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The Vattimo Dictionary: Some Reflections

Simonetta Moro

Conversation is a term of which Gianni Vattimo was particularly fond. Santiago Zabala, ICREA Research Professor at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, and one of his former students and collaborators, put it at the center of his obituary of the Italian philosopher in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* published on September 19, 2023, the day of Vattimo's death at age 87. It was part of Vattimo's particular way of thinking philosophy and the exchange of ideas, and it is very significant that this editorial project, *The Vattimo Dictionary*, began with a series of conversations with Santiago Zabala in various locations, both physical and virtual. One of these locations was the Vattimo Archive, hosted at the Pompeu Fabra University, of which Zabala is the supervisor, inaugurated in 2016 after Vattimo donated his papers, manuscripts, course materials, letters, notes, and photographic material to the Catalan institution. The first international presentation of this volume took place there on November 7, 2023, in the context of a commemoration of the philosopher. The archive certainly played an important role in identifying the key terms for the *Dictionary*, as well as in gaining access to published and unpublished material that proved essential to the task of writing the introduction. Even more so in my own case, as I could not claim a direct knowledge of the philosopher beyond his publications, contrary to many contributors to the volume, who had known Vattimo as colleagues, former students, friends, or scholars. In fact, I first met Vattimo only in 2018, at the presentation of *Essere e dintorni* (*Being and its Surroundings*) at the Circolo dei Lettori in Turin, a book that was largely the outcome of the work of collecting the archival material for Pompeu Fabra University, as Zabala himself confirmed in one of those conversations. Yet it seemed to me that I had known Vattimo more intimately for much longer, so much was he a familiar figure in the Italian cultural panorama, thanks also to his numerous television appearances in cultural programs (often directed by him), of which he was a pioneer through his work for RAI and other networks from the 1950s onward, and through his publications in newspapers and magazines. This willingness to follow different paths for the diffusion of knowledge, which until recently were considered very unorthodox and even openly snubbed by the Italian academic world, paired with his generosity in listening to various interlocutors, seems to me to be one of the most memorable and captivating traits of Gianni Vattimo, who immediately put those who spoke with him at ease—as it was the case with me on that day six years ago.

That event effectively marked the beginning of a deeper engagement on my part with his work, which ultimately resulted in this *Dictionary*—part of a series of philosophical dictionaries published by Edinburgh University Press dedicated to key figures of contemporary philosophy, such as Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Luc Nancy, Alain Badiou, Jean-François Lyotard, and a few others. It should not go unnoticed that Vattimo is one of only two Italian philosophers who are represented in the series, together with Giorgio Agamben, making this dictionary significant not only for the dissemination of Vattimo's thought among a growing English-speaking public, but also for contributing to the dissemination and expansion of contemporary scholarship on Italian philosophy in a field still largely dominated by French thought (what in the Anglo-American academic world goes often under the name of "French theory"). Together with Vattimo's original contributions to hermeneutics, this editorial project offers insight into the cultural background that informed the work of the philosopher, from his beginnings in post-World War II Italy, guided by mentors

belonging to the anti-Fascist and Catholic tradition (of which Luigi Pareyson is certainly one of the most significant), to his development through the study of German continental philosophy in Heidelberg under Hans-Georg Gadamer. To these academic experiences, one should be attentive to Vattimo's militancy in Italian leftist parties in the 1970s, his championing of progressive causes as a member of the European Parliament in the 1990s and the early 2000s, and his post-Cold War recuperation of communism through a hermeneutical approach indebted to Nietzsche and Heidegger.

