

Giuseppe Iannantuono, Alberto Martinengo and Santiago Zabala, (eds.) Gianni Vattimo. *Being and Its Surroundings*. Trans. Corrado Federici. McGill-Queen's University Press 2021. 264 pp. \$49.95 CAD (Hardcover ISBN 9780228006725).

This volume is a collection of essays by Gianni Vattimo, one of the most prominent contemporary Italian philosophers, a scholar of Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Gadamer, and an influential representative of 'weak thought,' a key expression of postmodern hermeneutics that emerged in the early 1980s. The editors have collected a total of thirty-one texts of which eleven are unpublished and the rest, published between 2007 and 2016, are extracted from journals and collective works. Released in Italian in 2018, the volume represents an invaluable opportunity for English-speaking readers to familiarize themselves with the recent work of Vattimo and with specific shifts in his thought. With the exception of a handful of essays, already available in English and appropriately revised, the collection is masterfully translated by Corrado Federici who has taken on several translations of challenging Italian works in literary criticism, aesthetics, visual arts, and poetry. This collection of essays is no less demanding given the diversity of topics and a philosophical language that cuts across different cultures.

The three editors are young scholars who have either collaborated with Vattimo on various projects as co-authors (Zabala has co-authored *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx*, 2014), as editors of his complete works, or as conference organizers on topics related to his thought. Their objective was not to collect essays centered on a specific philosophical area of investigation, but to offer an overview of Vattimo's reflections on a multiplicity of subjects: weak ontology and the end of metaphysics, hermeneutics and truth, science and rationality, ethical stands, globalization, democracy, technology, new realism, religion, and the application of the hermeneutical orientation to political praxis. The heterogeneity of the subject matter is not, however, without a focus. As a whole, the volume displays a unified and cohesive project that revolves around the adoption of hermeneutics in response to crucial issues faced by contemporary societies as they grapple with emergencies, from climate change to environmental disasters, violence, spiritual and psychological malaise, inequalities and economic oppression exacerbated by neoliberalism and global capitalism.

The primary philosophical notions elaborated by Vattimo through the years, from *The End of Modernity* to *The Transparent Society*, *A Farewell to Truth*, and *Nihilism and Emancipation*, are still present, but the emphasis has now shifted towards political and social responses from a hermeneutical perspective. He is still guided by interpretations of Nietzsche and Heidegger who, in his view, herald the vision of a post-metaphysical world and a radical break with the instrumental reason of the Enlightenment project. For Vattimo, principles of truth and universality are disguised notions of power, oppression, and domination. Indeed, facts, as claimed by the objectivist outlooks of the social and experimental sciences, are only interpretations. They do not correspond to any externality which, at the level of the noumenon, remains inevitably inaccessible: 'Interpretation does not lead us to the thing itself' (207). Here Vattimo's positions are close to those championed by Richard Rorty, in works like *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, for whom the mind as a



mirror that reflects nature is an illusion perpetrated by Western philosophical narratives. Indeed, Rorty's views (there is no reality or absolute truth independent of our discourses and utilitarian objectives) are recalled in several essays and particularly in the one entitled 'A Friendly Pragmatism' in which his rejection of epistemological certainties is linked to Nietzsche and Heidegger's anti-foundationalist philosophy (202-211). It is worthwhile to recall that there has been a collaboration between the two philosophers with the volume *The Future of Religion* (2007) in which neopragmatism and hermeneutics teamed up in discussing the relationship of religion with ethical and political issues in today's society.

From the 1970s to the end of the first decade of the 2000s, Vattimo's work displays a forceful critique of leading Western epistemological principles and of the conditions of modernity, perceived as an age of inauthenticity, massification, distorted notions of progress, colonialism, closure towards the other and oblivion of Being, in the Heideggerian sense. Philosophy was practiced principally as an instrument of negation of *all* essentialist and monistic conceptions of the world and of being reduced to a pre-given, fixed, and structured entity. This outlook still permeates the essays collected in this volume. They too seek the abdication of traditional certainties and postures, but the critique and the negation are counterbalanced by the necessity of an affirmative philosophical investigation, capable of transforming thoughts into praxis, into political action. For a philosophy constructed on a postmodern heterotopic vision, with its unconditional defense of differences as the sole possibility to gain freedom from all forms of authoritarianism, including Marxist Communism, and with its condemnation of definitive and exclusionary stands, it is problematic, to say the least, to propose an affirmative political orientation.

Indeed, the opening essays reaffirm Vattimo's general hermeneutic outlook on the social and political realities: 'the demand for secure and unquestionable certainties' upon which to ground both our individual and collective life 'comes from the *auctoritates*' (5); the 'need for metaphysics' is unavoidably tied to 'relations of power' (6); the declarations of rights and freedoms, such as the ones claimed by the French Revolution, do not stem from 'love for the universal truth of these principles,' but for 'reasons of power' and for the 'condition of dispossession,' including Marxist liberation of the proletariat, considered 'still metaphysical' theory (7).

