

The Decline of Certainty: On Gianni Vattimo's Weak Belief

by

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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This thesis argues that in order to demonstrate the possibility and sensibility of Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo's 'weak religious belief,' it should be understood as the becoming uncertain of traditional, metaphysical (strong) belief. The difference between weak belief and strong belief can thereby be understood not as two distinct modes of belief, but as an event of weakening in the history of belief that has yet to be realized by those who believe with the support of metaphysical certainty. Since Vattimo aligns metaphysics with violence, and since he aligns traditional belief with metaphysics, to demonstrate and defend the possibility of Vattimo's weak belief amounts to the reduction of violence in the world. However, the possibility and validity of weak belief has been called into question by thinkers such as Richard Rorty. In light of a review of the arguments and counter-arguments between Rorty and Vattimo, I argue that it is possible to distinguish weak belief from strong belief as long as this remains a weak distinction.

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Chapter 1: Weak Belief and Vattimo's Return To Christianity

I. Introduction to the Argument

A. Thesis, Problem, Method

1) The Argument

The thesis argues that it is possible to defend the coherence of Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo's (b. 1936) 'weak Christian belief,' by developing the idea of a weak distinction. A weak distinction can be secured through an analysis of Vattimo's understanding of Martin Heidegger's notion of *Verwindung*. This concept designates the Heideggerian way that a post-metaphysical thinker thinks about their relation to the metaphysical past. To this end, *Verwindung* (acceptance, distortion, healing, twisting) is contrasted with the dialectic notion of *Überwindung* (overcoming). *Überwindung* promotes a supersessionist or revolutionary logic, in which metaphysics can be overcome for good. In contrast, *Verwindung* promotes the idea that one never quite gets over metaphysics, but that one must pass through it, and in doing so, one can be healed of its damaging effects.

Heidegger believed that the supersessionist logic of *Überwindung* needed to be complicated, because to overcome metaphysics would imply that a new positive ground had been reached, which could promise the supersession of the past. Since Heidegger thought of metaphysics as the history of the forgetting of being itself (not the being of an entity), such a positive ground could only come at the cost of a full recovery or fully present manifestation of being. Yet, according to Heidegger, this is exactly how

metaphysics became the history of the forgetting of being: by trying to represent being as a fully present object before the eye of the mind. Thus, Heidegger began to understand that a post-metaphysical relation to metaphysics could not be one that was established by overcoming (*Überwindung*) metaphysics. Rather, a post-metaphysical relation with the metaphysical past would be based upon a distorting-acceptance of metaphysics (*Verwindung*).

To accept and distort metaphysics would be much like healing from a wound that one has suffered. A scar remains, but it remains as a mark of an experience that has one *gone through*—so too with philosophical thinking. *Verwindung* names the way that one can only think *through* the history that one or one's culture has passed through. In this way, thinking needs to come to a point where it is healed of its metaphysical propensity. Such a healing occurs through an accepting distortion of the past. Following Heidegger, Vattimo too is skeptical of any revolutionary logic that proposes to re-ground history on a new firmament. Because of this, he has adopted Heidegger's more complex notion of *Verwindung* (twisting, acceptance, distortion, healing) over the supersessionist notion of *Überwindung* (overcoming). By analyzing the relationship between *Verwindung*'s two sub-concepts, acceptance-distortion, one can provide the logic for a weak distinction between both metaphysics and post-metaphysics and their corresponding notions of belief, strong and weak belief, respectively. As will be shown in more detail below, a weak distinction between these two concepts thus amounts to a weakening of certainty in the history of belief itself.

2) The Problem

The need to defend the possibility of weak belief is developed through Richard Rorty's objection to Vattimo's use of the term belief to describe Vattimo's postmodern Christianity. Rorty objects to Vattimo's weak belief on the grounds that it makes little sense to talk about believing, if one does not also think that everyone else should believe what one believes, which Vattimo does not. Further, through a review of this argument and a presentation of Vattimo's counter-argument, it is shown that Rorty's objection has a substantial correlate within post-Heideggerian thought itself. If, as shown, a post-metaphysical relation with metaphysics means for Heidegger (and Vattimo) not a historical break with the history of metaphysics, but rather a historical continuity within metaphysics, then Vattimo cannot simply declare the possibility of his weak belief in opposition to strong belief. He must have a way to show its theoretical possibility out of the theoretical conditions of *Verwindung*. Only then can one decide whether Vattimo's concept of weak belief is valid according to the immanent needs of his Heideggerian philosophy.

This suggests that the main problem that confronts weak belief is not the sense that it does or does not make to traditional accounts of Christianity and religious belief, as Rorty argues. Primarily, this is because weak belief would be imagined as a *possible alternative* to strong belief, just as post-metaphysics is imagined to be a possible alternative to metaphysics. Weak belief would not be trying to represent itself in a traditional way, but to present a concrete manifestation of a transformation that occurs in belief itself. The primary problem is thus to show and develop its possibility from out of its own theoretical context.

To say that the main problem confronting weak belief is its possibility, is to thereby *anticipate* the possibility of weakening the relation between Christian dogmatism as it is manifested in strong belief and metaphysical violence. Vattimo associates metaphysics with violence because, at some point, metaphysical positions have the impudence to close off dialogue and to unilaterally try to force individuals and societies into a non-negotiable interpretation of what it means to think and to act. Not all such forceful methods are physically violent. As Vattimo describes, ideologically, violence takes the form of the cessation or silencing of questions (2002b: 455). At some point, metaphysical ideologies halt one's ability to question their legitimacy. In the Christian tradition, Vattimo thinks that institutionalized dogmatic authoritarianism and naturalized moralism is the result of metaphysical violence and strong belief. Vattimo's weak belief should therefore be understood as an attempt to break the link between Christianity and metaphysical violence, which is an attempt to reduce violence in the real world. He is searching for a non-dogmatic form of Christianity.

