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ETHICS AND NIHILISM IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF WEAK THOUGHT OF GIANNI VATTIMO

1. INTRODUCTION

We keep encountering the word “nihilism” in our language more and more often now, appearing in various contexts and meanings. An in-depth philosophical interpretation of that concept is therefore urgently needed. Was Frederic Nietzsche right when he said, more than one hundred years ago, that nihilism was standing at the gates of Europe? Was he right in believing that the 21st century would be an age of nihilism as well? What did Martin Heidegger mean by interpreting nihilism as the inevitable destiny of the Western world?

Nihilism is an important philosophical concept that was established in the intellectual life of the Western world at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. In that period we have to find the roots of the contemporary dispute over nihilism. In its most profound meaning, nihilism is concerned with and rooted in modernity. It is present in the philosophy of German idealism, the revolutionary movement of 19th century Russia, the thought of Nietzsche, or the reflections of Heidegger. This article is an analysis of the relationship between ethics and nihilism according to Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo (1936-) and his concept of weak thought.

2. THE PROBLEM OF NIHILISM IN ITALIAN PHILOSOPHY

Nihilism denotes a broadly-conceived cultural phenomenon in which the idea of nothingness plays a crucial role. Nihilism may thus be identified with a set of thoughts, beliefs and behaviours dominated by the concept of nothingness. It is a philosophical doctrine that suggests the negation of one or more reputedly meaningful aspects of life. The Greek philosopher Gorgias is perhaps the first to consider the Nihilistic belief. Most commonly, nihilism is presented in the form of existential nihilism, which argues that life is without objective meaning, purpose, or intrinsic value. In the interpretation on nihilism is very important to present

the relationship between nihilism and the concept of nothingness, as well as the cultural context in which that phenomenon first emerged, and its subsequent development through the ages. As a cultural phenomenon, nihilism is exceedingly complex and difficult to describe. To provide a reliable diagnosis, we therefore need an interdisciplinary approach¹.

Many authors stress that not only European nihilism exists today – contrary to what Frederic Nietzsche suggested, following in the footsteps of Jacob Burckhardt – but also a global, planetary nihilism. The phenomenon of nihilism is about humankind *tout court*, whose fate is marked with various manifestations of nothingness, such as the demise of permanent foundations of culture, the experience of emptiness or absurdity of existence. In our times, nihilism is no longer the subject of analyses performed exclusively in narrow intellectual circles, but has become an important element of the spirit of our times.

Over the past decades, the problem of nihilism has become the focus of interest for many representatives of Italian philosophy. It appears that much more attention is devoted to it in the country of Dante than anywhere else. This can be seen, for example, in the sheer number of books, articles, or scientific symposia organized on the subject. Italian philosophy has come up with many interesting attempts at capturing various manifestations of nihilism, as well as its theoretical analysis.

In Italy broadly understood philosophical problems are certainly much more present in culture and social life than in other societies. They are an evidence of the country's long and rich humanist tradition, in modern times continued by such authors as Giambattista Vico, Francesco De Sanctis, Antonio Gramsci, Luigi Sturzo, Giovanni Gentile or Benedetto Croce. One of the consequences of such abundant intellectual heritage today is the lively discussion of philosophical problems at universities, in high schools, in the press, politics, mass culture and public life. Indeed, it seems that in no other society its broadly conceived philosophy is afforded a similar status.

Over the past decades, a great number of Italian intellectuals, representing various philosophical directions, have devoted their attention to the issue of nihilism. Diverse interpretations of nihilism can be found in authors as varied as Massimo Cacciari, Sergio Givone, Vittorio Possenti, Emanuele Severino, Federico Verzellone, Vincenzo Vitiello or Franco Volpi. Perhaps the most original analysis of the phenomenon of nihilism can be found in the work of Gianni Vattimo, the contemporary Italian philosopher most frequently translated into other languages².

¹ Cf. E. Severino, *Essenza del nichilismo*, Adelphi Edizioni, Milano 1982, 1995²; W. Müller-Lauter, *Nihilismus. I. Der N.-Begriff in West- und Mitteleuropa*, in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, VI, ed. J. Ritter, K. Gründer, Schwabe Verlag, Basel 1984, p. 846-853; S. Givone, *Storia del nulla*, Editori Laterza, Roma – Bari 1995, 2003²; D.A. Crosby, *Nihilism*, in: *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, VII, ed. E. Craig, Oxford University Press, London – New York 1998, p. 1-5; W. Schröder, *Moralischer Nihilismus. Radikale Moralkritik von den Sophisten bis Nietzsche*, Reclam Verlag, Stuttgart 2005.

