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Metaphysics as a Source of Violence in the Thought of Gianni Vattimo

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Słowa kluczowe: Vattimo, myśl słaba, hermeneutyka, metafizyka, przemoc

Abstract

This article presents an interpretation of the phenomenon of violence in the philosophy of Gianni Vattimo. The main thesis of the article is that, for Vattimo, metaphysics—understood as the belief in the existence of absolutely true and final interpretations—constitutes the fundamental, if not exclusive, source of violence. The appropriate remedy for metaphysical violence is his hermeneutics, articulated as “weak thought” (*pensiero debole*). The article distinguishes three contexts in which Vattimo addresses violence: the theoretical, the contemporary-historical, and the practical-political. It demonstrates how, starting from general theoretical concepts such as Being as an event or the *Verwindung* of metaphysics, Vattimo develops specific diagnoses of contemporary reality and the violence present within it, while deriving ethical and political implications for human practice.

Introduction

The Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo developed a distinctive conception of postmodern hermeneutic philosophy, drawing primarily on Nietzsche

(notably the concept of nihilism expressed in the thesis of the death of God, marking the collapse of ultimate foundations and the transformation of reality into a fable), Heidegger (the end of metaphysics, the history of Being, and Being as an event), and Gadamer, whose philosophical hermeneutics emphasizes the historicity and linguistic nature of understanding (Vattimo, 1988, 1997, 2017).

Vattimo does not directly engage with the phenomenological tradition and is therefore not typically regarded as one of its representatives. When he does refer to phenomenology, he most often invokes Husserl critically, treating phenomenology—insofar as it seeks transcendental foundations and original givenness—as belonging to the metaphysical tradition (Vattimo, 1988, 1997). However, given that the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Heidegger is fundamentally phenomenological—in that it reworks the phenomenological attitude and the slogan “back to the things themselves” (Gadamer, 2004; Heidegger, 2010)—the phenomenological dimension of Vattimo’s thought can be located in its hermeneutic orientation.

Vattimo’s point of departure is the experience of the contemporary world, understood not as a set of pure data of consciousness but as always already mediated by history and language. Accordingly, an objective, presuppositionless, phenomenological description of what appears is replaced by a hermeneutic interpretation, in which the human participant is already situated and involved (Vattimo, 2021). For Vattimo, the being of things themselves consists in interpretations (Vattimo, 2017, 2021). His phenomenological-ontological motto —“there are no facts, only interpretations—and this too is only an interpretation”—captures this position (Vattimo, 1997, 2017).

The main aim of this article is to provide a systematic account of Vattimo’s interpretation of the phenomenon of violence, a topic not yet comprehensively addressed in the literature. This involves outlining the key theses, assumptions, theoretical significance, and limitations of his position. Since Vattimo does not present a unified theory of violence, this account requires reconstructing dispersed remarks and integrating distinct strands of his thought.

Vattimo’s interpretation of violence is noteworthy because it moves from general ontological claims—such as Being as an event and the *Verwindung* of metaphysics—to concrete diagnoses of contemporary reality and the violence present within it, while articulating corresponding ethical and political implications. The central thesis is that metaphysics constitutes

a fundamental, if not exclusive, source of violence, and that its appropriate remedy is hermeneutics, specifically in the postmodern form Vattimo developed. Accordingly, three contexts of violence in Vattimo's philosophy—theoretical, contemporary-historical, and practical-political—will be identified and analyzed in turn to substantiate this claim.

1. The Theoretical Context of Violence

1.1. Metaphysics as a Source of Violence

The theoretical context of violence concerns metaphysics and hermeneutics as interpretations of Being. In his understanding of metaphysics, Vattimo follows Heidegger, conceiving it as a philosophical project aimed at attaining knowledge of the ultimate, immutable foundations of objective reality, that is, the pursuit of absolute truth (Vattimo, 1988; Heidegger, 1998, 2010). Metaphysical thinking seeks to subjugate reality by uncovering its first principles and subjecting it to human control. Regardless of its particular form or method—whether intuitive insight, deductive reasoning, their synthesis, or an interpretation of history in terms of providence or teleology—metaphysical thought invariably claims universal validity (Vattimo, 1988, 1997, 2017).

Vattimo, however, does not limit metaphysics to the philosophical tradition alone. For him, metaphysics encompasses all dogmatic positions and discourses—scientific, political, and religious—that assert an unquestionable, absolutely true interpretation and the objective order of reality and seek to establish ultimate foundations or principles (Vattimo, 1997, 2017, 2021). Metaphysics also extends to social and political phenomena, mechanisms, and structures that are the product of such metaphysical positions.

Given Vattimo's distance from metaphysics understood in the above sense, his account of violence seeks to avoid any metaphysical, essentialist, or naturalistic elements. According to him, violence does not lie in the violation of an objective, natural order or a moral law (Vattimo, 2002, 2003). Rather, violence is fundamentally interpretative: it consists in infringing a person's freedom to propose or recognize alternative interpretations to the dominant one (Vattimo, 1997, 2003, 2017). Violence arises where pluralism of interpretations is limited and interpretive freedom constrained. Since, for Vattimo, only interpretations exist, interpretative violence reveals

what violence is in general. Metaphysics, by its nature, is the source of such interpretative violence. Its inherently violent character lies in its claim to an absolutely true interpretation corresponding to objective reality (Vattimo, 1988, 1997, 2017). This leads to the interruption of hermeneutic dialogue, the silencing of others, and the imposition of a single allegedly correct interpretation (Vattimo, 1997, 2003, 2017). Where ultimate truth appears, open and free discussion ceases; such truth can only be passively accepted.

