics in a postmodern age that calls its suppositions into question) a twofold concern. On the one hand, we find the rearticulation of Vattimo's critical impulse in the observation that Marxism and leftism can, after all, never be pure but are always and inescapably at risk of being coopted by the mechanisms that they seek to problematize: resistance, as in Foucault, "never occupies a position of exteriority in relation to power."⁷² Similarly, and no less importantly, the mechanism of revolutionary violence itself is not suited to the seizure of power envisioned by certain of the early Marxists in the face of a capitalism that is everywhere dominant. Even the successes of really existing socialism, however brief and however accompanied (as Vattimo is wont to remind us) by horrific violence, are hard to imagine in the contest of this current era of capitalist domination, in which we are better able to view socialism as something always-already doomed to fail, a confusing historical aberration rather than an authentic road-not-taken. Or worse yet, socialism's historical confrontation with an answer to the problem of fascism gets lost all too quickly in a capitalist historiography in which the two are grouped together under the rubric of a repressive and conveniently amorphous totalitarianism which only the supposed emancipatory power of the Western, capitalist model can help to keep at bay (and how much worse that the only notion of totalitarianism that survives such a treatment

⁷¹Gianni Vattimo, "Weak Communism?" in *The Idea of Communism* edited by Slavoj Žižek, (New York: Verso, 2010), 106.

⁷²Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality* Volume 1, translated by Robert Hurley, (New York: Random House, 1975), 98.

is the political excesses of an all-encompassing state, while the excesses of an all-encompassing market fade from sight).

Nor does an abandonment of modernity in favor of an unproblematically metaphysical resurgence of classical or medieval thought (as if such could ever be shorn of its modern readings) hold an easy answer to the problems posed by a fascism which, perhaps especially in the Italian case had been defined by its own disastrous pretensions to the recapturing of a heroic past. The violence of modernity must never be allowed to blind us to the violence of premodernity. What's more, the postmodern critical gesture does not, in any case, allow us the comfortable conceit that we can ever return to the way things were – uncontaminated by the specter of modernity. The fascist regimes themselves were actually conscious of this and harkened back to premodern cultures and systems as a way of connecting themselves to a heroic past, but in a way that did not prevent them from employing all the myriad mechanisms of the modern state and the principles of total organization and total mobilization (famously observed by Vattimo's classmate Umberto Eco⁷³) to pursue their aims or from holding themselves up as a novel, indeed revolutionary, answer to the pressing questions of an increasingly intolerable modernity.

Neither, however, is it satisfying to view Vattimo's project as a mere repetition of the critical gesture (articulated previously, as Vattimo himself is wont to acknowledge, by a rich heritage of thought that goes back at least to Nietzsche), designed to expose and thereby reduce the dangers of a lapse into totalitarian metaphysics or, still more disconcertingly, as an allegedly neutral account of a particular state of affairs. Either move, indeed, would be a lapse into

⁷³Umberto Eco, "Ur-Fascism," *The New York Review of Books*, June, 22, 1995.

totalitarianism in its own right, an aggressive cutting off of the possibility of novelty in the interest of a “pure” and therefore “safe” negativity. The historical experience of Italian political, social, and intellectual life that forms Vattimo as a thinker dramatically render the connection between a mere criticism, a mere negativity (descriptive or prescriptive), and the very excesses of political totalitarianism that Vattimo seeks to avoid. As we shall explore at length later, the will to power rushes violently into the vacuum left by traditional metaphysical conceptions and assumes their great and terrible position as a grounding for the most horrible expressions of violence. If we are to combat this, we, with Vattimo, proceed with the negative gesture as a clearing of space always for something new and fresh and different, yet also continuous with and flowing from the traditions and legacies of which we are a part and from which we can never truly part company. And where, after all, could the resources for a weakened reading of the history of Western metaphysics come from in the first place if not from the tradition itself? If there is negativity in Vattimo’s reading of the tradition (in, that is, his exposure of its dangers), it seems necessarily coupled to a constructive gesture, a reappropriation, a mining of traditions for their emancipatory resources and a corresponding preparation of the way for a better community than what came before.

What’s more, as should be clear from our consideration of the context in which Vattimo operated, there likewise seems to be a positive, ethical impulse underlying Vattimo’s efforts. Indeed, as is most explicit after the autobiographical turn in his writing starting with such works as *Belief*, Vattimo makes clear that if he is concerned with discovering the history of metaphysics as a history of the weakening of strong structures, it is not just because of his exposure to Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Pareyson, but also because of his compassion for others and his desire to spare them from the horrors of violence (and surely that concern is not absent, at least, from

Pareyson). What is envisioned here is a never stable or unproblematic construct in its own right, a new way of less violence. In this instability, we find an echo of sentiments famously uttered by another thinker perhaps unfairly characterized as purely negative, Michel Foucault:

My point is not that everything is bad but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So, my position leads not to apathy but to hyper- and pessimistic activism.⁷⁴

Our chosen echo, however, is in need of some distortion: Vattimo would surely acknowledge ours as a condition of constant danger (and what is metaphysics itself if not a response to that danger?) and his own life gives credit to his own belief in a “hyper”-activism (energetic, lively, and constantly in motion). However, Vattimo’s approach to this position of danger is not pessimism, but rather a hope colored indelibly by his own native Catholicism, manifest though it may be in an ineffable “I know not what” (a shared resonance with his sometimes interlocutor Caputo).

Let our beginning intuition, then, be one very much in line with Vattimo’s thought: that the process of weakening is, itself, always weakened as well by a refusal of either an unproblematically positive, metaphysical gesture, or an unproblematically negative eliminativist one. Nor, for that matter, are we able to take comfort in set and unchanging proportions of positivity and negativity, like bakers mixing ingredients according to a precise recipe. To mine for a moment the richness of the theological tradition with which Vattimo so productively engages, the path of weakening is that of John the Baptist out in the desert, a walk through the treacherous and problematic spaces undertaken to prepare a way for a better future.

⁷⁴Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd Edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 208.

Chapter 2: Motives and Methods (Or why I resist the Temptation to read Vattimo as a negative thinker)

Introduction: Where we are coming from and why it matters

It is useful for us to proceed with our inquiry with a certain sympathy for the view that Vattimo can be easily viewed as a negative, eliminativist thinker. Regardless of whether one is sympathetic to or suspicious of his work, Vattimo, at the very least, represents a meaningful voice for the critical evaluation of metaphysics, arising vocally and self-consciously from the tradition of the Christian West. My own initial encounter with Vattimo proceeded precisely along these lines. In his “Philosophy and Prophetic Postmodernism”⁷⁵, John Caputo describes the experience of being a progressive Catholic philosopher, coming from the tried and true curriculum of the Catholic university (that is, from Aristotle and Aquinas) and the sense of liberation and possibility in discovering the critiques of modernity (a modernity that, in any case, Catholicism has never really accepted) found in figures like Heidegger and Foucault. Here was an alternative to merely clinging to the old ways, a path beyond a violent and problematic modernity that did not entail an equally stifling collapse back into the premodern. How much greater, then, to find a critique such as Vattimo’s that not only claimed a rootedness in and new employment of the Catholic tradition but maintained an unmistakable affection for that tradition, to find, in a word, that the tradition itself contained an answer to the philosophical modernity with which it has long struggled? It is possible to read many thinkers as negative while still

⁷⁵John Caputo, “Philosophy and Prophetic Postmodernism: Toward a Catholic Postmodernity,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 4, Issue 4, Autumn 2000, 549-567.

acknowledging their importance. Nietzsche and Foucault are routinely read in this way, as figures who, Moses-like, open a space into which they themselves may never venture. Why, then, should we not reserve a similar place for Vattimo?

Certainly, we could acknowledge on purely exegetical grounds that much of the condemnation of so-called postmodernists as negative is itself suspect (we are systematizing these thinkers artificially, we are ignoring their own self-perceptions, we are ignoring the contexts in which they lived and worked, and so on). Likewise, there is an extent to which an answer to the question of why we should resist the temptation to read Vattimo, in particular, as more than merely negative must itself begin with the critical observation that we would be unwise to impose upon his thought a totalizing metaphysical closure of the very type that he critiques (by revealing, in any case, what is *really* there and what he *really* means). This answer only leads to another question, namely, that of why we should engage in exegesis at all, let alone one that considers Vattimo's motives and methods as having some bearing on whether he is a positive or negative thinker. Our answer to this must necessarily embrace a sort of circularity (one hopes, a virtuous one), in that we must remember that the questions that Vattimo seeks to address are ones of increasing urgency; the contested natures of both Truth and community are very much topics of importance in our efforts to confront the social, environmental, and spiritual problems confronting our shared world and, as a result our efforts cannot be confined simply to analysis. We cannot merely open up the space for possibility but, insofar as we can, must now advance boldly into it; a fact that Vattimo, that unique combination of philosopher, activist, and statesman has always understood. So, we consider the questions of motivations and methods as an exercise in fidelity to that which we take from Vattimo (as Vattimo himself shows fidelity to

that which he takes from the tradition) in the hopes of nurturing it and giving it a chance to grow into something worthwhile.

Section 1: The Inescapability of Metaphysics

In order to reconcile our previously considered intuition that Vattimo's thought is more than merely negative, it is necessary for us to examine in detail what is taken to be his negative gesture. For Vattimo, the supposition that we can escape from metaphysics is itself a metaphysical one. After all, into what could we escape? A non- or post-metaphysics? It is precisely for this reason that Vattimo does not speak of an elimination of metaphysics, but rather of its weakening, a process which, further, we are already caught up in but one in which we nonetheless have a volitional role to play (as we shall see later).

The process of weakening, then, occurs within and through metaphysical systems. Perhaps Vattimo's most well-known discussion of just what this looks like in practice is the progressive march of secularization in the West. Contrary to the conventional understanding of secularization as either the removal of religious influences from society altogether or their increasing confinement to the private sphere, Vattimo identifies secularization with the bearing out of a particularly religious impulse: the self-emptying of God in the Incarnation. God's Incarnation does not serve to instantiate explicit strength on Earth (for instance, via the establishment of political dominion), but rather models, for us humans, the refusal of that strength and the instantiation instead of a community founded on love. This approach to the Christian tradition (discussed in greater detail elsewhere) represents exactly the spirit of weakness as a twisting from within of a metaphysical tradition.

It is worth asking whether metaphysics is, after all, so inescapable. There is certainly a temptation to view metaphysics as a failed paradigm and a move beyond it as a transition to one with greater explanatory power as with, say, the move from geocentrism or heliocentrism or the like. It should be evident to us, however, that this perspective bears with it the marks of the modernist teleologies that still have such a strong sway over our interpretations of the world. Our suspicion, in turn, of those sorts of teleologies may well contain a healthy concern with the chauvinism that always follows in their wake, but at a more fundamental level, must also arise from the question of how we would determine a teleological progression in the first place. Per Vattimo,

The part of Heidegger's doctrine that we must not forget, but that Lyotard overlooked, is that the end of the meta-narratives is not the unveiling of a "true" state of affairs in which meta-narratives "no longer are", it is, on the contrary, a process of which, given that we are fully immersed in it and cannot regard it from outside, we are called upon to grasp a guiding thread that we can use in order to project its further development; that is, to remain inside it as interpreters, rather than as objective recorders of fact.⁷⁶

We note, then, that we are not able to dispassionately and objectively observe the unfolding of a progression of history, but rather, grasp, map, and, yes, create the direction of history from within in a manner which is both more intimate and more uncertain. Interpretation is interactive and the very act of interpretation confronts the possibility of other interpretations and refuses the sort of finality presumed by metaphysical thought.

Certainly, the critics of the negative gesture employed by Vattimo and similar thinkers are quick to identify and denounce what they take to be the dangerous alternatives to (so-called) post-metaphysical ways of thinking. Take, for instance, the frequent charge of relativism⁷⁷:

⁷⁶Gianni Vattimo, "The Age of Interpretation" in *The Future of Religion*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 46.

⁷⁷Antiseri, *The Weak Thought and its Strength*, 37.

would it not be possible to escape from traditional metaphysical conceptualizations into an apprehension of pure multiplicity? Further, if our concern is really with the tendency of traditional metaphysical conceptualizations to violently enforce uniformity upon plurality, would it not be desirable for us to do so? Vattimo himself writes that

I would say that from a Heideggerian perspective, we need to remember the meaning of Being and to recognize that this meaning is the dissolution of the principle of reality into the manifold of interpretations, precisely so as to be able to live through the experience of this dissolution without neurosis and avoid the recurrent temptation to “return” to a stronger (more reassuring and also more threatening and authoritarian) sense of the real.⁷⁸

Against this temptation, Vattimo warns

There is a risk attached to taking a step backwards, distancing ourselves from the concrete alternatives, which is that this may lead to the adoption of a relativistic metaphysics. Relativism can be particularly well described as metaphysics because only from a position solidly anchored in some universal point of view can we (should we) gaze on multiplicity as multiplicity. Relativism, one might say, is the (self-contradictory and impracticable) metaphysical rigidification of finitude. Only God can be authentically relativist.⁷⁹

In a word, then, our very rootedness in our particular social and intellectual positions (as observed by the late Heidegger) prevents us from ever attaining the sort of “view from nowhere” that would allow us the very possibility of truly apprehending pure multiplicity as pure multiplicity.

Correspondingly, our encounter with multiplicity, however mediated it may be, exposes us anew to the dread of a dizzyingly vast world. Per Nietzsche,

Rather the world has become “infinite” for us all over again, inasmuch as we cannot reject the possibility that it may include infinite interpretations. Once more, we are seized

⁷⁸Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 42.

⁷⁹Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 42.

by a great shudder, but who would feel inclined immediately to deify again after the old manner this monster of an unknown world?⁸⁰

Nietzsche is very particular in his language here. Our temptation, precisely, is to “deify again after the old fashion,” to reduce even this inscrutably vast and necessarily mediated multiplicity to a metaphysical construct in its own right and, indeed, one that fits nicely with the ancient Socratic conceit that it is better, at least, to know the limits of our knowledge. We may well encounter multiplicity and be changed by it, but we always do so from a particular position, which inevitably informs (not to say invalidates) that encounter.

Section 2: The Ethical Motivations and Utility for the Project, or Some Thoughts on the Relationship between Violence and Metaphysics

Of course, when we critique the very possibility of a departure from metaphysics, we could well be accused of being overly clever: When critics of postmodernity denounce what they perceive as a collapse into relativism, their concerns are not, after all, primarily epistemological in nature. Indeed, as Vattimo writes, “We have sought to think Being outside the metaphysics of objectivity precisely for ethical reasons, and the latter must guide us in our elaboration of the consequences of a non-metaphysical conception of Being, such as an ontology of weakening.”⁸¹ Hence, if there is a concern with the problem of relativism in Vattimo’s project, the concern is more properly with a collapse into undifferentiated intellectual and social chaos, into a world in which no state of affairs is regarded as superior to any other. In this we seem to find an echo of the very fascism with which Vattimo is concerned:

⁸⁰Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 239.

⁸¹Vattimo, *Belief*, 44.

Everything I have said and done in these last years is relativism by intuition. If relativism signified contempt for fixed categories and those who claim to be the bearers of objective, immortal truth... then there is nothing more relativistic than Fascist attitudes and activity.... From the fact that all ideologies are of equal value, that all ideologies are mere fictions, the modern relativist infers that everybody has the right to create for himself his own ideology and to attempt to enforce it with all the energy of which he is capable.⁸²

This passage, with all its various internal tensions and contradictions (so typical of and necessary for historical fascism), perfectly illustrates the ethical concern underlying the fear of relativism that informs so many critics of Vattimo and of postmodern projects more broadly: the concern is that, absent a supervening (that is to say, absolute and metaphysical standard), we are left with the option of either violently asserting our contingency, on the one hand, or collapsing into quietism, on the other.

If we are to take, as Vattimo does, Nietzsche's discussion of the will to power and its connection to metaphysics seriously we are left to confront the historical context in which it arises. Certainly, the language of and about both philosophical and cultural postmodernity implies a break with a dogmatic past. Beginning probably with Kant and certainly manifest in Nietzsche and Heidegger, we see a critical approach to metaphysics, whereby it is made to stand revealed as an absolutizing of this or that contingent horizon, and the absolutizing move is characterized in the Kantian language of dogmatism, or, more explicitly, of Nietzsche's idea of "interpretations that have forgotten that they are interpretations." Dogmatists are wrapped up in forgetting or they are slumbering or they simply do not know to ask the critical questions that will allow them to see the contingency of the positions that they absolutize. Of such thinkers, what can we say but "forgive them... for they know not what they do?"

⁸²Benito Mussolini, "The Lasting" (1921), as quoted in *Rational Man: A Modern Interpretation of Aristotelian Ethics* by H.B. Veatch (London: Amagi Publishing, 2003), 198.

Here, alas, we see in postmodernity the remnants of the modernist project that it critiques. If, as we have already seen, metaphysics is not to be moved beyond (into what space?), neither is it to be unproblematically rehabilitated by the “civilizing” influence of a recognition of contingency, as if all thought that can become engaged in our new, kinder, gentler, discursive universe must first undergo a period of quarantine and rehabilitation, following which it will be labeled “safe.” As with imperialisms both subtle and gross, the subjects of such efforts have quite understandable concerns that they are, in fact, being acted on yet again by contingencies wrapped merely in a new garb. And what, anyway, are we to do with the intransigent?

More to the point, the exposure of the contingency of heretofore absolutized categories does not, in general, cause those categories, or our attachments to them, to vanish. On the contrary, for good and for ill, our commitment to our contingent positions in cultural and intellectual space(s), in fact casts our connection to these positions in a new light. We will explore elsewhere the positive implications of this, but for now it suffices for us to consider the possibility that, freed of a necessity to violently assert one’s contingency against the plurality of contingencies, one will simply chose to do so anyway. It seems that this sort of critically aware violence should be no more attractive to us than its precritical antecedents: the contrary might actually be true, if we are to take seriously the previously considered suggestion that fascism represents precisely this sort of critically conscious violent self-assertion. Indeed, it may very well be (and Girard seems to suggest this in his excellent dialogue with Vattimo), that the tensions internal to the precritical, absolutizing projects of the past precisely held this sort of violence in check. If one imposes by violence absolute principles upon a resistant multiplicity, or to depart from the sterile and abstract language of theory, if one tortures, murders, enslaves a

people “for that people’s own good”⁸³ there may yet remain an opening whereby the perversity of your project may be shown to you, whereby you might be given cause for doubt (and, indeed, the communicative content of the various anti-imperialist projects of the last century was certainly, at least in part, the teaching of the oppressor by the oppressed: “how many atrocities can you subject us to and still call yourselves our friends and benefactors?”). Indeed, it may well be that the horrific violence of metaphysical totalitarianism betrays precisely the instabilities and tensions it contains:

If one needs to make a tyrant of reason, as Socrates did, then there must exist no little danger of something else playing the tyrant... The fanaticism with which the whole of Greek thought throws itself at rationality betrays a state of emergency: one was in peril, one had only one choice: either perish or be absurdly rational.⁸⁴

The danger here (which the project of reason seeks to address) is not merely the general (human, all too human) situation of a lack of control of one’s material environment⁸⁵, but also the

⁸³This sentiment fits just as well with the new imperialisms of humanitarian intervention as with the “civilizing missions” of ages past. Wolfgang Sützl provides an excellent summation of how these configurations of violence represent a style of strong thinking that seeks to conceal its ethical implications: “Peace as strength leaves the competence for peace in the hands of the security experts from the government and the military. Rather than abolishing war, the idea of a peace stronger than war has initiated a secularization of warfare. Its achievement has been a civilizing of the objectives and modes of legitimation of warfare, a progress from wars fought for the crude imposition of national pride or selfish power, to wars fought for sublime humanitarian motives. Peace thought as strength has brought war conceived as humanness, a historical situation in which war becomes, as it were, the better peace. In such a situation ethical criticism is bound to fail as the war machinery, by being able to refer to norms such as human rights, has itself occupied the universal ethical notions upon which the critique of violence has long rested. It is in this kind of ‘humanitarian militarism’ that the dependence of the strong subject on violence is exposed to the full.” Wolfgang Sützl, “The Weak Subject: Peace and Nihilism Reconsidered,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Volume 29, Number 4, 2003, 423.

⁸⁴Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* translated by Richard Holt (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1996), 16.

⁸⁵Vattimo, with Nietzsche, observes that metaphysics seeks to heal violence but, in fact, only masks and reconfigures it, rendering it less accessible to us. Emilio Carlo Corriero, *Nietzsche’s Death of God and Italian Philosophy*, translated by Vanessa Di Stefano, (London: Rowan and Littlefield, 2016), 156.

tumultuous political and social climate of the Ancient Greece more particularly. The question of plurality loomed large in both the thought and culture of that era (the rise of democracy, the primordial stirrings of what would become the physical sciences, etc.) and so created the need for the imposition of intellectual order through the project of reason, the supposition of a supervening order to which all thought and action must bow: a dam of univocity to keep out the chaotic floodwaters of plurivocity (and here, surely, we see a shared resonance with the Deleuzian characterization of philosophy as paranoid, obsessed the setting of boundaries and the delimiting of space).⁸⁶

For the fascist, on the other hand, the violent assertion of identity is bereft of such tensions. The fascist cannot be scandalized by the moral outrage of his victims, let alone their “ingratitude”, precisely because absent from fascist violence is the conceit that anything other than one’s contingent position is being served by one’s actions. One confronts plurivocity and simply rejects it in favor of the assertion of a position granted privilege merely and explicitly by the accident of it being one’s own. Instead of discourse, the ideals of struggle and violence are embraced, as these are contrasted with indolence and stagnation.

As is already suggested by our treatment of this topic, it is tempting to construct a teleological narrative in which we see a movement from the precritical age of violence on behalf of this or that absolute into an age of postcritical violence on behalf of this or that acknowledged contingency. Following this line of thought, we are left with the disturbing implication that the critical move of bringing to light the contingency of supposedly absolute projects merely gives

⁸⁶Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Second Edition, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

rise to what might be a still more violent focus on contingency. Worse still, the violence of a self-aware assertion of one's own contingency against the plurality of contingencies that confronts us in a globalized world would not be subject to the disarming critiques of postmodernity (the previously mentioned hope that confronting an absolutist with his own contingency might deprive him of the grounding for his more violent excesses). Likewise, goes the claim, the well intentioned, whose approach to pluralism consists of a desire to avoid violence, find themselves bereft of a strong counter-assertion against the violent. After all, if we are all products of contingency, what could be more fully our own than the contingent circumstances that constitute us? What external motivation could, without the invocation of some supervening principle, persuade us to do otherwise than assert our position as Mussolini says, "with all the energy [of which we are capable]"⁸⁷ Hence, we are left in a situation in which "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."⁸⁸

In order to determine how serious a problem this concern poses for Vattimo's project, we again need to turn to definitions. Pareyson, in some ways, anticipates this objection by observing that a focus on one's contingent position to the exclusion of something transcendent, in fact, causes one to lose one's sense of one's position. One can no more become atomistic in one's assertion of one's contingency than one can become atomistic in the assertion of a relativistic "view from nowhere." Indeed, the efforts to reach either position are, for Pareyson, symptoms of the same problem: our relationship with our own situatedness necessarily involves a (volitional)

⁸⁷Potentially more disturbing is the notion, mentioned previously, that anti-foundationalism would be no less potent a tool in the hand of those inclined towards violence than for those who seek to reduce violence. Ted H. Miller, "The Two Deaths of Lady MacDuff: Antimetaphysics, Violence, and William Davenant's Restoration Revision of *Macbeth*," *Political Theory*, Volume 36, Number 6, December 2008, 856-882.

⁸⁸William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming" as found in *The Collected Poetry of William Butler Yeats*, (New York: Digireads Publishing, 1998).

recognition of and relationship with a plurality that is never external to that situatedness, just as our engagement with plurality must include a recognition of our constitution by it in a particular way that inevitably shapes that engagement.⁸⁹ Hence, when Vattimo discusses the violence of metaphysics he refers to it precisely as a cutting off of ourselves from plurality as it appears in our discourses. Metaphysical principles are principles before which discussion must come to a halt and that is precisely what makes them violent. In this sense, then, the fascist violence of identitarian self-assertion is, in the end, just as metaphysical as its precritical antecedents in the sense that it rejects the dialogical participation that allows it to have a meaningful and productive sense of itself: in trying to focus only on identity and univocity against the plurality, it, tragically, loses both (and here we find already an important theme to be discussed at greater length elsewhere: the incoherence of a radical separation of one's own contingent constitution from that of "others").

There is nonetheless the question of how much metaphysical conceptions, old or new, precritical or postcritical, truly impact the broader issue of violence. After all, it might well be suggested that people are violent anyway for far less abstract reasons, that our metaphysics merely follows us into the fray, providing perhaps the occasional justification for or description of violence but otherwise having little real role in the production of violence. One might well argue, and convincingly, that most people devote very little thought to metaphysical conceptualization, let alone reasonably coherent and complete metaphysical systems. To this we might answer that such conceptualizations, even when not directly confronted, remain present in thought, often in unexpected ways (and, indeed, that we are all the more vulnerable to them by

⁸⁹Here we have an echo of the Hegelian insight that "the universal must be actualized through the particular." Hegel, *Reason in History*, translated by Robert S. Hartman, (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1953), 35.

our inability or unwillingness to consciously engage with them). Further, even absent violence carried out in a self-consciously metaphysical way, we are still confronted by violent systems, religious, political, economic, social, of an indelibly metaphysical character.⁹⁰ For instance, the mechanisms of Capitalist exploitation, racial prejudice, sexism, and the like, function in a disturbingly autonomous way, a fact which contributes to the frequent confusion that characterizes the popular discourse around these topics (a political figure is called a racist and responds to the accusation by citing his personal attitudes about race, his personal relationships with people of color, and so on, instead of confronting his participation in a racist system, his endorsement of, explicitly or implicitly racist policies, and so on). This is true, however, precisely because of the unquestioned metaphysical assumptions at play in these system (one thinks of Žižek's famous remark that it is easier for us to imagine the destruction of the entire planet than even a slight change in the Capitalist system⁹¹). It is no accident that, in his own storied career, Vattimo's philosophical confrontation with metaphysical totalitarianism was and is tied to an activism which confronts the structures of inequity within society. The failure of criticism is, fundamentally, a metaphysical problem.

Section 3: The religious motivation of the project

⁹⁰It is Vattimo's concern with systemic violence in his more explicitly political and social works that serves as a counter to the criticism that his perspective on violence is too abstract, concerned only with metaphysically *motivated* violence rather than metaphysically *produced* violence. See Erik Meganck, "Modern Violence: Heavenly or Worldly-Or Else," *Human Studies*, Volume 43, 2020, 300.

⁹¹Slavoj Žižek, "Introduction" to *Mapping Ideology*, (New York: Verso, 1994), 1-33.

Vattimo's notion of the weakening vocation of Christianity hinges on a vision of continuity with and fidelity to a shared past. On one level, at least, the centrality of Christianity represents a personal concern:

I confess that I experienced the clarification of this notion of weak ontology as the 'transcription' of the Christian message as a great event, as a kind of decisive discovery. I believe that this is because it allowed me to re-establish a continuity with my own personal religious origin; as if it allowed me to return home... It was like weaving together threads of discourse that had been left hanging, and that had found unity and coherence once more.⁹²

However, we would be mistaken to take Vattimo's religious "turn" (if that is even a meaningful characterization, given that religion was never absent from his work) as *merely* personal (idiosyncratic). Rather, it represents Vattimo's reckoning with his own situatedness within a context heavily inflected by religion. His own upbringing, his Catholic activism, his studies with Pareyson certainly all factor into this (certainly a mechanism to allow us to see, as it were, where he is coming from but also, as we shall see, out of a sense of fidelity to and affection for his intellectual origins); Vattimo is reckoning with his own intellectual, social, and spiritual formative influences. More broadly, however, "None of us in our Western culture- and perhaps in any culture- begin from zero with the question of faith."⁹³ The acknowledgement, then, is of the religiously inflected nature of the broader culture in which religion has once again emerged as something to be confronted (as a political and social question, certainly, but, as we shall see, also with respect to the reconfiguration of spiritual life).

Naturally, there is more at work here than a mere acknowledgement of where we are coming from, as if we are analyzing our cultural genetic code so as to avoid, or at least be aware of, predispositions to disease down the line. Vattimo, following Gadamer, has an understanding

⁹²Vattimo, *Belief*, 39-40.

⁹³Vattimo, *Belief*, 31.

of tradition that at least represents an interest in a faithfulness to and carrying forward of things past. Indeed, the act of interpretation consists not of an objective awareness of our situatedness but of our productive and volitional engagement with it. A reference to Gadamer helps us to shine a light on the (admittedly hidden) positivity of this move:

Even the most genuine and pure tradition does not persist because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated. It is, essentially, preservation, and it is active in all historical change. But preservation is an act of reason, though an inconspicuous one. For this reason, only innovation and planning appear to be the result of reason. But this is an illusion. Even when life changes violently, as in ages of revolution, far more of the old is preserved in the supposed transformation of everything than anyone knows, and it combines with the new to create a new value. At any rate, preservation is as much a freely chosen value as revolution and renewal.⁹⁴

This is a nuanced and valuable observation for our project, as it recognizes, on the one hand, that historical transitions of the type Vattimo describes and in which he participates are never free from the residue of the past (and here we see echoes of our previous discussion of the inescapability of metaphysics) and on the other that the persistence of the past is carried out freely and volitionally as a means of establishing continuity with and an impact on the new.

To further tease out the implications of that observation, it is important that we consider what is meant by a free encounter with tradition (of the sort that we are inclined to assign to Vattimo as a positive move). What we are looking at here is a way in which an element of the past can be said to speak to the present. We should not take Gadamer's emphasis on freedom and volition to deny the possibility that the past can return, neurotically, in an unintentional, neurotic manner. Indeed, our failure to reckon with our contexts can produce all manner of destructive outcomes (as, in the American political discourse, the pretension to "color blindness" or a desire to leave a racially oppressive past "in the past" can result in an insensitivity to the impact the

⁹⁴Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (New York: Continuum, 2004), 282.

history of race relations has on the lives of people today). This concern informs Vattimo's inclination to guard his own speculations from their internal inclinations to collapse back into the kind of totalitarian metaphysics that he critiques. This observation is an excellent illustration of the messy interconnectedness of things: ideas and traditions do not permit of our carrying them forward in discrete, easily digestible bits but rather stick to or mesh with each other in often unexpected ways. In a certain respect, the preservation of tradition can represent an awareness of these interconnections.

On another level, however, preservation here can have a more conventional meaning. While the Heideggerian acknowledgement of thrownness and situatedness can incline us to forget this, history and tradition do not unproblematically accrue of their own volition. Things are forgotten and set aside. Intelligibilities shift (and here we recall, again, the archaeology of the early Foucault). Traditions are kept alive, in a word, not via the negative move of preserving them from change but, on the contrary (and however much Catholic orthodoxy might occasionally pretend otherwise), via the positive move of making them speak to the conditions of the present. Correspondingly, this positive move is possible not insofar as the tradition speaks to some static human nature (again contra Catholic orthodoxy) but rather insofar as the tradition is ontologically rich enough to continue to address those situations in which we now find ourselves (much as classical literature continues to have cultural and intellectual importance well beyond the cultural milieu in which it arose because it contains within itself a superabundance of

meaning, continuously renewed by an ongoing process of interpretation that new generations of readers endeavor to continue and expand).⁹⁵

a. Catholic Aesthetics

We cannot separate Vattimo's ethical concerns from his particular aesthetic sense. More strictly, aesthetic sense has two meanings here. Firstly, we have Vattimo's treatment of the relationship between the ethical (considered previously) and the aesthetic (that is, his declining of strict, systematic ethical formulations, in favor of more open, aesthetic ones). Indeed, Vattimo's discussion of his return to religion hinges on aesthetics. Secondly and relatedly, we have Vattimo's Catholic conception of community.

We would do well to first consider the relationship in Vattimo's thought between playfulness and seriousness. Vattimo's distinct, freewheeling style that comes out especially in his interviews represents a performative demonstration of a particular manifestation of weakening. Indeed, Vattimo acknowledges "I don't take myself as seriously as other Italian philosophers..." and while it would be easy for us to view this as a mere personal idiosyncrasy, we do not need to delve too deeply into Vattimo's thought to find that something more substantial is at work.⁹⁶

Paradise can't be anything but play. The goal of our lives is aesthetic, rather than ethical, even if ethics counts for a great deal in the meantime. And when I say "in the meantime," I am talking about respect for others, rather than respect for objective norms.⁹⁷

⁹⁵Rene Girard and Gianni Vattimo, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith* edited by Pierpaolo Antonello and translated by William McCuaig, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), Kindle.

⁹⁶Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, Kindle.

⁹⁷Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, Kindle.

As we have seen above, Vattimo's ethics resist strictness and systematization in favor of a less tangible and more flexible notion of a compassion that mediates our conduct within the context of a community. It is not rational principles that guide Vattimo's ethics, then, but a vision of community that he draws from the tradition of which he is a part. Furthermore, the goal of that community, the proper end of social life, is precisely a playful one: freedom, creativity, and agency protected and grounded by the conditions of mutual respect that weak thought makes possible. Towards this end, pronouncements and formal arguments are often less valuable than provocations, a fact that explains a number of Vattimo's public statements.

Correspondingly, Vattimo observes that the condition of the world, the oppression, violence, and pervasive social evil, seems less a consequence of playfulness than of the seriousness that has defined Western intellectual history. As Deleuze and Guattari observe in *A Thousand Plateaus*, "it is not the sleep of reason that produces monsters, but reason, vigilant and unsleeping."⁹⁸ In contrast to this, we have the option of being playful, of taking things less seriously. While surely, the Christian Church has a long history of taking things very seriously, for Vattimo, it contains within itself a spirit of productive whimsy:

There is a page in Ernst Bloch's book *Spirit of Utopia* that always springs to mind, mine anyway, where he says that for him Christ can be compared to a clown more than he can a tragic hero. And I don't believe he meant it all that disrespectfully because in Christianity there is a deconstruction of sort, a dissolving of the power claims of the forces of evil: Jesus doesn't combat Satan through struggle but with Irony: "Death, where is your victory?" [1 Cor 15.55]. Death gains victory when we take it too seriously.⁹⁹

For all of the history of severity one can rightly associate with the historical Church, there remains within Christianity a spirit of joy and optimism; the Roman Rite Liturgy centralizes the

⁹⁸Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 112.

⁹⁹Vattimo, *Christianity, Truth and Weakening Faith*, Kindle.

Gospel (with vernacular translations reminding auditors that it represents “the good news of the Lord”) and the lives of the saints are full of transgressive episodes that celebrate the possibilities inherent in the subversion of our expectations (St. Francis’ sermon to the birds). Nor are more conventional manifestations of humor and play absent from the tradition, with its feast and pageantry¹⁰⁰ and with saints, martyrs (in St. Lawrence’s case, in the very face of his martyrdom!), and popes indulging in the occasional clever quip, only to have their remarks immortalized by some dutiful (if occasionally scandalized) hagiographer.

