

Foreword by Richard Rorty

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Gianni Vattimo is a prominent social democratic politician, a widely read newspaper columnist, and a distinguished philosopher. He was elected in 1999 to the European Parliament, where he has been very active in promoting progressive social legislation and in furthering European unification. For decades, his comments on the political scene in Italy and Europe have appeared in *La stampa* and other leading Italian newspapers and magazines; he is currently using those media to unleash fierce criticisms of the Berlusconi regime. His philosophical writings, of which this volume provides a rich sample, are among the most imaginative contributions to the tradition of philosophical thought that flows from Nietzsche and Heidegger.

These writings are perfectly suited to the needs of those hitherto unfamiliar with this tradition who would like to gain an understanding of the intellectual outlook he calls "nihilism." This way of seeing things might also be called "commonsense Heideggerianism," for it is widespread, and often taken for granted, among European intellectuals. Many philosophers who, like Vattimo and Derrida, were students in the 1950s, were deeply impressed by Heidegger essays such as "Letter on Humanism," "The Question Concerning Technology," "The Origin of the [x] Work of Art" and "Nietzsche's Word: God is Dead." Many of them presuppose, in their own writings, their readers' familiarity with Heidegger's story about the history of Western thought—his account of how the Platonic dream of escaping from Becoming to Being has been dreamt out, and how Nietzsche brought metaphysics to its destined end by inverting Plato, giving Becoming primacy over Being.

Commonsense Heideggerianism has little to do either with Husserlian phenomenology or with existentialism. It drops (as Heidegger himself did) the notions of "authenticity" and "resoluteness" that were prominent in *Being and Time* and that Sartre reworked in *Being and Nothingness*. Nor does it take either Heidegger's idiosyncratic retranslations of pre-Socratic texts, or his peculiar interpretations of figures such as Leibniz and Kant, with any great seriousness. But it does accept the main outlines of the story that Heidegger called, portentously enough, "the history of Being."

According to this story, Nietzsche marks the point at which it became impossible for Western intellectuals to believe what Plato had taught: that there is something stable for human beings to rely on, a fixed point in the changing world around which to rally. Simultaneously, it became impossible to believe that there is some privileged vocabulary—even Nietzsche's own talk of the will to power or the jargon of the early Heidegger's "ontology of *Dasein*"—in which to state the final truth about the human situation. For, as Hegel had already realized, we are historical creatures, continually remaking ourselves by redescribing ourselves. The hope for finality is futile. Philosophers should stop looking for necessary and universal "conceptual" truths and should realize that concepts are as malleable as any other social institutions.

Vattimo calls this Heideggerian outlook "nihilism" because it is not a positive doctrine but rather a series of negations—[xi]denials any proposed principle or jargon or insight enjoys a privileged reality to the nature of man or the universe, for the idea that either of these *has* a nature is no longer credible. Vattimo wants to show how leftist political and social initiatives can not only survive but can profit from jettisoning traditional philosophical attempts to reveal such things as The Ultimate Nature of Reality or The Ultimate Meaning of Human Life.

Heidegger was a passionately committed Nazi and a thoroughly dishonest man. His life provides further evidence that genius, among philosophers as well as among artists and scientists, has no particular connection with ordinary human decency. Many find it hard to imagine that any good could come from reading such a writer. Such readers may find it ludicrous that Vattimo should treat Heidegger's account of modernity as the best theoretical background for leftist social and political initiatives. The very idea of a Heideggerian social democrat may strike them as absurd. But reading this book might help to persuade them that leftist politics would indeed benefit from giving up on Enlightenment rationalism. They may come to agree with that Vattimo that nihilism and emancipation do, in fact, go hand in hand.

Heidegger is often described as an irrationalist, and his putative irrationalism is often linked to his Nazism. But it is easy to forget that John Dewey—America's most influential social democratic thinker—was also repeatedly accused of irrationalism and that Dewey's and Heidegger's criticisms of the Western philosophical tradition have much in common. Both the most important German intellectual to have supported Hitler and the philosopher whose writings helped shape American leftist thought from the Progressive Era to the New Deal urged us to abandon the rationalism common to Plato, Descartes, and Kant. After skimming through Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Dewey said that it sounded like his own *Experience and Nature* [xii] "translated into transcendental German." Had Dewey lived to read Heidegger's later writings, he might have seen them as taking up themes from his own *The Quest for Certainty*.

Vattimo is, of course, not the only eminent philosophy professor who has, in recent decades, been active and influential on the political left. But most of the others are suspicious of what he calls "nihilism." A leading contemporary American philosopher of law, Ronald Dworkin, has done a great deal for the cause of social justice to his analyses of issues in constitutional jurisprudence in *The New York Review of Books*. Jürgen Habermas's frequent contributions to such publications as *Die Zeit* have done the sort of good for the German left that Dewey's forty years' worth of contributions to magazines like *The Nation* and *The New Republic* did for the American left. But Dworkin and Habermas have little use for Nietzsche. They remain faithful to an intellectual legacy that back to my thinks it would be better for the left to renounce.

