

5

Beyond Interpretation?

On Some Perplexities Following Upon Vattimo's "Turn" from Hermeneutics

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My hypothesis: The subject as multiplicity.
—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*

From Postmodern to Premodern?

For more than forty years, Gianni Vattimo stood fast to the notion that ours is the age of nihilism, of the dissolution of all values, metaphysics having turned into a technoscientific "image" of the world.¹ Critical witness to complex social and political climates, a militant critic, in his scholarly publications he dwelt on these issues consistently and imaginatively, as the signature notion of *weak thought* attests. Alongside many of his contemporaries, Vattimo focused his attention on *both*, the tradition (Aristotle) and the ultimate philosophical avant-garde (Heidegger), and eventually theorized what we might term a "positive" or "constructive" understanding of the crisis of the 1968 to 1969 period and the pervasive nihilism it had ushered in various areas of culture. This conviction allows Vattimo to deground—*s-fondare*—traditional metaphysical "strong thought," an umbrella word that subsumes rational, technical, dogmatic, and axiomatic forms of thinking. Vattimo moreover intended, at least through the 1990s, to abandon the obsessive compulsion to forge a "new" or alternative system or general theory of Being, which was a key element of Modern/Modernist thought and culture,

and begins to think of reality and meaning as ever *partial*, more delimited, inscribed in a *finite* existence, one that accepts a "weakened" or we might say softer notion of the once almighty Being, and its Enlightenment incarnation in the discursive formations of Reason. Presumably this would therefore bring the *human* being closer to his or her reality, suggesting a more humble notion of the meaning of existence and at the same time free up creative possibilities of language and understanding. In other words, the task of thinking at the "end of metaphysics," which seemed to consist in practically inventing a different notion of what Being is, or more specifically of talking about Being, appeared to be a tall (and to some paralyzing or "impossible") order, but one that in the last analysis entailed a radical *rethinking* of what it has been all along. This position required therefore a constant attention to what and how we interpret the tradition of metaphysics, and the historiography of interpretation itself. Appearing in Italy in 1994, *Beyond Interpretation* explicitly addressed this situation, and later we look at it closely. For the path from foundationless metaphysics to a contemporary ethics,² and finally to religion, requires a long detour through hermeneutics,³ in order to thematize the process that makes the itinerary possible and meaningful in the first place. Vattimo's *Belief* (published in Italy in 1996) signals in fact a new beginning, one that may suggest that the postmodern thinker has gone completely around to the pre-modern, which is not to say that his thought is diachronically pre-modern, but theoretically in some ways it might be. With *After Christianity* (originally published in 2002), Vattimo continues even more determinedly to seek a "secular Christianity," one that, having been "weakened" through the dissolution of Modernity, may no longer seek a "religious ethics [grounded] upon knowledge of natural essences that are taken as norms, [and] observ[e] instead the freedom of dialogic mediation" (AC 90). This allows him to fish out from the Christian canon not only a nonreligious notion of *pietas*, but St. Paul's *kenosis* (AC 91), a making humble (rather than humiliating), a lowering, or weakening in God.

This is quite a parabola, if not a swerve, for a philosopher who had spent the first thirty years of his professional life theorizing and locating, in Nietzsche's footsteps, the transvaluation of all beliefs and forms of knowledge, the anti-metaphysical nature of postmodernity, the overcoming of the Subject,⁴ the revaluation of the *hubris* of the Overman as essentially an interpretive project within the uncertainties of the world, the untenability of the Enlightenment project, and who has systematically avoided the use of a philosophical vocabulary that harks to transcendentalism or existential phenomenology, which he considers

shot through with metaphysics. Consider some passages from the earlier *Belief*. After admitting that perhaps his turn to Christianity may have been triggered by aging or some other personal/philosophical trauma (B 21–24), which of course we respect and cannot either question or investigate, Vattimo does a quick review of some major socio-cultural events—such as the fall of the Berlin wall, the end of the Cold War, the disenchantment with the idea of disenchantment, the full onslaught of the technological worldview, and that the real world has become a fable: all of them amply analyzed by much postmodern literature—in order to find the possible explanation for the “return” of religion in our end-of-millennium times. Harking to his reading of Heidegger as the generator of a “weak ontology,” Vattimo wishes to show that this weakening “can be thought of as the rediscovery [*ritrovamento*] of Christianity and as the outcome of the permanent action of its tradition [*permanente agire della sua eredità*]” (B 35, translation modified). Permanent action of the Christian tradition? Was not the very word-concept “permanent” banned from postmodern thought, and with it, and in antithesis to religious ideologies, other Enlightenment terms such as “universal reason,” “absolute spirit,” for being too strong, metaphysical? Or was Vattimo emphasizing the term “tradition?” But in this case we run into two diverging problems, first concerning eschatology, and secondly with the idea of *facticity*, as we will see, because there are objective facts in the memory of this particular, and effectively dominant, tradition that cannot be whisked away by saying, as he does in several places, that “there are no facts only interpretations,” and then sustain, from 1998 onward, that “the idea [of] the fulfillment of redemption is not in complete discontinuity with our history and with our earthly projects” (B 24, translation modified). More recently, we can feel the *unease*, the *disagio* the Italians would say, in his response to both Sergio Quinzio and René Girard,⁵ when he admits that weak ontology is a “risky interpretation,”⁶ because of the complicated relation between “Christian heritage, weak ontology, and the ethics of nonviolence.”

