

Gianni Vattimo and Nihilistic Christianity: Creating Open Concepts of Truth and Knowledge in the Age of Interpretation

Stuart Chambers

Abstract: Borrowing largely from the Nietzschean and Heideggerian heritage, the works of Gianni Vattimo have been instrumental in promoting a nihilistic approach to Christianity. Vattimo's method entails the weakening of metaphysics (absolute foundations) by exposing the violence so often associated with it. As a consequence, truth and knowledge are maintained as open concepts within the dialectical process. This does not mean that "strong relativism" now prevails as a legitimate philosophical viewpoint. What it does mean, however, is that *Truth* has simply been transformed into some intelligible form of *truth*. Moreover, Vattimo emphasizes that in the post-metaphysical (post-absolutist) world both secularism and nihilism are imperative to expanding truth and knowledge. As a result, it is argued that both philosophical positions are actually complementary to the roots of Christianity. Furthermore, I suggest that nihilism – in its *positive* form – not only expands the Christian message of charity, but also transforms it into its endless human potential.

Introduction

With the rise of secular, liberal democracies in the West, one may ask: Why attempt to construct a new metaphysic when the previous Christian model, as the sole author of first principles, has already been discredited? Those who gravitate towards absolute foundations – in fact, long after Nietzsche declared the "death of God"¹ – continue to do so because it seems frightening

to envision a world without the Bergerian notion of *nomos* functioning as ultimate reality.² Undoubtedly, foundationalism has been an integral part of the history of philosophy. Anselm of Canterbury defended the ontological argument for the existence of God as “something than which nothing greater can be conceived.”³ Similarly, Spinoza had depicted Substance as the absolutely infinite.⁴ This “essence of being” or “supreme actuality” is said to be beyond temporal reality, implying that it has the property of transcending knowledge. Jacques Maritain summarizes such a claim. “Metaphysics...at the summit of natural knowledge, where it becomes fully wisdom, brings to light in its pure values and uncovers what is enveloped and veiled in the most primitive intellectual knowledge.”⁵ In fact, metaphysicians believe they can intuitively know the existence of the Absolute, meaning they “purport to render access to a supraempirical and above all foundational level of reality...”⁶ In the history of philosophy, this yearning to totalize the transcendent has often led to the treatment of truth and knowledge as closed concepts.

This essay, written primarily for a post-Christian audience, highlights the important contributions surrounding the nihilistic Christianity expressed by Gianni Vattimo. His central themes – metaphysics and violence, ethical hermeneutics, ontology of actuality, the “event of being,” and weak thought – are pivotal in understanding broader possibilities for truth, knowledge, and interpretation. Furthermore, Vattimo emphasizes that secularism and nihilism are imperative for expanding debate

¹ Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 3.

² Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 3–28.

³ Paul Edwards, ed. “Ontological Argument for the Existence of God.” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 5–6 (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc. and The Free Press, 1967), 538–539.

⁴ Baruch Spinoza, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Selected from His Chief Works* (New York: The Modern Library, Inc., 1927), 122–151.

⁵ Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics: Seven Lectures on Being* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1939), 19.

⁶ Lori G. Beaman, Anthony Gill, and Peter Beyer, “Symposium on Religious Freedom and Religious Pluralism,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 3 (2003): 336.

in a post-metaphysical (post-absolutist) world. In his view, both positions are complementary to the roots of Christianity. As I hope to demonstrate, nihilism – in its *positive* form – not only expands the Christian message of charity, but also transforms it into its endless human potential.

Vattimo's Nihilistic Christianity: Central Themes

Metaphysics and Violence

The Vattimian perspective begins with a rejection of metaphysics and its relationship to violence and power. Vattimo holds that “[w]herever there is an absolute...metaphysics is always present in the form of a supreme principle...”⁷ Vattimo feels that the pluralistic world in which we live runs counter to absolute foundations, meaning that diversity “cannot be interpreted by an ideology that wants to unify it at all costs in the name of a sole truth...”⁸ In other words, adherence to absolutes negates the dialectical process, mainly because of the former’s obsession with essentializing truth and knowledge. States Vattimo: “[T]he metaphysics of Being as stable and eternal structure, given once and for all...is inaccessible to rational discourse and therefore even more strictly ‘objective.’”⁹

Eventually, all metaphysical propositions exposed at the source become vulnerable to empirical disconfirmation. This is because such foundational claims require Humean tests of experience in nature.¹⁰ When challenged, metaphysical beliefs can be seen “as fictions that...dissolve in reference to the explication of the conditions that determined their formation,”¹¹ or as Nietzsche would say, “the progressive knowledge of the

⁷ Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1971), 52–63.