This volume, however, discloses a transformation of Vattimo's philosophical orientation. He must have been pressed to tackle fundamental questions raised about his postmodern hermeneutics and weak ontology in relation to the political and social realm. Beginning in 2011, the philosophical debate in Italy is centered around the positions expressed by the movement of 'Nuovo Realismo,' of which Maurizio Ferraris, one of Vattimo's former students, is a leading proponent (see his *Manifesto of New Realism*, 2012, Eng. tr. 2015). Hermeneutics is placed within a theoretical frame closely tied to the tradition of idealism, immersed in the interpretation of the human spirit and dangerously detached from an objective reality, independent of our interpretations. Vattimo strongly opposes these and other claims made by New Realism, but must admit that it contributed to 'push hermeneutics to see itself more clearly as a philosophy of praxis' (66).

The transition to a philosophy of political action leads to insurmountable complexities, if not to

overt aporias. Is it possible for a philosophy of weak ontology, with a view of modernity as the culmination of the history of nihilism, a world without foundations upon which to ground values and objective realities, to metamorphose into a ‘militant hermeneutics’ (45) as Vattimo advocates? In these essays, he remains faithful to Nietzsche’s principle that ‘there are no facts, only interpretations’ and he reaffirms that the objectivity claimed by science, its neutrality and rationality, ‘aims to silence all conflicts’ (65) and to put an end to interpretations. He also asserts the impossibility of elaborating a new ethics by following the Kantian categorical imperative, in as much as it cannot be ‘legislated as universally valid if the starting point is one’s own individual situation and individual pathos’ (43). If this falls within the realm of metaphysical postures, the position expressed by a philosopher such as John Searle, the argument that there exists an objective external reality, independent of our nervous system and acts of perceptions (we do not perceive our perceiving but the perceived object), is seen as a form of realism that functions as the ‘intellectual support of the neoliberal world,’ in sync with US imperialism and global capitalism (72). For Vattimo the impossibility of negating the ‘insurmountable historicity of understanding’ (185) results in a ‘philosophy of the late modern world where the world dissolves effectively and more and more completely in the play of interpretation’ (190). But don’t relativistic and anti-objectivist positions contribute in extinguishing resistance to all forms of power and domination? Can Vattimo’s positions constitute an actual opposition to the hegemonic logic of global capitalism without a specific political project? How can radical alternatives be based on the ‘weakness’ of his postulates?

He defines contemporary philosophy as an ‘ontology of actuality’ (29), an expression borrowed from Foucault but utilized with a hermeneutical slant. Vattimo recognizes the urgency for philosophy to be engaged in the ‘conflicts of concrete historicity’ but, at the same time, finds it ‘ultimately impossible’ to elaborate a final and decisive alternative to the conditions of the present (32). The principle of Being, centered around the notion of event and of an infinite and boundless becoming, cannot be separated from the endless ‘opening of historical worlds’ (29). The paradoxical nature of the notion of the ‘ontology of actuality’ is discussed quite lucidly and Vattimo is forced to concede that hermeneutical philosophy runs the risk of impotence and impracticability in confronting the here and now of history, lest betraying its own interpretations of Being. Indeed, to choose is to discriminate, in its etymological meaning from the Latin *discrimen*, separation, linked to *discernere*, to distinguish. Despite all the ideals of inclusivity, don’t differences and antagonistic views remain unworkable in a political project?

Vattimo advocates the urgency of revitalizing love and emotions, long ‘suspended in the name of economics’ by capitalism, to bring about a political transformation (92). In as much as ‘hermeneutics is basically the philosophy of the irreducible otherness of the other’ (13), its political vision can only be limited to ‘listening and responding to the request of help’ (44) by the other—adopting one of Levinas’ central principles. But is the issue resolved? Which other? How do we discriminate among all the appeals made by the others? Hermeneutics is able to interpret the negativity of the world but not to act over it. It can interpret nihilism, seen as the ‘triumph of technology’ and the manifestation of instrumental reason, but is destined to impotence at the level

of praxis. And Vattimo knows this well: ‘the need to become an interpreter reveals that nihilism of which hermeneutics is both the consequence and the effect’ (62). He offers a powerful critique of technology and its domination from a political perspective. In his view, technology is not a simple activity performed by a machine. It is an ‘integrated system’ that ‘eludes the possibility of our controlling and understanding it’ (108). The notion of the ‘end of history,’ as proposed by Francis Fukuyama, is interestingly reinterpreted as the outcome of a technologized world, to the extent that ‘nothing [can] disrupt the regular activity of the machine.’ The idea that there is ‘no possible alternative to the present state of affairs’ is the demonstration of the end of history, in as much as history can be defined as ‘nothing more than the history of freedom’ (113).