² Cf. G. Vattimo, P. Paterlini, *Not Being God: A Collaborative Autobiography*, trans. W. McCuaig,

Vattimo is emeritus professor of philosophy at the University of Turin. He studied in Turin under the existentialist Luigi Pareyson and graduated in 1959. After studying with Karl Löwith and Hans-Georg Gadamer in Heidelberg, he became assistant professor (1964) and later full professor of Aesthetics (1969), and finally full professor of Theoretical Philosophy (1982-2009) at the University of Turin, where he also served, in the Seventies, as dean of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy.

In many circles, Vattimo is considered one of the most popular European thinkers, and one of the most important representatives of philosophical postmodernism. He has been a visiting professor at several American universities (Yale, Los Angeles, New York University, State University of New York). The philosopher of Turin has led academic seminars and given lectures all around the world and received many honorary degrees from numerous universities worldwide. Member of the Accademia delle Scienze in Turin and former editor of *Rivista di Estetica*, as well as member of the scientific committees of a number of international academic journals, Vattimo has been and still is a columnist of various Italian (*La Stampa*, *l'Espresso*, *l'Europeo*, *Il Manifesto*, *l'Unità*, *Il Fatto quotidiano*) and foreign (*El País*, *El Clarín*) newspapers.

His philosophy can be characterized as postmodern with his emphasis on “pensiero debole” (*weak thought*). This requires that the foundational certainties of modernity with its emphasis on objective truth founded in a rational unitary subject be relinquished for a more multi-faceted conception closer to that of the arts. The philosopher of Turin draws on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger with his critique of foundations and the hermeneutic philosophy of his teacher Hans-Georg Gadamer. In Poland, Vattimo is most often presented as a representative of hermeneutics and postmodernism, with publications analyzing his philosophy of religion and ethics. Ignorance of the broader context of the philosophical discussion going on in Italy is a significant drawback of the Polish reception.

Many Italian intellectuals propose their own strategies of overcoming nihilism, unlike Vattimo, who encourages us to adopt nihilism, to become even more nihilistic, in fact. What Vattimo and the other authors have in common is their belief that it is necessary to build an adequate ethics in the face of nihilism. Each of the authors – against the background of various philosophical concepts – proposes his own view of ethics. Ethical aspect of the dispute with nihilism is as an important feature of the Italian today's philosophical reflection³.

Columbia University Press, New York 2009.

³ Cf. *Interpretazione ed emancipazione. Studi in onore di Gianni Vattimo*, ed. G. Carchia, M. Ferraris, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 1996; C. Dotolo, *La teologia fondamentale davanti alle sfide del pensiero debole di G. Vattimo*, Editrice LAS, Roma 1999; R. Pecoraro, *Nihilismo e Pós (Modernidade). Introdução ao pensamento fraco de Gianni Vattimo*, PUC – Loyola ED, Rio de Janeiro – San Paulo 2005; M. G. Weiss, *Gianni Vattimo. Einführung. Mit einem Interview mit Gianni Vattimo*, Passagen Verlag, Wien 2006; G. Giorgio, *Il pensiero di Gianni Vattimo. Lemancipazione dalla metafisica tra dialettica ed ermeneutica*, Franco Angeli Editore, Milano 2006; D. Monaco, *Gianni*

3. CONCEPT OF WEAK THOUGHT

Vattimo's interpretation of nihilism continues along the lines laid down by Nietzsche and Heidegger, but is also rooted to a large extent in the very rich intellectual tradition of Italy. Particularly prominent are relationships between Vattimo and his master Luigi Pareyson, the poetry of Giacomo Leopardi, and the philosophy of Benedetto Croce⁴. The concept of weak thought is a matrix for the entire philosophy of Vattimo. Perhaps his greatest influence though is the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose "discovery of the 'lie', the discovery that alleged 'values' and metaphysical structures are just a play of forces"⁵ plays an important role in Vattimo's notion of weak thought⁶.

The provocative expression *pensiero debole* refers to the theory of a weakening of existence in the times of the end of metaphysics, and a questioning of the Cartesian concept of the subject. "Weak thought" is certainly an ambiguous term, containing paradoxes, and in some respects even contradictions. It is a type of metaphor illustrating the conviction that in order to experience the world, being must not be expressed as a complete and permanent presence, but become dispersed as a trace – in fragility and mortality.