Perhaps the basis for this “turn” are embedded in his notion of *weak thought*, insofar as on the one hand he critiques dialectics for its potential for totalization, but vindicates its usefulness, on the other difference for its unresolvable aporias, though it was the unmasking strategy par excellence? Or is the answer to be found in his alleged *overcoming* of interpretation? But how could that be, since he has held fast, especially after what we may call a “conversion,” to the dictum that “there are no facts, only interpretations?”

The Basic Ideas of Weak Thought

As can be readily seen in the original 1983 text, "Dialectics, Difference, and Weak Thought,"⁷ Vattimo spends less time pointing out where philosophy failed, or dissolved, or proved no longer able to respond (at least credibly) to the great questions of all time (in the West, that is), and prefers instead answering the question: What do we do now? Where do we go from here? And how? This allows him to recover and reposition in a new context several philosophical traditions, but especially *dialectics* and *difference*. By accepting that we cannot "escape" metaphysics, that we cannot possibly think outside of it (as it shapes and informs our language, logic, and *forma mentis*), he therefore has no choice but to search *within* the tradition for the possibility of thinking being and things in untried ways,⁸ thus exploring lived-time, the tradition, yet again, recalling it, rewriting it, and remembering. Vattimo speaks to the failing of strong thought without forgetting that, *volens nolens*, that is the form of thinking we have inherited, and as such we must accept it: even though through its twentieth-century fragmentation and expoliations, it points to nihilism. All attempts at ignoring this state of affairs have led to hysterical moralizing and reactionary measures in ill-fated pursuits of "what is no longer," "utopian origins," or ever-elusive full "presence."

Vattimo begins by conjoining two separate areas of inquiry that reflect the heritage of the two great currents of thought, which more than any other have tried to identify and make sense of the late modern decline of western thinking—namely, dialectics and difference. He achieves this by bending them to accept the basic hermeneutic tenet that there is of necessity a human, personal, individual component to making a statement or judging anything, which, if we look closely, is actually what *prevents it from being totalizing and final*. This indelible "human" component entails recognizing its *partisanship*, its *limits*, its *chance occurrence* in a given moment in time. However, as there is no *from-to* passage in a chronological or topographic sense, this implies that there is no possible "overcoming" of either dialectics or difference, whereas, Vattimo argues, at most we reckon with a *Verwindung*, a "necessary" *distortion* in readapting these traditions.⁹

It is around Nietzsche that hermeneutics has been waging several battles to legitimate new readings to support appropriations, which the German thinker had smashed with his philosophical hammer. Because "[i]t is Nietzsche who helped bring this awareness to light with his analysis of metaphysical subjectivity in terms of mastery and with his announcement that God is dead" (PD 18). The sense of this assertion is

that the strong frameworks of metaphysics—*archai*, *Gründe*, primary evidences and ultimate destinies—are only forms of self-assurance for epochs in which technology and social organization have not yet rendered us capable of living in a more open horizon (as is progressively even more so in our day and age), in a horizon less “magically” guaranteed. Therefore, just like the idea of God, and the religions it gave rise to, “the ruling concepts of metaphysics turn out to be means of discipline and reassurance that are no longer necessary in the context of our present day disposition of technology” (PD 18). Vattimo’s own basic, nonfoundational ideas concerning a weak ontology revolve around four basic tenets, namely: 1) there is no noetic prehension of evidence, and truth is not of a logical order but rather of a linguistic one; 2) verification and hypothesis always occur in a rhetorical-hermeneutic horizon to which we already belong, and is therefore “impure,” but wherein relations and appartenance are informed by “*pietas*,” basis of a later attempt at an ethics of “deeds” [*beni*] and not of imperatives; 3) truth is an interpretation, a formulation, a saying that something is so; 4) therefore, that it constitutes itself fully aware of being a declination, a fading of Being within the tradition, the transmission of previously uttered messages (PD 24–26).

Beyond Interpretation?

Ten years after *weak thought*, we can say that Vattimo accepts in the end that we cannot “escape” our history and tradition, and that therefore what may have to change is not the premises for a truth, but rather the articulations of an understanding, a tolerance, a willingness to risk the retelling of the tale all over again. And so why not employ some of the tools or ruins or archives, ultimately, “conventions,” left around in the cultural (un)conscious? But when this means readapting some of the onto-theological constructs he has critiqued for so long, one must ask why and how this “turn” can be effected. And although there is a limit to how far we can pursue the “why,” insofar as there is no Socratic method to overwhelm with a demonstration, and no dialogic possible to persuade when confronted with belief, but at best a negotiation, or a pact, we can surely look into the “how” this turn is legitimated. For the Vattimo of the 1990s speaks of the need for hermeneutics to regain a certain “rationality” even as it must avoid foundationalism (BI 97–98), and more than that, historical reconstruction itself must be “a rational activity” (BI 107). What surprises is that more than in his earlier analyses, the philosopher addresses the “content” of messages and pays less attention

to their actual rhetorical formulation, a move that may prove counterproductive if we recall that when dealing with religion the question of textuality and the rhetoric of the messages is of fundamental importance.