¹¹ Santiago Zabala, ed., *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2007), 402.

origin increases the insignificance of the origin.”¹² However, philosophical debate often reverts back to a dependency on the Metaphysical Fact. When Nietzsche announced the death of God, he anticipated that “the latter’s shadow [would] continue to be cast upon our world for a long time.”¹³ Nietzsche warned that the death of God had to be “lived out as the death of the very notion of [absolute] truth itself, otherwise our enslavement to some supreme value or other would never cease: God would only have changed his name, the oppressive effects of the domination would live on.”¹⁴

Vattimo believes that violence is directly linked to metaphysics. He defines such violence as the antithesis of truth and knowledge: “the pre-emptory assertion of an ultimacy that, like the ultimate metaphysical foundation...breaks off dialogue and silences the interlocutor by refusing even to acknowledge the question ‘why?’”¹⁵ Through the marginalization of dialogue, the true meaning of metaphysics becomes “will to power, violence, and destruction of liberty.”¹⁶ When Christian norms become absolute, they too can be co-opted for violent purposes. According to Vattimo, “[V]iolence found its way into Christianity when Christianity made an alliance with metaphysics as the ‘science of Being as being,’ that is, as the knowledge of first principles.”¹⁷ Perfectionist metaphysics, particularly as a pernicious form of Christian natural law, requires a single conception of truth and knowledge, and as Joseph Heath reminds us, those who disagree must be either punished or killed.¹⁸ For Vattimo, such perfectionism lies in “conforming to the first principle and is persuaded, without question or explanation, of the first principle’s force. Here hubris

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, in Santiago Zabala, *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, 19.

¹³ Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 11.

¹⁴ Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 54.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁷ Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 117.

¹⁸ Joseph Heath, *The Efficient Society: Why Canada Is as Close to Utopia as It Gets* (Toronto: Viking Press, 2001), 31.

and submission are inextricably blended and in contradiction, to reveal the neurotic mindset of metaphysics...”¹⁹

To expand voices and prevent closed concepts, absolutist metaphysics must be denied a platform from which to operate its command style of ethics. John Ralston Saul explains: “We are then reminded that the urgency which seems to come with ‘absolute truths’ and ideology is really just bullying. And as with all bullying, if you refuse to panic and if you decline to respond quickly, it deflates and slinks away.”²⁰ As Amartya Sen acknowledges, this kind of theoretical reductionism is a major contributor to sectarian religious and political strife. This is because “singularity has the effect of momentarily impoverishing the power and reach of our social and political reasoning.”²¹ Such fixation on the self-evident only makes suffering inevitable. This is why Vattimo asserts that “pain is the very essence of metaphysics, that there is no metaphysics except the metaphysics of pain...”²² Therefore, exposing the violence of metaphysics has significant socio-religious implications. For post-Christendom, the goal is clear. “Thought must abandon all objective, universal, and apodictic foundational claims in order to prevent Christianity, allied with metaphysics in the search for first principles, from making room for violence.”²³

Ethical Hermeneutics

Fortunately, the violence of metaphysics is kept in check by hermeneutics. One of the main purposes of this dialectical process is to facilitate the encounter of different paradigmatic horizons. The cumulative effect of broadening interpretations not only weakens the violence of absolutism, but it also makes specific aims more intelligible. States Vattimo: “...[I]t is through the accumulation of the interpretations and through

¹⁹ Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 118.

²⁰ John Ralston Saul, *On Equilibrium* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2001), 5.

²¹ Amartya Sen, *Identity & Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (Toronto: Penguin Group, 2006), xv–xvi, 17.

²² Santiago Zabala, ed., *Richard Rorty/Gianni Vattimo: The Future of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 71.

²³ *Ibid.*, 13.

reference to them so as better to corroborate...the resolution of individual cases that the original [foundational] violence is actually consumed.”²⁴ To avoid the inertia of closed concepts, hermeneutics takes on a dual role: “the abandonment of metaphysical foundationalism (first philosophy, philosophy concerning principles, or concerning critical awareness of the a priori conditions of knowledge) and a concept of the world as conflict of interpretations.”²⁵ Any attempt, however, to identify truth outside of hermeneutics – as something that transcends knowledge – leads to what Leslie Armour calls “intellectual fundamentalism.”

For there need not be a world independent of interpretation and explanation and to say that there is while denying adequate access to it would be only to trap oneself...claiming to know that there is a world of a certain kind while claiming at the same time, that it is not possible to have the knowledge which would substantiate what is claimed about it.²⁶

In terms of ethical hermeneutics, the idea of closed concepts simply becomes untenable. First and foremost, this means “recognizing that something is better understood the more one is able to say about it.”²⁷

In contrast to deontological or principle-based ethics, hermeneutics requires the use of situation ethics in the Fletcherian sense.²⁸ This approach exposes the *a priori* limits of metaphysics, viewing ethics instead as situated, contested, and contingent. This is why Vattimo firmly believes that philosophy should move toward an ethics without metaphysics, “an ethics that no longer pretends, even surreptitiously, to embody the

²⁴ Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, 147.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁶ Leslie Armour, *The Concept of Truth* (Assen, Netherlands: Koninklijke Van Gorcum & Comp, 1969), 59.

