Interpretation, Religion, Politics: A Conversation[1]

Paolo Diego Bubbio and Gianni Vattimo

Abstract: In this 2017 conversation, Gianni Vattimo discusses with Paolo Diego Bubbio the core themes of his own philosophical journey. Vattimo first comments on the legacy of his mentor Luigi Pareyson and on the differences between Pareyson's conception of the relation between truth and interpretation and his own. Vattimo and Bubbio then elaborate on the return to Hegel and the possibility of a "hermeneuticized" Hegelianism. The participants also discuss Vattimo's view of religion and the role that the Christian notion of *caritas* plays in his "weak hermeneutics." Finally, Vattimo comments on his recent political writings and on his view of a "hermeneutic communism," arguing that revolution is possible only as a collective inner transformation. Vattimo concludes by mentioning his recent essays, collected under the title *Being and Its Surroundings*, in which he presents the radical thesis of Heidegger's philosophy as a new form of theology.

Keywords: Interpretation, Hermeneutics, Weak Thought, Caritas, Hermeneutic Communism, Revolution.

Paolo Diego Bubbio: The basic tenet of the philosophy of your mentor, Luigi Pareyson, can be summarized with his claim "of truth, there is only ever interpretation and there is no interpretation of anything but truth."[2] In

1. This conversation took place in Italian on 19 December 2017, in Gianni Vattimo's home in Turin. It was originally conceived as an interview, but Vattimo insisted that it take the form of a proper conversation instead.

2. Luigi Pareyson, *Truth and Interpretation*, trans. Robert T. Valgenti (Albany, NY: University of New York Press, 2013), 47 (translation modified).

light of your philosophical journey, do you think this formulation is still valid, or what do you find not fully convincing about it?

Gianni Vattimo: I need to distinguish the two parts of the claim. "Of truth, there is only ever interpretation": I agree, no truth is given if not through the interpretation expressing it, and which, while it expresses the truth, makes it its own and displays it somehow. I struggle more with the second part of the claim: "There is no interpretation of anything but truth." Why should truth alone give rise to interpretations? Of course, Pareyson has a possible answer to this objection: he would say that all interpretations are interpretations of the truth because anything that is not an interpretation of the truth is merely a derivative reproduction, which is falsifying or objectifying, and hence it has no relation with the truth. I might agree with the second part of the claim, but in a more "domesticated" version than Pareyson's own. That is, I would take the second part of the claim as meaning: let us be careful, interpretation always needs a truthful source without which it cannot be called interpretation, otherwise it can only be representation, objectivation, reproduction. Not any claim is an interpretation: for example, a meaningless claim is not an interpretation, and hence has no relation with the truth. Overall, I do not find anything that is radically wrong about the entire claim, but I see its limits.

PDB: Can we say that with respect to this claim, your philosophy, the so-called "weak thought," emphasizes the aspect of interpretation more, while leaving the aspect of truth in the background?

GV: Yes, in the sense that in Pareyson's philosophy there is, in my view, a metaphysical residue—the source, the origin, the idea that God must exist *somewhere*. Unlike Pareyson, I do not think that there is an origin to which everything can be traced back. There is in Pareyson a "nostalgie du fundamental," a nostalgia for the foundational, as Jean-Pierre Richard writes with reference to Mallarmé.[3] I still feel close to Pareyson's philosophical ideals, but I object to his preservation of this idea of stability. I remember that my friend Pietro Chiodi[4] used to joke about this, using a phrase in Piedmontese dialect: "'nduma a vëde l'esse," which literally means "let's go to

3. Jean-Pierre Richard, *L'Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1961), 298–299.

4. Pietro Chiodi (1915–1970) was an Italian philosopher and Professor of History of Philosophy at the University of Turin. He was the first Italian translator of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which was published in Italian in 1953.

see the being," an expression used in the countryside by the relatives of the bridegroom when they were going to visit the bride's household before the wedding: by "being" they meant "the substance," that is, the economic resources of the bride's family (the dowry, the farm, etc.). Well, it seems to me that Pareyson was still attached to this metaphysical residue. Conversely, my attitude towards this nostalgia is similar to that which Richard attributes to Mallarmé: "avec des riens on cachera le rien."[5] Nietzsche writes somewhere that there is no being, only becoming.[6] Is it so scandalous to claim that there is only the becoming, that is, that the world is not an objective given? After all, even God is *dunamis*, not pure act. Of course, I am aware that I am speaking from an ontological perspective that emphasizes the *event* [*accadimento*][7] rather than the *given*, that is, what is there "anyway." How would you deal with this problem, how would you respond to this?