Understood in this broad sense, metaphysics constitutes, for Vattimo, the primary and most significant source of violence. One may even argue that, in Vattimo's thought, metaphysics functions as a universal source. All forms of violence—symbolic, religious, psychological, or physical, whether individual or collective—would be forms of interpretative violence stemming from a metaphysical position and worldview. These forms of violence involve the metaphysical act of depriving others of the right to speak or hold their own views.¹

Therefore, the metaphysical character of violence to which Vattimo refers does not require explicit claims to absolute truth or objective reality. It is already present in the assumption of the unquestionability, self-evidence, or dogmatic superiority of one's own interpretation, including those serving particular interests—economic, class-based, social, or personal—over all others. For Vattimo, the justification of such absolutization presupposes metaphysical assumptions (Vattimo, 2003, 2017, 2021). In this sense, metaphysical understanding of conceptions of truth, subjectivity, reality, rationality, and other traditionally philosophical notions constitute a horizon within which violence becomes possible, intelligible, normal, or even necessary. Colonial violence, for example—an expression of the economic interests of the middle classes in Western European societies—can be understood as rooted in the acceptance of an absolute ontological division between categories such as

¹ The position advanced here—that for Vattimo, physical violence is one of many forms of interpretative, metaphysical violence—is not universally accepted in the literature. Harris (2012), for instance, objects to this view, arguing that although Vattimo brings these two forms of violence into close proximity, he does not identify them with one another. However, Harris does not offer any alternative, non-metaphysical and non-naturalistic account of physical violence that would remain consistent with the premises of weak thought. The strong, absolute distinction between interpretative and physical violence, that he appears to propose is at odds with both the letter of Vattimo's texts and the spirit of weak thought.

“civilized” Western citizens and the “savage” indigenous populations of colonized territories. Such metaphysical categories make it possible to interpret economic interests in ways that override the freedom and rights of colonized peoples, thereby legitimizing and sustaining colonial violence.

1.2. Weak Thought as a Remedy for Metaphysical Violence

The remedy for metaphysical violence in the theoretical context is an alternative hermeneutic interpretation of Being, which Vattimo terms “weak thought” (*pensiero debole*) (Vattimo, 1997, 2014, 2017). According to weak thought, Being does not simply “be” but “happens” (Vattimo, 1988, 1997, 2017). It is neither a stable, immutable substance or structure nor a ready-made object awaiting discovery. Instead, it is a historical and linguistic event occurring through interpretation, in which human beings participate (Vattimo, 1988, 1997, 2017). Being has a processual character and remains open to further interpretations. Central to this view is the Heideggerian concept of the history of Being, which Vattimo understands as a process through which Being opens variable and provisional horizons of disclosure of beings and human existence (Vattimo, 1988, 1997). Being can therefore no longer serve as an ultimate foundation of reality sought by metaphysics. Consequently, concepts such as substance, or reality lose their epistemological role as metaphysical foundations. Being, in this sense, is “weak” (Vattimo, 1997, 2017, 2019), a designation meaningful only in contrast to metaphysical notions of fundamentality and presence.

The weakening of Being entails recognizing the radically interpretative character of things themselves and truth: they exist only *in* and *through* interpretations, which are always historically, culturally, and linguistically situated (Vattimo, 1997, 2017, 2021). Thus, there is no single absolutely true interpretation. Nor are there interpretations that adequately reflect a pre-given object, since the object of interpretation is not a ready-made entity existing independently in the outside world, and interpretation is not an external act of knowing. Rather, things themselves are constituted and transformed within interpretation (Vattimo, 2021). It is therefore more appropriate to speak of a multiplicity of non-final, true interpretations in which Being and things themselves occur.

In this way, Vattimo’s hermeneutics eliminates the theoretical basis for metaphysical violence. From the standpoint of weak thought, metaphysics

becomes merely one possible interpretation among many, and an untenable one: its claim to absolute truth contradicts the event-like character of weak Being and presupposes a transhistorical, absolute standpoint that is impossible given human finitude. Within the framework of weak thought, such interpretative violence thus remains only a theoretically ungrounded and unjustifiable—epistemologically and ethically—irrational temptation (Vattimo, 2003).

1.3. Vattimo's Metaphilosophical Self-Awareness

However, might weak thought itself be metaphysical? Vattimo acknowledges this risk and emphasizes that hermeneutics, if it is to avoid reverting to metaphysics, cannot present itself as a true description of an unchanging structure of reality or as a revelation of absolute truth about the interpretative nature of human existence and Being (Vattimo, 1997, 2003, 2017). Hermeneutics is not a form of cultural or historical relativism that uncovers multiple perspectives as an objective fact, thereby remaining within a metaphysical framework.² Rather, hermeneutics itself hold the status of yet another historical interpretation (Vattimo, 1997, 2003, 2017, 2021). It can offer only rhetorically persuasive arguments, presenting itself as the best possible response to the challenges of contemporary times and the historical legacy we have inherited (Vattimo, 1997, 2003, 2021).

