# Introduction

**O**ne of Italy's leading contemporary philosophers for more than forty years, Gianni Vattimo has exercised a significant effect on contemporary debates in hermeneutics, political philosophy, and religious thought. A student of Luigi Pareyson at the University of Turin, under whose guidance he wrote a dissertation on Aristotle, Vattimo found his own philosophical ground during the course of his studies with Karl Löwith and Hans-Georg Gadamer at the University of Heidelberg, during which time he translated into Italian Gadamer's magnum opus, *Wahrheit und Methode* [*Truth and Method*], thus launching the interest in philosophical hermeneutics in Italy.

Refusing the path of phenomenological thought advanced by Gadamer's mentor Martin Heidegger and the later French reception of phenomenology, Vattimo formulated his own variant of hermeneutic philosophy that put the question of nihilism at center stage, drawing on the works of Heidegger and Gadamer, but now adding Nietzsche to this company as a hermeneutical thinker. In short, Vattimo proposes a radical hermeneutic ontology in which he essentially equates being and language, insofar as individual beings, and even the world, are defined and understood in light of their disclosure or appearance in the multiplicity of linguistic openings delivered by the text, in all its diverse forms, as it has been transmitted and received by and in the history of ideas. Moreover, Vattimo proposes that nihilism has a positive, affirmative aspect, without the acknowledgment of which the transformative, creative potential of hermeneutic thinking cannot be realized, and the problems of onto-theological metaphysics identified by Nietzsche and Heidegger never adequately overcome.

Vattimo's principal contribution, the concept of "weak thought" (*il pensiero debole*), first announced in 1983 in a groundbreaking and highly influential volume of the same name he coedited with Pier Aldo Rovatti, remains an important starting point for key discussions in Continental philosophy and offers one of the most lucid and far-reaching

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alternatives to Derridean deconstruction and Deleuzo-Guattarian post-structuralism. The "weakness" of weak thought is actually a positive reading of nihilism predicated on the rejection of the "strong" aspects of traditional metaphysical positions that are grounded on a correspondence theory of truth and reality, wherein concepts are equated with the existence of objective realities, be it forms or essences in the Platonist sense or the Being of God. The positive connotation of weak thought lies in its realization and affirmation of the present condition of existence, characterized by the increasing erosion of the traditional metaphysical and rational foundations of modernism. While this is indeed an expression of nihilism, he argues throughout the corpus of his work that nihilism need not be construed solely or at least primarily as reactive and destructive. Vattimo announces an "optimistic" or affirmative nihilistic phase of intellectual and cultural realization that will lead to an actual ethical social and political transformation. In the present postmodern scenario of rapidly changing values, belief systems, geopolitical boundaries, and epistemological foundations, Vattimo's weak thought represents an approach that attempts to move beyond the confining structures of modernity while nevertheless preserving and building on certain forms of critique located in modernity.

Weak thought, however, does not represent a simple refusal of certain metaphysical principles. Rather, weak thought understands itself in full continuity with the Western metaphysical tradition, but now replacing the certainty of metaphysical concepts with the Nietzschean observation that there are no facts, only interpretations. In this sense, weak thought can be construed as postmetaphysical and not simply another manifestation of the culmination of metaphysics, such as one encounters in Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy.

Supplementing the body of philosophical reflection made possible after the "death of God" and the subsequent exposure of nihilism is arguably the central problem of contemporary metaphysics, ethics, and politics. Vattimo's work is nothing short of an attempt to rescue philosophy and thinking itself from its own nihilistic awareness through a recovery or saving of that which has always been at the heart of the Western philosophical project—namely, the hermeneutic dimension of thinking that Nietzsche, among others, reveals after the death of God as being the fundamental project of philosophy per se. This radical thinking of the nineteenth century is conjoined with that of the twentieth century, the philosophy of difference, to produce a new approach to interpretation that both releases thinking from the metaphysical and epistemological constraints of modern and pre-modern thought, while at

the same time allows the positive, critical aspects of previous philosophies to flourish in a new, critical manner.

