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Is Nihilism Our Destiny? The Postmetaphysical Ethics of Gianni Vattimo

Gianni Vattimo is the best known theoretician of the so-called “weak thought” (*pensiero debole*) as a manifestation of fulfilled nihilism. His reflection on the phenomenon of nihilism refers in particular to the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger. In the opinion of the Turin philosopher, nihilism is now our destiny, and should be embraced creatively and constructively. This approach to the problem of nihilism carries with it serious ethical consequences. Vattimo does not create a new ethical system, but describes the most important elements of a nihilist ethics grounded in weak ontology.

1. From Metaphysics to Hermeneutics

Since the mid-1980s Vattimo has advanced the thesis that hermeneutics has in our times become a form of *koiné* – a language and speech universal not only for philosophy, but also for the entire Western culture.¹ He does not by any means have in mind hermeneutics meaning a narrowly-construed philosophical school. Vattimo is rather talking of hermeneutics as a broadly-conceived philosophical reflection developing along the Heidegger-Gadamer axis. In this approach, hermeneutics as a meta-theory of the play of interpretation not only constitutes the theory of the historicity of truth, but is first and foremost a philosophical response to the history of being interpreted as the happening of nihilism.² In consequence, Vattimo refers to authors as

¹ Cf. G. Vattimo, *Etica dell'interpretazione*, Torino 1989, 38-42; *Oltre l'interpretazione. Il significato dell'ermeneutica per la filosofia*, Roma – Bari 2002, p. 3-19.

² Cf. G. Giorgio, *Il pensiero di Gianni Vattimo. L'emancipazione dalla metafisica tra dialettica ed ermeneutica*, Milano, 213-244; W. Lorenc, *Hermeneutyczne koncepcje człowieka. W kręgu inspiracji heideggerowskich*, Warsaw 2003, p. 341-351.



different as Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricouer, Pareyson, Habermas or Rorty as hermeneutic thinkers. What connects them is not so much a common vision of philosophy, but rather the certain spiritual kinship (*Familienähnlichkeit*) of which Wittgenstein spoke.

Vattimo stresses that hermeneutics, which is born out of the anti-metaphysical polemic of Heidegger, remains even today thought that is motivated primarily by ethical reasons. The author of *La fine della modernità* accepts Heidegger's understanding of metaphysics as the conviction that there exists a foundation of existence which can be reached by reason in order to derive from it ethical principles, for instance, which should be followed in one's individual and social life.

Vattimo reminds us that Heidegger blamed Western metaphysics for having put existence and being on the same level and reducing the whole of philosophical reflection to questions about the being of beings. Since Plato, the category of being is only referred to as the common character of all beings, as a type of the most general and abstract term which is developed by observing that which is common to all beings. Western metaphysics understood that way amounts to understanding a being that leads an inauthentic existence and becomes a synonym for the "oblivion of being" (*Seinsvergessenheit*). Metaphysics forgets about the problem of being and deals only with beings. Consequently, being is not differentiated from beings and does not transcend it.³

The original motives of Heidegger's revolution against metaphysics were more ethical than theoretical in nature. Heidegger was convinced that metaphysics as a reflection on being in the categories of presence and objectivity should be rejected, as it is a form of thinking characterized by violence.⁴ Metaphysics leads to violence since, as a concept of categorical presence of existence as the ultimate foundation before which one may only remain silent and reverent, it leaves no room for questions, and imposes itself without providing any ex-

³ Cf. G. Vattimo, *Introduzione a Heidegger*, Roma – Bari 1993, p. 83.

⁴ Cf. id., *Il soggetto e la maschera. Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione*, Bologna 2003, p. 111-130.



planations.⁵ The identification of existence with an object we can dispose of leads to a special form of violence which is used today against reality by modern science and technology. Vattimo says that we are now living in an age of the end of metaphysics – of which Heidegger spoke – and in times marked by the “death of God” about which Nietzsche wrote. Hermeneutics is a thought that belongs to our times in which, as Heidegger used to say, the first flaring of the happening of existence occurs, as man and existence lose the features which metaphysics had previously ascribed them (presence, objectivity, and will of power). Thus construed, hermeneutics is the philosophical thought of secularized Europe. Using Habermas’ language, we can say that it is a philosophy of the society of public opinion, contemporary mass communication. In Heidegger’s language, hermeneutics may be described as the philosophy of the age of worldviews and their inevitable conflicts. For hermeneutics, truth as a stable structure of being, reflected in statements, does not exist. There are only horizons, diverse cultural universes within the boundaries of which experiences of truth happen as internal articulations and interpretations.⁶

Hermeneutics is the philosophy of a world in which being is revealed in the form of weakening and dispersion. The crucial role is played here by Nietzsche’s claim: “There are no facts, only interpretations”, which in simple terms means disappearance of actually existing reality. Recognizing its own nihilist destiny, hermeneutics paves the way for an ethics based on the ontology of reduction and dispersion.