²⁷ Santiago Zabala, ed., *Richard Rorty/Gianni Vattimo: The Future of Religion*, 8.

²⁸ Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1966).

practical application of some theoretical certainty about ultimate foundations.”²⁹ More importantly, locating an ethical consensus does not mean a return to another absolute foundation; rather, it implies agreement to a temporary, fluid solution. Vattimo acknowledges that the “essence” of truth originates from the *effect* of consensus, not from an external *cause*.

[W]e don’t agree because we have found the very essence of reality, but we say that we have found the very essence of reality when we agree...So, even if there is no objective Logos of the nature of reality, every time we agree on something we actually give a sort of testimony, we realize a sort of continuity of the Logos, which is the only criterion we actually have.³⁰

The focus on ethics now moves from a God-centred to a human-centred approach, or from Being to being(s). “What we are witnessing,” in Vattimo’s view, “is a passage from the ethics of the Other (with a capital *O*) to an ethics of the other or the others (with a lowercase *o*) or, to put it another way, the rise of postmetaphysical ethics.”³¹ Moreover, we are forced into an arena of dialogue and conversation that defies the rigidity of the self-evident. Explains Vattimo: “An ethics that no longer refers to the Other, meaning to a transcendent being, will be an ethics of negotiation and consensus rather than an ethics of immutable principles or categorical imperatives speaking through the reason of everyone.”³² The full hermeneutical process can now be experienced, which entails “[welcoming] the other in the name of the dialogical principle of charity, that is, by listening to the non-violent reasons of the other.”³³ Only in the interpretative

²⁹ Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, 44.

³⁰ Santiago Zabala, ed., *Richard Rorty/Gianni Vattimo: The Future of Religion*, 58–59.

³¹ Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, 64.

³² *Ibid.*, 67.

³³ Gianni Vattimo, *Belief* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 14.

arena can truth and knowledge be directed in a more meaningful fashion.

Ontology of Actuality

When making ethical decisions, it is crucial to acknowledge the uniqueness of one's circumstances – an ontology of actuality – within any given context. Ontology “is nothing other than the interpretation of our condition or situation...”³⁴ The point of origin for discussion becomes internal and existential, not external and transcendent. One's ontology of actuality is not interchangeable, nor is it something that can easily be decentred or dismissed. As Vattimo poignantly explains, “[T]here is no origin located somewhere outside the actuality of the event.”³⁵ Since the history of metaphysics has often entailed a devaluation of the human condition, an ontology of actuality becomes “a discourse that attempts to clarify what Being signifies in the present situation” as well as the “forgetting of [absolute] Being.”³⁶ In fact, an ontology of actuality offers a more authentic starting point to explore truth and knowledge because it recognizes contingencies. In this way, it promotes “a certain vision of the ongoing historical process and a certain interpretation...of its positive potential, judged to be such on the basis not of eternal principles but of argumentative choices from within the process itself.”³⁷

However, one's unique ontology of actuality is often constrained by liberal communitarianism. In fact, communitarian discourses used in applied ethics emphasize how individual behaviour will affect societal norms of influence.³⁸ The result:

³⁴ Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 3.

³⁵ Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, 87.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

³⁸ With reference to communitarian philosophical arguments and their critiques of liberal neutrality and justice, see Ezekiel J. Emanuel, *The Ends of Human Life: Medical Ethics in a Liberal Polity* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994); also see Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

debate is limited because it is focused in terms of the “social permissibility of the behaviours in question.”³⁹ Therefore, Vattimo warns of this shift in power from the individual to the collective:

What counts...is the fulfillment of a social duty...more than the personal dilemma, which is no longer central, since it too is seen as connected to social custom, the circumambient culture...It can be summed up as a shift of attention from the inner realm of individual behaviour... to what we might generically call the sphere of the social.⁴⁰

When the community begins to control truth and knowledge rather than facilitate their expansion, it is engaging in a metaphysical exercise of power, something Foucault referred to as its “regime of truth.”⁴¹ Vattimo points out that this has become a growing trend in liberal politics. “The left continues to feel the lure of communitarian ideals even today, but, when you think about it, those ideals are grounded, like equality, in a persistent metaphysical prejudice.”⁴² Although the focus on individual and community rights is contextual and contested, the aim should be to resolve the tension between the two, not presuppose communal ideals as favourable.

The Event of Being

Once exposed, “Being” in the absolute sense is now untenable in a world of open concepts. As Martin Heidegger asserts, “If the question of Being is to have its own history made transparent, then this hardened tradition must be loosened up, and the

³⁹ Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, 61.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴¹ Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 73–74.