In *Beyond Interpretation* Vattimo begins by referring to a short article he wrote in the late 1980s about hermeneutics being the *koine*, or dominant trope, of our times,¹⁰ reiterating that it is still applicable in the 1990s. But *because* of this, Vattimo continues, hermeneutics may have lost its original philosophical significance (BI 1). The problem he sets up to resolve is to see why and how this took place, and whether there is a resolution or answer to this state of affairs.

Vattimo falls back on one of the most used and unfortunately often abused citations from Nietzsche, namely, that "there are no facts, only interpretations," and with that theoretical prejudice he proposes to reinterpret the hermeneutic tradition as represented by the axis Heidegger-Gadamer. But is it true that there are "no facts"? And are all interpretations equally valid? In order to respond fairly to Vattimo's claims, let us follow his line of reasoning carefully. What is the issue? He writes: "Whereas, up to a certain point in the history of European culture, the word hermeneutics was always accompanied by an adjective—biblical, juridical, literary or even simply general—in contemporary thought it has begun to appear in its own right" (BI 4). A telling example is Gadamer's project, whose hermeneutics as a general philosophy of culture becomes ultimately a metaphysical "finally true" description of the "(permanent) 'interpretative structure' of human existence" (BI 6). For Vattimo, who had begun to distance himself from Gadamer many years before,¹¹ hermeneutics had fallen back into metaphysics and perhaps betrayed its original project, at any rate it would no longer be postmodern or at least post-metaphysical.

No doubt other philosophers have called attention to the fact that Gadamer's thought had become "olympic" with its claim to be a "universal" theory, and we need not get into that here. Vattimo's "revisionism" intends to challenge this by recalling Heidegger's idea that *Geworfenheit* demonstrates "the historicity and finitude of pre-understanding" (BI 6). In other words: "hermeneutics is not only a theory of the historicity (horizons) of truth: it is itself a radically historical truth" (BI 6). Because of this, it cannot be thought "metaphysically as a description of one objective structure of existence among others, but only as the response to a sending, to what Heidegger calls *Ge-Schick*" (BI 6).

Vattimo's argument then shifts to Nietzsche's announcement that "God is dead," which should be taken to mean not that God "objectively . . . does not exist" or that reality is such that he is excluded from it" (BI 6) but, rather, that "God is no longer necessary" (BI 7). We recall

that Nietzsche's argument was that the God of metaphysics was necessary so that humanity could organize itself in an orderly, secure social life protected from the ravages of nature through hierarchically structured social undertakings as well as from intestine ravages of a religiously sanctioned morality. But as times have changed, this reassurance could be considered as achieved insofar as we live in a world that, being scientifically and technologically structured, spares us the terror in which primitive human beings lived. In light of this achieved epochal turn, we can understand Nietzsche's revelation, synthesized by Vattimo as follows:

God seems too extreme, barbaric and excessive a hypothesis. And, moreover, the God that has served as this principle of stability and reassurance is also the one that has always forbidden the lie; so it is to obey him that the faithful have forsworn even that lie which he is himself: it is the faithful that have killed God. . . . (BI 7)

But by "killing" God because he is a lie, the faithful also renege on the value of truth, which, according to Nietzsche, is another name for God: the world become fable has no room for a deeper or higher truth, and that "leaves the field free to the play of interpretations" (BI 7, translation modified). An observation must be made here: Was there no play of interpretation *before* the realization of the death of God? Or phrasing it differently: was the determination of what is true possible only as long as there was a God, that is to say, a *theoretical arche*, *primum mobile*, *Grund*, or axiom? In other words, having become entirely foundationless, does that mean that we really have no way of establishing from *where* an interpretation derives or is located? Or where it is directed, what *sense* it might have? We should bear in mind as we proceed, that interpretation, insofar as it is embodied in language, requires an *other*, a respondent, an audience, and that as *applicatio* it will impart a meaning, impact on someone, have an effect on this other or others. This problematic picture appears as background to Vattimo's position, as he moves on to his second thesis: "In fact if hermeneutics is not accepted as a comfortable metatheory of the universality of interpretative phenomena, as a sort of view from nowhere of the perennial conflict, or play, of interpretations" (BI 8), then the only plausible alternative left is that of

Think[ing] the philosophy of interpretation as the final stage in a series of events (theories, vast social and cultural transformations, technologies and scientific "discoveries"), as the conclusion

of a history we feel unable to tell (interpret) except in the terms of nihilism that we find for the first time in Nietzsche. (BI 8)

We must now ask: What happened to the notion that all interpretation is *de facto* perspectival? What happened to that unceasing thrownness of the *Dasein* caught in a web of possibilities of *das Man*, confronted with the dilemma of ascertaining what meaningful facts are in the interplay between presence and absence, articulation and appropriation, *habitus* and memory? Interpretation becomes all the more dramatic, compelling, and risky, precisely *because* of the vanishing of the guarantees afforded by a stable frame of reference—God, universal values, History. And yet interpretation *must* take place insofar as the interpreting being cannot not relate to others, the difficulty remaining as to *what* the other being—him- or herself caught in the same predicament—interprets (about) me and my world, my history.