3) Method

The method pursued in this thesis is primarily textual and theoretical. This thesis uses a method of theoretical investigation termed immanent criticism. Immanent criticism uses the analysis of conceptual and logical relations in order to distinguish between the rhetorical aspects of a philosophy and its substantial or logical aspects. Through this analysis it aims to understand and clarify the legitimate and invalid arguments that a philosophical position might contain. This method provides me with three important moves in the body of this thesis.

First, in chapters 2 and 3, through a close reading of the record of their dialogue, I review the arguments that Vattimo and Rorty make concerning the objection that Rorty raises against Vattimo's so-called return to Catholicism. By analyzing and clarifying the logic and assumptions behind these arguments I develop the aforementioned problem.

Second, in Part I of chapter 4, I develop an argument for the possibility and validity of weak belief based upon a conceptual analysis of Vattimo's understanding of Heidegger's idea of *Verwindung*. I analyse the relationship between the two sub-concepts of this idea, acceptance and distortion, showing that they logically provide the basis for a weak distinction between metaphysics and post-metaphysics.

Third, in Part II of chapter 4, in order to make more sense of the significance of this weak distinction between strong and weak belief, I use it to interpret Vattimo's most prominent formulation of weak belief: 'believing that one believes.' This phrase suggests that weak belief is related to strong belief through the decline of the certainty of belief itself. In order to concretize this a bit more, I draw on an analysis of the history of belief as the history of becoming certain that Heidegger offers in *The End of Philosophy*, a move that I think Vattimo would endorse, because of its compatibility with the implications of his phrase 'believing that one believes.' In the end, weak belief is determined to be the weakening of certainty in the history of belief.

B. *Biographical Introduction: Weak Thought and Vattimo's Journey Back to Christianity*

In order to begin to introduce weak belief, I would like to give a brief recounting of Vattimo's journey both away from the Catholicism of his youth and his return back to Catholicism in his later life.

In 1996, Vattimo published a book entitled *Credere de credere* (Believing that one believes), which was translated into English as *Belief*. This book was an important landmark both for Vattimo's own personal religious views and also for Continental thought in general, because it marked one of the more prominent post-Heideggerian's philosophical legitimations for his return to religion. Since *Belief*, Vattimo has written a number of books that further extend his philosophical engagement with Christianity, such as *After Christianity* (2002), *The Future of Religion* (co-authored with Richard Rorty, 2005), *After the Death of God* (co-authored with John D. Caputo, 2007), and *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith* (co-authored with René Girard, 2010). Vattimo's return to Christianity is *the* predominant theme of his later philosophy, which is known as weak thought.

Weak thought is a form of post-Heideggerian philosophy that could be thought of as post-metaphysical. The idea of metaphysics and post-metaphysics will be developed more fully in the next chapter. For now, one can think of weak thought as the attempt to show the weakness of being as it relates to objective truth (foundational thinking) and the rise of hermeneutics as the primary method of philosophical investigation. With Nietzsche, Vattimo's weak thought constantly reminds us that there are no facts, just interpretations, and this too is an interpretation (Vattimo 2005: 43).

While the books on a post-metaphysical Christianity remain forthcoming, the reasons for Vattimo's return to Christianity offered in *Belief* remain pretty much the same. One can lay these reasons out along three interrelated trajectories: the personal, the socio-political, and the philosophical.

When he was a teenager, Vattimo would get up every morning and go to mass before school (Vattimo 1999: 20). During this time, he was heavily involved in the Catholic Action Group, a lay-oriented organization that attempted to influence Italian culture according to Catholic orthodoxy. However, Vattimo soon became discouraged with the Catholic religion's dogmatic rigidity, in terms of its moralism and political conservatism. Early on, before he had read Nietzsche or Heidegger, Vattimo writes that he was skeptical about an immutable natural order and natural theology (Vattimo 2009: 13). Despite these misgivings, he was still hopeful for an alliance between Catholicism and communism, an alliance between Christianity and radical politics. Because of this radical tendency, he was asked to leave the Catholic Action group in 1955 (ibid: 42).

This expulsion marked the beginning of a new phase in Vattimo's life. Disillusioned with the political conservatism of the Church and, more and more, exploring his homosexual tendencies, Vattimo largely turned his back on Christianity. He began devoting his time and energy to reading Nietzsche, Heidegger and later the radical political positions of Herbert Marcuse and Georg Lukács. In 1968, Vattimo 'converted' to Maoist Marxism after reading Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* and *Soviet Marxism* (ibid: 52).

However, Vattimo was also convinced that Heidegger's philosophy was 'more radical' than the critical theory of Lukács, Marcuse and Adorno. Vattimo *did* think that

politics, and not just poetry, could change the world (ibid: 60). Still, Vattimo did not want to promote an idea of revolution that would result in the dictatorship of the proletariat (ibid: 61-63). This ambivalence resulted in his important book *The Subject and its Mask: Nietzsche and the Problem of Liberation* (1974), in which Vattimo argued that we should not only try to change the relationships of power in capitalist societies, but that we should try to do it by changing the form of our own subjectivity. He took Nietzsche's superman as his main theoretical topic.