2. Communication – Redescription – Continuity

The ethics answers presented within the framework of the hermeneutic *koiné* in the face of the modern development of the man-existence relationship can be set out using three characterisations: the

⁵ Cf. id., *Oltre l’interpretazione*, op. cit., p. 40.

⁶ Cf. id., *Le avventure della differenza. Che cosa significa pensare dopo Nietzsche e Heidegger*, Milan 2001, p. 15-46.



ethics of communication, the ethics of redescription, and the ethics of continuity. The first is related to the names and theories of Habermas and Apel, the second to Rorty, and the third to Gadamer.⁷

For Apel, the experience of truth is conditioned by relation to language, which contains a certain type of call to communication. No experience of the world is possible without the medium of language. Referring to Wittgenstein, Apel says that we are not alone in the language game; even the most arbitrary form of private language requires from the user a certain “experience of division”, of acting at one time as creator of rule, and at another as the observer of rules. Observance of rules begets responsibility to the ideal interlocutor, even if this be the subject who created the norms.

Recognition of the linguistic and interpretative character of our experience of the world brings with it also a clear ethical guideline: I must acknowledge the rights of the interlocutor, which I cannot consider equal to mine as the speaking subject. On this basis Apel formulates the principle of unlimited community of communication, from which he draws basic moral norms.

Habermas talks about the normative meaning of a communicative act in similar terms, even if he puts less emphasis on the use of language. He believes that to act ethically means to move in a space of free argumentation, maintaining and developing conditions for a communication that is transparent, free from injustice, ideological prejudice, or pressure structures.⁸

Vattimo’s objections against the ethics of communication are focused on its idealist and subjectivist implications. Can the ideal of absolute transparency of communication be upheld while remaining faithful to the basic requirement of hermeneutics, i.e. maintaining the interpretative character of each experience of truth? Doesn’t the model of absolute transparency of communication imply the need to

⁷ Cf. id., *Oltre l’interpretazione*, op. cit., p. 42.

⁸ Cf. M. Januszkiewicz, *Etyczny wymiar hermeneutyki (wokół Gianni Vattimo)*, in: *Filozofia i etyka interpretacji*, ed. A.F. Kola, A. Szahaj, Kraków 2007, p. 294-296.

appoint a group of experts who would arbitrarily decide which type of communication is right, and which is distorted?

The philosopher from Turin believes that the ethics of communication remains to a large extent dominated by the metaphysical and transcendental approach, and that its understanding of historicity, at least from the hermeneutical point of view, is insufficiently radical. The ideal of transparency, of eliminating all obstacles, seems dangerous, as it approximates the concept of objective truth perceived by a neutral subject. Ethics inspired by hermeneutics – at least in its Gadamerian form – has only two paths before it. Either it will become ossified and explicitly define *logos* as a set of values shared by a historical community (...), inevitably becoming a conservative ethics which assumes recognized values and the existing order as its criterion, or (...) it will decide that in certain circumstances *logos*-language is a border concept, and will present itself as a purely formal demand for universalization by means of communication, not differing essentially from that which is found in such authors as Apel and Habermas in the context of a return to Kant's transcendentalism.⁹

Vattimo notices the profound relationship between the ethics of communication and modern metaphysics. He believes both Apel and Habermas propose at least indirectly the restoration of a certain form of metaphysics. He has in mind first, the concept of the subject which is modelled on a metaphysical subject whose ultimate form is full self-consciousness, and secondly, that the normative ideal of unlimited communication is an *a priori* concept which reveals its categorical face, retaining its imperative character with respect to any historical experience. The finiteness of the subject Habermas talks about is only finiteness that characterizes the objects of science, and not finiteness that is a feature of existence in the historical dimension. Habermas's intersubjective "I" is the whole "I" of modern metaphysics and science.