⁴² Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, 100.

concealments which it has brought about must be dissolved.”⁴³ This metamorphosis into Being as “event” should now be seen as a continuous process that we address and to which we adapt, not a static conception of truth fixed for eternity. States Vattimo: “It is above all because of the experience of postmodern pluralism that we can think of Being only as event, and of truth not as the reflection of reality’s eternal structure but rather as a historical message that must be heard and to which we are called to respond.”⁴⁴ Similar to Buddhist enlightenment and its emphasis on ‘awakening,’ Being as event “transforms the existence of the person who receives the announcement.”⁴⁵ Vattimo conceives of Being as “horizon and as light, rather than the general structure of objects,” adding that “[s]ince it is not an object, Being does not possess the stability assigned to it by the metaphysical tradition.”⁴⁶ This is similar to Jacques Derrida’s messianic concept of *différance* in which “the sails of deconstruction strain toward what is coming, are bent by the winds of *l’avenir*, by the promise of the in-coming, of the *in-venire*, of the wholly other, *tout autre, l’invention de l’autre*.”⁴⁷ Comparatively, both Derrida’s *différance* and Vattimo’s “event of being” imply faith in the promise of “absolute heterology” and “infinite alterity,” not the hyperousiology of negative theology that “affirms God precisely in God’s hyperessential reality” and “claims deep down to ‘know’ what God is.”⁴⁸

None of this implies the complete rejection of previous philosophical discourses; in fact, each new interpretation generates a new form of “being” or continuum of knowledge. This allows “new senses of experience, new ways for the world to announce itself, which are not only other than the ones announced ‘before.’ Rather, they join the latter in a sort of

⁴³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962), 44.

⁴⁴ Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁷ John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), xxiii.

⁴⁸ Anselm Min, *The Solidarity of Others in a Divided World. A Postmodern Theology after Postmodernism* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 30.

discursus whose logic...consists precisely in the continuity.”⁴⁹ In point of fact, Being cannot be an object of limitation; rather, it is a continuously arriving event. This is why, as Richard Rorty claims, “it is necessary for human culture to generate infinite redescriptions so that the conversation might continue.”⁵⁰ Karl Jaspers had previously made this same connection to the event of being by means of a “philosophical faith.” In contrast to monotheistic religion, a philosophical faith does not subordinate itself to absolutist propositions. As Jaspers admits, “It achieves no rest in a body of doctrine. It remains a venture of radical openness.”⁵¹ Being, therefore, should be seen as truth in motion since “Being ‘is’ not, properly speaking, but rather ‘comes about,’ happens.”⁵² Jaspers believed that truth was “always in movement” and that “it [was] lost when it appear[ed] to have become a definitive possession.”⁵³ However, with the fragmentation of knowledge, how does one interpret the event of being in a meaningful way? Vattimo argues that one must start by “placing oneself (that is, by interpretative listening) within these messages...thus rescuing them from the dispersion of the present and taking responsibility for them.”⁵⁴

Weak Thought

To counter closed concepts of truth and knowledge, Vattimo’s idea of “weak thought” is to be perceived, ironically, as a show of strength. “Weak thought becomes strong thought, on the one hand, because we realize through it that our life is conditioned by history and, on the other hand, because it is a responsible ethical project, since we must live our lives in an authentic form [non-absolutist]...”⁵⁵ Therefore, instead of seeing weakness as some kind of deficiency, philosophers should view error as “a source

⁴⁹ Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 67.

⁵⁰ Richard Rorty, in Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 17.

⁵¹ Karl Jaspers, *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1949), 11.

⁵² Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, 6.

⁵³ Karl Jaspers, *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, 157.

⁵⁴ Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, 8.

⁵⁵ Santiago Zabala, ed., *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, 17.

of the wealth that constitutes us and that gives interest, colour, and Being to the world.”⁵⁶ This “ontology of decline” actually promotes a shift in power from the infinite to the finite, from the metaphysical to the humanistic. It is

an invitation to overcome metaphysics by involving it in a relation of reciprocity...because ‘innovation’ prevails over ‘conditioning’...This new, weak way of thought not only opens up alternative directions, it also recovers tradition: the relationship between the believer is not conceived as power-laden but as a gentler relationship, in which God hands over all his power to man.⁵⁷

With the weakening of the Absolute, the dilemma of “strong” relativism – the claim that all interpretations are equally valid – must be addressed. This position would allow knowledge to become infinitely fragmented and, therefore, of no more value than knowledge unified under a single metaphysic. As Vattimo makes clear,

There is a risk attached to taking a step backward, distancing ourselves from the concrete alternatives, which...may lead to the adoption of a relativistic metaphysics. Relativism [strong] can perfectly well be described as metaphysical because only from a position strongly anchored in some universal point of view can (should we) gaze on multiplicity as multiplicity. Relativism, one might say, is the (self-contradictory and impractical) metaphysical rigidification of finitude.⁵⁸

Hence, the dialectic inherent to a democracy relies increasingly on weak thought. This is because the weakening of Being allows an infinity of voices to contribute to knowledge. Thus, it “supplies philosophical reasons for preferring a liberal, tolerant, and democratic society rather than an authoritarian and

⁵⁶ Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 170.