Dworkin has nothing but contempt for Heideggerian approaches to such notions as objectivity and truth. Habermas concedes more to the "relativist" side of controversies about such topics than does Dworkin; he is willing, for example, to follow Dewey in abandoning the correspondence theory of truth. But Habermas regrets Heidegger's pervasive influence on recent European philosophical thought. Both Dworkin and Habermas insist on retaining various Kantian ideas that Vattimo urges us to reject. So Vattimo is currently the most salient example of a philosopher who argues that the left's political purposes will be better served if we stop talking about unconditional moral obligations, universal validity claims, and transcendental presuppositions of rational inquiry.

Philosophers such as Vattimo, Derrida, and myself have become convinced—some of us reading Hegel and Dewey, some by reading Heidegger, some by reading both—that [xiii] philosophy should no longer aim at revealing the ultimate context of human existence—the context that, while not merely biological, is nevertheless transcultural and a historical. Candidates for such a context include, obviously, the Platonic realm of pure Forms and Kant's transcendental conditions of the possibility of experience. But they also include the materialist' Ultimate Nature of Physical Reality, the theists' divine commands, the Kantian moral law, and Marx's inevitable movement of history. Heidegger lumps the Lucretius, Augustine, Kant, and Marx together as examples of what he calls, more or less interchangeably, "metaphysics" or "onto-theology."

Vattimo describes those of us who agree that metaphysics, in this broad sense, is no longer worth pursuing as trying to make philosophy into an hermeneutic discipline. To think of philosophy in that way means accepting Nietzsche's claim that "there are no facts, only interpretations." That claim epitomizes the thought that none of the words human beings have invented to describe themselves and their environment enjoy a special relation to reality. So there is no division to be made between areas of culture in which we see correspondence to reality and those in which we do not—disciplines in which there is a "matter of fact" to be discovered and other, "softer" disciplines. To give up on the idea that either human beings or nonhuman reality has a nature to which true statements correspond is to put everything up for grabs, to admit that we are at the mercy of the contingencies of history.

This means that the best that philosophers (or anybody else) can hope to do is to say how things are with human beings now, as contrasted with how they once were and how they might someday be. So philosophy ceases to be ancillary either to theology or to natural science. Instead, it takes the form of historical narrative and utopian speculation. For leftists like Vattimo and Dewey, it becomes ancillary to sociopolitical initiatives aimed at making the future better than the past.

[xiv] Vattimo thinks that philosophers should stop trying to rewrite Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. They should instead rewrite the narratives offered in Vico's *New Science*, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Comte's and Marx's stories of progress, and Nietzsche's account (in *Twilight of the Idols*) of "How 'The True World' Became a Fable." Part of this rewriting should consist in removing any suggestion of inevitability, any hint that the story being told is itself more than another possible interpretation.

The other task that remains for philosophy is what Vattimo calls "the task of secularization . . . the unmasking of the sacrality of all absolute, ultimate truths." This task will never be completed, he says, because "the springs of metaphysical authoritarianism will never run dry," and so "anti-foundationalism itself is at risk of hardening into a metaphysics." Every narrative written in support of some leftist emancipatory project runs the risk of degenerating into yet another claim to have gotten beyond interpretation to hard fact, beyond contingency to necessity, beyond historical specificity to universality.

What I have dubbed "commonsense Heideggerianism" produces what Vattimo calls the "general tendency of contemporary philosophy to think of itself as a 'sociology,' or as a theory of modernity." By "contemporary philosophy," he of course means philosophy in most European and Latin American countries, as contrasted with the analytic tradition that is dominant in the philosophy departments of the English-speaking world. In the latter departments, few people offer (or would bother to read) a theory of modernity. Most British and American teachers of philosophy regard theirs as a quasi-scientific, problem-solving discipline—one that has nothing in particular to do with either history or sociology and that should culminate in theories rather than narratives. Analytic philosophy is still, for the most part, "metaphysical" in the pejorative sense that Heidegger gave to that term. It still hopes to place human history in [xv] an ahistorical context and thus to offer something more than just one more historically determined interpretation, one more response to the transitory problems of the present.

Although many philosophers in the analytic tradition (for example, such admirers of the later Wittgenstein as Donald Davidson and Robert Brandom) have provided valuable ammunition for use against the legacy of Platonic and Kantian rationalism, the mainstream of analytic philosophy is continuous with what Heidegger called "onto-theology." For what might be called "the common sense of analytic philosophy" consists in the belief that natural science enjoys a privileged relation to the way things really are. Philosophers who take this common sense for granted in their writings do not share Thomas Kuhn's and Hilary Putnam's doubts that inquiry in the natural sciences converges to an accurate representation of the intrinsic nature of things. They think of such doubts as lending aid and comfort to insidious relativism, one that is likely to spread from the philosophy of science to moral philosophy and thereby undermine leftist's attempts to achieve social justice.