Vattimo's work has provoked intense reaction, both positive and negative, in Italy and Europe ever since the controversial thesis of weak thought advanced the notion of a positive construal of nihilism and called into question the importance of philosophy itself. In a time of postmodern reconfiguration, Vattimo's lifelong work offers a viable path out of the morass of a deconstructed, foundationless metaphysics to positions that enable the thinking of new ethical and political possibilities. A long and arduous undertaking, this is precisely the road that must be trod in order to overcome the nihilism of the late modern, techno-scientific paradigm that is increasingly enfolding the horizon of future possibility, a horizon that in many respects is stripping away human freedom and autonomy, and threatening what remains of the environing world with the plastic and ultimately sterile veneer of manufactured reality.

The book is divided into three main parts: "Hermeneutics and Nihilism," "Metaphysics and Religion," and "Politics and Technology." Gaetano Chiurazzi's chapter, "The Experiment of Nihilism: Interpretation and Experience of Truth in Gianni Vattimo," leads off the volume. According to Chiurazzi, Vattimo's definition of hermeneutics as "a philosophical theory of the interpretative character of every experience of truth" needs to be understood in relation to the nexus of hermeneutics and nihilism, which Vattimo has posited since his earlier works. Chiurazzi considers Vattimo's contention that truth is an *event*, that is, a transforming occurrence. Insofar as it is transformative, such an event has an *experiential* character. Moreover, this transformation is connected to an interpretative work (that is, a work of reconstruction of meaning) that is also emancipatory in the sense of *Verwindung*. Hermeneutics is therefore a praxis and annihilates itself as simple theory. Chiurazzi clarifies this last point through a discussion of Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence, which is understood, following Vattimo's remarks, as theory of the relation between truth and experience.

In "Vattimo's Theory of Truth," Franca D'Agostini notes that in *The End of Modernity* Vattimo suggests that truth should be seen in a rhetorical rather than logical perspective. Since "there is no truth," properly and strictly speaking what we call "truth" is an intersubjective agreement on some topics of common use. When we inquire into truth, D'Agostini argues, we are in fact exploring the nature and extension of our agreement. Vattimo points out that friendship is the foundation of

truth, so Aristotle's saying "*magis amica veritas*" should be reverted: friendship should be preferred to truth. D'Agostini examines this particular version of combined pragmatism and coherentism, which significantly also combines Nietzsche's early writing "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" and the Christian theory of truth. Vattimo's view, however, can easily be misunderstood. By associating truth and friendship, logic and rhetoric, one may be inclined to assert the primacy of the latter over the former terms. It all depends on how the two concepts involved are constructed. What D'Agostini calls Vattimo's "theory of truth" is based (via Heidegger) on assuming friendship as the context of relevance of truth: there is no (question of) truth if we are not interested in agreement. Consequently, D'Agostini claims, rhetoric (in a particular sense) is the right perspective in considering "truth" as a concept of philosophical analysis. Logical truth is based on constructed domains or worlds, but philosophical truth regards the (truthful-friendly) ways of constructing these domains or worlds.

Heidegger recognizes that ontology has an ontic foundation. Developing a reading in which this foundation cannot be definitively overcome, whereupon ontology remains implicated in the concreteness of everyday existence, is the task that David Webb sets in "Vattimo's Hermeneutics as a Practice of Freedom." For Heidegger, Webb argues, this implication still leaves the ontological thinking attendant on a prior opening, the truth of Being, to which it must respond. While Vattimo shares this understanding of the truth of Being, his emphasis on the breakdown of the strong structures of metaphysical thought gives rise to an interpretative practice in which thinking can be genuinely transformative—a practice of freedom. In this respect Vattimo goes beyond Heidegger, and in doing so he also places in question Heidegger's insistence on the priority of ontology over ethics. Webb focuses on this idea of thinking as a transformative practice of freedom in an attempt to clarify its conditions and the relation between thinking and the matter of thinking involved in it. Noting that despite his long history of political activism Vattimo provides little in the way of an account of power, Webb explores the extent to which his understanding of thinking as a transformative practice calls for such an account.

