

## **Vattimo and otherness: hermeneutics, charity, and conversation**

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### **Hermeneutical nihilism and the ontology of actuality**

Gianni Vattimo's thoughts on otherness, on both the Other (with a capital 'O') and the other (with a lower-case 'o'), depend on his philosophical style of 'weak thought'. The latter can be understood as the way in which he thinks we should relate to metaphysics today in what Vattimo calls the late-modern, a time in which it is no longer possible to believe in modern values such as progress but which nevertheless does not constitute a complete break from the modern (a complete break would repeat the foundationalism of modernity, thus perpetuating metaphysics). Following Heidegger, Vattimo regards metaphysics as the rationalising way of thinking of 'Being' as presence, of what is calculable and capable of manipulation in predictable relationships. With its origins in the philosophy of Plato, metaphysics has gradually been weakened through the history of Western thought (Christianity, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Positivism, and finally modern science). The security given by metaphysics has given rise to the fruit of modern science, the technology that has banished the terrors of primitive existence: the will to truth engendered by metaphysics has revealed it to be a superfluous 'lie' (Vattimo 2007a, 90); this is Vattimo's reading of Nietzsche's 'death of God'. While metaphysics provided stability, it was in its essence violent not only because it was appropriating (aiming to order the world, a goal realised in its culmination in modern techno-science), but also because it reduces reality back to first principles, silencing questioning. Therefore, 'All the categories of metaphysics are violent categories' (Vattimo 1993, 5). As such, the end of

metaphysics in modern techno-science is an opportunity for emancipation. From the vantage point of late-modernity, Vattimo states that Being has a tendency for weakening, and that emancipation occurs through this nihilistic process (Vattimo 2004, 18).

By nihilism Vattimo means the devaluing of the highest values, not that there are no values left at all. If nihilism meant no values altogether, or some unthinkable 'nothing', then one would not have overcome metaphysics (Vattimo 1999, 63). Similarly, metaphysics cannot be overcome through dialectical overcoming; a 'new beginning' would be equally metaphysical as it would be repeating the metaphysical tendency to create foundations (Vattimo, 1988a). Rather, Vattimo thinks that the values we have are traces of metaphysics that have lost their plausibility after the death of God and end of metaphysics, but we cannot throw them off like a worn-out garment. One is reminded of Nietzsche's phrase that we cannot get rid of God until we have got rid of grammar (Nietzsche 1990, 43). Following Heidegger and Gadamer, Vattimo thinks that the traditions into which we are thrown are linguistic in nature. As such, they constitute the horizon of thought, of what it is possible to conceive and understand (Vattimo 2012, 44-45). Without the linguistic heritage of the Bible, for example, Vattimo states it would be impossible for him to understand Dante and Shakespeare (Vattimo 2007b, 36). Along with biblical and Christian thought, other traces of the linguistic heritage of the West include Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant, among others. Instead of overcoming these traces of metaphysics, Vattimo thinks we should 'twist' them. This notion of 'twisting' comes from the Heideggerian concept *Verwindung*, which has the connotations of resignation, convalescence, acceptance, and distortion (Vattimo 1988b, 172-173). We cannot overcome metaphysics dialectically and start again, for we are saddled with the metaphysical heritage of over two thousand years. Nevertheless, we can no longer believe metaphysics, either, if we have read Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, among others; it is impossible for any of us today, Vattimo thinks, to really believe in Plato's forms (although plenty of people in the West still believe in God in the

metaphysical sense, something about which Vattimo is largely silent). Therefore, we have to 'ironically distort' our heritage hermeneutically through listening to Being carefully when recollecting its traces.

Some post-Heideggerian philosophers, such as Derrida, would reject talk of 'Being' altogether as it is metaphysical. Vattimo, on the other hand, argues that out of modesty one needs ontology (Vattimo 2004, 87). After the end of metaphysics one cannot conceive of Being as presence, but as event (a linguistic event, of interpretation). In describing the being of how things are, Vattimo views the world as being the play of an irreducible plurality of interpretations, and, following Nietzsche, there are no facts, only interpretations. This is Vattimo's hermeneutical nihilism; philosophy today concerns itself with interpretations after the death of God when the notion of there being 'facts' in the strong, metaphysical sense is no longer plausible. As such, Vattimo's style of weak thought is an ontology of actuality (Vattimo 1995, 41), trying to make sense of the irreducible plurality of the late-modern world in which metanarratives of progress and Eurocentrism have been broken down in the light of the infinite number of interpretations of history and current events that have been disseminated through information and communications technology.

