Reconsidering the Emancipative Features of our Transparent Society: A Philosophical Reconsideration of Gianni Vattimo

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> If I must identify a turning point, a moment of crisis or of rethinking what matters, I would point to the second edition of *The Transparent Society* (2000) and its final chapter on 'the limits of derealisation'.
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> Vattimo, *Of Reality* (2012)

Few philosophers reconsider their views. It is a difficult task to acknowledge having missed something or made an error. Sometimes revisiting earlier work is the result of critics' pointing out errors, but it sometimes happens that a philosopher on their own acknowledges that something went wrong and must be adjusted. But it is still rare that a philosopher has enough integrity to acknowledge that their thesis must be reconsidered. Most of the time philosophers are certain of their ideas and would die before admitting a mistake. The difference between the responses is a matter not only of intellectual integrity toward readers, colleagues, and students but also of temperament. This is particularly evident in the case of Martin Heidegger. Besides refusing to apologise for joining the Nazi regime, which was his greatest mistake, he never acknowledged that one of his students (Ernst Tugendhat) was the source of a correction he made to *Being and Time* in 1965. But there are other examples, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Robert Nozick, who recognized their errors and made amends. The former stated in *Philosophical Investigations* that it was a mistake to believe semantics could solve all philosophical problems as he has previously thought, and the latter declared the 'libertarian position I once propended now seems to me seriously inadequate, in part because it did not fully knit the humane considerations and joint cooperative activities it left room for more closely into its fabric'.[1] These

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[1] On Heidegger's Nazism see Gregory Fried, 'The King Is Dead: Heidegger's "Black Notebooks"', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 13ᵗʰ 2014, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/king-dead-heideggers-black-notebooks. Two months after Tugendhat delivered a lecture ('Heidegger's Idea of Truth' [1964]) where he formulated, for the first time, his criticism of Heidegger's concept of truth as *alētheia*, Heidegger wrote: '[to] raise the question of *alētheia*, of unconcealment as such, is not the

errors and corrections are interesting because they point out the contingency of the ideas, theses, and positions of even great philosophers. Gianni Vattimo is no exception.

The Transparent Society (1989) has a special place in Vattimo's oeuvre because it is the only book he repeatedly believed required a reconsideration. These reconsiderations are present not only in the third Italian edition (2000) — in the form of a new preface and chapter — but also in several interviews, passages from other books, and unpublished notes now available in his archives.[2] And Vattimo's latest book, *Being and Its Surroundings* (2018), has a chapter dedicated to this text's central thesis in relation to totalitarianism. Although Vattimo has written new prefaces to many of his books, this is the only text he has repeatedly returned to since its publication thirty years ago. The goal of this essay is to interpret these reconsiderations not as corrections but rather as further contributions to autonomous existence in a society that is 'anything but transparent', as Vattimo wrote in his autobiography.[3]

The Transparent Society was published in 1989, following five important books that traced Vattimo's thought during the eighties: *The Adventure of Difference: Philosophy After Nietzsche and Heidegger* (1980); *Beyond the Subject: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Hermeneutics* (1981); *Weak Thought* (with Pier Aldo Rovatti, 1983); *Nietzsche: An Introduction* (1984); and *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture* (1985).[4] The introduction to Nietzsche is a monographic study of the German philosopher's key concepts, whilst all the other

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same as raising the question of truth. For this reason, it was inadequate and misleading to call *alētheia* in the sense of opening, truth.' Martin Heidegger, 'The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking' in *On Time and Being*, trans. J. Stambaugh (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), 70. A complete reconstruction of this affair can be found in the second chapter of Santiago Zabala, *The Hermeneutic Nature of Analytical Philosophy: A Study of Ernst Tugendhat* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). The Nozick quotation is from his *The Examined Life* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1989), 286–87.

[2] Vattimo's archives are available in the Library of the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona. Boxes 16, 28, and 34 are particularly interesting as they include plans to rewrite *The Transparent Society*, and reviews by other scholars with his comments.

[3] Gianni Vattimo, *Not Being God: A Collaborative Autobiography*, with Piergiorgio Paterlini, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 88.

