The Ethical Claims of *Il Pensiero Debole*:

Gianni Vattimo, Pluralism and Postmodern Subjectivity

David Edward Rose

Department of Philosophy, University of Glasgow

65-69 Oakfield Avenue
Glasgow G12 8QQ
Scotland – UK

+44 141 5765505
daviderose@ntlworld.com
§1| Introduction: Vattimo and Postmodernity

One of the best travelled and most commented upon philosophies to emerge from Italy since Gramsci has been the peculiar marriage between hermeneutics and nihilism offered by Gianni Vattimo known as *il pensiero debole* or "weak thought." Weak thought is essentially linked to the postmodern condition, which Vattimo holds originates from the writings of first Nietzsche and then Heidegger and in the significance of their respective notions of nihilism and hermeneutics. The originality of weak thought resides in the move, grounded in an ethics of interpretation, to a new, weaker, formulation of truth rather than the rejection of truth and the death of subjectivity and postmodernity is to be celebrated since it is that epoch in which this liberating ethics is made actual. This paper will describe the background to Vattimo's general philosophy and its inherent tendency to irrationalism before discussing his own ethics of interpretation as a response to this problem and describing the postmodern subjectivity which necessarily arises out of his position.

§2| Weak Thought: The Marriage of Hermeneutics and Nihilism

The foundation of Vattimo’s position is to be found primarily in those thinkers who have defined his approach to philosophy, principally Heidegger and Nietzsche. From the former arises the adherence to hermeneutics and an interpretative understanding of the world; from the latter, an acceptance of the consequences of nihilism. Hermeneutics is most readily understood as the turning away from a universal, Kantian position to one of localised and, therefore, relative reason; as Vattimo himself puts it, "... the subject is not the bearer of the Kantian a priori, but the heir to a finite-historical language that makes possible and conditions the access of the subject to itself and to the world." [OI; p. 12/8] It is still the case that the world is experienced through categories of the understanding and that true reality is inaccessible to the human mind since it would not – and could not without concepts – "make sense" to him. However, following Heidegger, Vattimo holds that these concepts are not universal, but that one’s perception of the world is determined by the situation into which one is thrown. The categories and concepts
through which understanding ourselves, others and our situation is possible are inherited through our community, tradition or language, that is our historical and geographical location into which we were "accidentally thrown."

As such, the subject – to truly know himself – has to interrogate himself, to interpret rather than merely process his world: the hermeneutic circle of Heidegger's *Dasein.* The conditions through which the subject understands reality are hidden from him; be they in his unconscious or the structures of meaning he uses to express his understanding. Only through the act of expressing *his* world can he disclose those categories which shape his perception of the world. Instead of rational interrogation of the world, one must interrogate the world hermeneutically:

There are no transcendental conditions of possibility for experience which might be attainable through some type of reduction or epoché suspending our ties to historical-cultural, linguistic, categorical horizons. The conditions of possibility for experience are always qualified… The foundation, the beginning, the initial transmission of our discourse cannot, in other words, but be a hermeneutic foundation. [PD; p.13/152]

Understanding is a fundamental way in which the subject relates himself to the world: the conditions which make experience possible are cultural givens which are revealed through the subject’s interpretation of the representation of the world which confronts him. Hermeneutics holds that a subject becomes aware of his categories of understanding through the process of interpreting what the world is for him.

It is in this turning away from, on the one hand, a vision of truth as a fixed, stable structure and, on the other hand, from the universal categories of Kantian idealism, that hermeneutics appears to inevitably incline to relativism. If the conditions of possibility for experience are culturally and not transcendentally given, then it is obvious that they cannot claim absolute validity: they are a tradition or form of life which the subject just happens to inhabit. Moreover, the justification of the metaphysical truth which the tradition holds is not to be found
in an eternal, fixed “real” world behind the “apparent” world, but, in the subjective values of an individual or social group and their interests. Hermeneutics tends, it seems, to either relativism (truth-for-us) or nihilism (no truth, only interpretations) and postmodern thought is most notably distinguished from modern thought in responding to this decline in metaphysics. In fact, according to Vattimo, the inherent inclination of hermeneutics to nihilism determines much of the debate in contemporary European philosophy, forming the basis for characteristic responses from diverse thinkers. Whether they openly embrace the nihilistic consequences (Deleuze), see the relativism as a game (Rorty), or, attempt to overcome nihilism through either conservatism (Gadamer) or procedural formalism (Habermas), they are all aware of the inclination of hermeneutics as opposed to the stability metaphysics.

Vattimo does not concede the philosophical commitment to truth as do the former two positions, nor does he shy from the nihilistic consequences of hermeneutics as do the latter two positions; instead he returns to the perceived origins of hermeneutics and attempts to unite the Nietzschean and Heideggerean insights into another response: weak thought. As he sees it, the true tendency of hermeneutics is to (weak) nihilism; if it refuses its fate it falls into one of two errors: strong nihilism or metaphysics. The former, perhaps, finds its best expression in existentialism and its relation to the absurd. If the world faces ultimate melt down, if the universe is infinite, if god is dead, if there are no longer any absolute truths et cetera, can my choices really matter? Does anything really matter? One chooses and rechooses with no opportunity for continuity; if I choose the world then, it is my choosing alone which matters and the new, the novel is given value. Anything old and fixed must be chosen again, the subject must feel his power through the devaluation of values and the arbitrary creation of new values. Ultimately this strong nihilism is either irrational and destructive or it seeks once more a stable structure, falling back into metaphysics: man seeks to construct another god or authority that can fix and stabilise the world.

Vattimo’s mistrust of metaphysics is Heideggerean in nature: truth is not fixed in the way
believed by the philosophical tradition, rather Being gives itself historically. Man can describe a perspective of Being but cannot catch it in its totality. However, metaphysics and its worldview (the technological-scientific world of Western capitalism) privilege one perspective over the others, stating it as the whole and complete truth. It is in this way that science can claim to be truer than the moral and human discourses, even though their respective truth values are in a certain sense incommensurable. They are different perspectives on, sometimes but rarely, the same object. In other words, the Heideggerean critique holds that metaphysics is a form of violence against thought: it illegitimately restricts and limits thinking. One must think in a certain way, one must see a certain perspective as absolute, or one is silenced and irrational.

Yet, any description is made possible only through an ungrounded appropriation of conditions of the possibility for experience. As such, any description implicitly contains these conditions not only as the possibility for experience, but also as the limit or horizon of experience. The experience must, in a sense, be contracted to fit their limits. The hermeneutic interpretation of truth reveals the limitation and necessarily constrained claims of any description. Truth is rather an opening where one can glimpse the totality that is hidden behind the part. It is easy to see how nihilism can easily fall back into metaphysics. Absolute perspectives often arise out of critical attacks, replacing the "false" version of the truth with the "true" one; this is loosely termed the violence of metaphysics.