This book marks an important transition in Vattimo's career, because the 'disappointing' radical left's response to it began to move Vattimo to develop his idea of weak thought (Zabala 2007: 12). In the late 1970s, Maoism was becoming increasingly violent in Turin. The Red Brigade was killing a public personality nearly every day (Vattimo 2009: 81). Some of Vattimo's students were arrested and wrote to him from prison. He was disappointed both with the metaphysical tenor of their revolutionary ethics and the way that they were interpreting his Nietzschean subject as a Leninist subject, offering a form of revolutionary moralism (ibid: 84). Moreover, Vattimo himself came under threat from the Red Brigade. He was in a faculty council meeting, when the secretary walked in and said "Professor, the Red Brigades have telephoned. They say they want to kill you" (ibid). Vattimo was targeted because he was too moderate, speaking against the metaphysical logic of the Red Brigade's tactics.

These events led Vattimo to revise his previous political readings of Nietzsche and Heidegger (Zabala 2007: 12-13). One of Vattimo's closest students, Santiago Zabala, writes, "weak thought came to life not out of fear of terrorism but as a response to the terroristic interpretation of the Italian democratic left during the 1970s, as a

recognition of the unacceptability of the Red Brigade's violence" (ibid). Weak thought finds in metaphysical positions of any political variety, the tendency towards violence. Thus, it aims to pay particular attention to avoid the trap of metaphysical foundationalism.

One of the main implications of weak thought is the way it liberates human experience from the domination of dogma, either secular or religious. As Vattimo wrote in his introduction to the collection of essays in which his seminal essay on weak thought was contained, weak thought, despite its weakness, is desirable because "the price paid by potent reason strikingly limits the objects than can be seen and of which it is possible to speak" (Vattimo 2009: 87). Foundational thinking tries to limit human experience to the bounds of that which it claims to be real, true or certain. Metaphysics is precisely that system of thought that defines *being* by representing it with a finite representation and then maximizing this representation so that it produces a self-regulating boundary between the possible and the impossible, between what can legitimately be thought and done and that which it deems to be illegitimate. By calling into question the strength of foundational thinking through an endorsement of Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, weak thought 'frees' being from human representation and thereby liberates human experience from the strictures and violence of metaphysical logic.

For our purposes, perhaps the foremost concrete application of this implication is Vattimo's philosophical defense of his return to Christianity. As he says repeatedly, the critique of metaphysics offered by Nietzsche and Heidegger undermines the philosophical basis for atheism: there are thus no more good reasons for being an atheist in the age of postmodern pluralism (Vattimo 1999: 28). Of course, this does not mean

that one just becomes a theist, which is also a metaphysical position. However, it does liberate religious experience, if that religious experience can be understood in a post-metaphysical way. Vattimo's life and philosophical project have resulted in an attempt to show this possibility. One of the foremost concepts in this development is that of belief, which, of course, needs to be understood post-metaphysically and, therefore, *weakly*.

II. Weak Religious Belief and Post-Metaphysical Ethics

A. *Ethics without Transcendence*

By promoting weak belief, Vattimo is hoping to encourage the reduction of violence in the socio-historical world. Because of this, his views on religion intimately relate to his ethical theory. Vattimo argues that religious ethics have been transformed in recent decades (Vattimo 2004: 60-63). This transformation has taken religious ethics out of a concern for the individual and his or her (inner) spiritual aspirations and sanctification and turned them toward a concern for the "sphere of the social" (ibid: 63). For instance, Vattimo thinks that "almost no one" in the Catholic world any longer pays any ethical heed to sexual purity (ibid). One is much more likely to hear sermons based upon the third world and its economic and humanitarian plight and other social issues. In other words, Vattimo thinks that the naturalized moralism of the Catholic Church is beginning to fade despite the official Catholic doctrine that continues to hold it in high esteem. To mark this passage from a religiously naturalized moralism to a more secular ethical situation, Vattimo says that there has been *a transition from an ethics of the Other to an ethics of the other* (ibid: 64). The former denotes a metaphysical form of ethics based upon "obedience to rules deriving from metaphysical essences and structures..." (ibid).

The latter denotes the passage into an ethical situation in which we can say that there are ethical norms *without transcendence*.

1) Vattimo's Critique of Emmanuel Levinas' 'Metaphysical' Ethics

In referring to the ethics of the Other, Vattimo is explicitly implying a difference between his form of ethics and Emmanuel Levinas' ethics (Vattimo 2004: 67). In regards to Levinas' ethical philosophy, Vattimo feels "duty bound" to note its "residual 'metaphysical'" instances (ibid). In order to understand why Vattimo thinks of Levinas' ethics as metaphysical, we can look to his discussion of Levinas' conception of divinity as radical alterity.

For Levinas, all ethical responsibility to the human other is first made possible by an attempt to relate to a radical alterity that Levinas called the "Il," or the *He*, or *Illeity* (Critchley 2002: 114). This radical alterity is the basis of ethics: "For Levinas it is the trace of *Illeity* signaled in the 'Il' that constitutes the first act of obligation, that in a sense 'founds' the ethical relation [to the human other]" (ibid: 114-115). From this perspective, every responsibility to the human other is first founded by a responsibility to the radically Other. The *Il* provides the true object of the ethical relation as one tries to obey the *Il* by responding to its trace in the obligation to the human other. This is why Simon Critchley notes the strong link between religion and ethics in Levinas' philosophy. Critchley says that for Levinas "ethics is religion..." (ibid: 115).