### **Vattimo and 'the Other'**

As Vattimo makes clear that the death of God is the death of the metaphysical notion of truth and its corollaries such as the ontotheological notion of God, why should Vattimo only think we are resigned to ironically distorting the traces of metaphysics? Inspired by Nietzsche's unpublished 'On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense', Vattimo regards language as essentially metaphorical. The death of God liberates metaphor, since language is no longer dominated by a single metaphysical semantic field, liberating a plurality of myths (Vattimo 1997, 54). Could the death of God liberate not only language, but also the possibility for an encounter with a God-beyond-God, of the 'Wholly Other' ('Other' with a capital 'O')? If metaphysics has been constraining our idea of God into logical,

human, all-too-human categories, then could the end of metaphysics not ironically clear the way for a return to religion conceived as the recovery of the transcendence of God? The language of transcendence has been banished to the margins in the last phases of the history of metaphysics, Positivism and modern science. If our linguistic heritage limits thought, and if we are no longer able to believe this heritage, then Positivism and thorough-going empiricism should no longer prevent us from opening our minds to the infinite, even if the 'Wholly Other' could not possibly be circumscribed in thought. This Other could then ground a non-metaphysical way of overcoming metaphysics, healing ourselves from its violence along broadly Levinasian lines.

Vattimo unqualifiedly rejects any notion of the 'Wholly Other'. He says that God as 'the wholly other of which much of contemporary religious philosophy speaks is not the incarnate Christian God. It is the same old God of metaphysics' (Vattimo 2002, 38). He thinks the Other and transcendence go hand-in-hand, and that transcendence is a metaphysical category (Vattimo 1999, 49, 55). To this end, Vattimo categorises philosophers such as Derrida and Levinas with Protestant theologians such as Barth and Bonhoeffer, as well as 1960s 'Death of God' theologians such as Altizer, Van Buren, Cox, and Hamilton (Vattimo 2002, 36-37). While Vattimo certainly thinks that the liberation of metaphor enables a return to religion (arguably this has been the defining theme of his later work), the return to religion must be a purely historical affair; it is a response to the event of the death of God and the perceived liberation of metaphor associated with the rise of society of mass communication. For Vattimo, metaphysics must be thought of as the history of Being with a guiding thread (its vocation for weakening, according to Vattimo's interpretation of this phenomenon), for if it were conceived as a discrete series of conceptual schemes and/or of the possibility of the 'Wholly Other', 'it would still leave an *ontos on* outside itself', Vattimo thinks, 'a thing in itself thought in metaphysical terms' (Vattimo 1997, 108). Therefore, Vattimo takes what he calls a 'left Heideggerian' approach. 'Left' corresponds to a 'historicist' reading of Heidegger on the one hand, and 'right' to

one in which a 'return' of Being is possible, the latter implied at the end of 'The Word of Nietzsche: "God is Dead"' (Heidegger 1977, 112).

Ever since he developed his philosophical style of 'weak thought' in the late 1970s, Vattimo has developed the theme in his work of the nihilistic vocation of Being, its tendency for weakening. Vattimo frequently makes use of the long aphorism in one of Nietzsche's later works, *Twilight of the Idols*: 'How the Real World Finally Became a Fable' (Nietzsche 1990, 50-51). Reading the aphorism through Heideggerian lines taken from the German's lectures on Nietzsche, Vattimo sees the devaluing of the world through metaphysical rationalism occurring first in Plato's realm of the forms. This becomes eschatological and historicised in Christianity's notion of the Kingdom of God. Drawing on Wilhelm Dilthey's work, Vattimo sees Christianity as creating the 'principle of interiority' that notably manifested itself in Augustine's writings (Vattimo 2002, 106), later finding expression in Descartes' and Kant's turn to the subject. The possibility of knowledge located within the subject is later made empirical through Positivism and modern science. Various factors dissolve the possibility of factual knowledge altogether, from the discovery of the historicity of science through Thomas Kuhn's paradigms, through to the breakdown of the notion of the human subject in the '*Ge-Stell*' outlined by Heidegger and developed by Vattimo: the transpropriation of subject and object through the universal challenging of everything by modern techno-science (Vattimo updates it to refer to the images of the world created through information and communications technology) (Vattimo 1992, 116-117).