Vattimo refuses both metaphysics and nihilism in their most stringent form. Instead he offers a "weak" or positive nihilism which is a direct consequence of the hermeneutical position:

The critique that hermeneutics can and must move against the techno-scientific world is aimed, if anything, to aid it in a recognition of its own nihilistic meaning and to take it up as a guiding thread for judgements, choices and the orientation of individual and collective life. [OI; p.35/26]

Much of contemporary philosophy attempts to regain the true in its strongest form, that of the Platonic essence: fixed and permanent. However, Vattimo proposes his weak nihilism as our
only chance of not falling back into metaphysical violence: "The fulfilled [compiuto] nihilist has understood that nihilism is his or her sole opportunity." [FM; p. 27/19] Weak nihilism allows that which is different a voice and a value, allowing these voices to communicate with other, even dominant, strains of thought rather than excluding difference into the realms of nonsense, non-meaning and un-reason. Of the four positions offered above, relativism (Rorty) and subjectivism (Deleuze) celebrate difference but do so at the cost of communication and truth. At the other extreme, conservatism (Gadamer) and procedural formalism (Habermas) both keep the commitment to communication and truth, but silence difference. Weak thought oscillates between these two extremes.

Vattimo's position depends upon the distinction between the strong nihilism outlined above and a weak nihilism. The former is extreme nihilism, the destructive theory which rejects all authority and values. The latter, however, is extreme protestantism: it not only questions the church, it places god himself in question. It allows one to interrogate one’s being, which is not fixed and permanent, and the being of one’s ethical substance or community; that is, those categories from which meaning arises. Weak nihilism is the transcendence of freedom, the ability to negate what is absolute, yet simultaneously recognise a new, "weaker" truth in the structures of meaning and orders of values found in the world, for without the concepts and categories of a tradition, the subject would not perceive the world at all. The tradition supplies the foundations with which one can appropriate and perceive truth, yet one is simultaneously aware that they are bounded and but one representation of truth limited by their very own possibility of understanding.13

Vattimo interprets both Nietzsche and Heidegger as exponents, or originators, of that which he calls weak thought. He sees them as accepting the principle of nihilism: there are only interpretations and interpretations of interpretations, but, according to him, this does not commit them to strong nihilism. It is the oscillation between the destiny of Being (Heidegger) and the
re-evaluation of values (Nietzsche) which secures the position of weak thought as opposed to relativism and subjectivism, on the one hand, and conservatism and formalism, on the other.

Weak thought reveals that the categories of understanding through which one apprehends the world distort and corrupt it; but, it is the awareness of the fact that mine is a perspective amongst perspectives that initiates a movement towards a consideration of pluralism (not relativism) via the hermeneutic realisation of one’s prejudice in apprehending the world. Vattimo in the preface to *Il Pensiero Debole* marks out exactly the origin, direction and aims of weak thought.¹⁴ (a) Serious consideration of the Marxist-Nietzschean view that there is a connection between knowledge and domination inside and outwith the subject. This first criterion is simply the acknowledgement of the nihilist discovery: one’s conditions of understanding the world are not true absolutely, but originate from one’s historical and geographical situation. Furthermore, the belief that such conditions are absolutely true is a myth propagated in the interests of whom or what such conditions serve. Conditions of understanding move from being perspectives to prejudices or, even more strongly put, ideologies. The subject of weak thought is aware of conditions of understanding as perspectives and as such liberates himself from the power of absolute claims. As such, Vattimo draws a direct link between his own fulfilled nihilist and Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*: nihilism does not lead to despair and non-meaning, but to the affirmation of values as my values and your values as your own.¹⁵

(b) Not using this discovery as a path to emancipation via the de-masking or demystification of power-knowledge constructs (ideologies), but casting a "friendlier" eye on the discursive procedures and symbolic forms of one’s world or form of life; accepting them as one possible experience of being.¹⁶ Instead of the aggressive critique, however, weak thought holds that such perspectives hold a partial trace of the true or Being. One does not deconstruct for the sake of deconstructing, or to free the world from corrupt perspectives, one hermeneutically interprets categories of understanding to separate the real truths from those contingent ones. Such a separation of real and contingent truths depends on the final criterion. In other words,
Vattimo seeks to temper the possible excess of the Nietzschean position which, without constraints, would tend to subjectivism.

Finally, (c) the identification of language as the home of being which holds "traces" or "memories" of truth. Such interpretation, coupled with the linguistic representation of truths, can lead to the realisation of that which is true in an important sense, and that which is contingent or purely symbolic. A provisional stab at the distinction must be something along the lines of a justified prejudice which helps one to experience (part of) the true as opposed to an unjustified prejudice which restricts and corrupts one’s experience of truth, doing so in the interests of an outmoded institutional or economic power. Weak thought, unlike most other forms of postmodernity, still aims to be rational and conditioned by the true. It is this adherence to rationality, as a prejudice which encourages thinking but does not restrict it, which commits weak thought to truth and not the rejection of this for epistemological anarchism.

These three criteria seem to encapsulate, in a nutshell, the difference of Vattimo’s postmodern position from that of his contemporaries. He returns to Nietzsche and Heidegger in order to develop an alternative to conservatism, relativism, subjectivism and formalism. Vattimo is at pains to stress the common thread between Nietzsche and Heidegger, that which he terms the secularisation of philosophy; that is, the dissolution of absolute foundations. Yet, weak thought is original because of the inherent difference between the two thinkers: the unresolvable tension between the liberalism and subjectivism of Nietzsche and the conservatism of Heidegger. It is this tension which secures the oscillation between conservatism and subjectivism central to Vattimo’s ethics.

Although Vattimo is intent on his commitment to truth, it is an enfeebled truth. It is a truth which gives itself historically in terms of those conditions of understanding which the subject possesses. It is following on from this that the distinction between strong and weak truth can clearly be delineated: "Hence a scientific truth is ahistorical and universal, while philosophical truth has no other meaning than to be the truth of the existence of the one who
professes it and propounds it to the world." [AD; p. 47/40] Strong thought is comfortable, conformist thought based on the scientific model: where my categories of understanding are in total agreement with the world in which I live. The object as perceived consolidates and reinforces the categories of perceiving. One’s metaphysics adequately describe the object in an acceptable manner. The subject’s perception of the world and his response to it is wholly internal to his form of life. The subject does nothing but reproduce those categories of his tradition: the rules of knowledge and conceptual perception which constitute his being oblige him to unconditionally see truth in a certain way. The categories are normative in the sense that, if the subject wishes to experience truth at all, they oblige him to experience the world in a certain way.\(^{18}\)