⁵⁷ Santiago Zabala, ed., *Richard Rorty/Gianni Vattimo: The Future of Religion*, 3.

⁵⁸ Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, 42.

totalitarian one.”⁵⁹ In opposition to closed concepts, weak thought serves the important function of keeping fascist tendencies in check. As Jacques Maritain points out, fascism does more than lie: it literally “perverts the function of language” and limits the expansion of human dignity and freedom.⁶⁰ Therefore, in terms of liberty, democracy, and reciprocity, weak thought could not be more pertinent to the discussion. States Vattimo:

[T]he emancipation and liberation that mankind has always sought are attainable through a weakening of strong structures, a reduction of claims, and that implies, in general terms...that listening to what others have to say counts for more than measuring objects with precision. In all fields, including science, truth itself is becoming an affair of consensus, listening, participation in a shared enterprise, rather than a one-to-one correspondence with the pure hard objectivity of things...⁶¹

Secularism, Nihilism, and Freedom

For Vattimo, the solution to ending metaphysical control over the Christian message of charity is to embrace both secular and nihilistic perspectives. First and foremost, secularism is intended to re-centre ontology toward temporal, humanistic concerns. Claims Vattimo: “The world with which Dasein [human existence] is always already familiar is neither a transcendental screen nor a categorical schema...the foundation of Dasein coincides with its groundlessness.”⁶² For humanity, this implies taking responsibility for our choices rather than deferring such power to the transcendent. In point of fact, Vattimo sees Nietzsche’s notion of the eternal return as “a call to responsibility and the assumption of responsibility...[which] really means the end of all guarantees with which traditional

⁵⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁰ Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy & The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 13.

⁶¹ Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, 35.

⁶² Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 116.

metaphysical man had surrounded himself in order to be free of full responsibility for his actions.”⁶³ In actuality, secularism is not anathema to Christianity but complementary to it because it brings the religious impulse back to its roots. In Vattimo’s words, “To embrace the destiny of modernity and of the West means mainly to recognize the profoundly Christian meaning of secularization [rediscovery of charity].”⁶⁴

Problems occur when metaphysicians view secularists as their nemesis. According to Vattimo, the former depict secularity as “a threat to their authenticity, and therefore take it less as a condition of liberty than as a negation limitation that must be overcome.”⁶⁵ Secularization merely allows Christians to see their faith in a different light. Richard Rorty elaborates on the ability of the secular to strip away only the metaphysical, submissive components of religion in the search for a more profound truth. “[S]ecularization is Christianity by other means. Both represent the triumph of love over law, of kindness over obedience.”⁶⁶ In point of fact, secularization merges Millian liberalism, and its emphasis on self-regarding acts,⁶⁷ with the Golden Rule in an ethics of reciprocity. Asserts Vattimo: “Above all, the establishment of liberal principles in a liberal society and in the political organization (do anything you will as long as it does not infringe upon the freedom of all others) is a secular symbolizing of the Christian message.”⁶⁸

Yet, if anything, Vattimo’s postmodern philosophy emphasizes freedom, particularly from the nihilistic perspective. This particular brand of nihilism accentuates the affirmative as a widening of dialogue. Positively stated: “[The Philosopher] must pass the gauntlet of complete nihilism and, having rejected the currently dominant values, he must raise other values, by virtue

⁶³ Gianni Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 36.

⁶⁴ Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 98.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁶⁶ Richard Rorty, in Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, xx.

⁶⁷ John Stuart Mill, *The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill: On Liberty, The Subjection of Women, and Utilitarianism* (New York: Random House, 2002); also see Gerald Dworkin, ed., *Morality, Harm, and the Law* (Oxford: Westview Press, Inc., 1994).

⁶⁸ Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 119.

of which life and the universe cannot only be justified but also become endearing and valuable.”⁶⁹ Rejecting any unworkable table of values, humankind now “erects another table with a new ranking of values and new ideals of humanity, society, and state.”⁷⁰ *Positive nihilism* – in both its negation of the absolute as redundant and its acceptance of radical transience – is life-affirming since it involves “the obliteration only of the currently reigning table of values, which is to be succeeded by a heroic and joyous acceptance of life.”⁷¹ As Vattimo’s biggest influences, the ideas of Nietzsche and Heidegger expose the “purely critical and negative description of the post-modern condition...to an approach that treats it as a positive possibility and opportunity.”⁷²

For Vattimo, *positive nihilism* provides the intellectual context in which to widen perceptions of truth and knowledge. The positive, active form, as an increased power of human spirit, involves two processes. “First, it doesn’t stop at unmasking the hollowness of all [eternal] meanings, structures, and values but goes on to produce and create new values and new structures of meaning, new interpretations.”⁷³ *Positive nihilism* contributes to more than just the rejection of absolute values. For Nietzsche, the basis of nihilism begins with “the dissolution of any ultimate foundation, the understanding that in the history of philosophy, and of western culture in general, ‘God is dead,’ and ‘the real world has become a fable.’”⁷⁴ But as Mariana Valverde clarifies, accepting Nietzsche’s viewpoint that truth and knowledge can become both redundant and resurrected should not throw us into despair over nihilism. “It is perfectly possible to be interested in small-t truth questions...without thereby claiming that Truth is necessary...Another way of deploying this distinction is to point

⁶⁹ Nikos Kazantzakis, *Friedrich Nietzsche on the Philosophy of the Right and State* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 19.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷² Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 11.

