

## **Metaphysics, Violence and the 'Natural Sacred' in Gianni Vattimo's Philosophy**

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**Abstract:** Gianni Vattimo makes a deep connection between the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and the anthropology of René Girard. Heidegger's ontology of decline is, for Vattimo, a 'transcription' of Girard's understanding of Christianity. At the heart of this identification is the parallel Vattimo sees between the 'natural sacred' in Girard's thought and the violence of metaphysics. The incarnation in Vattimo's utilisation of Girard's ideas is connected with a broader understanding of the incarnation as *kenosis*. Vattimo sees Christianity as inaugurating a principle of 'weakening' which moves through history as secularising message. Not much evidence is provided by Vattimo for this identification, but it is possible to go back through the history of Christianity and find examples which back up his claims, such as how Aquinas' theology in the thirteenth century could be interpreted as a 'twisting' of Aristotle which weakened his philosophy. Nevertheless, by bringing the violence of metaphysics too close to the physical violence of the natural sacred, Vattimo runs the risk of trivialising the latter. Moreover, Vattimo's hermeneutical nihilistic approach prevents him not only considering approaches to the origin of physical violence such as seeing it as a result of evolution, but also rules out a number of ways to cope with this violence such as institutions that are founded upon metaphysical principles.

### **Metaphysics, Violence and the 'Natural Sacred' in Gianni Vattimo's Philosophy**

#### **Metaphysics and violence**

Gianni Vattimo (b. 1936) follows Martin Heidegger in his view of metaphysics. The latter term takes on a specialist meaning for these two

philosophers. Metaphysics is a rationalising, calculating sense of 'Being'. With its foundational first principles, absolute values, and claims to objectivity metaphysics silences further questioning and reduces 'Being' to 'beings', to mere presences. Starting with Plato, Vattimo's Heideggerian view of metaphysics sees it as aiming to calculate and measure Being by objectivising and stabilising it, the motivation for doing so being the nearness of death and suffering in an age without the comforts afforded by modern technology and medical science; metaphysics allows a rational ordering of the world in the face of chaos. Metaphysics is the history of Being and it carries on through philosophy to the 'end of metaphysics' in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Heidegger. Metaphysics is 'violent' for Vattimo because it silences further questioning as objectivity permits there to be only one right answer for any given question. Metaphysics, through the use of reason, establishes foundations upon which truth is made objective and to which one 'must give one's assent or conform' (Vattimo, 1999: 43). As Martin G. Weiss points out (Weiss, 2010: 244), violence is speech act for Vattimo. It is not physical violence, even though Vattimo stresses that metaphysical violence can lead to physical violence, such as in the Inquisition where suspected deviation from metaphysically-guaranteed strict orthodoxy had physically painful consequences.

Vattimo thinks metaphysics has come to an end through the philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Nietzsche's notions of the death of God and fabulisation of the world are adopted by Vattimo, albeit in his own way. The death of God is the death not of all, but of the highest, values, particularly of truth. The scientific-rationalistic worldview, built on the metaphysical value of the pursuit of truth and epitomised by God's command for truthfulness, discovers God is a lie both in the literal sense of not being empirically verifiable and also because the horrors of war all against all and the forces of nature have been tamed by technology. Vattimo, in his essay on 'Zarathustra' (1979) included in his *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, puts it thus:

'Like the idea of an objective, stable truth, God too served to reassure man in ages when science, technology, and social organisation provided little shelter against hostile nature and the menace of the war of all against all. Today, when a certain degree

of security has been reached, thanks precisely to belief in truth, in God, in reason, these myths are no longer necessary' (Vattimo, 2006: 172).

God self-consumes due to the progress of science and technology which, ironically, were given impetus by the stable, rational worldview guaranteed under monotheism and the value of truth taken from onto-theology (Heidegger's term for the metaphysical God, the God of the philosophers). Heidegger similarly sees the end of metaphysics in the culmination of technology (Heidegger, 1993). Metaphysics is the essence of technology for Heidegger. Technology, whether ancient or modern, is a mode of revealing. Modern technology appropriates everything completely for Heidegger, 'challenging' it by forcing it to produce or to wait in 'standing reserve' for future production, such as an aircraft on a runway. Rather than being allowed to reveal itself naturally, modern technology challenges natural features to reveal themselves only as resources for production. The Rhine cannot just be seen as a river now, since hydroelectric dams and the tourism industry reveal it as a source of power and economy. Even humans are challenged to produce and are treated as commodities, as seen in titles of company departments such as 'Human Resources'. The total challenging posed by technology is Heidegger's notion of '*Ge-Stell*' ('enframing'). Taking Heidegger's analysis and bringing it up-to-date, Vattimo sees information and communications technology as challenging even the machines themselves, as well as blurring the distinction between appearance and reality to the dissolution of both concepts. While Vattimo agrees with Heidegger's estimation of technology, he sees liberating opportunities within it by taking into account the kinds of communications technology Heidegger did not get to see and consider in detail:

'It is not in the world of machines and engines that humanity and being can shed the mantles of subject and object, but in the world of generalized communication. Here the entity dissolves in the images distributed by the information media, in the abstraction of scientific objects (whose correspondence with the real 'things' open to experience can no longer be seen) or technical products (that do not even make contact with the real world via their use

value, since the demands they satisfy are increasingly artificial)' (Vattimo, 1992: 116-117).