Vattimo rejects any notion of a transcendental structure of reason or reality that would be given once and for all. This does not imply the loss of truth, but a Heideggerean reinterpretation of truth as the opening of horizons. Such truth is deeper than propositions which are made possible by such openings. Philosophies then are always responses to contingent questions, they are "ontologies of actuality", a thesis that can be confirmed by the historico-cultural links of particular philosophies. For hermeneutics to be consistent with its own rejection of metaphysics, it must present itself, argues Vattimo „as the most persuasive philosophical interpretation of a situation"⁷. To do this, the philosopher of Turin proposes a reading of hermeneutics as having a "nihilistic" vocation⁸.

Vattimo. *Ontologia ermeneutica, cristianesimo e postmodernità*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2006; *Weakening Philosophy. Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, ed. S. Zabala, McGill – Queen's University Press, Montreal 2007; E. Redaelli, *Il nodo dei nodi. L'esercizio del pensiero in Vattimo, Vitiello, Sini*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2008; M. Kopic, *Gianni Vattimo Čitanka*, Antibarbarus, Zagreb 2008; *Between Nihilism and Politics. The Hermeneutics of Gianni Vattimo*, ed. S. Benso, B. Schroeder, Suny Press, New York 2010; T. Franci, *Vattimo o del nihilismo. Provocazione alla filosofia*, Armando Editore, Roma 2011.

⁴ Cf. A. Kobyliński, *Is Nihilism our Destiny? The Postmetaphysical Ethics of Gianni Vattimo*, in: *The Dilemmas of Modern Ethics*, ed. A. Kobyliński, R. Moń, Wydawnictwo UKSW, Warsaw 2008, p. 97-116.

⁵ G. Vattimo, *The Adventure of Difference: Philosophy after Nietzsche and Heidegger*, trans. Th. Harrison, C.P. Blamires, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1993, p. 93.

⁶ Cf. G. Vattimo, *Nietzsche: Philosophy as Cultural Criticism*, trans. N. Martin, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2000; idem, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, trans. W. McCuaig, Columbia University Press, New York 2006.

⁷ Cf. G. Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, trans. D. Webb, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1997, p. 10.

⁸ Cf. M. Riedl, *The Permanence of the Eschatological: Reflections on Gianni Vattimo's Hermeneutic*

His answer and proposal is to insist on the nihilistic consequences of hermeneutics⁹. The claim that “there are no facts only interpretations and this too is an interpretation” amounts to saying that hermeneutics cannot be seen as the most accurate/true description of the permanent structures of reality of human existence. Hermeneutics is not a metaphysical theory in this sense and so can only be “proved” by being presented as the response to a history of being, a history of the fabling of the world, of the weakening of structures, that is as the occurrence of nihilism. This nihilistic reading of history involves a certain attitude towards modernity, whereby modernity is dissolved from within through a twisting, distorting radicalisation of its premises. Vattimo uses Heidegger’s term *Verwindung* to capture this post-modern recovery from modernity.

Recently Vattimo endorsed Marxism, reassessing positively its projectual principles and wishing for a “return” to the thought of the Trier philosopher and to a communism, rid of distorted soviet developments, which have to be dialectically overcome. Vattimo asserts the continuity of his new choices with the weak thought, thus having changed many of his ideas. He namely refers to a “weakened Marx”, as ideological basis capable of showing the real nature of communism¹⁰. The new Marxist approach, therefore, emerges as a practical development of the weak thought into the frame of a political perspective. His new political book, co-authored with Santiago Zabala, is *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx* (2011).

Separating communism from its metaphysical foundations, which include an abiding faith in the immutable laws of history and an almost holy conception of the proletariat, Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala recast Marx’s theories at a time when capitalism’s metaphysical moorings--in technology, empire, and industrialization--are buckling. While Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call for a return of the revolutionary left, Vattimo and Zabala fear this would lead only to more violence and failed political policy. Instead, they adopt an antifoundationalist stance drawn from the hermeneutic thought of Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty¹¹.

Hermeneutic communism leaves aside the ideal of development and the general call for revolution; it relies on interpretation rather than truth and proves

Age, in: *Discoursing the Post-Secular: Essays on the Habermasian Post-Secular Turn*, ed. P. Losonczi, A. Singh, LIT Verlag, Münster 2010, p. 111-126.