But even analytic philosophers who are receptive to Kuhn's and Putnam's debunking of the idea that natural science is ontologically or epistemologically privileged are likely to scoff at Vattimo's suggestion that Heideggerianism is just what social democracy needs. Ever since the early 1930s, when Carnap, a good leftist who was forced into exile by Hitler, squared off against Heidegger, an opportunistic Nazi, it has been part of the self-image of analytic philosophy that it is fighting on the side of social justice. Many analytic philosophers think that Heideggerianism not only rots the mind but corrupts morals.

The suspicion extends back to Hegel, whom Karl Popper, another of the initiators of the analytic tradition in philosophy, interpreted as a precursor of totalitarianism. Bertrand Russell, another founder of the movement, also wrote of Hegel with [xvi] contempt. So many analytic philosophers still think of Hegel and Heidegger as enemies of human freedom. The idea that reading either might assist us in our thinking about sociopolitical problems strikes them as ludicrous. That is why those two authors are infrequently taught in British and American philosophy departments, while remaining staples of instruction elsewhere in the world.

For Vattimo the shoe is on the other foot. It is the analytic moral philosophers who are concerned to preserve the Platonic and Kantian notion of unconditional obligation who are giving aid and comfort to authoritarianism. Where's these philosophers believe that appeal to such obligations gives us a defense against the fascists, Vattimo sees Kant's moral philosophy as a poisoned chalice. For the Kantian idea that

sufficient rational reflection will lead you to make the right moral choice, and would have led any rational being to make the same choice regardless of the epoch in which he lived, should itself be seen as a relic of authoritarianism. It is an attempt to attribute ultimate authority to a quasi-divinity called Reason, and it is no better than the attempt to attribute such authority to God. It is one more attempt to say, "What I am saying is not just one more interpretation; it is *true*."

According to the view that Vattimo shares with Heidegger, the Platonic-Kantian idea that Reason can cut through prejudice and superstition and lead one toward truth and justice is, just as Nietzsche suggested, merely an etiolated version of the Platonic-Augustinian idea that the immortal part of us can triumph over the animal part. It substitutes the philosophers' contemptuous suggestion that people who act badly are irrational, and therefore less than fully human, for the priests' threat that they will suffer postmortem punishment.

Heideggerians like Derrida and Vattimo (and also revisionist Hegelians such as Tarry Pinkard and Robert Pippin) are [xvii] happy to agree with the scientific materialists that we have no immortal part and no faculty that puts us in touch with the eternal. We are simply animals that can talk and so can praise and blame one another, discuss what should be done, and institute social practices to see that it is done. What lifts us above the other animals is just our ability to participate in such practices. To be rational, for these philosophers, is not to possess a truth-tracking faculty. It is simply to be comfortable.

Heidegger, once he gave up being a Nazi, did not adopt a different political position. He simply despaired of the modern world, which he saw as dominated by a blind faith in technology. He mocked the hope that concrete political initiatives could make any difference to its fate. As Vattimo says, "The fact is that both Heidegger and Adorno never escaped from a vision of technology dominated by the model of the motor and mechanical energy, so for them modern technology could do nothing except bring about a society subordinated to a central power dispatching commands to a purely passive periphery, as gear wheels are driven, whether these commands were mechanical impulses, political propaganda, or commercial advertising."

In contrast, Vattimo asks us to consider that "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 electrical: information and communication technology." One of his most distinctive contributions to philosophical thinking is the suggestion that the Internet provides a model for things in general—that thinking about the World Wide Web helps us to get away from Platonic essentialism, the quest for underlying natures, by helping us see everything as a constantly changing network of relations. The result of adopting this model is what Vattimo calls "a weak ontology, or better an ontology of the weakening of Being." Such an ontology, he argues, "supplies philosophical reasons for [xviii] preferring a liberal, tolerant, and democratic society rather than an authoritarian and totalitarian one."

"Weak thought" (*Il pensiero debole*) was the title of a much-read collection of essays by various Italian philosophers that Vattimo co-edited in 1983. The contributors had all been impressed by both the later Heidegger and by the later Wittgenstein. They tend the Wittgenstein's criticism of his own *Tractatus* as juvenile picture-thinking into a supplement to Heidegger's criticism of metaphysics. They turned Heidegger's criticism of Nietzsche as a power freak against the apocalyptic tone that Heidegger himself adopted. Like Wittgenstein, they hoped philosophers would stop thinking of their discipline as capable of taking charge of the intellectual or moral worlds.

Vattimo continues to use "weak" as a term of praise and to caution against the temptation to erect nihilism into one more metaphysics—one more claim about the one true context in which human lives must be lived. The Internet is a model of weak thinking because everything that appears on it is continually being recontextualized and reinterpreted as new links are added. It is thus a model of human existence as centerless and historically contingent and an example of what Vattimo calls "the dissolution of the principle of reality into the manifold of interpretations."