PDB: This is an issue that has been at the center of my own philosophical concerns. My way to deal with it is perhaps a surprising one: I would go back to Hegel. Hegel's project was the development of a new metaphysics: not a metaphysics of Being, but a metaphysics of becoming. Hegel wants to transcend the standpoint of substance. This is the main point behind his continuous attempts to overcome the opposition between the subjective and the objective.

GV: This is interesting. The fact that we call it "metaphysics" has implications that should be addressed. But overall, I agree. If there is a philosopher to whom we should go back today, it is certainly Hegel—who else? Hegel's philosophy can also be read as a metaphysics in which the "origin" is an origin "in the making."

PDB: When you say that if there is a philosopher to whom we should go back today, it can only be Hegel, you are moving farther from Pareyson. Certainly, Hegel was not a philosopher particularly loved by Pareyson, although it is fair to admit that Pareyson probably had the philosophers of Italian Neo-idealism in mind when he criticized Hegel, that is, Benedetto

5. Literally, "with nothings will hide the nothing." Richard, *L'Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé*, 298–299.

6. It is possible that Vattimo is referring here to *On the Genealogy of Morals* I, 13: "There is no 'being' behind the doing, acting, becoming." Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Ian Johnston (Arlington, VA: Richer Resources Publications, 2009), 32.

7. In Italian, "accadimento" can translate the German terms "Geschehnis" and "Ereignis," often employed by Heidegger.

Croce and Giovanni Gentile. But why do you see this urgency, in this particular historical moment, to go back to Hegel?

GV: There is no doubt that Pareyson used to read Hegel through the lens of the Italian neo-idealists. But after all, reading Hegel through Croce does not seem a huge mistake to me, insofar as Croce emphasized the role played by the concretions [*concrezioni*] of the Spirit. This is somehow relevant to my reading of Hegel—of a "hermeneuticized" Hegel, we might say. I am thinking of what St. Paul says: "nostra conversatio in cœlis est."[8] We live in the world of Spirit: the world emerges and establishes itself by interpreting itself. And this is the essence of Hegelianism, it seems to me. There is no "Reason" existing independently somewhere, but there is human rationality that builds itself, interprets itself—through stages, because I am also convinced that not everything flows: something remains, and "what remains, the poets found."[9] Being is *Wirkung* [effect], is real event, realization—I do not think we can say more than this. Does this mean that everything gets out of hand then? No, because *Wirkung* is the producing of some stability—which is not an object that is there "anyway," but is precisely the world of Spirit, made up by spiritual forms: art, social institutions, etc. This is the reason why I say that it is appropriate to go back to Hegel, because this is the only way I have to see the real: as events [*accadimenti*], concretions [*concrezioni*], realizations [*concretamenti*]. *Wirklichkeit* [actuality] as the result of *Wirkung*.

PDB: Hegel was considered as the main enemy both by early analytic philosophy and by various trends in continental philosophy, such as existentialism. And yet today there is a renovated interest in Hegel's philosophy both in analytic and in continental philosophy. With my work on Hegel, I tried to show that there is a fundamentally perspectival dimension in Hegel's thought—quite a bold thesis, I know. There is a kind of perspectivism in Kant already: for Kant, the cognitive object is not the object in itself, but the object as it appears to us. However, Kant's philosophy is still concerned with an object standing over and against a subject. Hegel radicalizes Kant's move, insofar as Hegel wants to overcome the opposition between subject and object, which are to be considered in their unity. In Hegel's view, an ob-

8. "Our citizenship [or conversation] is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20).