In the 1980s Vattimo introduced the idea that hermeneutics had become a sort of *koine* or general idiom of Western culture. Vattimo is not, however, making a theoretical or descriptive claim here, claims Robert T. Valgenti in "Weak Thought and the Recovery of Reason." Rather, as much of his work over the past two decades bears out, Vattimo's statement reads more like a diagnosis and prescription. Recovery from this illness requires, above all, an assessment of philosophy's role

within the recovery so that it can, Vattimo writes, "redefine itself in a more coherent and rigorous way, rediscovering its original inspiration (namely the Heideggerian meditation on metaphysics and its destiny)." And while this recovery embraces the "irrational" elements of the history of metaphysics interpreted as the occurrence of nihilism, for Vattimo "the truth is rather that hermeneutics can defend its theoretical validity only to the precise degree that the interpretative reconstruction of history is a rational activity—in which, that is, one can argue, and not only intuit, *fühlen*, *einfühlen* etc." Valgenti argues that a persistent theme in Vattimo's philosophical hermeneutics—from the publication of *Il pensiero debole* to his most recent work in *Nihilism and Emancipation*—is the meaning and scope of a rational justification of the project of hermeneutics as the philosophy of late modernity. To this end, Valgenti recovers and reconstructs the central theses of Vattimo's theoretical arguments, as well as those of his critics, in an attempt to present the force (and flaws) of the reasons behind his brand of philosophical hermeneutics.

Vattimo's thinking in the 1960s and 1970s was marked strongly by his studies and reflection on Nietzsche and Heidegger, in which the relationship "I-world" was unquestionably couched in terms of interpretation, as *Verstehen*. In the 1980s Vattimo gave an original twist to the hermeneutic tradition with his idea of weak thought, which allowed him to recover the traditions of both, dialectics and difference, but in which the linguisticality of understanding was still the key factor. This is further developed in his *Etica dell'interpretazione* (1989) insofar as interpretation, in virtue of its being dialogical, interpersonal, or community-oriented, must give preeminence to neither epistemology nor even ontology, but rather to ethics. In the 1990s, however, Vattimo signals a more radical turn with *Beyond Interpretation* and *Belief*, in which the idea of a secular sense of *pietas* is elaborated. These works dovetail in his more recent *After Christianity*, which is, according to Peter Carravetta, the most problematic, as it seems to suggest a radical, anti-theometaphysical revision of Christianity (like the untenability of Christ, son of a transcendent God) and yet hold that all our thinking cannot but be influenced by the tradition of Christian thought, and the point at which it is configured today, in *our* age, the postmetaphysical world. In "*Beyond* Interpretation? On Some Perplexities Following upon Vattimo's 'Turn' from Hermeneutics," Carravetta explores the paradoxes of Vattimo's thought at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and its implications for a theory of interpretation.

Part Two, "Metaphysics and Religion," opens with Edison Higuera's "Metaphysics, Violence, and Alterity in Gianni Vattimo." According to

Higuera, Vattimo's weak thought relates to a Nietzschean-Heideggerian tradition that considers "reason" as the source of the violence exerted in the Western world on behalf of the truth. Thinkers such as Adorno, Levinas, and Derrida have evinced the connection that exists between metaphysics and violence. Vattimo echoes the vivacious denunciations launched by contemporary thought against the "violent essence of metaphysics." Metaphysics is a synonym of violence when it claims to have reached *the* "truth as conformity." Within metaphysical thought, truth is in fact identified with first principles, immutable axioms, the certainty of the doubting ego, and so on. When truth becomes the possession of one single individual, therefore, it dangerously translates into a source of violence, because it reduces the other to a silent being. Higuera seeks to expose the reasons that explain the "logical" nexus between metaphysics and violence in order to understand why, in Vattimo's words, "all metaphysical categories . . . are violent categories," and to show the ways that one must proceed to overcome the violence inherent to metaphysics.