In a "weak" conception, morality is not a matter of unconditional obligations imposed by a divine or quasi-divine authority but rather is something cobbled together by a group of people trying to adjust to

their circumstances and achieve their goals by cooperative efforts. That is how Dewey thought of morality and how Vattimo urges us to think of it. Whereas those concerned to preserve the legacy of Plato and Kant think that adopting this conception of morality will lead to "relativism" and moral flabbiness, Vattimo thinks that it will produce a desirable humility about our own moral intuitions and about [xix] the social institutions to which we have become accustomed. This humanity will encourage tolerance for other intuitions and a willingness to experiment with ways of refashioning or replacing institutions

Vattimo sees this humility as an antidote to the pridefulness characteristic of those who claim to be obeying unconditional, ahistorical, transcultural, categorical imperatives. Adopting this "weak" attitude toward our moral obligations is, he thinks, the combination of a long-drawn-out process of secularization. He interprets Heidegger's definition of "the West, the *Abendland*, as the place of the going down of Being" as "a recognition of the profound vocation of the West, which has constituted itself as the site [probably contrary to Heidegger's own self interpretation] of . . . a series of secularizations." He views the history of the West as constituted by "interpretations that one after another have undermined the pretended absoluteness of the 'principles' on which the West was based. An emblematic case of this, he says, is "the ebbing away of the literal mode of understanding the Bible."

This last example is of particular importance for Vattimo, who in his book *Belief* writes "in Christianity I find the original 'text' of which weak ontology is the transcription" and that "the rediscovery of Christianity is made possible by the dissolution of metaphysics." He is impatient with what he calls "the scandalously superstitious character of much of the official teaching of today's [Catholic] Church." But he interprets the Christian message of *kenosis*—the emptying out of God into man that was the Incarnation—as a pre-figuration of nihilism, as a wholesale and complete transfer of authority from the nonhuman to the human.

By his account, the growing refusal by European Christians to accept the authority of ecclesiastical institutions is of a piece with contemporary intellectuals' inability to view philosophical reflection as a way of escaping from historical contingency. So [xx] for Vattimo, secularization is Christianity by other means. Both represent the triumph of love over law, of kindness over obedience. He sees the gradual rise of the modern Western social democracies and the gradual decline of "onto-theology" as signs that human beings are losing the need to feel themselves subject to the eternal and are becoming courageous enough to endure the thought of their own mortality.

Vattimo's way of weaving together Heidegger, Christianity, and socialism is audacious as it is original. Different as his outlook is from Habermas's, these two philosophers' writings are both good examples of philosophical and historical erudition yoked to the service of leftist political initiatives. Different as his tone is from Dewey's, Vattimo nevertheless stands in the same relation to Heidegger's revulsion against technology, and to his debilitating nostalgia, as Dewey stood to Carlyle's and Henry Adams's despair over modernity. These translations of Vattimo's recent writings will help readers in the English-speaking world to appreciate the work of an imaginative philosopher who is also a vigorous campaigner for social change.

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Rorty, Richard. "Foreword." In G. Vattimo, *Nihilism & Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, Law*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

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Introduction

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If emancipation is a process in which constraints are shed and we gain greater freedom, autonomy, and opportunity to choose, how is it possible to discuss it using concepts like nihilism and hermeneutics? The first thing to note—and this is something I have had occasion to highlight in previous books—is that the terms "nihilism" and "hermeneutics" are used here as synonyms. I interpret "nihilism" in the sense first given it by Nietzsche: 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." Only in western thought and culture? This initial obstacle will not be discussed thematically in these pages. But the significance of Nietzsche—and Heidegger, and before them Marx and Hegel as well—for me is that part of western culture and its nihilism is an increasing awareness that we do all our thinking within the boundaries of that same culture, since the very idea of a universal truth and a transcultural humanism (examples would be the doctrines of natural law and ultimate foundations) has arisen precisely within this particular culture. When western philosophy realizes this, it becomes nihilistic; it acknowledges that its own argumentative process is always historically and [xxvi] culturally situated, that even the idea of universality is "grasped" from a particular point of view. With this, however, nihilism becomes hermeneutic: thought that knows it can only regard the universal by passing through dialogue, through consent, if you like through *caritas* (see *Belief and After Christianity*). "*Veritatem facientes in caritate*," a Pauline expression that echoes, and perhaps not so very distantly, the *aletheuein* of the Aristotelian *Nicomachean Ethics*, means, in terms of today's philosophy, that the truth is born in consent and from consent, and not, vice versa, that agreement is reached when we have all discovered the same objective truth.