9. "What remains, the poets found" is the concluding verse of Hölderlin's poem "Remembrance," commented on by Heidegger in his 1942 essay *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister,"* trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 151.

ject never changes independently of the subject's activity, but only appears to do so. What primarily changes, is the subject. Hegel scholar Michael Inwood has a nice way of putting it, when he says that those who think that the object alters independently of itself are similar to someone who thinks that policemen are getting younger.[10] My own way to express this is that the object is not conceivable without our gaze, and our gaze is not conceivable without the object, so that if our gaze changes, the object also changes.[11] In my view, Hegel's thought, read in this way, can provide important resources to today's philosophy. Postmodernism, with its strong emphasis on symbols, seems to be struggling in dealing with a globalized world, where very different cultures face each other and are forced to coexist. I am thinking of Ricoeur here, who was certainly one of the most brilliant theorists of the symbol in the last century. And yet a symbol is completely meaningful only within a particular culture. I do not want to undervalue the importance of symbols; but symbols need to be translated into concepts if we want to find a common ground, a common language that can be accepted and shared among different cultures. This is where Hegel's discourse on recognition becomes very relevant. I am thinking of the way in which Hegel handles the notion of God as *Vorstellung*, representation, and then as *Begriff*, concept. There can be many representations of God, very different from each other, and representations are rarely the subject of agreement across cultures. But perhaps we can find an agreement about the concept. We agree on the concept of God that we recognize. This is Hegel's conception of God, in my view. Hegel scholar Paul Redding, for example, makes an analogy with human rights, which are "idealities," because they do not exist entirely independently of the practices in which we ascribe rights to others and ourselves. But they are not fictions either, as they would be for naturalists, because they have effects in the world, on our lives, on our choices. As Redding argues, we might think of God as having the same sort of ontology as human rights.[12]

GV: This is very interesting. I wonder whether God would be happy to be thought of in this way. . . .

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10. Michael J. Inwood, *A Commentary on Hegel's Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 458.

11. See Paolo Diego Bubbio, *God and the Self in Hegel: Beyond Subjectivism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2017), 65.

12. See Paul Redding, "The Metaphysical and Theological Commitments of Idealism: Kant, Hegel, Hegelianism," in *Politics, Religion, and Art,* ed. Douglas Moggach (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 65n49.

PDB: This is a good question! I remember that you once said, in a conversation, that perhaps we are more Hegelians than Christians. I guess you meant that Christianity, and religious faith in general, is inevitably "filtered" and mediated by the conceptual framework of one's culture.

GV: It cannot be otherwise. I admit that nowadays, when I pray, I can only do so by using the liturgy. I cannot figure myself addressing God directly, as in expressions such as "My dear Jesus, help me." I rather pray with the Psalms, or singing a hymn. I think this has something to do with what you were arguing. We are Christians, but we are probably Hegelians even more, because our Christianity is our culture, and our culture is our way of being in Being. I very much like what you say, your idea to employ Hegel to think of the transition of the symbol into concept. In a sense, my previous reference to St. Paul, "nostra conversatio in cœlis est," is my own (perhaps ingenuous) way of saying that we live in the world of Spirit, Hegel's *Geist*. It is the world of spiritual beings, as well as the realm of interpretations that interpret each other. That which is, is event [*accadimento*]; then the event has concretions [*concrezioni*], which are such because they are recognized. Recognition is not only the mutual recognition that plays a role in practical philosophy; it also plays an ontological role. All this seems to me like the ontology that Gadamer could have, a topic that has always interested me.[13] This is Being: neither the objective given, nor total vagueness, but a kind of "constellation," to use Adorno's expression:[14] to look at the sky means to become a relative observer with respect to an object that is always shifting. I do not usually like when philosophy employs physical metaphors, but this one is adequate. At the end of the day, this is a naturalistic philosophy.

PDB: But is it? Actually, it seems to me that there is in your philosophy, in weak thought, an element that is deeply anti-naturalist. There are several ways to make this point: for instance, I can refer to the objection that René Girard made, when he argued that most of the time you practically disregard Nietzsche's formula that "there are no facts, only interpretations."[15] As I once wrote, I take Girard's criticism as meaning that faced with a choice be-

13. Cf. Gianni Vattimo, "Interpreting the World is Transforming the World," *Journal of Continental Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2020), 77–84.

14. See Theodor Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," *Telos* 31 (1977), 120–133.

15. René Girard, "Not Just Interpretations, There Are Facts, Too," in Gianni Vattimo and Rene Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue*, ed. Pierpaolo Antonello, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 94.

tween the truth of the victim and the lies of the persecutors, you would not claim that all interpretations are equally valid, but you would stand firmly for the truth of the victim—although you would do that not in the name of *veritas*, but in the name of *caritas*.[16] I am confident you would agree. This has to do with the issue of naturalism, because it seems to me that there is, in your thought, a fundamental ethical choice that is all but naturalistic, that is, there is a normative source inspiring your hermeneutic perspective, and that source is *caritas*, charity.

