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MUST A POST-METAPHYSICAL POLITICAL THEOLOGY REPUDIATE
TRANSCENDENCE?
THE CASE OF GIANNI VATTIMO

A review essay of Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism, and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

In contemporary political theory, one of the most fundamental divides is constituted by the dichotomy between transcendence and immanence. Among those who are agreed that the currently prevailing political and economic conditions stand in need of urgent subversion, there is severe disagreement as to how this subversion should be underpinned theoretically. Does the invocation of a transcendent realm, principle, or ontology serve to overcome current political conditions? Or, on the contrary, does it only serve to reinforce the tyranny of violence and hierarchy from which liberation is sought? Thinkers such as Alain Badiou, John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek are all convinced that transcendence is a necessary precondition for effective political change. This is not to say that their conceptions of this transcendence are the same; Milbank's, for instance, is explicitly theological, while Badiou's is avowedly atheistic. Nonetheless, they are agreed that some form of transcendence is politically necessary. On the other hand, the influential political theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri are convinced that transcendence is something that an emancipatory politics must repudiate, arguing that transcendence "leads quickly to the imposition of social hierarchy and domination....the refusal of transcendence is the condition of the possibility of thinking this immanent power, an anarchic basis of philosophy."¹ This divide is clearly deeply pertinent to political theology, for it is difficult to conceive of political *theology* that does not invoke transcendence in some form. If Hardt and Negri's indictment of transcendence could be sustained, then this would have very serious implications for the very possibility of political theology as such. But must a political transcendence necessarily be metaphysical?

Gianni Vattimo's recent book, *Nihilism and Emancipation* (2004), is written in the wake of what might be characterized as the predominant philosophical "event" of the twentieth century: the demise of metaphysics. For Vattimo, one corollary of this demise is that it is now impossible to articulate a critical standpoint independent of the cultural context within which we are embedded. For such an attempt could only be made on the basis of some "first principle" or

¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2000), 91-2.

foundation which would enact a fall back into metaphysics. Consequently, the only methodological way forward for philosophy is a “descriptive” or “sociological” one, with the result that philosophical thought will be “true” in so far as it is consistent with and accurately reflects the cultural *zeitgeist*. In this essay, my aim is to suggest that a necessary corollary of this analysis is that philosophy loses its critical capacities. By definition, such thought will always endorse rather than question society. I further want to suggest this is too high a price to pay, not least because of the specific character of contemporary western culture. My response is not to advocate a flight back to metaphysics, which would be as undesirable as it is impossible, but rather to question the very dichotomy with which Vattimo presents us. Does a turn away from metaphysics necessarily condemn philosophy to thoroughgoing immanence and the descriptive and sociological status that Vattimo claims it does? Or is it possible to conceive of an uncoupling of those frequently married concepts: metaphysics and transcendence?

Vattimo says that “a good part, or perhaps even the largest part, of the philosophy of the twentieth century takes the form of a sort of ‘sociological impressionism’” (4)², and in order to understand why this is the case, he proposes that we play with the two available meanings of the genitive in the expression “ontology of actuality.” Vattimo’s translator points out that the Italian word *l’attualità* is being used here in the sense of the French word *l’actualité*, meaning “the present situation in its entirety,” “current affairs,” “the state of the world.”³ With this in mind, Vattimo says that the ontology for which we are searching “is a theory that speaks of actuality (the objective genitive) and also belongs to it in the subjective sense of the genitive” (8). With the demise of metaphysics, “a theory of present existence is a theory that has no other source of information or legitimization apart from the present condition itself. And what that means for us, in our search for a way to determine the content of the ontology of actuality, is that we must begin by seeing clearly what the very fact of the ‘slide’ of philosophy into sociology signifies: the slide is the primary constitutive trait of the ‘actuality’ with which we have to deal” (8). The implications of Vattimo’s methodology here are clear: if philosophy is not exactly synonymous with a simple description of the present situation—it does after all claim to interpret it—it must nonetheless be consistent with, and not at odds with, the present situation. In other words, the logic of such a philosophical interpretation must be consistent with and not challenge the logic of the present situation. For to challenge the logic of contemporary culture would be to invoke a transcendent metaphysical principle, which is no longer available to us. As Vattimo himself puts it, “having recognized that the foundationalism of metaphysics is also responsible for modern rationalization, its violence, and its fragmentizing effect on the significance of existence, it is no longer possible to think that escape from this condition of ‘alienation’ might be

² Parenthetical citations refer to Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation* (New York: Columbia UP, 2004).

³ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2000), 174.

achieved through some kind of ‘critical’ thought, which could only arise through reliance upon another first principle, another *arché*, and thus a foundation. In that case we would still be imprisoned with metaphysics and so with modernity and its violence” (11).

As we have noted, however, if the logic of such thought is consistent with the cultural logic of the prevailing *zeitgeist*, to what extent will such be thought be distinct from interpretative description? And if it turns out to be little more than this, then to what extent does this slide from “neutral” description to positive endorsement, such that the status quo itself becomes valorized? Vattimo himself is not unaware of this danger intrinsic to his proposed methodology. He says that “for philosophy, this entails the risk of becoming the apology for whatever is (the radical objection made against Heidegger by Adorno in the chapter on ‘ontological need’ in the *Negative Dialectics*), but it is a risk that has to be run, otherwise the overcoming remains an empty word” (12). If this is so, then the next pertinent question is to ask whether the resources for overcoming the violence and totalitarianism of modern metaphysics may be found within our contemporary cultural situation. Vattimo says that he follows Heidegger in thinking that they can, but that he (Heidegger) never provided a sufficient account of this and that, consequently, it remains as a significant gap in his thought. Vattimo interprets this gap as a corollary of the fact that Heidegger “never escaped from a vision of technology dominated by the motor and mechanical energy” (14), a vision that is now hopelessly out of date. For Vattimo, the possibility of overcoming metaphysics “really opens up only when the technology—at any rate the socially hegemonic technology—ceases to be mechanical and becomes electronic: information and communication technology” (15). Liberation, for Vattimo, is to be found in the webs and networks of our electronic and informational media culture, which promotes a view of reality as a “conflict of interpretations.”⁴ Here strong foundations subside, control is relaxed, and interpretations multiply within a milieu that is indeterminate and open-ended. For Vattimo, this is a cultural enactment of what he has described as a “weak ontology,” which he believes to be our only philosophical means of overcoming metaphysics. He says that “a weak ontology, or better an ontology of the weakening of Being, supplies philosophical reasons for preferring a liberal, tolerant, and democratic society rather than an authoritarian and totalitarian one” (19).

But it is my contention that such an analysis is open to question on several fronts. The first and perhaps most important question to be asked is whether the invocation of some external, transcendent, or heterogeneous “perspective” is necessarily to fall back into metaphysics. Is it really the case that the overcoming of metaphysics condemns us to endless improvisations of variations on the “given?” The argument that this is so really depends upon the assumption that to make some appeal to something “other” than our ontology of actuality would be to appeal to some independently valid foundation, *arché*,

⁴ There is a parallel here with some of Mark C. Taylor's recent work. See especially *Hiding* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997) and *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001).

or first principle. But this is itself already to make an assumption about the nature or character of this "other," and it is an assumption that may itself be called into question. It may be instructive here to make some limited comparison between Vattimo's work and that of Emmanuel Levinas. Although Levinas never really associated himself with that part of Heidegger's project which seeks to "overcome metaphysics," it is nevertheless well known that for Levinas, the "other" far from being a foundation or first principle, is that which exceeds both. As primordial *an-arché*, the "other" to which Levinas bears witness is that which both makes possible and calls into question every foundation and every first principle. For Levinas, therefore, to discern the trace of the other which never appears as such is not to invoke some transcendent ontological foundation. On the contrary, it is to discern the trace of that which destabilizes and interrupts all representational pretensions. As he puts it, "the heteronomous experience we seek would be an attitude that cannot be converted into a category, and whose movement unto the other is not recuperated in identification, does not return to its point of departure."⁵