Weak truth, alternatively, is bound to he who enunciates, and in enunciating learns of himself. It concerns the truth of the method or the metaphysics in which one’s claims to strong truth is grounded. An internal point of view is suspended and the subject transcends the given through hermeneutic interrogation, asking himself: what are the categories, and what is their origin, which determine that I experience the world in this manner? This is not to take an extremely external point of view which records the claims made on a subject by a particular tradition, for such a position requires a transcendental and articulate subject.\(^{19}\) Subjectivity, for Vattimo, is constituted by tradition and not external to it. Rather, hermeneutical interrogation demands a moderately external perspective: the categories of this way of life are a reason to hold a certain belief or experience truth in a certain way. Nietzsche’s maxim, to continue dreaming aware that one is dreaming, is often invoked by Vattimo, and it seems to capture the essence of understanding required by the moderately external point of view.\(^{20}\) Hermeneutic, interpretative subjectivity consists in understanding the claim of a certain tradition on knowledge without necessarily endorsing it. It is a shadow of subjectivity, an ethical knowledge of obligation but empty of any particular epistemological obligations.
Hermeneutical subjectivity takes this moderately external form; in reflecting on his form of life, the subject, in a sense, puts himself outside of it. He asks himself, given this form of life, what is he obliged to experience. Yet, because he is not taking the internal point of view, the obligation is not immediately binding. Similarly, he can ask himself the reciprocal question, given this obligation, what does this reveal about the conditions which make this perception of reality possible. In reflecting on his experience of truth, the subject is able to disclose the conditions that generate his response (that is, to reveal his way of life). It is to suspend the immediately binding nature of one’s social existence or tradition. Furthermore, given the realisation that the conditions which make knowledge possible also simultaneously constrain and limit truth, the subject becomes aware that what he holds to be true is a perspective of reality governed by his categories, rather than reality itself. Truth is, therefore, the best approximation of reality given the particular subject’s cultural and linguistic baggage which makes reality’s disclosure possible whilst simultaneously constraining it.

Yet, such a hermeneutical ontology: an interpretative knowledge of things rather than a prepositional order of knowledge itself, can so easily fall into either irrationalism, anti-intellectualism, relativism or even conservatism (that is, the tradition itself is true and cannot be acted against). This fear is based upon the simple lack of that moment of certainty (Descartes’ clear and distinct perception; Plato’s irrefutable proposition, et cetera) which has dominated Western thought. Such conformity to principles or methods can only be the truth in accordance with a perspective. Perspectives themselves cannot accord with principles which verify their truth; they are foundationless and groundless. Any method of knowledge which has such a moment of certainty has already appropriated a certain perspective as the one sole True perspective: Being is corrupted, distorted and becomes sufficient reason for any statements which adhere to its perspective.

Weak truth is, instead, the truth of the perspectives on the world and as such hermeneutical:
Firstly, truth does not amount to a "true proposition" but rather to a general order of the world, a "historical structure", a form of life, or an epoch of Being. Secondly, the inauguration of this new epoch does not depend on the individual and his or her decision, for only in such a new world could a person capable of such a decision be born. At most, the arrival of the new era and the birth of the decisive individual can only surface together. [AD; p. 64/55]

Weak truth is the interrogative existence of those categories of understanding or the objective representation of one’s community, within which one finds oneself situated. It is the existence of the conditions of knowledge which are themselves ultimately groundless (nihilism) yet allow one to comprehend, appropriate and act meaningfully in the world. To know who one is, is to know the truth of one’s time and immediate existence. For this reason, Vattimo uses the metaphor of "living" or "dwelling" as the notion of weak truth:

As a metaphor for speaking of hermeneutical truth, dwelling might best be understood as though one were dwelling in a library; whereas the idea of truth as correspondence conceives of knowledge of the true as the certain \( \text{certo} \) possession of an "object" by way of an adequate representation, the truth of dwelling is by contrast the competence of the librarian who does not possess entirely, in a single act of transparent comprehension, all of the contents of all of the books amongst which he lives, nor even the first principles upon which the contents depend. One cannot compare such knowledge-possession through the command of first principles to the competence of librarianship, which knows where to look because it knows how the volumes are classified and is also acquainted with the "subject catalogue." [OI; p. 104/82-83]

This metaphor is perhaps the most revealing aspect of Vattimo’s writings on weak thought since it opens up a way to understand the subject of weak thought. His originality and significance lie not only in his commitment to truth – albeit an enfeebled truth – but also in his refusal to
embrace wholeheartedly the death of the subject. Subjectivity is, for him, always constituted by
a tradition and not transcendent to history, yet hermeneutical interrogation requires that shadow
of subjectivity alluded to above; that ethical echo. The object of weak thought is clearly
understood as Being which gives itself historically depending on the conditions of knowledge
which determine it and are reciprocally determined by it. The subject, however, finds itself
dwelling within knowledge of the true, but not a truth which is obvious, clear and distinct.
Rather the truth is to be disclosed through the interpretative action of the subject. The library is
the ethical or epistemological substance, in which all values or entities are explained and
justified, and from which all norms or rules governing knowledge arise. The subject faced with
a question must research and interpret this substance to reveal its truth: that is, suspend the
immediately binding nature of immanent subjectivity.

Being is a destiny revealed through the truth of a tradition. To belong, to dwell, in an
ethical substance is to participate in a history. To avoid falling back into metaphysics, or to
resist the domination of strong absolutist claims, Vattimo proposes an acceptance of a destiny:

If it wishes to escape this relapse into metaphysics, hermeneutics must make explicit
its own ontological background, that is, the Heideggerean idea of a destiny of Being
that is articulated as the concatenation of openings, of the systems of metaphors that
make possible and qualify our experience of the world. [OI; p. 134/108]

In accepting the weaker truth of forms of life, one recognises that they hold partial truths and
that, in every epoch, they express some aspect of the truth. Hermeneutic interpretation
distinguishes those conditions which reveal truth and those which determine truth in the service
of a hidden agenda. The former are to be retained, the latter to be overcome. In a sense, it is to
recognise reason and truth becoming actual through the ontological expression of Being in each
age, and Vattimo adds:

… the rationality we have reached consists in the fact that, essentially involved in a
process (into which we are always-already "thrown") we always-already know, at
least to a certain extent, where we are going and how we must go there. But to orient ourselves, we need to reconstruct and interpret the process in as complete and persuasive a manner as possible. It would be an error to believe we can jump outside the process, somehow grasping the arché, the principle, the essence or the ultimate structure. [OI; p. 135/109]