Nevertheless, the end of metaphysics (and therefore of the domination of scientific positivism) dissolves the reasons to be an atheist (Vattimo 1997, 44-45), paving the way for the return of religion in the arena of public debate. Vattimo realised that the guiding thread of weakening was nothing other than secularisation. In other words, the nihilistic process in which metaphysics consumed itself was inaugurated in the Christian message. This is why, for Vattimo, the death of God is not the death of the biblical God (Vattimo 2002, 6),

for the latter is archetypical of hermeneutical nihilism. Vattimo identifies the moment that inaugurates secularisation as the *kenosis* of God. This term means 'self emptying' and it usually refers to the 'Christ Hymn' of St. Paul in Philippians chapter two. The hymn refers to the incarnation of God as the humiliation of God taking the form of a slave in order to serve humankind. Vattimo has been questioned on whether this is a literal occurrence, or whether this humiliation refers to a world historic event. As Vattimo's whole programme is to move away from metaphysical literalism (Vattimo 2002, 29), this is unlikely, and Vattimo has mentioned that he does not conceive of God in terms of a presence, whether transcendent, immanent, or utterly transcendent ('Wholly Other'). Instead, *kenosis* is a message of the humiliation of God in the incarnation, along with that of friendship for the other (Vattimo 1999, 95). The two go hand in hand. Some nuanced commentaries on Vattimo's philosophical theology state that *kenosis* has importance in his work in terms of Being emptying itself into becoming (D'Isanto 1999, 15). While this is a fruitful theme, this has been pursued elsewhere, such as in the death of God theologies of thinkers like Altizer, although with more overtly Hegelian enthusiasm. Indeed, this is not a theme Vattimo himself develops. The lowering of God through *kenosis* is to make him not a master of humans anymore, but their friend (John 15:15) (Vattimo 1999, 78, 95). In part, this is the message of the ethically corollary of *kenosis* that Vattimo develops as the driving force of secularisation, and that is the notion of *caritas*: the friendship of one for the other.

### **Caritas and regard for the other**

*Caritas* is the impetus for secularisation, of de-sacralisation (Vattimo 1999, 64). Drawing upon the work of the anthropologist René Girard, Vattimo identifies the sacred and the metaphysical, drawing a parallel between the violence found in religious thought and philosophy (Girard 1987). Girard thought humans naturally grow jealous of what the other has and can do. This is mimesis. Over time the undercurrent of resentment generated from mimesis threatens to erupt in violence,

destroying society. The balance of society was kept by directing this violence onto a 'scapegoat'. Gradually this became more ritualised and made sacral to have more efficacy, explaining the generation and development of religions and the 'natural sacred' (of this 'victimary mechanism'). Vattimo makes the link between the natural sacred and the violence of metaphysics by describing the metaphysical attributes of the ontotheological God such as omnipotence and omniscience as being naturally religious (Vattimo 1999, 49-50). Secularisation is therefore de-sacralisation of both the natural sacred (the violent aspects of religion) and the metaphysical tradition of philosophy.

Vattimo needs secularisation to be a continuous thread of weakening based on the de-sacralisation of religion and stripping away of the power of metaphysics. How does this relate to the hermeneutical occurrence of Christ both as person and his message? Vattimo follows Girard in regarding that Jesus Christ was put to death for revealing the victimary mechanism pertaining to the scapegoat. Whereas Girard thinks it recurs in the mass, and that Jesus was not a sacrifice himself (he has since changed his mind on this latter point), Vattimo does not think that the true message of Christianity is to institutionalise some natural sacred substitute. Rather, the message of Christ became underplayed and hidden in the institutional nature of Christianity in the decline and fall of the Roman Empire in which the clergy, such as the bishop Augustine of Hippo (Vattimo 2002, 116), had to continue civilisation at the expense of the Christian *kerygma*. Nevertheless, Girard's theory does not lend itself to a theory of weakening, for he was interested in anthropological facts, unlike Vattimo who does not believe in facts.