Weak thought is therefore indispensable for ensuring that the critique of metaphysical violence does not itself become metaphysical. This means that it must not be conducted in the name of another supposed absolute truth, even if presented as non-metaphysical. Nor should it eliminate limits on interpretive conflict between individuals, thereby culminating in a state of universal violence manifesting as a war of all against all, where the sole aim is domination through the imposition of one's interpretation upon others (Vattimo, 2016). For Vattimo, such a critique of metaphysics,

² The thought of hermeneutic philosophers—from Heidegger through Gadamer to Vattimo—is consistently marked by a rejection of relativism as a position that is essentially itself metaphysical, rooted in the assumptions of the metaphysics of presence (Gadamer, 2004, 2016; Heidegger, 2010). The tradition of hermeneutic philosophy can be understood as an attempt to move beyond the opposition between metaphysics and relativism, or, as Bernstein (1983) puts it, beyond the alternative marked by “Cartesian anxiety” between certain knowledge and the threat of relativism.

leading to further interpretative violence, would undermine its own purpose (2016). The grounding of the critique of violence in hermeneutic ontology is therefore essential.

Accordingly, it should be emphasized that Vattimo is fully aware of the metaphilosophical status of his own interpretation of violence. He does not propose an absolute or uniquely true account that claims to exhaust the meaning of violence or define its unchanging essence. On the basis of his own theses, his interpretation can—and should—be confronted with alternative accounts of violence and supplemented by other approaches, such as materialist or phenomenological ones, which may illuminate different aspects of the phenomenon and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of it. Like any interpretation, Vattimo's conception of violence presupposes a finite horizon of meaning that guides its development. In his case, this horizon is constituted by the relation between violence and metaphysics and by the aim of reducing violence or weakening metaphysical residues in contemporary reality. Vattimo would therefore not claim that his interpretation is the only possible or definitive account of violence. He would argue, however, that it is persuasive insofar as it discloses how violence operates in the contemporary world, identifies its historical sources, and promotes the reduction of violence.

1.4. The Interpretative Character of Violence (Example of Pain)

It should be noted that Vattimo's position is not reductive. He does not reduce the phenomenon of violence to the linguistic dimension alone, but rejects the idea of a "pure" fact of violence given in immediate self-evidence. Violence is always mediated by language and history. Accordingly, acts of violence are recognized and evaluated as such within specific horizons of meaning and historical narratives. When Vattimo emphasizes the interpretive character of violence, he does not thereby seek to dematerialize it or to reduce it to a merely semantic practice of imposing meanings. On the contrary, he consistently acknowledges that violence also has material, physical, and institutional dimensions (Vattimo, 2003, 2010a, 2021), which do not disappear or become negligible simply because violence is articulated through interpretation, but rather are constituted through it. Within Vattimo's hermeneutics, violence therefore occurs in reality, and is experienced, for example, as suffering and physical coercion; yet these occurrences and experiences

are not independent of interpretation. Rather, they are inseparable from interpretative mediation.

This can be illustrated through Vattimo's interpretation of physical pain in "Pain and Metaphysics" (*Nihilism & Emancipation*) (Vattimo, 2003). Vattimo is neither concerned with providing a phenomenological description of the bodily dimension of pain, nor solely with the social and political mechanisms that condition its occurrence and management. Instead, he concentrates on a critique of the metaphysical understanding of pain as a source of violence and proposes an alternative account that avoids metaphysical assumptions. More specifically, Vattimo criticizes as metaphysical those positions that attribute to pain an immanent meaning or value, according to which suffering is understood as a path to truth, knowledge, or virtue, or as a form of expiation for sins. For Vattimo, such metaphysical theses, far from remaining on the level of abstract theory, translate directly into concrete social practices surrounding pain, increasing its acceptance and justification in the name of a higher truth: "the exaltation of pain and sanctification of suffering is no more than a (usually blatantly authoritarian) claim to be in touch with some foundation that, being absolute, can only perpetuate (as asceticism, as punishment, as the search for putative authenticity) the violence of which pain is the manifestation, the effect, and the cause" (Vattimo, 2003, p. 77). One example of this logic can be found in the reluctance to administer painkillers during and after medical procedures: "These [metaphysical—A.N.] abstractions epitomize and condition many of the practical and medical ways of treating pain, in private relationships and in institutional settings. Anyone who underwent a surgical procedure thirty years ago, let's say, knows how reluctant the nurses were to administer the smallest dose of painkiller [...] the attitude of acceptance, indeed, endorsement of pain that prevailed even among people who were no longer formally religious" (Vattimo, 2003, pp. 72–73).

Consequently, the alternative, "weak" approach to pain requires acknowledging pain as a manifestation of human mortality and finitude, which does not confront us with any form of infinity or transcendent being. Pain in itself is thus deprived of any deeper meaning and appears rather as a purely contingent event that befalls us without our wishing for it. Accordingly, there are no grounds for maintaining reservations against its reduction. As Vattimo states: "pain and death [...] are both insuperable and irredeemable. They are beyond explanation or justification because they give no access to truer

truth; instead, they are what set us free from slavery and resentment vis-à-vis any truer truth (a law of Being, God as creator or judge, baleful destiny) [...] pain has no dignity, it merits no respect as such [...] Faced with pain, there is nothing else to do, nothing reasonable, except to try to eliminate it” (Vattimo, 2003, p. 75). At the same time, pain situates us within a community of mortals who share a condition of vulnerability and like ourselves, must confront suffering (Vattimo, 2003). The phenomenon of pain thus poses an ethical challenge: the obligation to reduce the suffering of others.

This example shows that Vattimo does not dissolve physical or corporeal phenomena into language or discourse. Pain remains an irreducibly corporeal phenomenon, experienced as suffering and physical constraint, whose reality is not negated by its necessary interpretive mediation. What ultimately matters for Vattimo is the way in which phenomena such as pain are historically and linguistically interpreted, and how these interpretations render them meaningful, justified, or tolerated, thereby conditioning concrete practices that either generate violence or contribute to its reduction. While it is true that Vattimo does not focus primarily on the physical or corporeal aspects of violence, it is incorrect to claim that he entirely ignores them or is unable to account for them. The charge that Vattimo overemphasizes the linguistic mediation of physical violence and ignores its material reality—formulated, for example, by Harris (2012)—is therefore unsustainable.