In "Thinking the Origin, Awaiting Salvation," Claudio Ciancio engages Vattimo's relationship to Heidegger's and Levinas' thinking. In his conception of the origin, Ciancio explains, Vattimo refers to Heidegger and yet his position is fundamentally different. In Heidegger, the origin is the end of a cyclical return and not of a linear process of weakening. Moreover, whereas Vattimo thinks a process of the weakening of God, the Heideggerian god is a god that withdraws. In the process of distancing from the origin, Vattimo finds the presence of an emancipatory intention. In this, Ciancio argues that there is an ethical note, such as one finds in the thought of Levinas, that is completely absent from the destinal vision of history belonging to Heidegger. Ciancio proposes a thinking of the origin as both unity and alterity, and turns to Schelling's philosophy and the phenomenon of love as a possible way to address Vattimo's later emphasis on charity.

Giovanna Borradori, in "Postmodern Salvation: Gianni Vattimo's Philosophy of Religion," draws the reader's attention to a startling claim that runs through Vattimo's original contributions to the philosophy of religion: In the age of the death of God, secularization is the constitutive trait of authentic religious experience. In pronouncing the words "I am . . . the truth," Christ turned divine and metaphysical truth into a human and mortal construct. For Vattimo, secularization is thus the innermost core of Christian theology. In dialogue with two twentieth-century philosophical heretics, Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty, Borradori discusses Vattimo's notion of salvation as *kenosis*, an "emptying" of individual will in the face of the defining challenges of the postmod-

ern condition: democratic politics, social pluralism, information technology, and globalization. While traditional Christian calls to silence the will have been aimed at intensifying one's receptivity of God, assumed both as the ontological principle of reality and the guarantor of the original meaning of the sacred text, Vattimo's focus, she maintains, is to enhance one's spiritual receptivity of others. Borradori sees Vattimo's conviction that the possibility of a spiritual connection to others, particularly the marginalized and disenfranchised ones, depends on attitudes of buoyancy, humility, and leniency, rather than gravity, arrogance, and justice, as striking an especially relevant chord in the post-9/11 world, both in Europe and the United States.

Vattimo's weak thought is an unmistakable and avowed form of post-metaphysical thinking, claims Eduardo Mendieta in "Secularization as a Post-Metaphysical Religious Vocation: Gianni Vattimo's Post-Secular Faith." The consequences of such a post-metaphysical stance for philosophy have been variously studied, assessed, exegeted, and either vilified or celebrated. What has not been properly considered, argues Mendieta, are the consequences of such post-metaphysical stance toward both theology and religion. At least since the early 1990s, when Vattimo and Derrida coedited a volume entitled *Religion*, Vattimo has explored these consequences in at least three incisive and provocative books: *Belief*, *After Christianity*, and *The Future of Religion* (this last one is a collection of two short papers and an interview between Vattimo and Rorty). Considering Vattimo's espousal of a post-secular view of faith and religion, or a stance that is "beyond atheism and theism," Mendieta attempts to reconstruct Vattimo's views on religion and theology. He then considers Vattimo's similarities and differences with Derrida's own articulation of a religious without a religion stance. Mendieta brings Vattimo's unique combination of the post-metaphysical and the post-secular into dialogue with Jürgen Habermas' similar trajectory from the post-metaphysical to the post-secular, and concludes with a consideration of Vattimo's post-secular faith as it relates to Europe and the West in general.