By drawing upon communications technology in relation to *Ge-Stell*, Vattimo 'twists' Heidegger's philosophy of technology. The 'world picture' created by technology has become a plurality of 'pictures', the unified sense of reality generated by rationalistic metaphysics has dissolved into an irreducible plurality of interpretations. In this dissolution, metaphysical epithets such as subject and object disappear.

The end of metaphysics gives way to hermeneutical nihilism, the fixed world of subject and object dissolves into a play of interpretations. The 'death of God' coincides with the Heideggerian dissolution of metaphysical Being into 'exchange-value' (Vattimo, 1988: 27). What Vattimo means by this phrase is the opening of hermeneutical plurality once the idea of objectivity has lost its sense of truth with a capital 'T'. Vattimo takes over Hans-Georg Gadamer's reading of Heidegger on this particular issue, that 'Being that can be understood is language' (Vattimo, 2010a: 57). Late-modernity for Vattimo is the land of the sunset of Being where it lives on only as linguistic traces. These traces are remnants of metaphysics that have been exposed for what they are by the event of the death of God, yet the term 'exchange-value' implies these traces function as 'common currency', like a 'worn coin' (Barbiero, 1992: 166). Another way of referring to these traces is as 'tradition', or 'truths'. The importance of these traditions for Vattimo's philosophy becomes clear when he contends that they constitute the horizon of all thought (Vattimo, 1988: 120). Thinking takes place within the parameters of the linguistic heritage of our provenance. Taking over Heidegger's notion of Dasein, the human being is always in-the-world and is 'thrown' into a series of contingencies. Our provenance as individuals includes where and when one lives and as such our linguistic heritage will vary between each individual depending on their thrownness. Vattimo uses the phrase 'Denken is Andenken' (Vattimo, 2002: 22), that thinking is remembering; thought is contained within the linguistic horizons of the traditions into which one is thrown. If thinking is remembering, this is not a passive act. New Being is generated by an interface between the reception of tradition and remembering as an interpretative act. Interpreting is not overcoming, but a twisting if it is carried out mindful of the 'signs of the times', by

which Vattimo means the event of the death of God. Traces cannot be overcome in the dialectical sense, for to do so would be to repeat the logic of modernity and its metaphysical value of the 'new'. Instead, Vattimo thinks we should aim for a release from metaphysics, and although he thinks we cannot do without an ontology for reasons similar to why a dialectical overcoming is impossible, any ontology for the late-modern should be one of decline. Rather than a dialectical overcoming, Vattimo thinks interpretation should be a *Verwindung*. This term, little-used by Heidegger, refers to a 'convalescence-alteration', a 'distortion' which is also a 'resignation' (Vattimo, 1988: 172). Metaphors such as 'worn coin' and 'sunset of Being' show both resignation and nostalgia for tradition, that traces of Being constitute the horizon of thought which is inescapable. However after the death of God one cannot believe in, for example, Plato's forms as if they were true, and so interpretation has the opportunity to further weaken these metaphysical traces by 'distorting' them or 'twisting' them by using these terms and concepts in new ways. By adding in contingency into these traces, seeing them for what they are, one can be 'healed' from the violence of metaphysics by the distortion of *Verwindung*.

## Girard

Vattimo sees Heidegger's ontology of decline as a 'transcription' of the anthropology of René Girard (Vattimo, 1999: 36), even as 'completing' Heidegger (Vattimo, 2010b: 78). Before it can be seen why he thinks it is the case, something has to be said about Girard's ideas and their influence upon Vattimo. Girard's ideas have focussed in the main on the role of religion in diffusing the violence he has identified as essential to human society. Often referred by him as 'mimesis', Girard sees mimicking as a fundamental human trait: 'There is nothing...in human behaviour that is not learned, and all learning is based on imitation. If human beings suddenly ceased imitating, all forms of culture would vanish' (Girard, 1987: 7). Envyng what the other has or can do eventually culminates in a threat to consume the whole community in violence. A 'scapegoat' is made a victim upon which to deflect the violence to prevent the community from being destroyed. At first ad hoc,

over time the making of a scapegoat becomes ritualised and is overseen by religions, gaining a sacral quality. These 'natural religions' thus have a notion of a violent 'natural sacred' and a 'victimary mechanism' in order to deflect the violence and restore the balance of the community.