All of this is, of course, to say nothing of the humor that arises subversively from the very strictness of the Catholic tradition. Jokes and playfulness by Catholics about Catholics and Catholicism form a centuries old and still thrive comedic subgenre. In this, one finds exposed the subversive core of Christianity, an inclination of and towards self-weakening that nonetheless maintains a sense of affection and a desire for fidelity. Vattimo is not shy about employing this sort of humor himself: “Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father. Really? What about the left hand? Politically, it is a bit biased!”¹⁰¹ Indeed, he chooses a similar quip as the very touchstone of his account of the role of Christianity in secularization:

When I repeat my favorite motto, “Thank God I’m an atheist,” what I mean is that luckily Jesus Christ has set me free from belief in idols, in divinities, in natural laws, and so on, and so in this sense I define myself as an atheist. But an atheist only with respect to the God of the philosophers, obviously meaning God as “pure act,” omniscience, and so on.¹⁰²

The deflationary thrust of Vattimo’s work, his unique analysis of the condition we call postmodernity or the age of interpretation or any of the other myriad titles that have arisen from

¹⁰⁰I recall an old colleague of mine, himself an acting instructor, saying of the Roman Rite Mass “I will say this for it: It is High Theater!”

¹⁰¹Vattimo, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, Kindle.

¹⁰²Vattimo, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, Kindle.

contemporary philosophy, will often voice the phenomenon of weakening as precisely an arrived upon inability to take things (dogmas, traditions, strong structures of every description) *seriously*. However, the refusal to take things seriously, does not mean the end of productive activity, but rather, its beginning.

Playfulness and provocation represent an interruption of the traditional model of the discursive as consisting principally of formal communication in the form of lectures, essays, structured debates, press conferences and so on. Vattimo. Indeed, makes much of the later Wittgenstein's turn to a broader notion of language, the localization represented by his notion of language games. Certainly, we can begin to see the political implications of the opening up of the notion of the discursive beyond that of formalized, logical intercourse of the kind that has dominated the Western philosophical canon since (at least) Plato, as we cannot but recognize the monopoly held by the powerful over such mechanisms of communication. Indeed, the disruptive potential of the playful, irreverent discourse has long been well known, perhaps most especially by religious authorities, as we find masterfully expressed in the words of Jorge to William in Eco's *The Name of the Rose*:

“But if one day somebody brandishing the words of the Philosopher and therefore speaking as a philosopher, were to raise the weapon of laughter to the condition of subtle weapon, if the rhetoric of conviction were replaced by the rhetoric of mockery, if the topics of the patient construction of the images of redemption were to be replaced by the topics of the impatient dismantling and upsetting of every holy and venerable image- oh that day, even you, William, and all your knowledge, would be swept away!”¹⁰³

The message here is unmistakable: pious contemplation and rational discourse alike are threatened with utter dissolution in the face of playfulness (understood here as embodying a giving of license to a transgressive impulse, an inclination to take things less seriously).

¹⁰³Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, (London: Vintage, 2004), Kindle.

This is not to say, of course, that Vattimo endorses a romantic surrender to idleness and sentimentality (into what might be termed an aesthetic equivalent of the collapse into relativism that is such a concern to ethicists and epistemologists).¹⁰⁴ We would do well to note his excellent discussion of the history of European aesthetics in *Art's Claim to Truth*. In that work, Vattimo notes that a notion of playfulness dominated the artistic sensibilities of the modern period (neo-Kantianism, Kierkegaard, Hegelianism and its offshoots), but that this notion precisely consisted of various efforts either to deprive art of its ontological character (by reducing it to an immediate confrontation apart from questions of being or reason, for Kierkegaard and the neo-Kantians or via its self-emptying of those reflective qualities that distinguished it from philosophy and reflection, in Hegelianism and its offshoots). As we can see, recalling our discussions elsewhere of Vattimo's analysis of metaphysics, this approach to art necessarily brings art to a point of closure, either in the form of the unspeakable or in the form of a systematized and completed analysis, proceeding according to definite rules. To these approaches, we oppose Gadamer's observation in *Truth and Method* that "aesthetics has to be absorbed into hermeneutics."¹⁰⁵ If Vattimo's Catholic aesthetic rests on a sense of community and on the idea of a playfulness, it is not play in this sense of triviality or (always attempted and never achieved) ontological neutrality, but rather, in access the ontological richness of the work, dialoguing with it and within it, in a way that celebrates its ontological richness (and here we see echoes of Pareyson):

For the theory of formativity, the value of artwork can be measured not so much when the work is said to be beautiful and successful as it is when the work, taken concretely

¹⁰⁴As Corriero does well to note, the playfulness that Vattimo has in mind here is not necessarily a gentle phenomenon, but rather, "the game of conflict and overload of interpretations without facts, that is, of symbolic configurations which result from games of force and which themselves become agents in establishing configurations of force, 'what Nietzsche calls the world as will to power' as 'artwork that is done by itself.'" Corriero, *Nietzsche's Death of God and Italian Philosophy*, 157.

¹⁰⁵Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 157.

and historically, stirs and gives rise to an infinite process of interpretations, to an infinity of arguments...¹⁰⁶

If Paradise cannot be anything but play, then, it is precisely the play of novelty as such which arises within the context of a discursive community through that community's encounter with irreducibility or, to reframe the matter in the time-tested language of Catholic theology, with *divine abundance*.

This move cannot be separated from the ethical and political considerations that we have already considered. Indeed, the confrontation with plurality that is the proper coming into discourse with and within a great work of art represents the widening, insofar as is possible, of community through the recognition of the multiplicity of perspectives (and, implicitly, as Pareyson would say, our openness to changing and being changed by them). This ties nicely with a particularly notion of Catholicism embodied in that famous phrase, penned by James Joyce, as "Here comes everybody!" Indeed, Vattimo's great contribution to political thought may well be the articulation of this sentiment in philosophical terms:

What I would like to limit myself to proposing here is simply the ideal (utopian as it is too, I admit) of a post-metaphysical utopia which takes as its starting-point the realization that unicity is no longer an inescapable characteristic of the utopian concept. Or rather, given that the very notion of oneness appears to be the ultimate grounding principle of metaphysics, bathed as it is in the ambience of violence and will to dominance, the issue becomes one of conceiving a post-metaphysical utopia precisely under the sign of multiplicity *asserted as a fundamental value* and not just a phase of 'confusion' to be overcome through a process of synthesis etc.¹⁰⁷

It is here that we find the radically Catholic hope that all can be saved, a hope that encourages a transgression of mere dogma in favor of charity (one alive, albeit intermittently and imperfectly,

¹⁰⁶Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, (New York Columbia University Press, 2010), Kindle.

¹⁰⁷Gianni Vattimo, "Utopia Dispersed" in *Diogenes*, Volume 53, Issue 1, 2006, 21-22, emphasis mine.

in the Papacy of Pope Francis¹⁰⁸). Vattimo's notion of a Catholic community may well have been forged in the particular fires of Italian anti-fascism and social justice, in his time with Catholic Action and in his studies with Pareyson, but they nonetheless strike a chord that resounds still, even in the Catholicism of a different place and time. To follow Vattimo's lead and allow myself a biographical aside, I well remember my own discovery of this self-same sentiment in the hymnals of the Novus Ordo liturgy of my own childhood, in the words of Sister Delores Dufner OSB: "Brought together at one table all the human family; shape a circle ever wider and a people ever free! Let us bring the gifts that differ and in splendid, varied ways, sing a new Church into being, one in faith and love and praise!"¹⁰⁹ Here we see not a call for the imperialist (and, in the history of Catholicism, sadly common) call for an erasure of difference for the sake of unity, but rather an acknowledgement of the value of a diversity and inclusivity permissive of a new kind of discourse and, hence, a fuller and better encounter with God.

Obviously, Vattimo's notion of community here is not uncontroversial. In a 6/11/19 guest article for *First Things*¹¹⁰, Guarino argues that a discursive community is not possible unless it is

¹⁰⁸We should be careful to note, even here, that to read Pope Francis in a Vattimary way itself represents a reading against the grain, a speculative, perhaps even violent appropriation. Keith Edward Lemna notes, I think convincingly, that the weakness found in Pope Francis' remunerative body of work (as distinct from the pieces seized upon by the popular press) reflects a more traditional (that is to say, orthodox) treatment of weakness (in the form of the Cross of Christ) as feeding back into strength (in the Resurrection). With that said, we can well retain our initial intuition (contra Lemna): that the shift in *emphasis* (not to say *discursive content*) found in Francis' Papacy itself represents an opening in religious discourse which encourages and allows for weakening in a more Vattimary sense. Keith Edward Lemna, "Pope Francis' Strong Thought" in *Theological Librarianship*, Volume 7, Number 2, July 2014, 45-53.

¹⁰⁹Dolores Dufner, "Sing a New Church" (Portland, OCP Productions, 1991).

¹¹⁰We should note with some interest that Vattimo's name appears in this publication, a bastion of conservative religious thought, with some frequency, principally as an object of criticism. This testifies, certainly, to Vattimo's increasing relevance in the broader culture of the religious (especially but not exclusively Catholic) Anglophone world, but also to the tendency of conservative elements within that sphere to try to restrain the plurality that they see Vattimo as representing. Joseph Trabbic's September 9, 2019 article "*Fides et Ratio*" in *The Catholic World*

mediated by a consideration of [T]ruth. In this (admittedly polemical) article, Vattimo is cast as a force promoting a slide into an untenable relativistic dissolution, guilty of subtly infiltrating Catholic thought and undermining Catholic scholarly institutions:

Catholic universities—and, by extension, all religiously-affiliated ones—do their students a disservice when they veer toward Vattimo’s “weak thought.” By invoking an uncritical and undisciplined notion of diversity, they communicate to students that all claims to truth are provisional and contingent. They also disseminate another major theme of Vattimo’s philosophy: that the Christian notion of *caritas*—supernatural charity animated by the Holy Spirit—is best understood today as “tolerance,” the ability to value all positions equally. The most important virtue to be cultivated at a university, then, becomes not love of truth, but unlimited tolerance based on truth’s unknowability. This reflects Vattimo’s repeated criticism of the traditional dictum rooted in Aristotle’s *Ethics*, “*Amicus Plato sed magis amica veritas*.” The Torinese philosopher wants to turn this ancient axiom on its head, insisting that “there is no truth worth affirming” in comparison with the tolerance to be extended to all perspectives.¹¹¹

The “critical” and “disciplined” approach to diversity that Guarino prefers here refer, of course to a traditional notion of community rooted in metaphysical notions, [T]ruth claims about which we can engage in discussion and establish common ground for social, spiritual, and intellectual activity. Diversity, in a word, cannot be held as a virtue for its own sake, but must instead be subjected, as it were, in advance, to rigorous tests of orthodoxy. Absent this, community itself dissolves into a chaotic lack of differentiation.

This sentiment echoes that of Gerhard Ludwig Cardinal Müller, former prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, expressed similar concerns in an earlier submission to *First Things*. Vattimo represents, for the Church, a “diabolical temptation,” in the form of an

Report portrays Vattimo as a relativist, whose self-contradictory musings should be compared unfavorably to Pope Saint John Paul II’s encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*. If this is a gentle urging backward to an older way of thinking, still more strident are works such as R.R. Reno’s January 2012 article “Loving the Law” in *First Things*, in which he portrays Vattimo’s thought as the intellectual expression of a culture corrupted by excessive and “disordered” permissiveness.

¹¹¹Thomas Guarino, “Catholic Universities and Gianni Vattimo,” *First Things*, June, 11, 2019.

avoidance of [T]ruth claims that echoes that of Pontius Pilate in John 18:38. Going further even than Guarino, Cardinal Müller writes that “The truth of God in Christ and in his Church remains the foundation and the source of the love of God and neighbor, a love that is the fulfillment of the whole law.”¹¹² We can leave aside, for the moment, the shared assumption between the Cardinal and Guarino that Vattimo’s thought represents an evasion (rather than a confrontation) of the question of [T]ruth (one, indeed, that is reducible, in the end, to a mere skepticism that Vattimo, following Nietzsche, recognizes as metaphysical through and through) and instead consider the perhaps more interesting objection that Vattimo’s notion of community itself, far from being a positive element in this thought, remains itself thoroughly negative. Unmediated by a reference to a way things are, community itself dissolves into a chaotic lack of differentiation.

We consider these responses not by chance but because they represent orthodox objections from figures of authority to Vattimo’s discussion of community. We can certainly anticipate various responses to these criticisms based on Vattimo’s discussion of metaphysics (which we have dealt with at length elsewhere). Regarding the relationship between [T]ruth and love, we might well ask (in anticipation of our discussion of pietas) whether a love that is grounded in [T]ruth is love in a meaningful sense (seeming, as it would, to be grounded in a sort of compulsion, a bowing before a reality external to the human person). Rather, we might find a common ground with Cardinal Müller after all: “To love a person is to want to know that person’s truth” (and here we leave the lowercase “t” intact) and “Faith in Christ already contains all truths.”¹¹³ We can surely agree that Truth should appear to us precisely as inexhaustible; where we would differ with these critics is in regarding it as appearing, not in a collapse into an

¹¹²Gerhard Ludwig Cardinal Müller, “Is There a Saving Truth?” *First Things*, March 13, 2018.

¹¹³Müller, “Is there a Saving Truth?”

undifferentiated relativism (what, after all, would that even look like?) but rather, in the form of an openness to the very plurality that they reject. Indeed, interestingly, these critics, for all their concern with the Vattimo's supposed (collapse into) skepticism about God, end up themselves asserting a quite limited God of dogmatic pronouncement, implicitly deferring God's infinitude (which surely cannot be exhausted merely in the discursive content of dogma and revelation) to the realm of the mysterious (and how can we refer to such a position as anything but skeptical?). The image, to which Vattimo's thought cleaves, of community and of aesthetics leaves us not with a diminished notion of Christian spiritual life but with an expanded and enhanced one.

b. Freedom for Pietas

So far, we may be said to have provided a somewhat weak answer to the initial intuition that Vattimo is merely a negative thinker: he wants only to "weaken" because elimination of metaphysics is not possible (and so is saved from the charge of eliminative postmodernism by a mere technicality) and he wants this for what purpose? Why, to reduce violence, of course! All is waning (if not vanishing altogether), nothing is waxing. Clearly, there is more work still to be done to advance our thesis.

In considering Vattimo's religious motivations, we at last come to something more explicitly positive in his thought. The ethical dimension considered previously, here takes on a new light: the goal is a freedom from violence, where violence is that before which discourse comes to a halt. This, of course, implies a diminution, where possible, of political, intellectual, and yes, spiritual coercion. In its simplest formulation, we may say that if we believe in religious principles because we believe they are [T]rue (that is, that they represent the way the world

really is), then we are left, in some sense, without a choice in the matter: we do not have a reasonable alternative to belief. This is the situation in which metaphysical religious thought finds itself.

On the other hand, we can consider religious belief understood merely as an expression of the newly unrestrained will to power. In this formulation, one would understand that one's belief is contingent but would embrace it and assert it nonetheless. As Vattimo himself observes, when we find that our conceptualizations are contingent, we cling to them all the more because they are now "all we have in the world."¹¹⁴ As we have observed elsewhere, of course, this conception hardly seems any less coercive than the more explicitly metaphysical ones that precede it. We cling to our belief, as it were, in desperation at having found ourselves unmoored and left to drift, finding security in the fact that our belief is, for all its contingency, still *ours* (again disregarding the reality of the cross-pollination of belief systems). The price paid for such an approach is, of course, that by making our tradition our focus, we deprive it of its vitality by demanding it become the sameness that stands as our bulwark against difference.

Against these approaches to belief, Vattimo offers us an alternative: that we confront weakening as an opportunity to choose to embrace our traditions out of affection rather than obligation. After all, even in a world devoid of the comforting bedrock of metaphysical absolutism, the implicit choice between violent, identitarian self-assertion and disintegration in the tempest of unleashed plurality is, of course, a false one. We arise from contexts, and those

¹¹⁴“We must keep in mind that it is the dissolution of metaphysics that liberates us for *pietas*... Once we discover that all the systems of values are nothing but human productions, what is left for us to do? Do we dismiss them as lies and errors? No, we hold them even dearer because they are all we have in the world, they are the only density, thickness, richness of experience, they are the only ‘Being.’” Gianni Vattimo, *Etica dell'interpretazione* (Turin, Rosenberg and Sellier, 1989) as quoted in Frascati-Lochhead, 82 (translation hers).

contexts remain a part of us; they are not subject to surgical removal in a manner that would leave us totally unmoored in the stormy seas of plurality. On the other hand, we are never bound to these contexts in the way that violent identitarians like to pretend (and it is only too easy to see in the violent assertion of identity, the neurotic and all-too-metaphysical fear of collapse into some relativist oblivion). Instead, our interaction with our contexts is (and here again we find in Vattimo's thought a Pareysonian echo) subject to our own volitional engagement.

All by itself, this freedom represents a striking note of positivity in Vattimo's thought. By banishing the specter of coercion from our spiritual lives, an ontology of weakening removes what would seem to be a terrible barrier to spiritual authenticity.¹¹⁵ Certainly, we find here an echo of a concern which features prominently in the Christian tradition: whether one's motivation for belief stems from love or fear. For those of us who grew up with the Baltimore Catechism, we need look no further for this concern than the traditional formulation of the Act of Contrition:

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins, because I dread the loss of Heaven and the pains of Hell, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, Who art all good and deserving of all my love.

¹¹⁵ We should note that this move is not as unproblematic for religious life as it might first appear. I recall a discussion, some years ago, about weak theology in which my interlocutor, a Protestant minister, asked (seeking after the proper wording) how one could *dare* to configure God as weak, let alone build a theology around doing so. The episode remains with me (although the details are lost) because I read this comment, not as an invocation of superstitious dread (still less as a forgetting of the theology of the cross that thrives even and perhaps especially within the bosom of orthodox theology) but as a pastoral reminder that *fear of the Lord* is a traditional component of pious speculation. What a weakened fear of the Lord might look like is well beyond the scope of this work. For now, we can at least speculate that freedom for pietas of the kind addressed here, in allowing a volitional engagement with the tradition, likewise occasions our encounter with the richness and its fullness of that tradition; an encounter that allows for something like the experience of awe or wonder.

Here, we find the traditional unwillingness to banish altogether the specter of divine punishment from our motivations, a concession to the fallenness of human character and the corresponding need for negative reinforcement, nonetheless paired with a careful subordination of fear of Hell to love of God. It is not difficult to understand the reasoning for this: a belief in God motivated solely by fear of punishment would not seem to be free in anything but a trivial sense, and thus would not be authentic and praiseworthy. The concern, in other words, is less with the role of fear per se than with the specter of an authentic and voluntary piety being overshadowed by a coerced and inauthentic piety.

If piety motivated by fear of punishment carries with it the specter of inauthenticity, so too would belief motivated by a bowing before the demands of a supposed “way the world really is”, that is, before a metaphysical conception of the world. If I believe in God because God really exists, I am not engaging in an act of love, but merely of acceptance of a feature of reality. The word is such that if I fail to bring my umbrella out with me on a rainy day, I shall arrive at work soaking wet: any emotional stake I may have in this state of affairs is surely not more than whimsy on my part, rather than something that is, in some sense, *due* this feature of reality. Similarly, then, the treatment of religious propositions as facts of this kind renders my reaction to them merely a reaction, a navigation of the moral and spiritual universe in which I happen to find myself (as I carry an umbrella to ward off rain, I visit my confessor to avoid damnation). And yet, the regulation of our internal life is a part of how we are to navigate a moral and spiritual universe consisting merely of states of affairs. How could such a position be productive of anything but the most intolerable spiritual anxiety?

The harm in this approach to our relationship with God is manifold. In a 2016 interview with Claudio Gallo of *La Stampa*, Vattimo says

It is because I believe in the Christian God that I release myself from all idolatries: from the scientific and economic ones (that today they try to impose on us as “technical” solutions to a political problem). This is the meaning of not recognizing God as a being among the others, even though he is the supreme being. The great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was killed by the Nazis, said that “A God who let us prove his existence would be an idol.” If God is a being, he should not be God. This doesn’t mean that the religious experience is meaningless, rather the contrary. It removes the superstition and also the dogmatic authoritarianism. The God, who in Nietzsche’s words is dead, is the God of philosophy, guaranteeing the fixed order of the world as it is; in the end, the God of reactionaries.¹¹⁶

Hence, to view God as a mere state of affairs, a closed fact in the metaphysical sense, is to commit the sin of idolatry. We end up with a reactionary and reductionist philosophy and politics, to be sure. To believers in particular, idolatry carries the special peril of cutting one off from the ontological richness through which the divine becomes present to us

This realization, in turn, allows the realization of a fidelity to our traditions not possible in the context of metaphysical or identitarian conceptions of belief. Vattimo’s own intellectual development serves as a wonderful demonstration of the form that this new fidelity can take: we recognize our emergence from traditions, our status as beings thrown into the world by an initiative not our own. We have received, from a source in the past, tools and capacities, resources with which to confront the world in which we find ourselves. And to this, we can choose to react with gratitude and affection and, in turn, with a desire to carry on the tradition to others as it was carried on to us.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶Claudio Gallo, “Gianni Vattimo Interview,” *Public Seminar*, July 11, 2016.

¹¹⁷This approach to tradition is itself a product of Vattimo’s situatedness within a particular style of thought: “In Italian philosophical literature you will not find statements such as ‘Here is where I part way from Kant’ or ‘I am in total disagreement with Hegel on this specific issue’- statements I have often found in analytical literature, as if Kant or Hegel were the not-so-bright colleagues from a rival department. Such healthy demonstrations that nothing is sacred (I do find them healthy, to a point) are anathema to the Italian philosopher, for whom the canonic texts can be endlessly questioned, criticized, retranslated, reinterpreted, turned upside down and forced to perform outrageous hermeneutic stunts, *but they cannot be dismissed.*” Alessandro Carrera, “The Many Challenges of Italian Theory”, 16, emphasis mine.

Of course, this cannot take the form of a mere assertion of identity, itself understood as an absolute. Rather, we carry on the tradition by nurturing its possibilities. Here again, Pareyson proves instructive):

Tradition has an essentially originary and ontological nature. It does not simply suggest loyalty to the past and transmission of a heritage; rather, it indicates the very conditions of such a loyalty and transmission, freeing them from a mere temporal dimension and returning them to their originary. It shows that linking the present to a past and continuing a past in the present is truly possible and fertile only if the past is delivered from its mere temporality and recovered in a more originary manner, only if the past is considered to be a bearer of the implicit, and for that reason imbued with an ontological import, and only if the past is seen not as anterior to the present, but as close to Being.¹¹⁸

We recognize that tradition is alive only insofar as it stands, not as a bastion of sameness against difference but precisely as a representation of difference in itself, as a living, breathing, manifestation of a plurality of interpreters engaged in the application of the tradition to the world in which they find themselves. Involvement in a tradition becomes, then, not merely a form of being-in-history but an answering-back to history, an exercise in (to use Pareyson's phrase) "making Truth speak to the listening of time."¹¹⁹

c. *Kenosis*

If we can recognize within Vattimo a religious and ethical motivation and if we would incline ourselves to read this motivation as a possible answer to the temptation to view Vattimo as a principally negative thinker, we must confront the centrality of his discussion of kenosis. Now here, we say, is a negative notion through and through: the God who "emptied himself, taking

¹¹⁸Pareyson, *Truth and Interpretation*, 41.

¹¹⁹Pareyson, *Truth and Interpretation*, 106

the form of a servant, being in the likeness of men and in the habit of man.”¹²⁰ If Vattimo connects this passage to Nietzsche’s notion of the death of God, it hardly adds any positivity to the topic. Here the God of metaphysics, the God of an absolute way the world is, the regressive and violent God of natural theology, is banished by the notion of a God who assumes an equality, not with the divine and transcendent, but with humanity.

Here we seem to have a weakness that wishes to transform into strength. After all, the passage in Philippians above that provides the encapsulation of kenosis does not leave us with the humbling of God in Christ but with the exaltation of Christ to the right hand (not the left!) of God the Father.¹²¹ The name of Jesus is made to resound above all names. Instead of weakness, kenosis represents a disguised or reconfigured strength. If we are looking for positivity, it would appear that we have found it in the most problematic possible form: that of a near-instantaneous return to natural religion and totalitarian metaphysics.

In contrast to this orthodox view, in this image of a self-emptying God Vattimo finds the thread of weakening manifest in our current era of interpretation. Secularization, multiculturalism, the collapse of absolute monarchies in favor of more democratic systems, in these we find a trend of the weakening of strong structures which is made possible precisely by this originary gesture of a self-weakening divine:

It is neither absurd, nor perhaps blasphemous, to maintain that the truth of Christianity is not the dogmas of the churches but the modern system of rights, the humanization for of social relations (where it has come about), the dissolution of the divine right of all forms of authority, even the Freudian discovery of the unconscious, which deprives the voice of conscience (which is also the voice of the most sanguinary kinds of fanaticism) of its supposed ultimacy, its unquestionable sacrality.¹²²

¹²⁰Philippians 2:7.

¹²¹Meganck, ”Modern Violence: Heavenly or Worldly-Or Else?,” 302.

¹²²Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 31-32.

The effects of this move echo down through the history of Western thought and culture and find themselves brought to self-expression in the very philosophies from which Vattimo draws most directly: “The Nietzsche of the death of God and the Heidegger of Ereignis are the most radical heirs of the anti-metaphysical principle that Christ brought into the world.”¹²³ Here already we see a sort of positivity: weakness is not manifest merely in passings-away but in reconfigurations and novel forms of social and intellectual organization (in what we might call, at the very least, a negativity coupled to a corresponding reconstructive gesture).

Vattimo ties the self-emptying of God to the corresponding elevation of the community of believers, in John 15:15 and Acts 2 (to which we might add the institution of the Church in Matthew 16:18). No longer a passive subject to whom a transcendent God dictates, the human person is instead transfigured into an active participant in and interpreter of religion. Indeed, in the context of Catholic theology specifically, God becomes present precisely in the community of believers and manifest in the Sacraments which take place within the context of that community. It is important to note that this elevation does not proceed along humanist lines (that is, by way of the elevation of the human to the status of metaphysical absolute) but rather, proceeds as an inauguration of friendship (or even kinship) represented by the bringing of humanity into the conversation as a productive participant.

Section 4: Some Thoughts on Circularity

¹²³Gianni, Vattimo, *After Christianity* translated by Luca D’Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 109.

A common criticism of so-called eliminative postmodernity in general and Vattimo's thought in particular is that it is circular: to critique reason, reason itself must be employed and the recognition of the historicity of our thinking is itself an insight that is historically conditioned. It should be noted, however, that the desire for unproblematic closure it itself represents a residue of the metaphysical worldview (and here we recall the inescapability of metaphysics). We cannot, after all, escape our situatedness in the historical and cultural circumstances into which we always-already find ourselves thrown and proceed from some neutral, objective ground. Similarly absolutizing would be the notion that thought and history proceed in particular directions in accordance with objective principles (the conceit, for instance, of Marxist historiography).

If we have a concern about circularity in Vattimo's thought, it would surely not arise from a desire to avoid transgressing against the totalizing approaches to metaphysics that he critiques. Indeed, circularities of various sorts have been a feature of hermeneutics and its philosophical antecedents from the beginning. What concerns us, rather, is the notion, suggested by circularity, of conceptual enclosure. To be trapped within a circle implies an inability to make forward progress, which, appreciate though we may the banishment of problematic teleologies, seems a less than attractive position when we consider the need to confront pressing social, political, and environmental issues. Likewise, the circle understood as enclosure seems to entail a closing-off from novelty or from "otherness" which would render community and discourse impossible. This last sort of enclosure marks the sort of collapse into metaphysics that we considered previously, in which a preoccupation with identity categories gives rise to a neurotic policing of boundaries, an effort to think in "water-tight compartments" (to borrow again from Whitehead); a condition which, indeed, can be held up (misguidedly) as a social good when it

manifests in concerns over “cultural appropriation” and the like, or, in more academic circles, can manifest in the form of various problems of (the possibility of) translation.¹²⁴

Where circularity means self-reference, we can certainly couple it to what we have already seen of Vattimo’s negative gesture. After all, a focus on our situatedness within contexts that we then endeavor to interpret keeps us from absolutizing our own position. Still more crucially, it keeps us from absolutizing even the process of weakening itself into yet another metaphysical standard (perhaps in the service, as we have already seen, of the Washington consensus’ preference for [framed] democracies). It keeps us mindful, in a word, of the contingency of our position in a manner that reduces and discourages violence in favor of a recognition and valuing of a plurality of perspectives.

More positively, the acceptance of circularity encourages a recognition of the process of interpretation as one in which the context, the interpreter, and the act of interpretation are linked in a relationship of mutual constitution.¹²⁵ Our situatedness constitutes us and conditions our act of interpretation, but our productive engagement with those contexts in turn shapes the contexts in which we find ourselves, opening up new possibilities. And this is most especially true where

¹²⁴Vattimo keeps company with Davidson on this question, insofar as both thinkers place an emphasis on a “principle of charity” as grounding discourse. See Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, Kindle. Where the two part ways is that Davidson is not so shy as Vattimo about positing a shared horizon of intelligibility in the context of which meaning (if not perfect translation) can be sought empirically. See Bruce Haddock, “The Crisis of Ideology in Italy: Eco, Vattimo, and the Erosion of Critical Space,” *The Italianist*, Volume 31, Number 1, 2011, 22.

¹²⁵The specter of dualism haunts our inquiry: negative and positive, violent and non- or less violent, strong and weak. Dualisms, of course, represent their own form of enclosure, a suggestion of parts mediated by relationship to each other and, hence, to an enclosed whole (one we cannot but associate with metaphysical violence, with cuttings off and with limit points). Against this specter (which illustrates, per Žižek, that atomism and monism are, after all, sides of the same coin), we invoke mutual constitution and messy interrelatedness (that is, in a word, irreducibility or, perhaps more accurately, the refusal of reduction).

it occurs in the context of a discourse with others. If there is a circle here, it is not one that allows for full enclosure but rather, one that calls for continuous expansion to welcome into discourse various perspectives as well as the engagement with the ever-changing sets of circumstances that we daily encounter. An acknowledgement of where we are coming from in fact becomes the precondition (as we shall see) for engagement in a less violent manner with the never-wholly - other.

Section 5: Positivity and Negativity Reconsidered

Having reviewed Vattimo's motives and methods, we begin to see why we might productively resist our initial inclination to view him as a negative thinker. There is a gesturing, here, towards something beyond mere analysis and criticism. Going forward, we shall see that, within Vattimo's project (of which we are not yet taking our leave), there is no shortage of productive work being done in the interaction between his positive and negative moves. We shall likewise see (in a nod to what we have just considered with respect to circularity) that there are alive in his work productive tensions whereby we may avoid an inclination to enclose the positive and negative as unproblematic, self-contained parts of a whole (like the poles at the end of a circuit¹²⁶). We are reminded once more that we are not proceeding from firm and absolute ground and that our movement cannot be towards unproblematic closure. Ever present is the danger of failure, of collapse, of unexpected and uncontrolled reconfiguration, and we must hold close our awareness of that precarity as we go.

¹²⁶Or, as we have previously observed, *a dialectic*.

Chapter 3: The Positive Move in Weak Thought: Intermingling our Motivations

Introduction

We have, at some length, considered our intuitions regarding the positive and negative moves in Vattimo's thought. Likewise, we have already given voice to the suspicion that these moves are related to each other, that the negative, deconstructive move paves the way for a positive, reconstructive one. However, we should remember that Vattimo's thought is, understandably, suspicious of just these sorts of conceptual enclosures; the notion of a positive and negative move, fitting neatly together into what becomes an unproblematically positive project (the clearing away, as it were, of conceptual rubble prior to new construction) seems to be the very image of the modernist reconfiguration of metaphysical absolutism that Vattimo critiques.

With that concern noted, we must similarly consider that it is not possible for us to unproblematically separate what we have called the positive and negative gestures. An attempt to do so would, after all, represent its own sort of conceptual enclosure, and it is not without reason that we have previously been obliged to accept (with, one hopes, a *productive* discomfort) a certain circularity in Vattimo's thought. What, after all, would pure positivity and pure negativity look like if not metaphysical absolutisms?¹²⁷ In the case of the question of what Vattimo's thought is able to accomplish, it is perhaps most helpful to read that circularity in the sense of a

¹²⁷Pure negativity, on the one hand, could take the form of the descent into pure irrationality, often accompanied by the Socratic, rationalist conceit exposed by Nietzsche that knowledge of our ignorance is itself wisdom (perhaps even the only wisdom). (*Nihilism and Hermeneutics xxvii*). Correspondingly, we can imagine that a pure positivity would be similarly metaphysical, representing a relativistic assertion of all positions which, necessarily, involves a view from nowhere; "Only God could be authentically relativist." Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 42.

relationship of mutual constitution between what we have previously identified as the positive and negative elements in his thought. Specifically, the motivation for the risky and experimental effort¹²⁸ to grasp the thread of weakening that stretches, unacknowledged, through Western thought and culture is an ethical and political one.¹²⁹ As a result, that project, though easily read as merely negative, comes always-already connected to a certain positivity: a never-unproblematic assertion of ethical and political consequences (and, as we shall see, religious and cultural ones, as well). What we end up with, then, is a productive tangle of negativity and positivity, cast forth as a speculative flight.¹³⁰ We are left, therefore, to consider, what is accomplished by this adventurous move.

Section 1: Opening up space

The political importance of Vattimo's project is, in many respects, embodied in the definition of metaphysics as that before which discussion comes to a halt. It is worth revisiting the

¹²⁸Again and again we brush against the notion of risk. This should serve to emphasize two key points about Vattimo's thought. Firstly, although Vattimo's thought is Hegelian (by way of Marx) in its proceeding in a broadly dialectical fashion, he breaks with Hegelianism in refusing to acknowledge an unproblematic teleological progress acting in history. Even where Vattimo treats history as most providential, that is, in the intervention of the Divine into history in the person of Christ, the emphasis is on risk rather than on destiny: Christ too is a risky interpretation of the Messianic tradition of Judaism, a scandal, and novel element through and through. Secondly, we should note that the assumption of risk, here, is understood as volitional and as personal. Indeed, while Vattimo is not shy in speaking about groups, broad historical trends, and the like, he nonetheless echoes his mentor Pareyson in situating the process of interpretation firmly with the situated subject in all of her glorious, messy, contingent interrelatedness. Indeed, this is precisely the sense in which hermeneutics can proceed as an ethical (and not merely an abstract, epistemological) move.

¹²⁹Indeed, it fairly explicit confronts us as such: "It is mostly in the political and ethical spheres that the unsustainability of metaphysics becomes evident." Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism* (New York, Columbia University Press 2014), 94.

¹³⁰Whitehead, *Process and Reality: Corrected Edition*, 5.

implications of this definition. Certainly, we can well observe a connection between [T]ruth and social and political regimes of power. On one very practical level, this arises as a result of the historic domination of intellectual and social institutions by elites. Correspondingly, we see notions of metaphysical [T]ruth employed as intellectual violence (and validation for social and political violence) against the marginalized. Absolute conceptions are capable of grounding political and social violence. Here we think of the explicit totalitarianisms of crusades and inquisitions, of oppressive bodies of law, of networks of social and economic disenfranchisement carried out in the name of absolute conceptions of race, gender, religion, or the natural order.

We should revisit the emancipatory implications of the process of weakening. In the first place, the emancipatory potential of weak thought would consist of disrupting the strong structures that are connected to metaphysical conceptions. Here we recall the ethical and political motivations for weak thought, namely, that it calls into question those causes before which people are willing to kill and die. Similarly, it deprives oppressive institutions and structures of their unquestionable sacrality and allows us to consider alternatives.