It is worth mentioning that, among all the philosophical dictionaries published by EUP, this one distinguishes itself for the highest number of authors: the fact that 53 scholars, many established and some emergent, have written entries on Vattimo—which total 101, but there could have been many more—is not just mere *data*, but rather is indicative of how much Vattimo's thinking is articulated and present in the most diverse fields of knowledge. In fact, the entries that make up this dictionary reflect the scope of his thought in fields ranging from hermeneutics to ontology, from art and aesthetics to religion and theology, from politics to a particular “ontology of actuality” that Vattimo elaborated in the last part of his long and productive career. In this sense, *The Vattimo Dictionary* provides a truly essential introduction in English to the work of Gianni Vattimo, considered the most important Italian philosopher of the last fifty years and one of Europe's foremost contemporary thinkers. *Essential* should be understood not only as *indispensable*, but also as a succinct and accessible orientation into the meanders and ramifications of the philosopher's thought, a research tool to enable the reader to find the references in relation to keywords that inform his work, and an instrument that offers readers the chance to deepen their knowledge of a particular concept, author, or thematic approach in Vattimo's corpus.

For example, while some of the keywords in the volume are directly related to concepts appearing in his works, such as “Weak Thought” (written by Franca D'Agostini), “Kenosis” (Felice Cimatti), and “Interpretation” (Gaetano Chiurazzi), there are also terms like “Analytic and Continental Philosophy” (Davide Monaco), which situate his thought vis-à-vis the debate around these two traditional branches in Western philosophy. Or, there is “Gifford Lectures” (Santiago Zabala), which gives the measure of the status achieved by Vattimo in the context of European philosophy through the awarding of this important recognition—the equivalent of the Nobel Prize in philosophy, conferred on him in 2010 in recognition of his stance as “one of the foremost philosophers in the world today” and “a major voice in European and world politics.”¹ Then there are entries like “Capitalism/Liberalism” (Mike Grimshaw), “Politics” (Cristina Basili), “Democracy” (Silvia Mazzini), “Marxism/Italian Marxism” (Giuseppe Stefano Azzarà) and so on, which treat his political and philosophical views. Author-based entries, such as “Dilthey, Wilhelm” (Chiurazzi), “Heidegger, Martin” (David Webb), “Derrida, Jacques” (Alberto Martinengo), “Eco, Umberto” (Daniel Gamper), “Gadamer, Hans-Georg” (Jean Grondin), “Pareyson, Luigi” (Robert T. Valgenti), and “Rorty, Richard” (Martin Woessner), among others, situate his thought in relation to other philosophers who acted as mentors, friends, or points of reference at different stages of his career. Other terms of biographical interest, such as “Turin” (Claudio Gallo) and “Europe/European Parliament” (Giuseppe Iannantuono), provide information on his personal background and activities outside of the academic field. Some of the entries shed light on concepts and figures relevant to Vattimo's thought that may not be as familiar to English-speaking readers because of seminal texts that have yet to be translated, such as the study on Schleiermacher that Vattimo published in 1968, *Schleiermacher: il filosofo dell'interpretazione* (Schleiermacher: the

¹ As stated by David Jaspers in his introduction to Vattimo's first lecture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHX5F9TFPnc&t=84s> (1:10).

philosopher of interpretation), or his influential book on Nietzsche first published in 1974, *Il soggetto e la maschera* (The subject and the mask), or because the work of certain philosophers instrumental to Vattimo's thinking, such as Pareyson or Bonhoeffer, historically had a more limited audience.

One of the challenges of editing *The Vattimo Dictionary* (which I think applies to philosophical dictionaries in general) was, first, choosing the keywords in a way that would do justice to the breadth of Vattimo's long career and vast philosophical output, while reducing them to a number that would be manageable within the publisher's word count limitations. This required some keywords to be cross-listed with others or subsumed under other related terms (e.g., "Charity (*Caritas*)" [see "Religion"; "Ontological Difference"; "Theology"]), which certainly can be questioned in terms of the accuracy or specificity of the definition when a term does not get its own entry. Be that as it may, I accept the fact that a dictionary of this kind is never exhaustive and is likely to leave out some important elements of the subject; it should serve more as a stimulus for new research than as a place to find all the answers.