For Vattimo, Levinas' ethics retains a form of metaphysical complicity. Levinas' wholly Other *Il* cannot be appropriated, but can be approached through its trace, which we find in our obligations to the human other. This reference to the Wholly Other of the beyond repeats a key negative theological move that tends to reify the God of

transcendence in a beyond, but a beyond that is nevertheless still existent ‘somewhere’ in reality (Vattimo 2002a: 37-39). Vattimo argues that Levinas’ God could only correspond to the irrational leap of faith and that this wholly Other God is the “same old God of metaphysics, conceived of as the ultimate inaccessible ground of religion (to the point of appearing absurd) and warranted by his eminent objectivity, stability, and definitiveness...” (Vattimo 2002a: 39). As I will show in Chapter 2, Vattimo thinks that this Wholly Other God is a violent God that continues to impose a sacrificial logic. To anticipate, we can briefly explain how Vattimo connects the God of negative theology (and Levinas’ ethics) to the violence of sacrificial, natural religions. Natural religions are those that continue to reify the connection between the sacred and violence because of their insistence upon sacrificial logics. In them, an all-powerful deity demands propitiatory atonement for human sinfulness. For Vattimo, the wholly Other risks this same tendency towards violence because it sacrifices human discourse about the divine to a negative moment (the *via negativa*) in order to exalt an inscrutable God who requires such sacrifice.

Understood from out of this critique of Levinas’ ethics, Vattimo’s ethics without transcendence, his ethics without the Wholly Other, poses an alternative way to ‘ground’ ethical discourse. Instead of grounding ethics within a metaphysical structure that claims to either grasp or designate positively or negatively a Transcendent beyond, Vattimo intends to completely historicize the ground of ethical logics. The obligations of ethical responsibility arise out of a definite historical trajectory, both cultural and personal. Insofar as religion and ethics are connected in Vattimo’s work, Christianity is the historical origin of the dual emphasis on secularization (critique of the natural sacred) and

the imperative of love, which both amount to the reduction of violence in the real world. For Vattimo, the God of Incarnation, the God of kenosis, brings this possibility into focus, because he himself submits to history for the sake of his love for humanity. The point is that history can yield measures for action, without grounding them in a transcendent and infinite beyond. There is no need for metaphysical referents in Vattimo's ethics without transcendence.

2) The Criterion for an Ethics without Transcendence

Vattimo insists that a post-metaphysical ethics without transcendence can still yield a criterion that can form the basis of a post-metaphysical critique of concrete social situations and thereby guide future choices. To many conservatives, the dissolution of metaphysical referents often implies the rise of a negative kind of nihilism and moral morass, in which the individual has no good reason to act ethically, because all the metaphysical bases of these strong reasons have been deconstructed. In other words, it amounts to *relativism* and an inability to criticize violence. One person's violence is another person's love. However, Vattimo points to the plurification of ethical perspectives as a positive contribution that offers a shared criterion for a new ethical discourse (Vattimo 2004: 65-66). For instance, the end of colonialism and the rise of non-Western logics and worldviews show that the Eurocentrism of metaphysics has been weakened and post-metaphysics gains an "emancipatory significance" (ibid: 66).

This situation provides a clear criterion for the *form* of post-metaphysical ethics. Such an ethics, which "no longer refers to the Other, meaning to a transcendent being, will be an ethics of negotiation and consensus rather than an ethics of immutable principles or categorical imperatives" (ibid: 67). The ethics of the other leads to the need

for a political outlook in which the ‘negotiation’ and ‘consensus’ of difference takes priority over the imposition of an absolute principle given by one social identity.

Vattimo is aware that this pluralist *form* of post-metaphysical ethics can lead to an empty and negative criterion: a deconstructive stance towards all metaphysical essentialisms and naturalized moralism. This is a problem because while it contributes to the ethical landscape by fulfilling a critical role against metaphysical absolutes, it is also hard to see how it provides a positive ethical *content* that avoids the pitfalls of ethical relativism. Vattimo therefore recognizes that he needs to have a post-metaphysical way to offer his own values without relying upon a hidden metaphysical imperative (ibid: 68).

In order to develop this positive *content*, Vattimo proposes to translate traditional ethical contents into Heidegger’s language of “the overcoming of metaphysics as the oblivion of Being” (Vattimo 2004: 69). For Heidegger, the task of philosophy was to remember that being itself (Being vs. beings or entities) had been forgotten in Western metaphysics. It had been forgotten because it had been represented as a stable substance or object by metaphysics. I will explain this logic a little more clearly in Chapter 1. For now, it is important to note that this means that in order to ‘overcome’ (not in the sense of *Überwindung*) metaphysics as the forgetting of being, one must stop thinking about being as an object. With this Heideggerian critique in mind, Vattimo proposes to retain the traditional ethical contents by interpreting them through Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics. His example is that of the seven deadly sins. He says that through Heidegger’s philosophy “a good deal of the content of this traditional doctrine [the seven deadly sins] might be retained, but with a profound change of meaning” (ibid).

By adopting this Heideggerian philosophy, Vattimo intends to ‘save’ traditional ethical contents in a post-metaphysical way. He uses the example of the seven deadly sins to illustrate his point. Taking the seven deadly sins in a post-metaphysical way would mean that the sins of envy, pride, gluttony, etc. could all be seen as “an incapacity to suspend total adhesion to the present object and listen to other voices,” a listening which would open up “other possibilities that could free us from the subjection in which the given tends to keep us” (Vattimo 2004: 69). Vattimo is saying that the radical new meaning of any positive ethical content will have two key aspects. First, there is a *de-formation* of the traditional metaphysical form of ethical contents. By rejecting the object-centered orientation of traditional metaphysics, Vattimo is trying to show how these traditional ethical contents can receive a post-metaphysical instantiation. Keeping with the example of the seven deadly sins, the reason that these can at all provide a guide for action is because they have been given in and through history and can therefore be subject to critique and procedural validation. They are not grounded in a metaphysical reality. In this sense, they become post-metaphysical, since they relinquish the idea of an objective reality.