Vattimo states: "If hermeneutics were only the discovery of the *fact* that there are different perspectives on the 'world,' or on Being, the conception of truth as the objective mirroring of how things are (in this case, of the *fact* that there are multiple perspectives) would be confirmed, whereas it is actually rebutted by the philosophy of interpretation" (BI 8; emphasis in the original). Thus "to accept hermeneutics as an interpretation and not a metaphysical description would, strictly speaking, amount to no more than a matter of taste; indeed not even that, for it would be a case not of choosing but simply of registering a state of mind that remained as wholly inexplicable to oneself as to others" (BI 8). But that is not exactly true, first because there are multiple perspectives by his own definition (that is, there are no facts only interpretations); second, because if reduced to personal choice, interpretation cannot be the *mere* registering of a mood, as choice entails reflection on the descriptions of the world *and* decision to act or utter a statement; and third, because it would imply *confronting* metaphysics (or the fallen or inauthentic or alienated concretions of the lifeworld) insofar as *my* interpretation (assuming with Vattimo's Nietzsche that, once again, there are *only* interpretations) is by default a questioning all other interpretations, all other assumptions (at least within my social-historical horizon). So here is what we have: either the end of hermeneutics itself, having vanished into the impossibility of being anti- or post-metaphysical, or else it is reduced to personal statements, opinions, in short, localized exchanges continually exposed to the risk of being absorbed in chatter. For if hermeneutics confirms the *fact* that indeed there are, and there have long been, "different perspectives" on the world, or on Being, or on God, we might then reasonably add: why

is that a bad thing, and who says that hermeneutics “rejects” that? Gadamer presumably, insofar as we are following an argument in which his version of what hermeneutics is is taken to be the Master Code in the field. But even in Gadamer, there is certainly a recognition that there have been different ideas about what hermeneutics was and is.¹² Moreover, the notion of the placing of the interpreting consciousness, or the “situation” of the interpreter in the broader dynamic of the fusing of horizons,¹³ addresses precisely the issue of the historicalness not only of the history of hermeneutics *as a discipline*, but of the background facticity of the human *Dasein*, which no interpretation can ignore and which is not limited to Modernity. Nevertheless, given then that hermeneutics wishes to be *more* than a general “metatheory” of the play of interpretations,

the further step . . . is that of asking whether such a metatheory is not bound to undertake a more radical recognition of its own historicity, its own formal character as interpretation, eliminating the final metaphysical equivocality that stands as a threat to it and which is apt to make of it a purely relativistic philosophy of cultural multiplicity. (BI 9)

Alerting my reader that we are being introduced to a new problematic, to be followed on, which haunts all interpreters and ethicists, namely the *factual* (empirical!) existence of the multiplicity of cultures and the consequent fear of relativism, let us first finish summarizing the argument. Retracing briefly the history of interpretation, Vattimo points out that each theory was always born as the result of specific situations, as a “response to contingent questions” (BI 10). But now our question is: Do we not always respond (to the Gadamerian dialogue, to the Heideggerian sending) on the basis of “contingent questions,” or “situations”—whether Nietzschean, Gadamerian or even Sartrean—that is, on the basis of what our present-day worldview is? Is that not the reason why, as we saw above, in the age of the “transparent society,” Vattimo is responding to the felt need to oppose strong thought once more and introduce the idea of a weakened being? Why is contingency such a monstrous concept as to be made *a priori* irrelevant or marginal to a reframing of the issue of what interpretation entails?

Another problem arises with Vattimo basing this “beyonding” of hermeneutics on the earlier formulation of hermeneutics as the *koine* of our (then 1980s) era, which he reiterates in the second chapter. Two new and crucial key word-concepts enter the scene: relativism and humanism. Hermeneutics seems to have found the closest manifestation of

the "truth" in the aesthetic sphere, which here is taken to include all new paradigm shifts, the work of revolutionary scientists, language games, and all sorts of "redescriptions." It appears that hermeneutics is forever seeking to bring the specialized knowledge of the sciences and their categories within the *Lebenswelt*, the precategorical lifeworld within which new disclosures of truth occur. The danger, according to Vattimo, is that hermeneutics risks being "a general and often *relativistic* philosophy of culture" (BI 20, my emphasis). It risks also being *normative* because it "seems to depend wholly on the fact that in the lifeworld—as the supporting horizon of a culture—belong those argumentative and dialogical features that are in fact specific to Western culture, and perhaps even to the 'transparent' community of modern scientists alone" (BI 20, translation modified). And yet, we read, unlike the Eurologocentric Habermas, Gadamer tends toward a universal theory grounded on the aesthetic and thus "avoids this metaphysical trap," in which presumably Habermas falls, "without falling back into *relativism*, by theorizing the indefinite opening of historical horizons, their unlimited susceptibility to interpretation" (BI 21). But should not this be desirable, after the death of God, on a terrain where we do want things—events, texts, lives—to be predisposed to continued interpretations? Risking normativity can also mean accepting norms for peaceful social coexistence, not necessarily believing in them in some supratemporal or theological manner. And why is relativism such a taboo or harbinger of an unthinkable critical situation?¹⁴ Is it because it harks back to the notion of relation, of intersubjectivity? Is not the determination either explicit or implied in an interpretation *relative to* (or pertaining to) a *Dasein*, a lifeworld, a horizon? Or are we to think of interpretation as *aperspectival*,¹⁵ as a lyric utterance in a deserted wood, as an evaluation in a nonworld?