⁷³ Gianni Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, 135.

⁷⁴ Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, xxv.

out that the opposite of ‘lies’ is not Truth but rather ‘truths.’”⁷⁵ Valverde adds that forgetting this has created “truth wars” that have haunted both the histories of philosophy and positivistic science.

Without addressing this caveat to nihilism, contemporary philosophers, particularly the French intellectual André Compte-Sponville,⁷⁶ have simply equated Nietzschean perspectivism with nihilism’s more negative and destructive forms. Yet Nietzsche simply depicts nihilism as “the situation in which the human subject explicitly recognizes that the lack of foundation is a constitutive part of its condition.”⁷⁷ In fact, those who are destined to triumph without a regression into passive-reactive nihilism (i.e. a longing for the status quo) are the

most moderate, those who have no need for extreme articles of faith, who not only concede but even love a good deal of contingency and nonsense, who can think of man with a considerable moderation of his value and not therefore become too small and weak...men who are sure of their power and who represent with conscious pride the strength man has achieved.⁷⁸

The openness and flexibility inherent in *positive nihilism* leaves little desire for its metaphysical alternatives. As Leslie Armour points out, “Short of union with the Whole – the mystic’s final dream – there can only be better and worse solutions, not final ones.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Mariana Valverde, *Law’s Dream of Common Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 8–9.

⁷⁶ André Compte-Sponville, *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007), 1–66. Compte-Sponville rejects Nietzschean perspectivism and the “overthrow of all values,” believing that nihilism is *the* primary danger because it leads to a dying civilization. Compte-Sponville describes nihilism only in the pejorative. *Positive nihilism* is simply not discussed.

⁷⁷ Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 118.

⁷⁸ Santiago Zabala, ed., *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, 402–403.

⁷⁹ Leslie Armour, *Being and Idea: Developments of Some Themes in Spinoza and Hegel* (Germany: Georg Olms AG, Hildesheim, 1992), 103.

Although Nietzsche and Heidegger viewed the creation of nihilism from different perspectives, the result was the same: the dissolution of metaphysics through the process of *positive nihilism*. “For Nietzsche, the entire process of nihilism can be summarized by the death of God, or by the ‘devaluation of the highest values.’ For Heidegger, Being is annihilated insofar as it is transformed completely into value.”⁸⁰ What this means is that within a nihilistic framework, value becomes reduced to ‘exchange-value.’ For Heidegger, the reduction of Being to value “places Being in the power of the subject who ‘recognizes’ value...Nihilism would therefore be, in the Heideggerian sense, the...claim that Being, instead of existing as an autonomous, independent, and foundational way, is in the power of the subject.”⁸¹ This view actually coincides with Nietzsche’s arguments regarding the death of God and the devaluation of the highest values because for Nietzsche, “values have not disappeared *tout court*: only the highest values – which are in essence expressed by that highest of all values, that is, God – have vanished.”⁸² Irrespective of their particular viewpoints, both versions are consistent with Vattimo’s anti-metaphysical, nihilistic views towards Christianity.

However, a form of nostalgia often occurs in which metaphysicians embrace passive-reactive nihilism by refusing to acknowledge the crumbling of supreme values. The result is the suppression of truth and knowledge. Vattimo elaborates on the effects of such a longing for certainty. “[W]e have faced up to the absence of foundations but have not rid ourselves of our grief at the loss we have suffered, and nostalgia for full Being continues to dominate us.”⁸³ Vattimo realizes that passive-reactive nihilists will “view the loss of transcendence as a disaster to be resisted with all strength, rather than accepting it...as a vocation.”⁸⁴ Such resistance often results in the “desperation of those who continue to cultivate a sense of

⁸⁰ Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 20.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 20–21.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸³ Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, 140.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

mourning because ‘religion is no more,’”⁸⁵ even to the point of embracing what Michael Ignatieff calls fictive nihilism, a kind of “willed indifference to the human agents sacrificed on the altar of principle.”⁸⁶