Second, because they are a historical and cultural inheritance, the seven deadly sins can also offer a now *de-formed positive content* and criterion for action. Since their metaphysical basis has been declined, the seven deadly sins receive a radical new meaning. Vattimo says that this offers the ethical thinker the possibility of providing a new definition of *duty*. Duty is “precisely the negation of the definiteness of the given...” (ibid: 70). This means that the content of any ethical inheritance can receive a

post-metaphysical instantiation if it amounts to a negation of the hard objectivity of an object existing in-itself.

Allow me to offer an example, in order to clarify this. Take the case of gluttony. A certain individual has a compulsive need to eat. For them, the object of their desire (food) receives a certain excessive valuation. In an extreme case, this person eats as much as is humanly possible. Because of this compulsion, they cannot ‘suspend total adhesion to the present object’—food. Food determines their life and dominates their potentialities. Because of this compulsion, they cannot hear other voices (e.g., voices of moderation) that value their object of desire differently. Perhaps their doctor or their family members, out concern for the glutton’s health, are trying to re-evaluate the significance of food in the glutton’s life. But because the glutton has no sense of distance from the object, their ears are deaf to the voices of concern that surround them.

Vattimo thinks that the traditional sin of gluttony can still provide a guide for action and a duty that the glutton should fulfill. There is both a negative and a positive moment here. First, *negatively*, it demands that the glutton gain some distance from the object of desire, so that he or she can be open to hearing the voices of concern that are trying re-evaluate the object. This would allow the glutton to gain some perspective, see food from a different angle, and understand what his or her gluttony appears like to others. It deconstructs the maximized relation between the subject and the object to the extent that it opens up other possibilities for both. Second, *positively*, the glutton can now see and hear other possibilities and also recognize their duty to not be gluttonous for many reasons: personal health issues, responsibility to family members, and a larger responsibility to the social world, playing into structural issues like overconsumption in

the West and starvation in the third world. None of these reasons need to be grounded in a metaphysical logic, but they still can be seen as *convincing* reasons for the glutton to stop eating so much.

Thus, it is clear that Vattimo's weak thought does not amount to relativism, but rather to a form of procedural ethics (Vattimo 2004: 155). I will define proceduralism more fully below. The point to be taken away right now is that Vattimo's post-metaphysical philosophy has a way to provide positive ethical determinations. First of all, because it is post-metaphysical, it cannot offer substantial, universal ethics. To do so, would be to contradict the very idea of duty as the negation of the myth of given. However, this very prescription can be applied to interpret any received ethical content. It is and will remain an interpretation because, once again, it is not based upon a substantial metaphysical ground that can guarantee identities once and for all. It is received because all interpretations occur within a historical and cultural *provenance*. For Vattimo, the key aspect of proceduralism is that it occurs within this provenance (ibid: 160). Thus, history provides the guides for thinking and action as they are received and negotiated immanently in any interpretive situation or event. The main point is that a post-metaphysical ethics is available to provide critique and direction for human thought and action.

(i) Ethics and Politics

As practical philosophy, ethics is also intimately related to the area of law and politics. Before describing the specific juridical views of Vattimo, we can take a broader approach first and show how he thinks of resistance against power. Vattimo should be considered part of the "nihilistic left" (Vahabzadeh 2006: 641). The main characteristic of the

nihilistic left is that it does not try to establish a rational foundation that justifies its practice or its *raison d'être*. Vattimo has become more and more inclined to an anarchic position since the time he served as a member of the European Parliament for the European Socialists. His experience working in politics led him to believe that the best way to fight power is not to try to take it over, but rather to subtract one's self from it (Caputo and Vattimo 2007: 112-113). He therefore directly promotes, and has undeniable affinity with, Reiner Schürmann's book *On Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*, because its main thesis is that we prepare sites of anarchy in our subjectivities and our collective identities, thereby subtracting ourselves from the archic and metaphysical justifications that power uses (ibid: 113). Vattimo uses this book to suggest that we should try to de-link ourselves from power. In this endeavor, there will emerge local resistances to power that have developed their own logics and philosophies out of their own histories and experiences. The idea is that this might not stop power, but it can slow it down.

Vattimo's term for this 'local' emergence of procedure that arises out of a larger historical provenance is called *proceduralism*. Like Vattimo's nihilistic hermeneutics, proceduralism is not based on the reality of the object. For instance, justice cannot be universally prescribed as a stable presence that would amount to the same state of affairs in every situation at all times. Rather, justice can only arise as a negotiation within the procedures established in any given democratic process or moment. Vattimo says, "recognizing that if metaphysics is finished...then ethics, law, and politics can only take procedural form..." (Vattimo 2004: 155). Vattimo aligns proceduralism with hermeneutics in the sense that every procedure is itself only an interpretation (ibid: 158).

Seen in this hermeneutical light, proceduralism loses the substantive object of justice and finds justice to occur *through* the agreed upon procedures of any negotiation or conversation.