Vattimo reiterates that the originary essence of objectification, lodged in Plato's doctrine of ideas, is what grounds modern science and the transformation of the world into "a place where there are no (longer) facts, only interpretations" (BI 26). I insist that Nietzsche's ironic, indeed sarcastic expression does not mean that literally there are no facts, only that without the axiom or the *metron* furnished by a supreme being, the interpretations of the actually happened, existentially lived, and historically transmitted events, situations, phenomena, in the end, facts, have multiplied exponentially. The challenge seems rather that of forging new theories and methods of interpretation on the basis of what humans have constructed, which is all we can possibly know, as Vico taught us, and this includes the creation of the divinity

itself. In chapter 3 there appears a term that the Vattimo of the 1970s to 1980s would have shunned:

Instead of reacting to the dissolution of the principle of reality by attempting to recuperate a sense of identity and belonging that are at once reassuring and punitive, it is a matter of grasping nihilism as a chance of *emancipation*. (BI 40; emphasis added)

Emancipation? Lyotard had considered this one of the three great meta-narratives of Modernity, which dissolve and turn practically meaningless in postmodern times, at least in the advanced Western societies. Nevertheless, Vattimo sees its usefulness, which is consistent with what he had laid out in the general premises of weak thought, namely, that a certain aspect of the thought of dialectics could still offer possibilities of development. Ultimately, if we acknowledge that the world is basically informed by the conflict of interpretations, and if we accept that thinking no longer conceives of itself as the recognition and acceptance of objective foundation, having "weakened" precisely because of this endless conflict of positions, then we should conceive of ourselves as the heirs, the "relatives, children, brothers, and friends of those from whom these appeals to co-respond issue [*provengono*]" (BI 40, translation modified) and compel a "new sense of responsibility" (BI 40). And it is from this initial and necessary response, which we suppose is grounded in intersubjectivity (using a language Vattimo carefully avoids), that he jumps to this observation: is it an accident that today people are speaking of the *principle of charity*?¹⁶ Now, Vattimo is fully aware that we may be recovering another metaphysical eternal value to substitute the old one of truth (BI 40). Yet he holds that this is a key authoritative word in the Western nihilistic tradition, and is decisive for philosophy precisely because of "loyalty to its own provenance," and that therefore it "should reappropriate" (BI 40). But not enough is given us as to why this particular theological virtue is to be preferred over the others, and the impact they had on the memory of the collective.

In chapter 4, Vattimo argues that secularization itself is proof that Christianity has developed side by side through Modernity, whereas one can object that secularization has been informed by what amounts to heretical currents, which have challenged the very dogma of Christianity. He writes:

We are led to the hypothesis that hermeneutics itself, as a philosophy with certain ontological commitments, is the fruit of

secularization as the renewal, pursuit, "application" and interpretation of the substance of the Christian revelation, and pre-eminently the dogma of the incarnation of God. (BI 52)

This may indeed be radical, but in recent years, indeed for the past two centuries, secularization has been understood and written about as the exact opposite, namely as the discarding, discontinuation, nonapplication, and revision of the contents of the Christian revelation. It is the continuation of that Humanist tradition that places man at the center of the universe and on which the sciences built epistemological castles *not* grounded on the divinity, beyond the necessary show of (political, military) respect. Therefore, is Vattimo not falling into the trap of a dualistic logic where by negating a position one is actually proving that it is valid—which is propositional logic?¹⁷ Is he not putting on the same plane the Enlightenment, radically anti-religious yet metaphysical by virtue of its "faith" in Reason, and Religion, which fought against all evidentiary proofs of the existence of God, and compelled the community not to question belief? Is he unwittingly deploying dialectics, which he had warned is always risking totalization? In his attempt to prove the connection between hermeneutics and Christianity, is he not digging for, and into, an ontotheological foundation and trying to redeem it as the only way we can rethink philosophy at the end of philosophy?