Another challenge I faced as an editor is the question of voice or style. Even though there is a general editorial tone that I aimed to maintain throughout the entries, I also wanted to preserve the individual authors' styles and approaches, partly due to the fact that the contributors come from a variety of backgrounds and linguistic traditions. Some differences are therefore to be expected in the way the key terms have been developed in the respective entries, which also has to do with the relative importance of a term within Vattimo's oeuvre. However, a book of this kind needs to remain polyphonic if it is to be authentically choral and collective; and multiplicity—although not a keyword included in the dictionary, perhaps unfortunately so—was a concept Vattimo valued a great deal. It is well known that he was averse to what he called "*il pensiero unico*"—which could be translated as "univocal thought"—which is the real obverse of weak thought. In genuine polyphonic fashion, *The Vattimo Dictionary* is a text that can be opened at any page, and entries can be read in no particular order; each term also includes cross references within the text itself, which point to possible narrative lines to follow. Having said this, the terms *Heidegger*, *Nietzsche*, and *Weak Thought* are certainly the three most important keywords in the dictionary; these are where someone unfamiliar with Vattimo's philosophy should probably start.

In particular, the concept of *il pensiero debole* (weak thought)—which he developed together with Pier Aldo Rovatti in the early 1980s—is one of the central themes in Vattimo's hermeneutics, as well as the contribution for which he is most well known in Italy and internationally. At times, it has been widely misunderstood by the popular press and dismissed by colleagues who subscribe to different philosophical positions. Despite being tied to the emergence of the discourse around postmodernism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the concept of weak thought is still very current. In fact, according to Rovatti, its full expression may be yet to come, and it is needed today more than ever.² Weak thought is deeply connected with the respective philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger, of which it constitutes in fact an original interpretation. It starts with interpreting nihilism as a *weakening* of the structures of metaphysics and a dissolving of the concept of being as an "objective foundation." From this point of departure weak thought develops a particular notion of postmodernity as the experience of the end of history, not as a new historical phase itself.³

² As declared in "Three tenors tra filosofia e psicoanalisi: Gianni Vattimo & Friends," June 9, 2021, video, 09:45 ff, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OIz8r4wogM>.

³ Jon R. Snyder, "Introduction," in *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*. trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), xviii.

Aesthetics, as Christine Ross observes in her entry “Postmodern Art/Aesthetics,” plays a central role in the post-metaphysical, postmodern experience of truth:

Postmodern art and aesthetics are understood not as a break with but as a critique of modernity, a dynamic that Vattimo explains by mobilising two Heideggerian concepts: *Überwindung* and *Verwindung*. Postmodernity, aesthetically understood, is not an overcoming (*Überwindung*) of modernity, insofar as modernity can never be dissolved by a process of rupture that is itself fundamentally modern (the value of the new, the cult of the *tabula rasa*), but a “healing of...and a resignation to” metaphysics, as well as a distorting (*Verwindung*) of it—so that tradition might be remembered, to better orient its dissolution and renewal.⁴

This crucial move leads also to an original reinterpretation of the Hegelian “end of art”; in lieu of the death of art, through the *Verwindung* we witness art’s decline as well as its convalescence. Postmodern art, although deprived of strong avant-garde propositions, still retains a weak emancipatory power, by distorting and bending the system from within, so to speak.⁵ In *The Transparent Society* and *The End of Modernity*, Vattimo’s particular declination of postmodernity through a “weak” and positive reading of nihilism and the decline of metaphysics in Heidegger leads to a re-evaluation of the process of aestheticization—starting with the historical avant-gardes—and the role of the mass media in generating a more pluralistic society, “which is realised by virtue of the infinitude of interpretations permitted by the media itself.”⁶ In assuming this position Vattimo revises Walter Benjamin’s thesis in the seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” and virtually turns it on its head by creating an opening for the possibility of political critique to be situated in the postmodern phenomenon of diffuse aestheticization. At the end of his career, however, Vattimo returned to these positions with a more critical (and perhaps disillusioned) eye, in light of the unfulfilled promises that globalization and the pluralism of postmodern society seemed to hold.⁷