1.5. Weak Thought and the Theoretical Context of Violence – Concluding Remarks

The significance of Vattimo’s interpretation of violence outlined above lies in its rethinking of the complex relationship between violence, claims to truth, metaphysics, history, and the contemporary world. Rather than offering yet another theory of violence within political or social philosophy focused primarily on mechanisms of power and domination—although these issues are not ignored—Vattimo concentrates on uncovering the ontological and epistemological foundations of violence and their entanglement with history. His account allows contemporary forms of violence to be linked to the ontological embeddedness of human existence in history and to the influence of inherited traditions, especially philosophical traditions. Within this framework, Vattimo offers an interpretation of history that discloses the metaphysical sources of violence embedded in the tradition, as well as an

interpretation of the contemporary historical situation that identifies metaphysical residues generating violence (both interpretations will be discussed in greater detail in the subsequent section of this article).

At the same time, the universal thesis concerning the interpretive character of violence and metaphysics as its source provides the theoretical framework that enables Vattimo to relate diverse forms of violence—corporeal, psychological, institutional, social, and others—and to demonstrate their underlying unity. Moreover, his approach remains consistent with his radically anti-metaphysical, hermeneutic, and postmodern assumptions of weak thought, while retaining the capacity for critical engagement with contemporary structures and manifestations of violence. In this sense, Vattimo seeks to articulate a position that moves beyond the opposition between metaphysical realism and relativism and to orient hermeneutics toward its practical dimension. His approach provides a theoretical grounding for the practical, ethico-political dimension of hermeneutics, including the formulation of concrete proposals aimed at the reduction of violence.

2. Violence in the Context of the Contemporary World and History

The second domain of Vattimo's interpretation of violence concerns the context of the contemporary situation and history. On the one hand, this context presupposes the theoretical framework of violence discussed above. On the other, it seeks to justify it by revealing both the presence of metaphysical violence throughout history and in the present, while also showing how the possibility of weak thought is embedded within them. Metaphysical violence involves the absolutization of particular interpretations in the present and thus the neglect of the fact that these interpretations are the result of a historical process and a response to a specific historical situation, meaning they are temporary and perspectival in nature (Vattimo, 2014). Metaphysics treats what is historical and finite as something ultimately and absolutely true. Vattimo's remedy for this aspect of metaphysical violence is the ontology of provenance—an interpretation of history (Vattimo, 1997, 2021)—and the ontology of actuality, understood as an interpretation of the contemporary historical situation (Vattimo, 2003, 2014, 2017, 2021). These constitute two sides of a single project of weak ontology aimed at relocating everything that appears indisputably true and necessary onto the

plane of historicity and contingency. They form a unity and mutually inform one another, since the present world is rooted in history, and understanding the contemporary moment requires grasping its historical genesis, while the interpretation of history inevitably proceeds from the present context, as the past is present only insofar as it speaks to and influences the present.

2.1. The Ontology of Provenance

The ontology of provenance shows how history leads to the present moment (Vattimo, 1997). This process, however, does not imply teleological necessity. Vattimo does not propose a philosophy of history in the Hegelian sense. He assumes neither a predetermined ultimate goal of history nor immutable laws governing its course. Instead, he proposes an interpretation of history, which takes as its point of departure the horizon of the contemporary hermeneutic situation. The first function of the ontology of provenance is to reveal the historical genesis of the present, including metaphysical theories, structures, and concepts functioning within it often mistakenly regarded as ahistorical.

Its second function is to uncover the emancipatory potential of history by offering a narrative of history that presents it as a source of possibilities for freedom and the limitation of metaphysical violence. The central idea of Vattimo's interpretation of history is that history should be understood as a process of the gradual dissolution of metaphysical structures and the weakening of Being (Vattimo, 1999, 2017). The contemporary world thus appears as the epoch of the end of metaphysics, in which absolutist interpretations reveal themselves as unjustified and devoid of their former power to shape reality. Nietzsche plays a key role in this account of history. Through his declaration that "God is dead" and his concept of fulfilled nihilism, he was, in Vattimo's view, the first to clearly recognize the absence of ultimate foundations and the interpretive character of reality (Vattimo, 1988, 1997). In Vattimo's later work, a second pivotal moment in the history of the weakening of Being is found in the emergence of the idea of *kenosis*, the self-emptying of the transcendent and absolute God into the finite, historically situated human form of Christ (Vattimo, 1999, 2002). For Vattimo, the essence of Christianity lies in the weakening of the metaphysical nature of God, and, consequently, in the weakening of the

link between religion and violence, marking the beginning of secularization (Vattimo, 1999, 2002).