What the philosopher is after, with a wink to Schelling, is to "liberate the positive aspect of mythological, religious and poetic discourses from the obstacles of the rationalistic ideal of truth as objectivity" (BI 46). In order to carry out this task, Vattimo is forced to go back to the beginning of the Western tradition, primarily to shun the Aristotelian tradition of interpretation (so crucial to Christianity) anchored on *substance*, and recover St. Paul, whose theory of interpretation is based on the key *event*, which is the coming of the Christ. As an anti-Aristotelian, Vattimo begins to develop "the plurality of meanings of Being" (BI 47), which can be read in the purview of St. Paul's vision. This reference immediately points to a cluster of other problems of gigantic proportions, which we cannot take up here, among which I recall, first, the relationship between the Greek notion of Being and the Judeo-Christian idea of God;¹⁸ and second, the manifold sense of that "experience" attributed to St. Paul, which even the younger Heidegger considered "special" but which he subsequently abandoned.¹⁹

As a point of critique, what is not thematized are the notion of *temporality* and of *facticity*, and how these played out in that "history," which, however interpreted—Heidegger used the expressions "authen-

tic" and "inauthentic"—have marked the destiny of the West and have become a heavy, indeed "strong" presence in its collective memory. It is against this fallen, inauthentic if we wish, *Überlieferung* that hermeneutics and the ethics it wishes to establish must struggle. And it must acknowledge that if great minds, city-states, larger than life institutions, indeed entire civilizations have for centuries, that is, *in concreto*, believed in interpreting the Divine Word—which was meant to "liberate us from myths," as Vattimo states—in ultra-metaphysical, dogmatic, when not totalitarian and nondemocratic, ways, then the task of interpretive thought would more likely be found in the direction of a comprehension of the reasons why and how this did happen at all, why it happened in this our world independently of the "Kingdom of God," which by definition is not in our power to know, God remaining mystery, enigma.

Conclusion

Our discussion could continue with an examination of the appendixes to *Beyond Interpretation*, where most of the above is reiterated in a more compact manner, but where we encounter similar arguments, from the idea of freeing hermeneutics of the charge of "irrationalism," to the danger of falling back both upon scientism and the philosophy of the *Lebenswelt*. In the end, sticking to the mantra that all we have is interpretations, which does raise a fundamental difficulty in establishing an ethics of any sort, Vattimo is forced to confront the paradox on the basis of which "it is only the radical awareness of itself as interpretative, and neither descriptive nor objective, that guarantees hermeneutics the possibility of arguing rationally on its own behalf [*di argomentarsi razionalmente*]" (BI 105–106). The statement borders on tautology. Ontology, he says further on, is central to all this because without it "hermeneutics risks appearing as no more than a theory of the multiplicity²⁰ (irreducible and inexplicable, to be accepted as one accepts life itself, or as an 'ultimate' . . . metaphysical fact)" (BI 107). It is difficult to follow Vattimo after statements of this kind. Is not the manifold a perspective Heidegger theorized as the *Geviert*, which unfortunately in the literature has not been adequately explored and developed? And is not the fact that interpretation (that is, hermeneutics) is "irreducible"—since all we have are interpretations, as he said many times earlier—precisely what Vattimo has been arguing all along, in order to avoid an unwitting yet implied unitary Logos behind all the individual manifestations of being, the interpreting being, that is?

All of this does not square, however, with his often repeated quote from Nietzsche that there are no facts only interpretation. Because although the facts of the history of the church can be subject to different interpretations, it cannot be denied that they took place, that they have *been*. In Heideggerian terms, the *Faktizität* is not only of the *Dasein* as fate (*Schicksal*), but also constitutive of destiny (*Geschick*), which entails a collectivity, one might even hazard the expression "a people." Vattimo places great emphasis on the concept of destiny as "destination" in many of his writings, but a rereading of paragraphs 74–76 of *Being and Time* suggests that the distinction needs further elaboration.²¹ "As thrown . . . [*Dasein*] exists factically with Others." It is "lost" in the world of the "they." But this is the bulk of the collective memory, and the interpreting *Dasein* must work with it, against it, "and yet again for it." The predicament, coherently with a hermeneutics, which is *ab initio* tied to its historicity, means that the "resoluteness" attempts to disclose "current factual possibilities of authentic existing, and discloses them in terms of the heritage which that resoluteness, as thrown, takes over." In other words, one comes to one's understanding of his or her own thrownness against the possibilities "that have come down to one, but not necessarily as having thus coming down" (BT 435). Put another way, they may have come down the wrong way, or wearing a particular mask. The authentic *Dasein* effects this in view of one's finitude, "snatching" one from the "endless possibilities which offer themselves as closest to one—those of comfortableness, shirking, and taking things lightly—and brings *Dasein* into the simplicity of its fate (*Schicksal*)" (BT 435). So far, this reflects the earlier Vattimo's concern with mortality as a constitutive element of the *Dasein* that informs all choices and bespeaks its freedom to choose among a number of possibilities in anticipation of the instance that obliterates all other possibilities.²² Though fate is something the *Dasein* hands down to itself, it is yet chosen, representing a readiness of the existent: in the clash of events and circumstances, in short, there is chance, or being "fortunate" (Heidegger's term) of encountering futurity, so that this "powerless superior power" amounts to nothing more than what may or may not happen, we might call it an accident in any given Situation. This will be developed later by Sartre. However, "if fateful *Dasein*, as Being-in-the-world, exists essentially in Being-with-Others, its historicizing is a co-historicizing and is determinative for it as *destiny* (*Geschick*). This is how we designate the historicizing of the community, of a people . . . Only in communicating and in struggling does the power of destiny become free" (BT 436). Recalling that the term destiny in German is related to both the sense of history as well as to that of vicissitude, it is important to bring