⁹ Cf. G. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*, trans. J.R. Snyder, Polity Press, London 1991.

¹⁰ Cf. G. Vattimo, *Ecce comu. Come si ri-diventa ciò che si era*, Fazi Editore, Roma 2007.

¹¹ The authors explain the book *Hermeneutic Communism* as follows: “Although the material published here has never been released before, there are two books that have determined the production of this text: Gianni’s *Ecce comu: Come si ri-diventa ciò che si era* (2007) and Santiago’s *The Remains of Being: Hermeneutic Ontology After Metaphysics* (2009). In the former, Vattimo emphasized the political necessity of reevaluating communism; in the latter, Zabala insisted on the progressive nature of hermeneutics. *Hermeneutic Communism* can be considered a radical development of both” (G. Vattimo, S. Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx*, Columbia University Press, New York 2011, p. VII).

more flexible in different contexts. Hermeneutic communism motivates a resistance to capitalism's inequalities yet intervenes against violence and authoritarianism by emphasizing the interpretative nature of truth. Paralleling Vattimo and Zabala's well-known work on the weakening of religion, the book *Hermeneutic Communism* realizes the fully transformational, politically effective potential of Marxist thought¹².

4. CHRISTIANITY IN THE WEAK AND NIHILIST VERSION

Other very controversial element of Vattimo's philosophy is the reduction of Christian religion to a cultural process, the identification of Christianity with nihilism, and the redefinition of the traditional understanding of the Christian religion¹³. The philosopher of Turin is convinced that his diagnosis of nihilism is not inconsistent with the Christian religion perceived in a particular, specific way – essentially being a profound reinterpretation and demythification of the foundations of the Christian message. For Vattimo, weak thought and the ontology of a weakening of existence are, in many respects, the crowning achievement of the development of Christian thought in history.

The radical nihilist reinterpretation of the traditional understanding of the fundamentals of faith and morality, follows from the acceptance of an ontology of actuality. An entirely new approach to religion results; to use Nietzsche's language, religion is fictionalized. The Christian message, for centuries defending the real nature of its content, becomes a collection of metaphors and mythical stories. In our opinion, the identification of Christianity with nihilism is not justified, neither is the treatment of the Christian religion as a cultural tradition, or a form of consolation, as this imposes a reduced, pared-down vision of Christianity. That problem will require an in-depth analysis on the grounds of religion, theology, the history of ideas, and ethics¹⁴.

The great problem is the Vattimo's identification of Christianity with nihilism, and the adoption of a radical model of hermeneutics as hermeneutics *tout court*. How, then, should Vattimo's interpretation of Christianity in the weak and nihilist version be evaluated? The philosopher of Turin, just like Caracciolo and Pareyson, links the problem of nihilism with the phenomenon of religion, but goes much farther than either of them: he gives up any attempt to overcome nihilism,

¹² Cf. G. Vattimo, M. Marder, *Deconstructing Zionism: A Critique of Political Metaphysics*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London – New York 2014.

¹³ Cf. J. Derrida, G. Vattimo, *Religion*, trans. D. Webb, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1998; G. Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. L. d'Isanto, Columbia University Press, New York 2002; R. Rorty, G. Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, Columbia University Press, New York 2005; J.D. Caputo, G. Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, Columbia University Press, New York 2006; G. Vattimo, R. Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weak Faith*, trans. W. McCuaig, Columbia University Press, New York 2010.

¹⁴ Cf. J. Tomaszewski, *Facing the Crisis of the Priesthood in the Catholic Church*, Studia Bobolanum 10(2014)4, p. 125-138.

and postulates its acceptance and identification with Christianity. In his nihilist reinterpretation of the Christian message, old concepts are provided with new, secularized content. A post-metaphysical Christianity results, based on an ontology of actuality and weak thought, breaking with tradition.

Vattimo's deliberations on modernity, nihilism and religion are related to the views of Jürgen Habermas. According to him, the contemporary societies of liberal democracy are not entirely secular, but are in fact post-secular societies, in which, surrounded by an environment that is subject to secularization, religious communities still exist. The death of the theory of global secularization does not mean a demise of secularizing processes. The post-secular society is aware that the "modernization of public awareness" encompasses both the religious and the secular mentality, leading to their mutual transformation. In the post-secular society, religious awareness must abandon its claim to monopoly in the interpretation of the whole of human existence in both the individual and the social dimension.

