

GIANNI VATTIMO: TRUTH'S VIOLENCE AND WEAK THOUGHT*

Erhan KUÇLU¹

ABSTRACT

In this article, we will take Italian philosopher, politician and cultural critic Gianni Vattimo's thoughts on truth's violence and weak thought in a general framework. At first we'll introduce the Italian Philosopher in a few words and give some information about his works. Secondly we'll explain his views on truth's violence. According to Vattimo, since Plato, Western thought and thus societies live in this "violence"/metaphysical categories. He argues that this violence stems from [metaphysical] truth claims. In other words, he put forwards that this truth claims are not only intrinsic to religious [truth] claims but also common in modern thought, science and technology. And finally, we'll discuss his concept of "weak thought" (il pensiero debole) as a critical and weakener stance against these truth claims. The weak thought tries to find a way to liberate us from these metaphysical categories and claims. In this direction Vattimo's intellectual background mainly depends on Nietzschean and Heideggerian literature. Nietzsche and Heidegger always object to these claims and categories in a different ways. Vattimo eclectically uses their thoughts and concepts/phrases (for example Nietzsche's famous phrase "God is dead" and Heidegger's concept of Verwindung (Overcoming)) to weaken these claims. In Vattimo's all works we can see the criticism of metaphysical thoughts because he believes that the end of the truth is beginning the democracy.

Key Words: Gianni Vattimo, Violence, Truth, Weak, Democracy, Verwindung (Overcoming).

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¹ Research Assistant, Uludag University, Faculty of Arts and Science, Sociology Department.

ÖZET

Gianni Vattimo: Hakikatin Şiddeti ve Zayıf Düşün

Bu makalede, Genel hatlarıyla İtalyan filozof, politikacı ve kültür eleştirmeni Gianni Vattimo'nun hakikat'in şiddeti ve weak thought'a ilişkin düşüncelerini ele alacağız. Öncelikle İtalyan düşünürü tanıtıp, eserleri hakkında bazı bilgiler vereceğiz. İkinci olarak, onun "hakikat'in şiddeti"ne dair fikirlerini açıklayacağız. Zira Vattimo'ya göre, Platon'dan beri Batı düşüncesi ve dolayısıyla batılı toplumlar, bu şiddet/metafizik kategoriler içerisinde yaşamaktadır. Vattimo, söz konusu şiddet'in [metafizik] hakikat iddialarından kaynaklandığını ileri sürer. Bir başka ifadeyle, bu metafizik iddiaların yalnızca dini [hakikat] iddialarına özgü olmadığını aynı zamanda modern düşünce, bilim ve teknolojide de yaygın olduğunu ileri sürer. Ve son olarak, bu hakikat iddialarına karşı eleştirel ve zayıflatıcı bir duruş olarak, onun "zayıf düşünce" (il pensiero debole) kavramını tartışacağız. Zayıf düşünce temelde bizi bu metafizik kategori ve iddialardan özgürleştirmenin bir yolunu bulmaya çalışır. Bu manada Vattimo'nun entelektüel geçmişi Nietzscheci ve Heideggerci literatüre dayanır. Nietzsche ve Heidegger her zaman bu iddia ve kategorilere farklı tarzlarda karşı çıkarlar. Vattimo onların ifade ve kavramlarını (mesela, Nietzsche'nin "Tanrı öldü" ifadesi ve Heidegger'in üstesinden gelme (Verwindung) kavramını) eklektik bir biçimde kullanır. Biz Vattimo'nun eserlerinin bütününde metafizik düşüncenin eleştirisini görebiliriz çünkü Vattimo şuna inanır: hakikat'in sonu demokrasinin başlangıcıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gianni Vattimo, hakikat, şiddet, zayıf, demokrasi, üstesinden gelme (Verwindung).