Vattimo says Girard 're-Christianised' (Vattimo and Paterlini, 2007: 150) him when he reviewed Girard's book *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Girard holds that the role of the Old and New Testaments is to reveal the violence of the natural sacred's victimary mechanism. Pierpaolo Antonello, in his Introduction to the collaboration between Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity, Truth and Weakening Faith*, succinctly puts it that Christianity functions as a 'Trojan Horse' (Antonello, 2010: 8), a non-religion posing as a religion in order to reveal the violence of the latter. In particular, it is Jesus' message, of the unmasking of the natural sacred and the revelation that God is love, which leads to his death according to Vattimo's understanding of Girard (Vattimo, 1997: 50-51), and is the basis of the revelation of the natural sacred for what it is. Girard held that this death is not a sacrifice, as is the orthodox understanding of it, for this would be to repeat the victimary mechanism. Crucially, Girard has gone back on this view and he now does think that Jesus' death is a sacrifice, in large part due to the writings of Raymund Schwager (Girard, 2010: 93). Vattimo has only acknowledged reading *Things Hidden* and therefore has not kept up with his development in his writing. In actual fact this does not matter too much. What Girard's theory does for Vattimo is to provide for him a tool for articulating a fundamental intuition he has had for a while on the dependence of hermeneutics, the philosophy of interpretation, upon the Christian tradition, an intuition expressed at length in his book *Belief* (Vattimo, 1999).

Vattimo's articulation of this dependence is in a theory of secularisation. Normally this concept is developed to express a 'moving away' from Christianity. Vattimo, however, sees secularisation as the realisation of the essence of the Christian message. For a decade before *Belief*, his first book-length treatment of his return to Christianity, Vattimo had used the concept of secularisation. Sometimes this was with reference to Girard (although only through brief allusions), at other times mentioning Arnold Gehlen's notion of *post-histoire*. In either case, Vattimo's aim was to ground hermeneutics historically. In 'Myth and the

Fate of Secularisation', Girard figures in Vattimo's first attempt to draw on the notion of secularisation by representing Christianity as the unmasker of the natural sacred: 'Christ shows that the sacred *is* violence' (Vattimo, 1985: 35), opening up the possibility of a new history. Around the same time, in *The End of Modernity*, secularisation refers to the making immanent of eschatological hopes which then become devalued in the routinisation of progress; faith in the progress of science and technology is the secularisation of the Christian hope for salvation in the progress of the kingdom of heaven (Vattimo, 1988: 7-8, 100-103).

Girard did not develop his theory of Christianity into a history of secularisation, much to Vattimo's surprise. Part of Girard's reticence is attributable to his academic discipline. As an anthropologist, Girard sees mimetic violence as a fact about human nature. If Christianity has unmasked the mechanisms keeping it from consuming society, this could be dangerous; other mechanisms, less violent, should be put in place. Antonello mentions examples of this kind of 'secularised forms of transcendence' such as democracy and mass media spectacle. Against this, Antonello says that 'Vattimo...rejects any apocalyptic perspective, foreseeing a progressive liberation...from any need for limits of any sort' (Antonello, 2010: 14). By contrast, Vattimo thinks the mere knowledge of a 'fact' does not grant salvation. For Vattimo, it is not enough to posit:

'a scientific, nonvictimary knowledge of human nature. I know that this is not Girard's intention, but as a matter of fact, even the redemptive power of Jesus seems to reside, for him, in a pure and simple theoretical unmasking of the violent essence of the natural notion of the sacred' (Vattimo, 2010b: 86).

For Vattimo, knowledge of the natural sacred is not only impossible factually (Vattimo thinks there are no facts), but would also be irrelevant were it not wedded to a history of weakening, for the important matter for Vattimo is to be able to ground and commit to a practise of weakening in the present through orienting interpretation towards further weakening of strong structures in accordance with *caritas* as the sole hermeneutical criterion (a notion that shall be explained in due course). As Vattimo does not think that there are any facts, he does not believe in society being essentially violent. The disagreements here are

perspectival, and Girard admits he is conservative in his thought, even going so far to challenge Vattimo's use of Nietzsche's phrase. For Girard, thoroughgoing hermeneutics is self-defeating and 'no facts, only interpretations', should be seen as a piece of rhetoric, not a developed theory of interpretation. The Nietzschean phrase that there are 'no facts, only interpretations' cannot provide a 'functional theory of interpretation. To have nothing but interpretation is the same as having none' (Girard, 2010: 94). Girard simply is not a nihilist, nor does he think that transcendence has to be violent in a metaphysical way.