This loss of the substantive object is important because it links proceduralism both to the structure of ethics that I have outlined above and the structure of weak belief that I will be trying to outline throughout the rest of this thesis. In terms of ethics, both proceduralism and ethical duty lose their substantive object. However, this does not mean that ethics and proceduralism become wholly relative and arbitrary. Rather, as Vattimo argues, they presuppose a rationality that is embedded in past experiences and that continues to be beholden to them, as long as they remain historically based and not metaphysically substantialized. He says, “rationality...is founded on a certain interpretive fidelity to provenance” (Vattimo 2004: 160). Vattimo comes to this conclusion through his explication of the Heideggerian notion of *Verwindung*, which we will work out more fully later. The important point is that ethical rationality or the procedures for political situations are given to every situation through the history or *provenance* that it inherits and brings into the discourse or negotiation. However, because this rationality is not metaphysical, but historically based upon contingent formations, it is not *deterministic* in the strong sense of the word. Rather, the parties must agree upon the procedures, which arise out of the common ground *established within the situation* as part of the process of negotiation. This means that every situation or event in which a political issue is at play also brings along with it the rational procedures and ethics that can be used to guide thinking and action.

(ii) Love, Dialogue and Violence

From the above insights, I would like to draw out some definitions. Vattimo argues that authentic dialogue can only occur when all the interlocutors have *risked* their own premises (2002a: 98-99). They do not presume to know the outcome of the conversation, but work towards it together through a shared commitment to establishing common premises, etc. In short, the dialogue can only be authentic when each party is willing to lose something or change or *hear* the other's voice in such a way that it dramatically alters their orientation.

As we saw in Vattimo's ethical argument, this can only occur when there is a weakening of the fixation on the stable object. It is precisely through the weakening of the fixation on the object that one's ears are perked to hear other voices in a way that will change one's relation to the 'object.'

With this ethical project in place, we can now come to a more precise definition of love. Love is listening to the voices of others so that a process can begin to change one's attachment to the object. Love is a process in which we have gained 'ears to hear' the voice of the other in a way that it can radically challenge our own fixations and pretensions to have grasped reality.

Because love is a process, it also has very close ties to Vattimo's idea of proceduralism. In fact, like dialogue, one could say that love comes to the fore in the process of finding criterions for thinking and acting as they arise in any situation. Love arises out of a provenance. Its measure is therefore established in and through the listening that can hear the echoes of past formations and ethical contents coming to the fore as received contents in the situation. However, once again, a dialogue must then occur as to what common ground can and should be established. So love can hear echoes

from history and also submit these echoes to the processes of dialogue in which they are at stake.

Also, love is therefore opposed to violence because violence, as Vattimo defines it, is the silencing of questioning or of questioning voices (2002b: 455). Violence is the excessive fixation on the object so that it both violently dominates the object and in its zealousness thereby drowns out the voices of others. Sometimes violence occurs physically, sometimes intellectually, but it results either way in the silencing of the voices that could change one's position in regards to the object.

III. Conclusion: Justice as the Horizon of Belief

The personal, political, and philosophical trajectories of Vattimo's life have brought him full circle, back to the Catholicism of his youth. However, this return is not a return to an orthodox Catholic position; his Catholicism is quite heterodox. His concern for justice has transformed the way that he thinks about Christianity. He is quite aware of the ideological violence that is tacit within the Christian worldview and he hopes to make the Christian message of love the basis of a post-metaphysical Christianity. His renewed appreciation for Christianity needs to be understood within this ethical framework and the call for justice.

By emphasizing ethics over "reality," Vattimo has begun to re-imagine many Christian concepts and ideas. Defending his return to Christianity is thereby complicated, because what Vattimo calls Christianity is often vastly different from what others take to be Christianity. Vattimo presupposes a post-metaphysical interpretation of Christianity, which emphasizes the need for a transformation of the Christian tradition. Thus, when

one encounters Vattimo's notion of Christianity, it can be quite disconcerting, because it presents an understanding of Christianity very different from what one might expect.

Perhaps one of the most disconcerting aspects about Vattimo's Christianity is the way that it transforms the context in which we are to understand belief. Traditionally, the context in which belief has been understood is that of a critical epistemology. The guiding assumption behind this approach was that there was a religious reality 'out there' somewhere and that belief (either rationally or non-rationally) both represented and secured access to that exterior religious reality. This idea of belief was supported by the two-world structure of traditional Christianity, in which there is a sensible, mundane world and a transcendent, supersensible world. As we will see in the next chapter, Vattimo follows Nietzsche's announcement of the fabalization of this supersensible world and the death of God. But for Vattimo, these Nietzschean themes enable a renewed vitalization of religious experience.

Since Vattimo has appropriated this Nietzschean interpretation of Christianity, the context of belief too has radically changed. No longer is belief a matter of epistemological access to a transcendent religious reality. Now, the horizon of belief is the call to justice and the ethical implications that this raises. In the terms of a traditional philosophy of religion, we could say that Vattimo has taken the question of belief out of the epistemological realm and transferred it into a theodical context, if we are willing to deconstruct the metaphysical moments of theodicy as well. In this new context, the problem of belief is not that a transcendent God allows or cannot but allow evil to happen, either because he is impotent or malevolent. Rather, it is that a God who has been emptied of all his transcendent qualities (omnipotence, omniscience, etc.) through

incarnation has also been submitted to the evil of the world, revealing evil as evil through his own suffering and therefore calling upon everyone to reduce violence. As we will see, the problem of belief in this renewed theodicy is not to justify God's ways to humanity, but rather to show how belief can contribute to the reduction of violence in the real world.

Existentially, this implies that evil and metaphysical violence is corrosive of belief and the only way to "believe" in Vattimo's sense is both weakly and ethically. To believe weakly is to believe ethically. This does not just mean that we could say that Vattimo believes in ethics, although this is true. More so, it means that the very form and modality of belief becomes an ethical task. There is no Kierkegaardian teleological suspension of the ethical in weak belief. Belief itself is directed to the task of love and the reduction of violence. In the following chapters we will be working towards an understanding about how to understand this ethical slant on belief and how it impacts the very idea of believing.