GV: Yes, I would subscribe to this.

PDB: Someone might object that charity too is grounded on mutual recognition. In other words, who decides what is an act of charity and what is not? There is not an a-historical archetype of charity—otherwise we would fall back into traditional metaphysics—so what counts as charity is decided collectively by us. What I am provocatively asking is whether we are facing a dilemma here: either recognition comes first, and then charity too becomes relative, or charity is a universal value, and in that case, we are *eo ipso* outside perspectivism. What would you reply to this objection?

GV: Charity always needs a *terminus ad quem*, someone towards whom the act of charity is performed. There is no charity in itself. It is the singular act of charity that provides the answer to your provocative question. An act of charity is first of all the recognition of the other, of the one who receives the act of charity. And the act of charity is confirmed insofar as it is recognized as an act of charity by the one who receives it. The act of charity grows within the relation with the other, which is its prerequisite.

PDB: Unfortunately, we humans have a stunning ability to convince ourselves—and we also try to convince others—that the act that we are performing is an act of charity, even when it is actually determined by other less noble and even selfish motives. To take this argument to the extreme: the Nazis used to justify the euthanasia of disabled persons by arguing that it was an act of charity. Thus, what distinguishes an authentic act of charity from a false one?

GV: Again, I think that the answer resides in the alterity, in the recognition of the act of charity as such by those who receive it. I do not think that those who were facing the prospect of being euthanized agreed with their

16. See Paolo Diego Bubbio, *Intellectual Sacrifice and Other Mimetic Paradoxes* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 153.

persecutors. That said, we should also admit that this reference to the other makes the act of charity always uncertain. It is, to some extent, a wager.

PDB: I am glad that you mentioned the wager—and that would also be my answer to my own provocative question. It is indeed a wager. And here, besides Pascal of course, we could refer to Nietzsche, to the ability to create values, and to Heidegger, to the ability to project ourselves. Charity is not a metaphysical value, which is there "anyway" before we recognize it as such; it is an arbitrary act, an unnatural act—this is the reason why I was arguing that there is a deep anti-naturalistic element in your philosophy. Animals do not perform acts of charity, after all. An act of charity is completely gratuitous, it is—as you said—a wager, and in this sense, it is non-foundational, it does not require a further foundation.

GV: Recently I have been reading again Badiou's book on Saint Paul.[17] As I understand it, Badiou argues that the event is something similar to a wager, that is, not the recognition of something that is already there, but a happening [*accadimento*], an event [*evento*]. Of course, the problem is: how do we recognize a true event? Someone might say that Saint Paul literally invented Christianity as a religion. But that is precisely the point: there is nothing external that defines what counts as a true event. The event establishes itself as true, and by establishing itself, it happens, it makes itself happen. Here we are dealing with the same predicament that we were discussing earlier, about Pareyson's conception of truth and interpretation. Not every happening is an event of truth, of course. In order to be an event of truth, it must be something that cannot be explained otherwise. It is like the work of art for Kant, or morality for Schopenhauer: it has no roots, no source. Naturally, when we think about this, we feel lost, because there is no stable ground. But hermeneutics is helpful here: if the claim that I make generates interpretations, it is true; if it does not, then it has no relation with the truth—it is metaphysical dogmatism, or biographism. But the bottom line is that the status of an event of truth as such is always threatened, always uncertain.

PDB: I often argued that, while you have been often charged with being a relativist—and sometimes you have also proudly accepted this charge—actually your philosophy can be better defined as a form of perspectivism.[18]

17. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

18. See Paolo Diego Bubbio, *Sacrifice in the Post-Kantian Tradition: Perspectivism, Intersubjectivity and Recognition* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014), 159.

Relativism claims that all perspectives are equally valid, whereas perspectivism claims that there is no way of seeing the world that can be taken as definitely true. Hermeneutic perspectivism, before having a cognitive, epistemological value, has an ethical significance. My way of expressing this would be that I have to put my point of view in perspective in order to take into consideration others' points of view. Do you agree?

GV: Absolutely, yes. You said it well. Yes, weak thought is a form of perspectivism, or relationism. Only in charity, truth happens [*soltanto nella carità accade la verità*]. That is the core of everything. There is no truth without charity. This is what I object to in the Catholic Church and the clergy, when they argue that if charity does not respect "the natural law," then it is not charity. I disagree. Truth and charity happen together, simultaneously. We should reflect more on this.