Even if one accepts the idea of a destiny of Being, even if one recognises that the reinterpretation of one’s "tradition" holds a way to truth, his metaphor of the librarian reveals the need for an ethical subjectivity which hovers between pure immanence and transcendentalism. The denial of full transparency, the idea that the subject does not "know" his identity nor the truth of his situation in an act of clear and distinct perception or rational inquiry, is to interrogate oneself and the objective determinations of one’s identity. Weak thought suspends the immediacy of one’s tradition and interrogates it, yet how does one know what is justifiable prejudice (that which helps one understand the world) and unjustifiable prejudice (that which limits one’s understanding of the world)? Vattimo allows the hermeneutic subject the resources of the librarian: the catalogue, index listings, et cetera, and these – when made explicit – should show that one metaphysics can be proven more apt or better than another in apprehending a certain truth of a particular situation. In other words, Vattimo does not espouse reason or rational argumentation, he encourages debate when two perspectives collide on a commensurable topic and he consistently reiterates throughout his work the positive role philosophy should occupy in constructing a vision of human existence.22 To research one’s ethical substance, one’s tradition and, therefore, ultimately one’s identity so that one can find the "truth" of one’s being, requires the skill of the subject; the ability to interpret. Such interpretation requires an ethics: living or dwelling within one’s ethical substance can only be possible through the possession of certain underlying values, talents or abilities. If one dwells within a library and cannot read, one is restricted in the quest for the true. It is for this reason
that Vattimo must articulate an *ethics of interpretation*, for if he fails to do so, then his position is susceptible to the twin horns of irrationalism: subjectivism and relativism.\(^{23}\)

Hermeneutics in general, and weak thought in particular, incline towards irrationalism. If one’s categories of understanding, that is one’s perspective which make possible experience of the world, are not universal and arise from a structure into which one is thrown, then the way in which one perceives the world is either true for me (subjectivism) or true for us (relativism). If there is a common philosophy of postmodernity, then it resides in responses to this problem generated by hermeneutic understanding; whether it be the embrace of irrationalism, or attempts to overcome it.

It is obvious from the second criterion of weak thought – that is, that nihilism should not lead to the aggressive critique of structures of meaning, but to the realisation that if truth is possible, it is only weakly possible – that Vattimo remains committed to truth. For this reason, he rejects the development of Nietzschean thought into the rampant liberalism of Deleuze who believes the creation of values itself is a value.\(^{24}\) Subjectivism describes the attitude of the strong nihilist who appropriates the truth of the tradition, but transcends it and ironically states: I recognise this truth, but I am above it; I can act as I wish. If truth is not binding and the subject is aware of it being but a perspective, how can it obligate him to act or think in a certain way? The constraints which determine that he think in one way rather than another just fall away. One’s culturally given identity makes experience possible and informs one’s practical reasoning, but, without absolute validity, its motivational power is indecisive. If Vattimo accepts strong nihilism and the subjectivism of the Nietzschean position, then the possibility of communication is lost, as is the possibility of interpretation. The statement that there are only interpretations and that is the end of the matter, silences the philosopher.

It would appear that hermeneutics, in order to hold on to the binding nature of truth and a partial objectivity, tends to relativism defined as the hypothesis that the values held by an agent arise from the way of life he just happens to inhabit. Its truth is to grant one’s way of life
authority, yet this is in a sense to repeat the problem with subjectivism: the death of communication. Interpretation is understood as an open dialogue with one’s tradition, yet where subjectivism rose above and negated the tradition, relativism immerses itself in the tradition: the agent is unable to criticise, rise above or interrogate it. In either case, subjectivism or relativism, the commitment to truth, the ability to offer a better interpretation, is lost because either there are no reasons but my own, or there are reasons only for us and we cannot promote them to others.

Where weak thought can concur with irrationalism is that "full objectivity" is unattainable. Yet, conversely, traditions hold partial truths and this is motivating not due to false belief, but partial knowledge. Therefore, history and tradition become the domain of truth and reason, yet the postulation of history as the domain of truth relies on an ethics of interpretation which can tease out the meaning for the interpreting subject. There exists, though, truth in the tradition: this is not just any perspective, it is the perspective which is most loyal to the "guiding thread." The guiding thread is nihilism, that is the openness to discussion and debate: the postulation of an interpretation which in its very positing denies any absolute claim on subjects. Thus, our (the postmodern subjects') tradition is nihilism and this involves a commitment to pluralism because we are perpetually aware that we cannot claim absolute validity for our tradition, whilst being aware that no other tradition is absolutely valid: "Not simply 'anything goes', but he who holds that everything goes and who also holds that there is even, above all, this additional 'thing' – which is the thesis that anything goes – he is more right than others." [my trans.] [VRF; p. 63] History, as object, must remain open to interpretation and this is the basis of those metaphysical systems or methods which can claim to be weakly true: they are prejudices which aid one in apprehending, understanding and experiencing the world. If Vattimo is committed to truth and to open communication, and he believes that not all perspectives are equally valid, then he has to reject irrationalism. Weak thought, then, relies upon a normative ground which determines the process of interpretation. Vattimo's significance resides in this ethics of interpretation.
§3 | The Ethics of Interpretation

Vattimo never gives a formal outline of his project but it is obvious that he is aware that if he is committed to hermeneutical truth, he requires an ethics to avoid the irrationalism of both subjectivism and relativism. It seems that to overcome relativism a decision has to be made concerning the value of a specific perspective: does it disclose truth or does it corrupt and distort it? How is it that an agent can decide to reject, have faith in or exchange interpretations?25 The simple answer is that underlying the agent’s interpretation of the world has to be an ethics which constrains and makes possible the appropriation of interpretations as both valid and reasonable. It is for this reason that hermeneutics, to avoid irrationalism, has to advocate an ethics. Vattimo’s ethics of interpretation arises out of his continual return to and rejection of three possible responses to the above problem which originate from Rorty, Gadamer and Habermas.26

It was hinted earlier that Vattimo’s originality arises from the uneasy tension held between Heidegger and Nietzsche. The positions he interrogates as instances of a post-metaphysical ethics reflect this in that they are in many respects the extreme development of the two thinkers in separation. For example, Rorty and his ethics of re-description seems to accept the implicit liberalism which originates in Nietzsche’s nihilism. Similarly, Gadamer develops the conservative strain of Heidegger (and Habermas responds to this position, but does so by invoking formalism). Vattimo tempers the subjectivism of Rorty with the historicism of Heidegger and the conservatism of Gadamer with the nihilism of Nietzsche.

Rorty, according to Vattimo, responds to the threat of relativism by embracing creative subjectivism.27 The ethics of re-description holds that through adding a perspective, through changing one’s point of view, a problem can be overcome. Vattimo criticises this on the basis that it privileges the artistic moment of creation and destruction of existing values. It undermines continuity in favour of the new, yet it is the newness itself which becomes a value. It becomes the subjectivism which Vattimo was keen to temper with his commitment to historical truth: destroying and resisting all values for the sake of resistance itself; it is the death
of communication. If this is his position, then Rorty is unable to overcome relativism because truth exists as either for-me or for-us and there are no grounds on which to resist, or even judge, false and corrupting interpretations. Vattimo is closer to Gadamer than Rorty, because he shares with him the belief that truth is given historically and partially, and not – as Rorty holds – that there is no truth.28

Gadamer, too, like Vattimo, felt the acute need to avoid subjectivism and relativism. Gadamer avoids subjectivism by holding that the agent interprets within an historical tradition which has developed independently of him. However, although this overcomes subjectivism (that is, values are not for-me but for-the-tradition), it requires a further stipulation to overcome relativism: the interpreter's historical consciousness is not, according to Gadamer, contingent or arbitrary, but is rooted in the way an object has been previously understood. Long before we are an individual, we are part of a common, shared tradition. The arbitrariness of individual prejudices can be overcome by returning to this common logos which is determined by an anticipation of completeness which reviews interpretations in terms of things in themselves or with the aim of articulating a better understanding of the matter in hand.