From this perspective, Vattimo, following Heidegger, speaks of the necessity of the *Verwindung* of metaphysics, understood as its distortion and convalescence (Vattimo, 1988, 1997, 2014). Metaphysics cannot simply be overcome (*Überwinden*), rejected as a past error, and replaced by an allegedly more accurate alternative in the form of a hermeneutic interpretation of Being. Such a gesture would itself be metaphysical, as it would follow the metaphysical logic of beginning anew from an absolute point and declaring metaphysics false for failing to correspond to reality (Vattimo, 1997, 2017). *Verwindung* entails, on the one hand, accepting metaphysics as an authentic stage in the history of Being, during which Being unfolded as presence and permanence (Vattimo, 1988, 2019). On the other, it involves distorting metaphysics' original aims and claims by placing it within the dynamic of the history of Being. It is therefore an effort of continual remembrance (*Andenken*) and rethinking of metaphysical concepts, liberating them from their foundationalist character and treating them as both belonging to the past and as our inescapable heritage, outside of which we have no access to Being (Vattimo, 1988, 2017, 2019). For this reason, Vattimo often conveys the idea of *Verwindung* through the metaphor of recovering from an illness, whose traces and remnants we still carry with us (Vattimo, 1988, 1997, 2017).

An example of such *Verwindung* can be found in Vattimo's interpretation of science. This interpretation involves two main elements. First, science undergoes hermeneuticization: it is stripped of its metaphysical status as the privileged domain of true knowledge about objective reality and becomes one mode of understanding the world, alongside philosophy, art and religion (Vattimo, 1997). Vattimo notes that this hermeneutic turn is already underway within the philosophy of science itself, for instance in the works of Kuhn (Vattimo, 2017). Second, science and technology based on it turn out not to be agents of metaphysical stabilization of Being, but instead contribute to the weakening of metaphysics by destabilizing the notion of fixed reality and preparing the world without facts. As Vattimo notes, science increasingly speaks of objects that can no longer be compared to those encountered in everyday life (Vattimo, 2010a). Meanwhile, technology gives rise to the postmodern world of mass media and the proliferation of world-images, in which strong conceptual distinctions are blurred and the line between natural and artificially created needs becomes difficult to draw (Vattimo, 1992, 1997).

The third function of the ontology of provenance is to justify Vattimo's own hermeneutic philosophy as an adequate response to the message of the weakening of Being conveyed by history. For Vattimo, hermeneutics cannot claim that it describes objective reality more accurately than alternative interpretations (Vattimo, 1997, 2003, 2017); instead, it must present itself as a product of the historical process—the result of a particular sequence of events. In other words, by telling a story of the origin of hermeneutics and showing how history prepared its possibility. Hermeneutic philosophy can legitimate itself only by arguing that it is a hermeneutically appropriate interpretation of the legacy to which it belongs and that, on the basis of its own reconstruction of history, it represents a more persuasive and more justified choice than other interpretations (Vattimo, 1997).

2.2. The Ontology of Actuality

In contrast, the ontology of actuality interprets the present as the epoch of the end of metaphysics (Vattimo, 2014, 2017, 2021). It reveals the characteristic features of the historical horizon into which we are thrown and contributes to the reduction of violence in two ways. First, it identifies and analyzes phenomena indicative of the weakening of Being in the contemporary world, such as the hermeneuticization of science, religious ecumenism, and the postmodern plurality of small narratives. In doing so, it demonstrates that metaphysics no longer holds either theoretical or phenomenological justification. Second, it tracks the remnants of metaphysics—those still-operating interpretations that lay claim to absolute truth and supreme authority—and exposes them, at the theoretical level, as merely interpretations (Vattimo, 2003, 2014, 2021). The concept of the ontology of actuality operates in both the *genetivus subjectivus* and the *genetivus objectivus* senses: it interprets the present while also being a product of it, since the hermeneutic idea of interpretation and its corresponding ontology become possible only within the epoch of the end of metaphysics and the weakening of Being (Vattimo, 2014, 2021). Such an ontology has no other source or justification for its interpretation than the very situation it interprets and from which it arises (Vattimo, 2003, 2021).

3. The Practical-Political Context of Violence

3.1. Weak Thought as a Hermeneutic Practice of Reducing Violence

When addressing the third, practical-political context of Vattimo's interpretation of violence, it is important to note that in the 21st century Vattimo abandoned the optimism he had previously held regarding the emancipatory potential of postmodern society—an optimism still evident in the 1990s, particularly in *The Transparent Society*. In that work, he argued that the features of postmodern society, such as mass media generating a multiplicity of images that replace reality, would almost automatically lead to the erosion of metaphysical narratives and foster pluralism of interpretations (Vattimo, 1992). In his later writings, however, Vattimo became significantly more critical of contemporary socio-political reality, identifying a resurgence of metaphysical tendencies and, consequently, an intensification of violence. This involved aspects of a globalized world such as the dominance of economic liberalism and the surge in social inequalities, the increase of social control and surveillance in the West under the pretext of the war on terror, and the return of “strong” narratives in the form of religious fundamentalism and the clash of cultures (Vattimo, 2017, 2021).

According to Vattimo, the response to this violence lies in recognizing hermeneutics as a form of existential and political engagement with the world aimed at the reduction of violence (Vattimo, 2014, 2017, 2021). As Lindsey (2013) observes, the principle of violence reduction serves as the starting point for Vattimo's reflections on ethics, politics, and society. This principle can organize a post-metaphysical political project, as it remains in line with weak ontology and does not propose a new metaphysical narrative (Lindsey, 2013). For Vattimo, hermeneutics must become both a philosophy of praxis, with the emancipation of humankind as its stake, and a practice involving political commitment to transforming reality (Vattimo, 2010a, 2017, 2021).³

³ In Vattimo's oft-repeated formulation, according to which hermeneutics must be both a philosophy of *praxis* and a practice that transforms the world, one can discern echoes of Gadamer's conception of hermeneutics as a practical philosophy and his distinction between practical philosophy and *praxis* itself, that is, between knowledge concerning the nature of the good life, the proper ends of action, and the general conditions of praxis, and the actual practice that determines what is good in a concrete situation (Gadamer, 2004). However, unlike Gadamer, Vattimo insists that hermeneutics cannot remain merely