These remnants of ahistoricism make it impossible to consider the ethics of communication the proper result of the moral call of

⁹ Cf. G. Vattimo, *Etica dell'interpretazione*, op. cit., p. 138.

hermeneutics.¹⁰ For hermeneutics, historicity is a form of belonging. The experience of truth does not occur when an object is reflected in the subject, but it is an interpretation of the tradition (language, culture) to which existence belongs.

Vattimo notices that the theory of redescription, developed by Rorty and present in the writings of such authors as Deleuze or Foucault, is contrary to the ethics of communication. Rorty emphasizes the fact that in communication space the concern is not only to transmit a message between interlocutors within a shared paradigm, but first of all about an incessant struggle to maintain one's own subjectivity, the right to differ, or change. This type of approach leads to redescription, describing anew oneself and the world one lives in.

If in the age of nihilism there still remains any obligation that we should impose on ourselves, it is certainly not observance of the existing tables of values, but the establishment of new tables of values, new lifestyles, new systems of metaphors for talking about the world and one's own experience.¹¹ Vattimo's chief charge against the ethics of redescription is that it reverts to metaphysics by emphasizing the role of a creative genius substantiated in the vitalist celebration of creativity as the sole explanation of the communication process.

In Vattimo's opinion, the only ethics which can be reconciled with the antimetaphysical perspective of hermeneutics is the ethics of continuity developed by Gadamer. The ethics of the author of *Truth and Method* is an explicit affirmation of the value of dialogue, even if personally he does not believe dialogue should be based on the ideal of transparency. Gadamer stresses continuation, rootedness in tradition and restoration of the value of authority and classics. Truth is embedded in tradition, by which it is also defined. Gadamer, citing Hegel, talks about the need to inculcate individual experiences in the continuity of individual existence, which is based on the foundation of belonging to a historical community and which lives in the language. Community, for its part, is not something closed and isolated. As

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 141.

¹¹ Cf. G. Vattimo, *Oltre l'interpretazione*, op. cit., p. 45.

a horizon, it moves together with us, and the integration of individual experiences in the horizon of the community is a perpetual process.

Vattimo agrees with Gadamer that hermeneutics should have a distinctly ethical orientation, thus confirming the role of ethics as an important element of the criticism of traditional metaphysics. Hermeneutics is philosophy which has been guided from the very beginning by its ethical call. Undoubtedly, it has considerably contributed to the “rehabilitation of practical philosophy”.

Vattimo continues on the path paved by Gadamer, and performs a nihilist radicalization of his concepts. He believes that also in the proposition of Gadamer that there is a certain risk of reverting to metaphysical foundations. Vattimo perceives the threat contained in the idea of morality as an infinite decomposition of continuity, which is exposed to the risk of depicting the authenticity of existence, or the so called good life, in terms of perfect integration within a certain whole which, as such, would be a good. This kind of structure begins to suggest metaphysical foundations. In consequence, it is necessary to perform a transformation, in the nihilist sense, of Gadamer’s ethics of continuity in order to avoid this risk, which would involve treason of the most profound, inherent motivations of hermeneutics.

Ethics springing from hermeneutics is not a system of norms and imperatives. The ethics that becomes possible through hermeneutics appears to be in essence not so much an ethics of imperatives, in Schleiermacher’s expression, as an ethics of goods. Or, to put it in another way, if a certain imperative is formed, then it is such as orders the reduction of different *logoi* – discourses of specialized languages, but also the sphere of interests and the domain of autonomous rationalities – to *logos* – common consciousness, the prevailing substratum of the common values of a historical community expressed in its own language.¹²

The ethics of interpretation in Vattimo’s approach rejects any perspective dominated by the metaphysical and transcendental, and acknowledges the fundamental role of the category of historicity. To

¹² Cf. id., *Etica dell’interpretazione*, op. cit., p. 136.

find the normative moral ideal is to recognize reason as *logos* – the common consciousness that is expressed in language, which is by no means the heritage of values defined once and for all. Values we refer to in the social dialogue in order to justify certain choices are radically historical.