Thus, Gadamer is committed to truth as a regulative ideal which guides interpretation: the text has to be accepted as an authority which will disclose its own truth to the interpreter who grants it this normative authority. The potential contingency of hermeneutical experience is overcome by two conditions: one, by its foundation in an interpretative tradition; and two, by the necessity to provisionally accept the normative authority of that which is being interpreted.

Such an ethics of continuity, then, holds that an individual lives within an ethical substance which opens the possibility of a dialogue between the subject and his inherited identity, the community and those values which offer themselves as motives. The tradition also supplies the rational model on which one can argue with other traditions, it confers on us reason but does not determine us by reason.
Vattimo admits that Gadamer is developing Heidegger’s thought: the truth of hermeneutics is related to that which Heidegger constantly refers to as the destiny of Being and Gadamer understands this to mean that the commitment to the most reasonable interpretation of a tradition overcomes the arbitrariness of a specific subject’s or society’s prejudices. The process of interpretation negates arbitrariness in that the action of interpreting is determined by the subject becoming that which the tradition demands. Gadamer grants authority to the historical process rather than the subject’s appropriation of it, thus tending to conservatism.

It is this conservatism which Vattimo sees as going too far. Truth, for him, is found in the tradition, but the subject has to be aware of the possibility of ideological corruption. If the agent interprets his own perspective, then he does so from within that perspective to which he has granted normative authority. Conservatism of this sort does not enable dialogue between traditions, but obstructs it. Vattimo, therefore, holds that the weak nihilism of Nietzsche which grants respect to other traditions, saves his own ethics from conservatism. Conservatism is a refusal of pluralism and hides a latent historical metaphysics which silences dialogue.

Habermas begins his response to Gadamer from the idea that one’s prejudice could be an ideology and that hermeneutics alone is unable to overcome ideology. For him, the experience of truth has to be accessed through public language. Thus, the speaker has the right of "unlimited communication" which entails (universally) that I cannot silence the other, since only through open and continuous debate can public language be purified of ideologies and distortions of truth. Universally agreed norms govern dialogue and ensure that the corrupting nature of a perspective is constrained.

The main problem with an ethics of communication is that it entails the claim to universality implicit in Kantian morality. Hegel was quick to criticise Kant for that which he termed "empty formalism." He held that the universal rules of reason could not generate imperatives on which a subject can act. Reason can only test and not generate laws. Habermas
recasts reason as procedural: formal rules which constrain the content of discourse and, in this way, he believes hermeneutics can avoid ideological bias.

Vattimo agrees to this, but notes a significant feature: if the procedures regulate the content of the will, but do not determine it, why should we accept them? Reason permits and rejects certain content, but it cannot make us accept its own rules (content is, after all, given historically), thus why should we prefer dialogue to violence?

[The ethics of communication] can in fact try to avoid the accusation of still being a transcendental metaphysics (which posits as a normative foundation of morality the fact that experience is made possible by the a priori of unlimited communication) by stressing the pure formality of its conception; it excludes all metaphysical rigidity to the extent that it conceives morality to be negotiation, persuasion by way of rational argumentation, not limited by any necessary metaphysical structure. In this respect, the ethics of communication presents itself as a rigorously egalitarian ethics. But at the same time, it shows itself unable to exclude the possibility that the egalitarianism and the negotiation come to be understood in the sense of pure escalation of social conflict. Why, in the end, if there are no metaphysical principles, should we prefer rational argumentation to physical confrontation? [EI; p. 146/119]31

If the procedures of reason are formal, then they cannot exclude violence as argument: the norms have to exist substantially within a tradition to motivate the agent. Vattimo recognises that unlimited communication is necessary for pluralism and dialogue, but if it is an a priori procedure it does not rule out violence. What is required is a tradition which substantiates the values of an ethics of communication and, it is for this reason, Vattimo goes beyond the subjectivism of Rorty, the conservatism of Gadamer and the formalism of Habermas. Hermeneutics is, for him, inclined towards ethics and this ethics has to be understood in terms of a tradition – that is, the shared customs, culture and mores of a specific community – which underlie and make possible the various discourses of knowledge. As such, he seeks a
postmodern ethics which makes possible his weakly nihilistic position and the enfeeblement of truth:

The ethics that hermeneutics makes possible seems to be primarily an ethics of goods… more than an ethics of imperatives. Or better still, if there is an ethics delineated in hermeneutics, it is one in which, taking interpretation as an act of translation… the various logoi – discourses of specialized languages, but also spheres of interests, regions of "autonomous" rationality – are to be referred back to the logos-common consciousness, to the cradling substratum of values shared by a living historical community and expressed in its language. [EI; p. 136/106-7]

Habermas invokes an ethics of imperatives and, like Kant, relies on theoretical wisdom, that is a knowledge of the rules which determine which objects are good. However, Vattimo realises that such a position will not generate good because one requires practical wisdom, or an ethics of goods. Being brought up in a certain tradition gives us experience of acting according to characteristics. If we have experience of the best goods, we will interpret more reasonably. Interpretation does not depend on knowledge of imperatives (as Habermas supposes), it depends on being informed by those goods which enable the best interpretation; goods found in one’s moral fabric. Vattimo holds that "the cradling substratum of values" in postmodern society is not just any tradition (relativism), nor the true tradition (conservatism), but the historically existing substantial equivalent of Habermas’s formalism. In other words, the goods which underlie postmodern society make possible an ethics of communication and these values can originally be found in the philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger. It therefore remains to offer an initial sketch of the values underlying postmodernity. However, first, there is one small – yet significant – point to be made.

It may have been noticed that Vattimo criticised Rorty on the basis of need for a tradition and Gadamer on the basis of a critical subject. Is this not a case of having it both ways? Paradoxically, it is this “having it both ways” – the oscillation between these two poles – which
is characteristic of Vattimo’s solution. The opposites of Gadamer and Rorty reflect the deeper antagonism between Heidegger and Nietzsche, and it is these opposites which temper one another’s excesses. The idea of the destiny of Being which originates in Heidegger leads to Gadamer’s conservatism and the disappearance of critique, yet Vattimo inserts a nihilist subject which does not accept that history is truth, but that history is the happening of truth and therefore the best access the subject has to it. Yet, the subject cannot be swallowed in the act of interpretation, the nihilism of Nietzsche holds that any articulation of the event of truth can only be an interpretation. Conversely, the nihilism of Nietzsche becomes, in excess, the subjectivism of Rorty or Deleuze, yet this is tempered by a commitment to truth which is to be found in the historical event of Being.