The question remains: how can the message of *caritas* function as a continuous thread of weakening, as a nihilistic process that culminates in the death of God and end of metaphysics? The answer for Vattimo comes in the principle of interiority that Wilhelm Dilthey thought was the constitute message of Christianity. With Christianity, compared with Greek thought, Dilthey stated that 'the will is no longer satisfied with producing an objective state of

affairs...On the contrary, the will goes beyond all this...and back into itself' (Dilthey 1979, 228). This inner life, on Dilthey's view of the Christian message, was based on the idea of fraternity among all people due to faith over against outward factors such as class, nationality, and education (Dilthey 1979, 229). The principle of interiority turned the soul of the late antique human inwards, having grown accustomed under the Hellenistic worldview to looking outside (Aristotle) or beyond oneself (Plato). Dilthey thought that the conflict between the interior life of the soul and the demands and value of the exterior world has been a constant theme in the West since the beginning of Christianity, especially in figures such as Augustine (Vattimo 2002, 106-107). Alongside the obligation to maintain and preserve civilisation amidst the destruction of the Roman world, Augustine developed a proto-*Cogito*. Other Christians retreated into their souls, such as the Desert Fathers such as St. Pachomius and St. Anthony. Much later the principle of interiority resurfaced under philosophers such as Descartes and Kant. Vattimo does not spell out explicitly how the principle of interiority culminated in the death of God, but he probably presumes his readers are aware of, among other things, Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche's notion of the will to power as the culmination of the metaphysical forgetting of Being by hubristically transforming Being to values posited by the subject (Pippin 1991).

Not only is Vattimo unclear about how the principle of interiority instigated by Christianity culminates in the death of God, but also there is the question about how this principle is related to the de-sacralising message of God's friendship in the 'new covenant'. On this point, however, matters become interesting with respect to the question of the 'other' (with a lower-case 'o'). Vattimo has been heavily criticised for bringing into his philosophy the principle of charity. Some commentators see it as making an exception for an absolute in his philosophical style where there is no place for one (Carravetta 2010; Depoortere 2008; Jonkers 2000). However, these commentators have not paid attention to Vattimo's description of how he understands *caritas*. For Vattimo, *caritas* is a kind of postmodern categorical imperative (Vattimo 1999, 66).



Vattimo, in his essay “Toward a Nonreligious Christianity” states that ‘Augustine’s turn inwards is already a step forward with respect to the notion of objective truth, because once you turn inward you must also try to listen to others like you’ (Vattimo 2007b, 42).

### **Otherness and the weak subject**

What does Vattimo mean by ‘others like you’? Vattimo’s philosophy is one that is other-regarding, but who is the other? On this matter, Vattimo is unclear and it is up to the reader to look for clues. Does Vattimo mean respect for other human subjects, with the term understood in its philosophical sense? As a Nietzschean, writing after the death of God and end of metaphysics, could Vattimo still believe in subjects? Nietzsche did not believe there was a doer behind the deed; it is a mistaken belief to think there is a subject behind the action (Nietzsche 1996, 29). Moreover, Heidegger thought the end of metaphysics was the end of Humanism, with its notion of the strong subject as locus of value. Following Heidegger, in Vattimo’s book *The End of Modernity*, he calls for the need for a ‘crash diet’ for the subject (Vattimo 1988b, 47), but he does not fill in many of the details concerning what this kind of subjectivity would be like beyond prioritising listening to Being over subjectivity in the western metaphysical tradition (such as the Cartesian self). This is not particularly helpful when trying to establish what others ‘like you’ might mean. Vattimo mentions that the turn inward inaugurated by the Christian message is a ‘step forward with respect to the notion of objective truth’, for it implies that one is turning away from external world, from observation to inward agreement with others. However, to look for inward agreement, one would need to have relinquished the notion of objective truth (Vattimo 2007b, 42-43).