Now the crucial question that arises from this is whether a thinker like Levinas, in invoking a transcendent "other" is, by the very fact of doing so, embroiling himself in the very ontological foundation from which he himself is attempting to twist free. In *Nihilism and Emancipation*, he makes only one fleeting reference to Levinas, and that is to accuse his work of harboring "residual 'metaphysical' elements" (67). Although Levinas has certainly spoken of a certain understanding of metaphysics of desire, the crux of the issue here comes down to the question of whether all Levinas's talk of the "other," the trace, proximity, the face and so forth is to install the sort of ontological foundation or first principle that Vattimo is so concerned to repudiate. Vattimo, whose "fictionalized" ontology is so central to his overcoming of metaphysics, would doubtless want to ask Levinas whether his whole account in *Otherwise than Being*, for instance, is self-consciously a fiction or whether he perceives it to be something more or at least something else. Levinas, in turn, would doubtless want to resist reducing his meditations to status of mere fictions; the "other" of which he writes, after all, exceeds and makes possible the distinction between fact and fiction, and the desire to reduce his thought to the status of either one or the other would be, for him, symptomatic of that which he himself is seeking to overcome. Meanwhile, for Vattimo, Levinas's refusal to admit frankly that his "speculations" are nothing more than fictions, would be evidence of Levinas's own failure to absorb the implications of the "event" of the weakening of Being.

It would appear that at this point we have reached a bedrock position, where the argument would end, and deadlock would ensue. As Wittgenstein has observed, there comes a point in all arguments where reasons have been exhausted, and one is left with the simple statement of one's position.⁶ But if

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other" in Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986), 348.

⁶ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, tr. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe

this is so, then Wittgenstein also points to a way out of this deadlock in at least two senses. First, when rational argument comes to an end, one resorts to persuasion; one simply persuades one's interlocutor to look at the world this way rather than that, to regard this form of philosophy as being more foundational than the other. Secondly, in order to discover what people believe, we should look less at what they tell us about what they believe and more at that to which their beliefs give rise, to look at the whole context within which their beliefs get their sense. I want to employ this double Wittgensteinian strategy here both to persuade that to invoke a transcendent other does not necessarily imply a metaphysical move in the way that Vattimo thinks it does, and, furthermore, by employing the second Wittgensteinian move, I intend to show how Vattimo's philosophical methodology gives rise to concepts and ideas that are more metaphysical than anything to be found in Levinas, and that this is particularly evident in his understanding of ethical subjectivity.

If we were to ask what it means for ethical and political subjectivity to make the shift from a metaphysical to a post-metaphysical condition, central to what would undoubtedly be a long, complex and contested answer would be that it entails a reorientation of the subject from a primarily nominative to a primarily accusative mode of existence. In the nominative mode, the human subject is discrete and autonomous. The assumption is that this subject is not ethically "prejudiced," but stands neutrally in an imaginary ethical vacuum, in need of a philosophical and ethical system which, when demonstrated to be rationally valid, will inform that subject of what is right and wrong, good and evil and of how it should act in all possible circumstances.⁷ In an accusative mode, by contrast, the human subject is from the very outset subject to and, indeed, constituted by a call of responsibility for the other that precedes all thought, reflection, and philosophy. This call is subsequently articulated in ethics and philosophy and not vice versa. We may question, however, whether the concept of ethical subjectivity we find in Vattimo's philosophy had indeed made this shift.