It is not without cause that Vattimo tends to connect the movement of weakening with the rise of democratic institutions, the increase of concern for human rights, and the liberalization of religious institutions (where it has occurred).¹³¹ These developments, brought about by the negative move of calling into question absolute structures, represent a broadening of the sphere of ethical consideration and a corresponding bringing into discourse of previously marginalized groups. Certainly, the history of Western democracies has been characterized by the (imperfect,

¹³¹As we note elsewhere, this reading is tempered by Vattimo's awareness of the status of democracies as enframed within oppressive political and economic systems (with even the earliest democracies arising against the backdrops of slavery and sexism, for instance).

uneven, and incomplete) efforts by women, racial and religious minorities, LGBT persons, and so on to obtain recognition and a corresponding capacity for greater social and political participation. Similarly, the (again imperfect, uneven, and incomplete) proliferation of information technology¹³² has allowed for new forms of self-expression, as well as seemingly endless opportunities for economic and cultural engagement (largely) unimpeded by borders. When compared to the premodern absolutisms of liturgical, (proto)state, and economic structures, it would seem that, weakening and the corresponding expansion of the realm of discourse is truly in full flower.¹³³ It is perhaps significant that even totalitarian political structures (of which even this Age of Interpretation has had more than its share) have almost universally felt a need to adopt populist attributes or the pretense of democratic features in order to satisfy what has become a normative desire for a broad, discursive field.¹³⁴

Of course, if we wish to consider weakening as a vocation, and not merely as an analysis of circumstances that are always unfolding, as it were, autonomously, we must nuance our inquiry somewhat. We should firstly remind ourselves that the reading of the impulse of

¹³²One considers, for instance, the smartphone being the fastest spreading technology, not just of our own era, but in *history*.

¹³³We are reminded here of the etymology of the word “republic” as being a state in which the affairs of government become the concern, not just of a ruler or an elite political class, but, at minimum, of the whole body politic (however imperfectly understood that notion may have been when that term arose).

¹³⁴It is worth considering here Zizek’s *In Defense of Lost Causes*, a work cited approvingly by Vattimo and Zabala in *Hermeneutic Communism* and in their contributions to Silvia Mazzini’s excellent companion volume *Making Communism Hermeneutical*. In his discussion of Stalinism in the early chapters of that work, Zizek recounts a circumstance in which a Soviet encyclopedia was mailed out with a reference to Beria and, after Beria was denounced, had to be modified *by having citizens remove and mail back the offending article and paste in a replacement (on the Bering Strait)*. In other words, even under the absolutism of Stalinism, the populace at large was treated as a collaborator, a partner in discourse (indeed, in the project of shaping discourse’s *speaking to history*). Slavoj Zizek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, (New York: Verso, 2017).

weakening is a risky one. Vattimo finds in Christianity a thread of weakening that nonetheless is largely contrary, even today, to the official institutional self-understanding of the Church. We can make similar observations of Vattimo's readings of democracy, human rights, and the hard sciences. What we are doing here is engaging in a *speculative* reading that finds the emancipatory potential within these structures and attempts to create pathways for the actualization of that potential.

No less important is our realization that what this reading seeks to invoke is an emancipatory trajectory that is not only incomplete but fraught with risk. We recall here that philosophical postmodernity, so called, arises, in part from modernist discourses which, intentionally or otherwise, revealed the problematic tensions that always-already existed within modernity. It is perhaps easy enough, even for a thinker rooted in philosophical modernity, to reject as problematic the explicit absolutisms of premodern discourse (and here we think of the productive Enlightenment critiques of medieval thought and its classical antecedents) and we are right to find here the move of weakening, of a calling into question of strong structures. However, we must correspondingly acknowledge that the insights of modernity themselves reiterated metaphysical absolutism, while simultaneously clothing it in the garb of non-absolutism or counter-absolutism.

An implication of this connection is that discourse per se is not necessarily free from metaphysical, violent absolutism. On the contrary, a certain sort of discourse is precisely an expression of such violence. The move of weakening in Western culture represents, after all, an emancipatory impulse that, nonetheless, is not unproblematically completed and, worse still, is subject to being coopted by oppressive institutions:

Although truth, as the reflection of a given objective order, has always inspired ethical and moral ideals of life, these same ideals depended on truth's unity, that is, the unity of opinions in the true. While this unity has effectively become reality today because of the establishment of a global political system (which we call framed democracy), truth does not therefore cease being violent, because *claims of truth are also claims of political power*. But how does this violence take place in our global political culture? Principally through the use of dialogue as "the moralization of politics," that is, as the apparently peaceful exchange of opinions- but, as we all know, even Plato's exemplary dialogues aimed to conduct one of the two interlocutors (often the slave) to recognize the truth that the other already knew from the beginning. If truth claims are always claims of political power, that is, violence, and if this same violence is nothing else than the "silencing" of other interlocutors through an apparent dialogue, truth and violence become interchangeable. Only the recognition of truth's violence will allow one to consider the implicit danger of those politics that have an ultimate foundation, that is, politics founded on truth.¹³⁵

We see here the idea that discourse can itself be grounded in metaphysical absolutes and can thus not only enact violence and exclusion but can do so in a surpassingly subtle way. Indeed, the violence of this particular form of metaphysics is all the more pernicious because it is difficult to access productively.

What we mean by this is that what separates modern from premodern metaphysical discourses is precisely the explicitness of the absolutisms involved. Even in the thought of Aquinas, that great systematizer, we find a fairly explicit concession to metaphysical absolutes (the reason of Aristotle, surely, but prior even to this, faith in the God of Abraham).¹³⁶ However,

¹³⁵Vattimo, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 18-19.

¹³⁶Following a number of contemporary Thomists, Victor Salas argues that St. Thomas' thought does not succumb so readily to conceptual enclosure as a contemporary (post-Heideggerian) reader might assume. Instead, he argues that, for St. Thomas, "the ultimate resolution of being is made with reference to *esse*. Accordingly, essence does not function as a static containment that hems in being, but serves as a clearing or dis-enclosure for being to manifest its own essential structures through its actions. As really identical, even if conceptually distinct, 'ens' and 'essence' have a common metaphysical origin that is thoroughly dynamic: *esse ut actus essendi*." Salas' argument is that this dynamic and expressive reading of the self-disclosure of being avoid the enclosedness that Vattimo associates with metaphysical violence. While this analysis is interesting in its refusal of a reductionist reading of St. Thomas (and, we

as we move into the era of republics, reformed churches, and scientific inquiry, we see a gradual movement away from this sort of explicit grounding move. Democracy, as Schmidt famously reminds us, substitutes the ultimate questions of the human person that previously dominated politics as a discipline with procedural and ethical questions (with ethics itself becoming simply a sort of calculation problem). Structured discourse acted out within institutions became a substitute to bowing before an explicit and unmovable absolute (after the fashion of the old monarchies, for instance). The ideal of constant movement appears here in the form of endless discussions (which seek to perpetually forestall intractable social and political conflicts), progressive reform, fine tuning of institutions and legal codes to meet present challenges, and so on.

Nor is this spirit confined to the political realm. On the contrary, the scandal of Vattimo's conception of the hard sciences as engaged in a sort of Truth production by way of consensus-building is something of a scandal precisely because this is not how the sciences have traditionally imagined themselves. On the contrary, the surprising zeal with which people can, even today, embrace a reductionist reading of science (that is to say, scientism) is made possible, not by an appeal to an explicit, stable metaphysical absolute but rather by a certain self-understanding of science as perpetually declining such an absolute in favor of the constant experimentation and revision demanded by the scientific method (that is to say, by fallibilism).

can likewise acknowledge, for its mining of the emancipatory potential of his thought), we can likewise suspect that dynamism per se is no more an egress from metaphysical violence in this case than it is in the case of, say, fallibilism. Victor Salas, "Faith Overcoming Metaphysics: Gianni Vattimo and Thomas Aquinas on Being," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, March 2022, 8, Online Journal.

Of course, we need not look too closely at these supposed modernist refusals of absolutism to find the metaphysics lurking underneath their apparent open mindedness. The self-understanding of modern science is closely connected to the idea that our understanding of the world should be subject to revision as additional information or preferable theoretical frameworks present themselves. Underlying this supposed openness to change, however, are any number of concealed metaphysical assumptions (perhaps the most important of which being the idea of a supervening order to the world that we are, in principle, capable of comprehending). In a similar way, democratic structures, a focus on human rights, and so on, are, in our present era are also showing their enframed status as they are forced, by activists, to push against their limits. Indeed, the frequently-repeated reactionary refrain that the various identity groups jockeying for recognition in the public sphere are agitating for “special rights” or “privileges” rather than for equal rights is, in some sense, correct: the groups in questions (the undocumented, LGBTQ persons, and so on) are attempting to force their way into a rights narrative which, at best, was initially articulated without them in mind and, at worst, was designed to promote their deliberate exclusion from social and political life. Nor do we need to look to these even sorts of limit points to see the totalitarian nature of political, legal, and social systems that serve to naturalize (that is, to obscure the contingency of) a market capitalism that exerts a pervasive and coercive role on every level of society (and, in turn, serves to delimit these democratic processes).

The danger inherent in these reconfigurations of metaphysical absolutism were precisely a point of opening within the thought of modernist thinkers such as Marx and Freud. For the former, the awareness that the advance of capitalism and its associates political forms produced not a dissolution of social and political power but rather its delocalization: no longer is power

concentrated explicitly (in, say, the person of the monarch) but instead it becomes a universalized and naturalized force that hides from us even as it surrounds, permeates, and constitutes us.¹³⁷ Correspondingly, if Freud (as Vattimo is fond of noting) demystified the inner workings of the human person and hence deprived them of their unquestionable character, he likewise noted that the value in doing so is that these workings can be most harmful to us when they remain inaccessible: the repressed returns and, sometimes with a great and terrible violence.

All of this, then, should serve to remind us that the project of weakening is an ongoing one and, still more specifically, one that is perhaps most urgently directed at those projects that have forgotten their own violent and metaphysical character. In this sense, then, we return, productively, to the negative reading of Vattimo's project. The effort of weakening must maintain itself as self-reflective and self-critical, if it is to open up space, rather than collapse into a new form of enclosure, indeed, a worse one, perhaps, than the one from which it seeks egress. As Vattimo so memorably puts it in *Nihilism and Emancipation*, "the wellsprings of metaphysical authoritarianism never run dry" and, to extend the imagery of water a bit further, metaphysics too flows, becomes defuse, gets absorbed into things, and reconfigures to fit neatly into such vessels as are available.

Section 2: Establishing Community

¹³⁷A very productive discussion of this topic can be found in the early chapters of Žižek's *In Defense of Lost Causes*. Indeed, as Žižek points out, one meaningful reading of the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat is that it constitutes not merely a practical seizure of the mechanisms of state power for the defense of the revolution, but also represents an antidote to the decentralization of power that takes place in late capitalism in favor of an embodied, explicit, and visible expression of power.

When we speak of a breaking down of impediments to discourse and a corresponding opening of discursive space, we seem to have settled once again back into negativity. We are once again in the realm of absence, albeit perhaps in a desirable sense (absence of oppression, refusal of exclusion). However, Vattimo still acknowledges that this move is only meaningful insofar as it opens the possibility for something useful to occupy the space in question; that useful activity can come to occur within the space. What he has in mind here is the *expansion* of discourse.

We must therefore ask how discourse can be said to relate to community. As we have already seen, there appears to be a connection between the two in Vattimo's thought. Individuals do not arise in a vacuum but rather are always-already thrown into social contexts and their acts of interpretation are always conditioned by this. Likewise, the act of interpretation itself is, for Vattimo, a communal act. It requires engagement between interlocutors (as well as between interlocutors and texts, institutions, historical conditions, and so on). Correspondingly, community would seem to depend on discourse understood as a shared capacity for communication and a capacity for analysis (of the community's situatedness) and (perhaps most obviously, in our present era of competing identity claims) a capacity for self-assertion. We are left, therefore, with an intuition of a connection between community and discourse; one that, like the other intuitions with which we have previously grappled, must be carefully nuanced.

The first dimension of the relationship between discourse and community brings us back into the realm of negativity and to our previous discussion of what Vattimo takes to be the alternatives to discourse. This topic is deeply connected to Vattimo's political and ethical considerations. Vattimo productively contrasts the openness of a hermeneutic discourse with the enclosure of metaphysical violence understood as the assertion of principles before which discussion must come to a halt. Metaphysical violence, in the specific sense employed by

Vattimo, represents a disruption of the communicative dimensions of community considered previously (cooperation, analysis, and self-assertion). This, in turn, carries with it a connection to more literal forms of violence (pogroms and inquisitions)¹³⁸ similarly disruptive of political, social, and religious community life.¹³⁹ The critique of metaphysics, then, carries with it as a desirable potential outcome the disruption of a serious threat to community life.

This move, however, is ongoing, rather than unproblematically accomplished. As we have already considered, it is possible for discourse itself to be structured along oppressive lines, certainly through the exclusion of participants, but also through the delimiting of the discourse itself in such a way as to validate existing structures:

The emergency today is the completion of a condition of neutralization where “freedom” is only possible within the established dialogue. While the goal of the metaphysical philosophers was to spread Enlightenment scientific objectivism to all disciplines to assure a more efficient manipulation of external reality, their main task now has become to assure the conservation of established “dialogic realism” against any outsider, parasite, or foreign event.¹⁴⁰

This latter type of enframed and violent discourse certainly takes the form of the limits imposed on the discussion of alternatives to current social structures or to the current structure of the discourse itself.¹⁴¹ This can take an explicit form, in which particular options are specifically

¹³⁸“From a nihilistic perspective, war can be understood as nothing else but the organized and forceful elimination of difference, the forceful sub-jection of the other, the reduction of diversity to a common standard against which no appeal is possible. In this way, war becomes the ultimate horizon of history, the ‘beyond’ of history, the source and destination of all history. War becomes identical with metaphysics. All reality can be traced back to war, and all reality can be destroyed in war.” Sützl, “The Weak Subject: Peace and Nihilism Reconsidered,” 414.

¹³⁹“Truth is not only ‘violent’ in that it turns away from solidarity, but it is ‘violence’ because it can easily become an imposition on our existence.” Vattimo, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 18.

¹⁴⁰Vattimo, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 28.

¹⁴¹“In Italy, parties lose their political identity as soon as they join coalitions (which have the only chance to govern); in the United States, the coalitions are the parties. Here ‘lack of emergency’ is translated into a lack of alternatives before elections and a lack of opposition after

rejected as unrealistic (one thinks of the current reactionary discourse of communism as contravening human nature, the “laws” of economics, or what have you). However, it also takes the more subtle form of the redirection of discourse away from radical change: “feel good” stories of individuals engaged in charitable acts, acts of racial reconciliation, acts of environmental protection and restoration, and so on, that serve precisely to obfuscate the contingency of the systems that give rise to the undesirable circumstances these acts seek to address¹⁴², creation and mobilization of identitarian enmities to prevent solidarity along class lines, and so on. In a word, discourse within the context of an enframed democracy, however supposedly free, is one that is disruptive of the formation and functioning of community.

We should revisit our initial impulse that the desired outcome here is the expansion of discourse. What, after all, is meant by expansion? Most obviously, the expansion in question refers to the inclusion of participants excluded from previous forms of discourse. While this process, in the West, has surely been one of fits and starts, we can nonetheless point to definite and visible progress on this front. However, as we have seen, the expansion in question, if it does not encompass the opening of new conceptual spaces, new topics, new cultural possibilities, remains oppressive, even if it occurs within the context of a political system that allows participation to a wide range of participants. Indeed, the oppression that occurs in systems like this is all the more dangerous for being cloaked in the garb of freedom. Not only is oppression naturalized and thus rendered inaccessible (by way of the denial of the very possibility of alternatives) but the oppressed are in fact put in the position of becoming collaborators in their

them. This is not a consequence of the parties’ radical positions but rather of the lack of positions created by liberalism’s all-embracing system.” Vattimo, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 54.

¹⁴²These stories, of course, explode in frequency during the course of emergencies that we are no longer capable of confronting as emergencies.

own oppression. Oppression, indeed, becomes a thing to be desired, something contrasted with “alternatives” which, in the end, serve only as cyphers for the monstrous, the impossible, or the unthinkable.¹⁴³

Certainly, we can see how discursive violence can give rise to political and social violence (repressive policing at home, wars for democracy abroad), but what is both less obvious and similarly important is the extent to which those forms of violence are themselves *folded into* the discursive. Consider, for instance, the long history of articulating physical violence in terms of discourse: one launches an attack to “send a message” or to communicate resolve, one engages in a strategy to produce an immaterial outcome (to strike terror, to break an enemy’s will, to destroy or disrupt that which is valued by the adversary).¹ In this way, military force becomes yet another form of discourse between nations and, indeed, its impediment becomes reconfigured as a disruption of a (horribly) broadened discursive space.¹⁴⁴ In the context of domestic policies, we have the reconfiguration of money (in the form of political donations) being equated with speech, and thus being transfigured from an invasive and dangerous force that breaks into politics, to a civil rights issue. Here again, we see that discourse itself can be complicit in the destruction of community and its members via disenfranchisement, exploitation, and by force.

¹⁴³Hence, in his preface to the English edition of *Anti-Oedipus*, Foucault famously remarked “The strategic adversary is fascism... the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us. It’s too easy to be antifascist on the molar level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish with molecules both personal and collective.” Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, translated by Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 15.

¹⁴⁴One considers the alarming frequency with which military force, regardless of the circumstances, is correspondingly articulated in terms of the rights or freedoms of the nations involved.

As a final caution, we must consider that, no less than discourse, community is not necessarily innocent of a connection with violence. If we consider our previous supposition that community entails cooperation, analysis, and the capacity for self-assertion, we are forced to acknowledge that even totalitarians can and do form communities. Fascisms too saw itself as addressing the historical and social circumstances in which it arose.¹⁴⁵ The internal capacity of fascist groups for cooperation and violent self-assertion was precisely what made them such a dire threat in the 20th Century.

The encouragement of community that is accomplished by the opening up of space, then, cannot refer merely to any and all communities, but rather to a sort of community predicated upon a certain openness. Here, we have, once again, a virtuous circularity: weakening opens up space for community that, in turn, is established, in part, along the lines of weakening itself (understood as a shared refusal of metaphysical, violent discourse). However, as we well recall, the apparent negativity of this move is misleading: we do not contemplate, here, a community devoted exclusively to critique and self-critique as means of guarding against the resurgence of metaphysical totalitarianism. Rather, what we have in mind is something more akin to a Gadamerian fusion of horizons.¹⁴⁶ Specifically, a discourse that refusal conceptual enclosure and metaphysical authoritarianism corresponds to one in which the participants are called to put forth

¹⁴⁵We think here of Heidegger's infamous embrace of Nazism as an alternative to the mechanization of Soviet Communism, on the one hand, and American Capitalism, on the other.

¹⁴⁶"The only ethics that appears to be coherent with the antimetaphysical aspiration of hermeneutics is perhaps that formulated in the years following the publication of *Truth and Method* by Hans Georg Gadamer...Gadamerian ethics is wholly an affirmation of the value of dialogue... The moral task is, for him, to realize something like Hegel's ethical life; the integration of everyone's single experiences into a continuity of individual existence that can only be sustained on the basis of belonging to a historical community which, as we have already said, lives in language. The community, for its part, is not something closed and isolated in a point of space or a moment of history. Like the horizon, it moves with us." Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1997), 37-38.

their perspectives to be interpreted and change/enhance the perspective of (never entirely) others, just as they become willing to engage with and be changed by perspectives not their own.¹⁴⁷

There is involved in this approach more than the mere occupation of a shared discursive space but a humility, a compassionate regard for one's fellow interlocutors, and a spirit of openness, and here we find in full flower the Christian elevation of the members of the community to the status of interpreters: we are "no longer slaves, but friends" and, not just "friends of God" but friends with our neighbor, and, most especially, our neighbor who is in need, through whom God becomes present to us.¹⁴⁸

Section 3: Finitude and the Expansion of the Sphere of Ethical Consideration

It is here that we rejoin the question of the ethical motivations of the project of weakening. Once again, we must resist the temptation to search for conceptual enclosure with respect to the ethical. Vattimo does not envision here a rigorous and theoretical approach to ethics. Rather, he frequently and famously defines ethics as "charity plus the traffic regulations", meaning that we should love our neighbor and have a concern for our neighbor's well-being and that this general concern, in turn, permits our creation of rules designed to facilitate human flourishing. For

¹⁴⁷"As in the case of Gadamer's hermeneutics, truth comes about as the ongoing constriction of communities that coincide in a 'fusion of horizons' (*Horizontverschmelzung*), which has no insuperable "objective" limit (like that of race, language, or "natural" belongings). Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, 51.

¹⁴⁸"To reveal the world as a conflict of interpretation also means, however, to recognize ourselves as heirs to a tradition of the weakening of strong structures of Being in every field of experience- heirs, and therefore relations, daughters, brothers, and friends of those to whose calls we must now co-respond. Thinking that no longer understands itself as the recognition and acceptance of an objective authoritarian foundation will develop a new sense of responsibility as ready and able, literally, to respond to those whom, insofar as it is founded on the eternal structure of Being, it knows to be its 'provenance.'" Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 40.

instance, we can reach a consensus on the use of stop signs in order to avoid traffic accidents, but no longer can we take seriously the suggestion that there is something absolute about stopping at stop signs.¹⁴⁹ Vattimo points out that even the detailed rules of behavior found in Scripture tend to fit in this reading: “The commandment not to desire another man’s wife keeps men from fighting to the death with knives over women.”¹⁵⁰ In other words, to paraphrase Mark 2:21, the law exists for human beings, not human beings for the law.

If the “traffic regulations” represent provisional concessions to charity, we must still consider what founds charity itself. Clearly, we cannot depend upon an absolute and unproblematic principle to serve as a foundation. Rather, Vattimo notes that humans are united by a shared finitude: we are all subject to death and pain. While this may seem to be yet another form of metaphysical absolutism (understood as human nature), Vattimo’s conception of pain and death as pure event acknowledges their irreducibility. Pain and death are precisely that which is not reducible to an absolute or to signs of one: “They are beyond explanation or justification because they give no access to a truer truth; instead they are what sets us free from slavery and resentment vis-à-vis any truer truth (a law of Being, God as creator or judge, baleful destiny).”¹⁵¹ Pain and death confront us all and they do so with a refusal to be neatly incorporated into conceptual schemes (perhaps especially those which seek to use them to validate absolute, metaphysical perspectives).

This approach to the topics of pain and death leaves us in an odd position. On the one hand, there seems to be a negativity at play here. In the face of suffering and finitude, oppressive

¹⁴⁹Vattimo, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, Kindle.

¹⁵⁰Vattimo, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, Kindle.

¹⁵¹Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 75.

and totalizing systems hit a limit point. Notwithstanding the deflationary implications of this reading of finitude for the absolutisms of traditional theologies, here also we see an unmistakably religious gesture: the Kenosis of God finds its ultimate fulfilment in the Cross.¹⁵² However, it is difficult to view a shared finitude of the type described here as emancipatory in any more positive sense. Death and suffering too are things before which conversation would seem to come to a halt and hence represent what is perhaps the ultimate and most inescapable form of violence.

Nonetheless, Vattimo does not go so far as to say that death and pain do not, in their own way, speak to us. It does not speak to us in the manner suggested by traditional asceticism, as a mechanism of self-mastery or a means of oneness with the Divine. Nor does our suffering entitle us to anything. Rather, the suffering of others is that which calls out for the only respect that we can offer: our efforts to bring it to a resolution. Rather than seeking an absolute and violent validation in our own pain (which only too often takes the form of trying to lend our pain an “objective” reality by putting it out in the world, inflicting it upon others), pain speaks to us in the faces of those with whom we share the world and it is this call which, for Vattimo, must ground an ethics of charity.¹⁵³ We have in mind here a shared call to address suffering and death through merciful action, but we must note, as Vattimo does, that this call addresses us most

¹⁵²We recall here Pareyson’s discussion of suffering and negativity with reference to God in *Existence, Interpretation, Freedom* (253-254), in which we find that the suffering of humanity calls out to God for a compassionate response, in the form of the Incarnation and, importantly, the Passion (understood as a Divine internalization of negativity which draws a limit point for negativity itself). Luigi Pareyson, *Existence, Interpretation, Freedom*, (New York: The Davies Group Publishers, 2009).

¹⁵³C.f. Pareyson in *Existence, Interpretation, Freedom*, 71: “Death is not a subject of *objective thought*, but a term of *existential engagement*; it is not a concept which, when separated from existence, can become a subject for scientific or speculative thought, but an idea which, inseparable from existence, provokes a trend of thought and action within it.” (Emphasis Pareyson’s).

especially as it emanates from those who traditionally have been excluded. The very process of weakening that removes the barriers to the participation of the weak in discourse and community is likewise intertwined with the ethical imperative to hear the voice of the weak and, correspondingly, heed a call for justice:

[H]ermeneutic weak thought is the thought of the weak, of those who are not satisfied with established principles imposed on them and who demand different rights, that is, other interpretations. In the political of interpretation, conversation becomes the realm where the powerful describers of the world can listen to the requests of the weak and perhaps change their selfish priorities. But if they do not listen, today the weak can finally come together.¹⁵⁴

As we can see, the suffering of others calls us into discourse but, in a special way, calls the weak and their allies to the sort of solidarity and collective action so vital to the production of lasting change. Indeed, by grounding (in the necessarily less-than-firm manner of a weakened grounding, subject to continually self-weakening and re-examination) this solidarity in a shared and irreducible human finitude which demands our response proceeds without denying, even provisionally, the particularity of the lived experiences of those involved, configuring instead that very plurality as an inexhaustible wellspring from which our responses to the challenges of the day may be drawn.¹⁵⁵

This very consideration links us together as community and so allows history to march on in the face of the sufferings and deaths of individuals, certainly in the sense that communities are what carry forward traditions, remembrance of things past, the very substance of *pietas*, but also in the sense that, as the late Heidegger observed, our finitude that imparts to us our particularity

¹⁵⁴Vattimo, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 107.

¹⁵⁵As with philosophy, we engage politically in the manner particular to us, as a risky interpretation amidst and in dialogue with other interpretations. It is precisely this sort of openness that allows us to avoid the suffocating and violent conceptual enclosure of more metaphysical approaches to political activity.

and our situatedness within time (that is, that allows our constitution as subjects and renders our lives and our choices meaningful) carries with it the price of our eventual death (and replacement in the successive order of time).¹⁵⁶ Hence, death, suffering, and finitude confront us as a call for compassion for those with whom we share the world in which we find ourselves, but so too do they present the opportunity for a corresponding fidelity to our collective past, which we interpret and make to speak to the listening of the present, and to the future, in deference to which we ourselves must someday give way.¹⁵⁷ In this sense, then, our sphere of consideration extends beyond the human person as such, to institutions, traditions, and structures which no longer loom over the individual as unassailable absolutes (striving, ironically, for what would amount to a static posture, conceptual death itself) but as points of intersection subject to reexamination and reinterpretation (in other words, to an openness to *restoration and continuation* and, correspondingly, to *growth and change*).

If suffering, finitude, and death confront us as irreducible and call to us for a response, then surely that response itself must similarly resist conceptual enclosure. Love and charity, after all, are themselves perfectly capable of grounding violence and oppression. From the “tough love discipline” that is so often a mask for abuse, to the various (and ongoing) atrocities of colonialism done “for the good” of the oppressed group, love often shows itself precisely as coercive force.¹⁵⁸ Worse still, this configuration of love and charity itself would seem, as some

¹⁵⁶Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 76.

¹⁵⁷See footnote 15.

¹⁵⁸Famously, when Erich Mielke, the East German Minister for State Security, was summoned before the Volkskammer in 1989 to testify regarding recent protests, upon being jeered at and pressed for answers by that body, responded by blurting out his love for humanity and bursting into tears. This image has come to stand as a metaphor for the aged and out of touch GDR leadership of the day, but if we are to take the utterance seriously, we are left with a striking image: a figure of state terror and oppression, under duress, confessing that his myriad atrocities were indeed grounded in a love for humanity.

level, to satisfy the other conditions of a broadening sphere of ethical consideration: imperialisms do tend to expand to encompass every greater multitudes under their “compassionate” rule and, correspondingly, to have a sense of themselves as showing fidelity to the past and an orientation towards a united (which is to say, homogenized) future. Unsurprisingly, what these violent readings of love and charity have in common is a rootedness in metaphysical absolutes: we can say, unproblematically, that we know what is best for the Other when we have a sense of absolute [T]ruth to which we can refer (a contrary notion of [T]ruth merely becomes identified with ignorance and, if not readily abandoned, intransigence).

We return, at length, here to the realization that the expansion of the sphere of ethical consideration must entail more than the broadening of our notion of those to whom charity can and should be addressed. Instead, if love and charity are to avoid the trap of becoming themselves expressions of metaphysical and violent totality, they can only do so by a refusal of that totality, in other words, by a love that refuses the metaphysical boundaries that have traditionally been imposed upon it. In this sense, Vattimo rejects the common notion of ethics as a mere calculation problem. Rather, ethics is merely the specific, technical bearings out of a spirit of charity that surpasses all particularity (and hence can be made, endlessly, to speak to various particularities): in the language of Ephesians 3:19, “To know also the charity of Christ, which surpasseth all knowledge, that you may be filled unto the fullness of God.” As Vattimo himself memorably puts it,

Of course, I don't believe that we're in Eden. But there are moments of fulfillment when we do love, and those could be made more lasting if we could all manage to live with a bit more love for one another- not an impossible circumstance, given that human natures doesn't have these limits. “You must therefore be perfect just as your heavenly Father is

perfect.” That’s from the gospel of Matthew (5:48). I desire to be perfect, like my Father. Could Jesus possibly have commanded us to do something absolutely impossible?¹⁵⁹

We are called, in a word, to love as God loves; to love in a manner that seeks to overcome boundaries and that refuses limits. Here again, we find the productive intersection of Vattimo’s negative move, the breaking down of boundaries, coupled to a positive one, the assertion of a love beyond limitations (and here again we encounter the notion of ontological richness: individual loves may fail, but, to rephrase 1 Corinthians 13:8, love as such is continually renewed through our ceaseless efforts to bring it into the world as an answering to the suffering of our fellows).

Section 4: A Return to the Question of Religious Circularity

We cannot help but notice that, in our discussion of what is accomplished by the intermixing of Vattimo’s positive and negative gestures, our answers are indelibly marked with his particular religious motivations. Similarly, we return once more to the question of circularity: Vattimo’s ethical move is inspired by a notion of religious community of which he is an inheritor; correspondingly, that move inspires the breakdown of strong structures whereby that community, at last, becomes a possibility. In this sense, we recall the origin of weak thought in the Heideggerian concept of *Verwindung*: we always-already are thrown into contexts and we reconfigure them from within, by taking hold of those impulses that, historically, have been suppressed or merely overlooked. For instance, the Roman Catholic Church, as the heir to the Roman Empire, was put into a position of political and social authority; the impulse of weakening within the Church’s own teachings was positively suppressed (one considers

¹⁵⁹Vattimo, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, Kindle.

Catholicism's historical distrust of democracy) in favor of narratives consistent with the exercise of that temporal power. It is Vattimo's (productively risk and speculative) reading that this dominant narrative was not so absolute as to prevent the vocation of weakening being born out in the institutions of the modern West that Catholicism helped to shape.

There is more at play here than the simple rearticulation of what we have previously considered regarding the inescapability of metaphysics. Certainly, in the West, religion has had an important historical role in both the shaping of the narrative of absolutist metaphysics and in the political and social expressions of violence that are its outcomes. However, for Vattimo, the religious character of the discussion of weakening, while contingent in the broad sense (of being historically conditioned), is essential *for him*, in the sense that without Christianity, he would have likely become a proponent of some species of metaphysical thought: it is truly only thanks to God that he is an atheist! Surely, this is not to remove all volition from his thought; he proceeds, knowingly, from a knowledge of and, more importantly, an affection for the Christian heritage that helped to shape him. But if that heritage did not have some of the features that it does, the self-emptying of God in the Incarnation, the elevation of the Church at Pentecost, the becoming present of God in cultural practices (the Sacraments or in the Church as the Body of Christ), the experience of our lives as Provenance (as coming, that is, from an initiative not our own), the concept of a supervening grace that opens our path to a holiness beyond our own capacities, the notion of the intervention of the Holy Spirit into history, than Vattimo's thought would be rendered wholly unrecognizable.¹⁶⁰ Correspondingly, the move of weakening allowed

¹⁶⁰“...I do believe that if ethics has any inherent validity, it lies in keeping faith with those who came before me and with those who will come after-and so with the history and traditions of the saints, too. I can't discard them because they are all I have. They are the rigging of this vessel, like the Holy Scripture and the teachings of the Catholic Church. To me, these are like the torch in a relay race that I have to carry for a while and hand over to those who will

by these features allows the tradition itself to be interpreted in new and less violent ways. And can we not regard this as a sort of emancipation of the tradition? Even the great architects of Christian metaphysics detected (rightly) a sort of impiety in the supposition of metaphysical totality. St. Thomas' epiphany, at the end of his life, before which all of his brilliant philosophizing was "as so much straw" surely serves as a caution against precisely this temptation.

Affection for the tradition, no less than compassion for our neighbor, comes to us as a call. We can respond to that call in a violent manner, attempting to enclose and ossify the tradition. To do so, however, is only to starve our inheritance of life out of a desire for control and simplicity. If we instead respond with openness to the myriad possibilities alive in the tradition, if we allow ourselves to confront it in its inexhaustibility, we nurture in it the capacity to speak to the particular circumstances that we confront today. If this process carries with it risks and tensions, we shall see that these too can be productive and, indeed, are a sign of the vitality and promise that traditional metaphysics has long sought, violently and unsuccessfully, to contain.

follow on. I can't withhold or bury it, like the talents in the parable." Vattimo, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, 98.

Chapter 4: Productive Tensions within the Positive Move in Weak Thought

Introduction

Up to this point, we have considered some of the productive work accomplished by Vattimo's project. Vattimo's work is explicitly a reaction against metaphysics and the violence associated with it. However, we must decline our impulse to view the product as enclosed and unproblematically a moving beyond the metaphysical and the violent, instead observing the elements of these things that persist in the project. Indeed, we can see that the metaphysical and the violent do not only persist but also themselves perform productive and necessary work for the project.