Notwithstanding Girard's misgivings, Vattimo has drawn upon his ideas in his more mature work on Christianity to develop an idiosyncratic theory of secularisation to show how modern hermeneutics relies upon its Christian inheritance. In his essay on 'Religion' in his book *Beyond Interpretation*, Vattimo sees Christ's message of love as adding an ethical dimension to hermeneutics, that there is a limit of *caritas* ('charity') to interpretation in the nihilistic vocation of hermeneutics. Some scholars have seen Vattimo's selection of *caritas* as arbitrary (Carravetta, 2010: 89). However, it comes from the bigger picture of Vattimo's philosophy of religion. In *Beyond Interpretation*, Vattimo's two principal aims are to ground hermeneutics historically to prevent it becoming a meta-theory of interpretation and to devise a criterion for interpretation to rule out a situation in which 'anything goes'; Vattimo wants only 'weak' interpretations. While the Heidegger-Gadamer axis will provide resources for historical grounding, they do not readily yield an ethic. By turning to the incarnation, Vattimo feels he has both things he is looking for. Comparing 'archetypal' Western formulas of plurivocity, he picks Aristotle's *to on léghetai pollachôs* ('Being is said in many ways'), and St Paul's '*multifariam multisque modis olim loquens Deus patribus in prophetis*' (Hebrews 1:1) (Vattimo, 1997: 46). The former is still rigidified by the metaphysical category of 'substance' (Being is said in many ways). More particularly, Vattimo thinks Pauline historicism 'contaminated' Aristotelian plurivocity through the adoption of metaphysical terms by the early Church (Vattimo, 1997: 47). This 'contamination' manifests itself later in the historicising of the rationalistic hermeneutics of Spinoza and Schleiermacher by Heidegger. It is with the latter, along with Nietzsche, that the 'Age of Interpretation' is born, roughly corresponding to the 'Age of the Spirit' in Joachim of Fiore's Trinitarian historical schema of which

Vattimo is so fond. In this 'third age' discipline will give way to charity (Vattimo, 1997: 49), further addressing Vattimo's decision for *caritas* over any other biblical virtue. The incarnation is, for Vattimo at this point, *kenosis*, vaguely referred to by Vattimo as this 'contamination' of Aristotelian plurivocity by its prophetic, historical plurivocity. The ethical dimension of *kenosis* is *caritas*, played out in the third age but foreshadowed by the love shown by Christ in Girard's understanding of the incarnation as a revelation of the violence of the natural sacred by the message of love. Christ's unmasking of violence reaches its culmination in the end of metaphysics in the philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and this is secularisation for Vattimo.

Vattimo's argument is serpentine and magpie-like in its borrowing of ideas from unlikely sources. His understanding of Hebrews, Joachim, Girard, and *caritas* has come under criticism from Frascati-Lochhead (1998), Newheiser (2011), Depoortere (2008), and Carravetta (2010), respectively but not exclusively. In defence of Vattimo, he is only trying to put together what Marilyn Adams (Adams, 2000) would call an 'aporetic puzzle' by drawing upon resources with which he is familiar in order to offer another non-metaphysical way of showing how hermeneutics can be the *koine* of late-modern philosophy. Nevertheless, Vattimo's solution in *Beyond Interpretation* does not gel very satisfactorily. The link between Girard's understanding of Christ and Vattimo's notion of *kenosis* is unclear, let alone how they combine into a history of secularisation. Vattimo makes brief allusions to particular examples of secularisation such as Max Weber's thesis that capitalism is the secularised Protestant work ethic, but these are contingent and can be interpreted in different ways. What Vattimo did in his next major work, *Belief*, is to bring *kenosis*, *caritas*, his interpretation of Girard, and secularisation far closer together. In this work, Vattimo makes clear that secularisation is de-sacralisation; the revelation of God's love through the message and person of Christ dissolves strong structures by its movement through history. Jesus' message is one of 'the friendliness of God towards his creatures' (Vattimo, 1999: 95). The message of friendliness constitutes also the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, that of 'you heard it was said...but I tell you...' (the 'Antitheses' in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew) and 'I no longer call you servants but friends' (John 15:15; see Vattimo, 1999: 49

for both of these quotations). 'The guiding thread of Jesus' interpretation of the Old Testament', writes Vattimo, 'is the new and more profound relation of charity established between God and humanity, and consequently between human beings themselves' (Vattimo, 1999: 49). Here again the message of charity comes to the fore. Vattimo sums up the meaning of the incarnation in a way which emphasises both the message of Jesus and Jesus' message: 'The interpretation given by Jesus Christ of Old Testament prophecies, or (better) the interpretation which he himself *is*, reveals its true and only meaning: God's love for his creatures' (Vattimo, 1999: 64). According to Girard's thesis which Vattimo takes over and modifies, it is the Judaeo-Christian tradition that seeks to reveal the violence of the natural sacred through his message of God's love for, and friendship with, the world. Vattimo is against any literalism, including that of the incarnation. Therefore, it is the message of the incarnation that introduces the kind of 'contamination' of the absolute through historicism to which he referred explicitly in *Beyond Interpretation*.