It is likely that Vattimo considers those ‘like you’ only as those people interested in listening to the sending of Being as ‘weakening’, that ‘like you’ means only those people who realise both they and their beliefs are contingent and historically situated; in other words, that one should only listen to other people

who have put friendship before objective truth. Put yet another way, one should listen to those who are not prepared to fuse horizons and agree. Taking the case of Vattimo's views on Islam, he tacitly agrees with Richard Rorty when the latter stated that 'dialogue with Islam is pointless' (Vattimo, Rorty, and Zabala, 2005, 72). In this exchange with Rorty, recorded in the book *The Future of Religion*, Vattimo notes that the West is 'refused' by 'some parts of the Islamic world' (Vattimo, Rorty, and Zabala 2005, 72). Elsewhere, Vattimo's reasoning behind such an opinion is clarified, for in an article for *La Stampa* (17 February 1989) called 'Our Savage Brother', Vattimo noted that Islam has 'strong values' (quoted in Antiseri 1996, 69). Later, in lectures published as *After Christianity*, Vattimo stated practices based on a 'strong identity' (indicating Vattimo identifying approaches to knowledge with personhood), such as women wearing the chador, should be outlawed (Vattimo 2002, 101). 'Strong values' and 'strong identity' are examples of 'strong thought'. 'Strong thought' (*pensiero forte*) is not a term outlined and elaborated on much by Vattimo, but it is the logical antonym of weak thought (*pensiero debole*). In Vattimo's landmark essay, 'Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought', he describes strong thought as 'deductive cogency, which fears letting the initial move escape, the move after which everything falls into place' (Vattimo 2012, 39). The 'initial move' mentioned in this quotation is the 'first principle', religious ('God') or philosophical ('substance'), against which everything is measured and to which everything is reduced. With the example of the chador, there is the suspicion that in Vattimo's society, 'strong thinkers' are not to be considered others 'like you' but others 'unlike you' who need to be banished to the margins. There is a paradox in Vattimo's thought in the sense that for all Vattimo is interested in going to the margins to bring the other back in from exclusion (Vattimo and Zabala 2011, 50-51), these others would have embraced weak thought as a way of combating the meta-narratives and strong values of metaphysics and the natural sacred, such as homosexuals who have been marginalised by Natural Moral Law. Vattimo himself is an example, of somebody who sought-out Nietzsche and Heidegger and turned his back on the Thomism

with which he was brought up because it made him an other ‘not like’ other heterosexual Catholics (Vattimo and Paterlini 2009, 13). Neo-Thomists, however, will be banished to the margins should a form of weak thought become normative as they are ‘strong’ thinkers with ethical naturalism as their cognitivist metaethical standpoint. Ironically, Vattimo’s thought is a repeat, and inversion, of the Enlightenment in which religion was banished from public respectability and debate. A similar observation has been made by Thomas Guarino. ‘The contrast between the crucifix and the chador is revelatory’, writes Guarino, ‘because it indicates that, for Vattimo, no one with strong beliefs can truly participate in the public sphere’ (Guarino 2009, 71). Guarino worries that the cognitive content of religious belief will be emptied if it were to participate in a public sphere organised along Vattimian lines. Another worry not mentioned by Guarino is what about those who neither know, nor care, about weak thought; will there simply be no effort to go to the ‘margins’ to engage with ‘strong’ thinkers? Will ‘charity’ be extended to these people? When considering ‘friendship’ (another way of Vattimo’s for referring to charity, normally used by him when not discussing religion) below, this theme will be taken up once more.

### **Secularisation reconstructed**

There may be a way of reconstructing Vattimo’s notion of secularisation to help keep hermeneutics grounded in history, as well as yielding an ethic of charity as friendship which is more inclusive. To begin with, a number of Vattimo’s premises can be assumed, such as the identification of metaphysics with the natural sacred, the notion of *kenosis*, and the message of God’s friendship in, through, and as Christ. Rather than then develop these themes into a history of secularisation explained through the principle of interiority that leads to an undefined notion of otherness (does one take into account other *Daseins*, or just people who realise they are *Daseins*?), there is another way of showing how Christianity effected the weakening of strong structures throughout history.