Section 1: The Project is Metaphysical

Vattimo's most well-known contribution to Western thought is surely his critique of metaphysics. Following the later Heidegger, Vattimo reads the Plato to Kant canon¹⁶¹ as an unfolding history of the forgetting of Being. The road to our current situation follows a quite comprehensible progression: the self-understanding of metaphysics, from Plato to Kant (and beyond) is one of an attempt to apprehend ultimate principles (first and last things) through philosophical speculation. This impulse towards understanding stems from a desire for conceptual enclosure that itself represents a violent reaction of unity and, if not stillness per se,

¹⁶¹This phrase stands as a marker for the traditional and totalizing approaches to metaphysics that Vattimo critiques. We should note, however, that these approaches themselves often contained the stirrings of what would become actualized in postmodernity as weakening (for instance, in Kant himself, in his observation that our experience of the world is never an unmediated one). See Vattimo, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 92.

then at least reliable and predictable movement against the multiplicity and becoming of the world of lived experience. This reaction take the form, in some instances, of the attempt to escape altogether from the messiness of worldly matters (we think here of Platonism and its offshoots or the explicit supernaturalisms of certain strains of medieval thought or, somewhat later, of idealism¹⁶²) and, in others (and this is especially evident in the Western culture of today) of a desire to master (by knowledge and understanding) the world at a stroke¹⁶³ (and the American Pragmatism of James, Dewey, and, more recently, Rorty is surely right to recognize this latter current as a descent into instrumentalism).¹⁶⁴ This, in turn, reaches a kind of crisis point in the technological domination of society (identified, similarly, by the Frankfurt school as the arising of a society of total organization¹⁶⁵) against which Heidegger's Nazism was a (deeply misguided) reaction and to which the various leftist Heideggerians (including Vattimo) seek to productively respond.

For our part, and lest we conclude that we are dwelling exclusively in the realm of negativity, we should consider the political and social consequences of the forgetting of Being.

¹⁶²Some commentators are wont to describe Vattimo's thought in terms of the idealism of the modern period: "Interpreting means being able to consider any fact as non-definitive: it means seeing the facts as a result of interpretations, in their turn still interpretable, that is transformable. This consideration of the real not to be a limit, an unsurpassable thing-in-itself, is of course an idealistic point, we can even say a Fichtean motive in Vattimo's philosophy (though Fichte does not appear in it as an explicit referent; yet he was so for Pareyson): the primacy of ethics, in Vattimo as in Fichte, has the sense of an unceasing dissolution of the real into the ideal, that is of the facts into interpretations. And, just like for Fichte, also for Vattimo the choice between realism and idealism or irrealism is basically ethical." Gaetano Chiurazzi, "Pareyson and Vattimo from Truth to Idealism" in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, Edited by Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander, (London: Routledge, 2015), 186.

¹⁶³Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 10.

¹⁶⁴ We can see the primordial outline of this trajectory even in the opening to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "All men, by nature, desire to know and this is evident from the delight that we take in the senses..." Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, as found in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Edited and Translated by Richard McKeon, (New York: Random House, 1941).

¹⁶⁵Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 34.

What we have in mind here is a culture in which reason has become instrumentalized in such a way that thinking ceases to occur; in other words, we are left in a situation in which we can pursue technical responses to the world but no longer have critical access to the systems within which we operate. This, in turn, reduces our lives to an appalling condition of dehumanization and servitude, outlined by Heidegger in his famous passages from *Four Lectures on Technology*:

Agriculture is now a motorized food industry, the same thing, in its essence as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and the extermination camps, the same thing as blockades and the reduction of countries to famine, the same thing as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs.¹⁶⁶

Moving beyond Heidegger, we can easily connect this concern over dehumanization to the Marxist concern with alienation, as well as the social disruption, fragmentation, and commodification that accompanies Capitalism.¹⁶⁷ For Marx, the answer to this situation was, of course, a revolution that would not only entail the overturning of the totalizing systems of social and economic order, but the reconfiguration of the political subject. For Nietzsche, the answer would be gestured towards in the form of the *Übermensch*. Heidegger, in his 1966 interview with *Der Spiegel* famously remarked “Only a god can save us.” We can certainly see a sort of shared resonance between these responses to the society of total organization and mobilization (in turn grounded upon totalizing metaphysical enclosure) but it is in their differences, rather than their similarities, that we come to find Vattimo’s particular position: One of the one hand, we have the impulse found in a certain reading of Heidegger and Nietzsche, in which the emphasis is placed on an opening up of space for the entry of novelty into a system that is, after all, never quite as enclosed as it would seem or like to be (and here we see Vattimo’s rediscovery of the religious

¹⁶⁶Martin Heidegger, *In Heidegger, Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1997), 15.

¹⁶⁷ Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 11.

impulse in full flower¹⁶⁸); on the other, we have the Marxist impulse of salvation coming from within the system, resulting, as it were, from the playing out of the system's own contradictions (which, of course, is a humanist vision through and through).

Vattimo, of course, embraces the apparently contradictory character of these impulses. Indeed, he makes an excellent case that they are perhaps not so disentangled from each other as our initial intuition might suggest. For instance, if we have a sense of being the product of an initiative not our own (which Vattimo explicitly characterizes as a religious sentiment), it is precisely as a result of our always-already being embedded within history and culture (which gives us, at least, a meeting point between Marx and Heidegger).

Importantly, we should observe that the Heideggerian, Nietzschean, and Marxist impulses that we have considered here retain a concern with ultimate principles that marks them as metaphysical. Here we recall, once again, that metaphysics is not radically escapable into a post- or non-metaphysics and that the impulse towards such an escape would itself involve a collapse back into metaphysics (into a view from nowhere or an access to an unproblematic reality shorn of problematic metaphysical conceptualizations). Beyond this observation, we can observe a concern with the recapture, in the Heideggerian sense, of the question of Being (here understood as our critical access to the contexts in which we find ourselves enframed and a

¹⁶⁸For instance, Vattimo writes, of Christ's sacrifice (in what Vattimo takes to be a rebudiation of the victimary mechanism) "This is such a shattering novelty that it could only come from 'outside.' *I would even hazard that the proof that Jesus is God is precisely the fact that it could only come from a nonhuman wisdom, this radically new news.* This is not proof of the existence of God, of course, or of the divinity of Jesus, but, for me, it's a beautiful thing. Almost too beautiful to be true...I am unable to reasonably disavow it." The language here is contradictory, and provocative: the proof of Christ's divinity is not proof in a metaphysical sense, but rather, an image of surpassing beauty and of profound emancipatory potential; hence, we cannot discard it, even where we cannot affirm it in an unproblematically metaphysical way. Vattimo, *Not Being God*, 151 (emphasis mine).

corresponding recognition of their historicity and contingency and, perhaps most radically, a capacity to imagine alternatives to them). Vattimo is very explicit on this point: weakening is itself an ontology.

What separates an ontology of weakening from the problematic ontologies of the metaphysical systems of the Plato to Kant canon is that it does not seek an unproblematic foundation (a firm and unassailable one). Even the proto-physics of the Presocratics, after all, endeavored to find such a foundation by theorizing as to the basic, ultimate substance of the physical world (and, in some cases, its mechanism of activity or principle of differentiation). Deleuze and Guattari identified the Western narrative of Reason with paranoia precisely because of that narrative's preoccupation with limits and boundaries, with the constant policing of intellectual space. The impulse, here, is to keep at bay a chaos that is always seeking to intrude into the system.¹⁶⁹ Yet even within a heritage of thought so concerned with order there was always present (sometimes in a sublimated way, sometimes emerging as a transgressive impulse "from the fringes") a concession to the vital power of that beyond the system (that is to say, with Chaos). This external and inexhaustible vitality could certainly be rendered somewhat more palatable, if not altogether safe, by theologization (we here recall again St. Thomas' concession to the insufficiency of all his brilliant systematizing in the face of divine mystery and, we must further concede, divine plenitude). In a more general sense, Deleuze and Guattari note that reason would give up its certainty for a sample of chaos that it could explore, however often this

¹⁶⁹The aspiration towards complete metaphysical enclosure finds perhaps its furthest expression in the Hegelian idealism to which Marx and Nietzsche are, in their own ways, answers. Stefano Azarrá, "Left-Wing Nietzscheanism in Italy: Gianni Vattimo", *Rethinking Marxism*, Volume 30, Number 2, 2018, 280.

impulse may result in still more attempts to incorporate chaos back into the systems from which it offered egress.

There is a question of whether and why we would support Vattimo's careful terminological separation of metaphysics and ontology. The latter, after all, has traditionally been understood as a subcategory of the former. If we merely look at metaphysics as the philosophical inquiry into first and final principles, the consideration of Being would certainly seem to qualify, even if that consideration involves a conception of Being that is non-reductive and problematic. Why, then, not simply say that the project is yet another in a line of metaphysical projects? A part of the issue may be that metaphysics has traditionally sought to divorce itself radically from the lifeworld to focus instead on an ultimate foundation (even if that foundation is a material one, as in the case of, say, Presocratic physics) and that the transcendence of Being that characterizes the Plato to Kant canon bears the mark of this impulse. The reduction of the question of Being to a merely historical one, in the fashion, for instance, of Marxism or to a material one, as in scientism, does little to dispel this sort of move towards transcendence, as the principles of history (however constantly in motion) or of the physical universe (however incomplete our understanding) function as principles no less absolute than those embodied in Platonic forms or the God of scholastic philosophy. Clearly, then, our goal here cannot be the establishment of an ontology of the kind that has characterized the history of Western metaphysics.

What is needed instead of this traditional approach is one characterized by an openness noticeably and fatally lacking from metaphysical thought. A recognition of historicity, of always-already being situated within contexts, is a necessary component of this more open approach. Likewise, as Vattimo notes at length, the unprecedented proliferation of communications and

information technology and, to a lesser extent, the increased ease of international travel, occurring alongside (and not by coincidence) the movements of anti- and post-colonialism and cultural pluralism similarly has a vital role to play.¹⁷⁰ Taken in combination, these factors educate us as to the contingency of our particular circumstances, with this realization, in turn, serving as an antidote to intellectual and social totalitarianisms.¹⁷¹ Faced with this, we are struck by two contrary impulses: to regard the corresponding revelations of pluralism and contingency as representing a dissolution altogether of the question of Being or to regard it as opening the way to a new approach to that question.

It is worth asking whether the dissolution of the question of Being can be taken to be identical with the deflationary philosophical accounts of the last century. Certainly, Vattimo has no qualms about borrowing the Foucaudian phrase “ontology of actuality,” which, in context refers to the network of social (read power/knowledge) relations that constitute us and the contexts in which we are always-already enframed.¹⁷² Vattimo, more than Foucault, carries an inclination to configure this discussion in discursive terms, citing with approval Gadamer’s famous dictum, “Being that can be understood is language.”¹⁷³ We should further note here that, for Vattimo, this sort of ontology is realized most fully not in a theoretical discussion of Being,

¹⁷⁰“With the demise of the idea of a central rationality of history, the world of generalized communication explodes like a multiplicity of ‘local’ rationalities- ethnic, sexual, religious, cultural, or aesthetic minorities- that finally speak up for themselves. They are no longer repressed and cowed into silence by the idea of a single true form of humanity that must be realized irrespective of particularity and individual finitude, transience, and contingency.” Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 9.

¹⁷¹One considers, as a sign of this growing awareness, such books as Marcus Bach’s 1961 *Had You been Born in Another Faith*, which encourages readers to imagine how their lives and thought would have been different had they been born into a different faith tradition. Marcus Bach, *Had You been Born in Another Faith*, (Toronto: Penguin, 1961)

¹⁷²Santiago Zabala, “Weakening Ontology through Actuality” in *Beyond Foucault*, edited by CG Prado, (London: Continuum, 2009), 109-122.

¹⁷³Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 470.

but rather in a productive engagement with the political and social contexts in which we always-already find ourselves. Writes Vattimo,

One could argue, in fact, that hermeneutics as I have interpreted it effectively implied a kind of transformative Hegelian Marxism which contested any naturalistic conception of absolute principles and thus possessed a political vocation from the outset. When I became a Deputy in the European Parliament, in 1999, I hoped to apply this contestation of “absolutes” to the political domain, by insisting, for example, on the conventional character of laws, and on a democratic practice grounded in processes of coming to agreement, by seeking to break all those absolutisms which originally issue from the Vatican and end up buttressing the neo-liberal theory of the sovereignty of the market. My sympathy for Marxism derives, above all, from Marx’s claim that political economy is not a natural science, but a historical science whose task is to examine structures that have been produced over time and can in principle be changed.¹⁷⁴

Combined with the realization of the contingency of these networks of relations, this already seems like a kind of dissolution of Being into the social and the historical, a means of depriving Being of its traditional ultimacy. Being perhaps escapes identification with beings via this conceptual scheme, but only via a technicality; through, that is to say, configuration as the network of relations between beings but also by which beings are constituted (a relationship, at best, of mutual constitution).

We should note that this configuration, while a demotion, of sorts, from the traditional (read: violent and metaphysical) role of Being as producer and sustainer of beings (language that remains alive even in the less robustly metaphysical wording of the *Novus Ordo* liturgy), is not a true disappearance. The dissolution of the question of Being, for Heidegger, takes the form of the instrumentalization of thought, the descent into machination. If we find the echo of Being even here¹⁷⁵, it is in the pragmatic mirror-image of instrumentalization; in, that is, a notion of thought

¹⁷⁴Gianni Vattimo, “Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality,” *Iris: European Journal of Public Debate*, 2009 344-345.

¹⁷⁵We mean here by instrumentalization the forgetting of Being, the rendering impossible of a critical confrontation with the reality that confronts us. However, as we shall see, this very forgetting contains within itself a call for the renewed consideration of the question of Being

that is made to work in service of ethical and political goals. In this notion of thought, rendered explicitly in Rorty's work,¹⁷⁶ we find Vattimo's key intuition that the ethical-political-aesthetic complex (or, to put it more theologically, the impulse to move closer to a world in which "love is pretty much the only law") that gives life to philosophical discourse (once the barriers of a totalizing and violent metaphysics are cast down) is precisely Being (Dasein, in the sense of Being *as situated*).¹⁷⁷ To be more precise, ontology, here, has the meaning, not of an analysis of an absolute and unchangeable Being in the fashion of tradition metaphysics, but rather, as the analysis of networks of social relations (in the sense of a Foucaudian "Ontology of Actuality") but also of the (similarly contingent) heritage of thought and our relationship to that heritage (and here again we confront a sort of circularity, as the political-ethical-aesthetic aims of our readings and re-readings of our tradition necessarily arise from within the tradition itself).¹⁷⁸ We see, therefore, that ontology is not dissolved into the social or the historical via this

(understood as a productive and critical engagement with our rootedness within contexts): "It seems to be a law of machination, whose ground is not yet established, that the more powerfully it unfolds- for example in the Middle Ages and in Modernity- the more stubbornly and more machinatingly it hides itself *as such*, hiding behind *ordo* and the *analogia entis* in the Middle Ages and behind objectness and objectivity in Modernity, as basic forms of actuality and thus beingness... And a second law is coupled with this first one, namely, that the more decidedly machination hides itself in this way, the more it insists on the pre-dominance of that which seems totally against what is ownmost to machination and nevertheless belongs to its overmost: *lived-experience*." Martin Heidegger. *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 89 (c.f. Ibid 80).

¹⁷⁶We are thinking here of Rorty's notion of philosophy as cultural politics, his focus on images of a better world (that is to say, of social hope) and so on.

¹⁷⁷"Heidegger maintains that it is the modern *Gestell*, or technical 'enframing' of the world, that permits an initial glimpse of the *Ereignis*, of the 'event': if there is any hope or salvation for us, this certainly cannot be attained by repeating or reclaiming a previous state of development, but only by penetrating to the root of the state in which currently find ourselves." Vattimo, "Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality," 336.

¹⁷⁸"The true existence is not the objectivity of objects but the intersubjectivity of *meaning*." Vattimo, Remarks at the Society of Italian Philosophy Annual Conference at the Rochester Institute of Technology, 3/25/2018.

conceptualization, but rather is taken to be always connected to particular socialities and historical conditions (those, in a word, in which Being, necessarily, becomes present to us).

Contingency strikes us first as a limit point, a recognition that our context (and, correspondingly, our particular constitutions as subjects) exists alongside those of others and thus cannot be naturalized or imbued with an unquestionable sacrality. The positive component of this move is twofold: when we recognize that there is no ultimate foundation, our particular cultural contexts become, for us, our only Being and we, correspondingly, are free to embrace them voluntarily and affectionately, rather than out of a (perceived but ultimately untenable) bowing before an objective “way the world is.” No less importantly, however, the confrontation with plurality, though showing the contingency of our own positions, likewise opens anew the horizons of possibility previously forestalled by a limiting, metaphysical worldview. The discourse is continuously renewed and reconfigured by the presence of an expanding sphere of interlocutors, by the possibility of different interpretations, by the myriad entry points of novelty represented by an embrace of a diversity of perspectives. The richness of Being becomes present to us within history but is never reducible to the merely historical.

The issue here is that, undertaken via this reconfigured ontology, the project remains a metaphysical one. If, that is, we look beyond Vattimo’s recurring definition of metaphysics as the violent imposition of univocity before which discussion comes to a halt and instead to the broader, traditional self-understanding of metaphysics as an inquiry into first and final principles, we find that even an ontology characterized by weakening would seem to qualify in at least two important senses. The first sense is one with which we are already familiar: the idea that metaphysics is inescapable, that weakening itself is a bearing out of the destiny of metaphysics (understood, not in an unproblematically teleology sense as a necessary and unavoidable

unfolding¹⁷⁹ but rather, as the playing out of certain tensions within metaphysics as it speaks to our present situatedness). Relatedly, the process and vocation of weakening necessarily has the character of *Verwindung*, a twisting from within of the attributes of metaphysical systems themselves; the appeal of Vattimo's thought to emancipation-minded readers surely consists, at least in part, of his capacity to take structures that have been historically associated with the worst excesses of metaphysical violence and reading them in a way productive of more desirable social and political outcomes.

The second sense in which the project remains metaphysical is, if anything, even more significant for our thesis that Vattimo's thought contains an often unacknowledged positive move: weakening is, of itself, no less a *foundational* move (a move, we can say, of *grounding*) than the more violent metaphysical systems whose critique it involves.¹⁸⁰ If we embrace the realization that the element of ontological richness that becomes present to us in the recognition of an inexhaustible plurality of interpretations (and interpreters), and we further recognize that the refusal to regard Being as exhausted by particular histories and contexts correspondingly entails its not being reducible to those contexts. The recognition of plurivocity gives life to our particular interpretations, to our efforts to make the traditions that we inherit speak to the challenges of our present circumstances. In that sense, it underlies our productive efforts in much the way a more traditional metaphysical principle would underlie the constructive efforts of the

¹⁷⁹We have, in Hegel, an apparent resonance with Vattimo, in that history is configured as a process of emancipation ("World history is the progress of the consciousness of freedom...") that, upon further investigation, is found to represent just the sort of metaphysical enclosure that Vattimo rejects. Hegel, *Reason in History*, 24.

¹⁸⁰As Pareyson reminds us, "...the problem of truth is metaphysical before it is epistemological..." Pareyson, *Truth and Interpretation*, 62.

systems of ethics, politics, and so on that are dependent upon it.¹⁸¹ An ontology of weakening certainly seeks to avoid¹⁸² the dangers of more traditional efforts to establish a metaphysical grounding for thought, but no more so than other efforts to establish a non-reductive and emancipatory metaphysics.¹⁸³ An ontology of weakening, in other words, represents not an alternative to or departure from metaphysics understood as the philosophical effort to ground thought, but rather represents an effort at grounding that acknowledges the problematic character of grounding as such and, further, that acknowledges a corresponding need for risky, speculative flight (that is, of a constant, renewed engagement with the contexts in which we find ourselves as well as the never-entirely-other context of an ever-broadening sphere of interlocutors), both to continue allow for productive (political, social, cultural, theological) activity and to guard against ossification of our thought into yet another violent and repressive structure.

Section 2: The Project is Violent

If we can concede that Vattimo's project is, in some sense, a metaphysical one, it is likewise necessary to examine the extent to which it managed to avoid the violence that it associates with traditional configurations of metaphysics. We will recall here that, for Vattimo, violence is associated with metaphysics insofar as it represents a limit point to discourse and,

¹⁸¹This would, in any case, represent the traditional configuration of metaphysics as "first philosophy", as foundational for entire philosophical systems. In the context of Catholic philosophy, it is impossible not to think of the sublime complexity of scholastic metaphysics (for instance, that of Aquinas) here.

¹⁸²We should recall here that these dangers cannot be unproblematically eliminated. Weakening too can be totalized and weaponized against a sort of plurivocity.

¹⁸³Although we must remain mindful, here, of the fact that many of the conceptions of metaphysics produced by philosophical modernity themselves likewise claim a non-reductive character (a trend noticeable, certainly, in fallibilism, but also in various attempts to establish strategic essentialisms for the sake of political activity).

correspondingly, to the form and function of community and, not coincidentally, that this arrangement results in the realized violence of oppression, warfare, and so on. The weakening of this notion of metaphysics represents a refusal of this sort of limiting of discourse and a corresponding problematizing of the grounding of political and social totalitarianisms. Given what we have already discussed of the metaphysical character of the project, as well as Vattimo's own concerns about the possibility of weak thought lapsing back into a sort of violent totalitarianism, we can similarly acknowledge that the project maintains, at least, traces of violence or, perhaps more accurately, that it contains a reduced but never unproblematically eradicable violence.

The continued presence of violence in Vattimo's project, however, is more complex than the notion of a weakened metaphysic retaining weakened violent elements against which we must remain constantly on-guard. Contrary to this reductive treatment, we instead must acknowledge, with Vattimo, that, while metaphysics represents and grounds important types of violence¹⁸⁴, it is not identical with violence.¹⁸⁵ The goal of metaphysical violence was and is the restraint and control of pre-existing (we might even say primordial) forms of violence: the violence of the world as it confronts us and as it remains outside of our control (we think here

¹⁸⁴With the political violence of the 20th century firmly in mind, Vattimo goes so far as to claim "Not all metaphysics have been violent, but all violent people of great dimension have been metaphysical." Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 45.

¹⁸⁵"Metaphysics is an aspect and consequence of dominion, not its cause." *Hermeneutic Communism*, 12; Correspondingly, "...metaphysics, in any form, is merely the ideological legitimization of the existing forms of power." Gianni Vattimo, *Being and Its Surrounding*, (Chicago: McGill-Queens University Press, 2021), Kindle.

most obviously of the more-than-human world) and the violence of the unrestrained passions of the crowd.¹⁸⁶

The idea that metaphysics gives us power over the world has been shown, increasingly, to be untenable. Most obviously, we have the previously discussed awareness of the plurality of ways of interpreting the world. If we follow Heidegger in conflating science and technology in our current era, it would likewise not be out of a mistaken assumption (asserted with perplexing frequency by certain vocal advocates of scientism) that the scientific worldview (understood, implicitly, as the outgrowth of the Western discourse of Reason that dates back, at least, to the Classical Greeks) is the only worldview productive of technology but rather out of a recognition of the nature of the project of the reduction of all thought to the level of the instrumental. What remains when we have proceeded via these critiques is the concession that metaphysics gives us power over the world in which we find ourselves in one remaining way: as a mechanism for the delimiting of discourse in service of the existing structures of power; in other words, as the very violence that Vattimo identifies.

This first metaphysical assertion of power flows organically into our second: the restraint of the crowd precisely functions as a metaphysical imposition upon human behavior. In his dialogue with Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, Vattimo is confronted by

¹⁸⁶We should note here that these non- or pre-metaphysical forms of violence share with the metaphysical form of violence addressed so far the character of impositions upon our existence. Metaphysics seeks to overcome the impositions of the world in which we find ourselves, of the passions of the crowd, or what have you, by way of its own imposition of first and final principles, enclosed systems (after the fashion of Hegel) and so on. The ethical and aesthetic dimensions of weak thought therefore apply to how we address ourselves to these non- or pre-metaphysical forms of violence: we are called to reconfigure them or to make them lighter, we hold against than an assertion of an ever-broader community mediated by love and charity.

Girard's suggestion that the weakening of strong structures, in addition to opening the way for charity, community, and so on, likewise opens the way for horrific violence. To this, Vattimo responds as we might anticipate: that the violence that most fully confronts us stems not from human nature (a concept that, in any case, we find increasingly difficult to take seriously) but rather, from institutional structures; the very structures subject to the sort of weakening that his reading of the tradition proposes and entails. Vattimo is likewise quick to observe that the distrust of desire is, itself, a function of an enframed delimiting of discourse in favor of the powerful:

I have been told that the riot in London broke out because the protestors wanted brand-name sneakers, the latest cell phones, and such. Even if these were the reasons, then what? Let us, instead, ask ourselves, who and what brought them up in the cult of brand names and superficial things, if not the very banks and governments that now try to impose austerity on them? These young men and women are the real proletariat of today, and their imagination has been taken from them.¹⁸⁷

Indeed, even the revolutionary impulse itself is often coopted, not by the deficiencies of human nature but by the intentional configuration of desire by Capital:

The mistrust of revolutionary parties in the face of desire, when it is not a means for defending the privilege of bureaucrats, is a form of Stalinism. Precisely as did Stalin, who had to become a bloodthirsty dictator because he wanted to achieve a kind of capitalist-American form of industrialization, revolutionaries often adopt the repressive ethics of their enemies.¹⁸⁸

There is no better caution here than the one that we have already repeatedly observed: the process of weakening must be an ongoing one. Even the rise of violent identitarian self-assertion in the end merely represents a reconfiguration of metaphysical violence through the denial of our connection to and constitution by the never-entirely other.

¹⁸⁷Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, Kindle.

¹⁸⁸Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, Kindle.

We should note here that a weakened metaphysics arises no less from the confrontation with violence than does the traditional metaphysics that Vattimo critiques. Certainly, it arises as an ethical-political-aesthetic critique of the violence of the tradition, but, on a more fundamental level, it must also recognize that the awareness of situatedness, contingency, and plurivocity that are the beating heart of hermeneutics are themselves a confrontation with a sort of violence:

Existentially speaking, even the fact of being thrown into the world is a form of originary violence that must be acknowledged as such: it is clear that one can easily connect this fact to the natural experience of birth in which I am given to myself, but if I continue to remain simply as I am given, without taking responsibility for myself, without articulating or interpreting myself, then I am not acting as I should. Thus the sense of thrownness, of a continual rethinking of the history of being, is perhaps also bound up with this fundamental experience: as soon as I am born I always begin to exist in inauthenticity, I am a finite being and, as such, have a beginning that I can never completely cancel or absorb in processes of self-reflection. My history is nothing but the continual effort to absorb this starting point of my existence, to come to terms with my finitude, and thus to take over what has been given to me, to appropriate all this by interpreting and transmitting it in a newly modified way. As if authenticity consisted in the decision to live my finitude as a way of appropriating and transforming this very finitude. We find ourselves in situations whose peremptory character must be absorbed and consumed in a process of interpretation. In a certain way this is also the model for how Heidegger thinks of the history of being: there is a finite happening which is then articulated, dissolved, and disseminated in processes of everyday significance, and is not “sacralised” in a kind of merely contemplative stasis.¹⁸⁹

If the response of traditional metaphysical systems to this originary violence is to respond violently, to attempt, as it were, a seizure of power, for Vattimo, the move is instead to embrace finitude as a means of preventing that sort of violent overreaction and of (never unproblematically) grounding our coming into discourse with our fellow beings (and surely we can see here a Christ-like turning of violence against itself and thereby short-circuiting of the logic of violence).

¹⁸⁹Vattimo, “Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality,” 331.

Even prior to the mature formation of his thought, Vattimo was attracted to this notion of reducing violence via a departure from or disruption of its internal logic. Speaking of his early studies, Vattimo recalls

In those years I was also sympathetic to some of the ideas of Antonio Negri when he elaborated on the conception of “riding horseback,” which meant leaning neither to the left, nor to the right, but simply pressing ahead: instead of trying to form a Leninist advance guard of the revolution, we wished to create autonomous and anarchistic communities which would escape and transcend the prevailing logic of power. Hence our ambition to live without relation to institutions of power at all: as if subjectivity itself was inevitably bound up with subjection, as if we only became subjects by subjecting ourselves to the structures of power... The true revolution would be an inner revolution which would involve a dismantling of subjectivity.¹⁹⁰

The radical subtraction from the structures of power, of course, is no more possible here than it was for the monastic societies of early Christianity, yet, like those societies, the gesture in that direction proves to be enough to prompt constructive reconfigurations in its own right. Indeed, while Vattimo, aware of the impossibility of a truly radical (hence, metaphysical) “escape” from his contexts elects to reconfigure them from within (and we look here at his time in office), in his later works (for instance, *Hermeneutic Communism*) he shows a sympathy for the Latin American governments that seek to subtract themselves from the systems of financial and political enframing imposed by the United States and its allies.¹⁹¹

This would seem to be a reasonable response to the question of how to resolve the violence that is intrinsic to any metaphysical process. Less easily resolved is the violence that is, as it were, *intentionally* incorporated into Vattimo’s project. Indeed, we must recall that the project is the product of political, ethical, and aesthetic motivations and, thus, necessarily entails a component of conflict to avoid collapsing into triviality: “hermeneutics understood as the

¹⁹⁰Vattimo, “Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality,” 325.

¹⁹¹Vattimo, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 24.

doctrine of ‘dialogic’ conciliation, stripped of the severity of dialectic, namely, of conflict, is reduced to a hurdy-gurdy song.”¹⁹² That is to say, it of necessity takes the form of disruptive and persistent interventions: “We are experiencing the transformation of the most ‘innocent’ of crafts (see Heidegger’s “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry”)- so hermeneutics has often portrayed itself- into a sort of terrorist network constantly subjected to policing and attempts at control.”¹⁹³ Before we dismiss this sort of language as mere hyperbole, it is necessary to recall that the process of interpretation is not and cannot be limited to the merely abstract realm; the project is politically-ethically-aesthetically motivated through and through and not only rejects any supposed primacy of the theoretical over the practical (that is to say, activism, political/social activity) but problematizes the very boundary between the two (interpretation is meaningful precisely insofar as it addresses itself to the circumstances in which we find ourselves). In consequence, “[t]he hermeneuticists, if they are to become serious, must also become, fatally, militants.”¹⁹⁴ Indeed, for Vattimo, hermeneutics takes on the character of a positively revolutionary project:

...the future will belong to hermeneutics- or it will not be at all. The world of the future- as seen by hermeneutics, as searched for by hermeneutics- is a world where the “objective” constraints, the “principle of reality” (which is increasingly indistinguishable from the laws of corporate capitalism) must increasingly be challenged by the world of dialogue and conversation, by the world of the truth event, by the world of progressive symbolization in which objects move into the background as that which supports the engagement between subjects and in which the violence of immediacy is also there but reduced. What is at issue is nothing less than a reformation of the world. A reformation that must be undertaken by a militant hermeneutics with all the tools of the humanities at its disposal- philosophy, theology, fine arts, law, politics- and that will draw the world

¹⁹²Vattimo, *Of Reality: The Purposes of Philosophy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), Kindle.

¹⁹³Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, Kindle.

¹⁹⁴Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, Kindle.

ever close to being what for Hegel (and later for Marx) is the place of the spirit, where this spirit feels itself finally (but never thoroughly) at home.¹⁹⁵

The project of weakening, in a word, entails a conceptually violent disruption of strong structures, which is precisely what contributes to the perception of the project as intellectually and socially dangerous (as entailing, for instance, a collapse into relativism and a breaking down of barriers to political change).

Likewise, the political change itself does not exclude revolutionary activity. On the contrary, Vattimo articulates a notion of a weakened form of revolutionary activity:

In the name of what do we start a revolution? In the name of what do we write a poem that will become a classic? Whether in the case of the name of the classic or in the case of revolution it seems that only the result, the historical occurrence, is in play. The classic becomes what it is because “the public” reads it and recognizes it as such. Revolution succeeds if it is really declared, if it gives rise to institutions that meet with widespread participation.¹⁹⁶

Revolutionary activity, then, is subject to a weak grounding, in the sense that it arises from consensus and community, rather than from a metaphysical absolute. Vattimo certainly maintains a skepticism about the prospects of a violent revolution, given the power of the hegemonic capitalist powers of our age. However, he likewise notes that the opening up of discursive space creates, not just an opportunity for the weak to address the strong with their concerns and grievances, but also for the weak to coordinate with each other against the strong in the event that those calls for change go unanswered.¹⁹⁷

We should note that we have discussed violence in its political and social forms, as well as in the sense of conceptual interventions and disruption, but not in the sense that is perhaps most important to Vattimo’s thought: the notion of violence as that before which discussion

¹⁹⁵Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, Kindle.

¹⁹⁶Vattimo, *Of Reality: The Purposes of Philosophy*, Kindle.

¹⁹⁷Vattimo, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 107.

comes to a halt. Political and social violence (configured here as revolutionary violence) can certainly fit this definition. Conceptual disruption, by contrast, seems to be the opposite of violence understood as a closing-off of discourse. Weak thought certainly includes its own refusals and barriers, but these are precisely configured as impediments to violence, refusals of refusals, as it were.¹⁹⁸ Rather than regarding these barriers as violence, it is perhaps more realistic to acknowledge that Vattimo's configuration of violence as that before which discussion comes to a halt is overly limited and that the breaking open of possibilities, no less than the cutting off of possibilities, contains an ineradicable element of risk.

Section 3: The Value and Dangers of the Tension

If we have revealed the persistence of metaphysics and violence in Vattimo's project, it is worth asking what is accomplished by this revelation. We have already seen that metaphysics and violence, as they exist in Vattimo's project, are reconfigured in productive ways. In a more general sense, the recognition of the persistence of these elements helps us to resist the temptation to regard weak thought as a radical moving beyond violence and the metaphysical, which, of course, would represent a collapse back into totality. Likewise, the persistence of these elements reminds us of the risks that can never be entirely removed from the project. On the other hand, the inescapability of violence and metaphysics, the two most important objects of Vattimo's critique, seems to trap us in a different sort of enclosure. Indeed, if we view the vestiges of these problematic elements merely as a caution against letting the project of

¹⁹⁸We should note here that Vattimo's thought is not immune to what are perhaps more problematic closings-off and refusals, for instance, in the imposition of univocity upon the plurivocity of the metaphysical tradition. Victor Salas, "Faith overcoming metaphysics," 13, Online Access.

weakening itself collapse back into metaphysics (by, we will recall, a ceaseless, critical vigilance), we seem to once more (indeed, once and for all) situate Vattimo's project in the realm of the negative (that is, of pure critique).

We might respond to this concern by recalling that the forms of metaphysics and violence that are most fully a part of Vattimo's project are themselves a product of weakening. This response, however, does not address the particular conceptual enclosure in which we find ourselves. The reconfiguration of a metaphysical grounding principle as the ontological richness that becomes present to us in a robust and pluralistic discourse and the reconfiguration of violence as provocation and cooperative emancipatory projects certainly carry real risks that we must always carry in mind. The recognition that these risks are borne out of a kind of necessity because the alternative to them would be a flight from risk that would entail nothing more than a collapse into the totality of something akin to traditional, violent metaphysics, does little to comfort us. On the contrary, we seem to find ourselves in a situation in which we are once again trapped by a way the world is, constituted, in this instance, by the inescapability of a certain sort of risk. What hope is left to us, in such a situation?

Certainly, we can regard this situation of being trapped by cruel necessities to have an element of the tragic. Pareyson, famously, adopted this position and, correspondingly, embraced a response rooted in the Catholic tradition, in which the Passion of Christ stands as a limit point for negativity "beyond which it cannot go."¹⁹⁹ Part of divine abundance is precisely that God takes suffering and negativity upon Himself, divides against Himself in the moment of the passion, in which Christ suffers not only the pain of the Cross but also abandonment by the

¹⁹⁹Luigi Pareyson, "Pointless Suffering in the Brothers Karamazov," *CrossCurrents*, Volume 37, Number 2/3, 285.