The Nietzschean term nihilism acquires the sense of emancipation for me when it is read in light of another famous expression of the German philosopher: "God is dead, and now we wish for many gods to live." It is the dissolution of foundations (in which we can also recognize the moment of transition from the modern to the postmodern) that brings freedom, and, once again, there is a profound echo to be found in the gospel, which says that "the truth shall make you free;" not: knowing how things "really" are will make you free (by finally discovering the theorem of Pythagoras? the necessary geometric order of the universe? Einsteinian relativity?) Rather, only that which sets you free is truth, and thus, above all else, the "discovery" that there are no ultimate foundations before which our freedom must come to a halt, as authorities of every sort, wishing to command in the name of these ultimate structures, have always tried to make us believe. Hermeneutics is the thought of accomplished nihilism, thought that aims to reconstruct rationality in the wake of the death of God and opposes any current of negative nihilism, in other words the desperation of those who continue to cultivate a sense of mourning because "religion is no more."

It is easy to see how all this has a significant impact on the [xxvii] way we conceive of ethics, law, and politics. Will it still be possible, after the death of God, to speak of moral imperatives, of laws that are not grounded in arbitrary acts of will, of an emancipatory horizon for politics? The essays in this book make no illusory claim to give exhaustive replies to these questions, but they do not confine themselves to rhetorically restating them either, the way a great deal of contemporary tragical attitudinizing does. The tragic pose is often a prelude to a "leap of faith" (which thus becomes a leap into pure irrationality, a surrender to the dogmatic authoritarianism of churches, central committees, charismatic leaders), and sometimes it is just a way of clinging to the pure and simple awareness that "there are no answers," with the tacit Socratic presumption (but Nietzsche was right to unmask the optimistic rationalism of this stance) that it is better at any rate to know that you do not know.

The hermeneutic way out of tragic and negative nihilism naturally entails the inclusion of many aspects of the latter: we might say, with Nietzsche, that it is not possible to build without destroying. Or again, and perhaps more realistically, that the wellsprings of metaphysical authoritarianism never run dry, so that the task of secularization—that is, the unmasking of the sacrality of all absolute, ultimate truths—is an ongoing one. Politics, law, and social life continue to supply evidence of this, and not just in Italy, where

the Catholic Church persists in (claiming to) impose unreasonable constraints on the laws of the state on issues like cohabitation by unmarried partners, research on embryos, and euthanasia; we see the same thing in international relations as well, where American domination disguised as democratic humanitarianism is threatening to impose a sort of universal police state "legitimated" by (putative) respect for human rights, or what the empire defines as such. Will the new Napoleon perhaps in the end provoke another "romantic" revolt of the nations—of cultures and "peoples" [xxviii] (with all the caution the use of these terms demands) against the Pax Americana imposed with armed force?

So in attempting to measure up—albeit very theoretically—to problems like these, hermeneutics inherits a large portion of the critical and "destructive" content of tragic nihilism at the outset—but also a couple of pathways toward something more constructive. Above all, the death of God should not be thought of as a truth achieved at last, as a dogmatic basis on which to erect some natural right of atheism, the "unfounded" world, or a Nazi superman. The constructive nihilism of hermeneutics certainly has to guard against the neurotic return of authoritarianism—but antifoundationalism itself is at risk of hardening into a metaphysics, and when it does it fits very nicely with things like the imposition of liberty and democracy by means of armed intervention against what President Bush has called "rogue states" (the appellation fits most of them, but neither Bush nor the UN in the guise of an ethical tribunal is in a position to adjudicate that). Against these aberrations of nihilism, hermeneutics relies fundamentally on the principle of the plurality of interpretations, in other words respect for the freedom of everyone to choose. This may not go much beyond the argumentative rationality of Habermas, but it does strip away the residues of metaphysical rationalism that still impair his theory, which, with its idealization of knowledge freed of opacity and fundamentally modeled on the scientific method, is always at risk of legitimating a future world dominated by "experts" of various kinds. Hence the critical tools of negative nihilism remain decisive for the constructive project of hermeneutics. The attempt to base laws, constitutions, and ordinary political decisions on the idea that we should gradually be setting our norms and rules free from the limits of what is supposedly "natural" (meaning obvious to those in power) can become a positive political project in itself. I recall that even the battle against [xxix] hunger in the world was justified many years ago by a theoretician close to Habermas, Karl Otto Apel, on the basis of the respect for the equal rights of the interlocutor that any use of language imposes if it is not to incur a performative contradiction. In other words: even when I am only talking to myself, I have to respect rules; I am responsible for showing the same respect to any interlocutor—that is, I attribute my own rights to any interlocutor—but in that case I also have positively to guarantee him or her the conditions for the exercise of those rights, hence humane conditions of survival. Apel did not elaborate these ideas into an explicit program, and in any case the hermeneutic (and "nihilistic") ideal of basing all laws and social behaviors on respect for the liberty of everyone, and not on supposedly objective or "natural" norms, entails positive consequences much more far-reaching than the ones he set out in the 1960s. Peace, for example (and not what theologians call "ordered tranquillity," an Augustinian expression that allowed the Catholic Church to maintain the worst sort of silence about Nazism and Fascism) is a basic human right, one that recent events have, sadly, shown to be both topical and problematic. Why should constitutional reform and legislative amendment to take account of rights like this not be the basis for a positive political program? After all, that is the mark of the (necessary) movement from liberalism to democracy and, as I see it, socialism: in order to bring fully into existence the rights of liberty proclaimed by liberalism, we cannot just let things like the laws of the marketplace proceed "in accordance with their own principles" (there is an unacceptable "naturalism" about Adam Smith!). The conditions for equality are not "naturally" given, so we have to create them.