By overcoming its pessimistic nihilism, humanity can continue to strive toward its endless potential. According to Nikos Kazantzakis, the goal is clear: “the permanent and external tendency of humankind to actualize a new human type – one that is higher and stronger – must be deemed as yet another bridge toward one more, an even more perfect type. And so on, ad infinitum, since the height [humankind can reach] can have no [fixed] destination or boundary.”⁸⁷ Vattimo is adamant that nihilism can finally arrive at the emancipatory phase of its accomplishment. “[I]t reaches its extreme form, by consuming Being in value. This is the event that finally makes it possible, and necessary, for philosophy today to recognize that nihilism is our (only) chance.”⁸⁸ As a facilitator of liberty and truth, an accomplished nihilism calls for “a fictionalized experience of [metaphysical] reality which is also our only possibility for freedom.”⁸⁹ For Vattimo, what proves liberating is not the “cogent evidence of principles” but a Kierkegaardian “leap into the abyss of mortality.”⁹⁰

A Nihilistic Christianity

Vattimo’s Contribution to the History of Philosophy

Ironically, the death of God (end of absolutist metaphysics) through secularization and *positive nihilism* actually facilitates the rebirth of religion. For Christians, this means embracing the charitable roots of their faith. Since religion can now assume its

⁸⁵ Ibid., xxvi.

⁸⁶ Michael Ignatieff, *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in the Age of Terror* (Toronto: Penguin Group, 2004), 123.

⁸⁷ Nikos Kazantzakis, *Friedrich Nietzsche on the Philosophy of the Right and State*, 20.

⁸⁸ Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 23.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 29.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 120.

role without “masks and dogmatism,” this makes the death of God a post-Christian phenomenon, not anti-Christian.⁹¹ This “weakening” of the Eurocentric Christian model now deprives it of any objectivist, ontological status. As Michel Gardaz correctly points out, “[I]t is not the metaphysical questions that are dead, but the ‘provincialism’ of Western metaphysical tradition.”⁹² For Vattimo, the Age of Faith as well as the Age of Reason had previously assumed absolutist stances in the search for truth and knowledge. The former epoch embraced an Augustinian approach to faith in God, one who alone held the promise of eternal happiness,⁹³ while the latter accepted rationalism as its god. In contrast, the Age of Interpretation (postmodernism) allows for a greater chance of human freedom, the production of new knowledge, and the unending formation of the self (edification) through higher truths.⁹⁴ This can only be accomplished through the end of logocentrism, or the end of any privilege accorded to metaphysical thought.⁹⁵ The death of God literally becomes the death of closed concepts.

Since Vattimo accepts the Nietzschean interpretation of the “eternal return,” responsibility for ethical/moral choices can be left to no one but humankind. Basically, the ties binding God to man have now been permanently severed. As Michael Luntley astutely puts it, “It is not the world according to God or whoever is supposed to sit at the Archimedean point enjoying the point of

⁹¹ Santiago Zabala, ed., *Richard Rorty/Gianni Vattimo: The Future of Religion*, 2, 7.

⁹² Michel Gardaz. “‘The Trojan Horse of Philosophia Perennis’: Mircea Eliade’s Quest of Spiritual Transformation.” *Religion* 38, no. 4 (2008): 343, n. 10. Gardaz acknowledges that one cannot dismiss metaphysics, only its hegemonic application. In other words, a pivotal distinction has to be made between the death of metaphysics and the death of absolutes. As Gardaz notes, “the fundamental questions of metaphysics are still alive and well. The questions of existence, of being in the world and of the human condition are still essential questions to be answered.”

⁹³ Saint Augustine, *The City of God*. Book 1. Vernon J. Bourke, ed. (New York: Image Books, 1958), 39, 65.

⁹⁴ Santiago Zabala, ed., *Richard Rorty/Gianni Vattimo: The Future of Religion*, 7.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

view of the cosmos. It is the world according to us.”⁹⁶ In Heideggerian terms, Being is revealed as “time-language,” meaning that Being “coincides with the historical transmission of messages that unfold *in time* [italics mine], and of which can never have an exhaustive understanding.”⁹⁷ For humanity, what is left of Being today is its announcement in “the drift on interpretation,” not “the supreme point of the objective world order...”⁹⁸ Basically, a Being without eternal structure is one produced by man – by his intellect, his praxis – in the event of being. As a result, the “essence” of truth has been transformed from the Absolute into the most reasonable interpretation our human condition can deduce in the *here and now*.⁹⁹ In other words, a transformation has occurred through the cyclical effect of *positive nihilism*. We no longer discuss God as formal *cause* or as *the* creator. Instead, God has become the present *effect* of human knowledge. Don Cupitt admits that such a radical humanism spells the death knell for theological reductionism or moral realism. In his opinion, we are coming to see that “there is no morality *out there* [italics mine], that morality is wholly human, and that we must joyfully posit and love our values purely for their own sakes.”¹⁰⁰

If Karen Armstrong is correct and we are moving toward a new philosophical era, or a second Axial Age,¹⁰¹ then the Vattimian perspective makes a viable contribution to this new era. Vattimo not only provides the means for overcoming the heritage of exclusivist metaphysics – a method potentially applicable to even non-Christian cultures – but he also recognizes that truth and knowledge must remain contested within an endless, open conversation. This can be accomplished by linking the metaphysical tradition of *Being* with violence, understanding the importance of hermeneutics to ethical choice,

⁹⁶ Michael Luntley, *Reason, Truth, and Self* (London: Routledge, 1995), 120.