The key idea here is Pierpaolo Antonello's reading of Vattimo's interpretation of Christianity. Antonello sees Vattimo as putting forward the notion that Christianity was a 'Trojan Horse' (Antonello 2010, 8), posing as a religion when in fact not really being one at all. Christianity destroyed itself by being a lie; it was not really about sacrifice at all, and we are realising now through the work of Girard that this is the case. God commanded humans not to lie, but the religion has been discovered to have been based on a lie. When it comes to how philosophy weakened religion, the 'death of God' reading of Nietzsche by Vattimo also applies. The value of truth in religion culminated in the modern, secular world of techno-science in which God was a superfluous lie. Therefore, one can understand why now we are living in the light of the death of God. It could be argued that this idea of Christianity as a Trojan Horse could be taken further and in a slightly different direction not only by including Christianity as a Trojan Horse for religion, but also for philosophy, a view that shall be developed below in relation to the issue of how 'truth' entered Christianity to begin with.

From where did Christianity gain this idea of the absolute value of truth in the first place? It certainly was not from its Jewish roots, for the Old Testament emphasises the relationship of the covenant rather than philosophical ideals, even if philosophical ideas were beginning to enter Judaism in the Wisdom literature and in Egypt through the writings of Philo of Alexandria. If it was not from Christianity's Jewish heritage, the earliest Christians must have sought out other cultures that happened to include philosophical ideas; this is the line of thought that shall be pursued below. Fernando Savater contrasts Vattimo with his British contemporary, the philosopher John Gray (Savater 2007, 299). In Gray's understanding of secularisation, Christianity actually made thought stronger rather than weakening it by bringing into religion the value of truth: 'Atheism is a late bloom of a Christian passion for truth' (Gray 2002, 127). Through a dialectical reading of Vattimo and Gray it is possible to synthesise their ideas for it could be

argued that Christianity brought the value of truth from philosophy into religion, posing as, and weakening, both.

There are plenty of examples of Christianity weakening philosophy. One can think of the use of philosophy made by the Church Fathers in Late-Antiquity during disputes concerning the Trinity and Incarnation. An example is that the term '*ousia*' was used as 'essence' rather than as 'substance' by theologians such as Gregory of Nyssa. The term '*ousia*' functioned reasonably well within the Aristotelian system, but when it was applied to such an exceptional case as the Trinity then the internal logic of the concept failed as the doctrine required that one essence was shared between three persons (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). In fact, the use of the word *ousia* even confused the Church Fathers, and there was very little agreement on philosophical terminology in general among them (Peters 1993, 195, n. 19-21). Arguably the paradigmatic example of how theology weakened philosophy is the case of Thomas Aquinas. In disputes on the Eucharist, Aquinas, in the words of P. J. Fitzpatrick, abused Aristotelian terms 'to the point of nonsense' by positing that there were free-floating accidents of the bread when Christ was substantially, and sacramentally, present (Fitzpatrick 1993, 11). In short, religion and theology ruined philosophy by holding the universal and metaphysical ransom to the scandalously particular and historical.

Why did Christianity adopt the values of philosophy? Jesus himself went to the margins of society to seek out prostitutes, 'sinners', tax collectors, and people with leprosy. He taught that one should love one's enemies and seek out and help even those who are definitely 'other', such as in the parable of the Good Samaritan. More importantly for hermeneutics and the philosophical question of encountering the other in dialogue, the risen Christ's last words to his disciples were to spread the good news to 'all the nations' (Matthew 28:18-20). This is the 'Great Commission', and it forms the evangelical, universalising, and missionary basis of Christianity. Vattimo himself 'twists' this basis by reading it through his late-modern lens, interpreting it anew through his reading of Derrida on the concept of 'hospitality'. The latter term means placing 'oneself in the hands of

one's guest, that is, an entrustment of oneself to him' (Vattimo 2002, 101). In dialogue, 'this signifies acknowledging that the other might be right', and that in the spirit of charity the Christian 'must limit [himself] almost entirely to listening' (Vattimo 2002, 101). On these grounds, one can reach out even to those 'strong' interpreters, for the primary action of this 'twisted' missionary activity is listening, not trying to convince the other. This view of secularisation and friendship is more inclusive than Vattimo's own because it clearly involves seeking out the other no-matter who they are; whether or not they are fellow 'weak thinkers', or staunch 'strong thinkers'.