Certainly, Vattimo explicitly sets himself against metaphysical ethics. Once again, we see that he rejects an ethical system based upon foundations and first principles and instead seek one that is reflective of our current condition. "To correspond to the times," he says, "is a responsible form of commitment; so even here a form of obligation subsists, which allows us to speak of a rationality and an ethicality, meaning a commitment to derive logical consequences and practical imperatives from certain 'principles' (here used merely in the sense of points of departure)" (39). He then goes on to anticipate the objection I am about to elaborate when he says that "some may protest that this just repeats the pattern of metaphysical ethics: you recognize the principles, articulate them

(Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), 602-20, 79-82.

⁷ This is an assumption commonly found in analytical ethical philosophy, such as that propounded by John Rawls and Alan Gewirth, for instance. For a discussion and criticism of this approach, see Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990), 65-72.

rationally, then derive guidelines for actions from them" (39). He concedes that such an objection would be "perfectly correct," but that the metaphysical mechanism is here both taken up *and* distorted in the manner of Heideggerian *Verwindung*. But the question remains of just how much distortion Vattimo effects and whether any *Verwindung* is really accomplished.

For the ethical and political subject at the heart of Vattimo's "ethics of provenance" is very much the modern neutral ethical subject standing in need of principles and guidelines for action to tell her how to behave. The picture here is still of a subject who stands in subsequent need of ethical guidance rather than a subject who is constituted from the very outset by an ethical calling. We have already quoted him above when he said that "a weak ontology, or better an ontology of the weakening of Being, supplies philosophical reasons for preferring a liberal, tolerant, and democratic society rather than an authoritarian and totalitarian one" (19). So our ethical and political commitments are still ones that need "philosophical reasons" upon which they can rest. Ethics and politics still stand in need of a philosophical justification, even if this justification is provided by an "ontology of actuality" rather than metaphysical principles. For Vattimo, ethics is secondary in the sense that it is something we develop or invent by means of our own "choices" and "decisions." So with respect to our "heritage and provenance," our inherited traditions, we have to make informed choices about what to retain and what to reject. These are what Vattimo calls "'philological choices': What to retain actively and what to exclude from the core of ideas, values, 'principles' of which we consider ourselves the heirs and by which we feel ourselves summoned? These choices must be made through acts of responsible interpretive recognition" (45). How do we decide whether or not such principles are still valid? Vattimo says that this is "something to be decided in light of the criterion that, with a responsible interpretation, we take to be characteristic of whatever 'really' forms part of the legacy to which we feel ourselves committed" (46). For Vattimo, of course, this criterion is to be found in nihilism, in the "dissolution of ultimate foundations." But the important point for the time being is that Vattimo appears to be assuming here, throughout his exposition of an "ethics of provenance," a modern metaphysical subject that stands in need of deconstruction. In spite of its ostensible rejection of metaphysical first principles, it remains, in ethical terms, a subject that is actively founding rather than a subject that is passively founded. In other words, it remains a nominative rather than an accusative subject. In so far as this is the case, we must question the effectiveness of Vattimo's professed subversion of metaphysics and the extent to which he has effected an accomplished *Verwindung*. His account of ethical subjectivity here remains the most incongruous and glaring instance of a metaphysical residue. Paradoxically, therefore, it seems that although he rejects the return of the "other" so as to avert a relapse back into metaphysics, we actually find that it is this very refusal that cultivates a metaphysical residue.

There are, however, other problematical elements of Vattimo's ethical philosophy which both arise from and reveal a certain metaphysical remnant. We have already observed that for Vattimo, ethics, and politics must still

somehow be derived from philosophy and be philosophically justified. And we have also observed that he derives his ethics from a nihilistic ontology—because it is the ontology most attuned to the spirit of the times. The ethical content that is derived from a nihilistic ontology is simply stated: it is “the exclusion of violence that thinks itself legitimate and the exclusion of the violent refusal to be questioned, the authoritarian silencing of the other in the name of first principles” (46). On the basis of this principle, our whole ethical heritage is to be judged. Although there is nothing ethically objectionable in this principle itself, this whole methodological procedure is deeply problematic (and, I should argue, residually metaphysical) in at least three ways.