The post-secular state, directed towards liberty, is founded on normative assumptions which it can neither guarantee nor substantiate on its own. This means a democratic constitutional state is only able to renew the normative sources of its existence on the basis of ethical traditions rooted either in a particular worldview or religion. Liberally constituted pluralist societies should demand that believers and non-believers show mutual understanding to each other in the public space, and accept also certain dissonances which are a natural element of the pluralist society.

5. HOW TO CONSTRUCT A NIHILIST ETHICS?

An apology of nihilism, a nihilist reinterpretation of the Christian message, and the emergence of its weak version are of key importance for determining whether it is possible to construct a nihilist ethics of mercy in the times of a demise of metaphysical foundations. For the author of the concept of weak thought, this means that no metaphysical ethics is possible today as an application of the first principles. The only possible ethics is a post-metaphysical ethics, which takes the form of a nihilist ethics of mercy. It should respond to the challenges of contemporary science and technology, and provide grounds for a lay bioethics¹⁵.

History as a process of weakening (secularisation and disenchantment are other terms Vattimo uses) "assumes the form of a decision for non-violence"¹⁶. An ethics of communication along the lines suggested by Jürgen Habermas suffers from finding itself in a substantially ahistorical position, while oscillating between formalism and cultural relativism. For Vattimo it is only when hermeneutics accepts its nihilistic destiny that "it can find in 'negativity', in dissolution as the 'des-

¹⁵ Cf. G. Mucci, *La possibilità di costruire un'etica nichilistica secondo Gianni Vattimo*, *La Civiltà cattolica* 3944(2014), p. 188-193.

¹⁶ Cf. G. Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, trans. David Webb, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1994, p. 95.

tiny of Being'. The orientating principle that enables it to realize its own original inclination for ethics whilst neither restoring metaphysics nor surrendering to the futility of a relativistic philosophy of culture"¹⁷.

Ethics of mercy is a legitimate variety of lay ethics, but found the proposal put forward by Vattimo to be incoherent and ambiguous. The philosopher of Turin is clearly more concerned with pointing out problems than with identifying systemic solutions. Consequently, when attempting an analysis of his views, one runs the risk of ending up with many different interpretations. One of the major drawbacks of Vattimo's diagnosis of nihilism is his adoption of a Heideggerian notion of metaphysics. Considering the great tradition of existential metaphysics developed by Pascal, Kierkegaard, Blondel or Unamuno, we found it difficult to reconcile the profoundly sceptical nature of weak thought with its radical and categorical rejection of other models of metaphysics.

Is Vattimo right in encouraging us to accept it? The philosopher of Turin should be appreciated for his rejection of the popular understanding of nihilism as the acceptance of total anarchy and moral destruction. He protests against the identification of nihilism with the conviction about the nothingness of existence. In his interpretation, he relies mostly on a creative and fulfilled nihilism, proclaiming the need not so much to overcome nihilism, but to accept a nihilist awareness – abandoning all attempts to impose sense and meaning on things. Vattimo proposes a nihilism that is friendly to humans and familiar, while he rejects its tragic and negative version. His concept has ethical, political and religious dimensions, and in that sense provides a perspective for the emancipation of modern man. The philosopher of Turin stresses that the reason for our confusion and frustration is not the fact we are living in a time dominated by nihilism, but the fact we are not nihilist enough, that we are unable to fully and completely experience the disintegration of foundations and first principles.

Such an optimistic diagnosis of nihilism is difficult to accept. We join its critics – Mucci, Poppi, Possenti, Reale – in postulating that nihilism should be overcome on the grounds of the classical view of the world and man. For Vittorio Possenti, overcoming nihilism requires a return to a classical philosophy of existence, and a personalist view of man. A similar opinion has been expressed by Giandomenico Mucci, who argues that at the source of nihilism we always find oblivion of the actually existing reality, and the anti-realist paradigm. He recommends a return to classical philosophy as the best cure for nihilism. Just like Antonio Poppi, who distinguishes between theoretical and practical nihilism, and presents nihilism in ethics as an inevitable consequence of theoretical and metaphysical nihilism, it is a form of anti-humanism which may be overcome by restoring the classical concept of man. The same solution has been proposed by Giovanni Reale: nihilism may be overcome by going back to the ancient roots of our culture¹⁸.