PDB: About Christianity: some people still find it contradictory that you, the philosopher of interpretation and the theorist of weak thought, still profess your Christian faith. Since we mentioned the wager, albeit in a slightly different context, we might refer to the "many Gods" objection, first raised by Diderot: Pascal's wager can at best lead to the belief in the existence of *a* God—but why should one believe in the *Christian* God, and in Jesus Christ who became man, died, and rose again?[19] What would you reply to those who still criticize you for this alleged incoherence, that is, the coexistence of weak thought and Christian faith in your thought?

GV: What is so scandalous about this? To my critics, I would reply that the Christian faith is the one in which I found myself thrown. Of course, there is no "reason," strictly speaking, why I am a Christian. I am not choosing among a range of religions—between Christianity and Buddhism, for example. I happen to be a Christian, this is my background: without it, I cannot interpret anything. But there is also another reason why I, a "weak thinker," call myself Christian: because this knowledge about charity, this message, came to me from Christianity. I cannot separate the content of the Christian message from the tradition that transmitted it to me. Performing a similar separation would be equal to making a metaphysical claim. For me, the encounter with this message is a personal encounter. "Jesus looked at him and loved him" (Mk 10:21). This is enough for me. This idea that there is a message of truth that is communicated to me by a *person* fits well with the whole of Christianity, as well as with the whole of weak thought,

19. See Denis Diderot, *Pensées Philosophiques*, vol. 1 (Paris: Garnier, 1875), 167.

which is a philosophy that does not believe in the existence of pre-determined structures or in "true" propositions.

PDB: In other words, the personal encounter you are referring to is made possible by Christ's incarnation. As you know, I have argued that *kenosis*—modelled on God's self-emptying of the divinity in the incarnation—is the driving force, silent but powerful, of the entire tradition of perspectivism, from Kant up to contemporary philosophical hermeneutics. I see some similarities between my way of conceiving a kenotic act and your way of describing the event of truth: for me, *kenosis* is an ethical act, fundamental but not grounded, gratuitous, arbitrary if you wish; it is the renunciation of one's point of view to make room for the others' points of view. Culturally, there would be no post-Kantian perspectivism without Christianity. It is in the context of Christianity that perspectivism could emerge, because Christianity is a perspectival religion: God gives up God's divine absoluteness to embrace a finite point of view. As St. Paul writes, Christ "made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Phil 2:7).

GV: As I wrote when I reviewed your book, I have no objection to this.[20] And I think Hegel would feel very comfortable in this conceptual framework!

PDB: Indeed. I am also convinced that the main reason why Hegel regarded Christianity as the consummated religion was not because he considered Christianity, and Lutheran Christianity in particular, as dogmatically or epistemologically "truer" than other religions or confessions, but because of the central message of a God becoming man, renouncing God's absoluteness and embracing the finite point of view. There is no such thing as a "God's point of view" on the world: it is a contradiction in terms. A point of view, to be such, must be finite. Another reason why Hegel regarded Christianity as the consummated religion is the Trinity, the idea of thinking of the divine as fundamentally dialogical.

GV: I agree: a point of view, to be such, must be finite. As for the Trinity: is God really "one and triune"? My answer is: God is such for the Christians, for those who belong to this specific linguistic and cultural tradition.

20. See Gianni Vattimo, "Kenotic Sacrifice and Philosophy: Paolo Diego Bubbio," *Research in Phenomenology* 45, no. 3 (2015), 431–435.

PDB: As a matter of fact, Hegel remarks that, taken literally, the notion of the Trinity is a "childlike" and "imaginative" expression.[21] Rather, Hegel inclined towards a conception of the divine as a unique "personhood" that expresses itself in a range of relationships. I think that for Hegel the meaning of the Trinity is to be identified neither in its literal reading nor in a supposedly abstract content, but in the *figural* relation between the religious representation—the three persons of the Trinity—and the structure of the human self. The Trinity is the truth of the idea of God, because God is fundamentally dialogical.

GV: This seems right to me. But to claim that "someone" is dialogical means to claim that it is not something that is simply "there." One of the reasons why someone could say, perhaps legitimately, that I cannot rightfully call myself a Christian is because I do not believe that "God is the most perfect being, Creator and Lord of heavens and earth."[22] If I make such a claim, I am attributing some concreteness to God, I imply that God is *somewhere*—on earth, in the heavens, everywhere. I know that a consummated Heideggerian could say that with this, we take note of the metaphysical limits of our language, that is, of the fact that we cannot ever say "is" or "is not" without attributing some kind of spatio-temporal existence to the being in question. If we were attending an Ecumenical Council, we could never define anything!