The concept of weak thought or weakening also informs the way in which Vattimo’s reflection on religion is carried forward under the umbrella of Christianity, understood not as metaphysical faith but as adherence to cultural tradition. As he put it in an interview for his eightieth birthday, the interpretation of Christianity through the “weakening” effect of hermeneutics emphasizes “the incarnation, the *kénosis*, God that becomes man and therefore abandons his sacrality,” leading to a philosophy of history in which “human emancipation can only be thought of as a progressive reduction of natural violence,” which is perhaps the most important legacy of weak thought.⁸

⁴ Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 52. See also Santiago Zabala, “Introduction: Gianni Vattimo and Weak Philosophy,” in *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, ed. Santiago Zabala, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press), 3–34, 14, as cited in Christine Ross, “Postmodern Art/Aesthetics,” *The Vattimo Dictionary*, ed. Simonetta Moro (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 155.

⁵ See Ross, “Postmodern Art/Aesthetics,” 156.

⁶ Federico Vercellone, “Aesthetics,” in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, 25.

⁷ As acknowledged by Federico Vercellone at the end of his talk at *The Vattimo Dictionary* presentation, Pompeu Fabra University, video, November 7, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&si=FlvNXSY0UR1ToITC&v=j12UvIJNbg&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3KjudgAn6L4bKzg-E0EnCYYSSsCYxwVz73IT5Gl_5yEg6QLEHXEGKHZ3Y

⁸ Maurizio Asssalto, “Gianni Vattimo: ‘I miei ottant’anni da estremista,’” *La Stampa*, January 3, 2016, <https://www.lastampa.it/cultura/2016/01/03/news/gianni-vattimo-i-miei-ottant-anni-da-estremista-1.36545766>. My translation.

To these aforementioned three main terms I would add “Art and Aesthetics” (Federico Vercellone), “Hermeneutics” (Chiurazzi), “Religion” (Martin Weiss), “Politics” (Basili), “Difference” (Silvia Marzano), “Metaphysics” (Elena Ficara), and “Nihilism” (Ashley Woodward), simply in order to orient readers around three main areas of Vattimo’s thought—namely, art, politics, and religion, together with his key methodology, namely hermeneutics. Having said this, there is also the possibility that some interesting surprises may await the reader—as happened to me while editing this volume. By this I mean the possibility of seeing new constellations emerge out of the terms as they enter into “conversation” with each other and across the dictionary, in ways that make some keywords appear as much more relevant to the understanding of Vattimo’s work. Such is the case, for example, of terms like “*Andenken* (Remembrance)” (Andrzej Zawadzki) or “Convalescence/*Verwindung*” (Valgenti); or terms like “Violence” (Clayton Crockett) and “Kénosis” (Cimatti, Diego Bubbio), which received more cross-reference citations than initially expected. My hope as editor is precisely that this dictionary will not simply be used as a tool for research and definition of key terms, but also as a possible generator of new points of focus in the study of Vattimo’s oeuvre, and of new intertextual readings with other authors whose paths intersect with his or participates in a broader dialogue with his work.

In the coming years, as the secondary literature on Vattimo is likely to grow even further, particularly in view of his posthumous legacy, *The Vattimo Dictionary* may play an even more significant role in highlighting these possible constellations. For instance, some themes in his work are just starting to be explored in more depth, such as the religious implications of weak thought within theological studies. I can also see how some of his key concepts could be extended to current debates concerning the ecological crisis and the human effects on climate change, also in relation to art and politics (as some authors are already doing), or put into a productive conversation with non-Western systems of thought and traditions, as has been suggested in relation to Daoism,⁹ to name only a few possible directions awaiting new scholarly contributions. It is encouraging, in this sense, to witness the quality of the entries written by emerging and young scholars, many of whom are recent doctoral graduates or PhD candidates; taking Vattimo’s work toward new and original interpretations and connections, they have contributed to this dictionary in significant ways. For example, Francesca Monateri with “Totalitarianism/Totalisation,” Libera Pisano with “Vico, Giambattista” and “Language,” Thomas Winn with “History/Historicity” and “Modernity (End Of),” Gabriel Serbu with “Literature/Narration,” Seraphine Appel with “Universalism,” and Gregorio Tenti with “Wittgenstein, Ludwig.”