More importantly, Vattimo's understanding of the kind of violence Christ came to abolish is equivalent to Heidegger's metaphysical violence. Vattimo makes an explicit connection between the violence of the victimary mechanism of the natural sacred and the violence of metaphysics. How he makes this connection is not obvious. As a 'bridge' between these two understandings of violence, Vattimo refers to the 'metaphysical' characteristics of God such as 'omnipotence', 'absoluteness' and his 'transcendence' (Vattimo, 1999: 39). While Vattimo is right in the sense that these attributes featured in some understandings of God such as the kind of view of God referred to by Heidegger as 'onto-theology', there is very little to suggest that this kind of God has anything to do with primitive religion. In fact, there is little in the Bible to justify divine attributes of onto-theology. One could take an opposite reading of the situation, that Christianity did not abolish strong structures, but actually introduced the value of 'truth' into religion. This is the view of John Gray in his book *Straw Dogs* (Gray, 2002), as Savater mentions in his essay on Vattimo (Savater, 2007: 299). What one can do is to combine the insights of Gray and Vattimo in order to better justify Vattimo's identification of Girard's and Heidegger's thought. Christianity looks like a religion. Nevertheless, its essentially hermeneutical and 'friendly'

quality at first manifested itself in a missionary manner. Events such as Pentecost and Saul's conversion, along with the socio-political-geographical provenance of Christianity led it to embrace Hellenistic categories of thought as a tool for conversion. As such, began both the dissolution not only of religious violence, but also of the violence of metaphysics. In other words, if one takes both Gray and Vattimo seriously, it is possible to see Christianity as functioning like a 'Trojan Horse' not only for natural religions, but also for metaphysics, appearing both as a 'religion' and as 'philosophy'. Vattimo, in drawing attention to the connection between religion and metaphysics in his analysis of Girard brings to attention a further way of providing evidence for his understanding of secularisation as the weakening of strong structures.

### **The Christian message and weakening metaphysical strong structures**

Looking into the history of Christian thought, particularly in the early church fathers' writings and in the Middle Ages, there is evidence for Vattimo's secularisation thesis he does not entertain himself. There are numerous examples from creative appropriation of the doctrine of the Logos in the writings of early Apologists such as Justin Martyr, to the confusion of metaphysical categories of *ousia*, *hypostases*, and *personae* in the disputes on the Incarnation and Trinity from the third to fifth centuries. In these cases, although the metaphysical categories and value of 'truth' in the metaphysical senses were introduced as a result of early missionary and apologetic efforts, philosophy was serving a more contingent historical truth, the scandal of the cross and the message of the resurrection. The notion of truth is given a dose of radical contingency, with metaphysical categories being employed to explain particular things such as God, the incarnation and salvation.

Arguably the best evidence of the Christian message 'weakening' strong metaphysical structures can be found in the Eucharistic controversies of the Middle Ages. By the time of the thirteenth century, it had been decided that the Eucharist was not a symbol. Rather, there was a 'real presence' of Christ in the consecrated host. Moreover, the council Lateran IV included the term 'transubstantiation' in its decrees in order to explain how Christ becomes present. Other options were available to