The essays that follow represent a first attempt (on my part) to develop the discourse of hermeneutics in this constructive direction—for what (little) any merely theoretical activity is [xxx] worth, of course. If it makes no sense, even on the theoretical plane, to claim to discover an ultimate truth independent of dialogue and the common praxis, how much more so in politics, justice, and ethics. This at any rate justifies their publication (in anticipation, if you will forgive the pun, of public action). Although the texts assembled in this volume are not (as I see it anyway) excessively heterogeneous, they were written on different

occasions. Santiago Zabala performed the task of selecting and editing them, and I wish cordially to thank him for the competence and the dedication he put into the job.

Chapter 7:

Philosophy, Metaphysics, Democracy

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I propose to address the problem of the relationship between philosophy and politics at a time that I take to be characterized by two "epochal" events (with all the risks inherent in the use of this term). On the one hand, philosophy has lived, and is still living, through the process that Heidegger called the end of metaphysics, the dissolution of the claims made by foundationalist thought. The so-called crisis of reason may perhaps have been overemphasized and reduced too generically to a slogan, but it is a fact difficult to ignore. On the other hand, as regards politics, the collapse of real socialism has cast political ideologies of the "deductive" and global type into general discredit, favoring the rise of a largely "Popperian" liberalism, which strives to conceive of politics in terms of small steps, trial and error, and extreme pragmatism and concreteness. Although there is no relationship of cause and effect between them, the two events are obviously connected. Even before the collapse of real socialism, the crisis of metaphysics (in the sense Heidegger assigns to this word) had in any case arisen in connection with the collapse of a political environment favorable to universalistic thought: colonialism ended, other cultures began to make themselves heard, cultural anthropology took shape as a discipline, and the [82] myth of humanities unilinear progress guided by the more civilized West was discredited in practice (with the First World War) and then in theory.

If this is the distant horizon, a sort of "prologue in heaven" to the situation in which we are living, closer to home the crisis of the political parties (not just the ones destroyed in Italy by endemic corruption but also the ones that have seen their vitality reduced to a low ebb as much of their traditional "public" has become television dependent) has also signified a drastic shift in the relationship between philosophy and politics. The organic intellectual has lost his role and legitimacy mainly because Marxist communism is finished (sunk, defunct: not confuted, just bypassed) but also because this type of intellectual has lost his interlocutor, the political party. Although in many cases this interlocutor has been resuscitated in the form of "public opinion"—for the many who like me practice the trades of commentator, essayist, "pundit," as well as university professor—you could hardly say that this is the same thing as a true political role for intellectuals. Although academics cannot be said to be doing specialized or technical work when they write for the newspapers and do have the traits of the intellectual in the Gramscian sense, they are operating more like freelance writers or even creative artists, whose relationship to social and political reality is always mediated by the working (how free? how neutral?) of the marketplace.

This aspect of the problem may seem too exclusively "practical," and therefore marginal, but it isn't. The relationship of the philosopher to politics is certainly also, and maybe primarily, a problem of content, of what she has to say to the politician. But the content is itself profoundly marked by the circumstances in which it is elaborated and enunciated. The difference that, until a few years ago at any rate, we often observed between Italy and the English-speaking world with respect to [83] the "public" (media) presence of philosophy, for example, was evidently a consequence of the fact that in Italy, ever since the reform of the school system by Giovanni Gentile in the 1920s, philosophy has been a regular curriculum subject in a significant proportion of the Italian secondary schools. I mentioned this as a reminder that in speaking of philosophy and politics, we have to pay close attention to the actual conditions of existence of those who profess philosophy in our societies, particularly when it comes to the position of philosophy in the school curriculum (which I believe ought to be expanded far beyond the current limits).

The two "macroevents" to which I alluded to at the start create a double condition of difficulty and opportunity for the relationship between philosophy and politics, which seems to me to merit attention. The parallel and connected dissolution of metaphysics and real socialism has ended forever the epoch in which

philosophers were counselors to princes, whether the latter were the enlightenment sovereigns of the eighteenth-century philosophes or the modern political party, Gramsci's "new prince." This change is not, however, due to the direction in which government policy often seems to be moving in industrialized societies: not, in other words, because the place of the philosopher is being taken by the scientist or economist, in accordance with the Comtean logic of movement toward the positive stage. If that were the case, the traditional "metaphysical" (and authoritarian) relationship of philosophy to politics would not have changed, except that one (nonspecialized and thus obsolete) type of scientist would have been replaced by others.