This aspect is particularly significant, in that it honors the legacy of Vattimo as a beloved teacher and mentor. As I remark in my introduction to the dictionary, in delivering his final lecture as a professor at the University of Turin in 2018, with the title “From Dialogue to Conflict,” he stressed the point that “philosophical discoveries are not independent of the actual present.”¹⁰ It was a fact that Vattimo’s ontology of actuality manifests itself not only in his attention to ongoing political and social events through an “analysis of the sense of existence in the technologically oriented postmodern society,”¹¹ but also in the way he would infuse his lectures and seminars with

⁹ See for example Liu Liangjian, “It’s Time to Change the World, so Interpret It!: On Vattimo and Zabala’s Hermeneutic Communism,” in *Making Communism Hermeneutical: Reading Vattimo and Zabala*, ed. Silvia Mazzini and Owen Glyn-Williams (New York: Springer, 2017), 153–59.

¹⁰ Gianni Vattimo, “Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality: A Biographical Theoretical Interview with Luca Savarino and Federico Vercellone,” trans. Nicholas Walker, *Iris: European Journal of Philosophy and Public Debate* 1, no. 2 (2009): 311–350, 349.

¹¹ Luca D’Isanto, introduction to Gianni Vattimo, *Belief* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 4.

a sense of humor and a tendency to use humble and everyday examples to explain difficult concepts. In a 2008 article dedicated to the philosopher, renowned Italian writer Alessandro Baricco, one of Vattimo's former students, recalls an example of this: "I think I understood Kantian ethics when you pointed out that at 3 a.m., in a deserted city, in front of a red traffic light, you stop only if you are a fool: or if you are Kant."¹² Humor and clarity were his defining traits as a teacher, qualities that are also notably present in his interviews and philosophical writings. Nevertheless Vattimo never made clarity the end goal of his philosophy, but rather "the starting point, the precondition without which thought cannot get going."¹³ It is not surprising, if one reflects on the meaning of weak thought, that Vattimo was always fond of peppering his lectures and talks with jokes, ironic word play, and witty examples: humor was for him a form of lightness or lightening, a way to make abstract ideas somewhat more concrete and digestible, which pedagogically is a formidable tool—and a very difficult one to use successfully. This process of lightening occurs whenever metaphysical weight is subtracted from ideas so that they do not operate dogmatically but, on the contrary, become open to interpretation and to being challenged. Zabala has declared that "[a]mong the first things my teacher, Prof. Vattimo, taught me is that to be 'a philosopher means to be obsessed with the verb Being (concerning what is and what is not) because it invites you not to remain satisfied with your own identity and to seek the entire horizon of Being—in other words, to dialogue.'"¹⁴

It is precisely in the spirit of dialogue and intellectual exchange that this dictionary came to be, while honoring the teaching of Vattimo in an age in which too often preconceived notions of identity, truth, and being are affirmed with acritical certitude. Part of the ongoing legacy that Vattimo has left us is a call to critically engage with his work and to bring fresh perspective to his thought: it is my hope that this dictionary will play an important role in this ongoing process.

¹² Alessandro Baricco, "Grazie, caro Vattimo, sei stato un maestro," *La Repubblica*, October 14, 2008. My translation.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Santiago Zabala, "An Interview with Santiago Zabala," Columbia University Press, <https://cup.columbia.edu/author-interviews/zabala-remains-being>.