INTRODUCTION

Gianni Vattimo is a Italian philosopher, politician and cultural critic. Vattimo was born on 4 January 1936 in Turin. He completed his Phd dissertation on Aristotle under the advisor of Luigi Pareyson at the University of Turin. After getting the degree (1959) from university he went to Heidelberg and studied with H. G. Gadamer and Karl Löwith. In 1968 he became a full professor of aesthetics at the University of Turin. He has also been visiting professor at several universities around the world; Stanford and Yale University etc. Vattimo's well-known books are *The End of Modernity*; *The Adventure of Difference*; *The Transparent Society*; *Beyond Interpretation*; *Belief*; *Vocazione e responsabilità del filosofo (The vocation and responsibility of the philosopher)*; *After Christianity*; *Nihilism and Emancipation*; *Dialogue with Nietzsche*; *Religion, coedited with Jacques Derrida*; and *The Future of Religion, co-authored with Richard Rorty*; *Hermeneutic Communism*; *From Heidegger to Marx, co-authored With*

Santiago Zabala; and recently *Of Reality: The Purposes of Philosophy*. He is also the Italian translator of Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode*.²

In the philosophical literature, there are lots of thoughts and comments on the decline of the West. For Vattimo, "...decline of West signifies the solution of the idea that there was a unitary significance and direction to the history of mankind". (Vattimo, 2004; 21) After death of God and Crisis of Reason (both of them are metaphysical foundations) we live in a new "age"; the age of interpretation. Vattimo emphasizes this new age with Nietzsche's famous two phrases: "God is dead" and other is the title of chapter of the *Twilight of the idols*; "How the "True World" Finally Became a Fable". According to Vattimo, "When Nietzsche says "God is dead," he's saying that there is no center, no single, overarching principle that explains things". (Vattimo, 2007; 133) and also "Nietzsche calls "the death of God" because it's the death of any version of monism or reductionism, including secularism. (Ibid, 133) From this point of view, Vattimo says that this phrase means that "There's just a multiplicity of fictions or interpretations. Vattimo's reading the second phrase in a similar tendency. "The 'true world' that becomes a fable (as the title of a well-known chapter of the *Twilight of the Idols* has it) in no sense gives way to more profound and reliable truth; it gives way to a play of interpretations that is presented philosophically, in its turn, as no more than interpretation". (Vattimo, 1997; 7) In other words, for Vattimo, all these metaphysical categories must be weakened by reinterpreting them. In Vattimian thought, all of metaphysical categories are already interpreted categories. They are not stable or unchangeable things as strong thought argues. Vattimo uses Reiner Schürman's perspective to show the temporality of "things and our understanding of them. Schürman argues that "a new arrangement produces a new *nomos* of our oikos, a new economy. He gives Parthenon as an example, "...the Parthenon: within the network actions, things and words the way an entity like the Acropolis is present epochally assumed well-defined although complex character- when rhapsodes prepared for the Panathenaean festival, when the Parthenon served as a Byzantine church, when the Turks used it as a powder magazine". (Schürmann, 1987; 56-7) But after this historical background "today, when it has become a commodity for tourist consumption and when UNESCO plans to protect it from pollution with a plastic dome, it is present in an epochal economy in yet another fashion-a mode of presence certainly inconceivable for its architect, Ichtynos". (1987; 57) He comes to a conclusion that "At each moment of this history, the edifice was present according to finite,

² For more information on Vattimo's life and works see *Weakening the Philosophy*, edited by Santiago Zabala, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007

unforeseeable, uncontrollable traits. And each reversal entailed the irremediable disappearance of such an epochal physiognomy". (Ibid, 57) Vattimo and Zabala comment Schürmann's words; For Schürmann, Western metaphysics becomes a succession of epochal principles that determined hegemonically the different periods of the history of thought. (Vattimo and Zabala, 2011; 99) And also, "when an epoch changes, a new principle installs itself hegemonically in order to legitimate new practices". (Ibid, 99) In a new age namely in age of interpretation Vattimo suggests that we should reconsider all these metaphysical categories.