First of all, if it is the case that our ethics and philosophy must be consistent with the spirit of the times because there are now no metaphysical first principles with which to challenge the direction of this spirit, it must also be recognised, on the same basis, that the direction and path of our cultural *zeitgeist* is wholly contingent. Rejecting, as Vattimo would, any Hegelian notion of teleology, it must be recognised that the movement of the spirit of the times, if not arbitrary, is at least unpredictable. If ethics and political philosophy must follow wherever culture and society leads, then on Vattimo's own criteria, there are no methodological reasons for resistance, even if society were to move in a direction that is, on the basis of Vattimo's own current metaethical principle, unambiguously malign. Indeed, it may well be the case that this is not only a hypothetical and potential difficulty, and this leads me on to my second point.

As the title of Vattimo's book makes clear, he sees an indelible link between “nihilism” and “emancipation.” Nihilism frees us from violence and tyranny because it no longer provides us with any legitimization, foundation, or justification for the enforcement of such violence and tyranny. But to what extent is this really the case? To what extent may nihilism be read otherwise? The answer to this question must surely be: to a very great extent, as a mere cursory glance at the literature on the subject will tell us. Legion are the voices—philosophical, critical, sociological, ethical, and theological—who interpret nihilism not as emancipatory but as malign, tyrannous, even, in some cases, fascist. These voices are both influential and well known. Mark C. Taylor, developing the insights of Jean Baudrillard, draws an analogy between the demise of the gold standard and the death of God. In each case the disappearance of the transcendental signified gave rise to a free play of currencies in one case and of meanings in the other. The point he is making is that there is a common logic at work in philosophical nihilism on the one hand and economic capitalism on the other.⁸ Fredric Jameson similarly sees philosophical nihilism and postmodern culture alike as being expressions of the cultural logic of late capitalism.⁹ From a theological perspective, John Milbank sees an ontology of nihilism as promoting an ethics of violence, tyranny and,

⁸ See Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage Publications, 1993) and Mark C. Taylor, *About Religion: Economies of Faith in Virtual Culture* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999), especially chapter 6.

⁹ See, for instance, Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998).

ultimately, fascism, and he too sees this ontology as being given its economic expression in capitalism.¹⁰ These thinkers (and it should be noted that they are illustrative rather than exhaustive) are by no means compatible with each other, neither in their methodologies nor in their conclusions, but what they do share in common is their conviction that nihilism, far from being emancipatory, is deeply malign. This is a serious challenge, and it is one that Vattimo does not adequately address. He remains convinced that an ontology of nihilism is the best defence against the emergence of a 'war of all against all' because it provides no 'positive reasons', no legitimization, no foundation for the violent domination or abuse of others. But if nihilism provides no "positive reasons" for the violent domination or abuse of others, it might just as easily be said that nihilism provides no "positive reasons" for the resistance of such domination and abuse. It could be argued that, applied consistently, the logic of nihilism provides no legitimization for any principles of action—whether benign or malign. A crucial move here, as I have suggested elsewhere, is to distinguish between a "metaphysical" nihilism and an "accomplished" or "fictional" nihilism. An accomplished nihilism, that is a nihilism that has relinquished all metaphysical pretensions, is one that recognizes that its own perspective shares in the same fictional, perspectival and relative status that it ascribes to everything else. Thus understood (and Vattimo has himself argued for such an understanding of nihilism), I should argue that nihilism could not be seen as in any sense putting forward an ontology or an ethics. Unlike metaphysical nihilism, it is not making any claim about "the way the world is"; rather it is more like an acknowledgement of the impossibility of making any definitive claim about the "way the world is." Consequently, it cannot make any claim that one ethics is more natural, spontaneous, justified, or consistent than another. An accomplished nihilism does not prescribe any particular ethics but, rather, opens the way towards particular ethical commitments, ethical traditions, or ethical narratives.¹¹ This would be one way of responding to some of the critics just mentioned, a way of reconciling commitment to a nihilistic disposition on the one hand with a denial that such a commitment in itself entails malign ethical prescriptions on the other. But this is a route Vattimo does not want to take. For he still remains wedded to the old metaphysical procedure whereby ethics is derived from philosophy, where nihilism provides "good reasons" for preferring liberal democracy and respect for the other over totalitarianism and tyranny. But the difficulty here is that it is by no means self-evident that nihilism does indeed provide such "good reasons." For a metaphysical nihilism (which, admittedly, Vattimo wants to move beyond), there are strong arguments to the effect that it actually promotes a malign, totalitarian, violent ethics. For an accomplished post-metaphysical nihilism, there are strong arguments to the effect that it does not promote any particular form of ethics at all.