Rather, the end of metaphysics has its genuine political parallel in the strengthening of democracy. Philosophy is finding out for its part (how thoroughly?) That reality refuses to be confined within a logically tight system, the conclusions of which can be applied to political choice. Politics, for its part, is experiencing [84] the impossibility of adhering to "the truth," for it must let itself be guided by the interplay of minority and majority, by Democratic consensus. (It is not irrelevant to underline this separation of politics from truth. In Italy and throughout the Catholic world we have continually been challenged by demands to adapt the laws of the state to what the Church considers metaphysical truths about human nature, the good, justice).

Naturally a politics without "truth" is not exclusively and necessarily a democratic politics; it might also be a despotic politics that, rather than surpassing metaphysics, does not even go as far as the (metaphysically inspired) discovery of the natural rights of man and the demand for them. In my view it is mainly because of a preoccupation about this, together with the awareness that it is utterly impossible to found a rational politics on philosophy, that today we are seeing the birth of political philosophies that concentrate on the philosophical legitimation of democracy and, more generally, of the liberal state. I will not pause here to discuss whether positions like those of Jürgen Habermas or Karl Otto Apel, which I would call transcendental proceduralism, can go beyond simply legitimating democracy and make substantive commitments to this or that politics, this or that particular model of society in the state. Whatever the answer to this question, it is fairly clear that they remain within the confines of a model which we can call traditional or, in my terms, metaphysical, of the philosophy-politics relationship: from a philosophical consideration of the conditions of possibility of any meaningful discourse, they derive the necessity or duty to construct democratic societies. To fail is, in the last analysis, to fall into a performative contradiction—the *passé-partout* of Apel, which also undergirds the Habermasian theory of communicative action. It will be obvious that I find nothing unacceptable in the political conclusions at which, by different routes, Apel and Habermas arrive. But they do remain [85] stuck within the bounds of academic specialization, at a time moreover when the legitimacy of liberal democracy is hardly contested any longer by anyone, and this imparts a certain air of political futility to their discourse. The problem is their inability to really adapt to the new conditions in which philosophy (and not just political philosophy) finds itself. Democracy has wrought changes that go far beyond the range of discourse about the legitimation conducted from an essentialist or, at any rate, transcendental, point of view.

Whether it intends to present itself as a theory legitimating a certain form of state or tries instead to promote more substantive and specific political choices, philosophy today must cease to speak from a foundational standpoint. Those who do take this standpoint, even implicitly, expose themselves to the consequence of having to make their own political effectiveness dependent upon an alliance with a prince, ancient or modern, in other words upon some form of authoritarianism. Let us take the notion of unhindered social communication, common to Habermas and Apel; it leads to the persistent suspicion that the dominant classes might be using the mass media to manipulate the electorate and that therefore the results obtained at the polls must always be more or less seriously flawed because the voting was not truly free. Suspicion of this kind may certainly serve as a stimulus to frame legislation that will enhance freedom of the press and impede the formation of media monopolies. But taken to the limit, it also posits a linkage between politics and truth and thus entails the risk of having to accept some form of mandarinism entrusted with making sure that the information transmitted by the media is uncontaminated.

My own view is that, apart from the (important) consideration of the specific factors affecting the

relationship between philosophy and politics today (the media society, the place of philosophy in the school curriculum, the disintegration of the [86] political parties, and so on), the principal question that needs to be answered is this: what becomes of the relationship of philosophy to politics in a world in which, as a result of both the end of metaphysics and the expansion of democracy, we cannot (any longer?) think of politics in terms of truth? The double condition of difficulty and opportunity in which philosophy finds itself in this new world lies in the fact that, on the one hand, it can no longer supply politics with guidelines derived from its knowledge of essences and foundations, not even from the conditions of possibility, and, on the other, since it no longer can or should be foundational thought, philosophy becomes intrinsically political thought, in the form of what I propose to call and "ontology of actuality." I have attempted elsewhere to make it clear what I mean by this expression, freely adapted from the late Foucault.

Very briefly, I conceive it as the (most persuasive) answer to Heidegger's call to recollect Being. This call was formulated (in *Being and Time*) not out of an abstract urge for cognitive completeness (a fundamental ontology is required to found regional ontologies: Husserl in the *Krisis* starts from this position also) but in reaction to the fragmentation of experience and the notion of reality itself produced in modernity. It is principally in "Weberian" modernity, characterized by specialization and the separation of spheres of existence and value and by the multiplication of sectoral languages, that the memory of what "being" signifies is lost. For the rest, since the thrust of Heidegger's thinking leads to the recognition that Being "is" not but rather that it happens, and thus that we cannot simply return to an object, to its coming-about in presence, by dispelling the cloud of oblivion into which it has fallen, then to recollect Being will signify, for those who wish to interpret Heidegger even against the grain of certain self-misunderstandings on his part, the effort to grasp what is meant by "Being"—the word itself and virtually nothing else—in our experience now.