However, even if these two positions temper one another, they are not brought together in a Hegelian *Aufgehoben*, for this would be to overcome modernity and “overcoming” is the very essence of modernity.33 Hegel would suppose that the truth of the two positions can be brought together revealing a new, truer structure, yet Vattimo refuses this modern form of progress. Rather it is Heidegger’s *Verwindung*, the recollection, distortion and rehabilitation of the presence of both nihilism and hermeneutics as the thought of the end of history which makes possible the best interpretation.34 He concludes his critique of late modernity from the nihilist perspective with these words:

In this situation, one must speak according to me of a “weak ontology” as the only possibility of leaving metaphysics – through an acceptance-convalescence-distortion [*viz. Verwindung*] that has nothing left of the critical overcoming characteristic of modernity. It might be that in this resides, for postmodern thought, the chance of a new, weakly new, beginning. [my trans.] [FM; p. 189]35

Instead of negating and synthesising the positions of Heidegger and Nietzsche, Vattimo wishes to keep the tension, to stress there is no going beyond and it is the oscillation from one to the
other that makes interpretation possible. The common logos is, for us, cradled by nihilism and hermeneutics, and it is in these that an ethics originates:

… it is the ethics of interpretation that furnishes morality with the more substantial rationale – though not, to be sure, with a foundation. To the extent that hermeneutics recognizes itself as provenance and destiny, as the thought of the final epoch of metaphysics and thus of nihilism, it can find in "negativity", in dissolution as the "destiny of Being", given not as presence of the arche but only as provenance, the orienting principle that enables it to realize its own original inclination for ethics whilst neither restoring metaphysics nor surrendering to the futility of a relativistic philosophy of culture. [EI; p. 147/119]

The ethics Vattimo searches for is the common conception of the good that makes possible the weakly nihilist subject of Nietzsche and the commitment to truth as historical as found in Heidegger. The Verwindung of these two positions, the reciprocal tempering they operate on one another advocates certain values from which any process of interpretation must draw its provenance.

It is in the article, "Etica della Provenienza", Vattimo is most explicit of the form such an ethics of interpretation would take and describes those goods which derive from the common logos of nihilism and hermeneutics. Ethics is based upon the normative question and it is the possibility to interrogate a situation in terms of this question which opens the debate. First, it must be possible to transcend one’s immediate position:

The first characteristic of such an ethics can be recognised in a "step back", in taking distance from the concrete choices and options which are immediately imposed by the situation. [my trans.] [EP; p.75]

This is the transcendence of freedom: I am not this situation, I am not this person. Moreover, it is the recognition of the "step back" as a refusal of the absolute nature of truth: the most obvious response to a situation is not always the right one, one must question everything. A tradition and
its epistemological commitments must be observed externally. It is here that one feels the influence of Nietzsche and the refusal of an interpretation as truth. Yet, as we have seen, such a refusal must be tempered by continuity. The subject outside all traditions is hollow and cannot communicate, one must comprehend with respect to a form of life, to value, to norms. The shadow of subjectivity demanded by weak thought must remain. Secondly, therefore, an ethics of interpretation has the characteristic of finitude:

An ethics of finitude is that which seeks to stay faithful to the discovery of the always unsurpassably finite setting of its own origin without forgetting the pluralistic implications of this discovery. I am with the saints in church and with the boozers down the pub, and I cannot fool myself into placing myself in a higher condition; even when I utter this phrase in a philosophical discourse I am only in another condition, that imposes certain obligations on me, as all the others: the particular condition of the philosopher, of the essayist, of the critic, never of universal Man.

[my trans.] [EP; pp. 77-8]

Any obligations, any maxims for action or tables of values come from the situation and its truth, not from any ground of absolute truth. One must be aware of the situation or history which one occupies and the claims they make on one’s identity. More than this, one must be aware of both one’s tradition and the tradition of the other if truth is to be disclosed. The recognition of plural truth must be tempered, as Gadamer would propose, by a sense of continuity of who I am, where I come from, and the same for the other. Ethics has to be constructed within the finitude of one’s position and it involves recognising the values at play and evaluating what relation they bear equally to oneself and the situation. Which is the better perspective from which to articulate the sanctity of marriage, the pub or the church? Which the fitness of a football player? And which the moral problem of abortion? It is an awareness of the perspective from which one speaks and an accountability to one’s tradition and identity, for only if one assumes continuity can values
develop their truth. Only through interpretation of the situation in historical terms will its partial truth be revealed with relation to oneself.

Finally, Vattimo adds: "Respect of the other is above all recognition of the finitude that characterises us both, and that excludes every definitive overcoming of the opacity that everyone brings with himself." [my trans.] [EP; p. 80] With the recognition of the "weakness" of one's own truth, comes the claim to validity of other truths. One cannot silence other voices because they, too, reveal a perspective on the truth and one cannot assume to know the truth of others without first hearing their words since the subjective will remains always opaque and inviolable. Thus, the openness of communication pleaded for by Habermas and the consequential procedural model of reason which rules communication has to originate from a substantial, postmodern way of life. One must interpret other values and their relation to their tradition and one's own; to do this one must respect the voice of difference or others. The reason for which is obvious:

If [the rational norms] must or must not be applicable, it is decided in the name of the guiding thread which, with a responsible interpretation, we assume as characteristic of that which is "truly" part of the heritage towards which we feel obliged. If we identify this guiding thread with nihilism, with the dissolution of absolute foundations and of their imposition – that is each and every time violent interruption of the questioning – then the choice between that which is applicable and that which is not of the cultural heritage from which we originate will be made by the criterion of the reduction of violence and in the name of rationality intended as a discourse-dialogue between finite positions that recognise one another as such, and that for this reason do not have the bent of legitimately imposing themselves (since they are confirmed by a first principle) on those of others. [my trans.] [EP; p. 79]
Respect stems directly from the resistance to unitary truth. If one recognises the weakness of truth, if one is committed to pluralism, it becomes impossible to value one truth above all other perspectives. Pluralism holds that there exist different, equally valid interpretations of the same reality and it is this which distinguishes Vattimo from his contemporaries: it permits him to hold on to his commitment to truth.36