TRUTH'S VIOLENCE

It can be said that the center of Vattimo's thought is Nietzschean and Heideggerian literature but despite the controversy between Nietzsche and Heidegger on some philosophical issues such as the Being, Metaphysics and Nihilism etc. He differently interprets Nietzsche and Heidegger to find an exist from the metaphysics if we use A. Woodward's words his philosophical style "is thus a syncretic amalgam of themes found in Nietzsche and Heidegger, hermeneutics and postmodernism." (Woodward, 2009; 76) In fact, Vattimo's central problem is mainly "violence of truth", which leached into The world of Western thought; From Plato's dialogues to science and politics. In *Hermeneutic Communism; From Heidegger to Marx*, Vattimo and Zabala examine this violence's origins; they argue that Plato's dialogues have some implications that contain violence:

The slaves in Plato's allegory of the cave could today be represented by the weak, that is, by those oppressed cultures, citizens, and states that are constantly called on to join Western civilization (also named the "Washington consensus," IMF, or United Nations). Just like Plato, the West believes that it holds truth, that is, the appropriate knowledge capable guiding the interest of all the other states. Although Plato probably thought his dialogues were in the slaves' best interest, the fact that he would also consider it necessary to "drag the slave away by force into the light of the sun" if he was not convinced (through the dialogue) implies that Plato himself was serving other interests. But which interests? The interests of truth, which belong to those who understand, know; and probably even created it in order to justify their objective presences. This is why in most of Plato's dialogues truth is not an outcome but is always presupposed by those who opportunely interrogate the others... (Vattimo and Zabala, 2011; 23-24)

This fragment reveals that in the Plato's dialogues (and today in the Western States' politics) some impositions to put across to his interlocutors. They argues that In Plato's dialogues, even if the slaves discover the truth he cannot understand it without Plato's query and guidance. For Vattimo and

Zabala these impositions are main obstacles which hinder the emergence of “conversation”. Because these impositions serve “...the silencing of the other through dialogue, that is, an act of violence for the sake of conserving truth”. (2011: 25). For them, this indicates a difference between the “*conversation*” and “*dialogue*”. “Conversations, just like Heidegger’s “event of unconcealment,” represent the disruption of the order that dialogues protect, because in the conversational exchange truth is not presupposed but rather discarded from the beginning. (2011; 25-26). In *The Remains of Being*, Zabala details the difference. He argues that “... it is important to clarify the difference between the English terms “dialogue” and “conversation,” as this will also introduce the remains. Although, literally, the German *Gespräch* should be translated as “discussion,” Dialog as “dialogue,” and *Unterhaltung* as “conversation,” most translators of Gadamer’s works have rightly translated *Gespräch* always as “conversation,” not because of linguistic arbitrariness but because of a philosophical demand implicit in the meaning of *Gespräch*.(Zabala, 2009; 80) According to Zabala “When Gadamer refers to *Gespräch*, he is not alluding to something programmed, conducted, and organized in advance under the direction of a subject matter where the partners leave aside their particular points of view.

On the contrary, a genuine *Gespräch* is never the one we wanted to conduct but rather the one we fall into and become involved in as it develops; we are led by it instead of being the leaders of it. In this way, the conclusion or truth reached by the *Gespräch* is actually produced through its own unprogrammed modalities, which we never have under control, and most of all this end is achieved without our knowing we would even reach it”. (Zabala, 2009; 80-81)

In this case, Vattimo’s thought recommends us the giving up of the dialogue due to its truth claims and thus due to truth’s violence. Our task is to construct the “consensus” without bringing forward any claims for truth. By giving up the truth claims we can establish real democratic dialogue without any imposition: “...*the end of the truth is beginning the democracy*”. (2011; 23) In other words, especially in a political area, truth claims always bring “the violence”. In *Nihilism and Emancipation* Vattimo says that “I use “violence” to mean the peremptory assertion of an ultimacy that, like ultimate metaphysical foundation (or the God of philosophers), breaks off dialogue and silences the interlocutor by refusing even to acknowledge the question why?” (Vattimo, 2004; 98) In this sense, metaphysics may be understood as violent because it manifests a suppressive authority in the form of a foundation: metaphysical thought limits the free play of dialogue and interpretation by silencing those voices that are not appropriately related to the foundation to which metaphysics appeals as an arbiter of legitimacy.

(Woodward, 2009; 80) For Vattimo, after the Nietzsche's famous phrase: "God is dead", "objective-world" became impossible. We cannot put forward metaphysical absolutes or truth claims. In other words we should leave truth claims/strong thought rather hear the weak thought.