Vattimo makes an extraordinary effort to channel hermeneutics towards a political project. He offers the notion of ‘open dialectics’ or of an ‘ontology of revolution’ (16), connecting Heidegger to the critique of instrumental reason of the Frankfurt School in the realization that an ‘objectivist metaphysics’ is inseparable from the ‘objectification of the human being’ and the ‘totalitarian, rationalistic domination’ (10). He even ventures into the proposal of a ‘hermeneutic communism’ (69). For an anti-objectivist philosopher guided by an epistemic skepticism that negates facticity in all domains, the notion of communism, linked to expressions of metaphysics, authoritarianism, and scientism, may sound like a paradox. Vattimo’s critique of the current affairs of the world are insightful, radical, and supported by much of the left. The issue is that hermeneutics, as a form of ‘militant philosophy’ (71) within the political arena, remains ambivalent and noncommittal. Allusions to democratic processes implemented by Latin American leaders, such as ‘Lula, Morales, Chávez, Correa,’ or identifying the absence of ‘the emergency of democracy’ (73) as the sign of the deep crisis that afflicts liberal democracies, are not adequate illustrations of political action. These vaguely affirmative notions are followed by the need to remind the reader that ‘we (the social order, i.e., the victors) need truth, meaning the ideological legitimation of our domination’ (74). In other words, all affirmative philosophy and culture is a bearer of prevarication, power, and violence. The conclusion cannot but be that hermeneutics ‘is not a metaphysical philosophy [...], has no “reason” [...] for preferring one social order or another’ (76). Hermeneutics as ‘an ontology of revolution’ (77) remains a philosophy rooted in unmasking the negativity of the experience of the world. The impossibility to be transformed into praxis creates the risk of supporting the status quo of the social order. Marx’s call to change the world rather than interpreting it is brought to light, but it is viewed as a universalist ideology that leads to the negation of differences (124).

Vattimo puts forward intriguing and thought-provoking arguments for exposing fossilized versions of the world and identifying models apt to build a post-metaphysical society in various domains. An essay is devoted to the role of art and its ‘politicization,’ commodification, reception, and ‘crossing of boundaries’ (137-140). Several essays deal with philosophy as a reflection on the contemporary religious experience in relation to ‘pluralism and multiculturalism,’ viewed as expressions of a postmodern condition that abandons notions of truth and the absolute (143). Religions are critiqued for their claims of ‘objective forms of knowledge.’ Their beliefs are seen as ‘poetic metaphors,’ ‘mythos or narrative’ that concerns the meaning of existence’ (146). In this respect, he also tackles the issue of Christianity as a ‘presence-absence’ (214) in Heidegger’s

philosophical developments. An ethics conceived as ‘a criterion for distinguishing good from evil’ has no place in his philosophy, except for the principle of an ‘ethics of interpretation’ (215). Nonetheless, Vattimo, an advocate of a non-metaphysical Christianity based on notions of pietas and care towards the other, affirms that ‘if I were not a Heideggerian, I would not be a Christian, and vice-versa’ (228). In his analysis of the *Black Notebooks*, Vattimo engages with Heidegger’s antisemitism for considering ‘Jews as a metaphysical people [...], conveyors of metaphysical poison’ (158, 160) and as people ‘without historical roots [...] bearers of an abstract rationality,’ responsible for the ‘capitalist, but also Stalinist [...] rationalization of the world,’ in its various ‘forms of oppression’ (232). In this case, Vattimo’s condemnation is unequivocal, as it is towards his identification of Nazism with a ‘society free of metaphysics’ (159). At the same time, Heidegger’s philosophy remains for Vattimo a fundamental and indispensable point of reference for interpreting the contemporary world.

Vattimo sees all human expressions, including religion, through the lens of an epistemic skepticism that foregrounds ‘tolerance’ as ‘the only ethical imperative [...] appropriate for historically finite beings that we are’ (185). For the secular contemporary culture, it is relatively unproblematic to subscribe to his notion of ‘Being as a dialogical event’ (161) and to the view that we are inescapably historically situated. With these essays, Vattimo shows a distinct and provocative ability to attach abstract philosophical reflections to current and pressing issues that confront Western societies in particular. This warrants our attention and recognition, as does his radical critique of outdated models governing moral codes, religious beliefs, and social organization. However, negating all grounds of truth and knowledge is a philosophical posture that risks incurring in apodictic outlooks that belong to that metaphysical thought so vigorously denounced.

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