Its practical and political dimension stems from the concept of weak Being, which exists only through interpretations, as well as from the notion of hermeneutics as an ontology of actuality tasked with offering a persuasive narrative of contemporary reality and responding to the problems and challenges it presents. If there are only interpretations, then proposing new ones is as much a theoretical activity offering new ways of understanding as it is a practical endeavor of shaping reality (Vattimo, 2021). Rephrasing Marx's 11th Thesis on Feuerbach, Vattimo writes: "Until now philosophers thought they were only interpreting the world, yet they were truly changing it" (Vattimo, 2021, p. 184). The philosopher is engaged in the Being they interpret: they cannot speak about it without participating in its happening and constituting a part of its history (Vattimo, 2017). Hence: "in philosophy I believe that some political good is always at stake, some question of the political community. That is what justifies philosophy as teaching, philosophy in newspapers, and philosophy in politics too" (Vattimo, 2010a, p. 105). This marks a break with the classical division between theory and praxis, in which theory is presumed to provide the foundation for praxis, and a ready-made theoretical project is subsequently applied to practice. For this reason, Vattimo maintains that hermeneutics, as weak thought, is inherently political as it is a praxis situated within concrete reality and actively transforms that reality through interpretation aimed at reducing metaphysical violence (Vattimo, 2003, 2010a, 2017). The ontology of weak Being "supplies philosophical reasons for preferring a liberal, tolerant, and democratic society rather than an authoritarian and totalitarian one" (Vattimo, 2003, p. 19). Hermeneutics thus becomes a political project oriented toward human emancipation (Ambord, 2022; D'Arcais, 2007; Risser, 2010), understood as situation of freedom to interpret.

Vattimo concretizes the goal of practical-political emancipation through two tasks assigned to hermeneutics. First, hermeneutics must demonstrate that all metaphysical claims to truth function as claims to domination and as sources of violence (Vattimo, 2010b, 2017). For Vattimo, truth is employed in political discourse as an ideological tool to legitimize domination over others. However, this connection between truth and power is neither natural nor necessary, stemming from some immutable human nature; rather,

a philosophy of *praxis*; it must also take the form of concrete political action aimed at reducing violence in the world.

it is historical and contingent (Vattimo, 2017, 2021). Breaking this link is possible through the weakening of the metaphysical conception of truth and through subordinating the phenomenon of truth in the political sphere to democracy and freedom. Hence, “‘the truth will make you free’ ought to be rephrased: not ‘that which is true frees me,’ but ‘that which frees me is true’” (Vattimo, 2010a, p. 96). The second task is “demonstrating, first of all theoretically, but also with an active presence in public opinion, that rational human coexistence is possible without ‘the truth’, namely with regard to the plurality of values and worldviews that constitute the richness, rather than the danger, of humanity” (Vattimo, 2010b, p. 284).

3.2. The Political Dimension of Vattimo’s Philosophy

At the level of practical philosophy, hermeneutics becomes primarily an interpretation of democracy as a system that is supposed to be pluralistic and tolerant and is thus best suited to the epoch of the end of metaphysics.⁴ This interpretation outlines how democratic governance should function in a world where only interpretations exist. Vattimo advocates a procedural rather than essentialist conception of democracy (Martin, 2010). Democracy should provide space for open and polyphonic discourse and reject appeals to absolute truth and to natural order (Vattimo, 2003, 2014, 2017). As he states: “where there is democracy, there cannot be a class of those who possess the truth and either exercise power directly (Plato’s philosopher-kings) or dictate rules of conduct to the sovereign” (Vattimo, 2014, p. 16). Accordingly, democratic discourse must abandon the idea of human rights based on an innate and common human nature, as well as the concept of natural equality among people, due to their metaphysical character (Vattimo, 2003). As he notes: “Equality is not a natural fact; it is precisely the opposite” (Vattimo, 2003, p. 107). Equality is thus socially constructed, always realized within

⁴ Bacon (2016) is mistaken in claiming that Vattimo would be more consistent if he held that the weakening of metaphysics does not justify any political system—particularly that it does not justify democracy more than any other form of governance—and if he maintained that democratic politics requires no conception of truth, metaphysical or otherwise. The former position would entail abandoning the inherent political dimension of hermeneutics, so crucial for Vattimo, as well as the concrete political implications of weak thought. The latter would result in arbitrariness and relativism, which Vattimo seeks to avoid.

a specific historical situation and rooted in the history of political transformations. The value of equality in a democracy must be subordinated to the overarching goal of emancipation and the reduction of violence (Vattimo, 2003).

Hermeneutics, as political practice, also involves exposing specific metaphysical structures and beliefs shaping contemporary reality—such as those previously mentioned, including the dominance of liberal capitalism, assumed as the default and optimal economic order, or religious fundamentalism. To these, one may add the weakening of natural justification in the political sphere, that is, the tendency to ground political claims, decisions, and actions through appeals to objective nature, whether the nature of economic reality or of the human being (Vattimo, 2003, 2017). Alongside this critical function, hermeneutics supports concrete political proposals consistent with weak thought. For example, in *Nihilism and Emancipation*, Vattimo argues that interpretive freedom, including the free projection of one's own life, requires the greatest possible equality of initial opportunities, supported by access to affordable health care, free education, guaranteed housing, and even a basic income (Vattimo, 2003).