It is in the above quotation that the full extent of an ethics of interpretation is revealed and it also discloses the ethical claims of weak thought. Vattimo talks explicitly of a responsible interpretation. The guiding thread is reason, it is that which preconditions one’s appropriation of a perspective. For Vattimo, this must be a weak nihilism so that one must be open to the postulation of other, alternative truths which may either exist alongside one’s own or, in exceptional circumstances, conflict with it.37 Furthermore, weak thought entails the rejection of violent interruption, or the "no" without response. "Why is abortion wrong?" "Because god says so and that is the end of it." Vattimo seeks to reduce the violence of metaphysics in the name of reason and to simultaneously recognise the validity of pluralism through the ongoing resistance to "evangelical" foundations, those which demand unequivocal obedience. Pluralism holds that even if values are incommensurable in the case of conflict, debate must hold sway, not silence. Truth is enfeebled to refuse the violence of absolutism, the crime of silencing difference and the other. Reason is no longer adherence to the principles which originate from a worldview, but the rationality of an open dialogue between versions or aspects of the truth. Accountability arises from one’s tradition and identity to the extent that they do not commit violence against the other. Such a subject must be able to transcend and interrogate both his identity and his situation. Furthermore, such a subject must inhabit a pluralist world, which must imply the values of openness, communication and tolerance; yet, such pluralism must be, in turn, interpretation in terms of a heritage or tradition which imposes on one’s account the continuity with which to communicate the "truth" of a perspective.

§4| Conclusion: the Moral Fabric of Postmodern Subjectivity
The essay opened with the premise that Vattimo’s postulation of weak thought is original and significant for two reasons: one, that he retains a commitment to truth even if he accepts nihilism; and two, he does not fully endorse the death of the subject. Regarding the first point, it appears patent in Vattimo’s simultaneous recognition of the connection between power and knowledge and his refusal to reject knowledge on this basis, that he is committed to truth. Not full, absolute truth, but partial, plural truth. He is a weak nihilist: the categories which determine knowledge are not grounded in truth but originate due to some interest or contingent structure, yet they still allow one to experience truth. Categories corrupt, but they are necessary, for without them the subject is – one may remember – blind.

However, it is this weak nihilism and its pluralistic consequences which support Vattimo’s rejection of the death of the subject. The death of the subject is to be understood as the deconstruction of the illusion that it is the subject who experiences the world, rather – it is held – the experience is merely that of the determining structure, be it the unconscious, the deep economic structure or the contingency of language itself. For hermeneutic interrogation to be possible, there must be a subject – a shadow of subjectivity – which can interrogate the claims of weak truth which makes experience possible by adopting a moderately external point of view on perspectives. It is a subject which is first announced in Nietzsche’s texts and, according to Vattimo, fulfilled in Heidegger and the idea of Being as event giving itself historically. This subjectivity is the dreamer aware of his dreaming, the nihilist, of Nietzsche tempered with the projection of the question attempting to comprehend Being found in Heidegger. Such a subject is ethical and necessary to begin the philosophical quest for the best interpretation, but it is not a knowing subject which would test strong truth; that is, the correspondence of an object to its conditions of being experienced. The hermeneutic subject is ethical because the norms which oblige the knowing subject should conform to an evaluative description which guarantees the absence of violence: transcendence (freedom), reasonableness in terms of one’s tradition, openness, limited tolerance (limited by the refusal of violence), recognition of the individual’s
right to propose his worldview and respect for others. This is not an exhaustive list, nor even a certain one, but simply the first attempt at naming those values which are shared in postmodern culture and which determine one’s comportment to others. The point is that these values require a subject to apply them – thus, the shadow of subjectivity thus far termed the hermeneutic subject – and they arise from the common, shared logos of the postmodern epoch; viz. the cradling nihilistic and hermeneutic substratum.

It seems that in the final instance weak thought reveals certain normative claims which apply to the conditions of experience. For me to propose my worldview as true, I must be aware of the other’s right to dispute it and I must encourage this right through explicating said truth in a manner in which the other can understand and, therefore, dispute. These values are universal, in that one must adhere to them to resist both metaphysical violence and irrational, strong nihilism; and normative in that they prescribe the conditions for one’s truth to meet so that it does not fall into one of these two positions. They are the substantial account of the good which constitutes postmodern society.

The relevance of weak thought and its consequent ethics of interpretation is to supply an ethical basis for truth claims. The true cannot, in its totality and transparency, be grasped in a single act of possession. Truth is not easy. Rather, what these values propose is a "reductive ethics" not dissimilar to Kant’s reductive metaphysics. How can one best approximate the truth given its opacity and historical taints? Of course, implicit in Kant is the idea that one cannot but see in terms of space, time, causality, et al. The "reductive ethics" here proposed is not universal in this sense nor a new substantial, metaphysical picture of man because it does not hold the belief that these values are the absolute foundation of our ethical perception. They are, however, universal and normative in another sense: they are universal to the extent that they supply the foundations for the possibility of agreement on the best approximation of the true. They constrain illegitimate perspectives and set the limits of claims to truth. Thus, we have an ethical (normative) basis for truth claims.
Protestantism, as exemplified in its secular twin, the Enlightenment, was the rejection of authority in favour of reason. Vattimo proposes the same move, but does not wish to fully reject authority since it is necessary for experience and constitutes reason. Instead he chooses to constrain it by hermeneutic interrogation. His weak nihilism rejects the possibility of ever answering once and for all the metaphysical question. For Kant, one could not transcend one’s categories of understanding and so the metaphysical question was unanswerable. Yet, all theories of knowledge, all sciences, depend upon a metaphysical worldview (often nowadays termed rather humbly a method). For Kant, the ultimate method was reason itself, but such a response is not open to Vattimo. Alternatively, he must admit the possibility of plural metaphysics or methods with incommensurable entities or suppositions, whilst simultaneously allowing for such metaphysics to prove their worth. It is for this reason he is still committed to truth and a shadow of subjectivity. If this is the case, then postmodernity cannot be the overcoming of modernity, but rather its fulfilment or – as Vattimo would say – its necessary enfeebling.

Bibliography and Abbreviations to works by Vattimo:

All quotations are from the standard English edition unless specified otherwise. Citations refer to the page numbers of the Italian, and then to the English. Abbreviations to the works of Vattimo, with their original publication date in parentheses, are as follows:

AD (1980)  Le avventure della differenza: che cosa significa pensare dopo Nietzsche e Heidegger Milano, Italy: Garzanti; 1988

PD (1983)  Il pensiero debole eds. Vattimo, G & Rovatti, P Milano, Italy: Feltrinelli; 1998; from which Vattimo’s article is translated as “Dialectics, Difference and Weak Thought” trans. Harrison, T in Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal vol. 10, no. 1; 1984; pp. 151-164

FM (1985)  La fine della modernità Milano, Italy: Garzanti; 1991

ST (1989)  La società trasparente Milano, Italy: Garzanti; 1989


OI (1994)  Oltre l’interpretazione: il significato dell’ermeneutica per la filosofia Bari, Italy: Editori Laterza; 1994


This section attempts to briefly outline Vattimo’s philosophical position, but does not pretend to be comprehensive. The sketch offered here is intended for those readers unaware of Vattimo’s work so that one can better engage with the ethical question. For more historically and contextually comprehensive introductions, the reader should refer to Snyder’s introduction to the English translation of FM; Part One of Antiseri, D *The Weak Thought and its Strength* (Aldershot: Avebury; 1996); and D’Agostini’s excellent introduction to VRF (in Italian). For a general contextual introduction to the history of Italian philosophy as a whole, see the introduction to Borradori, G ed. *Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy* (Illinois, USA: Northwestern University Press; 1988).