[4] All these books are now available in English: *The Adventure of Difference: Philosophy After Nietzsche and Heidegger* (1980), trans. Cyprian Blamires and Thomas Harrison (Cambridge: Polity Press 1993); *Beyond the Subject: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Hermeneutics* (1981), trans. Peter Carravetta (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019); *Weak Thought*, with Pier Aldo Rovatti (1983), trans. Peter Carravetta (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012); *Nietzsche: An Introduction* (1984), trans. Nicholas Martin (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); and *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture* (1985), trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). A full bibliography may be found on the archive's website: https://www.upf.edu/en/web/gianni-vattimo/arxius.

books seek to understand the postmodern condition by employing philosophical hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, which has always been at the centre of Vattimo's investigations — as demonstrated by his previous studies of Schleiermacher, Gadamer, and Nietzsche — has enabled Vattimo to weaken those metaphysical concepts at the centre of our philosophical tradition. The question —also tackled by Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, and Jürgen Habermas — was not *whether* metaphysics and modernity had to be overcome but rather *how* such overcoming ought to take place through postmodernity.

In the books that preceded *The Transparent Society* Vattimo suggested that postmodernity should not be interpreted as a radical 'rupture' with modernity but rather as a new attitude capable of overcoming the objectivist obsessions of Enlightenment philosophies. In order to explain this new attitude, Vattimo uses one of Heidegger's most characteristic philosophical distinctions, between '*Verwindung*' and '*Überwindung*'. The latter suggests overcoming modernity with a Hegelian *Aufhebung*, a surmounting that goes beyond and leaves behind, falling unconsciously once again into modern foundations. Instead, *Verwindung* should lead us to think of 'turning to new purposes', 'twisting free', 'resigning', and 'accepting ironically' the state of modernity.[5] It is in this second sense that Vattimo offers us the idea of '*pensiero debole*', weak thought, as an aspect of the postmodern attitude and approach not only toward modernity but also toward society at large.

In the first edition of *The Transparent Society* (1989) Vattimo claims that the rise of mass media in the 1980s ultimately runs counter to two central features of modernity: the generalisation of dominion and its realisation in history. This is why he considers the dissolution of the idea of a linear history, that is, of a universal history that could be imposed upon others, one of the most important events signaling the end of modernity. 'The impossibility of thinking history as unilinear [...] does not derive solely from the crisis in European colonialism and imperialism. It is also, and perhaps above all, the result of the birth of means of mass communication'.[6] The end of 'grand narratives', as Jean-François Lyotard called them, takes place in the swift change from mechanical technology to information technology, where history is multiplied and dissolved. This dissolution is linked to Vattimo's ambition to weaken the idea of 'reality' and what Heidegger referred to as 'metaphysics' and Derrida to 'logocentrism'.

Proffering a weakened sense of reality, as well as truth and Being, allows Vattimo to replace the modern ideal of emancipation modeled on 'a lucid self-

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[5]On this important distinction see James Risser, 'On the Continuation of Philosophy: Hermeneutics as Convalescence' in *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Gianni Vattimo*, ed. Santiago Zabala (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 184–202.

[6] Vattimo, *The Transparent Society* (1989), trans. David Webb (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 5.

consciousness' with an ideal of emancipation based on difference, plurality, and transparency. In order to embrace the latter it is important to interpret the relative chaos that mass media created as an opportunity rather than a problem. The multiplicity of images and perspectives constitute a hope for emancipation and liberation not only in resistance to the idea of a single account of knowledge and truth but also for those voices that have been disregarded. Emancipation consists in '*disorientation*, which is at the same time also the liberation of differences, of local elements, of what could generally be called dialect. With the demise of the idea of a central rationality of history, the world of generalised communication explodes like a multiplicity of "local" rationalities — ethnic, sexual, religious, cultural or aesthetic minorities — that finally speak up for themselves'.[7] Although the weakening of the 'reality principle' has opened the way for the liberation of differences, Vattimo acknowledges that the 'problem of its critical status naturally becomes a matter of urgent concern'.[8]