Father (an abandonment made all the more unfathomable by His being, as the Creed states, “consubstantial with the Father”). In this configuration, suffering (and, for the purposes of our narrative, we can include the conditions of finitude and of being at risk) unites God with humanity, much as it unites human beings with each other, and renders meaningful the deliverance found in God from suffering.

Vattimo does not share this sense of the tragic exactly. He certainly views with suspicion the ascription of too much significance to suffering. Suffering has meaning insofar as the suffering of our fellow beings calls out to us for compassion and for succor (a call that, nonetheless, can bind us together in an acknowledgement of our shared finitude). The image of a suffering God, therefore, represents the ultimate extension of the kenotic gesture, the weakening of the strong, violent, and capricious God of metaphysics. Nonetheless, the corresponding move of the elevation of human beings to the status of interpreters (friends of God, rather than slaves) reminds us that our enclosure within contexts is not, after all, a purely negative thing, that there dwells within those contexts a salvific impulse that will, providentially, make itself known. Further, the bearing out of that impulse in the move of weakening shows to us an ontological richness that, though it may carry ineradicable dangers, nonetheless represents possibilities for renewal and liberation. The element of risk is packaged with the element of possibility and, in the end, if we regard the former as representative of a tragic enclosure, we can likewise regard the latter as a source of hope, perhaps most especially, as a hope against hope. Part of the legacy of the Catholic tradition that Vattimo makes the risky choice to embrace is to proceed joyfully, even playfully, to strike out into the fertile realm of conceptual possibility in the spirit of Romans 5:5: “We glory also in tribulations, knowing that tribulations worketh patience; and patience, trial; and trial, hope; And hope confoundeth not...”

Chapter 5: Implications of our Discussion for Religious Discourse

Introductory Thoughts

Given our examination of the religious character and motivations of Vattimo's project, it is appropriate to consider the implications of that project for religious life. However naturally this effort may appear to flow from a consideration especially of Vattimo's later work, it nonetheless confronts us with certain unique difficulties. Vattimo, after all, engages with the question of the impact of his work on what we might call applied theology only in a very limited way and that engagement can be divided into two sorts. On the one hand, we have what can be termed Vattimo's personal engagement with a weakened religiosity. On the other, and somewhat less clearly, we have the impact of his thought on the institutions and structures that define the religious practice of believers.

Section 1: Luther and the Move of Weakening

Given his frequently acknowledged indebtedness to and participation in the Catholic tradition which formed him, it is somewhat interesting to observe that Vattimo, in his writings and interviews on religion, sites positively the Reformation and the thought of Martin Luther. Indeed, here we do find several points of shared resonance. For instance, Luther stands (in Vattimo's thought) as a ready example of a hermeneutic response to a repressive denial of community. It is, however, one badly in need of further nuance. Firstly, we should note that it would not be accurate to say that the late medieval Church was merely an edifice of unassailable [T]ruths. Just as important is the fact that it was one in which these truths were inaccessible in a way that

produced the most appalling condition of spiritual anxiety in the life of the believer. If one lived in a world of carefully prescribed rituals and behaviors, one was likewise utterly unable to be free from the anxiety that one was given over to them in an incorrect or insufficient way. Not only did a given ritual need to be completed at the right time and in the right way, but the receiving believer likewise needed to be properly receptive and of a proper spiritual condition in order to benefit from it. One could never be sure, for instance, that one's confession was valid, rather than impeded by some (however small or unintentional) lapse in spiritual or mental discipline. Hence one was wary of partaking of the Eucharist for fear of profaning that sacrament and heaping sin upon oneself. This was not a concern that plagued only the laity: Luther himself, famously, was so anxious during his first celebration of Mass that he nearly collapsed, recognizing perhaps that the priest's role as a vessel of what is essentially a Divine Agency did not avoid the question of worthiness that so afflicted lay believers but merely changed its form (how could the priest ever be worthy of acting *in persona Christi*?). Similarly, if the sale of indulgences that so offended Luther held such an attraction for the people of Western Christendom during that period, it was surely because of the fear that one would spend an interminable period in Purgatory due to the accretion of the temporal consequences of what one felt was a life practically steeped in sin.

Here we see already the relationship between this pervasive and omnipresent spiritual anxiety and the structures of domination with which it is inextricably intertwined. Participation in the community of faith was required, and yet, because of our opaqueness to ourselves (and the resulting anxiety over our worthiness or our motives) and because of the mysterious character of religious practices, true and full participation could never be guaranteed. This anxiety, in turn, increased dependence upon the structures of the Church, which of course could not be

disassociated from those of political and economic power (the need to tithe, the need to attend services, the need to seek out relics or otherwise obtain indulgences), even as it led to ruptures and outbreaks of spontaneous religious expression more or less outside of those structures, which in turn prompted a disciplinary response from the Church (the prosecution of heresy) which fed again into the spiritual anxiety of the populace. We would not be wrong to see in this arrangement a precursor to the alienation that defines so much of our own lives, with spiritual mysteries being replaced by inaccessible political, economic, and social realities arising within the supposedly absolute structures of various norms (Capitalism, the Washington Consensus, and so on).

This shows us, very explicit, the conception of absolute [T]ruth as tied up with authority: the Church was the inheritor of Revelation and was the sole effective interpreter of it. This power structure was wielded by Luther's earliest interlocutors as a bludgeon: rather than addressing the substance of Luther's various complaints, he was asked repeatedly whether he, in fact, rejected the authority of the Church and the Pope to adjudicate the matters at issue, was threatened with summons to Rome (and with the prospect of an actual trial before Church authorities on charges of heresy). The question, in other words, of [T]ruth (understood as both monolithic and impersonal) was so inextricably wrapped up in the question of authority (understood as the hierarchy of the Church) that Luther was, in the end, obliged to explicitly reject both. Writes Vattimo

Luther's hermeneutic operation was directed against the hegemony of the Catholic Church's magisterial establishment, which pretended to be the only valid interpreter of biblical text. His *Ninety Five Theses* (1517) and translation of the Bible into German (1534) provoked a general revolt against the papacy, because until then the ecclesiastical hierarchy had forced every believer to turn to its officials for readings, interpretations, and elucidations of the text. Against such spiritual, cultural, and political dominion,

Luther instead believed that the literal meaning of the Bible contained its own proper spiritual significance, which should be interpreted by each believer...²⁰⁰

While maintaining a place for specialized clergy, Luther articulated a priesthood of all Christians (again, drawing from scripture), which denied the special status by which the Catholic clergy of his era presumed to dictate and delimit religious discourse.

The rejection of authority and the increased focus on interpretation as the domain of the believer, rather than of a limited Church hierarchy of course had serious implications for other areas of theology. Indeed, Luther's skepticism regarding the metaphysical trappings of Catholic Eucharistic theology is taken by Vattimo as a logical extension of the primordially antimetaphysical character of Luther's thought:

I feel that the Protestant view of the sacrament of the Holy Communion is justified because there is not the real presence in the transubstantiation, all these medieval theories that were thought to support the fetishist notions of Eucharist sacraments in the church.²⁰¹

Luther rejected the metaphysically encumbered doctrine of Transubstantiation by asking why such elaborate philosophizing was at all necessary to supplement the words of Christ himself as conveyed in scripture: surely a True Presence theology could be both asserted and left "mysterious," unconfined by the limits of a Thomistic metaphysical scheme that flew in the face of the philosophical pluralism of Luther's own time (and still more, as Vattimo is wont to remind us, of the still greater pluralism of our own).

Correspondingly, Luther substituted the anxiety of adherence to Catholic orthodoxy with an individual relationship with God within a community of believers. If the biblical text contains its own significance and can be comprehended by the believer, it is only insofar as the believer can depend upon the grace of a loving God to mediate that process. In this formula, the

²⁰⁰Vattimo, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 81.

²⁰¹Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, 66.

deficiencies of the believer are taken as assumed and hence de-emphasized: Of course we are unworthy, but such is God's goodness that we receive the grace by which we are saved! We no longer need to drive ourselves mad with the demands of adherence to regimens of spiritual discipline that rely entirely too much upon our own agency but may instead trust in a Divine Agency that is greater than our every imperfection.

Thus, we see Luther as a figure, not just of emancipation but of an inauguration of the hermeneutic religious project of which Vattimo's own work serves as a continuation. It is, in any case, difficult to dispute that Luther's Reformation was a response to the centralized and totalitarian structure of the Roman Church and that the translation of scripture and the focus on the reception of grace by the individual believer through the principle and (mostly) unmediated operation of the sacrificial love of Christ, and that this response was, in many ways, one of weakening. Indeed, as Vattimo writes, "By recognizing everyone's right and contribution to interpret for himself, Luther not only defended the weak but also exercised the latent anarchic nature of interpretation", as is surely evident from the proliferation of faith traditions and the questioning of social, political, and economic norms that followed, not by accident, in the wake of the Reformation.²⁰²

Notwithstanding Vattimo's generally positive reading, it is necessary to approach Luther with a certain amount of caution. After all, the Reformation represented emancipation in a certain sense but was still involved in what, by Vattimo's criteria, would be a thoroughly metaphysical theological project, one that quickly proved just as adept at social and political coercion as the Catholicism that it sought to replace. What's more, the Reformation gives us an

²⁰²Vattimo, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 82.

excellent example of how an emancipatory gesture can ossify into a violent, metaphysical one: Luther's infamous antisemitism, after all, arose precisely out of the failure of the Jewish people to flock to an emancipated Christianity in the way that he anticipated.

Nor should we ignore that many of the greater successes of the Counter-Reformation echo through the ages precisely because of their own adoption of this model of weakening, with its focus on discourse and community (increasingly, even as concerns the laity!) and the development of various Catholic vernacular translations of scripture (one thinks, in English, of the Douay-Rheims translation of the Latin Vulgate that was to itself become a valuable source text for the King James Version). Vattimo himself acknowledges the value of the Catholic Church's response to Luther's approach to scripture:

Against the Lutheran principles of the free investigation of Scripture, the Catholic Church sets the thesis that the two sources of revelation are Scripture and tradition. It is a thesis that has always seemed to me preferable to the Protestant 'sola scripture', because the scriptural text, I am thinking primarily of the New Testament- is itself the crystallization of the discourses that were already in circulation in the community of believers.²⁰³

In other words, scripture must be regarded as, itself, a product of and participant in the discursive process. Indeed, the Reformation, in no small way, gave birth to the modern Catholic Church that produced Vattimo by forcing the tradition to at last take religious discourse seriously *as discourse* and to engage productively with questions of interpretation.

However, this recognition of the role of tradition in constituting even scripture must itself benefit from the weakening inaugurated by the Reformation. After all, Vattimo must return, with Luther, to a calling into question of tradition understood as the uncritical acceptance of the absolute sovereignty of Popes and Councils over our interpretation of scripture. Writes Vattimo,

²⁰³Vattimo, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 82.

What, in my view, is not acceptable is the idea that the Church's tradition should be infallibly identified with the teachings of Popes and bishops (or rather, in the twentieth century, exclusively by the Pope). By this, I mean that the limit represented by the principle of charity, which is to guide the secularized interpretation of the sacred text, does in fact prescribe that the tradition should be heard charitably however, what is heard is not confined to the *ex cathedra* teaching of ecclesiastical authority, but is rather the living community of believers. Needless to say this hearing does not provide clear-cut dogmatic principles like the definitions produced by Popes and councils, which are also themselves to be considered. But the relationship with the living tradition, with the community of believers, is far more personal and risky and is part of the overall duty of giving a personal interpretation of the evangelical message, which is the believer's task.²⁰⁴

Vattimo certainly appreciates Luther's stand against the tyranny of the medieval Church (taking, as he does, a similar stand against the tyranny of the modern one) but correspondingly recognizes that sola scriptura too can easily collapse into a totalitarian metaphysics in which scripture becomes regarded as absolute and self-evident (that is, in a way that is blind to historical and cultural particularity). Catholicism avoids this risk and, if we refuse the correspondingly dangerous move of regarding tradition in an absolute sense, we instead find Popes and councils, bishops and theologians, transformed into still more interlocutors with whom, in the context of a living community and an ongoing tradition, we can productively engage (and is not Catholicism's worst kept secret that the Church is renewed from the fringes?).

Section 2: Identitarian Religiosity and Hermeneutic Risk

The Reformation, then, is an important expression of the unleashing of the emancipatory and hermeneutic impulses that Vattimo finds in Christianity, the very impulses that are well expressed in secularization and the rise of democracy. As Vattimo writes, "Faith in God allowed the construction of a more secure, organized, and peaceful world, in which faith became an

²⁰⁴Vattimo, *Belief*, 86.

unnecessary lie.”²⁰⁵ However, Vattimo, at least, would not have us echo the modernist dismissal of religion as merely a steppingstone along a path leading to the social forms we know now:

What would Christianity be when read, a la Heidegger as a moment in the history of Western Metaphysics? Would it simply be the story of an error to be erased in an Enlightenment manner? Obviously not, because this would still imply reference to a supratemporal truth.²⁰⁶

Indeed, the hermeneutic gesture and the problematization of the aristocratic monopoly on [T]ruth which characterized the Catholicism of the Late Middle Ages likewise unleashes the forces of secularization by which the value of religion as such is called into question. Religious traditions (even, ironically, Luther’s own) initially confronted these developments in a reactionary manner, reconfiguring, rather than abandoning, a focus on an objective way the world is. In Protestantism, this manifested in the development of various strains of biblical literalism, or in various attempts to absolutize the personal relationship with God which had replaced the authority of the Magisterium. Within Catholicism, meanwhile

...the Church’s “literalism” changed over time, owing in part to a hermeneutic that grew increasingly attentive to the “spiritual” meanings of Scripture. But at the same time... the Church developed a whole doctrine of *preambula fidei*, entangling itself more and more in a metaphysics of the objectivist kind, which by now- as we see even in recent encyclopedias- has become inseparable from the authoritarian claim to preach laws and principles that are natural, hence valid for all and not the faithful alone. The disputes that are arising in many countries all over the world concerning bioethics constitute the terrain on which the Church’s claims to speak in the name of humanity, rather than in the name of positive revelation, is made most forcefully.²⁰⁷

Modernity, then, becomes a period in which religions come, unfortunately, to occupy the role of competitors in the marketplace of metaphysical claims, responding to the absolutizing metaphysical projects of secularized natural, political, and social sciences with either an equally

²⁰⁵Vattimo, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 86.

²⁰⁶Vattimo, *Thinking the Inexhaustible*, 165.

²⁰⁷Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, 48.

absolutist reading of Scripture (the interpretation of which, if left to the individual, remains nonetheless mediated in a manner which must lead to preordained outcomes productive of uniformity rather than diversity) or of a (usually premodern) metaphysical narrative of “natural law.”

Certainly, we cannot simply take at face value the religious discourses of early modernity, find in them though we may the seeds of emancipation. On the contrary, the movements towards emancipation that Vattimo points to seem inevitably to produce countermoves which attempt to keep hold of a metaphysical absolutism that is ever in danger of slipping away. In the age in which we now find ourselves, in which metaphysical absolutism as such has been called so completely into question, we find the identitarian character of these countermoves increasingly unmasked. One can look, for instance, at the increasing emphasis of the Catholic Church on bioethical positions, as markers of *identity*. Not just from the pulpit, but from bumper stickers, billboards, protest signs, t-shirts come sentiments such as “You cannot be Catholic and pro-choice.” Universities push back against LGBT professors or pro-choice guest speakers, hospitals launch lawsuits and media campaigns decrying the need for their employee healthcare plans to fund contraception, and all of it for the sake of their Catholic *identity*. Vattimo’s writings on the approach of the Church to these questions under the Papacy of Pope Saint John Paul II still provides us with a window into this still all-too-present element of Catholic culture:

In this climate, it seems that the proclamations of the Catholic Church, planted squarely in the defense of a family and sexual morality that even practicing Catholics no longer take seriously, appears to seek justification less in doctrinal principles (which are often simply laughable; for example when they seem to identify masturbation with genocide) than in the need to defend an image of the ‘true believer.’ And the latter is to be distinguished from tepid Christians precisely through a practice of virtue that no reasonable morality demands, but which serves to strengthen the unity of the Church

conceived almost like an army where soldiers who are not totally resolute are not admitted. What I am trying to say is that the present Pope's insistence on indefensible aspects of Catholic sexual morality (just think of the prohibition on condoms in the epoch of AIDS) seems to be motivated less by fundamental principles (even if one takes up the naturalistic and essentialist metaphysics preferred by this Pope) than by the desire to avoid the impression that Christian doctrine and morality may be weakening.²⁰⁸

Somewhat ironically, a constitutive element of the modern Catholic identity is precisely an affection for the tradition that persists *in spite of* an understandable cynicism about the identitarian demands of the institutional Church.²⁰⁹

In other words, as traditional metaphysical absolutisms become harder to take seriously, a similarly metaphysical focus on identity (asserted in the midst of and against the plurality of our present age) comes to the fore; indeed, it is precisely our inability to take traditional metaphysical conceptions seriously that allows these conceptions to function as effective identity markers. Indeed, it is notable that the move of Pope Francis to reduce the emphasis on sexuality seems to correspond less with a calling into question of metaphysical absolutisms (which are alive and well elsewhere in his thought, particularly as it manifests itself in his writings and those emerging more broadly from the Vatican under his leadership) than with the recognition, observed by Vattimo in his reading of Foucault's later work, that the *cultural* fixation on sexuality which characterized the modern period has already largely been emptied of its power.

²⁰⁸Vattimo, *Belief*, 56-57.

²⁰⁹As Santiago Zabala puts it, "Today, there are few Catholics who do not favor freedom of decision regarding birth control, the marriage of priests, the ordination of women, the free election of bishops by priests, the use of condoms as a precaution against AIDS, the admission to communion of divorcees who remarry, the legalization of abortion; above all, there are few who do not believe that it is possible to be a good Catholic and publicly disagree with the teachings of the Church. If the Catholic Church is to have a future as an institution in the twenty-first century, it will require a papacy that is not above the world, as the head of the Church, but in the Church as, in the words of Pope Gregory the Great, the "servant of the servants of God." The Catholic Church no longer needs primacy in law and honor; it needs a constructive pastoral primacy, in the sense of a spiritual guide, concentrating on the duties required by the present..." Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, 18.

Luther's religious revolution, as we have seen, attempted to free believers from the untenable anxiety of navigating a spiritual and intellectual environment to which they did not have productive (we would say, hermeneutic) access. The process of weakening itself, however, gives rise to a similar anxiety, born of being trapped in the nihilistic state outlined by Nietzsche, in which a foundational past has died (but not, of course, altogether passed away) and in which a future is waiting to be born. Like a suitor in a comedy humiliating himself to regain the affections of his beloved, or an adult child going through the ritual revisiting of some childhood experience for the benefit of his aging parent, the display of love demanded by the Church must have a sort of absurd, even comical, and exaggerated quality, in order to convince the subject (and perhaps the performer as well) of its authenticity.²¹⁰ Interestingly, this pattern of behavior serves only to prolong the conditions of anxiety and forestall their resolution. As Žižek puts it,

Fidelity should be strictly opposed to zealotry; a zealot's fanatical attachment to his Cause is nothing but a desperate expression of his uncertainty and doubt, of his lack of trust in the Cause. A subject truly dedicated to his cause regulates his eternal fidelity by means of incessant betrayals.²¹¹

Understood in a hermeneutic sense, the zealot invokes the image of sameness as an attempt to contain the outbreak of difference/plurality, while, by contrast, a fuller confidence in the tradition is precisely what allows us to engage with it productively on a level that acknowledges its own ontological richness (that is, the very possibility of new and different interpretations), even at the risk of departure or infraction.

²¹⁰We should briefly acknowledge the important observation that identitarian violence is itself a kind of love; specifically, the love for one's group, for one's contingency and situatedness. Where it differs from the kind of love in which Vattimo places his hope (and in which we place ours) is one in which this love does not impose itself as a denial of our connection to the never-entirely-Other (which must always also be a closing off from a part of ourselves).

²¹¹Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, (New York: Verso, 2018), xiv.

Indeed, it is following Zizek that Vattimo and Zabala acknowledge that hermeneutics couples a fidelity to the past with a willingness to take the sort of risks that might lead us to a better future:

...hermeneutic thinkers like to take risks. Heidegger took a political risk. Rorty took a philosophical risk. If Slavoj Zizek called for a “defense of lost causes” it is probably because too many of us have stopped taking these sorts of risks...Contrary to what many think, abstaining from taking risks has a greater intellectual consequence than taking them, at it is the realm where the possibilities of change and emancipation rest.²¹²

Risk here, however, represents no absolutizing leap of faith or collapse into skepticism or even a Socratic concession to the limits of our own knowledge. Rather, it is an acknowledgement precisely that we proceed without firm foundations (and here we return once again to the notion of circularity) and thus in a necessarily speculative and transgressive manner. Accordingly, if there is an emphasis in Vattimo’s thought, on our need to recognize our own contingency and to maintain a corresponding capacity for self-critique, it is precisely as a concession to the continued need for risk taking (and correspondingly, the need to deal with its consequences: wrong turns, missed connections, and so on).

Section 3: The Question of Religious Participation

Vattimo himself, famously, continues to observe certain of the Catholic practices that he picked up in his youth. One should perhaps be wary of drawing conclusions from such biographical details about a thinker, but we might weaken this caution with our own observation that, for Vattimo, the “religious turn” in his later thought corresponds with a biographical turn (a connection rendered very explicit by perhaps his best-known work in the Anglophone world,

²¹²Vattimo, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 98.

Belief). Certainly, Vattimo sees his project of weak thought as being an extension of the religious tradition (among other, overlapping influences) of which he is a part. There is, however, a non-trivial distance between accepting Catholicism as an intellectual influence and continuing to, for instance, pray the Breviary daily. Vattimo notes, at least, that a weak thinker would not be prohibited from religious practice:

Participating in the Mass, partaking in the sacraments, and praying in the various forms we have been taught does not require any metaphysical subscription to philosophical or dogmatic truths.²¹³

This observation, of course is entirely in keeping with Vattimo's observations elsewhere about the very connection between the process of weakening and Christianity; if the Kenosis of God represents an escape from metaphysical totality, surely Christianity cannot be dismissed as irredeemably metaphysical in character.

If religious practice does not require metaphysical conceptions, however, how can it, and more importantly, *why should it* proceed without them? Vattimo would, firstly, make a distinction between performance of religious rituals and theologizing:

Christianity does not retain any of the features that the metaphysical tradition has ascribed to it and with which Christianity has for far too long been made to coincide. Then what? If I had to say it synthetically, I would say that, on the grounds of his hermeneutics of myth, Pareyson can certainly go to Mass and say the rosary but cannot go to seminaries and theology schools. A myth that is listened to but not translated and reduced to metaphysical-rational terms finds its most appropriate expression in Christian prayer and certainly not in theology.²¹⁴

Theology has, in the West, traditionally been wrapped up in the discourse of metaphysics. In the case of sacred theology, we find the self-articulation of a system of belief describing what it takes, fundamentally, to be a received and external state of affairs: the [T]ruths of revelation, to

²¹³Vattimo, *Thinking the Inexhaustible*, 65.

²¹⁴Silvia Benso and Brian Schroeder, *Thinking the Inexhaustible*, (New York: SUNY Press, 2018), 165.

which reason is imperfectly applied. Similarly, apologetic theology represents the articulation of a faith community meant to persuade, the shield which defends the tradition, the sword which attacks heretics or non-believers, and perhaps the carefully listed propositions which smooth the way of the intellectually inclined into the life of faith. In both forms, theology finds itself concerned with that which is true. If modernity rejected theology on the grounds that it goes about this task in a flawed way (assuming, quite self-consciously, its own conclusions), Vattimo rejects its embrace of absolute principles before which discourse must come to a halt.

If these sorts of religious discourse cease to be valuable to us, what remains would be religious practice, albeit religious practice approached in a certain way. If religious practice takes the form of a negotiation of a way the world is, it assumes the totalizing character productive of the anxiety from which Luther and his contemporaries offered escape. Instead, Vattimo, suggests that ritual practice, shorn of its metaphysical baggage, can be regarded as an important expression of hermeneutics in its own right: “Ritual practice could also be understood, once again, as a moment of maturation in the interpretation-construction process a way of rationalizing or reducing complexity.”²¹⁵ Rationalization and the reduction of complexity can be understood as an interpretive act and, indeed, as an especially mature one insofar as it represents the engagement with and application of the elements of the tradition, a refusal to regard the tradition as objective, closed, and inert but rather as a wellspring of meaning which demands a *multiplicity* of expressions. In this sentiment we surely see Vattimo’s nod to the rich tradition of religious practice from which he emerges. Indeed, for all of its at times neurotic and violent preoccupation with enforcing uniformity across its vast domain, Catholicism, perhaps more than any other Christian tradition, has produced a dizzying variety of devotional practices designed to

²¹⁵Vattimo, *Belief*, 75.

create points of access suited to a no-less dizzying diversity of historical moments, cultural structures, and personal circumstances. This is especially true if we broaden our inquiry to include folk Catholicism. Believers weave consciously the threads of the tradition into every aspect of life with prayers, chaplets, fasts, devotions to saints and Marian incarnations of every description, with all of these continuing to proliferate (aided, of course, by modern communication technologies and the increasing interconnectedness brought about by globalized trade) even in this age of declining religious observance. Indeed, the universalizing vocation of the Church is perhaps best realized in these diverse expression, rather than in the ongoing struggle to maintain unity and orthodoxy.

We should note here that the hermeneutic function of religious practice understood in this way is not the conceptualization of religious thought but rather the refusal to do so. Through his reading of Pareyson, proposes an untranslated approach to religious practice:

The one who recites the rosary cannot truly think that he or she is truly speaking with the Virgin Mary, who could be listening somewhere (in the heaven to which she would have been bodily assumed two thousand years ago). Nor can praying to God truly mean addressing Him personally, perhaps so as to ask Him whether He would do a certain specific thing for us, whether He would bestow “grace” on us. Or perhaps yes, it could mean precisely this because moving in the realm of prayer means remaining in myth without “translating” it.²¹⁶

What, however, is meant here by translating? Surely, Vattimo does not mean to endorse a pre- or uncritical approach to religious practice. In order to answer this, we must look to Pareyson’s own writing on the role of myths:

The philosophical reflection in and on myths must abstain from a demythologization that aims at replacing myths with Logos or translating their content into a philosophical format. It has the task of respecting myths, preserving and confirming their revelatory

²¹⁶Vattimo, *Belief*, 78.

character, aware that myths say things that can only be said in that manner, and that it is important for philosophy that such things be said in such a way.²¹⁷

Religious practice, then, when not reduced to a conceptualization (that is, rendered in a closed off metaphysical form) instead maintains a “revelatory character” which refuses to be closed off, and in fact represents a connection with an inexhaustibility that is the very spiritual opposite of the metaphysics that Vattimo critiques. At the same time, revelatory thought, perhaps especially as embodied in religious practice, remains situated within history; it is composed of practices which arise historically and are transmitted to us (always in a mediated form) from generations past. Therefore it has a unique role to play in establishing the condition for the possibility of religion:

Only revelatory thought can serve as mediatory and avoid both the violent oppression of the religious element by the practical attitude, and also the withdrawal of the religious element into a hazy and ineffectual supra-historical distance.²¹⁸

We can recall that what Pareyson has in mind here is a conception wherein Truth is manifest in time and culture but is never reducible to them and, indeed, that the relationship between Truth and cultural and temporal particularity is mediated by the active role of individuals. Thus, religious Truth as with Truth more generally, becomes manifest to us as inexhaustible, as something of which multiple interpretations are not just possible but necessary: we only grasp Truth as Truth insofar as it is capable of being endlessly productive of different particular expressions, readings, and so on: Truth, and here we must mean especially religious Truth, inspires us. If we are to decline to translate myths, then, it must mean that we decline either to allow them to ossify into metaphysical conceptualizations of a way the world is or to merely

²¹⁷Pareyson, *Truth and Interpretation*, 172.

²¹⁸Pareyson, *Truth and Interpretation*, 146.

particular and contingent constructions, but rather, we must view them as inexhaustible wellsprings of meaning with which we are constantly called to productively engage.

In this formulation, we see a positive role for myths as sources of inspiration for our discourses as well as representations of the inexhaustible and irreducible character of religious contexts, which in turn grounds the function of a discursive and performative community. The Church, as the Body of Christ, does not exhaust the Truth but engages with it constantly and productively in a way that testifies to its refusal to be reduced, even to community itself (which, after all would merely substitute one metaphysical conceptualization, revealed and absolute Truth, with another, a community which, as we have seen elsewhere, is always at risk of ossifying into an absolutizing identitarian structure). We may have departed, I think necessarily, from Vattimo here, in that he views Truth somewhat more ambiguously than does his mentor. That is, when Vattimo speaks positively of Truth, he seems to suggest that it is more akin to a property of discourse, rather than something which is made manifest in but is never reducible to discourse. Truth takes on the character of consensus arrived at on ethical grounds or in the interest of pursuing delimited discursive objectives:

It is still possible to speak of truth, you understand, but only because we have realized *caritas* through agreement. *Caritas* with respect to opinion with respect to choices about values, will become truth when it is shared... Or else, in the case of anthropological truth, there certainly exists criteria within individual domains, as in the various languages of Wittgenstein, valid for establishing whether something works or not, but this merely signifies a truth determined on the basis of paradigms that are themselves historical.²¹⁹

Truth, in this conceptualization, might represent a certain assertion of inexhaustibility, but only against the spiritual and political suffocation represented by the denial of discourse (including,

²¹⁹Vattimo, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, Kindle.

interestingly, the denial of discourse represented by a corresponding denial of our capacity to establish Wittgensteinian language games).

Truth, in a word, becomes practice (volitional and risky), a navigation of the discursive planes we occupy in a manner consistent with the refusal of violence in favor of charity and engagement. Likewise, when Vattimo talks about this effort proceeding providentially, we are left more with the impression that he is referring to our status as always-already situated within traditions, histories, and contexts, yet he himself refuses to dispense with language more reminiscent of the more traditional religiosity of his mentor, referring to being the product of an “agency not [his] own.” On the contrary, he endeavors to transform this language, to mine it for meaning more suited to the age of interpretation in which we find ourselves. Consider, for instance, Vattimo’s reconfiguration of the notion of transcendence:

As for the problem of transcendence, recently I read the latest version of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and I was pleased to observe that it no longer speaks of transcendence, because transcendence is a highly metaphysical notion that implies a distinction between a natural order and a supernatural order- and that way leads back to Aristotle. But if transcendence is called *charis*, meaning grace, the intervention of an illumination, then that is a perspective I could accept. In a certain sense, there is an element of “transcendence” in history because if something new comes about in its course, that can be defined as a form of transcendence of history itself. Hence, from my point of view, the very notion of transcendence has to be reexamined.²²⁰

As is often the case in his work, Vattimo seems a little at odds with himself here and seems to drift towards Pareyson’s position of accepting the possibility of an intervention *from outside* into history, culture, and discourse. This stands in contrast to his discussions elsewhere of Truth understood as consensus (that is, as what we might call an emergent property of discourse). Vattimo does little to resolve this tension within his thought (and anyway, can we really expect a

²²⁰Vattimo, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, Kindle.

firm and unproblematic resolution?), instead allowing it to abide as a provocation to further consideration and a testimony to the risky character of his thought.

We might suppose that the question of whether Truth emerges from outside of history and discourse or whether it is an emergent property of discourse within history is beside the point, a distinction without a difference. Certainly, we can understand Vattimo's reluctance to posit anything outside of history and discourse, however bound to those things it might be for its actual expression: this outside seems to carry with it the specter of the metaphysical "way the world is" and the notion of [T]ruth as a correspondence to an external and independent reality. Pareyson openly admits that the question of Truth is a metaphysical one before it is an epistemological one. On the other hand, the notion of Truth as external to the discourse through which it becomes present is perhaps more satisfying in the sense that it offers us an account of the fact of the emergence of novelty into history (which even Vattimo is, at least occasionally, obliged to acknowledge and try to account for) and, correspondingly, providing an account of how not every feature of discourse that arises within history participates equally in Truth. After all, if Vattimo wants to identify Truth with consensus and community, surely it cannot be just reducible to these things. Even Fascists arrive at consensus and form communities. For Pareyson, Truth stands above and beyond discourse precisely insofar as it allows us to reject these by applying to them a standard that, strictly speaking, is outside of discourse itself: precisely the openness to inexhaustibility through which a Truth becomes present to us as Truth. Vattimo certainly has no qualms about asserting the existence of a similar mediating factor in his own thought, but he is much more careful to identify this as a contingent feature of his own tradition, a manifestation of Caritas. Correspondingly, the concept, for Vattimo, carries a problematic cultural specificity (with which we are obliged to deal at some length elsewhere). Pareyson, who

after all is less cautious about engaging explicitly in a more old fashioned, metaphysical style of thought, can give offer the reassurance that

...when I undertake to philosophize, I am moved by a necessity common to every thinking being: The need for truth. It is not my philosophy to which I am dedicated: it is *philosophy itself* that I serve, even if, in such service, I devise a philosophy of my own.²²¹

Indeed, if there is a question of cultural specificity at play here, it is surely no more troubling than that of individual specificity: “A human being who philosophizes in her own way nevertheless philosophizes; indeed there is but one way of philosophizing and that is to do one’s own.”²²² In fact, such questions merely demonstrate the shared and transcendent character of Truth and, indeed, are that through which Truth is able to become present to us at all. Here again we find ourselves drifting back to the question of cross-cultural discourse, but to prevent further digression we can simply note that Pareyson’s approach to these questions carries with it the mark of his particular religiosity. The ever-present threat of the denial of discourse, community, and plurality stands as a manifestation of human sinfulness (and all the better for the universality of the danger!) against which stands the figure of Christ, whose death marks the boundary point of this impulse, the turning of negativity back upon itself and hence the overcoming of the negative impulse in favor of the Truth that is Love. For Pareyson, the drama of the Passion represents a crisis point for the human character as such, rather than, as for Vattimo, a feature of one culture which perhaps solicits a sort of confrontation between and across cultures.

Might these positions on the nature of Truth, a seemingly vital point of departure between master and student, yet be reconciled? One possible solution appears, once again, to take us back into the realm of negativity. In various configurations, postmodern philosophers have sought to

²²¹Pareyson, *Existence, Interpretation, and Freedom*, 54.

²²²Pareyson, *Existence, Interpretation, and Freedom*, 54.

reestablish common ground by way of citing the human experience of finitude. Butler writes about the opaqueness of the subject to herself (understood here as the experience from birth as an emergence from a past to which we will never obtain access) in a way that resonates nicely with Vattimo's understanding of being a product of an initiative not his own. As for Vattimo, the recognition of our finitude is tied up in the very possibility of an ethics:

An ability to affirm what is contingent and incoherent in oneself may allow one to affirm others who may or may not "mirror" one's own constitution. There is, after all, always the tacit operation of the mirror in Hegel's concept of reciprocal recognition, since I must somehow see that the other is like me, and see that the other is making the same recognition of our likeness. There is a lot of light in the Hegelian room, and the mirrors have the happy coincidence of usually being windows as well. This view of recognition does not encounter an exteriority that resists a bad affinity or recursive mimesis. There is no opacity that shadows these windows or dims that light. In consequence, we might consider a certain post-Hegelian reading of the scene of recognition in which my own opacity occasions my capacity to confer a certain kind of recognition on others. It would be, perhaps, an ethics based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves.²²³

In a sense, then, our position of being opaque to ourselves, as being embodied beings whose origins remain shrouded in a preconscious past that we cannot recollect or as beings always-already thrown into contexts not of our creation, stands as a, necessarily irreducible, ground of commonality with our fellows beings. We share a certain precarious position, we are not God (one thinks of the provocative title of Vattimo's 2010 autobiography) or the Cosmic All, we are at risk and amidst others who are affected by our actions.