Although chronologically Nietzsche precedes Heidegger, I deal with hermeneutics before nihilism in the following section because the former tends to the latter and not vice versa. Vattimo “marries” the two because instead of trying to solve the nihilistic tendency of hermeneutics, he embraces it.


7 Ibid.; Division 1, §32.


This article follows the interpretation Vattimo offers of the above thinkers rather than attempts a comprehensive interpretation of their work since it is necessary for the postulation of his own position. It may be that his interpretations are slightly off the mark, but he could reconstruct the positions he wishes to avoid anonymously and, as such, it is an interpretative question which can be side-stepped given the main interest of this article. I repeat the names so that when the reader refers to Vattimo’s own writings, he or she will be aware of what is at stake. For the authors’ own views, refer to most notably Deleuze, G (1968) *Difference and Repetition* trans. Patton, P (London: Athlone Press; 1994); Rorty, R (1979) *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell; 1980); Gadamer, H-G (1960) *Truth and Method* trans. Weinsheimer, J & Marshall, D (London: Sheed & Ward; 1989); Habermas, J (1981) *The Theory of Communicative Action* 2 vols. trans. McCarthy, T (Cambridge: Polity Press; 1997).

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this article does not dwell on the cogency of the respective interpretations, the interest – as before – remains Vattimo’s ethics. However, I do stress the tension and I think rightly so, for example Heidegger at one point says echoing Vattimo's criticisms of Deleuze/Rorty: "Nietzsche's passion for creators betrays the fact that he thinks of the genius and the geniuslike only in a modern way, and at the same time technologically from the view-point of accomplishment."; in "Overcoming Metaphysics" (1954) in The End of Philosophy trans. Stambaugh, J (London: Souvenir Press; 1973); p. 94.  
18 It is the normative form of the concepts and categories of being which best exemplifies the move from Kantian reason to hermeneutic reason. For Kant, one could not but see in terms of universal categories, for a hermeneutic view the norm is no longer “must” but “should” given that there are other possible traditions. This difference between must and should opens up the Heideggerean (and deconstructionist) question: why should I? Is it because Being dictates it thus, or because hidden (perhaps, unconscious) interests hope to corrupt my perception of Being for some other motive. It is for this reason that Vattimo resists the interpretation of Heidegger as a conservative, and he himself will not accept conservatism as a possible hermeneutic ethics.  
19 On this, see Snyder in the English version of FM, pp. xxi-xxi.  
21 The translation has been slightly amended by the inclusion of the adjective "certain" or "certo."  
22 His latest book – VRF – is, after all, entitled The Philosopher's Vocation and Responsibility.  
23 It may be obvious that I am ignoring one other response to the problem of relativism, one which is strongly connected to conservatism and, in many respects, Heidegger: the theological or religious response. In Part Two of his book, Antiseri op cit. believes Vattimo should embrace theological agnosticism. Vattimo himself explores this avenue in Credere di credere (Milano: Garzanti; 1996), (and elsewhere) yet remains too Nietzschean to accept it. His religion can only be a "weak" religion and thus appropriated by the fulfilled nihilist via his own ethically permissible re-interpretation. Religion as a response to relativism is, at best, merely a step towards an ethics of interpretation (hence the centrality of pietas in Vattimo’s early works) as Vattimo himself seems to advocate: “… I am no longer able to conceive of the notion of truth as distinct from evangelical charity. The only emancipation of which I can think is an eternal life of charity, that is in listening to others and participating in dialogue with others.” [my trans.]; VRF, p. 103.  
24 In ST, Vattimo believes this to be the central feature of the modern attitude: one chooses the new because the new itself is good.  
25 Contemporary liberalism obscures the issue by picking easy targets: I can agree that whether one eats beef or one eats dog can never rise above a tradition and is not, therefore, a case of objective morality, but I am not so willing to concede this as concerns female circumcision. And, if that is the case, what about male circumcision? Vattimo’s ethics may allow us to interrogate such traditions and work them over, so that their hidden grounds are revealed.  
26 For Vattimo’s discussions, refer to EI and the final chapter of the English translation of ST; OL, ch. 3; and EP.  
27 Rorty, then, is not surprisingly similar to Deleuze since relativism and subjectivism differ only in degree and not in form. Vattimo ruled out an appeal to pure subjectivism in his three defining criteria of weak thought, see pp. 7-8 above and note 14 and here re-iterates his reasons why. For this reason, the grounds on which Vattimo rejects Rorty are the same grounds on which he rejected Deleuze's position.  
28 Cf. VRF, pp. 71-73 & 105-106.  
30 The clearest exposition of this is to be found in “On the Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law…” (1802) in Political Writings trans. Nisbet, H (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1999), although it recurs throughout his work.  
31 The English page number refers to the translation of ST.  
32 Habermas is the formal aspect of postmodernity as Kant’s morality was the formal aspect of the Enlightenment. For Hegel, Kant’s morality could only work if one understood its history and its place in ethical life as a whole (the necessary moment of subjectivity), that is the objective structure which makes it possible. One feels Vattimo’s point is very similar: yes, Habermas, that is the formal aspect, but why is it thus?  
33 Refer to the introduction to FM.  
34 For Vattimo’s own presentation of this, refer to his article in PD and ch. 10 of FM. D’Agostini’s discussion is good in VRF, pp. 33-37 and she hints that Vattimo may be more indebted to Hegel than he acknowledges. For a concise example of Heidegger's own presentation of Verwindung, refer to chs. 3 and 4 of The End of Philosophy (1973).  
35 This passage does not appear in the English translation.  
37 If weak thought is to be thought of as relativistic, in any sense whatsoever, this comment reveals that it is that which Bernard Williams terms "interesting relativism": "… a province of informative social science, where there is
room for such claims as that a given practice or belief is integrally connected with much more of a society's fabric than may appear on the surface, that it is not an excrescence, so that discouragement or modification of this may lead to much larger social change than might have been expected”; in Williams, B An Introduction to Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); p. 36. Antiseri, op-cit. ch. 16, does not believe Vattimo overcomes relativism, believing a thorough elaboration of Pietas is required. However, from the late eighties through the nineties, Vattimo moved away from Pietas to ethics.