Gianni Vattimo, From Z to A

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It is only fitting that the readers of *Telos* should be introduced to the thought of a contemporary Italian philosopher, Gianni Vattimo, at a certain "end" marked by the last lesson he gave on the occasion of his retirement from the University of Turin on October 14, 2008. Announced here is the coming to a close of a lecture course and of a long and illustrious university career, though not the end of an active theoretical and political engagement. (As far as the latter is concerned, Vattimo was reelected, after a brief hiatus, as a deputy to the European Parliament in June 2009.) The non-termination of the philosopher's path is already anticipated in the title "From Dialogue to Conflict," which inscribes in the point of destination that which resists closure: a new beginning, a gushing forth of contention from the fault lines retracing the ostensibly fused horizons in the hermeneutical edifice. In a transition to conflict, Vattimo leaves the "boring" (his choice of word!) exigencies of dialogue behind because they mask the already established procedural or substantive grounds on which the interactions between interlocutors unfold, rendering the dialogic process itself superfluous. Dialogues are not conversations, as the author who much prefers the latter term, foregrounded by his student Santiago Zabala, hints in his recently published "collaborative autobiography" *Not Being God*.[1] One may surmise that the reason for this preference is that conversations are much more open-ended than dialogues because they do not rely on a prior, objectively fixed *logos*, however bifurcated, but create their own ground as they proceed by turns (*com-vertare* = turning about with someone),

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1. Gianni Vattimo and Piergiorgio Paterlini, *Not Being God: A Collaborative Autobiography*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia UP, 2009), p. 108.

welcoming tensions and oppositions. Unlike the linear, progressive development of a dialogue that finds fulfillment in a consensus, conversations, like conversions, require their participants to suspend a previously held set of beliefs and, thus, to subject themselves to a possible paradigm shift and the unforeseeable event of Being, which "cannot be deduced from [any] premises."[2]

We will elaborate on Vattimo's take on the event in what follows. For now, let us note that, just as dialogue is not synonymous with conversation, so conflict cannot be reduced to a mere disagreement between interlocutors. While disagreement—something to be resolved—entails a deviation from the "normal" consensual trajectory of human interactions, conflict is a confrontation that shakes to the core those who are engaged in it and that, in this disturbance, defines their identity. I began this short commentary by saying that it is not an accident that the first Vattimo text published in the pages of *Telos* pertains to a certain end of a philosophical path, since it is in this end, which harbors the promise of a new beginning, that his thought assumes its most political character. Influenced by hermeneutics from the outset of his intellectual journey, the Italian philosopher has, nonetheless, rejected some of its deplorable political consequences. His diagnosis is clear and precise: traditional hermeneutics is in collusion with various political-ideological neutralizations by virtue of its insistence on dialogue that forecloses the transformative possibilities of conflicts. And yet, Vattimo does not eschew the hermeneutical framework but endeavors to bring it to its radical culmination in what he calls "the nihilistic outcome of hermeneutics," a substitution of the historical for the metaphysical criteria for truth. He draws here on Nietzsche's writings on nihilism, which is not to be understood in a purely negative sense as a malady of meaninglessness that has befallen the West in the nineteenth century. Rather, nihilism is a symptom for the loss of a transcendentally vouchsafed meaning, for bidding "adieu," as Vattimo does in one of his books,[3] to the objective metaphysical truths that are separate from the human subjects who seek them. After a period of nihilistic drift and nostalgic yearning for such certainties, "truth"—it is hoped—will be rediscovered not in a trans-historical realm always nestled in the shadow of Plato's Ideas, but in the historical encounters of concrete human beings, in conflicts and conversations.

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2. Unless otherwise specified, this and subsequent quotations refer to Vattimo's "From Dialogue to Conflict," published in this issue of *Telos*.

3. Gianni Vattimo, *Addio alla Verità* (Rome: Meltemi, 2009).

On Vattimo's view, this hope is all but betrayed in Habermas's theory of communicative action, which, privileging dialogue, furnishes a one-size-fits-all model for such encounters and, thereby, incorporates them into the old transcendental scheme. That is why Habermasian subjects resemble lab researchers devoid of any "possible opacity"; they lack unconscious motivations and historical "thickness" untranslatable into the revamped Enlightenment ideal of communicative rationality.

Differently put, what Vattimo selectively inherits from hermeneutics is the sense of truth as an interpretation thoroughly embroiled in historical becoming. But instead of deducing the historicity of hermeneutics from the Gadamerian fusion of horizons, he implies, in a rather Schmittian mode, that interpretations will have to be fought out, be it on the rhetorical plane, or otherwise, and, thus, endows them with an inherently political character. In "The Age of Interpretation," he will show that such hermeneutical radicalism "reduces all reality to message,"[4] so that the opposition between facts and norms turns out to be misguided, for both are handed over to the interpretative paradigms through which *someone* (always a concrete, historically situated *someone*) makes sense of them. It is this historicity of truth and its singular hermeneutical disclosure to human Dasein that attracts Vattimo to Heidegger. And it is within the scope of this attraction, that we should approach "weak thought," a term most intimately associated with the Italian thinker.

Weak thought, *pensiero debole*, is probably as famous a theoretical coinage as it is misunderstood. I single out Heidegger as a shorthand reference to the philosophical background of this concept because the Heideggerian notion of destruction, or *Abbau*, corresponds to the operations of weak thought. The object of destruction is the objective foundational metaphysics, the history of naming and misnaming Being indifferent to all historical contingencies and human interventions. Vattimo has, thus, recognized that Heidegger's ontology is "'an ontology of decline,'…a weak ontology"[5] that aspires to save something of Being that would not be determined in objective terms, as a fact, but, instead, would disclose itself in and through multiple interpretations. At the risk of oversimplification, I

4. Gianni Vattimo, "The Age of Interpretation," in *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia UP, 2005), p. 45.