Two attributes of this situatedness and our resulting opaqueness to ourselves hold particular import for theology. Firstly and most obviously, this recognition lends itself to a theology of fallenness:

²²³Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 1st Edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 41.

Sin is, in this sense, “original” to us: it co-originate us. I did not chose ancestors’ slaveholding, my nation’s aggressions. Yet such preconditions have shaped, privileged, and deformed “me”- like a contagious disease, as Augustine would say (yes, we are all connected). If one earthling falls into alienation, into greed, into domination- that sin will infect its relations and thus in part constitute all who follow. A relation is a repetition: recapitulation.²²⁴

Similarly, of course, risk takes the form of the possibility of wrong turns, lost opportunities, and our recurrent impulse to deny our finitude in favor of some assertion or other of a more secure-seeming absolutism. As Keller further notes, “I stand not guilty for the patterned chaos of relations preforming me- but responsible...I become guilty if I do not take responsibility for the effects of past relations upon me now, as I affect the future.”²²⁵ Not without reason does Vattimo make much of the Italian expression *ce peccato*: “What a sin!” expressed in much the same way we English-speakers would say “What a pity!” at an opportunity missed.

For Vattimo himself, of course, the network of connectivity to which Keller alludes represents a discursive community mediated by the demands of charity. Nonetheless, his configuration of the universality of sin and of the corresponding need for divine justice mirrors Keller’s own:

God may well be judge and yet forgive: this is ultimately the mystery we have to reckon with. And it becomes more intelligible if we recognize that we all stand in need of forgiveness; not because we have broken sacred principles that were metaphysically sanctioned, but rather because we have ‘failed’ towards those whom we were supposed to love- God himself perhaps (who is not, as we have often been told, identical with the natural law) and the neighbor through whom God becomes present to us.²²⁶

Here again we see, for all his occasional employment of the language of post-metaphysics, Vattimo engaging in an explicit metaphysical project, albeit a weakened (Keller might say

²²⁴Catherine Keller, *Faces of the Deep*, 1st Edition (New York: Routledge, 2002), 80.

²²⁵Keller, *Faces of the Deep*, 80.

²²⁶Vattimo, *Belief*, 90.

irreducible) one. If Keller ventures into a realm where Vattimo is disinclined to follow, it is, like Butler, that of an explicit materiality:

The habit of disrecreation is healed, inasmuch as it can be healed, not by a one-time, unmoved incarnational solid, but by the capacitating flux of what, for us mammals, is an *ever carnal grace*.²²⁷

While the inclusion or exclusion of materiality (considered more fully elsewhere) has important implications for Vattimo's project in its own right, for our current purposes, it suffices to abide in the commonality of the messy network of communitarian interrelatedness, where it fails, represents the ubiquity of sin, then that which allows community to grow and thrive is precisely a manifestation of divine healing in the world. The Catholic liturgy is structured on the ritual revisiting of the events of the life of Christ; events that, while historical, are nonetheless never held as being exhausted by their historicity but rather are taken as preconditions for an ongoing exercise by a living community to which they impart the spirit of a still active divine presence. If we reconfigure, following Vattimo, the traditionally totalizing underpinnings of this approach to religious life, we find that it fits remarkably well with the sort of emphasis on community, interrelatedness, and movement (in a word, process thought!) that resounds in Keller's work.

We have, at length, considered a necessarily weakened and reconfigured notion of transcendence, understood as the emergence of Truth into the network of interrelations in which we finite human beings always-already find ourselves. We have considered the question of sin and of the grace by which it can be addressed. We have even considered the revelatory character of religious thought and the refusal to attempt the conceptual enclosure of religious concepts and practices that would reduce those things to mere idols. Taken together, these speculations form an assertion, against the temptation of negativity, of the possibility of a weakened but vital and

²²⁷Keller, *Faces of the Deep*, 81.

productive form of religious life. With this assertion in mind, we turn our attentions to the troubling question of religious institutions and power structures.

Section 4: An Ecclesiology, After All

The question remains, of course, of what the Church as an institution would look like within Vattimo's framework. We have seen already that individual cultural practice, such as Vattimo's own, remains possible when we refuse to treat it as a manifestation of an unproblematic absolute, but rather as remaining within a mythological mindset which refuses translation (and hence problematizes all such absolutes). This already gives us a primordial framework for the Church understood precisely as a shared body of religious practice. To what extent, however, does it leave intact the ecclesiastical function of the Church?

Vattimo certainly maintains a suspicion of the proactive and political leanings of the Church hierarchy, condemning the Church's teaching on homosexuality, women clergy, prophylactics and the like as representing a strong, metaphysical world view. Indeed, for Vattimo, the metaphysics of the Church and its totalitarianism are linked to the particular historical circumstances which confronted it:

...the endurance of metaphysics in Augustine, as in all the Church fathers and medieval thinkers, maybe be understood above all in light of the social and political responsibilities that the Church had to take over after the fall of the Roman Empire. Indeed, the remnants of the ancient social institutions, and the culture that they expressed, rested on the shoulders of the Church. Furthermore, the Church developed into a rigid structure, which was unavoidably grounded on an objectivistic metaphysics and on scientific knowledge's claims about the natural world- as Galileo's case shows.²²⁸

²²⁸Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 108.

Indeed, one of the positive outcomes of the Church's carrying forward, not just this metaphysical legacy but also the seeds by which it might be weakened from within (by the concept of Christ's kenosis) is that it productively problematizes this role for the Church (that of guardian of the legacy of the Classical world of Greece and Rome) and lets us dare to imagine other ones. We have already seen that not all of these imaginings lead in positive directions; the Church may well become yet another identitarian faction fighting for its place in the world. Even if the Church were to take to heart Vattimo's reading of its nihilistic vocation, it could well fall back into its ancient imperialist habits, becoming to secularized Western modernity what it once was to Greece and Rome (a crusade for weakening sounding every bit as good as a crusade for democracy, human rights, etc.).

A more prevalent concern is that Vattimo's thought would lead to the end of the Church or to something so close to it as to make no difference. Following Guarino, Matthew Edward Harris argues that Vattimo's notion of community, far from salvaging a role for the Church, instead reduces its role to the point of absurdity and impotence. Referring to Vattimo's discussion of Joachim's "Age of the Spirit" in *After Christianity*, Harris writes:

Vattimo's Church is based on quiet contemplation, of listening to others, whereby most of the others to whom you listen are authors. Spiritualization is the process of bringing-out different meanings through reading the text of the Bible in different ways based on your own preferences, or at least- as Guarino recognizes- endlessly reinterpreting the Bible through consensus within your community, with 'others like you'. 'Truth' cannot be formed through consensus with others unlike you because they would be strong thinkers, not weak thinkers, which makes missionary, humanitarian and peace-making dialogues fruitless from a Vattimian standpoint. As a result, this ecclesiology is ill-equipped for our times where there are seemingly more divisions than ever, concerning Brexit, Trump, the refugee crisis and also about identity politics.²²⁹

²²⁹Harris, "Vattimo and Ecclesiology," 8.

The argument here is that a weakened conception of the Church would consist, first of all, of only weak thinkers (which Harris reads as “like minded thinkers”) and, second of all, that these thinkers would be confined to purely academic pursuits (the interpretation and reinterpretation of texts), rather than necessary political and social activity. Harris goes further, noting (and not entirely unfairly) that Vattimo has little to say on articles of faith (what might be termed the existing discursive content of religious thought). So, at the end of the day, we are left, not with a Church in any meaningful sense, but with a collection of politically impotent book clubs. A dire fate indeed for Christianity, once the self-proclaimed guiding light of civilization itself!

Harris deserves credit for tackling, in an explicit and proactive way, the question of how Vattimo’s thought relates to ecclesiology, but we can surely take issue with a number of his conclusions on this topic. The presence of a plurality of perspectives is precisely a precondition for a healthy discourse, a realization that, far from repudiating hermeneutics, can be justly said to be its beating heart. Likewise, the question of a willingness of diverse parties to engage in a discourse (a question considered more fully elsewhere in our inquiry) stems from a recognition of the principle of charity (that is, of a refusal to close off discourse, a preferencing for discourse over violent conflict, a willingness to affect and be affected by the never-entirely other) that, while arising, for Vattimo, from the intellectual, social, and spiritual legacy of the Christian faith is surely not without its echoes in many traditions (and, following Butler and Keller, perhaps not without a never-unproblematic groundedness in our shared finitude). All of that is, of course, leaving aside the question of how persuasive we find the negative move in Vattimo’s thought. Even if we simply regard Vattimo as a negative and descriptive figure, we are still confronted by his observation that a new and implacable age looms before the world, one pointed to by Nietzsche and Heidegger and one to which several generations of subsequent thinkers have felt

obliged, in their various ways, to address, on in which strong thought is everywhere finding itself problematized, cracked open, and made to perform in unimagined ways.

More concerning would be the other elements of Harris' argument: that the Church would become, following Vattimo's lead, merely a series of book clubs without any social, political, or spiritual relevance. In answer to this, we must firstly note that Vattimo's notion of the discursive, while certainly problematic, is wider than the term itself might suggest. Indeed, discourse does not merely take place between interlocutors about the Bible (with the latter as a merely passive object of inquiry) but *between* interlocutors *and* the Bible. As he notes in his dialogue with Girard (*Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*), Vattimo acknowledges that the classics are classics, not because of where they come from or, for that matter, because of some indelible feature of the human person to which they are able to speak, but rather, by virtue of their capacity to speak to people in different situations, at different points in history; by virtue, in a word, of seemingly always having new and worthwhile things to say to our individual listenings. As Vattimo notes in *Belief*, Christ Himself stands not merely as an interpreter of but an *interpretation* of Scripture and of the extra-Scriptural messianic tradition; indeed, a very risk one, one that shocked and scandalized the authorities of His day!

We must likewise remember the Catholic context from which Vattimo emerges and to which he addresses himself. Religious activity for Catholics is not and has never been reducible to Bible study, not least because Catholics do not regard the Bible as the sole source of revelation. Hence, at minimum, we would need to welcome yet another interlocutor in the form of sacred tradition. Vattimo, of course, would caution against imbuing tradition (as is the wont of Catholic orthodoxy) with an absolute and metaphysical character, but he certainly is not shy about viewing it as a partner in discourse and, indeed, one that has produced and therefore

addressed itself to him (Belief 92). It is a partner to which we can feel a sense of fidelity, admiration, and affection (which is itself never unconnected with the affection and respect that we have for the community of believers of which we are a part). Tradition, no less than scripture, addresses itself to believers who, in turn, are called to respond in their various ways and the resulting plurality, in turn, reveals the ontological richness of the tradition itself. As Badiou so memorably put it “Differences, like instrumental tones, provide us with the recognizable univocity that makes up the melody of the True.”²³⁰

If we maintain, then, roles for the community, the Scriptures, and tradition as participants in religious discourse, we have yet to consider the thornier question of the role of the institutional Church. By invoking the institutional Church, we draw a distinction between the community of believers (“where two or three are gathered in my name...”²³¹) and the various structures that have come, historically, to be associated with Catholicism: the Vatican, bishops, cardinals, priests, religious brothers and sisters, the code of canon law, the various ministries and offices, and, perhaps most of all, the Papacy. It may be that this dividing line is itself in need of weakening, that these structures, insofar as they can continue to exist at all, must be made accountable to and representative of the broader community of believers that they avowedly represent. And let us be clear about what this would mean: Yes, by the inclusion of women! Yes, by the democratization of certain offices and yes, by the abolition of others! Yes, by, in a word, opening the doors to at least some of the liberalizing reforms that Christianity was so instrumental in introducing to the West! Here, surely, we are still sharing a platform with Vattimo’s explicit and oft-repeated positions on these topics and, indeed, seeing a bearing out of

²³⁰Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: Foundations of Universalism*, translated Ray Brassier, 1st Edition, (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2003), 106.

²³¹Matthew 18:19-20.

the negative gesture in the assertion that the strong structures of the Church, the metaphysical and violent structures, must be weakened.

In the spirit of weakening as *verwindung* (in contrast to *überwindung*), the sorts of reforms mentioned above need not entail a complete passing away of the structures involved. Vattimo's discussion of the Church remains largely in negative territory. He speaks and writes approvingly of the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI and of Pope Francis' pulling back from strong, metaphysical language and contentious culture war topics. In his dialogue with Girard, he remarks that his preference would be that the Pope refrain from discussing such questions as the permissibility of condoms. In a word, then, Vattimo, quite unsurprisingly, calls into question what orthodoxy would call the Magisterial authority of the Catholic Church: Its capacity to articulate itself, infallibly, on questions of faith and morals.

If there is a role left for the institutional Church, then, it cannot be the hierarchical and totalitarian one to which it has become accustomed. Instead, we could imagine a place for Popes and Bishops and Cardinals, not as absolute authorities, but as participants in the community's engagement with the tradition. These offices would no longer make pronouncements from on high but would instead stand as representatives of the continuity of the tradition and of the unity of the community, not under the banner of violent absolutism, but in the spirit of charity and shared fellowship. In a word, then, the hierarchy of the Church would be a hierarchy no longer but would, in a sublime imitation of Christ, empty itself and, in so doing, elevate those previously relegated to the margins.

We must, at last, address the question of whether a weakened Church would indeed be one condemned to political and social impotence. It is instructive to remember here that Vattimo's religious motivations are not separable from his ethical ones. Indeed, Christianity's

role in the process of weakening is precisely tied to the need for charity and for an ongoing and productive social engagement. As Vattimo writes,

Secularization concerns not just the substance of Scripture but also and inseparably the structure and order of the world. With no illusion over natural laws, and solely on the basis of the commandment of charity, Christians move through the world order according to the principles proper to it. They obey the rules of the game and do not presume that their appeal to the 'supernatural' gives them any right to break them. Yet they must also look upon this order as a system that needs to become lighter, less punitive, more open to recognize the (sometimes good), reasons of the culprits, as well as the rights of the victims.²³²

It would be deeply misleading to view the enterprise of weakening as consisting merely of textual analysis (still less merely of the Bible). Instead, the process of weakening represents not just a reconfiguration of intellectual space but also a corresponding change to social and political space, hence Vattimo's connection of the process not just to what we might call philosophical postmodernity (understood as a series of abstract critical projects) but also in things like democratic social institutions and projects of political and social emancipation (in which, notwithstanding the famed anecdote about a young Vattimo declining to participate in street activism in favor of continuing his studies with Pareyson, he has been a lifelong participant).

Section 5: The Work Still to be Done

The foregoing speculations stand, not as finished accomplishments but as invitations to the extensive and important work still to be done in the articulation of a weakened religiosity. Religious institutions and a broad allowance for community and religious practice are all very well, but, for Catholics in particular, burning questions still remain. For Catholics, God does not become present to believers, after all, merely in the participation in a community in the broad

²³²Vattimo, *Belief*, 91.

sense but also and perhaps more fundamentally, in the Sacraments carried forward by that community. If the Eucharist is, as the Catechism says, “the source and summit of Christian life”²³³ what role remains for it in an age when it is no longer possible to take the doctrine of transubstantiation (a term we owe to the Fourth Lateran Council and a concept we owe to the adoption by Catholic philosophers of Aristotelean metaphysics in the late 13th century) seriously? For that matter, what would a weakened supernaturalism, if it is possible (or desirable) at all, even look like?

There is an extent to which the move of weakening has already made itself present in these areas. Certainly, reductionist scientism is no less weakened than dogmatic religiosity by the conditions of our present age. Likewise, on an institutional level, if the Roman Church, whose Sacraments have traditionally been articulated in explicitly philosophical and metaphysical terms, can accept (via for instance, the 1993 *Directory on Ecumenism* and canon 844) the licitness in principle of the Sacraments of the Eastern Churches, who historically have declined to articulate the Sacraments in a bindingly philosophical way (although there is surely a different type of metaphysics at play in the appeal to mystery), we can at least see a potential for the shift in focus from a specific, metaphysical mechanism of action to a more broadly construed belief in the True Presence of God in the Sacraments. We can, then, imagine a negative conception of the Sacraments or supernaturalism, based on the idea that we cannot enclose these topics in a strictly metaphysical way (but also acknowledging that mere mysticism or skepticism too would represent such a foreclosure). This too, however, can be instead understood as an opening up: if we conceive of Being, not in a metaphysical sense, but, as Vattimo repeatedly urges, as event, then these topics too call out to use for engagement and interpretation, within history and as parts

²³³Catechism of the Catholic Church Paragraph 1324.

of a community inaugurated by “an initiative not [its] own.” We should look forward, with enthusiasm and hope, to the productive work still to be done in these areas, while remembering, with Pareyson, that our encounter with religion can speak to philosophy (and politics and myriad other disciplines besides) but is precisely not exhausted by that speaking:

In short, myth is experience of reality and truth; it is experienced truth and reality, which implies total involvement: humanity and transcendence, human beings and God. Its sense is deep, beyond meanings. Myth is that primogenial interpretation of truth which every human being is to herself; it is truth in that it primarily speaks to everyone; it is memory of origin and the remembrance of the immemorial; it is attentiveness to unobjectifiable transcendence; it is the very revelation of Being, of truth, and of divinity: it is God insofar as he speaks to human beings; it is God who speaks to human beings. This is why religious experience must be grasped at a deep level, where it is inseparable from thought and poetry, poetical in its symbolism and truthful in its revelatory power.²³⁴

We should not despair of productive intellectual work merely because that work confronts us with the tension between particular (never complete) conceptualizations and an ontology of the inexhaustible. Indeed, it is this very tension (now brought to light by our denial of the enclosure represented by traditional, totalitarian metaphysics) that will allow productive work to take place.

²³⁴Pareyson, *Existence, Interpretation, Freedom*, 226.

Chapter 6: The Implications of our Discussion for Cross-Cultural Discourse

Our consideration of the cross-cultural implications of Vattimo's project confronts us, first of all, as a question of contexts. Such a question is well suited to any hermeneutic project, defined, as such a project must be, by a recognition of our situatedness within contexts and our corresponding interest in both interpreting, from within, those contexts and in making use of the resources provided and entailed by them to address our present circumstances. Nowhere is the intermingling of what we have dealt with previously as the positive and negative gesture of Vattimo's thought found more clearly than here, where concurrently we find the critical move of a refusal to violently assert our contingency as universality coupled with a renewed and positive embrace of that contingency as a wellspring of resources for positive intellectual, social, and spiritual activity. From this general observation, we proceed to the specific ways in which contexts concern the extension of our inquiry to the space of cultural interaction.

Firstly and most obviously, we confront this issue as it manifests in the question of Vattimo's rootedness in his particular cultural milieu. As Vattimo repeatedly affirms, he is a product of "an initiative not his own." Specifically, Vattimo recognizes that his thought arises as a reading of the tradition in which he finds himself and one motivated by the particular aesthetic sense imparted by that tradition. Coupled with this recognition is Vattimo's broader recognition of our inescapable rootedness in contexts and a corresponding suspicion of universalizing narratives. The metaphysical absolutes that featured so prominently in the canon of Western Philosophy are revealed by to be cultural and historically specific after all. The question arises, then, of whether Vattimo's thought can be applied outside of the cultural contexts in which it

arose and, indeed, whether doing so is even desirable, rather than merely a reappearance of cultural imperialism.²³⁵

The second level at which cultural context confronts us has to do precisely with the urgency of the question in our present historical situation. Immigration, the neo-imperial adventures of the Western powers over the last two decades (and beyond), international terrorism, economic and cultural globalization, all confront us in the West with the pressing nature of cross-cultural discourse. Relatedly, there is an increasing concern with multiculturalism. Questions of cultural appropriation and cross-cultural violence have found themselves thrust, not only into the academic discourse (of ethics, postcolonial thought, and the myriad disciplines grouped under the frustratingly broad rubric of “theory”), or even into the related discourses of politics and foreign relations, but into the popular discourse. From the left, comes an increasing concern with sensitivity to the autonomy and dignity of cultural groups, particularly ones burdened by long and painful histories of disenfranchisement and exploitation. From the right, come various anxieties about the erosion of shared national narratives (revealed, troublingly, to be creations of and for the benefits of privileged groups) and a corresponding

²³⁵David Edward Rose’s configuration of Vattimo’s relationship to liberalism proves interesting here. In contrast to Rawls, for whom liberalism is imposed upon plurality as a means of avoiding conflict, for Vattimo, something like liberalism (we would say the various political manifestations of weakening) arises from plurality itself. Correspondingly, Rose asserts: “Vattimo is, however, perhaps too conservative: the agent’s first obligation is to the tradition from which she speaks and, at times, his position is in danger of being nothing but a sociological description of postmodern society rather than a normative prescription of certain ethical values. The subject for Vattimo must listen to her tradition and be responsible for her interpretation of it, yet the values conferred on her cannot play the role of legitimation in a plural society.” At stake in the question of cultural particularity, then, is the very political efficacy of Vattimo’s project for modern, pluralistic society. David Edward Rose, “Essere Italiano: The Provenance of Vattimo,” *Philosophy Today*, 2016, 7.

descent into identitarian struggle (understood as an unleashed will to power).²³⁶ The deployment of these various concerns as increasingly prominent political and cultural wedge issues illustrates the opening up and contestation of new cultural spaces in the discourse of the modern West.

We should consider, before moving on to the specific question of contexts, what exactly we mean by cross-cultural discourse. Mostly obviously, this refers to interactions between cultural groups, both on a global level (with respect to policy making) and at a domestic level (multiculturalism). What is being dealt with more broadly by these questions, however, is the issue of communication outside of one's particular situatedness. Hence, the question applies no less to discourses of gender/sex, ability/disability, and so on than to those of culture, race, class or religion. Obviously, the issues affecting different types of identity categories are possessed of a specificity that deserves better than to be merely brushed aside. Our intent here is not to trivialize those differences but rather to provide a starting point for using Vattimo's thought, in its negativity and positivity and in collaboration with distinct but compatible intellectual projects, to address the possibility and desirability of productive emancipatory discourse between identity groups and, in particular, between the historically powerful and the historically marginalized.

To begin with the question of Vattimo's own rootedness in particular contexts and the implications of that rootedness for the cross-cultural implication of his project, we should firstly confess that this rootedness does function as a sort of limit point. In other words, Vattimo's thought carries openly a recognition of its own contingency. In autobiographical statements and works, Vattimo is not above acknowledging not only his indebtedness to the tradition from

²³⁶In extreme cases, the concern with cultural particularity itself is regarded as merely another power move, either on behalf some universalizing narrative or other (for instance, Marxism) or on behalf of one identity group or another.

which he emerges (with all its myriad inflections and influences) but also that his reading of that tradition is a risky one, born of a preference that arises from an aesthetic and political sense that is itself historically and culturally conditioned. Vattimo is careful to highlight these components of his thought to avoid giving the impression that he is articulating a universal or objective or unproblematic system of thought (to replace those that he weakens from within).

With this observation in mind, we are left to proceed as Vattimo himself does, with an analysis of the implications of the tradition for cross-cultural discourse. Historically, of course, the Catholic heritage to which Vattimo has such a strong connection has maintained a focus on universality and this focus has been manifest in the claim of the Church to be in possession of an objective, metaphysical [T]ruth; a [T]ruth, in a word, that is accessible to all people, regardless of individual attributes or historical or cultural particularity. This claim has grounded the very worst imperialisms with which the Church has been associated and continues to dwell in its still-living impulse to impose, for instance, its particular (Thomistic) reading of bioethics, through overt lobbying at the national and international levels and through spiritual coercion at the individual level. The imposition of the Catholic worldview is portrayed as no imposition at all, but as a liberation from sin and error, a revelation of “the way things really are.” Naturally enough, any coercion undertaken towards this end is done for the greater good of the victim and thus is morally justified.

The focus of the Church on universality, in turn, became a living part of the Western tradition more broadly. Indeed, the notion of a dichotomy between civilization and barbarism, originally a localized, linguistic distinction, was elevated to the status of an enforced “global” norm by the mechanism of its assimilation by the Roman Empire, and the Catholic Church adopted that legacy with all that it entailed (and we have already dealt, at some length, with the

historical circumstances that thrust the Church into a position of guardian of this notion, indelibly marking its development, often to the detriment of its more spiritual vocation). What we should not disregard is that this notion of civilization as a standard was lent a new and terrible strength by the notion, imparted by the newborn institutionalized Christianity, of a supervening order to the universe (a notion that existed for the Greeks only in an undeveloped form). This notion of a supervening order (associated with the idea of a transcendent God over and against the immanence of the world) persisted and lent strength to the metaphysical tradition and to the various subsequent imperialisms (large and small) that drew their strength from it. Indeed, we find its mark even on modern science, for which it stands as an often unacknowledged (perhaps even scandalous) presupposition.²³⁷

In the spirit of Vattimo, we can nonetheless review this universalizing history and find in it what the later Heidegger would term “another beginning.” Certainly, it is easy to think of the universalizing impulse of Catholicism as being embodied in the Church’s violent imposition of orthodoxy. However much this current has defined the history of the institutional Church, no less important are the countless localized, lived expressions of the faith. Indeed, everywhere Catholicism goes there can be found a cascade of particularized expressions, symbols, saints, rituals, works of art, and so on, all flourishing, alongside and sometimes in spite of the explicit metaphysical authoritarianism of the institutional Church. Just as significant are the by now well-

²³⁷“More or less all enlightenment thinkers, Hegel, Marx, positivists, historians of every type, consider the meaning of history to be the realization of civilization, that is, of the form of Western European man. Just as history may be thought of as unilinear only from the point of view as one placed at the center. So, the conception of progress requires a certain ideal of man as its criterion. In modernity, however, the criterion has always been that of modern European man—as if to say: we Europeans are the best form of humanity and the entire course of history is directed to the more or less complete realization of that ideal.” Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, (New York: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 3-4.

known elements of syncretism at the heart of the faith (from the placement and naming of major feasts, to the supplanting of pre-Christian rituals, images, and figures without carefully tailored, Christianized replacements). Even the Church's theology would be unrecognizable without its incorporation over centuries of Classical Thought (first the Neoplatonism of Augustine, then the Aristotelianism of Aquinas). If the Catholic Church, at its worst, represents an impulse for self-assertion that plunges headlong into the suppression of difference by sameness, at its best, it represents (as Vattimo recognizes only too well) something very much like the hermeneutic project: a willingness to be made to speak to particularity and to be spoken to and impacted in turn.²³⁸

If the thread of the imposition of universality moves through the discourse of Western modernity, so too does the weakened counterpart that Vattimo identifies. In other words, while the history of the West has been one of imperialist violence, so too has it given rise to democracy, psychoanalysis, the notion of human rights, and similar manifestations of weakening:

The dissolution of the politics of description can also be found in the end of colonialism and in the rise of cultural anthropology. When cultural anthropology took shape as a discipline, it dissolved the myths of humanity's linear progress guided by the "more civilized" Western countries and allowed other interpretations to come forward. The end of metaphysics goes hand in hand with the end of modernity and the recognition of the interpretive nature of descriptions. In this postmodern condition, politics, instead of relating truth, must be guided by the interplay of minority and majority, that is, by democratic consensus.²³⁹

Even within Marxism, as metaphysical a system as any, there is a focus on the unmasking of power dynamics and the opening up of discursive and political space to the previously

²³⁸One thinks of the missionary work of Saint Patrick in Ireland, where great care was taken to incorporate the beliefs and customs of the pre-Christian Irish into a particularly Irish Christianity.

²³⁹Vattimo, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 78-79.

disenfranchised proletarian subject. This weakened and more authentically emancipatory interpretation of the universalizing vocation of Western modernity reads that impulse as expressed, not in the imposition of sameness upon difference, but on the removal of imposition, the bringing into discourse of an ever-wider range of participants and an encouragement of their capacity to critically evaluate the structures of which they are a part.

As a brief note of caution, we should observe here that Western civilization cannot be made to be identical with or reducible to Christianity (still less to Catholicism). Instead, we recognize that the identification of the self-dissolution of metaphysics within Western thought is a thread that Vattimo, speculatively, connects to certain impulses inherited from Christianity. However, the fact that Christianity is not as monolithic as it pretends is, in its own right, a sign of the often-unacknowledged instability internal to the (so-called) Christian West:

Hypocrisy and contamination are our Western legacy in which even the divine word darkens in mixing with metaphysics. God speaks authentically rather from another place, from an exteriority that Levinas thinks he can guarantee also insofar as he refers only to the *Old Testament* and to the people who have remained loyal to it, the Jews. However, as seems to be confirmed by the history of Jewish culture and by its presence as a lay factor within modern culture, Jewishness may not represent, as Levinas thinks, the opening of the way to an improbable listening to the radical alterity of the divine word, but rather the phenomenal element in which the nonunitarian character of Western tradition presents itself most emblematically. Jewish alterity, that is, should be perceived, not as the voice of an Other, radically stranger, but as a “disturbance” to the racial, political, and cultural unity of the Western world, as a recapitulatory example of all the elements of impurity and contamination constituting the essential laity and secularism of European civilization.²⁴⁰

Hence, the aforementioned process of bringing into discourse is not the only component of weakening for which Vattimo makes an allowance. Just as vital is the awareness of an already-being-in discourse, a recognition that a particular cultures are not (indeed, cannot be) monolithic.

²⁴⁰Gianni Vattimo, “Ontology of Actuality” as found in *Contemporary Italian Philosophy*, edited by Silvia Benso and Brian Schroeder, (New York: SUNY Press, 2007), 91.

As we shall see, this concession opens the way to a particularly fruitful shared resonance between Vattimo's thought and that of other thinkers.

With this speculative reading of history in mind, we should consider the sense in which the question of cultural discourse confronts us today. We should certainly avoid the perhaps understandable temptation to trivialize the issue of cultural conflict as a mere distraction from other concerns, such as economic inequity, environmental destruction, and the increasing encroachment of the society of total organization. It has long been clear, for instance, that these issues exert a disproportionate impact on marginalized cultural groups, both domestically and globally. Likewise, of course, questions of equity, social justice, and environmental preservation are always-already culturally inflected; tied up, that is to say, with particular notions of human flourishing (we remember once again that Vattimo's project arises from a contingent cultural motivation). Based on these observations, then, we can recognize the violent character of attempts to forestall the discussion of cultural concerns in favor of supposedly more "immediate" or "material" concerns. Indeed, it is a sad feature of the history of the advancement of marginalized groups that such advancement is almost invariably accompanied by admonitions against the advancement of others.²⁴¹

²⁴¹The history of the extension of suffrage in the United States certainly follows this pattern, albeit sometimes on allegedly strategic grounds (Frederick Douglass was famously a supporter of the extension of suffrage to black men and to women of all races, but argued in 1869, against a number of proponents of women's suffrage, that the former was much more urgent an issue than the latter). Perhaps more troubling on a theoretical level is the current agitation, in the Anglophone world, against inclusive measures for transgendered persons; agitation frequently advanced on the grounds that such measures are detrimental to (cisgender) gay rights, (cisgender) women's rights, or both. Neither the setting of marginalized groups against one another nor the (metaphysically inflected) policing of identity categories is anything new, of course, but we can nonetheless take these cases as a valuable demonstration of the ease with which emancipatory energy can be coopted by systems of control.

It would likewise be easy to misunderstand the impulses at play in the current discussion of culture in the West. What we seem, at first blush, to have, is the neurotic resurgence of metaphysics, on the one hand, and an unleashed, violent plurivocity on the other. The former persists for us in the residual efforts to impose, by economic, military, or social force, (albeit force often disguised as persuasion²⁴²) a consistent, shared narrative upon the world (certainly the “Washington Consensus” but also and perhaps more fundamentally, the Capitalist system of exploitation and commodification). The latter seems to be an unleashing of the Will to Power following the discrediting of universalizing metaphysical systems: people seize upon their contingent identities as their only remaining ground (a buttress against complete conceptual dissolution), band together, and scramble to carve out space in a sort of conceptually open free-for-all. Or, viewed more charitably, previously disenfranchised groups are at last given some mechanism for self-expression without an external imposition of universalizing narratives and are given license to speak or remain silent on their own behalf. However distinct these conditions may appear, a common thread runs through them: the residue of metaphysics that is found in the imposition of a global order upon a plurality of countries, cultures, and so on, likewise manifests in the exploitation by Capital of the proliferation of identity categories (through commodification of cultural resources, marketing to ever more specific identity grounds, and so on). Similarly, the loss of faith in universalizing narratives and the corresponding recognition of an ever-expanding range of identity groups leads to a neurotic and violent identitarian power struggle only insofar

²⁴²“The real enemy- *totalizing* rationalism- presents itself in the disguise of ‘persuasion,’ but this is just the wolf musing as sheep, as is its nature, it will finally *eat* the sheep! The wolf tends to appear in the form of ‘necessary first principles,’ which fittingly seem to ‘explain’ the whole universe (away); or it disguises itself as ‘transcendent argument,’ forcing us to accept necessities or otherwise be incoherent.” Roland Faber, “Surrationality and Chaosmosis” in *Secrets of Becoming*, 1st Edition, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 163.

as the groups involve accept tacit metaphysical assumptions about those categories (we are thinking here about the inclination to think of cultures as atomistic) or about the relationships between them (the supposition of a “natural” state of conflict, restrained only by the intervention of now-discredited universalizing narratives).

It is worthwhile to further discuss the metaphysical residue that persists in many contemporary discussions of culture. As we have already observed, even the well-meaning condemnation of cultural appropriation can often stray into the metaphysical and violent suppression of discussion on behalf of an essentialist view of the culture involved. One hardly needs mention the even more explicit essentialism of identitarian supremacist groups of all stripes. The issue here is precisely the denial of the ontologically messy character of identity groups. When we analyze cultures and their defining attributes, rituals, artistic forms, and so on, we find hybridizations, points of intersection (and yes, clashing), borrowings (and yes, thefts). In a word, we find *mutual constitution*, and networks of *relationality*, with identity categories functioning not as ontologically closed-off atoms but as points of intersection and that in a discursive (and perhaps not *just* discursive) space defined by flux rather than by fixity.²⁴³

²⁴³An instructive summary of this point (as it stands as a point of intersection between those thinkers grouped, at times uneasily, under the shared rubric of process thought) is as follows: “One of the important implications of this Chaomosis of vibrations is that literally nothing is excluded, and everything can and should be restated as a series of dis/harmonic vibrations: whether it be an ‘object’ like the pyramid with its change through time, the perceiving relationship of a ‘subject’ in its ‘perceiving event’ with this object, or the experience of the ‘subject’ itself in being its own ‘object’ of perception. In all cases, the event of becoming is the process by which nothing that happens is, in its subjective/objective moments, a predicate of an underlying substrate; rather, that which becomes repeats and alters patterns, structures, or modes of existence in order to *become* what it seems to be from the outset, but only *is* by reinstantiating patterns of in new events- be it the pyramid, the perceiving Self, or the transcendental Self of Apperception. Indeed, *this* deconstruction of the pinnacle of modern philosophy and modern society- the Cartesian *ego cogito* in the form of the Kantian transcendental unity of the Self- is the ‘convergent vibration,’ i.e. the *event* in which (cosmologically for Whitehead and Deleuze

In venturing this relational ontology as having something to contribute to our discussion of how Vattimo's thought can be made to speak to the question of cross-cultural discourse, we are obviously moving beyond Vattimo himself and even beyond figures such as Rorty and Foucault and into a realm more closely connected to process thinkers such as Whitehead and Deleuze, a realm defined by relationality and becoming. Accept though we may that Vattimo's project is more positive and constructive than is often credited, putting him into discourse with process thought must nonetheless be regarded as a profoundly risk, even jarring move. The negative comes crashing back in upon us, as we look upon the chaosmosis and recall that movement and relationality themselves do not promise an unproblematic deliverance from the risks of metaphysical violence; scientism acknowledges flux (of a sort) but is no less metaphysical and violent for doing so (the fallibilism of science serving only to make its presuppositions all the more inaccessible and its discussions all the more delimited)²⁴⁴ and relationality can be just as easily configured as the web that enframes us (in the late Heideggerian sense) or subjectifies us (in the late-Foucaudian sense) as the symbol of our connectedness to and condition of being with the (never entirely) Other.²⁴⁵

Nonetheless, if it would be a violence to stretch even a positive Vattimo into the shape of a process thinker, we can still acknowledge a number of shared resonances, and if there is a risk in that, we can bear it gladly and recall yet again that the impulse to eliminate all risk is precisely

and culturally and politically in Butler) the Self emerges as their 'togetherness.'" Roland Faber. "Negotiating Becoming" in *Secrets of Becoming*, 13.