the full weight of the series of events, the memories, the lived-experiences of countless beings who, together, in a variously configured co-appartenance, have attempted to interpret, or have been compelled to accept an interpretation, whose narrative²³ has brought light and dark, hope and despair, ecstasies and terror, all as a function of a reified Supreme Being, a Power against which, in Aristotelian fashion, all manifestations of beings have been measured and legitimated. There have been conflicting interpretations of these messages over time, and the events they spawned, but they did happen, they do echo *through* time, not through eternity. The facticity of the collective must be accounted for, because death here is not the individual last possibility for the single *Dasein*, for the *moi*, but that of the not-me, the others in the ontological phrase: Being-with-*Others*. I believe that Vattimo is speaking more in terms of fate, which we may translate as pertaining to the "personal" dimension of Being-there, and less of destiny, which may best reflect the conflicted history of Christianity. For unfortunately we cannot say that the Crusades were only interpretation and not a fact, that the Inquisition, which held court on the proper behavior of "Christians" vis à vis the institutional church for six centuries, and clearly a harbinger of "state terrorism," was only an interpretation and not a fact, and that genocides have not occurred in the name of the Lord.

Perhaps what is needed is an ethics not based on a revealed religion, but an ethics without God. And there is no need here to rehash the arguments made to that effect by Hobbes, Hume, Kant, Mill, and others.²⁴ But a rereading of the Nietzschean sentence as having finally liberated us from the twisted logic of the Church, eliminating the onto-theological immutable essences of Foundation, Salvation, Eternity, of God *causa sui*, and investing *homo humanus* once again with the responsibility of working out an ethics grounded on human, not divine, values. And when Heidegger said in the often-cited *Der Spiegel* interview that "only a God can save us," we should recall that it is definitely not "the Christian God."²⁵

Hermeneutics as the general theory of interpretation should be concerned with the "fallen beings," especially with how these have invented and venerated their gods, including the one that gave rise to monotheism, because of these we do have records, memories, echoes, monuments, in short, *facts*, and the witnesses to "special" or "epochal" or "monstrous" events, where even these are interpretable on the ground (however illusory, or "inauthentic") of a vision, a position, a desire, and an effective course of action. As an enterprise concerned with "effects," with "historical horizons," hermeneutics ought to "save" the early Heidegger, the one of the 1920s, where his analytic of *Dasein*

is still so powerfully illuminating; but it must be corroborated by, and integrated into, a broader theory that includes more refined considerations on the nature of language, of metaphor in particular, and tackles on the problem of collective memory, of what exactly an idea of history is, and how its strategies of power and legitimation have impacted on those who come after. The ethical considerations Vattimo introduces as a sort of ground to hermeneutics are not in and by themselves a bad idea at all, and can easily be accommodated within a secular, post-Enlightenment critical practice, except that there inevitably looms in the background the theoretical legitimizing discourse of a religion, which, even "*after Christianity*," wishes to consider the reincarnation of Christ as *the* event that marks the coincidence of temporality and eternity. One cannot be more metaphysical than that. The grounding of hermeneutics in the singularity and uniqueness (because unrepeatable for all eternity) of this particular faith-event (however distorted and politically motivated it ended up being, as Vattimo's letters to the Pope continue to argue), cannot but raise the suspicion of someone born under a different sun, and which in a global context cannot even foster that needed dialogue among peoples,²⁶ on the basis of the fact that they may have their own monotheism and polytheism to grapple with.

Notes

1. See, for example, the "Preface" to the Italian translation of Heidegger's *Was heißt Denken?*, *Che cosa significa pensare*, 2 vols., trans. Ugo Ugazio and Gianni Vattimo (Milan: Sargarco, 1978), 22–23, where we can pick some constants throughout Vattimo's thought, but also, retrospectively, some shifts in his views on religion.
2. Vattimo's explicit thematization of ethics begins in chapter 3 of *Beyond Interpretation*, continues in *Belief* and in *Vocazione e responsabilità del filosofo*, and finds a fuller expression in *After Christianity*.
3. The notion that philosophy *tout court*—whether as acknowledgment of its "end" or as exploration of any possible "task" left to it—has turned increasingly to the problem of interpretation is also present in Vattimo's writings of the 1960s to 1970s, but finds full articulation in his *The Adventure of Difference* (18–19) and in *Al di là del soggetto* (8 et infra). With a broad historiographic sweep, in a 1987 article titled "Hermeneutics as Koine," trans. Peter Carravetta, *Theory, Culture & Society* 5, 2–3 (1988): 399–408, Vattimo claims

that the one overarching philosophical current or mood in our Euroamerican cultural context is hermeneutics, displacing structuralism as the dominant theoretical matrix of the 1960s to 1970s, which had followed in turn on the cultural hegemony of Marxism in the 1950s to 1960s.