explain the real presence, such as 'consubstantiation'. The latter would have involved the accidents of Christ becoming co-present with those of the bread and wine. Consubstantiation was rejected by Aquinas on grounds of authority mainly, but also philosophically. With transubstantiation, the substances of the bread and wine are converted into those of the body and blood of Christ (respectively), but with the accidents of the bread and wine remaining: 'it is clear that the body of Christ is in this sacrament 'by way of substance', and not by way of [the accident of] quantity' (*Summa Theologica*, III, q. 76, a.1). If an accident were 'free floating' it would not be an accident, but a substance. Aquinas' position has drawn significant criticism, most perspicaciously and strongly, by P. J. Fitzpatrick, who states, 'For me, transubstantiation is a Eucharistic application of Aristotelian terms which abuses them to the point of nonsense' (Fitzpatrick, 1993: 11), for the terms are taken from his system but their application is outside of this system (Fitzpatrick, 1993: 24). Making nonsense out of Aristotelian thought in this way is weak thought *par excellence*, a *Verwindung* of trace of metaphysical thought left over from the Classical age of philosophy. Once recovered in the thirteenth century during the Crusades, the works of Aristotle added to the linguistic horizon of Being for the main scholars of the day. Part of their heritage, it enabled the likes of Albert Magnus and Aquinas to articulate their faith more precisely, but also to prevent Aristotle's philosophy from being seen as 'true' independent of, or superior to, the Christian faith, a fear expressed in the Parisian condemnations of 1277 in which Aquinas' legacy was nonetheless embroiled. In the thrownness of the all-embracing Christian faith of medieval Europe, Aristotle had to be interpreted through the contingencies of the Christian faith. Of course, Albert and Aquinas were living a long time before the 'Age of Interpretation', and the conclusions they drew were not at all nihilistic, for they were still able to believe in a radically historical truth with a capital 'T'. Nevertheless, the examples of Aquinas' use of Aristotle in the Eucharistic controversy of the thirteenth century is evidence of how secularisation as a moving away from the logic of sacrifice thought he victimary mechanism by Christ's revelation of love an friendship could also effect a dissolution of metaphysics.

To recap, Jesus' call to love and friendship added not only a dose of historicism in virtue of his *kenosis*, but also a missionary vocation to

embrace all of humanity. To do so required speaking different languages and engaging with linguistic and cultural horizons of those to whom they were meeting in friendship. Through the provenance of Christianity in the Near East at the time of the Roman Empire, Christianity soon found the mission to the Gentiles as involving an engagement with Greek metaphysics, first mainly with Stoicism and Middle Platonism, later with Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism. The radical contingency of the message of the Cross, with love and friendship at its centre, historicised the abstract nature of metaphysics and led to a lack of clarity between the value of truth given by metaphysics and its historical interpretation *by* Christianity. As a result, metaphysical categories came to be broken away from their system through the serving of a radically historical truth, a truth that would eventually consume even itself and realise its nihilistic vocation in the event of the fabulisation of the world through the death of God, when even the value of truth itself-- epitomised by God-- was found out to be a 'lie'.

### **Different kinds of violence**

If evidence can be found by an abductive methodology to support Vattimo's identification of the dissolution of the natural sacred with metaphysics or a history of the weakening of Being through secularisation, there are problems for Vattimo's theory if the identification between the violence of the natural sacred and metaphysical violence is drawn too close. The first problem is the status of the subject in relation to the act of violence. With metaphysical violence, although Weiss characterises Vattimo's understanding of the violence of metaphysics in terms of an act of speech, the violence is effectively a 'sending' (*Geschicke*) of Being itself, independent of human agency, which is manifested in language gauged in a certain way, namely in foundational first principles. Before the death of God and the end of metaphysics, first principles were constructed in various sendings of Being. Even if Christianity had added contingency to Aristotelian categories, modern foundationalism saw the human subject as the basis for knowledge in the Cartesian and Kantian senses. The modern attempt at foundationalism would, too, be undermined through thinkers such as

Freud, Marx and Nietzsche. The point is, though, that metaphysics is a history of Being and for Vattimo, like Gadamer, Being that can be understood is nothing other than language. Metaphysical violence is primarily in language, secondarily in interpretation, and only thirdly in speech acts. After the death of God, strong though only survives through interpretations that do not read the 'signs of the times', that is, God's death and the fabulisation of the world.

In contrast to metaphysical violence, the violence of the natural sacred is physical for it is the ritual sacrifice of a human being or animal. If the ritual was sublimated or made symbolic, then there would be no violence. What makes it violent, and also what enables it to be a functional tool in controlling the culmination of mimetic violence which would be all-too-physical is that physical violence occurs. A problem for Vattimo is that unlike metaphysical violence, physical violence unavoidably presumes a 'subject' that carries out the violence. Vattimo follows Heidegger in identifying metaphysics with Humanism which he takes as placing Being in the hands of a subject in the Cartesian and Kantian senses. Subjectivity in this Humanistic sense is a metaphysical notion that fades away with the end of metaphysics (see Vattimo, 1988, ch. 2). The 'unavoidability' of a subject involved in physical violence could be challenged. Given the influence of Nietzsche upon Vattimo, it is very possible that Vattimo could draw upon Nietzsche's notion of a deed without a 'doer' (Nietzsche, 1996: 29). However, when one looks into Nietzsche's work more closely, there is a 'doer' behind an action, found both in his will to power (even if 'choice' seems absent here), and the 'eternal recurrence', which presumes at least a 'yes-saying' choice of attitude as a hypothetical test of whether one is an 'overman' (how these contradictory elements play out in Nietzsche's philosophy is another matter that cannot be dealt with here). A further response in Vattimo's defence would be to argue that perhaps the event of the end of metaphysics exposes the subjectivity behind physical violence insofar as it reveals the violence of metaphysics. As such, there would be a threefold revelation. Firstly, there is the violence of the natural sacred, inaugurated by the revelation of love and friendship of God for which Jesus was put to death. Secondly, the violence of metaphysics is exposed, through the search for truth, ever historical and made immanent, consuming itself. Thirdly, with this unmasking of metaphysics goes

subjectivity. However, Vattimo does not mention the exposure of subjectivity with the natural sacred, even though he does identify the death of Humanism with the end of metaphysics.