²⁴⁴We can go further even than this observation: Fascism too fetishized movement (or at least *speed*). See Emily Braun, "Making Waves: Giacomo Balla and Emilio Pucci" in *The Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, Volume 20, Number 1, 67-82.

²⁴⁵Although surely any criticism on this score applies just as well to Vattimo's own conception of *discourse*.

a residue of an earlier metaphysical violence in its own right! So, we can compare, productively, the notion of mutual constitution as it exists in process thought, with the relationality that is a necessary part of the discursive space as Vattimo conceives it, and further recall that participation in this space is precisely an affair of openness and connection, of a willingness to impact and be impacted.²⁴⁶ The corresponding and shared recognition of our rootedness in contexts, cultures, and traditions entails precisely the recognition that this moving, growing, and changing relationality is always-already in place and that it has a history to which we are likewise connected. This historicity is something to which we are responsible, in the sense of its being a legacy that we carry on, as Pareyson and Vattimo would put it, but also something *for* which we are responsible, as Keller reminds us, insofar as we carry forward the habits of discretion and the legacy of originary violence with us and confront a corresponding call to heal these points of rupture where we can (and can we find a better way than this of translating the project of the reduction of violence into *process theological terms*?). What process gives to weak thought and hermeneutics, then, is the *emphasis* on relationality and flux and the corresponding *recognition* that the participants in discourse are never-entirely Other, they are always-already involved with and constituting each other *without* dissolving into one another (as Pannikar reminds us) or into an undifferentiated mass.²⁴⁷ Coupled to this is the recognition that violence can certainly take the form of Keller's "discreation", of connections severed or missed or never-allowed-to-become (and the playing out of these patterns of disruption over the course of time), through conscious and malicious effort (blockings, cuttings off, and so on), certainly, but also

²⁴⁶Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, 51.

²⁴⁷Raymond Pannikar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, Revised Edition, (Washington, Paulist Press, 1991).

through replicative errors, wrong turns, dead ends.²⁴⁸ To return something to process from the standpoint of weak thought, we may say that these recurrent and perhaps ineradicable forms of violence arising again and again from the chaosmosis itself are healed, insofar as they can be healed, certainly by what we have called the negative, critical (and yes, self-critical gesture) of breakings open and refusals of ossification, but also by the affirmation of the inexhaustible ontological richness that becomes present to us in our ongoing engagement with plurality (and which provides the vitality for the network of interrelationships itself; an entry point for novelty into what otherwise could be regarded as a closed system, lifelessly reconfiguring itself).

With these theoretical considerations in mind, it is worthwhile to consider, practically, what role a modified weak thought might have to play in facilitating cross cultural discourse. If we might be tempted, in the spirit of negativity, to regard rootedness as a validation for a dismissal of the whole enterprise, in favor of cultures (and those within/composing/constituted by identity categories more broadly) “keeping to themselves” as a means of avoiding violence, we can temper that temptation with the paired observations that this sort of suppression of discourse would itself represent a form of violence and that, in any case, cultures are not the ontologically discrete entities that we sometimes imagine them to be. The caution, however, is

²⁴⁸“In a sense of a theology of becoming also finds in the ‘deeply active’ swell of *tehom* the source of sin. For we read the *tehom* as the chaosmic spontaneity of all becoming; as analogous to what Whitehead calls the ‘substantial activity,’ or later the ‘creativity’ of which all creation is an articulation. It is the indeterminacy of a freedom to actualize good or ill. So we too may, with Augustine, locate evil in a deformation of freedom. From this perspective ‘sin’ appears not as disobedience but has discretion, that is, creaturely relations that deny and exploit their own interrelations. Sin is in this sense ‘original’ to us: it co-originate us. I did not choose my ancestors’ slaveholding, my nation’s aggressions. Yet such preconditions have shaped, privileged and deformed ‘me’ - like a contagious disease, as Augustine would say (yes, we are all connected). If one earthling falls into alienation, into greed, into domination- that sin will infect its relations and thus in part constitute all who follow. A relation is a repetition: recapitulation.” Keller, *Faces of the Deep*, 80-81.

one to be tempered but not dismissed: the specter of resurgent (or perhaps, merely reconfigured) imperialism looms as large now as in centuries past. It is necessary to remain on guard, in particular, against imperialisms conducted on the behalf of weakening (as Vattimo repeatedly affirms).

With this caution in mind, it is nonetheless appropriate to consider the positive move that Vattimo's thought permits with respect to cross-cultural discourse. As we have previously discussed, the universality that has historically featured so prominently in Western thought can be read, not only with respect to its connection to imperialism and violence, but to its expression in weakening (democratic institutions, rights talk, and so on). As Vattimo puts it

Christianity frees itself from complicity with the imperialist ideals of European modernity in the wake of a series of historical experiences in which the former colonized nations turned against their "Christian" dominators in the name, too, of a more authentic interpretation of the biblical message. Christianity was forced to recover its lay inclination- to present itself as the promoter of a free dialogical space of religions, world views, ideal dispositions, and other cultures-because in its missionary vocation it had to confront new, unheard of historical experiences. Christianity cannot realize its missionary vocation within the new order of relations among nations and different peoples and cultures by stressing its own doctrinal, moral, and disciplinary specificity. Instead, it can take part in a conflictual or comparative dialogue with other cultures and religions by appealing to its specific lay orientation (since the same stress is not found in those other cultures and religions). This proposal could be summed up with the slogan "from universality to hospitality."²⁴⁹

The reconfiguration of the Christian and broader European legacy of universalization (and, for that matter, the alleged "civilizing mission") here takes the form of the opening up of space in which cultural discourse can occur, particularly where it concerns previously marginalized groups. This opening up of space, in turn, represents a kind of charity, a receptivity to the

²⁴⁹Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 100.

inherent risks and challenges of cultural discourse and a willingness to allow, at least to an extent, these difficulties to play out:

Hospitality... is not realized if not as a placement of oneself in the hands of one's guest, that is, an entrustment of oneself to him. In intercultural or interreligious dialogue, this signifies acknowledging that the other might be right. If Christian identity, applying the principle of charity, takes the shape of hospitality in the dialogue between religions and cultures, *it must limit itself almost entirely to listening*, and thus giving voice to the guests.²⁵⁰

The gesture here, we see, is principally one of the self-weakening impulse of Western metaphysics, a refusal of the violent suppression or domination of discourse coupled to a receptivity to the (never entirely) Other.²⁵¹

It would be easy to regard the opening up of space as a principally negative process, followed by a sort of apolitical quietism by the powerful. Indeed, there seems even to be a sort of *imitatio Dei* at play here. After all, (and well do we recall the paradox of tolerance here) even the keeping open of discursive space (referred to previously) through the prevention and disruption of violence represents itself a sort of de-cision, a turning of violence against itself (and here we venture beyond the kenosis of the incarnation, to which Vattimo refers most directly, to the kenosis of the Cross, from which he, though not his mentor Pareyson, is inclined to shy away). However, we cannot conclude from this observation that this process is merely negative. Indeed, while placing the powerful in a position to adjudicate the suitability of all supposed Others for participation in a shared discursive space would simply be another form of violent domination,

²⁵⁰Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 101 (Emphasis mine).

²⁵¹“Hermeneutics in the sphere of philology and the historical sciences is not ‘knowledge as domination’ - .e. an appropriation as taking possession; rather, it consists in subordinating ourselves to the text’s claim to dominate our minds. Of this, however, legal and theological hermeneutics are the true model. To interpret the law’s will or the promises of God is clearly not a form of domination but of service.” Hans George Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 310.

there nonetheless remains a space for provocations and interventions.²⁵² The question here is what such gestures should look like (again, we remain under the shadow of a possible resurgent imperialism).²⁵³ The image of provocation perhaps works best when we do not regard it as endless critique, still less as some sort of sanity test or training that conditions the possibility of participation in discourse, but rather (in the spirit, again, of hospitality) as an invitation or, to again borrow from process language, a “lure of novelty,” indeed, one that carries within it the promise not of a conformity to some external standard (which is, after all, never so external as we might at first believe) but to the productive engagement with one’s own identity:

Some respond more responsibly than others to cosmic desire. Committees and democracies make a lot of messes. The creature either responds in creative sensitivity to its own context or it blocks the flux of its own becoming.²⁵⁴

Likewise, if an unproblematic and universalizing ethical system is neither possible nor desirable, we do have recourse to a certain shared finitude which grounds our desire for charity (understood broadly as the enabling of human flourishing) and our corresponding need to make our various traditions speak productively to the challenges that confront us. In this, as in many corners of our inquiry, we have recourse not to a violent and metaphysical certainty (destined, in any case, to give way before pluralism) but to a very theological virtue: a hope in the emancipatory

²⁵²On the occasion of the American bombing of Iraq, Vattimo was said to have quipped that the planes should have been dropping pornography rather than explosives.

²⁵³Vattimo is not shy about engaging in strident critiques of political Islam (so-called), which, at the very least, border on imperialistic impositions in their own right. Harris is instructive on this point. We should therefore observe that the reading of multiculturalism in which we engage here represents a weakening of Vattimo’s own thought (not least by the introduction of process elements). See Matthew Harris, “Gianni Vattimo on Secularization and Islam,” *The European Legacy*, Volume 20, Number 3, 239-254.

²⁵⁴Keller, *Faces of the Deep*, 181.

possibilities not just of our own culture but of the never-entirely-Others²⁵⁵ with whom we share the world²⁵⁶ (and, correspondingly, in the possibility of shared resonances between cultures).²⁵⁷

We can immediately observe that this opening up of space represents the application of weak thought to the question of cultural discourse insofar as that question concerns the actions of the powerful and the privileged. The concept of embracing weakness is, obviously, less attractive to marginalized groups. Indeed, “Vattimo cannot be completely absolved from the fact that he does not give due weight to the negativity that often accompanies the ideal of self-giving love as applied to women.”²⁵⁸ The notion of weakening, when applied to those who are weak already, seems to entail a sort of violence all its own, given that it represents a cutting off of the weak from resources that they could use to better their situations. We can observe, to return to a previous example, that cultural appropriation does name a real phenomenon, or rather, a set of related phenomena: the refusal to allow groups and individuals to speak or be on their own terms, on the one hand, and the previously mentioned commodification/exploitation of cultural difference, on the other. In a sense, then, the violence of a *condemnation* of cultural appropriation as it appears from the cultural left may well be seen, at least, as a form of defensive

²⁵⁵Harris, “Gianni Vattimo on Secularization and Islam,” 248-252.

²⁵⁶And if we would benefit from an example of such, to inspire us on this count, we could do no better than the following: “We have appointed a law and a practice for every one of you. Had God willed, He would have made you a single community, but he wanted to test you regarding what has come to you. *So, compete with each other in doing good.* Every one of you will return to God and He will inform you regarding the things about which you differed.” -Surat al Maida, 48 (Emphasis mine). See also Gianni Vattimo and Tu Weinming, “Toward a Dialogical Civilization: Identity, Difference, and Harmony,” *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Volume 2, 2010, 7203-7207

²⁵⁷See Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, “Kenosis, Dynamic Śūnyatā and Weak Thought: Abe Masao and Gianni Vattimo,” *Asian Philosophy*, Volume 25, Number 4, 358-383.

²⁵⁸Frascati-Lochhead, *Kenosis and Feminist Theology*, 161.

violence, or perhaps more accurately, a restorative or corrective violence.²⁵⁹ Vattimo concedes the possible need for this sort of activity, noting that the opening up of discursive space represents an opportunity for the weak to address their concerns to the strong, but also (with Rorty) that if those concerns are not addressed, it likewise represents a space in which resistance can be organized.²⁶⁰ Hence, if the strong are to open and hold open a space for discourse and are to provide a call to the structuring of that discourse along emancipatory lines suited to the discourse's participants (again, conditioned by an awareness of our mutual entanglement), it is the weak who are called to "inherit" the space in question, to make use of it in an experimental and productive manner.²⁶¹

It might be objected that we have fully abandoned our commitment to a reduction of violence. After all, revolutionary violence has, historically, led to all manner of excesses, to oppressions and atrocities of all sorts. While the interventions necessary for the opening up of discursive space do not seem likely to spawn tyrannies and central committees and so on, we have to at least acknowledge the possibility that the mobilization of the weak may do just that. Difficult and painful as it may be, especially for the privileged, this risk is one that we must be willing to accept, if we are truly regard ourselves as receptive to the long-repressed claims of the weak. Accordingly, we can acknowledge that revolutionary interventions can, in fact, represent the rescue of discourse and thought from the enclosure of "enframed democracy":

It is useless to think of revolution as the immediate and violent taking of power—capitalism is infinitely stronger than that... On the other hand, the revolutionary ideal must be saved from the corruption it has been subjected to in democratic regimes. The

²⁵⁹Rose goes so far as to assert that an aspect of Vattimo's own situatedness is precisely an inclination to root his politics not in consensus but in resistance, with community functioning principally as a means to that end. Rose, "Essere Italiano", 23.

²⁶⁰Vattimo, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 107.

²⁶¹Matthew 5:5.

history of the European left in recent years, especially in Italy, shows that whenever the left comes to power it fatally loses its transformative energy... Formal democracy always exposes the opposition to the risk of becoming an accomplice.²⁶²

Here too, we find an echo of the Christian legacy to which Vattimo cleaves, since the Church too is historically renewed from the fringes (from the earliest monastic traditions of Egypt to Saint Francis of Assisi and beyond). The weak are in a unique position to refuse (perhaps, yes, via violent cuttings-off) the commodification and domestic of discourse by regimes of power. Revolutionary violence, conceived in this way, may well involve the cutting off of discursive dead-ends, traps, and pitfalls, but it does so precisely to allow for a richer and more vital discourse, one in which the weak are no longer systematically excluded.²⁶³

We must also recall once again that our anxiety about the employment of violence by the weak is itself a residue of the history of oppression and a form, in its own right, of metaphysical violence. Our inability to believe in a world in which the only categories possible are oppressor and oppressed too is something that needs to be weakened. It is both frustrating and entirely appropriate that Vattimo does not give us an unproblematic eschatology, be it Christian or revolutionary (this would, after all, just be another form of enclosure), but instead gives us hints of (lures towards?) a new and better world. “Paradise” writes Vattimo, “cannot be anything but play”²⁶⁴ and we must be “perfect, as [our] heavenly Father is perfect.”²⁶⁵ This paradise and this

²⁶²Vattimo, “Weak Communism”, 206.

²⁶³I am indebted to Meredith Jones for various conversations regarding this topic and in particular for the observation that violence itself always functions in relation to systems of powers. To unproblematically equate the violence of revolutionary opening (of the founding, that is, of a more emancipated discourse) by the weak with the violence of oppressive enclosure by the strong is precisely itself a form of violence *on behalf of the status quo*.

²⁶⁴Play certainly carries with it an element of volition of a type that we have already encountered: we engage with our contexts freely, hence speculatively (even dangerously). There is an echo of Pareyson’s focus on *individual agency* here, as well as an echo of Nietzsche’s discussion of the *will*.

²⁶⁵Vattimo, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, Kindle.

perfection would never be possible without the transformative energy that the weak are uniquely capable of mobilizing and it represents for us, not a systematic prediction, or a teleological outcome but a provocation, an image of a world in which a shared weakness brings with it a shared *lightness*, in which it is compassion, and not necessity, that rules and in which cooperation can emerge, not from coercion, but from still largely untapped resources of an emancipated plurality.²⁶⁶ The mechanism of oppression traps even the oppressor in a structure that exists precisely to cut off possibility and, as a result, keeps the oppressor too from experiencing growth and improvement (and we can hopefully say at least this much without suggesting that the oppressor is just as damaged by oppression as the oppressed!). To exist in such a state is to be impoverished, to be cut off from the richness, beauty, and possibility that dwells, certainly, in a community that welcomes as wide as a range of human interlocutors (and their institutions, works, and so on) as possible, but also, as shall see, in a more-than-human world that likewise refuses to remain silent.

²⁶⁶We should likewise not forget that this unleashed plurality represents a liberation, not just of discourse, but of feeling as well (see the discussion of violence in Section II of Chapter 3). Likewise, we must acknowledge that, upon this latter liberation hinges the former and, more broadly, the political efficacy of Vattimo's project, for, to as Hegel puts it, "we may then affirm without qualification that *nothing great in the world* has been accomplished without passion." Hegel, *Reason in History*, 29.

Chapter 7: The Implications of our Discussion for the More-Than-Human World

Introduction

Vattimo's hermeneutic project is one indelibly marked by crisis. From the reaction to the totalitarian excesses of the last century, to the refusal of the absence of emergency that characterizes our current one, the project of weakening and the corresponding movements of interpretation and speculative reappropriation represent the productive engagement with the (never entirely) past which makes it speak to the urgency of the present. This focus exists at the heart of our own inquiry, in the sense that Vattimo's desire and capacity to address his thought to the problems facing the world is precisely what is at issue in the question whether his thought is purely negative (as his critics often claim) or contains within itself a corresponding positivity. As we have already considered, this urgency is, in many important respects, no less defined by social, economic, and political questions than was the antifascism that defined Vattimo's formative years: we are concerned, today, with questions of inclusiveness (of different ethnic and cultural groups, genders and sexualities, the differently abled, and so on), with democratic backsliding in the political realm and with precarity, inequity, and coercion in the (never entirely separate) economic one. And looming, perhaps, over these questions (but never entirely unrelated to them), is an increasing awareness of the escalating danger of environmental degradation that confronts not only humans, but a dizzying plurality of species.

The crisis of environmental destruction (with which we must include the refusal of such a crisis in our Capitalism inflected cultural milieu) seems to be one different in kind from the cultural, political, and economic questions to which Vattimo refers most extensively in his

writings (and to which we have, correspondingly, devoted most of our attention so far). On one level, this seems natural enough, insofar as environmental collapse contains within itself an existential risk to the future of the human species. If the species dies out or “dies back” to a point where our current levels of social complexity become difficult or impossible to sustain, social, political, and economic questions either become moot (in the first instance) or find themselves radically transformed (in the second). This initial intuition, however, does not hold up to scrutiny most obviously because social and political upheaval and economic collapse or dysfunction could, taken to extremes, result in similar consequences for our species (one thinks, for instance, of nuclear war). Perhaps more to the point, environmental destruction is itself a function of political and social and economic issues (capitalism, racism, and so on).²⁶⁷ The distinctiveness of the confrontation with the crisis of environmental degradation, then, must arise, not from the severity of the problem or its potential implication for our and other species, but rather from something else.

If the issue of environmental destruction confronts us in a unique and interesting way in our present era, it does so precisely because it forces us to consider disquieting questions about the world and our place in it. Specifically, we have in mind here questions of animal rights, of our situatedness within ecosystems and our corresponding responsibilities, of incorporation into or separation from a “natural world”, even of our relationships with science and technology. We cannot but observe that these sorts of questions necessarily bring us back into metaphysical territory, forcing us to confront the nature of the human person. Perhaps more disturbingly, these questions seem to take us beyond the realm most immediately proper even to Vattimo’s positive

²⁶⁷Correspondingly, we must acknowledge the metaphysical character of the violence represented by environmental destruction. Jason Royce Lindsey, “Vattimo’s Renunciation of Violence,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 2013, 101.

hermeneutics; beyond the realm, that is, of the discursive. The discursive, after all, is a realm from which even the scientific community is only incorporatable via a sort of (yes, violent) appropriation; Vattimo's notion of the scientific community as being involved in consensus-building and truth (small t) production, while holding up that community as a model of democratic consensus, is certainly not how most (more metaphysically minded) scientists perceive themselves.

The problem only worsens as we move beyond the human into what we shall call a more-than-human world. We ask, again and again, in what sense can this world be considered a discursive one or even one involved in discourse. Technology can facilitate types of discourse and leaves its mark upon discourse. We can also say, with some confidence, that it can participate in discourse in at least the manner that texts and institutions can (producing, that is, particular artifacts that exist in relation with interpretations). Technology may have a disquieting capacity to take on a life of its own, to move beyond the intentions of we humans, its creators. Already, we find resistance here to the process of incorporation into our discursive spaces.

If that is the case, how much more difficult must it be for us to try to incorporate plants, non-human animals, fungi, bacteria, or the non-living spaces we shape and by which we are shaped (never merely passively occupying)? Is not even the process of incorporation into the discursive itself a form of violent appropriation, an impinging upon or an employment as a resource of the more than human world? Here we find an example par excellence of the interaction of the fantastic potentials of the interaction of the positive and negative in Vattimo's thought: If the process of weakening represents a problematization of boundaries that is connected to and oriented towards the expansion of discourse and community, the engagement with the more-than-human world is surely one of the most productive and important forms this

expansion can take. If this venturing forth entails risks (we have already observed the risk of an imperializing, we might say *instrumentalizing*, violence), these risks, we well recall, are also present in the expansion of discourse within the realm of the human, all too human discursive space (for instance, the expansion across cultural lines). Likewise, the closing off of these spaces, even out of an attempt to prevent imperialism, can itself represent a form of violence, as the long history of human conceptual separation from the “natural” (read, non-human) world surely shows us; It is but a short journey from “standing apart” to “standing over”.²⁶⁸ Cutting ourselves, as humans, off from the more-than-human world, in the face of a looming environmental catastrophe that threatens all the beings of our shared world, would likewise entail a giving way in the face of violence.

Section 1: Machine Ontology (The Cyborg, with a Steampunk Interlude)

We begin our inquiry with the corner of the more-than-human that most directly concerns Vattimo: technology. He comes, naturally enough, to the discussion of this topic by way of Heidegger. Heidegger’s understanding of technology is connected to his discussion of the instrumentalization of reason and hence takes on a negative character. Instrumentalization results in a complex whereby nature is reduced to the condition of appropriable resource:

The hydroelectric plant is set into the current of the Rhine. It sets the Rhine to supplying its hydraulic pressure, which then sets the turbines turning. This turning sets those machines in motion whose thrust sets going the electric current for which the long-distance power station and its network of cables are set up to dispatch electricity. In the context of the interlocking processes pertaining to the orderly disposition of electrical energy, even the Rhine itself appears to be something at our command. The hydroelectric

²⁶⁸Our own selection of the term “more-than-human world”, as opposed to “natural world” or “nonhuman world” or similar, is an effort to avoid this type of difficulty: the more-than-human can include the human without being reducible to it.

plant is not built into the Rhine River as was the old wooden bridge that joined bank with bank for hundreds of years. Rather, the river is dammed up into the power plant. What the river is now, namely, a water-power supplier, derives from the essence of the power station. In order that we may even remotely consider the monstrosity that reigns here, let us ponder for a moment the contrast that is spoken by the two titles: "The Rhine," as dammed up into the power works, and "The Rhine," as uttered by the art work, in Hölderlin's hymn by that name. But, it will be replied, the Rhine is still a river in the landscape, is it not? Perhaps. But how? In no other way than as an object on call for inspection by a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry.²⁶⁹

This notion of technology entails the subordination of the more-than-human world and its incorporation into a resource (that is, its absorption into a complex of economic and cultural organization). The reduction and imperialism on display here are coupled with the departure of Being and the corresponding reduction of thought to the calculative and technical.

Of course, one of Vattimo's earliest insights is precisely that this notion of technology does not adequately capture its spirit in our present era. Writes Vattimo,

We have to realize that when we speak of a technical civilization, in the broadest and most 'ontological' sense implied by Heidegger's notion of the Ge-Stell, this does not simply mean the sum of all the technical apparatus that mediates man's relation to nature and eases his existence by making every conceivable use of natural forces. Although this definition of technology generally holds good for all ages, today it appears too generic and superficial. The technology that shapes the world in which we live is indeed made up of machines, in the traditional sense of the world, which provide us with the means to 'dominate' external nature. But it is primarily and essentially defined by systems collecting and transmitting information. This becomes increasingly obvious as the gap between developed and underdeveloped countries is gradually revealed as a gap in the development of information technology. Consequently, when Heidegger defines modernity with reference to an 'age of the world picture', he is neither metaphorical nor singling out a particular feature of the techno-scientific complex fundamental to modern thinking. Rather, he defines modernity as the epoch in which the world is reduced to- or consisted as- images; not Weltanschauungen as value systems and subjective points of view, objects of a possible 'psychology of world view', but images constructed and verified by science. These images take shape in the course of both manipulation of experiments and the application of results to experimental techniques, and (something

²⁶⁹Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" as found in *Basic Writings*, (New York, Harper Collins, 1993), 15.

that Heidegger does not make clear) culminate in the science and technology of information.²⁷⁰

Where Heidegger finds reduction (and yet another example of the rising to dominance of an instrumentalist conception of intellectual activity) however, Vattimo finds weakening. As distinct from the technologies of the industrial revolution- factories, motor vehicles, power plants- which are meant to wrestle the intransigent world of the more than human- animals, plants, minerals, chemicals- into a useable shape, information technology represents diffusion and interconnectivity, the very technological antecedent of and precondition for the dawning of the age of weakening and interpretation. The reduction to images represents a reduction to objects of interpretation and, as quickly becomes evident, our interpretative schemes are not as locked-in as the residual modernity of scientific reductionism (or neurotic resurgences of premodern interpretive schemes) would like to pretend. On the contrary, high speed, networked communication opens up the possibility of cross-cultural discourses, encouraging a decentering of our world view that calls into question the absolutisms that so characterized modernity (principally through allowing for discourse, cultural cross-pollination, and so on).

What we have here appears to be two competing notions of technology, one modern, and one postmodern. However, in essence, these notions seem bound to a notion of technology as the product of human intellectual activity: modernity's preoccupation with dominance (as a defense against the originary violence and uncertainty of our situatedness in a world that stems from an initiative not our own) produces mechanisms of dominance, while postmodernity's impulse of weakening gives rise to technologies permissive of decentralization and plurivocity. Even allowing for the acknowledgement that these typologies of technology are not monolithic and

²⁷⁰Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 15-16.

allow even for disquieting reversals (the modern technologies of transportation decenter the world, even as the postmodern technologies of communication allow forceful impositions in the form of propaganda, mass surveillance, etc.) we are left to wonder whether and in what sense technology can, after all, be identified with a more-than-human world, rather than a human, all too human one.

What is at stake in this question is, once again, the relationship between positivity and negativity and what that relationship is, in fact, able to accomplish. Vattimo's critique of Heidegger's limited understanding of technology rests precisely on a reading of technology as negative, a force of weakening in its own right, and as one tied tightly to the structures and orientation of a human, all too human, discursive space. We are left, therefore, to consider whether this account is no less a form of violent appropriation than Vattimo's discussion of science that we considered earlier. The beginnings of an answer to that tension should perhaps be found in the historical observation that technology is not necessarily a product of patterns of thought in the way suggested previously but rather exists within a relationship of mutual constitution with such patterns: an impulse to domination encourages the development of industrial technologies whereby the world is made to stand reserve, but so too do these technologies feed back into the impulse to domination (precisely by making present the apparent prospect of domination); So too with communication technologies grounding a weakened ontology, which in turn encourages the development of ever more diverse and decentralized communications platforms. Understood in this way, technology can, at least, be incorporated into discursive space after the fashion of institutions or objects of interpretation (texts, works of art, etc.).

The thread of mutual constitution goes deeper than that which exists between styles of technology and styles of thought. Indeed, technology, increasingly, has become such that it mixes messily with traditionally human categorizations and, consequently, calls those categorizations into question. Here, as elsewhere, it is helpful to bring Vattimo's weakened metaphysics into discourse with the compatible, non-reductive metaphysics of process inflected perspectives. Let us begin, then, with Haraway's now famous pronouncement: "By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs." Increasingly, we regard ourselves as mixed up with, rather than merely employing, the mechanical. We (ourselves) are "plugged in" and "online", our genes are "blueprints" and "codes", we see the world through lenses worn and carried, the face we show to others is, now more than ever, one made of pixels, and our day to day lives are something that we hack (or try to). The resulting ontology represents not just a hybridization of the human and the machine (and a problematization of both, as categories) but also, in a fashion that shares a kinship with Vattimo's thought, a hybridization of an element of weakening (the cyborg represents liberation from oppressive dualisms, origin stories, and teleologies) coupled to a move of politically-minded positivity (the cyborg "seeks kinship" and "have a natural feel for united front politics, but without the vanguard party"²⁷¹).

The emancipatory impact of the hybridization of the human and the machine represented by the cyborg ontology can only be accomplished if the machine is not regarded as itself a human, all too human construct. Indeed, Haraway notes that the dawning of the cyborg as a

²⁷¹Donna Haraway, "The Cyborg Manifesto" in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Woman*, 1st Edition, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 151.

(problematic and transgressive) category arises precisely in an age in which machines take on a disquieting autonomy:

Pre-cybernetic machines could be haunted; there was always the spectre of the ghost in the machine. This dualism structured the dialogue between materialism and idealism that was settled by the dialectical progeny called spirit or history, according to taste. But basically machines were not self-moving, self-designing, autonomous. They could not achieve man's dream, only mock it. They were not man, an author to himself, but only a caricature of that masculinist reproductive dream. To think they were otherwise was paranoid. Now we are not so sure. Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.²⁷²

This image of active machines and passive humans shows full well that the notion of the cyborg is a dangerous and problematic one. It arises from warfare (the technological integration of command, control, and intelligence structures) and may well collapse back into warfare (through destructive unleashing of the energies of technology upon the world or through the imposition of a technologically-enhanced program of total organization). There is an extent, similar to that which we have already observed in the project of weak thought, to which the emancipatory potentials of a non-reductive, non-totalizing ontology are precisely connected to certain dangers and risks of this sort are to be expected when we acknowledge the problematic character of attempts at strict conceptual closure. If this is true of a cyborg ontology (as with Vattimo's own weakened ontology), however, it is precisely because of the dramatic openness to possibility represented by that ontology; New dangers can emerge into this open space, and resurgent forms of oppression can attempt to take advantage of the confusion that can result from decentering to impose old orders (however disguised or reconfigured) upon the newly unleashed plurality. As in Vattimo's conceptualization, these risks are confronted (if never banished altogether) via a

²⁷²Haraway, "Cyborg Manifest", 152.

recognition of the capacity for the opened space to function as a realm of assertion of difference against sameness, and of previously silences groups against dominant ones.

Hence, if there is an answer to the dangers that necessarily follow alongside a cyborg ontology, it must come from a very hermeneutic direction: a continual affirmation of discourse and self-assertion. The disquieting activity of machines allows them to problematize traditional categories and, where that problematization invites danger, so too is it a source of political and social potential. What is needed here is precisely a refusal to try to absorb the machine, then, into the realm of the unproblematically human (as if it were merely a resources to be employed) in favor of a willingness to acknowledge that the machine can, in some sense, be allowed to speak with its own voice. The cyber- and steampunk aesthetic traditions of the last fifty years manifest precisely as an expression of this impulse:

Some elements of the steampunk critique of contemporary technology may help clarify steampunk's utopian intentions. Steampunk visual ideology is often based in an anti-modern critique of the contemporary material landscape. Expressing a discontent with the developed landscape that is not exclusive to steampunk thought, Margaret P. Ratt, for example, writes in *SPM* that she believes that most steampunks "look at the modern world about us, bored to tears, and say, "no, thank you. I'd rather have trees, birds, and monstrous mechanical contraptions than an endless sprawl that is devoid of diversity" (Ratt 2006: 1). Incorporating mechanical production into a counterintuitive vision of a more "natural" landscape, Ratt gives her critique something of the flavour of an environmentalist polemic against overdevelopment and accords machinery (of the type favoured by steampunks, at least) the status that revered biological features, such as mountains, bodies of water, and trees, enjoyed in the pre-development landscape... Some steampunk designers dislike what they see as the hegemonic grip of modern design. In an interview with Sara Brumfield, who operates the Steampunk Home blog (a home-décor approach to the genre), Andrew Meieran, the designer of Edison Bar, a steampunk-ish space in Los Angeles, criticizes what he sees as the "ubiquitous design" of the second half of the twentieth century. Meieran explains that by using an industrial aesthetic for his bar, he was trying to "bring a sense of the romance of design back" (Brumfield 2007b). Jake von Slatt, in an interview with *The Boston Globe*, refers to current technology and engineering as "jellybeans" (everything is differently coloured, creating the illusion of difference, but is actually executed in fundamentally the same shape). "Steampunk is a backlash to the sameness of design. In Victorian times, decoration was integrated with

the form and the function. Individual components were beautiful,” von Slatt claims (cited in Brownlee 2007).²⁷³

Steampunk ontology recognizes that machines, no less than human beings, are subject to oppression and subjectification, pressed into uniform shapes and made to serve counter-emancipatory aims, but likewise recognizes that this approach to technology is a contingent and undesirable one, and that it is possible for us to move in a different direction, to focus on the uniqueness and expressiveness of machines, no less than of the organic beings with which they share (and shape and are shaped by) the world. If Haraway’s cyborg achieves emancipation via a decentering and a refusal of the mythologized past (of dualities, of religious origin stories) and a corresponding opening up of possible futures, a steampunk ontology looks instead to an imagined past (one known, of course, to be imagined) and considers another possible beginning (and here we see a kinship with Vattimo’s own reimagining of the Christian tradition, a reaching backwards, an asking of “what if” which opens our way to a “what may still be”).²⁷⁴ Steampunk, perhaps even more than cyberpunk (which is always tempered by the awareness of the capacity of Capital or the State to coopt technology into repressive ends which the punks, hybridized and transgressive, seek to resist) offers a vision of technology as customized and particularized, subtracted radically from the economic and social impositions of Taylorized production and possessed still of a visceral physicality that neither dissolves into air nor allows itself to be

²⁷³Rebecca Onion, “Reclaiming the Machine: An Introductory Look at Steampunk in Everyday Practice,” *Neo-Victorian Review*, 133-134.