### **Encountering the other: possibilities and pitfalls**

Charity in terms of friendship is seeking out the other, primarily to listen to them in order to weaken one's own position by being genuinely changed through the encounter. The earliest Christians, Jews seeking out Gentiles (especially philosophers), are an example of seeking out those who are not 'like us'. How can we understand this reconstruction of secularisation in relation to encountering the other as working in terms of Vattimo's own philosophy? Here one can draw upon the influence of Gadamer's interpretation of Heidegger on Vattimo's philosophy. Dialogue is possible as the traditions of the interlocutors are linguistic, and each particular language inheres within language, within Being. Vattimo, translating Gadamer, wrote 'Being, that can be understood, is language' (Vattimo 2010, 57), so every experience of Being is linguistic. The primacy of language 'has a kind of metaphysical preeminence' (Vattimo 2008, 148), and we are each thrown into a horizon that is a linguistic tradition; we can understand other people because they use language, too. Language, shaped through the tradition which is the heritage into which we are thrown, is Gadamer's way of resolving the Heideggerian problem of the way in which we can conceive of our pre-understanding as Dasein without resorting to a Kantian *a priori*. As such, language is required not only for experience, but also as the possibility of thought. When interlocutors engage in dialogue, an 'event' of interpretation occurs, generating new Being. The

continuity of one's own horizon is broken by the novelty of the other. More than a simple exchange of ideas occurs, but a 'fusion of horizons', 'in which the two interlocutors recognize each other not as they were before but as discovered *anew*, enriched and deepened in their being' (Vattimo 2008, 133; emphasis Vattimo's). Although Vattimo rejects 'vertical' transcendence, of the 'Wholly Other', he accepts the necessity of this kind of 'horizontal transcendence' (Vattimo and Dotolo 2009, 17), of the salvific possibility of the event coming from without historically in order to bring people beyond their own horizon by fusing them closer together. The fusion re-establishes the continuity of the horizon, which is similar and yet different after the dialogue.

Influenced by his pupil Santiago Zabala (Zabala 2009, 79), more recently Vattimo has chosen to use 'conversation' than 'dialogue'. The latter term in philosophy is reminiscent of the Socratic dialogues in which truth is presupposed from the outset (Vattimo and Zabala 2011, 25-26). Moreover, dialogue may not be possible with some people because they only want to talk, not listen: apparent dialogue would be a monologue. By contrast, Vattimo and Zabala argue that conversation occurs when truth is not presupposed from the beginning (Vattimo and Zabala 2011, 25-26). However, this term is not helpful when encountering 'strong' thinkers as many people have a sense of certainty even when one takes into account the infinite plurality of interpretations in the late-modern. Even after having read Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, and Wittgenstein, some people are unwilling and/or unable to relinquish their strong beliefs; they simply do not feel the need. Whereas Vattimo reads plurality as meaning that it is impossible to find a centre or foundation and that certainty is presumptuous and violent, another way to view plurality is that one may feel one is right and everyone else is wrong. Vattimo sees the latter as implausible, giving the example that is it really possible for the pope to dine with the Dalai Lama and still think the latter is damned to hell (Vattimo and Girard 2010, 40)? How could the pope believe this at all, especially in the late-modern world of techno-science in which mass communication presents us with a de-centred, disorienting world of hermeneutical plurality? The answer is

that many people, especially in America (a technologically developed country Vattimo seldom mentions, as commentators on his work such as Nancy Frankenberry note) (Frankenberry 2007, 282), take a leap of faith beyond the pluralistic world Vattimo so ably describes. This might be a leap towards the kind of 'Wholly Other' God or 'force' that Vattimo decries, or even to a biblical God very different to the one presented by Vattimo, that is, one who is transcendent (although not in the sense of ontotheology), a judge, and one who is glorious, not humiliated. This move is not open to Vattimo as he thinks that all transcendence is metaphysical, and all metaphysics is violent. The first assumption is questionable; the God of the Old Testament is transcendent in the sense that he is beyond his creation, but this 'beyond' is not worked out through metaphysical categories. Even if one argues successfully for the view that any 'beyond' is metaphysical, and that any metaphysics is violent, some believers may accept the trade-off between the comfort of their faith and not engaging with other non-believers.