5. Santiago Zabala, "Introduction: Gianni Vattimo and Weak Philosophy," in *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, ed. Santiago Zabala (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's UP, 2007), p. 12.

would suggest that weak thought is one of the ways to carry out the weakening of metaphysical ontology after Heidegger by means of acknowledging the unavoidability of the historical-hermeneutical givenness of Being. Being is not given once and for all in an immutable constellation of truth; rather, it is an event that is singular and historically situated in a conflict of interpretations. Weak thought comes to terms with its incapacity to arrest Being; its weakness is not a shortcoming but, to revert back to Nietzsche, a sign of convalescence, of getting over the malady of nihilism and a longing for secure metaphysical truths. (Convalescence, to be sure, is an indefinite process that cannot be limited to the two centuries allotted to it by Nietzsche, for the weakening of metaphysics is an ongoing, infinite task that demands an extreme vigilance of thought that must be on guard against the recurrence of metaphysical biases.) Be this as it may, in the figure of weak thought, we will discern echoes of Adorno's thinking of non-identity that resists the tendency of Hegelian dialectics to synthesis, positivity, and identity, as well as Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence.

The simple point that the reader of Vattimo should not miss behind the torrent of details is that the objective metaphysical ontology both corresponds to and substantiates an institutional approach to politics. The truth of Being perceived to be independent of the subjects to whom it reveals itself is paralleled by an institutional political bureaucracy that treats its subjects as interchangeable. Moreover, in its latest stage marked by the ascendancy of the scientific and technological rationality, metaphysical ontology orchestrates "a more up-to-date—and more elusive—version of class, group and individual domination." The violence of metaphysics, a Derridean theme upon which Vattimo has also elaborated,[6] hinges on the fact that objective Being gets further separated from human beings and imposes itself as a vacuous external form onto our experiences that are forced to conform to its predetermined molds. To overcome such violence, nothing less will suffice than locating the event of truth *in us* in an ingenuous mix of Heidegger's post-metaphysical ontology and non-institutional Christianity (the event of Being that discloses itself in and through historical Dasein and Christ's "subjectivization" of truth in proclaiming, "I am the truth"). "Christianity," in Vattimo's words, "introduces into the world the principle of interiority, on the basis of which 'objective' real-

6. Cf. Gianni Vattimo, "Conclusion: Metaphysics and Violence," in Zabala, *Weakening Philosophy*, pp. 400–22.

ity gradually loses its preponderant weight."[7] Nihilism and weak thought, therefore, amplify the divestment of objective Being and truth in early Christianity; the death of God as a transcendental ideal and guarantor of veracity metonymizes secularization as an internal transformation in the theological sphere of Christianity. In turn, religious clericalism and political institutionalism (for example, statism) betray the event of Being by creating avatars of objective metaphysics at the level of concrete history.

Human freedom and emancipation in their multifarious forms are inconceivable without loosening the metaphysical grip on Being. Since metaphysics cannot be conclusively overcome, however, the project of liberation, too, will be essentially unfinished. For Vattimo, this is not reason enough to despair and to abnegate the promise of freedom; if weak thought is an endless weakening of metaphysics, emancipatory struggles are soberly viewed as an ongoing process of liberating human (as well as non-human) beings from the violence of metaphysical domination that is powerless to lift the weight of objective Being from their shoulders once and for all. Thanks to a Heideggerian reading of Marx, Vattimo retains the paleonym *proletariat* to describe the collective subject of liberation no longer confined to the teleological trajectory of historical materialism. In Marx's scheme, the proletariat was free in two ways: members of this class were free to sell their labor to any "boss" whatsoever, but they were also free of any possessions, save for their capacity to work. Vattimo adds a third and somewhat unexpected determination to proletarian freedom, namely, freedom from metaphysics, a vision of the world that is not tainted by "a metaphysics of truth" and that is "free to see the world outside of ideologies." Whether such space of freedom is even conceivable in the wake of Althusser's treatment of ideology, for instance, remains a contentious issue. To be charitable, we would need to suspend our judgment for the time being, at least until Vattimo's new book, co-authored with Zabala and entitled *Hermeneutic Communism*, sees the light of day in 2011.

From this express overview of Vattimo's thought, it should be obvious how it overlaps with the crucial areas of concern for *Telos*. The struggle against the bureaucratization of public and political life waged by the journal for over forty years will be enriched with the anti-metaphysical critique of these trends. A valorization of tensions and conflicts actively pursued by the interpreters of Carl Schmitt resonates with the way Vattimo steers hermeneutics away from the fusion of horizons and consensus.

7. Vattimo, "The Age of Interpretation," pp. 46–47.

The opposition to the neutralization of political life is supplemented with a compelling account of the new modes of power and domination that are, indeed, traceable back to something very old, namely, the refinement of metaphysical violence perpetrated under the banner of dispassionate scientific and technological rationality. Of particular interest to us is the question: What kind of politics is implied in a weak ontology, the ontology that remains "after" metaphysics? Vattimo's alternative is diametrically opposed to Heidegger's "mistake in 1933," but in quoting the German thinker as saying, "Those who think big, cannot but make big mistakes," he does not exempt himself from this axiom. Only in assuming this risk does one gain the right to pursue political philosophy today.