⁹⁷ Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, 6-7.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 46, 82.

¹⁰⁰ Don Cupitt, *Emptiness & Brightness* (Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 2001), 12.

¹⁰¹ Karen Armstrong, in Don Cupitt, *Emptiness & Brightness*, 7. Armstrong presented the idea at a conference in 2001 at the Westar Institute at Rohnert Park, California.

highlighting ontology of actuality and its inherent contingencies, welcoming the event of being, and using weak thought to defuse foundationalism.

The Vattimian perspective does not thereby ignore the dilemma that arises between unity and fragmentation of knowledge. However, any unified consensus of truth is made more intelligible if (1) the basis of philosophy (and therefore Christianity) remains positively nihilistic (non-absolute) and if (2) the concept of *unity* is clearly distinguished from *totality* or the Metaphysical Fact. The former accepts discernable truths that expand human potentiality; the latter simply dictates the limits of truth from some *a priori* metaphysical stance. If Gianni Vattimo is right, both a nihilistic Christianity and its radically humanistic offspring possess the greatest chance of imparting something meaningful to others because the dialectic is never closed; it simply awaits the arrival of a new interpretation that will reorganize being. In the pursuit of truth and knowledge, how we wish to redefine our humanity is the never-ending labour of philosophy. As Leslie Armour admits, “The foundation for knowledge lies in the possibility of making [sets of interpretations] all fit together in the relevant way.”¹⁰²

¹⁰² Leslie Armour, *Being and Idea: Developments of Some Themes in Spinoza and Hegel*, 148.

Bibliography

Armour, Leslie. *The Concept of Truth*. Assen, Netherlands: Koninklijke Van Gorcum & Comp, 1969.

_____. *Being and Idea: Developments of Some Themes in Spinoza and Hegel*. Germany: Georg Olms AG, Hildesheim, 1992.

Beaman, Lori G., Anthony Gill, and Peter Beyer. "Symposium on Religious Freedom and Religious Pluralism." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 3 (2003): 327-346.

Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Anchor Books, 1990.

Caputo, John D. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

Compte-Sponville, André. *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*. Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007.

Cupitt, Don. *Emptiness & Brightness*. Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 2001.

Dworkin, Gerald, ed. *Morality, Harm, and the Law*. Oxford: Westview Press, Inc., 1994.

Edwards, Paul, ed. "Ontological Argument for the Existence of God." In *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 5–6. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc. and The Free Press, 1967: 538–43.

Emanuel, Ezekiel J. *The Ends of Human Life: Medical Ethics in a Liberal Polity*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Fletcher, Joseph. *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*. London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1966.

Gardaz, Michel. “The Trojan Horse of Philosophia Perennis’: Mircea Eliade’s Quest of Spiritual Transformation.” *Religion* 38, no. 4 (2008): 338–345.

Heath, Joseph. *The Efficient Society: Why Canada Is as Close to Utopia as It Gets*. Toronto: Viking Press, 2001.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962.

Ignatieff, Michael. *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in the Age of Terror*. Toronto: Penguin Group, 2004.

Jaspers, Karl. *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*. New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1949.

Kazantzakis, Nikos. *Friedrich Nietzsche on the Philosophy of the Right and State*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.

Livingston, James C. *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II*. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1971.

Luntley, Michael. *Reason, Truth, and Self*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Maritain, Jacques. *A Preface to Metaphysics: Seven Lectures on Being*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1939.

_____. *Christianity and Democracy & The Rights of Man and Natural Law*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986.

Mill, John Stuart. *The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill: On Liberty, the Subjection of Women, and Utilitarianism*. New York: Random House, 2002.

Min, Anselm. *The Solidarity of Others in a Divided World. A Postmodern Theology after Postmodernism*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004.

Rabinow, Paul, ed. *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.

Saint Augustine. *The City of God*. Vernon J. Bourke, ed. New York: Image Books, 1958.

Sandel, Michael. *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Saul, John Ralston. *On Equilibrium*. Toronto: Penguin Books, 2001.

Sen, Amartya. *Identity & Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. Toronto: Penguin Group, 2006.

Spinoza, Baruch. *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Selected from His Chief Works*. New York: The Modern Library, Inc., 1927.

Valverde, Mariana. *Law's Dream of Common Knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Vattimo, Gianni. *The End of Modernity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.

_____. *Belief*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999.

_____. *After Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

_____. *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

_____. *Dialogue with Nietzsche*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

Zabala, Santiago, ed. *Richard Rorty/Gianni Vattimo: The Future of Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

———. *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2007.