¹⁷Ibidem, p. 119.

¹⁸ Cf. A. Kobylński, *O możliwości zbudowania etyki nihilistycznej. Propozycja Gianniego Vattima*, Wydawnictwo UKSW, Warszawa 2014, p. 240-277.

These critics are right in their description of the problem of nihilism, but the solutions they propose are largely alien to the main currents of contemporary philosophy, related more to social sciences than to metaphysics. Today's dominating philosophical currents push the classical view of man on to the sidelines and treat it as a concept that is *passé* and can no longer be reinstated. In Italy, that situation is illustrated by the case of Possenti, a leader of the classical camp. His diagnoses of nihilism and proposal of a personalist ethics have been ignored entirely in the two Italian monographs on nihilism compiled by Vercellone and Volpi. Italian scholarship shows much more regard for the interpretations of nihilism developed by Caracciolo and Pareyson. Both authors argue that it is necessary to rediscover the *sacrum* and religion. Pareyson's remarks on the role Bierdyaev's philosophy, predicting man's ultimate victory over evil, are particularly meaningful. Caracciolo and Pareyson, in our opinion, provide a correct diagnosis of nihilism, but their interpretations do not fit within the main current of contemporary philosophy which, while still referring to religion, increasingly treats it merely as a type of cultural tradition.

That current of contemporary thought includes the proposals for overcoming nihilism developed by Severino and Cacciari. The former refers to the philosophy of Parmenides, the return to the conviction that things are eternal and cannot be destroyed. The latter proposes a rather enigmatic way of overcoming nihilism with a humanist, secularized version of a mystical experience. Both interpretations of nihilism, that of Severino and Cacciari, resemble a pantheist view of the world and propose a very disputable form of overcoming nihilism.

Generally speaking, difficulties in overcoming nihilism in contemporary Italian philosophy confirm what we have established: we should try to build an ethics on an encounter with nihilism, rather than simply aim at overcoming nihilism. That would be our chance to leave the domain of nihilism, to cut the Gordian knot: instead of looking for a way of overcoming nihilism, we put at the centre of our reflection the question what model of ethics we can propose today. From that point of view, the dichotomous division of the contemporary diagnoses of nihilism into those who accept it as our destiny, and those who seek to overcome it, is no longer useful. It is far more important to look for a way of building an adequate form of ethics in dispute with nihilism. We believe that the ethics proposed by Vattimo, the ethics of mercy – despite its clear drawbacks and weaknesses – is a valuable achievement in that direction. The philosopher of Turin has provided the most important elements of hermeneutic ethics based on weak ontology.

In today's ever more secularized world, we need ethical models acceptable to emancipated people who reject the need for permanent foundations of morality and culture. Seeing that more and more often now the Western world, and many other cultures, are unable to accept a metaphysical ethics, we should look for new forms of post-metaphysical ethics, capable of standing up to the moral anarchy and dictatorship of relativism.

6. NIHILISTIC BIOETHICS WITHOUT DOGMAS

Vattimo's nihilist ethics of mercy resembles, to a certain degree, *toutes proportions gardées*, the formal ethics of Kant. The philosopher of Turin admits that the imperative of treating other persons as goals *per se*, and not as means to an end, does not result from nature but from Christian mercy. Without an attitude of mercy, we will be left without any convincing justification of placing universal principles over particular interests. In a nihilist ethics of mercy, the concepts of good and evil are replaced with compassion and violence; Vattimo claims that this leads to reducing violence and embracing compassion. In that sense, a hermeneutic ethics of mercy is a formal ethics, which inherits, in a way, all dilemmas related to the ethical system proposed by Kant. Thus, no form of particular ethics is possible within the framework of the ethics of mercy, such as would identify judgments and norms referring to particular kinds of human deeds. What remains is but a general imperative – the principle of mercy, and a practical rule of behaviour which says: one should do that which suppresses violence and enhances compassion.

Naturally, such an ethics cannot be fully satisfying; it is too abstract and not capable of defining any particular moral norms. We should remember, however, that Vattimo is developing his ethics with the contemporary secularized and multicultural societies in mind. It is, in fact, one of the few ethical models still acceptable to everyone. In our opinion, the ethics of mercy, while weak and limited, is a valuable achievement, considering the universal acceptance of complete axiological emptiness or extreme moral anarchy¹⁹.