3. Post-Metaphysical Ethics as Nihilist Ethics

The author of *La fine della modernità* is convinced of the nihilist destiny of hermeneutics. In his works the terms “nihilism” and “hermeneutics” are often used interchangeably. Nihilism becomes hermeneutics, thought that is able to aim at that which is universal through dialogue and compromise. It does not seem that the sense of modern history, the sense of the age of existence with which hermeneutics remains in harmony, can be referred to otherwise than as nihilism. Hermeneutical ethics is thus called to locate individual experiences within a network of relationships which are oriented towards disintegration of existence.¹³

Vattimo stresses that his interpretation of nihilism coincides with the analyses of Nietzsche and Heidegger. For Nietzsche, nihilism is the demolition of all ultimate foundations, and the awareness that in the Western culture “God is dead” and the real world has become a fairy tale. For Heidegger, on the other hand, nihilism is a process as a result of which “nothing at all” remains of existence as such. In these two definitions of nihilism the same truth is expressed: existence has been reduced to a replaceable value.

Nihilism does not mean that being has been subjected to the rule of the subject, but that existence has melted in the dispersion of values, in the undefined transformations of universal equivalence.¹⁴

Vattimo suggests that tragic nihilism be replaced with constructive nihilism. The exit of hermeneutics from tragic and negative nihilism naturally also leads to the acceptance of many aspects of the latter:

¹³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁴ Cf. G. Vattimo, *Koniec nowożytności*, Kraków 2006, p. 18.

following Nietzsche we might say that one may not build without pulling down.¹⁵ Vattimo refers to the figure of the “fulfilled nihilist” that appears in Nietzsche’s writings. A fulfilled nihilist is one who has understood that nihilism is his (only) chance. This is what our approach to nihilism looks like today. We are beginning to be – we are beginning to be able to be – fulfilled nihilists.¹⁶ When Nietzsche talks about a fulfilled nihilist, he refers to nihilism that is not experienced as loss and grief over the end of metaphysics, but as a chance of a new position for man in relation to existence.¹⁷

In this perspective, instead of reacting to the disintegration of reality with attempts to restore identity and belonging, one should rather perceive nihilism as an opportunity for emancipation. To discover the world as a conflict of interpretations also means to acknowledge oneself as heir of the tradition of weakening the strong structures of being in every dimension of existence. If we are uncomfortable today, it is not because we are nihilists, but rather because we are not nihilistic enough, because we are unable to live the experience of the disintegration of being through and through. This is the root of all the feelings of frustration and being lost that we call alienation.¹⁸

Philosophy should abandon its claims to any foundation role in order to understand itself as *pensiero debole*, as an ontology of relevance capable of accompanying humanity in a world that needs no absolutes any more. Vattimo does not believe that *pensiero debole* means chiefly a certain concept of thought more aware of its limitations, which abandons all claims to comprehensive, global metaphysical visions, but that it is a theory of weakening as the constitutive feature of existence in the times of the end of metaphysics.¹⁹ He admits that in developing the concept of *pensiero debole* he was inspired,

¹⁵ Cf. id., *Nichilismo ed emancipazione. Etica, politica, diritto*, Milano 2003, p. 7.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁷ Cf. G. Vattimo, *Introduzione a Nietzsche*, Roma – Bari 2003, p. 81-91.

¹⁸ Cf. id., *Credere di credere*, Milano 1996, p. 8.

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 26.

among other things, by a search for non-aggressive ethics and his personal reflection on Christianity and religion.²⁰

Heidegger believed that the only cure for us now was remembrance (*Andenken*), a return to the memory of existence. Vattimo disagrees with him. In his opinion, it is not possible to prepare the return of existence. We cannot remember being, we can only remind ourselves that we have forgotten it.²¹ The only possible history of existence is the history of the gradual disintegration of objective truth; the history of existence is nihilism. Vattimo interprets Heidegger from the point of view of weakening, instead of waiting for the reappearance of existence.

Metaphysics does not leave us orphaned: its disintegration (Nietzsche's "death of God", if we wish) appears to us as a process endowed with its own logic, which can also provide the elements necessary for reconstruction.²² Active, or constructive, nihilism, acknowledging the disintegration of primary principles at the outset, aims now at developing a post-metaphysical ethics, consisting essentially in a move from an ethics of the Other to an ethics of the other. Post-metaphysical ethics is ethics understood as respecting laws which come from metaphysical essence and structures, founded on the nature of man and things. Post-metaphysical ethics, on the other hand, will be an ethics rather of negotiations and consensus than of unchangeable principles or categorical imperatives which speak to everyone's reason in a binding way.

Post-metaphysical ethics not only criticizes ethical naturalism and essentialism, and the related authoritarianism, but also proposes certain moral contents. Are any principles or norms possible if we consider ourselves part of a tradition characterized by a disintegration of the basic principles? Vattimo believes one must not identify post-metaphysical ethics with ordinary relativism. If I rely on certain forms of

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 106.