It is, moreover, quite an assumption that 'friendship' can only occur between weak thinkers. Are all 'strong thinkers' averse to being friends with those who do not share their convictions? Some people can be good friends and care for one another perfectly well without engaging on the level at which convictions lie (in Britain it is often said that one should never discuss religion or politics if one wishes to remain friends). Even if one thinks in terms of fusing horizons to reduce marginalisation or barriers between people, rather than establishing friendship through conversation, it may be possible to create friendship through listening without judging or trying to share ideas. Sometimes people who are very sure of their beliefs become more open-minded when given a platform, especially where people seem to be taking on board at least some of their ideas. This may create a friendship in the sense of caring for and respecting the other which may lead to a conversation in which a genuine exchange may take place. Vattimo follows Gadamer in arguing that through a fusion of horizons one can be changed (Vattimo 2008, 133). Nevertheless, one wonders whether the psychological attitude of another towards you (such as caring for the other), even of someone



very much unlike you, can affect one even when a worldview is still held strongly, enabling, potentially at least, a future fusion of horizons through a genuine exchange. In other words, there may be too little interplay between the psychological and philosophical in Vattimo's hermeneutics. Indeed, there seems to be more than a little determinism in the pairing of 'weak thought' and 'openness' and 'strong thought' and 'closedness', as if openness to the other in terms of friendliness of disposition (caring for the other) and openness to ideas (that is, not presupposing truth at the outset of an encounter) were synonymous. If anything, Vattimo, perhaps unwittingly, reinforces the idea that we should be friends with those people who are willing to be open to other interpretations, and that those who are closed-minded are not worthy of friendship. It is highly doubtful this is Vattimo's intention, but it does follow from what he says.

### **Conclusion**

Rightly or wrongly, Vattimo's hermeneutical nihilism precludes any 'vertical transcendence' that might pave the way for a 'return of Being' or any kind of 'Otherness' with a capital 'O'. Nevertheless, concern for the other (with a lower-case 'o') is at the heart of Vattimo's philosophy in recent years, although the identity of the other is largely undefined. This causes a problem for Vattimo, for even though he derives an ethic of charity, or friendship, from historically grounding hermeneutics in the weakening of Being as the nihilistic process of secularisation, he is ambivalent about with whom one should be friends. When considering *caritas*, Vattimo thinks one should consider others 'like you'. What 'like you' means is unclear, and it could be that one should be charitable only to those engaged in weak thought. When Vattimo discusses the example of the chador, this is what is implied. On this view, those who are not weak thinkers are banished to the margins, much like religion was in the Enlightenment. Even when Vattimo is not discussing charity, but the more secular correlate 'friendship', the implication is not only the same, but even more clear. 'Friendship' implies that one does not presume the truth at the outset of the encounter, allowing oneself to

be changed in the event of interpretation constituted by the fusion of horizons. On this view, those who hold one's views 'strongly' are not included in 'friendship'. One's disposition towards the other is reduced to the extent to which one is willing to be open-minded, neglecting the fact that it is perfectly consistent to have strong views on a subject, or even the world in general, and care for and enjoy the company of somebody who thinks differently to you, that is, being their friend. In fact, the latter could effect the former, whereby if someone cares for and enjoys the company of another, an exchange of ideas is more likely to be brought about in the future (although not necessarily from strong thought to weak thought). Vattimo frequently mentions preferring friendship to truth, and approvingly cites Dostoyevsky's claim that he would choose Christ over truth (Vattimo 2002, 103-104), but Vattimo is really choosing and approving weak thought over strong thought. Remodelling charity and secularisation by 'twisting' the missionary, universalising vocation of Christianity, in which the imperative is to seek out and listen to others no-matter who they are, will inculcate the type of friendship that is more inclusive and capable of abandoning the centre/margins distinction that Vattimo has ironically retained.

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