[87] On this basis I see nothing scandalous and maintaining that an *andenkend*, or recollecting thought, as Heidegger thinks a non-or postmetaphysical thought must be, can also be defined as democratic thought. What it is listening to in its effort of recollection is not just the voices of some archaic primordial mystery, supposedly drowned out by the vertiginous becoming of modernity; there is no origin located somewhere outside the actuality of the event. The event has its own thickness and certainly bears within it the traces of the past, but it is just as much composed of the voices of the present. In the past itself is something to which we gain access only through the part of it preserved down to us, its *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

Can a philosophy that has taken leave of the foundational illusion really continue to call itself ontology? We know that some interpreters and radical continuators of Heidegger, Jacques Derrida in the lead, deny that it is still possible to speak of Being because this would be a sort of relapse back into the metaphysics of foundations. Yet to continue to speak of Being and ontology is not an excessive claim; it is rather an expression of modesty on the part of this philosophy, which knows that it is not obliged to respond to truth but only to the need to recompose the experience of a historical phase of humanity that is living through the fragmentation of the division of labor, the compartmentalization of language, the many forms of discontinuity to which we are exposed by the rapidity of the transformation (technological above all) of our world. On the contrary, you can only set Being to one side if you neglect this modest task and suppose that you must in any case still answer to an objective truth of things, which would exclude just such a "simulation" as being too vague and too rigid at the same time.

Defined as the ontology of actuality, philosophy is practiced as an interpretation of the epoch, a giving-form to widely felt sentiments about the meaning of being alive in a certain society [88] and then in a certain historical world. I am well aware that defining philosophy as the Hegelian spirit of the age is like reinventing the wheel. The difference, though, lies in the "interpretation": philosophy is not the expression of the age, it is interpretation, and although it does strive to be persuasive, it also acknowledges its own contingency, liberty, perilousness. It is not just Hegel who seems to be returning; empiricism is playing a part as well. The epoch and the widespread sense of what it means are perhaps no more than experience, to which empiricists once sought to remain true—experience interpreted philosophically, meaning in continuity with and employing the same instruments as a certain textual tradition. Within this tradition certain elements,

aspects, and authors are of course privileged over others, but it remains present in its totality as background, as a possible source of alternative interpretations.

However one assesses this proposal, it is clear at least that it offers an alternative to the philosophies that do still lay claim to a foundational function in politics (or even just to the transcendental legitimation of a certain form of government, whatever the specific choices made according to those rules of the game may be). An ontology of actuality abandons all foundational claims and offers politics a certain vision of the ongoing historical process and a certain interpretation (free and not without risk) of its positive potential, judged to be such on the basis not of eternal principles but of argumentative choices from within the process itself (when we are on the road, we already know more or less where it is we want to get to). As is well known, Richard Rorty has spoken, in one of his essays, of a Kantian lignée and a Hegelian lignée, which rival one another in the thought of today; well, here we are obviously taking a "Hegelian" stance, in the sense that philosophy makes a commitment vis-à-vis history, backs certain outcomes in preference to others, and the surrenders its position of transcendental [89] neutrality—a position to which not just the explicit revivals of Kantism (as with Apel and Habermas) but also a large part of today's analytically inspired political thought still cling.

The ontology of actuality, when it does make the effort to go from programmatic declarations to their concrete elaboration, does not have an easier time of it than do the foundational philosophies. If anything, the work turns out to be even harder because, to return to one of our initial considerations, the socio-professional condition of its practice is still mainly cut to the profile of the traditional philosopher, or at most the scientist, the specialist, the academic with a mission to excavate rigorously one small corner of the immense terrain of knowledge. If we add to the fact that with the dissolution of the parties and the general decay of the habits of political participation any possibility of a "supplement" of sociology for the philosopher has almost disappeared, it will be clear that her efforts to give form to the widely diffuse sentiments, to somehow "represent" democratically the current sense of Being, entails almost insurmountable difficulties. Hence there remains an enormous distance between even this form of philosophy (which in principle at least ought to be more open to dialogue) and politics. But even if reflection on philosophy and politics does not take us (at least as I see it) very far down the road to reorganizing the relationship and the contribution of philosophy to politics, at least it may mean summoning philosophy back to a more radical awareness of the significance of the event, if that is what it is, of the end of metaphysics and the advent of democracy in philosophical thought.

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Vattimo, Gianni. *Nihilism & Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, & Law*. Trans. William McCuig. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Page numbers to this text are in square brackets within the text.