²¹ Cf. G. Vattimo, P. Patolini, *Non Essere Dio. Un'autobiografia a quattro mani*, Reggio Emilia 2006, p. 34.

²² Cf. G. Vattimo, *Nichilismo ed emancipazione*, op. cit., p. 52.

belonging (racial, ethnic, familial, class) as the final point of reference, I limit my perspective of judgment and decision-making at the very outset. If my ultimate point of reference is origin, then it is an origin to which we are responsible. Acknowledgement of one's origin means listening intently to the tradition to we belong. Listening to tradition leads not just to a redefinition of all values, but also to a rediscovery of certain contents that we have inherited. Many principles which used to have validity as "natural" are now considered part of cultural inheritance; they are in force not only because they have the character of nature or essence, but because they have been considered rational norms.

The choice between what is and what is not valid in our cultural heritage is made on the basis of the criterion that only that is valid which leads to limiting violence. Post-metaphysical ethics is an ethics of finiteness. It tries to stay faithful to the discovery of the position, always immutably finite, of one's origin, remembering the pluralist implications of that discovery.²³ The acknowledgement of one's own tradition also means listening to the voice of contemporary people to whom we are responsible.

Post-metaphysical ethics assumes the form of an ethics of piety (*pietas*). It is about an ethics which does not need foundations and which does not distinguish between good and evil, but between violence and *pietas*. In his reflection on the category of *pietas*, Vattimo refers to the views of Heidegger and Schleiermacher. Heidegger criticizes the rule of contemporary science and technology over existence, and calls for a piety of thinking (*Frömmigkeit des Denkens*); with *pietas*, thinking can return to the past, discovering its unacknowledged capabilities. Thinking about existence should not be a form of violence and subjugation, but a special kind of memory (*Andenken*) characterized by piety and respect. *Pietas* does not apply only to messages from the past, but should also facilitate the approach to the present, to our specific historical situation.

²³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 55.

In Schleiermacher, on the other hand, *pietas* is the central principle of religious life. As with many other representatives of the Reformation, *pietas* for this author has a strictly religious meaning. It is nothing other than a feeling of dependence and finiteness, the maximum manifestation of the awareness of the existence of the Creator of man and the world. Drawing on the concepts of Heidegger and Schleiermacher, Vattimo secularizes the category of *pietas*, conceiving it as the ability to listen to the messages of the past in a new form. *Pietas* is not portrayed as a relationship with deity or the metaphysical *óntos ón*, but as the survival of the traces of finiteness, and as a non-violent relationship with life experiences formed by present attention paid to beings in their historical origin and their forms of appearance. *Pietas* thus acquires its meaning through mortality, finiteness, impermanence, and emerges, as it were, in the shadow of the dead God. Only after the death of God does the path open to understanding religion in a way which emphasizes *pietas* as an important aspect of post-metaphysical ethics, weakening the image of a God who is almighty and vindictive, who imposes law upon us without forgiveness or mercy. This way existence is shattered, which forces us (also from Heidegger's perspective) to define our position with respect to beings, taking *pietas* as our guiding principle.²⁴

Vattimo rejects Rorty's opinion that there is no need for a history of existence and weak ontology to explain one's own preference for a world in which solidarity and respect for others prevails over universal war. He points out that there is a need to substantiate attitudes and the roots of preferences. A direct relationship with one's origin endows the ethics of non-violence with rationality and inherent content.

It is true that founding the ethics of non-violence on the ontology of weakening may appear to be another return to a metaphysics in which morality coincided with the acknowledgement of and respect for essence, natural law, and so on. If, however, such ontology talks

²⁴ Cf. F. Arens-Dolz, *Vattimo e Schleiermacher: pietas ed interpretazione*, in: *Pensare l'attualità, cambiare il mondo. Confronto con Gianni Vattimo*, ed. G. Chiurazzi, Genova 2008, p. 89.



about existence as something which is constitutively hidden and whose hiding is also manifested in the fact that a thought cannot consider itself to be a reflection of objective structures, but merely a risky interpretation of heritage, postulates and origin., then the risk appears to me to be pure invention, a purely logical delusion.²⁵