Chapter 2: Metaphysics, Post-Metaphysics, and Vattimo's Belief

The purpose of this chapter is to present Vattimo's argument for his return to Christianity and his defence that he has a form of belief. Vattimo's form of belief is idiosyncratic because of the ethical way that he interprets Christianity while keeping in mind Martin Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics. He has used a number of different phrases that are meant to qualify his belief as non-traditional: "half belief," believing that one believes, and "postmodern faith" (1999: 77; 2002a: 1; 2002a: 8). These phrases indicate that while Vattimo's belief is unorthodox, he nevertheless thinks and insists that he believes. The following will present the argument that he has made when challenged by those who deny that what he is calling his belief, is in fact belief.

In Part I, I will briefly describe the main Heideggerian themes that provide the post-foundationalist philosophical context of which Vattimo writes. I will also show how Heideggerian philosophy influences Vattimo's rethinking of Christianity. Then in Part II, with this background in place, I will present the argument that Vattimo offers in defence of his return to religion, one which occurs in dialogue with Richard Rorty.

I. The Heideggerian Context for Vattimo's Belief

The most important aspect of Heidegger's philosophy for understanding the post-Heideggerian context in which Vattimo works, is Heidegger's deconstruction of the history of metaphysics as the forgetting of being. This Heideggerian theme informs all of

Vattimo's major presuppositions and forms the philosophical basis of all his arguments. As we will see shortly, it also conditions his understanding of belief.

A. *Heidegger and Metaphysics*

Metaphysics is the western, philosophical tradition of thinking about that which is beyond or above (*meta*) beings. One of its primary topics is *being*. Although being is one of metaphysics' main topics, perhaps Heidegger's greatest contribution to philosophy was to delineate the history of metaphysics as the *forgetting of being*. The primary way that metaphysics becomes forgetful of being is by thinking about being like a representable object, which leads to foundational thinking. The term *onto-theology* captures the sense of how this happens.

1) Metaphysics as the Forgetting of Being

Metaphysics "states what beings are as beings" (Heidegger 1998: 287). This means that a thing becomes a being *by relating it to the idea of being as such*. Since it states what beings are *as beings*, it relates them to being as such by representing them in relation to the "beingness of beings (the οὐσία of the ὄν)" (ibid). *Beingness* is what all beings share by virtue of being beings (*ousia* of the *on* or the essence of beings). Beingness thus designates the most universal aspect of beings, while being thereby becomes the *transcendental condition* of all possible beings. By saying what being is, one also thereby sets a limit to what could possibly be a being or an entity.

In the history of western philosophy, metaphysics leads to the *forgetfulness of being* because it is forgetful of the way that *being has been concealed* in the idea of the beingness of beings. Heidegger says that:

as metaphysics, it [metaphysics] is by its very essence excluded from the experience of Being; for it always represents beings (Ńv) only with an eye to that aspect of them that has already manifested itself as being (ŃŃ Ńv). But metaphysics never pays attention to what has concealed itself in this very Ńv insofar as it became unconcealed. (ibid: 288)

In a usefully condensed form, this quotation contains Heidegger's critique of western metaphysics as the forgetting of being. The second clause of the first sentence contains the positive sense of the forgetfulness, while the second sentence contains the negative sense of forgetfulness. Metaphysics positively forgets being by thinking of beings only with "an eye" for the way that being has *already been interpreted or manifested in the pre-articulated sense of being itself*. In short, it only thinks of beings as *representable* entities. Second, metaphysics negatively forgets being by neglecting the concealed or forgotten possibilities within both beings, and more to the point, being itself. The positive interpretation of being obscures, covers over, or *conceals* the negative aspect.

One can think of this forgetfulness by thinking about *interpretive basis* of being itself. For instance, if beings are thought about for the purposes of the natural sciences, then being is already pre-conceived in terms of what allows the scientist to represent, control, or manipulate the characteristics of a physical object. Heidegger argues in *Being and Time* that the natural sciences all already presume a scientific ontology (Heidegger 1962: 31). Being has been interpreted, either implicitly or explicitly, as that which can be measured or quantified, because the beingness of the object will have already been pre-understood according to the interpretation of beingness that suits the technical purposes

of the natural sciences. Thus, being is objectified through the interpretation of beingness that suits the techno-scientific purposes of theoretical science.

In a different context, Heidegger says that the objectification of being (as an object of techno-science) occurs because “one thinks ‘Being’ as objectivity, and then tries to get to ‘what is in itself.’ But one only forgets to ask and to say what one means here by ‘what is’ and by ‘in itself’” (Heidegger 1973: 96). Heidegger is saying that to try to access the object as it is ‘in itself’ (as that which suits the scientific-technical purposes of manipulation and control) already implies an interpretation of ‘what is’ (the beingness of beings). Thus, the in-itself of the object is already affected by the subject’s approach towards it with these ontological assumptions. In other words, Heidegger is saying that one forgets that there is *an implicit interpretation of being as objectivity working in the background* of one’s thought when one investigates beings from a scientific, representational perspective.