In drawing physical violence so close to metaphysical violence, Vattimo is, perhaps unintentionally, in danger of making light of the former by reducing it to the latter, as well as removing resources with which to deal with it. Firstly, Vattimo seems to be implying that physical violence will disappear proportionally to the weakening of strong metaphysical structures. Vattimo may respond that he is talking specifically about the physical violence of the natural sacred. If he is not talking specifically about the natural sacred, he is reducing all physical violence to metaphysical violence. However, if he is talking specifically about the violence of the natural sacred, then how does Vattimo aim to reduce, or even conceptualise, physical violence that does not arise from the natural sacred? Vattimo may respond by making the move that all physical violence is a result of metaphysical violence. Certainly Vattimo makes the connection between the two, providing examples such as burning heretics in the Inquisition based on metaphysical principles (Vattimo and Zabala, 2002: 455). However, Vattimo refrains from a total identification of these two types of violence in this specific causal relationship, for to do so would be too law-like, moving close to a metaphysical judgement of sorts. Moreover, as a move it would be patently absurd, raising problems for Vattimo's philosophy he would be uncomfortable dealing with. The absurdity of the reduction of causality of physical violence to metaphysical violence is clear when one raises the issue of Being and humankind. If Being is nothing apart from language, did violence not occur before language? There was a time in which early humans did not possess language, yet violence must have occurred among humans and between humans and the rest of nature. Before humans, there would have been violence among all kinds of creatures. Should one not class these kinds of phenomena as violent, then one begins to use terms in ways very contrary to how they are normally understood. Indeed, to do so would be to minimise physical violence even today.

Wolfgang Welsch, in his contribution to the Santiago Zabala edited volume of essays on Vattimo, *Weakening Philosophy*, argues that pre-history, including evolution, is of greater importance than history or

ontology for why and how humans are the way they are today: Vattimo's hermeneutics 'swears allegiance to origins but equates these origins only with 'history' (and even with a history understood to consist exclusively of linguistic messages, of texts) and thus overlooks and ignores the by far greater part of our origin: prehistory and the entire evolutionary trajectory of humankind' (Welsch, 2007: 101). Evolution may be a more likely cause than metaphysics for the kind of violence described by anthropologists such as Girard in shaping our drive for mimesis and capacity for violence all against all if left unchecked or without sublimation. Organisms that show traits such as aggression are more likely to survive and pass on their characteristics than those that do not show some aggression, even if individuals who display excessive violence are taking too much of a risk (Ferguson and Beaver, 2009). There is also mimesis as a type of behaviour to account for. Girard shows how mimesis plays a fundamental role in human behaviour at the later stage of evolution. There is no evidence that *Homo Erectus* had mastered language. Therefore, although mimesis leads to violence, it is not attributable to Being, as there was no language in which it could be understood. There is evidence for mimesis having a pre-linguistic role in symbolic gestures for purposes such as mastering skills (Webb, 1995); mimesis thus has an origin in natural selection. Evolution is, for some, a 'theory'. For many people, though, it is a fact, or at least the fossil record can be classified as such. Anthropologists such as Girard also regard their findings as facts. Evolution and anthropology cannot be taken as facts for Vattimo as he does not accept there are facts. As a result, there is a danger of him reducing violence ultimately to metaphysics, neglecting to consider other causes for violence such as genetic heredity.