The ethics of mercy provides correct solutions in the area of interpersonal relationships and social life: its demands include taking care of the weak, the outcast, those who have been affected by evil or violence. It is, however, quite helpless in the face of contemporary bioethical problems. This is clearly illustrated by the “bioethics without dogmas” proposed by Vattimo. This version of lay bioethics resembles Peter Singer's utilitarianism and justifies most of the extreme manifestations of the contemporary bioethical revolution.

“Bioethics without dogmas” proposed by Vattimo is concerned with bioethical issues, related mostly to the contemporary biotechnological revolution in looking for new ways of applying science and technology to the modification of living organisms: microorganisms, plants, animals and human beings. The philosopher of Turin participates in the contemporary dispute over the dignity and value of human life, referring to the debate on the methods of artificial insemination which has continued for years in Italy. After the referendum on *in vitro* held in Italy in 2005, the discussion on the status of the human embryo in numerous papers and journals proved to be a very inspiring phenomenon, engaging the most prominent Italian

¹⁹ Cf. G. Vattimo, *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, trans. W. McCuaig, Columbia University Press, New York 2010; idem, *A Farewell to Truth*, trans. William McCuaig, Columbia University Press, New York 2011.

philosophers and intellectualists. The advocates of *in vitro* (including M. Cacciari, S. Givone, E. Severino, G. Vattimo, S. Veca) emphasized mainly that the human embryo does not have the same rights as the adult person, while the opponents of *in vitro* (including D. Antiseri, E. Berti, F. Botturi, V. Possenti, C. Vigna) underscored mostly the personal character of the conceived child²⁰.

The ethics of mercy is almost identical with the ethics proposed by Emanuele Severino and Massimo Cacciari. They have many valuable things to say, mainly at the level of interpersonal relationships and social life. Severino devotes much attention to the dangers of technology and mass media, the various forms of dehumanization in our lives. Cacciari, on the other hand, emphasizes the central position of the other person, who is to be placed “before ourselves” and accepted in his freedom as our travelling companion. As far as bioethical questions are concerned, the solutions proposed by Cacciari and Severino coincide with those suggested by Vattimo in that they accept most of the extreme aspects of the present biotechnological revolution.

7. RELATIVISM AND WEAK NORMATIVITY

What should we think about the normative dimension of the ethics of mercy? Is normativity possible at all with any form of post-metaphysical ethics? Vattimo claims it is. The nihilist ethics of mercy does not give up on normativity entirely. We must say, however, that Vattimo proposes a weak normativity, persuasion, without claims of universal applicability. Weak normativity grows out of dialogue and respect for tradition, recommends compliance with specific moral principles, but does not consider their applicability to be universal²¹.

Post-metaphysical ethics remains in agreement with cultural heritage, with the possibility of its diverse interpretations. Normativity is substantiated on the grounds of agreement and contract. In our opinion, such a version of normativity is but a poor substitute of normativity *sensu stricto*. We must not forget, however, that on the grounds of weak thought and a nihilist reinterpretation of Christianity, such a (weak) version of normativity is the only acceptable one. Isn't the nihilist ethics of mercy threatened by relativism, then? To an extent, yes, even though its author claims his ethics to be free from that danger. Vattimo may say so because he does not treat relativism as a strict philosophical theory, but mostly as a doctrine of social life which, in accordance with the principle of mercy, allows for the existence of various worldviews and ethical standpoints in the public sphere. The true strength of the West lies in science, ethics and religion. In that sense, Western civilization has never been dogmatic or absolutist, but simply relativist.

²⁰ Cf. A. Kobyliński, *Czy embrion jest osobą? Spór o sztuczne zapłodnienie we Włoszech*, *Studia Ecologiae et Bioethicae* 5(2007), p. 157-172.

²¹ Cf. G. Mucci, *La possibilità di costruire un'etica nichilistica...*, p. 192-193.

In Vattimo's view, epistemological, ethical, cultural or religious relativism is merely a guarantee of peaceful coexistence between people and the laity of the state. It appears that for the philosopher of Turin, relativism in social life means first of all respect for the principle of pluralism and worldview neutrality of the state; it is a principle of the multicultural society, affording various religions and worldviews equal right of citizenship. The author of the concept of weak thought does not accept relativism in absolute terms. Relativism with respect to the understanding of good and evil must be rejected; other relativisms – if their meaning coincides with the principle of pluralism – may be accepted. Relativism should never be absolute; and in that spirit the ethics of mercy allows for its weak version, in line with the limitations of normativity and lack of permanent grounds²².

8. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have attempted a critical analysis of the concept of nihilism proposed by Vattimo, outlining its originality against the background of other interpretations. The conclusions may be summarized as follows: one of the most important tasks, facing contemporary philosophy, is not so much overcoming nihilism, as understanding its essence and looking for appropriate forms of ethics. The widespread belief that a concept of ethics built on an encounter with nihilism depends, first of all, on whether the latter is rejected or accepted, in our view, is mistaken.

The above conclusion has been confirmed by our comparison of the ethical concepts of Cacciari, Severino and Vattimo. The first two are ardent supporters of the need to overcome nihilism; Vattimo, on the other hand, has suggested it may be creatively accepted. Despite profound differences between them, all of the above authors propose almost identical versions of lay ethics. In today's most heatedly discussed bioethical questions, ethics such as theirs justify attempts to modify the human genome and explain the advisability of euthanasia as a rational approach to human life.

Nowadays weak thought of Gianni Vattimo has not lost its significance; on the contrary, it still helps us better understand the times in which we are living. Its main elements, the ontology of actuality and a nihilist ethics of mercy, though problematic in many respects, do aptly express the mood of our times and the mentality of people living today – not only in the Western world, but in other cultures as well.

A nihilist ethics of mercy is possible, with the reservation that it is a variety of weak ethics, which ignores transcendence and is threatened by relativism. Such ethics is one of the many manifestations of a new humanism, which – in the face of radical challenges brought by the technological and bioethical revolution – representatives of very different philosophies, cultures and religions claim to be necessary.

²² Cf. R. Moń, *Warto czy naleŹy? Studium na temat istoty i Źródeł normatywnoŹci*, Wydawnictwo UKSW, Warszawa 2011, p. 475-543.

Future studies should take up, among other issues, the problem of finding a common ground for discrepant diagnoses of nihilism and their corresponding ethical concepts. Unfortunately, the interpretations that are provided today are clearly contradictory, with diagnoses of nihilism rendered within the framework of differing paradigms. In that context, the concept of veritative hermeneutics (*ermeneutica veritativa*) proposed by Italian intellectual Gaspare Mura seems promising²³. It may provide a bridge between very different diagnoses of nihilism: hermeneutic, existential or metaphysical. *Ermeneutica veritativa*, according to its author, is based on veritative foundations, and may thus be open to metaphysics as well. This makes it a meeting place for various interpretations of nihilism and the related attempts at creating new models of ethics.

ETHICS AND NIHILISM IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF WEAK THOUGHT OF GIANNI VATTIMO

Summary

The main aim of this article is to outline the relationship between nihilism and ethics according to an Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo (1936–) and his concept of weak thought. Nihilism denotes a broadly-conceived cultural phenomenon in which the idea of nothingness plays a crucial role. One of the most important tasks, facing contemporary philosophy is not so much overcoming nihilism, as understanding its essence and looking for appropriate forms of ethics. Nihilist ethics of mercy is possible, with the reservation that it is a variety of weak ethics which ignores transcendence and is threatened by relativism.

Keywords: bioethics, ethics, nihilism, normativity, relativism, weak thought

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ETYKA I NIHILIZM W FILOZOFII MYŚLI SŁABEJ GIANNIEGO VATTIMA

Abstrakt

Głównym celem tego artykułu jest przedstawienie relacji pomiędzy etyką i nihilizmem w ujęciu włoskiego filozofa Gianniego Vattima (1936–) oraz jego koncepcji myśli słabej. Nihilizm oznacza szeroko rozprzestrzenione zjawisko kulturowe, w którym idea nicości odgrywa kluczową rolę. Jednym z najważniejszych zadań, stojących przed filozofią współczesną, jest nie tyle przewyciężenie nihilizmu, ile zrozumienie jego istoty i szukanie odpowiednich form etyki. Nihilistyczna etyka miłosierdzia jest możliwa, z zastrzeżeniem, że jest formą etyki słabej, która ignoruje transcendencję i jest zagrożona relatywizmem.

Słowa kluczowe: bioetyka, etyka, nihilizm, normatywność, relatywizm, myśl słaba

²³ Cf. G. Mura, *Introduzione all'ermeneutica veritativa*, Edizioni PUSC, Roma 2005.