In order to address the inevitable consequences of global communication technologies it is necessary to draw upon a philosophy that theorises an experience of reality as our belonging to it rather than first of all reflecting upon it. Defined as a 'philosophy of the epoch of the worldviews and their inevitable conflict', hermeneutics can help us recognise that 'everything sent out by the mass media is imbued with a strange air of fragility and superficiality'.[9] Contrary to other philosophers still attached to Gadamer's uncritical acceptance of tradition, Vattimo believes hermeneutics is a philosophical stance that not only theorises the interpretative nature of truth but also embraces the postmodern world of chaos and transparency: 'Hermeneutics is the philosophy of this world in which being is given in the form of weakening or dissolution. The thesis "there are no facts, only interpretations" has a reductive sense, of the loss of reality, which is essential to hermeneutics'.[10] This loss of reality is also an indication of the 'nihilistic effects of hermeneutics', which Vattimo draws from Nietzsche's revaluation.

This question of the consequences of this loss is at the centre of Vattimo's reconsiderations of his work. The new preface and chapter to the third edition of *The Transparent Society* responds to this question by pointing out that even though the general inspiration of the book — the possibilities of radical transformation enacted by the mediatisation of our existence — is still valid, a 'certain optimism with regard to the emancipative function of the media is now mitigated. This is not to question the

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[7] Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 9.

[8] Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 26.

[9] Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 113.

[10] As Ashley Woodward explains in *Nihilism and Postmodernity* (Aurora, CO: Davies, 2009), the significance of nihilism in postmodernity is at the centre of Lyotard's, Baudrillard's and Vattimo's philosophies.

general philosophical approach, but rather to find a way out of the new problems — above all, political problems — created by the development of media and their social weight'.[11] Vattimo told Luca Savarino and Federico Vercellone, 'When I prepared the third edition of my book *The Transparent Society*, a certain return to communism and the political critique of contemporary society had already begun to make itself felt'.[12] Among the many events that induced him to reconsider his position was the election of Silvio Berlusconi in 1994. The fact that the owner of the majority of Italy's TV networks and newspapers could use these to democratically rise to power demonstrated that technological transformation did not necessarily imply that emancipation would actually take place.

This general optimism regarding new global communication technologies — which emerged as a response to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's aversion to the 'culture industry' — was prompted by the 'absence of a central motor that determines all the other gearwheels' that so bothered the founders of the Frankfurt School. The transition from 'the gearwheel controlled from a central station to the horizontal model of the web seemed to many thinkers an opportunity to break free from the image of the Big Brother which conditions and manipulates the masses through propaganda'.[13] Victims of this optimism numbered not only postmodern theorists but also such critical theorists as Habermas, whose theory of communicative action could only have emerged in these circumstances. The 'ideal speech situation', on which so much of Habermas's grand theory was based, is one which is today actually supplied by the internet. But as we have learned from the proliferation of television channels and newspapers, and now Google and Facebook, these phenomena do not represent an extension of the public sphere so much as its colonisation by a 'transparent totalitarianism'.

In order to understand how the optimism of a 'transparent society' turned into a distrust of a 'transparent totalitarianism' Vattimo considers it important to remember the social and political transformations that took place after 9/11 with the war on terrorism. The obsession with national security has 'rendered us so transparent that there is no confusion, no Babel: research engines arrange massive amounts of data

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[11] Vattimo, *La società trasparente* (Milan: Garzanti, 2000), 4.

[12] Vattimo, 'Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality: A biographical-theoretical interview with Luca Savarino and Federico Vercellone', *Iris* 1, no. 2 (October 2009): 348.