¹⁰ See, for instance, John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

¹¹ I have argued this in Gavin Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), chapter 5. As I there make clear, my argument for an "accomplished" or "fictional"

There is, however, yet another metaphysical remnant in Vattimo's political philosophy which may end up by unwittingly promoting the very totalitarianism he is concerned to resist. In his chapter, "Liberty and Peace in the Postmodern Condition," Vattimo avers that "the reconciliation of peace and liberty in the postmodern or late-modern world will be attained only on condition that esthetics prevails over objective truth. The variety of lifestyles and diversity of ethical codes will be able to coexist without bloody clashes only if they are considered as, precisely, styles, not reciprocally exclusive but compatible, like the artistic styles within an art collection...." (58). The logic of Vattimo's thought here is clear. In a world of conflicting outlooks, philosophies, religions, metanarratives and ethical codes, if the respective adherents of these various worldviews claim that their own positions are metaphysically true, this will only lead to the mutual and violent imposition of these perspectives upon others. He says that "it may have been possible to believe in unique truth and morality in traditional closed societies, founded on a single source of authority and a single tradition; today it has become too dangerous to think like that...." (58). But there are a number of philosophical moves being made here. On the one hand, Vattimo is making a pragmatic argument about how best to "regulate" the empirical fact of conflicting and competing worldviews that coexist in the world. He is asking the question of how we may best ensure that such global differences in outlook do not boil over into aggression, violence, and war. But this is not, of course, the only move being made here. Vattimo's specific solution—that we should be "ironic" (in Richard Rorty's sense) towards our inhabited traditions and treat them more in the manner of "artistic styles" than as claims to truth—is derived from a particular philosophical tradition or worldview, namely, that of nihilism. So what Vattimo is actually doing is precisely that which he wishes to avoid: the elevation of one particular tradition (in this case, that of nihilism) and imposing this upon all other traditions, the acceptance of which appears to be a condition of their continued existence. It is far from clear, of course, why other traditions would wish (or think it just) to interpret their own traditions in a way that is consistent with western hermeneutical nihilism and why this should be elevated above all other traditions. Once again, of course, Vattimo would explicitly reject the claim that hermeneutical nihilism is "truer" than other traditions, such a recourse being ruled out in the wake of the death of God. But it is significant and telling that in spite of this repudiation, Vattimo nonetheless ends up by repeating this classically metaphysical (and in this case liberal) gesture: allow a multiplicity of worldviews to exist, provided that they all pay homage to an overarching western framework. As usual with this gesture, a rhetoric of tolerance, liberalism and peace masks a violent and imperialistic imposition.

One recourse for Vattimo might be to say that he is not advocating that the world traditions understand themselves in this way because hermeneutical nihilism is "truer" or "better" than other traditions, but simply as a matter of pure and urgent pragmatics. Given the world in which we currently live, with its resurgent fundamentalisms and spates of extreme violence, we have an

nihilism (as opposed to a "metaphysical" nihilism) was itself indebted to Gianni Vattimo's own work.