4. Nihilist Interpretation of the Christian Message

From the beginning of the 1990s, Vattimo's thought bears witness to his rediscovery of Christianity. He tries to reconcile the fundamental message of the philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger with the Christian message. Vattimo proposes that the idea that the guiding thread of the history of existence is the weakening of strong structures is nothing other than a transcription of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation of the Son of God.²⁶ In this way Christ's kenosis becomes a weakening of the transcendental power of God, which in consequence leads us to the weakening of all the ontological truths that have characterized the history of man's thought. Consequently, Vattimo proposes the provocative thesis that postmodern nihilism is a contemporary form of Christianity.²⁷

Vattimo confesses that he discovered the nihilist destiny of the history of existence because he was raised in the Christian tradition in which God is not a ruler, but a friend. The direct inspiration for his nihilist reinterpretation of Christianity came from the views of two contemporary thinkers, Sergio Quinzio and René Girard. Quinzio believes that nihilism is a form of a secular translation of the words of Jesus who, dying on the cross, utters the dramatic words about his abandonment. Quinzio stresses that it is the culmination of God's kenosis. Christ on the cross gives up his power, becomes weak, experiences nothingness and senselessness. This way, the cross becomes a picture of the fall of the omnipotence of God. It is also the end of the

²⁵ Cf. G. Vattimo, *Credere di credere*, op. cit., p. 38-39.

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁷ Cf. G. Vattimo, P. Patolini, *Non Essere Dio*, op. cit., p. 182.



existence of any absolute values, and the breakdown of its ultimate foundations. Thus, Christ's death on the cross is the beginning of the history of nihilism.²⁸

Girard, on the other hand, presents his own theory of the beginning and development of human civilization. His basic thesis is that what from the purely natural point of view is called *sacrum* is profoundly related to violence.²⁹ Human communities are animated by the impulse of imitation. That impulse also becomes the source of crisis and threatens the breakdown of communities when the need to imitate others explodes as the will to appropriate things that belong to others, creating an opportunity for a war of every man against every man. In such a situation, reconciliation is only possible if we find a scapegoat against which violence may be directed.

Since a scapegoat restores peace and rebuilds the foundations of coexistence, it is endowed with sacral attributes and becomes an object of cult, remaining substantially a propitiatory offering. This "natural" character of the *sacrum* has also been retained in the Bible and in Christian theology which interprets Jesus Christ as the "perfect offering". This sacrifice satisfies God's desire for justice after the sin of Adam. Girard claims that Jesus does not become man in order to offer himself up to God as sacrifice, but comes to this world in order to reveal and cut the bond that connects violence and *sacrum*. He believes that the portrayal of Jesus' as a propitiatory offering is a remnant of natural religion in the heart of the Christian message. In reality, Jesus' death on the cross is a disturbance of the cultural matrix which founded order on violence. Christianity is liberation; one needs no longer resort to new scapegoats to resolve conflicts and restore peace.³⁰

Referring to such authors as Quinzio and Girard, Vattimo stresses that a violent God, typical of natural religions, is a God of metaphysics, the one whom metaphysics called *ipsum esse subsistens*, who had

²⁸ Cf. S. Quinzio, *Nichilismo e rivelazione*, „Archivio di Filosofia” 1-3 (19994), p. 170.

²⁹ Cf. R. Girard, G. Vattimo, *Verità o fede debole? Dialogo su cristianesimo e relativismo*, Pisa 2006.

³⁰ Cf. G. Vattimo, *Dopo la cristianità. Per un cristianesimo non religioso*, Milan 2002, p. 122-127.

all the characteristics of an objective being. The fall of metaphysics is also the end of this image of God. It is Nietzsche's "death of God". The end of the God of metaphysics means more than a purification of the image of the Christian God from elements of natural religion. Incarnation, that is, God's coming down to the level of man, which the New Testament calls a kenosis of God, is interpreted as a sign that the non-violent and non-absolute God of the post-metaphysical age is distinguished by the same vocation to weakening of which philosophy inspired by the thought of Heidegger speaks.³¹

The process of gradually weakening the Supreme Being is called secularization. Vattimo depicts it as Christianity's positive way of development in history. This interpretation differs diametrically from the vision presented in dialectic theology (Barth, Gogarten). The effect of secularization is not emphasis on the increasingly complete transcendence of God, purification of faith from an excessively close relationship with time, expectance of man's self-improvement, or illusions concerning progress in the enlightenment of reason. For Vattimo, secularization is a way in which the kenosis that began with the incarnation of Christ proceeds in its fulfilment, accomplishing the task of educating man to overcome the primordial, aggressive essence of the *sacrum* and of all social life.