PDB: We were talking about *caritas*, charity. One way to make *caritas* concrete is politics, in the highest meaning of the term. One of your most recent contributions is the book *Hermeneutic Communism*.[23] One of the fundamental features of the weakened communism that you and Zabala sketch in the book is the rejection both of the violence of metaphysics and of physical violence. This in turn implies your refusal, which is explicit in the book, to

21. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. P. C. Hodgson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984–1985), vol. 1, 126; vol. 3, 194; vol. 3, 284. See Paolo Diego Bubbio, *God and the Self in Hegel*, 118.

22. In Italian, "Dio è l'Essere perfettissimo, Creatore e Signore del cielo e della terra." Here Vattimo is quoting from the *Cathechismo della Dottrina Cristiana* (*Catechism of the Christian Doctrine*), issued at the order of Pope Pius X in 1912, with questions and answers regarding the essentials of Catholic faith. It was used to teach the fundamentals of the Catholic doctrine to generations of Italian children. It was progressively abandoned after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and nowadays is regarded by some as one of the symbols of the pre-conciliar Catholic Church.

23. Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

consider revolution as a feasible political strategy.[24] Provocatively, I want to ask you: in our globalized and neoliberal world, is it really possible to imagine a radical political change that does not go through a revolutionary movement—not in the traditional sense of an armed struggle perhaps, but still revolutionary, insofar as it implies a radical overturn of "the present state of things" (to use Marx's expression)?[25] Otherwise, don't we run the risk of simply doing "armchair communism," so to speak?

GV: I am interested in this. It might seem that the last communists left today are the intellectuals. What does this mean? If I wanted to look at this phenomenon positively, I would say that there cannot be any revolution except as a religious, intellectual transformation. My point is that there can only be a revolution of an inner, ethical kind.

PDB: . . . a conversion?

GV: A conversion. I cannot imagine it otherwise. My central idea here is that there cannot be a revolution except as a collective inner transformation, because all the other objective transformations bring with them the risk of dominion, the risk of a power that re-establishes itself. It is inevitable: the Russian revolution is evidence of that. Not to mention that in the contemporary world, a revolution like the Bolshevik one would immediately trigger the response of the capitalist world, and then we would have something analogous to so-called "War communism," and a Stalin who hangs political opponents . . . it is unimaginable. We can say that a radical transformation is a necessity. But the only radical transformation that is imaginable, without falling back into the practical-inert, as Sartre would say, is an inner transformation. Without religious revolution, there is no political revolution. And revolution can only be a fundamentally religious one, because if it is a fundamentally political one, it self-destructs. It is like a nuclear fusion: fusion is a process, not a state. I remember that in the sixties some Heideggerians looked at the notion of permanent revolution with some sympathy, implying that either revolution is permanent or it is simply not a real revolution. But is a permanent revolution really possible? Is anarchy really possible? Of course, there is an anarchic component in Christianity. In this respect, the work of the French thinker Jacques Ellul is

24. See Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 3.

25. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 57.

fundamental.[26] The conservative right has always benefited from the practical impossibility of a revolutionized society. And it is clear that the idea to ground the political order on charity, or as charity, as an exercise of charity, is nonsense. What happens if someone needs to be put in jail? In a political state, there is the need for a police force, for example.

PDB: So, do you agree with René Girard when he argues that any political structure is necessarily sacrificial, at least because it possesses the monopoly on the means of revenge, that is, on violence?[27]

GV: I agree with Girard. I wish I could not agree with him on this, but unfortunately, he is right. Of course, the problem then becomes how to act in light of this realization.