WEAK THOUGHT: OVERCOMING THE METAPHYSICS

Peter Carravetta, the translator of Weak Thought (in Italian, *il pensiero debole*), in his introduction, "What is "Weak Thought?"" gives some informations about the history and literature of weak thought. "Weak thought" –*il pensiero debole*– has been known more than quarter century, in Italy the first appearance of the term is 1983. According to Carravetta, "weak thought goes to the very heart of the great problems in continental philosophy but without any intent to raze all previous conceptual edifices to the ground". (Carravetta, 2012; 1) Another introductory historical information and description belongs to Santiago Zabala tells us that "Vattimo has explained on several occasions that the expression "weak thought" was drawn from an essay by Carlo Augusto Viano ("Reason, Abundance, and Belief," in *Crisi delle regione* [The Crisis of Reason], a famous book edited by Aldo Giorgio Gargani in 1979) and that he used the concept for the first time in the essay "Toward an Ontology of Decline," written in 1979 (and included in *Al di là del sogetto*), where he specifically announces that no one has ever interpreted Heidegger's ontology as "an ontology of the decline," as a weak ontology, because interpreters continue to think of Heidegger's meditation on Being in foundational, or metaphysical, terms". (Zabala, 2007; 12) In his Collaborative Autobiography, *Not Being God*, Vattimo mentions the history of weak thought. "Weak thought got its name, *pensiero debole*, only in autumn 1979, and it became the title of a collection of essays— it seems incredible now, when everyone is shunning it like the plague—edited by Pier Aldo Rovatti and me in 1983". (Vattimo and Paterlini 2009; 87) Weak thought allows philosophy to correspond to the dissolution of metaphysics (through hermeneutics) and to search for new goals and ambitions within the possibilities of the "thrown" condition of the human being: instead of an understanding of the eternal, philosophy redirects humanity toward an interpretation of its own history. (Vattimo and Zabala, 2011; 97) The phrase *weak thought* refers to the gradual weakening of being that has transformed contemporary philosophy from its former obsession with the metaphysics of truth to its current and more limited understanding of itself strictly as an interpretative exercise. (Robbins, 2007; 16) In *The Future of Religion's* Introduction, *Introduction A Religion Without Theists and Atheists*, Zabala

declares that ““weak thought” is an invitation to overcome metaphysic...but this invitation is not a “revolution call”, Vattimo and Zabala’s thought especially avoid of classical leftist revolution call. In *Hermeneutic Communism*, Vattimo and Zabala clearly explain their attitude against the classical revolutionists: “Unlike Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri, and other contemporary Marxist theorists, we do not believe that the twenty-first century calls for revolution because the forces of the politics of descriptions are too powerful, violent, and oppressive to be overcome through a parallel insurrection: only such a weak thought as hermeneutics can avoid violent ideological revolts and therefore defend the weak”. (2011; 3) Unlike the revolution weak thought Weak thought is a very strong theory of weakness, where the philosophers achievements do not derive from enforcing the objective world but rather from weakening its structures. (2011; 97) They argue that this weakness is just *irreparable* one. “Weak thought does not become strong once it weakens the structures of metaphysics, since there will always be more structures to weaken, just as there will always be subjects to psychoanalyze, beliefs to secularize, or governments to democratize”. (Ibid; 97) In front of the weak thought always will be some strong structures, which must be weakened. In this direction, Vattimo in his essay “*Dialectics, Difference and Weak Thought*” gives us the core of weak thought. “We are aware that the breakdown of foundations cannot be perceived as a *bad truth* which has to be overcome by a *good truth*.” (Antiseri, 1996; 3) Vattimo

In *Toward a Nonreligious Christianity*, Vattimo formulates the notion of weak thought: “As the objective world consumes itself, it gives way to a growing subjective transformation not of individuals but of communities, cultures, sciences, and languages”. (Vattimo, 2007; 40) As Nietzsche had seen very clearly, and as Heidegger shows in ontological terms, the metaphysical tradition is the tradition of 'violent' thinking. (Vattimo, 1993, 3) And thus, “All the categories of metaphysics are violent categories: Being and its attributes, the 'first' cause, man as 'responsible', and even the will to power, if that is read metaphysically as affirmation or as the assumption of power over the world”.(Ibid, 3) Because every truth claim has a “violence”, the main aim of weak thought is to weaken the truth [claims] to get rid of the violence. Pier Aldo Rovatti, stresses this aspect of weak thought in detail:

“Weak Thought” intends to impair the act of knowing in its entirety, both on the side of the knower as well as the side of known. Subject and object are by now worn-out terms, but are there any better ones available? “Weak thought” asks for a modification of the object of knowledge as well as of the knowing subject. We are propelled toward this end by the nihilist deconstruction of fundamental

categories by the attempt to cut a dent into power [*il potere*] or, put otherwise, the “power” of unity”. (Rovatti, 2012; 64-65)

As we said above, weak thought is not a call for revolution, because revolution has radical transformation notions and truth claim. Weak thought tries to go beyond the present ways which try to build a “truth”. Santiago Zabala expresses this attempt in general terms; “Overcoming the theological and platonic distinction between the “eternal and the temporal,” between “the real and the apparent,” between “Being and becoming” means that there exists an intermediate way between entrusting oneself to a divine substitute and entrusting oneself to individual preferences: this way consists of weakening and dissolving the ancient European concept of “Being” and the very idea of “ontological status.”(Zabala, 2005, 3) But to dissolve *the ancient European concept of “Being” and the very idea of “ontological status*, Vattimo Vattimo prefer a Heideggerian term: *Verwindung*. He explains the origin of the word *Verwindung* in his article, *Verwindung: Nihilism and the Postmodern in Philosophy*. “*Verwindung* (Overcoming) is a word that Heidegger uses rather rarely; it appears in one passage in *Holzwege*, in an essay in *Vortrage und Aufsätze*, and, above all in the first essay of *Identitat und Differenz*. (Vattimo, 1987; 7) Vattimo says that with the *Verwindung* “Heidegger seeks to designate something similar to yet distinct from *Überwindung* (“going beyond”) in that *Verwindung* contains no notion or dialectical sublimation (*Aufhebung*) nor of a “leaving behind” which characterizes the connection we have with a past that no longer has anything to say to us. (Ibid, 7). The overcoming of the metaphysics (*Verwindung*), says Vattimo, depends on leaving the metaphysics and its strong concept of Being. “*Verwindung* frees these metaphysical categories from precisely what made them metaphysical: the presumption of gaining access to *ontos on*. (Vattimo, 2012; 47) The function of *Verwindung* closely resembles that of recollection, or, *Andenken*; indeed two terms together define for Vattimo the nature of hermeneutic ontology as fundamental post-modern mode of Philosophizing. (Synder, 1988; li) The Being is message from the past and it must be re-interpreted. “This means that the experience of Being is always both an *Andenken* and a *Verwindug*”.

CONCLUSION

For Vattimo we shouldn't aim at radical disengagement from the modern thought and religion instead of this we should try to transform them. For example, we saw that the modern enlightened prediction which believes the dissolution of religion, did not come true, God is still speaking for his believers. In this case the weak thought tries to transform classical God figure in Christianity. “This new, weak way of thought not only opens up

alternative directions, it also recovers tradition: the relationship between the believer and God is not conceived as power-laden but as a gentler relationship, in which God hands over all his power to man”. (Zabala, 2009; 3) Vattimo expands this transformation: If there is a possible line of emancipation in our human history, emancipation comes not through the final realization of an essence that was given at the beginning once and for all (which therefore would mean that we must somehow return to our state of original innocence before original sin). (Vattimo, 2007; 40) ““We cannot not call ourselves Christians” because in a world where God is dead—where the metanarratives have been dissolved and all authority has fortunately been demythologized, including that of “objective” knowledge—our only chance of human survival rests in the Christian commandment of charity”. (Vattimo, 2009; 54).

In a sociological sense, to live together we should leave aside the truth claims. For Vattimian thought the Nietzsche’s declaration, “there are no facts, only interpretations” means a turn to interpretation. Only Interpretation can save and liberate from the metaphysical violence, and only the soft origin of weak thought can establish a suitable condition for “conversation”. In this sense the weak thought tries to destroy the western truth claims. Because the truth claims surrounded the western thoughts, western politics. For example it is visible clearly when we talk about the democracy, today western countries (US, United Kingdom etc.) claims that just only they have the real democracy namely, only they have the truth of democracy. These countries are imposing the truth of democracy to the middle eastern countries. This truth claims destroy the basic feature of democracy: dialogue and reciprocity.

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