Christianity rediscovered as the doctrine of kenosis and secularization is not a collection of definitive truths which can be referred to in order to find firm ground in the sea of insecurity, in the age of the Babel of the languages of the post-metaphysical world. It is a version of secularized Christianity which abandons its revealed dogmas, becoming a universal religion, a set of values, a certain ideology.³²

The Christian heritage which goes back to weak thought is also, and first of all, the Christian heritage of the commandment of love and its rejection of violence.³³ The Christian message, interpreted with the

³¹ Cf. id., *Credere di credere*, op. cit., p. 31.

³² Cf. A. Livi, *Rorty e Vattimo: il cristianesimo in prospettiva post-metafisica*, „Aquinas” 49 (2006) 1, 175-187; R. Ottone, *Ontologia debole e caritas nel pensiero di Gianni Vattimo*, „Scuola Cattolica” 132 (2004), p. 171-203.

³³ Cf. G. Vattimo, *Credere di credere*, op. cit., p. 37.

key of weak ontology and the idea of secularization, is reduced to the commandment of love. Christian teaching on love is not only, or is not at all, an ethical consequence, however constructive, of the revelation of objective truth concerning our nature as sons of God. It is rather an appeal, derived from the fact of incarnation, that tells us of the nihilist destiny of existence, of the weakening of any solid ontic dimension.³⁴

Truth as love and existence as an event are two aspects calling to each other. The words “God is dead, long live gods” are neither a declaration of atheism nor an encouragement to pagan polytheism. Vattimo holds that “the death of God” means that we are free to do, not everything that occurs to us, but everything we feel to be an obligation not necessarily before supreme judge, but first of all to our neighbour. In Vattimo’s interpretation, Nietzsche’s “death of God” fully realizes one of the most important Christian truths concerning the presence of the invisible God in the person of our neighbour.

5. Bioethics and Human Nature

The author of the concept of *pensiero debole* is actively involved in the discussion on bioethical issues.³⁵ In a sense, he can be considered a representative of broadly-conceived lay bioethics (*bioetica laica*) which stresses freedom in disposing of life, the lack of any absolute prohibitions, and man’s independence and the autonomy of his decisions with respect to any prior ontic order (Beauchamp, Engelhardt, Scarpelli, Singer). Vattimo believes that it is not possible today to derive practical imperatives from various objectively existing foundations. He agrees with “Hume’s law” which says one cannot go from a description of a certain state of affairs to formulation of moral principles. Consequently the first thing necessary in bioethical reflection is rejection of the concept of natural law. In his opinion the concept leads

³⁴ Cf. id., *Dopo la cristianità*, op. cit., p. 54.

³⁵ Cf. id., *La vita dell’altro. Bioetica senza metafisica*, Lungro di Cosenza 2006; *Una bioetica post-metafisica*, in: D. Antiseri, G. Vattimo, *Ragione filosofica e fede religiosa nell’era postmoderna*, Catanzaro 2008, p. 5-16.



to naturalism which is authoritarian and anti-democratic; if in a political debate we have a certain truth which is justified by nature, we undermine the principle of freedom and the means of the democratic coexistence of men. In this perspective, the category of natural law hinders the development of civilization and limits the freedom of scientific research.

Vattimo stresses that in agreement with the proposition of many modern thinkers (from Marx to Nietzsche, Freud and Adorno), one may not rely on a normative concept of nature. Thinking in Aristotelian terms must be abandoned, because human nature may not be the source of norms and limitations deciding the moral right or wrong of our deeds. Looking for another point of reference, Vattimo refers to one of the greatest representatives of the Italian Platonism of the Renaissance. He believes we should begin again from Pico della Mirandola. The only essence of man is that he has no essence, that he must choose it for himself. There are no limitations for our freedom in creating laws other than respect for the equal freedom of all other persons.³⁶

Pico della Mirandola was the thinker who described man as a being to which God had not ascribed any specific nature. He opposed the depiction of man as a microcosm reflecting various natures present in the universe, believing that this concept limits our freedom and violates human dignity. Pico advanced the thesis that man's dignity has its foundations in his freedom. Man does not have any determined place in the universe, but has been created so that he may become whoever he wants to be: an earthly or heavenly being, a mortal or an immortal creature. Consequently man is responsible for adopting his own essence.³⁷

Vattimo does not agree with Habermas who sees in the age of technological revolution an urgent need to go back to the ever too often forgotten category of human nature.³⁸ Habermas stresses the need to use the thought of Aristotle, who differentiated between that which is

³⁶ Cf. G. Vattimo, *La vita dell'altro*, op. cit., p. 31.