Vattimo's failure to consider prehistory and evolution has implications for how he can possibly deal with violence. Even if metaphysics is violent in the way Vattimo characterises it (and that is another issue entirely) is it worse than letting physical violence go unchecked? Put differently, is not the Nietzschean 'slave revolt in morals', the postulating of a 'world behind a world', the Kantian *summum bonum* of a marriage of virtue with reward, better than allowing humans navigate through a 'play of interpretations' without discipline or authority, especially if some or all humans are predisposed to at least some aggression and violence? If natural selection has entailed only the

most well adapted humans have survived, and toughness and aggression have played a part in being well adapted, is there not something to be said for metaphysically-derived ethics having a place in order to temper natural violent streaks which do not find a ready outlet in hunting in a late-modern consumer society? Not every human is a placid, well-educated Italian with a penchant for *caritas*; very few are. Is it not for the greater good that metaphysics be tolerated, or even encouraged, in order to impose a framework for morals? Vattimo would object that metaphysics has lost its purchase after the death of God to the extent that it can no longer be regarded as true, only weakened indefinitely. Vattimo may well be doing philosophy as a form of autobiography, extrapolating from his own personal experience to the West at large. Metaphysics may not be as unbelievable or as indefinitely declining as he thinks as not only is it alive and well in some quarters, but also there is the possibility of the return of Being. Concerning the former, Frankenberry (2007) mentions the well-known fact that belief in God is flourishing in America, a highly developed western country. As for the question of the 'return' of Being, Vattimo is aware that he adopts a 'left' Heideggerian approach (in the sense of right and left Hegelian), one which is immanentist and historical as opposed to the 'right' interpretation which reads Heidegger as leaving room for a return of Being. This choice may well, again, be biographical, for he has always been interested in political issues (Vattimo, 2010a), a long-standing concern that also drew him to various forms of Marxism. There is evidence in Heidegger's work that a 'right' reading of his work could be justified. At the end of 'Nietzsche's Word: God is Dead', Heidegger argued that the human who stops reasoning can make room for thinking and find faith (Heidegger, 2002). While this moves away from metaphysical rationalism, Heidegger kept the door open for a transcendent dimension to interface with and provide a check for the human. In his criticism of dialectical theology, negative theology, and the notion of the 'wholly other' in the philosophies of Derrida and Levinas, Vattimo identifies transcendence with metaphysics: 'transcendence is a highly metaphysical notion' (Vattimo and Girard, 2010: 76; see also Vattimo, 2002: 37).

Vattimo, in castigating institutions and principles that either are metaphysically-based or entertain at least the possibility of transcendence, may rob himself of much-needed resources to deal with

both the causes and effects of a physical violence rooted not only in metaphysics, but also in human nature (evolution) and society (Girardian anthropology). A variety of examples could be given of metaphysically-derived ways in which physical violence could be curbed. It is not the place to go into any one or more strategies in any detail. However, a few could be briefly mentioned. The philosophy of alterity, for instance, is implicitly ethical and can be developed into concern for the other (Lim, 2007). The Neo-Kantian position is another one in which, on Thomas Nagel's ethics, concern for the 'other' is based on the natural facts of pain, presuming both a subject capable of empathy and the non-solipsistic position of acknowledging other subjects who feel pain; knowledge of one's own pain should be reason enough to prevent pain in others (Nagel, 1986). Iris Murdoch is another philosopher of recent times to deem metaphysics as important to morality (Murdoch, 1992). These ethical positions are not open to Vattimo because of his disdain for 'facts', metaphysical 'subjects', ethical naturalism, transcendence, and absolute values. However, each of these strategies are metaphysically-sanctioned ways for human subjects to deal with the violence that occurs from decision-making and impulses, to a significant extent shaped by evolution.

## Conclusion

Vattimo draws upon the ideas of René Girard in order to ground hermeneutical nihilism historically and to develop an ethic of *caritas* to function as a limit of interpretation, of what can or cannot be secularised. This emphasis on historical grounding comes from Vattimo's 'left' Heideggerianism and his fundamental intuition that hermeneutics is dependent upon its Christian inheritance in the West. Secularisation is, for Vattimo from *Belief* onwards, a de-sacralisation. To tie this in his Nietzschean-Heideggerian philosophy, Vattimo sees the violence of the natural sacred as identifiable with metaphysical violence. Late-modernity, in which the culmination of secularisation occurs, Vattimo thinks, reveals both for what they are. While it is possible to provide evidence for Vattimo's claims by drawing upon episodes in the history of thought of Christianity weakening metaphysics through the encounter of

one with the other, such as Aquinas' *Verwindung* of Aristotle's thought, there are problems in bringing metaphysical violence and physical violence so close together. The identification of metaphysical violence and the natural sacred raises the question about the origins of physical violence. Vattimo's particularly nihilistic hermeneutics cuts him off from being able to conceptualise the origins of physical violence in the way evolutionary biology and anthropology can. This leads Vattimo to place undue weight on metaphysics as an explanation for physical violence. In so doing, Vattimo would never consider metaphysics, or at least transcendence (which he cannot but see as a form of metaphysics), as the lesser of two evils in checking the worst excesses of human nature. This is a pity, for metaphysically-derived ethics, or a moral value sanctioned by reference to a transcendent source, may still be able to function as a check on the worst excesses of human behaviour left over from the development of humankind by the process of natural selection.

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