urgent practical need to seek some solution, albeit transitional or impermanent, that will avoid pending disaster. The challenge identified here is certainly a real and urgent one, but such an answer would again reveal a certain metaphysical residue. For it seems to assume a dichotomy between on the one hand traditions that consider themselves "true" in a foundational sense, with the dangers of violence and tyranny that that brings and on the other hand, traditions that regard themselves ironically in the manner of "works of art" or as fictions, with the impulse towards imposition consequently dissolved. But again, this is a peculiarly western and metaphysical dichotomy. It refuses to consider the possibility of an "other" that might break up and transcend such a dichotomy. Is it possible for a tradition to be utterly serious (and non-ironic) about its ultimacy and authority without it being prone to the absolutism, tyranny and violence that metaphysical truth seems to bring? In other words, is it possible for a tradition to be free of the shackling antinomy that western metaphysics seems to impose? I should suggest that it is, although the articulation of such a vision is not one that can be entered into here. But the important point is that in seeking a post-metaphysical articulation of liberty and peace in the postmodern world, Vattimo advocates one particular horn of a metaphysical dilemma, rather than looking beyond that dilemma altogether.

Indeed, the antinomy within which Vattimo appears to be trapped here seems to echo the very dilemma with which we began this discussion. There we saw him caught between a cultural criticism based on metaphysical first principles on the one hand and a philosophical slide towards sociological description on the other. Faced with this choice, he endorses philosophy's sociological slide and repudiates the intervention of any transcendent other, lest this deliver him over to the other horn of his dilemma. But what if the interruption of such transcendence, far from condemning him to one alternative in this antinomy actually delivered him from it altogether? What if Vattimo's refusal of transcendence, far from protecting him from metaphysics actually reveals his own continuing indebtedness to it? Indeed, my burden in this essay has been to argue precisely that. I have argued that in several different ways, Vattimo's ethical and political philosophy is marked by the trace of a residual metaphysics. Furthermore, I suggest that these metaphysical traces all stem from his refusal of a transcendent other, which alone could deliver him from them. In effect, therefore, this essay also constitutes a plea for the return of transcendence in any ethical and political philosophy which not only seeks a *Verwindung* with regard to metaphysics but also seeks to be robustly critical with respect to the spirit of the times.¹²

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¹² I am very grateful to Jeffrey W. Robbins for his insightful comments on an earlier version of this essay, particularly with regard to the discussion of Levinas.

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Gianni Vattimo occupies the relatively rare position of being both a prominent philosopher and an engaged politician.⁷ Marta Frascati-Lochhead, Kenosis and Feminist Theology: The Challenge of Gianni Vattimo (Albany: SUNY, 1998), 37. 8 Vattimo employs this expression, coined by Michel Foucault, in "Postmodernity, Technology, Ontology," in Technology in the Western Political Tradition, (eds.)⁹ Right, in the case of Heidegger, denotes an interpretation of his overcoming of metaphysics as an effort, in spite of everything, somehow to prepare a "return of Being," perhaps in the form of an apophasic, negative, mystical ontology; left denotes the reading that I propose of the history of Being as the story of a "long goodbye," of an interminable weakening of Being. Vattimo and Theology. This page intentionally left blank. Vattimo and Theology Thomas G. Guarino Published by T&T Clark International A Continuum Imprint The Tower Building 80 Maiden Lane 11 York Road Suite 704 London SE1 7NX New York, NY 10038. www.continuumbooks.com.¹⁰ Secondary literature WP: Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo, ed. Santiago Zabala (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2007).¹¹ But presumed animosity is hardly the case today, with some courting this line of thought as offering the best chance for the Christian message to be clearly heard. Since the narrative of postmodernity is important to Vattimo, some broad features of this concept, as well as his particular use of it, should be briefly sketched. Gianteresio Vattimo (born 4 January 1936) is an Italian philosopher and politician. Gianteresio Vattimo was born in Turin, Piedmont. He studied philosophy under the existentialist Luigi Pareyson at the University of Turin, and graduated with a laurea in 1959. In 1963 he moved to Heidelberg and studied with Karl Löwith, Habermas and Hans-Georg Gadamer with a scholarship of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. Then, Vattimo returned to Turin where he became assistant professor in 1964, and later full...