³⁷ Cf. G. Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno e scriptis vari*, Firenze 1942 (Latin text and Italian translation).

³⁸ Cf. J. Habermas, *Przyszłość natury ludzkiej. Czy zmierzamy do eugeniki liberalnej?* [*The Future of Human Nature. Towards a Liberal Eugenics?*], Warsaw 2003.



spontaneous and that which is artificial, that which grows on its own and that which has been created. Habermas tries in this way to mark out limits for liberal eugenics and potential genetic manipulations that may change the identity of man.

Vattimo holds that it is difficult to limit human nature to what man is and what he could become by leaving things to nature. Rejecting nature understood in metaphysical terms, he accepts nature in the historical meaning. “Natural” is that which appears to be so in certain conditions of existence; for instance, responding to a greeting in the street is “natural” even though no metaphysical law imposes it on us. This “natural” criterion should responsibly bind through laws established within the framework of the democratic regime.³⁹

Appealing to Heidegger, Vattimo says that through our birth we are thrown into a historical condition which defines us, even if this does not happen in accordance with purely mechanical laws. Until now, this “throwing into” was merely and exclusively destiny which could only be accepted. Today, we are able to consciously change this, precisely thanks to our human nature which has been given to us by God so that we can freely transform it. We are now called to create laws and organize behaviours which are truly free, that is, independent of any predefined principles and norms. The modern biotechnological revolution is a manifestation of such freedom.

In this perspective, the only solution is a level of democratic and argumentative understanding which acknowledges no limitations other than consent between interlocutors. Limitations should, of course, exist, but we must together arrive at them instead of deluding ourselves that they can be found in nature, which delusion becomes merely a justification of our rejection of responsibility. Settling the issue of euthanasia or cloning within the framework of democratic order, we may not be guided by the principles of natural law, but only and exclusively by the will of the majority. Created law cannot seek its legitimization in natural law, but in the will of the majority which makes sure that the right of the minority to act in accordance with their conscience is guaranteed as well.

³⁹ Cf. G. Vattimo, *La vita dell'altro*, op. cit., p. 43-44.

6. Summary

The basic problem in interpreting the views of Vattimo is related to the incoherence and ambiguity of his propositions. He is certainly more a *Problemdenker* than a systemic thinker. Nevertheless, an analysis of his writings allows us to adequately depict the ethical consequences of constructive nihilism understood as our destiny.

Vattimo holds that the contemporary world, which is becoming more and more secularized, needs a new ethical concept to meet the needs of man emancipated from transcendence. The contemporary fulfilled nihilist should aim at replacing metaphysical ethics with a post-metaphysical one, which involves not so much norms and principles as a rational interpretation of our *hic et nunc* condition. Post-metaphysical reasoning should indeed look for convincing arguments justifying particular moral attitudes, but it should not aim at imposing universal obligation. In this context, it is not possible to uphold ethics understood as a set of norms which are in harmony with basic principles. Post-metaphysical ethics remains in harmony with cultural heritage, which is subject to various interpretations. Prescriptivism of ethics understood in this way finds its substantiation on the grounds of consent and contract.

Ethics founded on weak ontology need not mean total relativism. Vattimo reminds us that relativism is an element of a multicultural society in which various religions and worldviews have equal right of citizenship. In his opinion, warnings against relativism are an attack on a secular and liberal society in which the ruling principle is freedom of opinion and the right to look for one's own form of life without any limitations as long as the freedom of others is not threatened. Relativism should not be absolute, however. Vattimo stresses that all his thinking and all his life are directed against any form of absolute, against any claims at being absolute which mutate into political bondage, or the enslavement of conscience. Thus, he could never absolutize relativism.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Cf. G. Vattimo, P. Patolini, *Non Essere Dio*, op. cit., p. 183-184.



A particularly contentious element of Vattimo's thought is his nihilist reinterpretation of the Christian message, in which old concepts are given a new, secularized form. Over the past few years, he has declared himself, to the astonishment of many, to be a Christian philosopher. He believes that the discovery of a connection linking the history of Christian revelation with the history of nihilism is confirmation that Heidegger was right in what he said about metaphysics and its end. It appears that the proposed triad of weak ontology, the Christian message, and ethics, requires a particularly profound reflection and is a major intellectual challenge.