²⁷⁴This past is no more innocent of violent association than the cyborg, as, of course, steampunk works tend to set themselves in era’s defined by racism, sexism, heteronormativity, and colonialism, and wax poetic though we may about the rumbling of boilers and the hissing of steam, the environmental consequences of the technologies of the early industrial revolution are by now well known. Likewise, we note that the machinic vision enshrined here is that of the tinkerer in the workshop, a subtraction from the oppressive class structure that has always marked factory work that has the potential merely to instantiate that structure (we have, of course, blue collar heroes working with scavenged parts, but so too do we have the glorification of the gentleman or bourgeois inventor, whose tinkering itself bears the stain of class privilege).

reducible to an oppressive testimony to the [T]ruth of a world order; even the clattering, chaotic inefficiencies of these machines speak vitality, spitting steam and condensation in the face of attempts at mere instrumentalization (and here again we see the value of the *aesthetic* as a guiding principle for the *ontological*).

For the purpose of our inquiry, we can see the steampunk aesthetic as both tempering and giving new life to Haraway's cyborg ontology. The liveliness of machines is what allows them to enter into hybridization with the human and hence to call the human (as a category) into question. However, if for the Haraway of the "Manifesto", there is a danger of the machine disappearing into the human (and the figure of the cyborg is itself troubling light, perhaps in danger of its own dissolution), the ontology suggested by steam- and cyberpunk, with its customized and unique and unsilenceable manifestations of technology, represents an embrace of hybridization that refuses the risk of a collapse into undifferentiation (and here we recall again the lesson, previously considered, from Panikkar: that kinship, hybridity, and shared resonance, need not rob the participants in a shared discursive space of their self-understandings or capacity for self-assertions). It is fitting that this refusal of collapse finds itself rooted, as in Vattimo, in a shared finitude, certainly in the sense of a non-reducible physicality (not alien to Haraway's thought), but also in the sense of arising from contexts (hence, from an initiative not one's own). Even for the Haraway of the "Manifesto", the cyborg is defined by an impulse towards transgressive (not oppressive) unities, towards *kinship*, hence we can see in her ontology, no less than that of its cyber- and steampunk relations, an image of a broader and richer and more politically effective community very much in line with that envisioned by Vattimo, but one that expands itself provocatively into the realm of the more-than-human. As we shall see, the

emphasis found here is not limited in its application to the world of machines; there is a still broader world into which we must venture.

Section 2: Animal Ontology

If we can see that machines can, in some sense, engage with us in and reconfigure our discourses and that they can do so precisely by our refusal to subsume them unproblematically into the human, all too human realm, we must still admit that we come to the question of the machine with certain advantages absent from other forms of more-than-human discourse. Machines, for now at least, rely almost exclusively upon human beings for their reproduction, they speak languages to which we have access (and in which we can, to greater and lesser degrees, communicate). If, indeed, the issue in considering the sense in which machines can come to occupy a shared discursive space with human beings is the danger of the collapse of the machinic into the human, non-human animals seem to confront us with the opposite problem: an autonomy so pronounced it calls into question the possibility or desirability of a shared discourse with humans. The question of language and communication poses a similar difficulty, as non-human animals seems to exist the built-in interface points that existent between humans and machines (interface points that, as we have previously observed, are so extensive as to problematize the boundaries between the two). Though we have shared the world with our animal cousins for much longer than we have shared it with machines, our kinship with these fellow beings seems disadvantages, perhaps even doomed.

The duality of human and non-human animal²⁷⁵ has eroded somewhat in our present era, largely due, as Haraway observes, to scientific insights into the cognition, behavior, and communication of non-human animals. If humans and non-human animals appear to (usual) lack a shared language, it has become increasingly difficult to regard language as uniquely human in the face of the dizzying plurality of communicative forms employed by our fellow animal beings. Sociality, sometimes of amazing complexity, exists even in the realm of insects, birds and primates are increasingly being shown to employ something like conceptual language, and even the songs of birds follow syntactical rules. Tool use (even compound tool use), group dynamics, and behavioral complexity have similarly eroded as mechanisms for separating humans from other animals. This weakening of the dualism between the human and non-human animal has helped to ground arguments for the treatment of the latter as an ethical subject, prompted discourses of conservation and animal rights.

By itself, this recognition that the difference between the human and the non-human animal is not so great as traditionally conceived, does not pave the way for an unproblematic incorporation of the non-human animal into the sphere of ethical consideration, let alone community in a more robust sense. The advent of modernity and the weakening of the boundary

²⁷⁵The astute reader will note the (attempted) use of inclusive terminology here, as the dualism we are considering would perhaps more frequently and traditionally (in the West, at least) be configured as “human and animal” with the understanding that the human could not be animal and vis versa. I once had occasion to teach an English lesson to a group of students from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. When I began a discussion of how to refer to non-human animals, however, the class was brought to a perplexed halt: half the class was scandalized by the phrase “non-human animal” insofar as it implied the possibility of a “human animal”, while the other half was confused by my need to even address the (supposed) dualism (“Of course humans are animals! Why not just refer to particular species?”). In the end, we side-stepped this ambiguity by recourse to another one, substituting “non-human creature” for “non-human animal.”

between the human and non-human animal instantiated a new form of colonialism whereby humans began to look to non-human animals for insights into human issues. As Haraway notes,

We need to understand how and why animal groups have been used in theories of the evolutionary origin of human beings, of 'mental illness', of the natural basis of cultural co-operation and communication, of technology, and especially of the human forms of sex and the family. In short, we need to know the animal science of the body politic as has been and might be. I believe the results of a liberating science of animal groups would better express who the animals are as well; we might free nature in freeing ourselves.²⁷⁶

If modernity imposed upon our narratives about non-human animals our human, all too human concerns (our anxieties about our own natures and origins), postmodernity has problematized the boundary between the human and the non-human, but similarly threatens to impose upon our fellow beings our new anxieties.²⁷⁷ Emancipatory and counter-emancipatory forces alike attempt to weaponize non-human animals as instruments in our discourses, principally as a rhetorical mechanism for naturalizing their ideologies of choice. With Vattimo, we can recognize these

²⁷⁶Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 12.

²⁷⁷As categorizations become problematized, new possibilities arise, but so too do cultural, emancipatory struggles, into which we inevitably draw other species. Haraway gives us an autobiographical account about just such a reappropriation of nature (in the emancipatory struggle of queer communities), worth recalling here: "With high spirits, if little zoological erudition, we began talking about some ducks across the lake. We could see very little, and we knew less. In instant solidarity, my friend and her husband narrated that the four ducks in view were in two reproductive, heterosexual pairs. It quickly sounded like they had a modest mortgage on the wetlands around that section of the lake and were about to send their ducklings to a good school to consolidate their reproductive investment. I demurred, mumbling something about the complexity and specificity of animal behavior and society. Meanwhile, I, of course, held that the ducks were into queer communities. I knew better; I knew they were ducks, even though I was embarrassed not to know their species. I knew ducks deserved our recognition of their non-human cultures, subjectivities, histories and material lives. They had enough problems with all the heavy metals and organic solvents in those lakes without having to take sides in our ideological struggles too. Forced to live in our ethno-specific constructions of nature, the birds could ill afford the luxury of getting embroiled in what counts as natural for the nearby community." Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, 1st Edition, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 129.

moves as violent and metaphysical, and with Haraway, we can move towards different conceptualizations of nature that refuse to function as a ground for oppression (but instead as a space for kinship). Hence, against the temptation to instrumentalize non-human animals, Haraway proposes the desirability of letting non-human animals speak with their own voices.

This places us back into the realm of non-human animals being radically separate from humans and hence not incorporatable into a broader, more-than-human narrative space. Indeed, liberating the non-human animal from human conceptualizations could seem to take the form of a purposeful isolation from the non-human animal, a letting-be and letting-go of our fellow beings (which would seek to prevent, at least, our imposition upon them). However, as we discussed in the case of cultural discourse, this ends up leading us precisely back to the violence of compartmentalization (reinstantiating old boundaries) and the refusal of discourse (with the corresponding political vulnerability that refusal entails). In any case, this type of enclosure is no more possible with respect to non-human animals than it is between cultures: we are always-already involved with our fellow species, nor is our own species as ontologically discrete as we would like to pretend (being as it is composed, we know realize, of a whole microbiome necessary to its healthy and ongoing function).

If the cutting off from dialogue of our fellow creatures is itself a form of violence, however, we have already observed the violence of a unilateral imposition of human discourse upon the non-human animal. Indeed, one of the more explicit prospects for cross-species communication, the training of non-human animals by human beings for specific roles, would seem to be the exact opposite of what we would hope for in establishing a relationship with a discursive partner. Writes Haraway,

I quibble about discussing this matter in terms of people's control of the dogs, not out of a fetishized fear of control, and of naming who exercises it over whom, but out of a sense that my available languages for discussing control and its directional arrows mis-shapes the forms of attention and response achieved by serious dogs and trainers. By mis-shapes, I do not mean mis-represents, but, more seriously, I mean that the language of unidirectional "human control over dog" instrumentally is part of producing an incoherent and even dangerous relationship that is not conducive to civil peace within or across species. A convinced sceptic about the ideologies of representation anyway, I am not interested in worrying too much about the accurate portrayal of training relationships. But I am very much concerned about the instrumentality of languages, since they are forms of life.²⁷⁸

The suggestion here that the relationship between humans and companion species (we note the declining of the more pejorative term "pet") is and ought to be one of controller and controlled is surely a form of violence in its own right. Against this configuration, we can propose instead a model more suited to hermeneutics: that of impacting and being impacted, a reciprocal and mutually constituting relationship. For an example of this, Haraway considers the literature on human beings influenced by non-human animals:

In her final chapter, "Meeting the Other: towards an anthropology of animals," Noske describes the history of Western writing about "wolf children," very young children believed to be somehow lost from human communities, raised by other social animals, and then found by people. She is interested in how to hear the stories of and about animal-adopted children. So she asks if, instead of asking if people can "de-animalize" the children by restoring, or teaching for the first time, fully human language, we can instead ask what kind of social thing happened when a human child acquired a specific non-human socialization? She imagines that the children did not become "human," but they did become social beings. Even in stories of less extreme situations, such as the tales of white, middle-class, professional homes that contain young apes and human children, the children experience animal acculturation, as well as the reverse. For Noske, these situations suggest not so much "human- animal communication" as "animal-human communication." None of the partners is the same afterwards.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, 132.

²⁷⁹Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, 143.

Socialization, in other words, is not held to be a feature of humans alone but of various species (perhaps every species) and where species meet, there arises not unilateral domination of one party or another, but a sort of productive mutual impacting, often with novel results.

When we look at human interaction with non-human species, we find that we are already involved in a vast network of communicative relationships with volitional partners. Some species, like dogs and cats, engaged productively in the establishment of an evolutionary partnership with human beings that resulted in dramatic physical and behavioral changes for all involved. We should stress here that the relationships involved in these sorts of kinship are reciprocal: humans breed dogs and cats for desired traits, but so too does the presence of the dogs and cats affect the behavior of humans, perhaps dramatically.²⁸⁰ We should likewise recognize the plurality of relationship types that abound in humanity's interaction with other animal species. We have the aforementioned companionship of dogs and cats, birds taught to mimic human speech, apes taught to communicate via sign language, cetaceans taught to carry out complex tasks at human urging, these sorts of relationships that seem to evoke, most directly, cross-species communicative relationships; But we also have the myriad species who scavenge from human settlements, the opportunistic predators of livestock or of humans themselves, the myriad (often unnoticed) species whose lives and behaviors shape and are shaped by our own. How often do we stop and wonder why one species maintains an impenetrable caution with

²⁸⁰We can consider, speculatively, the roles played by dogs as watchers and guardians of human dwelling places, and of cats as exterminators of vermin as contributors to the rise of complex, human society. Likewise, the presence of *Toxoplasma gondii*, a parasite that matures in cats and that may infect as much as half the human population, has shown signs of influencing impulsivity and risk aversion in its human hosts. See Cook TB, Brenner LA, Cloninger CR et al, "Latent Infection with *Toxoplasma gondii*: Association with Trait Aggression and Impulsivity in Healthy Adults." in *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 60, 2015, 87-94.

respect to humans, even after thousands of years living alongside them, while another loses their fear of human beings in just a few generations? This opacity and agency on the part of non-human animals is not a point of breach but rather precisely gives vitality to the messy network of relationality that binds the human and non-human, even as it problematizes those categories.

This expansion of community into the realm of the more than human, in the form of a pursuit (and, indeed, recognition) of our kinship with our fellow creatures, is not one that admits of an unproblematic closure (any more than does our effort to expand the realm of human community). On the contrary, we must engage productively with the fraught histories that define our relationship with non-human animals and we need to try to address the problematic character of our present relationships with them. This, in turn, stands as a call to a broader confrontation with the environmental crisis brought about by our civilization and its structures, even as we come to recognize the roles played by non-human animals in our own constitution. As Haraway puts it,

The simple and obvious point is that nothing is self-made, autochthonous, or self-sufficient. Origin stories have to be about fraught histories of consequential relationships. The point is to engage “ontological choreography” in the yearning for more livable and lively relationships across kinds, human and non-human.²⁸¹

Hence, we must remain on guard against resurgent cross-species imperialisms (a negative move) but we must also nurture within ourselves a willingness to engage in what is essentially a speculative, risky, adventurous exercise (and to accept that this involves risk).²⁸² This fusion of a

²⁸¹Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, 316-317.

²⁸²A valuable initial step in confronting the application of this double move is found in the ethical project of Australian philosopher Valerie Plumwood, who puts forward a dual recognition of the condition of species being food/resources for one another (with humans, of course, not being exempt) while also noting that this reality need not erase our solidarity with the creatures with whom we share the world. Valerie Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile*, edited by Lorraine Shannon, (Canberra: ANU Press, 2012), 39.

negative move (the recognition of our own limitedness and that of our particular categories) and a positive one (the recognition of a more-than-human realm from which we are never quite separate and to which we have a connection and moral responsibility) bears clear resonances with Vattimo's own project and is similarly dependent on a particular aesthetics, one that recognizes the beauty and value of a notion of community expanded to include non-human animals. Here, as in Vattimo's own project, we can take inspiration from the emancipatory potentials found within the Christian tradition, in the transgressive and uncontainable harmony of living creatures and the world that they share: "But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee: and the birds of the air, and they shall tell thee... Speak to the Earth, and it shall answer thee: and the fishes of the sea shall tell."²⁸³

Section 3: Plant Ontology

The consideration of plant life presents challenges that are perhaps beyond even those found in our previous discussions of machines and non-human animals. Indeed, as Marder puts it in his book *Plant-Thinking*, "If animals have suffered marginalization throughout the history of Western thought, then non-human, non-animal living beings, such as plants, have populated the margin of the margin, the zone of absolute obscurity undetectable on the radars of our conceptualities."²⁸⁴ Indeed, despite the cultural and material importance of plants, they seem to occupy a realm of pure passivity within thought, mere objects for appropriation, lacking agency

²⁸³Job 12:7-8.

²⁸⁴Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 2.

or meaningful interior life.²⁸⁵ While the ancients²⁸⁶ and medievals may have indulged in proto-taxonomic speculation and endeavored to discuss the “vegetative soul” (understood as the interior capacity for life, growth, regeneration), this form of inner life frequently found itself eclipsed, in later eras, by speculation about reason, locomotive and appetitive processes, and so on.²⁸⁷ It is not difficult to see why engagement with the plant was a challenge, historically, for philosophy: if they share, with animals, communication/translation difficulties in engagement with humans, we add to our difficulties the fact that plants are quite explicitly ontologically complex (multiplicities acting collaboratively, rather than unproblematic unities) and are possessed of an alien temporality (living and acting in time scales substantially slower than those of animals or machines).²⁸⁸ The engagement with plants, therefore, is necessarily an engagement not just with translation problems or with the issue of the imposition of the human on the more than human but also with the particular temporality and ontology of plant life.²⁸⁹

This built-in philosophical complexity couples nicely with our inquiry up to this point. Indeed, Vattimo and Zabala supply the foreword to Marder’s *Plant-Thinking*, and not by

²⁸⁵As an aside, we might note that this is wrapped up in the human attitude towards the environment itself as passive and subject to appropriation, precisely because plants are so instrumental in the creation of the world as an environment in which humans and are other animals live and move: “All the objects and tools that surround us come from plants (nourishment, furniture, clothes, fuel, medicine). Most importantly, the entire higher animal life (which has an aerobic nature) feeds off the organic exchange of gases among these beings (oxygen). Our world is a world of plants before it is a world of animals.” Emanuele Coccia. *The Life of Plants*, translated by Dylan J. Montanari, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 9.

²⁸⁶Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 9.

²⁸⁷Marder, *Plant Thinking*, 37.

²⁸⁸“One cannot separate the plant- neither physically nor metaphysically- from the world that accommodates them. To interrogate plants means to understand what it means to be in the world.” Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 5.

²⁸⁹As we shall see, this engagement is precisely rendered possible by the move of weakening. Michael Marder, “Theses on Weak Ecology,” *Philosophy Today*, Volume 60, Issue 3, Summer 1996, 651-662

coincidence. Indeed, in yet another relationship of mutual constitution, the possibility of a philosophy of vegetal life emerges from and is nurtured by the provocative traditions of philosophical postmodernity:

...Hermeneutical phenomenology advocates the kind of description that, going back to the things themselves, interprets them from the ground up and addresses each experience from the standpoint peculiar to it, all the while guarding against any unwarranted presuppositions about the subject matter. Deconstruction exposes metaphysical violence against the material, the singular, the finite; strives to do justice to what metaphysics has suppressed, while admitting that absolute justice-as utmost attention to singularity-is impossible; and permits us to focus on that which has been otherwise marginalized without converting the margins into a new center. Weak thought resists the tyranny of “objective” factuality and welcomes a multiplicity of interpretations, even as it takes the side of the victims of historical and metaphysical brutality... Succinctly put, they create the philosophical infrastructure for our encounter with plants.²⁹⁰

The philosophy proposed here, in a spirit not unrelated to Haraway’s impulse towards kinship with other beings, is one of the encounter. We reach out and engage with the plant as never-entirely-other, yet still autonomous and possessed of its own way, its own voice. The intersections and relationality that exists between and throughout humans and plants does not result in a reduction to unproblematic wholeness, or even oneness, but rather, (as with the case of our relationality with non-human animals and with machines) opens the way to insights into the multiplicity that exists within beings traditionally regarded as discrete and unified.

When we consider the sense in which plants and humans are involved in a relationship of mutual constitution, we follow a path that is, by now, quite familiar to us from our consideration of the machinic and non-human animal patterns of life. Humans do impress their will upon plants, treating them as an appropriable resource for food, clothing, decoration, building material, and so on. Plants, however, resist the passivity implied by these sorts of colonialism, coming to engage in opportunistic relationships with human beings, including competitive (as

²⁹⁰Marder, *Plant Thinking*, 6-7.

with weeds developing defenses and countermeasures to human prunings and poisonings) and even cooperative (as in the Vavilovian Mimicry of rye, which, over generations, transformed itself from a weed into a nutritious food plant that is now grown intentionally) examples of coevolution. Correspondingly, human physical makeup and social organization came to be dependent on the availability of crops, bio-pharmaceuticals, clothing fibers, and building materials. The relationship of mutual constitution functions and is enlivened based on the agency of both the plant and human components.

In terms of structure, plants confront us, not as unities, but as multiplicities. As Marder puts it,

If the plant is not an organism consisting of independent organs, we should avoid conceiving it as a totality or as a differentiated whole. Its parts likewise transcend the distinction between “part” and “whole”; in their externality to one another, they are both members of a plant and independent entities in their own right. Unbound from the logic of totality, they constitute a provisional unity of multiplicities (“The plant, in an apt expression of nineteenth-century French botanist Brisseau-Mirel, “is... a collective being”), a loose community not interlaced with the ironclad ties of an inner essence.²⁹¹

Leaves grow to fulfill a purpose (one, indeed, supplementary to other “organs” of the tree or bush) only to be cast off in winter, a death which allows for an economizing of energy that allows the survival of the plant through the darker months; plants represent a being-towards-death in a very particular way, through ebbings and flowings of growth and death, held in a precarious balance that, though it take centuries, will eventually give way (disrupting the all-too-provisional unity represented by the “individual” plant).²⁹² It should come as no surprise to us, then, that plants admit too of hybridizations that elude other life-forms; grafts and cross-breedings and symbioses of all descriptions. Even in the face of the most intense efforts to

²⁹¹Marder, *Plant Thinking*, 84-85.

²⁹²Marder, *Plant Thinking*, 87.

impose a design upon plants, surprising mutations will sometimes arise.²⁹³ Hence, if metaphysics has an interest in the suppression of difference and plurivocity, it should come as no surprise to us that the suppression of plant-being is pursued with such singular ferocity.

The denial of connectivity and agency (to use hermeneutic terms, the violent suppression of difference) robs the discourse of vitality.²⁹⁴ Commercialized mass agriculture serves to reduce the vibrant expressiveness of wild flora to sterile commodification; consider the tree farm as a parody of the forest, and the rows of potted flowers as a caricature of the open field. The violent imposition likewise has consequences that bleed from the aesthetic and into the social and political: monoculture in food crops carries with it the risk that a single blight might plunge whole corners of the world into a famine that plurality and natural regeneration guard against by design (albeit at the cost of lower productivity and profitability for agricultural business interests). Writes Marder,

The plant cannot offer any resistance to metaphysics because it is one of the impoverished products of the metaphysical obsession with primordial unity, an obsession not derailed but on the contrary supported by taxonomies and the scientific systems of classification that, from the antiquity of Theophrastus and Dioscorides onward, have been complicit in the drive toward identity across hierarchically organized difference of species, genus, family, and so forth. Today, the ontic manifestation of this ontologico-metaphysical consolidation of the plant is the “mono-crop,” such as sugar cane or corn, which increasingly displaces varied horticulture all over the world but especially in the global South. Metaphysics and capitalist economy are in unmistakable collusion, as they militate against dispersed multiplicities of human and non-human lives...²⁹⁵

²⁹³The Dragon’s Breath chili (a *Capsicum chinense* varietal), one of the spiciest chilies in the world, was produced by accident in an effort to produce an ornamental pepper plant.

²⁹⁴The ontologically messy character of plants not only benefits from the move of weakening that we find in Vattimo’s thought but suggests such a move in its own right by directing us towards the interrelatedness and mutual constitution of things and concepts. “This is because every truth is connected to every other truth, in the same way that every thing is connected to every other thing...In the world, everything is mixed with everything else and nothing is ontologically separated from the rest.” Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 117.

²⁹⁵Marder, *Plant Thinking*, 55.

The Great Famine that afflicted Ireland in the middle of the 19th Century remains as a symbol of just this sort of danger.²⁹⁶ Animals too are bred for particular traits, of course, but it is difficult to imagine their subjection to a uniformity equaling that of plants (for instance, genetic manipulation to a degree that entails, as far as science allows, the erasures of all differences between individuals, to whatever extent that term has meaning in reference to plants, of a particular type; the small, individuating characteristics even of ‘designer’ companion animals are often themselves selling-points).

Plants occupy vitally important ecological roles, as well as an often unacknowledged importance to our self-conceptions as humans, and our reckless impingements upon their manners of life represent an important facet of both our ongoing alienation from the more-than-human world (and hence, as we have seen, from the parts of ourselves constituted in relation to it and intermixed with it) and a corresponding risk of environmental catastrophe. In answer to these twin dangers, there is a need to liberate the autonomy of plant and human alike: “Only a non-totalizing multiplicity of perspectives, only anarchic radical pluralism comprised of the all-too-human and the other-than-human existences and ‘worlds’ is capable of countering originary metaphysical violence...”²⁹⁷ Plants certainly serve as a model of the failure of metaphysical efforts at enclosure to encompass the world that we encounter and hence *speak to us* a weakness that promises our own liberation and offers us an image of a world governed not by relationships of exploitation but by a collective pursuit of flourishing and plurality. The challenge that confronts us is to cultivate in ourselves a listening worthy of that speaking.

²⁹⁶All of this is to say nothing of the social and political disruption that could accompany the introduction, by colonists and traders, of a new food crop to a society organized around production of native vegetation.

²⁹⁷Marder, *Plant Thinking*, 57-58.

Concluding Notes on Weakening and Community

Vattimo's weak thought shows us that the metaphysical worldview is not just to be rejected because of its intellectual violence or because of the real fear that such violence will give way to political and social violence. It is also an effort to utilize the tools of our tradition to create a space in which we may dare to dream of a better, and less violent world. Metaphysics impoverishes us. It cuts us off from discourse, novelty, and community. If we are to deny that cutting off, if we are to imagine an alternative to it, that effort cannot allow itself to be satisfied with particular gains but must continually push for greater and broader and richer engagement with the plurality through which Being becomes present to us. Hence, the more we look at discourses of science and technology, the more we find that we cannot and will not be satisfied with just a human community (or even a human community that engages with the more-than-human world on a purely instrumental level). Rather, we seek a community that expands beyond the human and calls into question the lofty position that we sometimes claim for ourselves in the order of the universe.

To return again to Vattimo's own religious origins, we can look with new eyes at the glimpses of the more than human that we find in scripture or in the lives of the saints. Saint Francis preaching to the birds, the image of predator and prey abiding together in Isaiah 11:6, or of the trees of the country clapping their hands in Isaiah 55:12, these images of communion, even in the context of a thoroughly anthropocentric religious tradition, refuse to be limited to the human realm. The allegorical content of these sorts of passages and stories can itself represent an imposition upon our fellow beings and, hence, a form of violent metaphysics. However, against this prevailing impulse we can now assert an admittedly weak and speculative alternative: that

these inclusion of the more-than-human in images of a world reordered in accordance with divine love are present for us because *such a world would not be complete without them.*

Conclusion as Opening

This work has been, consistently, one of productive engagement with temptations. It is fitting, therefore, that we return to a temptation with which we have engaged repeatedly, namely, the temptation to enclosure. Our inquiry does not allow for decisive finality. Indeed, if we have learned anything from Vattimo's thought, it is precisely that the quest for such finality is itself a residue of metaphysical violence, a desire to find a stopping point for our discussion. Instead, our inquiry represents provocations, speculations, and, to again return to the language of theology, hopes. We should, therefore, mark our inquiry a success if it produced, not enclosure and a comforting but ultimately misleading sense of finality, but rather openings to newness and starting points for the productive continuation of the project of weakening.

To consider, for a moment, our own situatedness, we in the Anglophone world currently occupy a historical moment in which philosophical postmodernity (with all of the vagaries to which that term is heir) has been politicized and inserted into a public discourse already riven with division regarding the role of tradition, our orientation towards the past, and (though this language is seldom used) the role of metaphysical strength in our thought. Sokal-style hoaxes and Science Wars- resurgent attempts to ground social discourse in scientism- are given new energy by the urgent need to respond to environmental crises and the global COVID-19 pandemic. In the realms of the social and political, reactionary movements have sought to impose anew univocity on the increasingly dizzying plurality of identity categories (in the name, of course, of combatting the alienation and disorientation which we can associate both with Vattimo's Age of Interpretation and with the functioning of Late Capitalism). In response to this, there is a countervailing impulse to secure identitarian categories by ossifying and essentializing them, despairing of the very notion of cross-cultural discourse (and disregarding the real

connections that always-already exist between and throughout cultural groups). Within the context of religion, the focus on identity manifests in the rise of fundamentalisms of various descriptions and in the need for increasingly strident forms of political and social self-assertion on the part of religious adherents, configured, of course, as resistance to an increasingly secularized world. In this particular cultural climate, projects critical of metaphysical absolutisms find themselves, simultaneously, criticized as paths to relativism (hence, as politically counterproductive) and as vehicles for concealing metaphysical absolutisms of their own.

If we have considered Vattimo's thought in terms of positivity and negativity, it has not been out of a belief in some essential dualism, but rather, out of a recognition that concerns with the twin dangers of relativism and violent, metaphysical impositions are defining features of our shared intellectual life. Respectively, these concerns allegedly represent positivity and negativity run amuck: The merely critical, the merely open, is seen as representing a risk of relativism, a collapse into undifferentiation; Metaphysical violence is seen as a suffocating enclosure that suppresses novelty. Even in these images, we find mutual constitution. The negativity of relativist collapse into undifferentiation arises from a surplus of positivity, the breaking out of a plurality of voices such that differentiation ceases to be possible (a notion that already supposes, as Vattimo observes, a view from nowhere). The positivity of metaphysical violence similarly represents a univocal assertion that accomplishes a negative move in the cutting off or suppression of other, similar assertions. If we accept as dangers these cominglings of the positive and the negative, it becomes only fitting to regard Vattimo's attempt to navigate between them in similar terms, as consisting of a negative, critical move of weakening that is never separable from positive origins- in the aesthetic-ethical-political complex from which Vattimo's thought derives its unique vitality- and positive outcomes- in the opening up of community, in the

breaking down of barriers to novelty, in the rediscovery of the ontological richness of traditions at last liberated from metaphysical suffocation.

The intermingling of the positive and negative moves in Vattimo's thought of course carries with it dangers and tensions all its own. Metaphysics is not, after all, something that we can escape but something that we necessarily weaken from within. Furthermore, we cannot merely sidestep the question of Being but instead must rediscover it by engaging with its complexity and irreducibility. The inexhaustibility that makes itself present to us in discursive plurivocity keeps the refusal of metaphysical violence from ever being merely arbitrary but never allows it to itself ossify into an unproblematic (hence metaphysical, hence violent structure), nor does it secure us from the violent expressions that may emerge from the necessarily novel and experimental new relations that will inevitably arise from the space that weakening breaks open. The breaking open itself is a discursive violence, of a kind, and Vattimo goes beyond an acceptance of this reality to embrace even the more radical possibility that these new discursive spaces will become necessary sites of resistance for the weak to coordinate against the strong. We should accustom ourselves to the disquiet occasioned by condition: violence itself is not removed or overcome altogether by weakening but is itself weakened; we move, with Vattimo, not towards a philosophy of non-violence or of anti-violence, but towards a philosophy of least violence, towards a world in which the ubiquitous mechanisms of violence are reduced wherever and whenever and to whatever extent is possible. If we cannot hope, intellectually, for an unproblematic conclusion to this effort, we can, with Vattimo, imagine at least a new and flourishing equilibrium in which our cultural, intellectual, and political spaces are defined by the effort to reduce violence and promote charity and community rather than by the effort to impose by violence a particular worldview. Likewise, if Vattimo is not above waxing theological in his

hopes for a paradise defined by lightness and by radical human self-improvement (as close, perhaps, as he gets to painting us a picture of salvation), we approvingly observe that community and plurivocity and the reduction of violence open for us possibilities that metaphysics has long kept closed off.

Religiosity in general and Catholic religiosity in particular finds itself at a crisis point with the calling into question of traditional metaphysical systems. The practical move by the Church to take refuge in an increasingly strident politics of identity is increasingly and rightly seen by believers as a species of spiritual coercion and is made still more untenable by recourse to metaphysical absolutes that even clergy are less and less able to take seriously. Reading the history of weakening as a bearing out of the Christian legacy, indeed, of its spiritual core in the Incarnation, opens the way for a new understanding of the Church, one that replaces coercive metaphysics with a voluntary and productive engagement with the tradition. This new imagining shifts our focus to charity, community, and hope and resuscitates even the universalizing mission of Christianity, not as a colonialist purveyor and absolute and univocal [T]ruth but as a symbol of hospitality and guarantor of the discursive space in which Truth becomes present to us (as the inexhaustibility of interpretation).

Vattimo's thought likewise opens the way for a new engagement with never-entirely-other cultures. Certainly, weak thought lets us recognize the violence inherent in the efforts to endlessly forestall such engagement, however well-motivated such efforts might be. It likewise opens a space in which such engagement can, at least, occur. Harkening back to the religious roots of his thought, we find here an emphasis on humility, a recognition that the West, no less a cultural than an economic, political, and military hegemonic bloc, can and should allow other voices to be heard. Weakening can and sometimes should take the form of keeping silent. It can

also take the form of speech that does not seek to pronounce or instruct, but also to invite and provoke. We find in the spirit of hermeneutics- the openness, the willingness to effect and be effected, the humble recognition that one can learn from never-entirely-others- a far more promising starting point for cultural discourse than totalizing metaphysical systems ever offered.

Vattimo's thought opens itself up for surprising and productive collaborations, even with thinkers who, on the surface, might appear wholly incompatible with his approach to philosophy. Process thinkers like Haraway and Marder are quite explicitly metaphysicians: they engage productively with the material world and the world of science, albeit on terms that refuse reduction or political reappropriation. This engagement with materiality is precisely what allows these thinkers to fill what might otherwise be blind spots in Vattimo's thought, particularly with reference to the more-than-human world. Vattimo, in turn, contributes an element of hermeneutic caution that guards against the ossification of these non-reductive metaphysical schemes into forms of violent imposition (since, after all, the metaphysical schemes of modernity likewise regarded themselves as provisional and non-reductive). Taken together, these elements allow us to proceed with a speculative endeavor to expand discourse to the more-than-human world, providing us with a mechanism for confronting the environmental crises facing us.

Obviously much work remains to be done in even the limited range of topics to which we have sought to apply Vattimo's thought. The construction of a weakened ecclesiology or a weakened sacramental theology, the consideration of a weakened discourse between specific cultures, the broadening of our notion of a more-than-human community beyond the scope of the animal, the plant, the human, and the machine, these are all worthwhile and interest projects that stand as untrod ground for further scholarship in this area. As Vattimo is wont to remind us, further inquiry into these and as yet unimagined areas of application will produce wrong turns,

dead ends, even dangers. Likewise, as we have already observed, they will increasingly require us to move beyond the letter of Vattimo's robust and extensive body of work and into the sort of productive speculations and hybridizations in which we have already engaged, in a limited way, in this inquiry. This carrying forward is only in keeping with the spirit of Vattimo's own work, a work that is always in an admittedly risk continuity with what came before and which always orients itself toward the utilization of generations still to come. Our situatedness in Vattimo's thought, no less than in Christianity, or in Western Philosophy, stands as a call to fidelity to and humility before the traditions in which we always-already find ourselves, and this call is answered, not in static preservation, but precisely in necessarily risky and experimental carrying's forward that demonstrate the continued vitality of the tradition.

In the final analysis, the disorientation of our present era confronts us with a choice: we can fall back into resurgent metaphysical absolutisms or into the identitarian self-assertions that are their echo in our present age, or we can engage in the project of weakening and of hermeneutics. The core of this choice is, to return to Vattimo's originary impulse, theological through and through. Metaphysical violence is a response to danger, an attempt to protect ourselves and to lay claim to those resources that we believe we will need in an inevitable, identitarian struggle. Weak thought, by contrast, calls for sharing, for vulnerability, for an ongoing effort to reduce violence in favor of community mediated by compassion for one another. In that effort, we find, at last (and sometimes with a little help) that the Other is never quite so Other after all, that the world is a bigger, richer place than our previous conceptualizations would allow for, and that plurivocity carries with it possibilities and a vitality undreamt of by even the most ambitious of metaphysical schemes. We find an echo, here, of the Gospel logic of reversals upon which Vattimo so explicitly relies, as Christ came, not as the

expected conqueror and liberator from political oppression, but humbly, to instantiate in the world a message of love and fellowship. To take this image further, we can say that the project of weakening, rooted in caritas, carries within it the refusal of boundaries, the orientation towards the never-entirely-other, and the impulse to manifest in the world through good works that caritas entails. One would be hard pressed to imagine a manner of thought that so elegantly and appropriately makes the Christian tradition speak to the listening of our troubled present.

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