4. In the Introduction to my translation of *Al di là del soggetto* (1984), which I prepared for Humanities Press (no date of publication yet established), I tried to demonstrate how Vattimo leaves the door open to newer forms of subjectivity, or at least to alternative forms of conceiving it. However, he never returns to the question of the subject, at least thematically.
5. See on this René Girard and Gianni Vattimo, *Verità o fede debole? Dialogo su cristianesimo e relativismo*, ed. Pierpaolo Antonello (Massa: Transeuropa, 2006).
6. *Ibid.*, 38.
7. For a translation of the original essay, which I did with Thomas Harrison, see *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 10, 1 (Spring 1985): 99–115. My translation of the entire anthology *Weak Thought*, eds. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti (*Il pensiero debole*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983), is forthcoming from State University of New York Press.
8. I abstain from using the expression “new ways of thinking” insofar as the notion, artistic expression and ideology of the “new” have been object of critique by Vattimo himself in various studies, beginning with *Poesia e ontologia*, *The End of Modernity* (90–112), and *The Adventure of Difference* (86–102, 161–162).
9. Arguably one of his most fruitful contributions to a theory of interpretation, and easily exportable or translatable outside of continental philosophy, *Verwindung* entails a twisting distortion, or a making recourse to something or someone else, which is inevitably impure and not exactly alike what it refers to or what it can infer from another set of discourses. This applies to the tradition especially, as in its being handed down everything undergoes growth or sedimentation or rewriting, or a combination of the three, and is therefore never equal to itself (except to rationalists and dogmatists). For a reading of the early Vattimo, and discussion on *Verwindung*, see the chapter “Gianni Vattimo and the End(s) of Modernity” in my *Prefaces to the Diaphora. Rhetorics, Allegory and the Interpretation of Postmodernity* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1991), 215–235.
10. Gianni Vattimo, “Hermeneutics as Koine.”

11. See, for instance, the difference between his Introduction to his translation of *Warheit und Methode* into Italian, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Verità e metodo*, trans. Gianni Vattimo (Milan: Fabbri, 1972), and the "Postilla" he added when the work appeared in a second edition by Bompiani in 1983.
12. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 245–267.
13. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 269, 271.
14. See Enzo Di Nuoscio, "Elogio del relativismo," in *Il bello del relativismo. Quel che resta della filosofia nel XXI secolo*, ed. Elisabetta Ambrosi (Venice: Marsilio, 2005), 105–114.
15. A thinker who had thematized the "aperspectival world" is Jean Gebser, whose *The Ever-Present Origin*, trans. Noel Barstad with Algis Mickunas (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986) was eerily prescient of some aspects of the postmodern condition. See a partial discussion in my *Prefaces to the Diaphora*, cit., 154–157.
16. The reference is to the work of Donald Davidson.
17. This argument is picked up and developed in *After Christianity* by appealing to Karl Barth, according to whom "the secularization of modern man [is] the paradoxical affirmation that God radically transcends any worldly realization" (AC 36).
18. See on this Umberto Regina, "Noi eredi dei cristiani e dei greci. *De-struktion e Faktizität* nel cammino di Heidegger," in *Heidegger Oggi*, ed. Eugenio Mazzarella (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998), 195–215. For a broader historical view, see Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon. Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 2007).
19. See Otto Pöggeler, *Martin Heidegger's Path of Thinking*, trans. Daniel Magurshak and Sigmund Barber (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1987), 9–31; and Felix Duque, "Il Contrattempo. Lo spostamento ermeneutico della religione nella fenomenologia heideggeriana," in *Heidegger oggi*, 165–194. The above cited article by Regina and the one by Duque study Heidegger's 1919–1920 and 1920–1921 university courses; in particular Duque details how, whatever Heidegger may have drawn from St. Paul, after Augustine the Christian religion for him becomes "theology" (187). Pöggeler emphasizes the Patristic appropriation of Greek metaphysics (27).
20. "*Teoria della molteplicità*" could also be rendered as "theory of the manifold," though technically if the latter is meant then the Italian should have been "*teoria del molteplice*."
21. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); hereafter referred to as BT.

22. See the powerfully argued position he takes ten years earlier, in his response article in *Che cosa fanno oggi i filosofi?*, ed. Norberto Bobbio (Milan: Bompiani, 1982), 201: "Heidegger calls death the coffer of nothingness, but we can also call it the casket of being. The important thing is the idea of coffer, of a deposit of treasures. It is mortality that furnishes history with its richness, it is mortality that generates the possibility of constructing a life with a meaning, with a continuity, as a discourse, a passage. The language that allows me to accede to being, that discloses the horizons within which things are given to me, is richly stratified and dense precisely because it bears the mark of the generations that have expressed themselves with it. On the ethical plane, our common mortality is perhaps the only value capable of founding a morality, in the sense of the *pietas*, of the respect for the living and its traces."
23. Here we should open a long paragraph on the interconnectedness of discourse and temporality; cf. *Being and Time*, par. 34 and 68d.
24. Cf. Kai Nielsen, *Ethics without God* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1990); Eugenio Lecaldano, *Un'etica senza Dio* (Bari: Laterza, 2007).
25. See Martin Heidegger, "Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)," in *Gesamtausgabe* 65 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1989), 403, cited in Regina, 217. See also Günter Figal, "Forgetfulness of God," in *Companion to Heidegger's Contributions to Philosophy*, ed. Charles Scott, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 198–212.
26. See, for instance, Raimon Panikkar, *L'incontro indispensabile: dialogo delle religioni* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2001).

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