The third and final part of the book, "Politics and Technology," leads off with James Risser's chapter, "Philosophy and Politics at the End of Metaphysics," which begins by considering Vattimo's question in "Philosophy, Metaphysics, Democracy": What becomes of the relationship of philosophy to politics in a world in which, as the result of both the end of metaphysics and the expansion of democracy, we cannot think of politics in terms of truth? Within this question, Risser argues, one can readily see much of Vattimo's philosophical project of weak thought where the end of metaphysics signals philosophy's inability to discover

essences and provide a foundation for truth. In response to his own question, Vattimo states that philosophy at the end of metaphysics becomes political thought in the form of an "ontology of actuality." Not to be confused with the Hegelian idea of philosophy as the expression of an age, the task of philosophy at the end of metaphysics is merely an interpretation of an epoch that "offers politics a certain vision of the ongoing historical process" and a certain interpretation of its positive potential, judged solely on its arguable choices from within the process itself. While Vattimo acknowledges that, given the existing relation between politics and philosophy, there is an enormous distance between even this form of philosophy and politics, an ontology of actuality may at least contribute to the advent of democracy in philosophical thought. What Vattimo appears to be arguing for, Risser submits, echoes not only Rorty's notion of philosophy as the "conversation of humanity," but also Gadamer's idea of the transformation of the theoretical life of philosophy into the hermeneutical communicative event. Proposing to explore the implications of Vattimo's ontology of actuality in two directions, Risser considers first the way in which an ontology of actuality is able to carry out in its own way emancipatory interests that would in fact enhance the relationship between philosophy and politics. This leads to a consideration of the character of interpretation that would be given over to democratic discourse within an ontology of actuality in order to reveal the limits of the relation between philosophy and politics.

In "Deciding to Bear Witness: Revolutionary Rupture and Liberal Continuity in Weak Thought," Luca Bagetto argues that weak thought has paid no attention to the polemic against neo-Kantianism within which Heidegger's thinking developed. Thus it has itself ended up understanding the *a priori* in a neo-Kantian (albeit historico-social and supra-subjective) way as a mentalistic shaping of beings. Beings give themselves to us from out of our epochal way of ordering the phenomena. Here is born, in Vattimo, a theory of political representation that is founded on an immanent cultural continuity and on the refusal of all transcendent element up to the reduction of the political space to a testimony of the consciousness immanent to it. It is as if the action of political representation were to find its own tribunal in the consciousness of cultural history, and not in its own responsibility toward the transcendent of the common space.

The connections between Vattimo's theoretical commitment to history (and the political) and the concrete project of emancipation, which inspires the content of his philosophy, are explored in Silvia Benso's chapter, "Emancipation and the Future of the Utopian: On Vattimo's Philosophy of History." Benso inquires whether Vattimo is a utopian

thinker, with the intention of assessing the kind of philosophy of history that supports Vattimo's overall position. Ultimately, underlying the question of the utopian is the question of the possibility of the future and its unexpected nature; that is, whether there is a place for ruptures, breaks, and discontinuities—some form of radical alterity, of which the future and the utopian would be a mark, interrupting the process of historical thinking—in Vattimo's epochal thinking. The issue is whether the new is a matter of radical novelty (as, for example, in messianism), or the consequence and the consignment of a legacy, in which case it does not properly exist as new. In other words, is revolution or reformism at work in Vattimo's philosophy? Benso concludes that the continuity of resistance and not the eschatological discontinuity of the utopian revolution leads Vattimo's political agenda and his philosophy of history.

Vattimo's account of contemporary forms of technology presents a novel standpoint within the tradition of Continental philosophy, insofar as he interprets technology not in terms of a closure of our horizon of thinking, but rather in terms of a pluralization of possibilities for thought and action. Although his point of departure for thinking technology is Heidegger's notion of *Ge-stell*, Vattimo claims, contra Heidegger, that the *Ge-stell* constitutes not so much the danger of quasi-totalitarian closure, but rather harbors the potential for a "weakening" of reality in that the former metaphysical "objectivity" of reality is dissolved into multiple mediatic realities. In "'Postmodernity as the Ontological Sense of Technology' and Democratic Politics," Erik M. Vogt contends that, for Vattimo, contemporary media technologies enact and testify to the new freedom(s) of a groundless, post-metaphysical life-world. Moreover, the general mediatization of "reality" contains within itself a plural democratic politics (that Vattimo develops, for instance, in *Nihilism and Emancipation*). Although Vattimo's novel interpretation of technology is intriguing, Vogt inquires about the possible price that has to be paid for this celebration of the democratic structure of mediatic reality. Vogt takes recourse to the work of Slavoj Žižek in order to assess the question of whether there is any place in Vattimo's thought for the (Lacanian) Real, and thus for some of the more problematic effects generated by a mediatic world that supposedly consists only of endless interpretations.