The foregoing characterization of the political dimension of weak thought demonstrates that the hermeneutic pluralism of interpretations advocated by Vattimo has little in common with the neoliberal pluralism of lifestyles, opinions, and consumer goods. The latter lacks both anti-metaphysical radicalism (being itself metaphysical, insofar as it endorses the universal hegemony of free-market logic and dominance of liberal and individualist ideologies) and genuine critical force (since it does not so much challenge the prevailing socio-economic order as function as an integral part of it, stabilizing and reproducing it under the guise of diversity and tolerance). As a result, neoliberal pluralism remains fully compatible with various forms of structural violence. By contrast, Vattimo's hermeneutics aims to weaken the metaphysical structures that sustain domination and thereby reduce violence in all its forms. It is therefore intrinsically emancipatory and critically oriented toward existing social reality, and incompatible with any apology for the status quo and structural violence inscribed in it and thus avoids the risk of co-optation by the capitalist order.

At the same time, Vattimo recognizes the risks involved in philosophers' political engagement within the concrete ontic world. The emblematic example of such risk for him is Heidegger. Vattimo interprets Heidegger's

involvement with Nazism as a failure to maintain the ontological difference, specifically as a conflation of the return of Being with a particular ontic political project, one purporting to restore a mythical pre-metaphysical world in the modern age (Vattimo, 2021). The lesson Vattimo draws from Heidegger's example is twofold. First, the philosopher must accept responsibility for political engagement and the risk of error (Vattimo, 2021), while remaining aware of this risk. Therefore, she must avoid ideological involvement that ignores the ontological difference (Valgenti, 2014). Second, a distinction between the philosopher and politician must be preserved. The philosopher adopts a more critical and distanced stance toward the existing state of affairs (Vattimo, 2010a). Her participation in politics should not primarily consist in direct involvement in decision-making, law-making, or party activity, but rather in offering general diagnoses of reality, meaningful ideas, and concepts that explain specific phenomena, thus shaping social and political attitudes (Vattimo, 2010a). At the same time, as Valgenti (2014) rightly observes, the philosopher should not simply function as an expert or external authority *vis-à-vis* political practice, providing objective criteria for political action. Thus, while the distinction between philosophy and politics is preserved in Vattimo's thought, it is also weakened, to the extent that neither the figure of the philosopher without practical-political involvement, nor that of the politician without philosophically interpreted responsibility for responding to the weakening of Being and the reduction of metaphysical violence, can be properly conceived. As D'Arcais (2017) observes, philosophy and politics in Vattimo's thought become two forms of the same emancipatory practice in the contemporary world of the end of metaphysics. The philosopher's existence becomes a vocation (Vattimo, 2010a), intrinsically tied to the role of the politically engaged thinker, that is, a practitioner who remains mindful of the ontological difference.

Conclusion

Connection Between the Three Contexts of Violence

In conclusion, several observations can be made regarding Vattimo's interpretation of violence. First, it should be made explicit what has been implicitly assumed throughout this article: that the three contexts outlined above form

a unified whole in Vattimo's thought, mutually shaping and justifying one another. The theoretical concept of the metaphysical origins of violence and its remedy in the form of weak thought is justified by Vattimo's account of the present (ontology of actuality) and history (ontology of provenance). At the same time, these ontologies presuppose a weak interpretation of Being.

From both contexts it follows that hermeneutic philosophy is not limited to theory but is a situated interpretive practice aimed at transforming the contemporary world of global technological and capitalist domination through the reduction of violence. To fulfill its practical-political function without losing its critical edge—namely, without reverting to metaphysical habits of proposing a new, singularly correct social order—the practical dimension of hermeneutics must, for Vattimo, remain theoretically grounded in the ontology of weak Being and in the interpretation of history as its weakening. These provide the guiding framework for how its practical dimension is supposed to be enacted: as the dissolution of metaphysical foundations of violence driven by the recognition that there are only interpretations and aimed at the constitution of a maximally open, tolerant, and democratic society.

This dependence is reciprocal. The practical dimension of reducing violence shapes the horizon of reflection on the present and the interpretation of history. For example, the encounter with specific phenomena during practical engagement enriches the understanding of the contemporary world, while theoretical reflection remains tied to hermeneutic practice and is itself an interpretive practice that shapes reality. Nevertheless, D'Arcais (2007) overstates the practical and political dimension of Vattimo's hermeneutics when he claims that its theoretical goal (anti-metaphysical and anti-dogmatic) is one-sidedly governed by its political goal (anti-authoritarian and anti-violent). As Valgenti (2014) rightly observes, it would be an oversimplification to claim that the overriding motivation behind Vattimo's hermeneutics is merely a rationalization of leftist ideology and the source of weak thought is neither purely theoretical nor purely practical or political.

Descriptive and Normative Aspects of Vattimo's Account of Violence

A second observation concerns the dual character of Vattimo's interpretation which is both descriptive and normative. By presenting Being as an event and identifying metaphysics as the source of violence, he simultaneously

formulates a practical task of reducing violence and indicates the manner in which this task should be carried out. This duality also appears at the metaphilosophical level. Descriptively, Vattimo portrays philosophy as it has always already been—namely, an inherently political interpretation of reality. Normatively, he calls for philosophy to acknowledge and assume this role explicitly. Consequently, Vattimo advocates stronger engagement of philosophical reflection with concrete social and political problems of contemporary society (Vattimo, 2003, 2017, 2021).