PDB: In fact, there is no proper "political philosophy" within Girard's mimetic theory. A few years ago, I argued that the point of encounter between the perspective of hermeneutic communism and mimetic theory can only reside in the notion of conversion in the etymological meaning of the term: in the Gospels, "conversion" often translates the Greek term "metanoeite" (Mk 1:15), which literally means "change your hearts and minds" or "change your point of view."[28] I remember we discussed this during a public debate in Sydney in 2013.[29]

GV: Today I would subscribe to this more than I did back in 2013! I must admit that my active engagement in politics ruined my life somehow.[30] But I did engage in politics because I tried to save myself from the possible criticism that "it's all talk," that philosophy is nothing but edifying discourse, and then nothing ever got done. In a sense, it is true: at the end of the day, nothing ever gets done. So, is it worth doing it anyway? Perhaps it is. From

26. See Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991).

27. See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 23.

28. See Paolo Diego Bubbio, "Mimetic Theory and Hermeneutic Communism," in *Violence, Desire, and the Sacred: René Girard and Sacrifice in Life, Love, and Literature,* eds. Joel Hodge, Scott Cowdell, and Chris Fleming (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 44–56.

29. The debate happened in the context of the Australian Girard Seminar session at the 2013 Annual Conference of the Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy, held at Western Sydney University on 5 December 2013.

30. Vattimo was a member of the European Parliament from 1999 to 2004 and then again from 2009 to 2014.

those who take seriously, and possibly endorse, my idea of a hermeneutic communism, I expect that they perform small acts of sabotage. To engage in counter-information, for example, or to boycott an arms factory, or to strike against injustice. But again: who can be satisfied with such small acts of sabotage? Only a religious person, someone who acts in the name of a salvific intention. Intention is the point. I think that a society permeated by these sabotaging, contesting contents is better than a society where such acts are absent (of course, these actions always need to be contextualized: an act of sabotage can slow down an ambulance that is taking someone to the hospital, for example). But who are those who can make a revolution in this way? The intellectuals, those who can change the content of a speech for instance, and then be satisfied with this change. It is not by chance that intellectuals and priests have always been the cheap revolutionary classes!

PDB: It seems to me that recently you have been oscillating between the "pessimism of the intellect" and the "optimism of the will," to use Gramsci's famous motto.[31] This is also the impression that I got from reading your last book, *Being and Its Surroundings*,[32] and not just when you address politics or religion, but also when you address Heidegger's philosophy.

GV: Originally, the subtitle of *Being and Its Surroundings* was meant to be "To save Heidegger." My way to save Heidegger is to acknowledge that Heidegger can only be a Christian thinker—because who can have a fruitful dialogue with Heidegger (either the early Heidegger or the late Heidegger)? My answer is: only someone who thinks in terms of the history of salvation. I consider Heidegger's philosophy as a new form of theology, a thought that serves to introduce Christianity. I realize that this is a very radical thesis, and I expect—indeed, I hope—that it is considered scandalous. This is what I care about. I find the recent debate about the publication of Heidegger's *Black Notebooks* rather pointless. Habermas did the right thing by not dealing with the *Black Notebooks* in any way whatsoever. Nothing really interesting comes out of the *Black Notebooks*. It is just a business: publishers get money, reviews are published, articles are written; at best, from time to time one can find a line that can be quoted to support an argument. I have no interest in all this. For me, what is important to reflect upon today is the happening [*accadimento*] of the history of Christian salvation.

31. Antonio Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, ed. Frank Rosengarten (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 18.

32. Gianni Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, trans. Corrado Federici (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021).

To meditate on it. In the book I have also tried to imagine what a Heideggerian Christianity might look like. I do not think this idea is implausible. When Heidegger talks about the history of metaphysics, about rebuilding the history of metaphysics, he is not so different from someone who reads the Scriptures every day: in both cases, there is something that one needs to understand, like a call that comes from the outside. I am comfortable with this thought: once again, "nostra conversatio in cœlis est," I live in this world of spiritual transmission. Mine is prominently Christian, but it can also be informed by other religions.

PDB: In general, are you pessimist or optimist about the future of philosophy?

GV: My position could be called "optimistic pessimism." I think that philosophy has a future as a discipline that works on texts and develops discourses. Even great integrated societies need to be "lubricated" with philosophy, so to speak. You cannot do without philosophers, even and perhaps especially in the world of advanced technology. To keep this structure alive, a discourse is needed. Of course, there is always the risk that this discourse becomes—to go back, in a circular fashion, to where we started, that is, to Pareyson—mere ideology in the service of the reproduction of the present state of things. But there is no way to distinguish between genuine philosophy and ideology in a definite way. To some extent, they always go together. I cannot claim "Now I am going to build a philosophy that is not mere ideology." How? I try, I wager, I narrate. I am not even completely sure that what I do is actually philosophy. I talk about Heidegger, who I think wrote some of the grounding works of our age. More, I do not know.