Like Nietzsche and Husserl, Vattimo shares the view that there is no "real world" hidden behind our interpretations, because our interpretations are the appearance, that is, the being of reality. According to Vattimo, our interpretations are not based on any kind of hidden substratum or Kantian *Ding an sich*. The productivity of Vattimo's starting

point becomes clear, claims Martin Weiss in "What's Wrong with Biotechnology? Vattimo's Interpretation of Science, Technology, and the Media," when we look at two phenomena, which Vattimo's position opens to completely new possibilities of interpretation: science and technology. Following from Gadamer's hermeneutics, one might think that only the *Geisteswissenschaften* can access hermeneutic truth, understood as interpretation within a historical horizon, whereas the natural sciences are unable to get away from the idea of truth as *adaequatio intellectus et rei*. But Vattimo, following Heidegger, argues that modern technology need not lead to the reification and solidification of phenomena. Rather, he says, the straight striving of modern science for absolute availability and predictability turns over into absolute incalculability, because in the attempt to control nature, science dissolves its object into interpretations. According to Vattimo, philosophy's fight against the natural sciences in the name of hermeneutics is anachronistic, because today the straight natural sciences are the most striking argument against reification. Similarly, Heidegger says that the quest for total control finally leads to radical uncontrollability, and that in this phenomenon we could perhaps experience *Sein* itself, understood as the act of appearing. Weiss takes up Vattimo's proposal for a revaluation of science and technology, no longer seen as the realm of reification, but as an outrider of the nihilistic postmodern insights that the world has became a fable, that there is no objective truth, but only interpretations. This is especially true if one looks at the astonishing possibilities given with biotechnologies. Thus the dissolution of (normative) human nature, due to genetics, pharmacology, and prosthetics, can be interpreted as an aspect of the more general weakening of Being, argues Weiss, which according to Vattimo characterizes postmodernity.

While the name and thought of Gianni Vattimo is familiar to European philosophers, theologians, cultural and political theorists, and even the general public, in North America he is comparatively little known outside the domain of Continental philosophy. Yet he is the author of some thirty-three books and coauthor of another seven, of which sixteen have been translated and published in English (an excellent bibliography including secondary works can be found in Santiago Zabala's recently edited volume, *Weakening Philosophy*) and is regarded by many as one of today's most original and influential thinkers (if not the most, as another leading Italian philosopher, Pier Aldo Rovatti, attests). Moreover, Vattimo is a genuinely public intellectual—something that is painfully absent in American society. A former member of the European Parliament from 2000 to 2005, Vattimo recently retired in the spring of 2009 from his position as Professor of Theoretical Philosophy

at the University of Turin, yet he still regularly writes commentaries for *La Stampa*, a major Italian newspaper in Turin, appears frequently on television talk shows, and continues to publish philosophical works. In many respects, Vattimo serves as a model for what the academic thinker can and arguably should be.

This volume is the first collection of chapters in English that deals directly with Vattimo's philosophy from a purely *critical* perspective. More than just interpretations of Vattimo's thinking, the chapters are also expressions of the new impetus given to hermeneutic philosophy by weak thought. While Vattimo's thinking represents a continued and consistent engagement of the themes and figures first addressed in his early writing, his later efforts mark a distinctive broadening of his philosophy, wherein the relationship between politics and religion becomes more prominent in his attempt to address the problem of nihilism in Western thought and culture.

BRIAN SCHROEDER
Ivrea, Italy and Rochester, New York