Limits of Vattimo's Conception of Violence— The Problem of the Non-Human

Vattimo's concept of interpretive violence rooted in metaphysics implies that violence is intrinsically linked to language and history: it involves the denial of someone's right to participate in discourse and is conditioned by historical circumstances. While I have argued that Vattimo does not simply reduce violence to its discursive dimension alone, it still raises a question that ultimately remains unresolved here: to what extent does such an interpretation of risks oversimplify the complexity and variety of the phenomenon of violence? The problem of physical violence raised by this question has already been addressed in this article. However, another issue remains that is equally pressing and potentially more troubling.

A further difficulty concerns the non-human. In Vattimo's framework, the category of violence applies only to actions rooted in language and history, which effectively restricts it to human agents. This position follows from Vattimo's conception of violence as interpretive in its core and from the assumption that non-human beings lack history and language and therefore cannot engage in interpretation in a strict sense. Consequently, Vattimo does not address the existence of violence in the non-human world and considers human violence against nature only in terms of its consequences for human beings (Vattimo, 2003, 2021).

Violence against the natural environment can be thus conceptualized only from a human perspective. Namely, as a dogmatic imposition of a particular interpretation of what nature is (for instance, from a technoscientific or capitalist standpoint, in which nature is understood as a resource to be exploited), leading to destructive actions against the environment and the exclusion of alternative interpretations. The natural environment, insofar as

it is always mediated by interpretation, it becomes a fundamentally cultural phenomenon (Vattimo, 1988, 1994). Consequently, Vattimo not only denies any intrinsic normative value to nature, but effectively leaves no room for an autonomous non-human domain at all. Non-human animals and the environment as a whole are not treated as full-fledged subjects or agents within interpretive processes. This eliminates any basis for attributing agency or normative claims to non-human beings or ecological systems. It thus becomes evident that, despite his proclaimed weakening of the metaphysical category of the subject, Vattimo's philosophy ultimately remains anthropocentric.

This does not preclude critique of the devastation of the natural environment. Vattimo himself interprets environmental degradation as a manifestation of the dominance of a metaphysical interpretation of nature (Vattimo, 2003). However, he also criticizes ecological thought for its own metaphysical character, particularly its tendency to essentialize nature and to ascribe to it an immanent normative value (Vattimo, 2003). By rejecting nature as an ontological foundation, Vattimo rules out the possibility of articulating an autonomous environmental ontology and instead subordinates ecological thinking to human political emancipation. Consequently, concern for the non-human environment is rendered derivative of human interpretive horizons, historical situation, and political goals, rather than recognized as grounded in the significance of nature itself. This raises a serious doubt as to whether an ecological critique grounded in Vattimo's philosophy can provide a sufficiently robust theoretical basis for the effective protection of the natural environment.⁵

At the same time, alternative developments within hermeneutics suggest otherwise. Works inspired by Heidegger demonstrate the

⁵ These are, of course, not the only objections raised in the literature regarding Vattimo's conception of violence. For example, White (2009) points to the problematic nature of deriving the imperative to reduce violence from a weak, non-foundational thought. Lindsey (2013) highlights the ambiguity in Vattimo's distinction between unjustified, metaphysical violence and justified violence—for instance, in self-defense—as well as his underestimation of the impact of new technologies on the contemporary understanding of violence. Webb (2011) argues that Vattimo's notion of violence is both too rigid, failing to capture all forms of possible authoritarianism, and too general, lacking sufficient precision to clearly determine when violence is actually at play. Regardless of the extent to which these criticisms are fully justified, and one could attempt to defend Vattimo's hermeneutics against them, it can nonetheless be said that Vattimo's unconventional conception of violence, which links it to metaphysics, has provoked lively discussion.

possibility of ecological reflection on the natural environment within this tradition (see, e.g., Foltz, 1995; Fontini, 2022; McWhorter & Stenstad, 2009). Vattimo's framework therefore calls for a revision of its approach to nature—one that would reduce its anthropocentric character, seek a stronger embedding of the human being in the world understood not only as a cultural and linguistic domain but also as a natural environment (even if our understanding of this environment remains mediated by interpretations), and allow nature and non-human beings to participate more autonomously in the play of understanding, while preserving the anti-metaphysical and hermeneutic core of weak thought. Whether such a revision is compatible with Vattimo's assumptions remains an open question.⁶

Reducing Violence as an Ongoing Task

A final remark concerns the nature of Vattimo's proposed remedy for violence. Weak thought is neither a universal cure for violence, nor a means of achieving a completely non-violent order of reality (Vattimo, 2003, 2017). Since metaphysics cannot ultimately be overcome but only subjected to *Verwindung*, also violence itself cannot be entirely eliminated. In other words, interpretive violence is unavoidable.

What remains possible is its reduction: a continuous critical effort to weaken its structures and disrupt metaphysical patterns within specific historical contexts. This process has no endpoint, as new metaphysical sources of violence will inevitably emerge. The reduction of violence must therefore be understood as an unending process, not a final state that can be achieved once and for all. For Vattimo, the project of emancipation remains permanently unfinished and always ongoing (Marder, 2011). This is reflected in a telling passage from *Being and Its Surroundings*, in which Vattimo describes hermeneutical communism as “a shadow that accompanies and torments [...] the established order and the prevailing power structures” (Vattimo, 2021, p. 154). The communism Vattimo envisions is not a positive revolutionary proposal to abolish the existing order and establish a new, non-violent social and political system, but rather an endless critique directed at the metaphysical aspects of contemporary public sphere.

⁶ The necessity and feasibility of such a revision within the framework of Vattimo's interpretation of kenosis are acknowledged by Daniele Fulvi (2022); however, he does not specify the content of the proposed revision.

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