[13] Vattimo, *La società trasparente*, 103. Vattimo explained in an interview in 2009: 'I think that I placed too much faith in technology and its emancipatory possibilities, a perspective that may be explained as a kind of reaction against the pessimistic outlook of Adorno. I felt that I had to settle accounts with the way in which both Adorno and Heidegger had effectively excommunicated technological society in general. In this sense, perhaps, my opposition to the Frankfurt School perspective here led me to overemphasise the event of being harbored within the technological *Gestell*, which, as I saw it, possessed an emancipatory potential.' Vattimo, 'Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality', 348.

from the start, any freedom that emerges from uncertainty and confusion seems unthinkable now'. [14] Vattimo, contrary to other intellectuals analysing these transformations, was also able directly to experience this fixation on security from within the European Parliament after winning a seat there in 1999. As a member of various commissions on these matters he noticed how the total transparency promised by technology was still grounded in actual power relations:

> In a world where technology and economy are constantly integrated, the transparency promised by the media could only turn into a culture of massive control. Movements or transformations, regardless of whether they are central or peripheral, would not be tolerated or allowed to take place freely. [...] What we now know for sure is that transparency, whose nature we hoped was ambiguous, being endowed with the possibility of a Babelic liberation, is not ambiguous at all. Connected systematically to globalisation, it has become a feature of the total dominion of everything, which is not the 'truth' anymore, but rather its opposite. [15]

The distorting effects of the mediatisation of our existences, as far as emancipation is concerned, have been at the centre of Vattimo's reconsiderations for over thirty years. The latter have not only sought to mitigate a previously felt optimism regarding the emancipative function of the media but also serve as autonomous contributions to philosophy. This is why throughout his rethinking, particular space is given to the 'political' ability of hermeneutics to resist the totalitarian nature of communication technologies. Hermeneutics, contrary to Habermas's critical theory, for example, pursues emancipation not through objective knowledge but rather through the interpretative nature of truth and the weakening of reality. Whereas Habermas, Vattimo explains, 'has always been a successor (through Adorno) of a Hegelian and Marxist self-transparent and objectivist ideal, hermeneutics is rather the heir of Nietzsche: it is a question not of emancipation from interpretations but of emancipating interpretations from truth's dominion and claims'. [16]

Vattimo's reconsiderations were not a 'moment of crisis', but rather a 'moment of radicalisation'. This is evident in his call for readers not only to become autonomous interpreters against the totalitarian transparency that permeates our reality but also to resist those 'realist' limits that obstruct its 'derealisation'. The 'recent eruption of fundamentalism of every type that is taking place throughout the world',

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[14] Vattimo, *Essere e dintorni*, ed. Giuseppe Iannantuono, Alberto Martinengo, and Santiago Zabala (Milan: La Nave di Teseo, 2018), 186–87.

[15] Vattimo, *Essere e dintorni*, 191–92.

[16] Vattimo, *La società trasparente,* 105.

Vattimo writes, 'is a sort of agoraphobic reaction, a nostalgic return to restricted and firm horizons such as those of the family, local communities, ethnicity, or religious sects'. [17] If this return to order is felt especially acutely today, as the rise of right-wing nationalist politicians throughout the world demonstrates, it is also because of its reinforcement through social media.

The Transparent Society and its reconsiderations are useful today in helping us resist the ongoing return to order that the mediatisation of our existences promotes, because they supply a progressive philosophy that can respond to these challenges.[18] When interpretation is understood as an ontological and practical point of view it can resist the 'transparent' and 'neutralising' effects of the algorithms of big data and social media that control and manipulate our lives. Hermeneutic interpretation not only unmasks the complicity of media with global finance, now often referred to as 'surveillance capitalism', but also serves as a practice that can preserve the Heideggerian idea of the event of Being, that is, the singularity of the human being. Recent whistleblower revelations — such as Christopher Wylie's concerning Cambridge Analytica's involvement in Brexit and the 2016 Trump election —received so much attention because they showed how (social media) transparency is meant to reduce our existence to statistical items in the system of production or consumption. Against this reduction Vattimo believes hermeneutics can help us to resist as autonomous interpreters, even as capitalist and security-state society continues to insist on increased levels of transparency.

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[17] Vattimo, *La società trasparente,* 117.

[18] Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), for example, considers transparency a false ideal that must be overcome, without suggesting how this can take place. A different approach may be found in the various contributions to Emmanuel Alloa and Dieter Thomä, eds., *Transparency, Society, and Subjectivity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).