Thus, the forgetfulness of being occurs in two ways. First, positively, it occurs by an *attitude of matter-of-factness* towards beings (and thereby being), in which there is always-already an unrecognized *a priori* interpretation of being at work. Second, negatively, this pre-understood interpretation of being *conceals* other possible ‘interpretations’ of being. This matter-of-factness and concealment of being composes the forgetfulness of being that is the heritage of metaphysics left to the western world. Heidegger declares, “Being remains unquestioned and a matter of course, and thus unthought. It holds itself in a truth which has long since been forgotten and is without ground” (ibid: 96-97). It is this ungrounded truth of being, the idea that being could not

be grounded in an object-like entity, that Heidegger was trying to get at by deconstructing the history of metaphysics as onto-theology.

2) Onto-theology: How Metaphysics Has Forgotten Being

One of Heidegger's most important terms for the forgetting of being is *onto-theology*.

Onto-theology designates the primary way that metaphysics has forgotten being: it has done so because it has interpreted being as *a* being or an entity. Through the concept of beingness, metaphysics represents the most universal property or characteristic of beings as a whole. Beingness represents "the totality of beings as such with an eye to their most universal trait; but at the same time also the totality of beings as such in the sense of the highest and therefore divine being" (Heidegger 1998: 287). Beingness thereby has two senses. First, it is the most universal trait or characteristic of beings. Second, it is this universal trait that is placed at the ground or origin of all beings, receiving the rank of first being or the highest/most divine being. By divinizing the ground of being in terms of a first cause or God, metaphysics imagines being to be a kind of, but perhaps *the* highest kind of, entity. This is why Heidegger formulates the concept of *onto-theology*: because "according to its essence, metaphysics is at the same time both ontology...and theology" (ibid). There is a theoretical alliance between ontology and theology that has historically contributed to the forgetting of being.

For our purposes, the importance of onto-theology in the history of western philosophy is that it leads to *foundational thinking*. When being as the most universal and highest type of 'object' can be positively represented and thereby grasped by philosophers, then all legitimate thought and action can be deduced from it. An interpretation of being as 'such and such' therefore *founds* and *governs* what is knowable

and doable, leading to dogmatism if this ultimacy remains non-negotiable. For Heidegger, the philosophical task was to try to remember being by deconstructing the history of metaphysics and this alliance between metaphysics and theology. This amounted to trying to recover, in whatever way possible, being as such by distinguishing it from the being of entities. By trying to remember being, Heidegger also developed a form of non-foundational thinking, which Vattimo has attempted to promote in his weak thought.

B. Onto-theology, Post-Metaphysics and Christianity

Vattimo accepts Heidegger's analysis of the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics. His return to Christianity is therefore marked by an attempt to distinguish between metaphysical Christianity and a post-metaphysical instantiation of it. He works out his post-metaphysical Christianity at a number of key points, all of which tend to undermine the traditional border between philosophy and theology. The following will briefly demonstrate how Heidegger's critique of western onto-theology makes its way back into Vattimo's re-thinking of Christianity on three key topics. The first is in Vattimo's interpretation of the death of God; the second is in his *kenotic* reading of Christianity; the third is his positive identification of Christianity and secularization. All three of these topics contribute to a unique postmodern version of belief. The point of this section is simply to introduce the idiosyncrasy of Vattimo's approach to Christianity. This will provide a context for understanding the need to defend his belief against objections like that of Rorty's, who argues that one should not call Vattimo's relation to Christianity a form of belief.

1) The Death of God

According to Vattimo, the Nietzschean announcement of the death of God should not be understood as an atheistic thesis. To think of the madman's episode in this way "would amount to another absolute truth entirely equivalent to the affirmation that 'God exists'" (Vattimo 2009: 18). In other words, this would amount to another instance of the metaphysics that Vattimo thinks Nietzsche has diagnosed as superfluous (ibid).

The statement "God is dead" needs rather to be understood as meaning that there are no longer any ultimate foundations for thought or action, which could guarantee the stability and absolute truthfulness of dogmas, either religious or secular (ibid). In short, it should be understood as the announcement of the rejection of the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics. Vattimo says that an "analogous meaning [to the death of God]...is found in Heidegger's polemics against metaphysics...which believes itself capable of grasping the ultimate foundation of reality in the form of an objective structure like an essence or a mathematical truth, which is given outside of time" (Vattimo 2002a: 3). For Vattimo, the death of God signals the end of foundational thinking, because it rejects the idea that one can grasp a timeless truth upon which to base one's conclusions and make them universally valid like a mathematical formula.

Because the death of God does not offer an atheistic thesis, but because it rather revokes the metaphysical basis of atheism, it signals the possibility of a recovery of religious experience in the postmodern world (Vattimo 2002a: 5). However, the form of this recovery is not traditional. That is, it is not to be understood as a simple return to dogmatic (metaphysical) religion, which would contradict the premises of its recovery. This recovery thus exceeds the objective, metaphysical orientation of both atheism and

theism. Thus, Vattimo's belief cannot be reduced to the terms of the debate between atheism and theism.

2) *Kenosis*, Scapegoating and Incarnation

In order to understand the context in which Vattimo's belief makes sense, one should understand his Heideggerian reading of René Girard's scapegoat thesis and its result in a *kenotic* understanding of Christianity (Vattimo 1999: 37-39). Then, one can better understand how Vattimo's belief exceeds the traditional boundaries of the atheism-theism debate.

Girard's anthropological theory argues that human institutions and societies are both held together and torn apart by *mimetic desire*. Mimetic desire is the human drive to possess and retain objects of desire, simply because one sees others from one's peer group possessing and retaining them. This drive is powerful and leads to conflict over the objects of desire, threatening to destroy society. Girard argues that in order to negotiate this destructive tendency, human societies developed a *scapegoat mechanism*. The scapegoat functions as a focus-point, displacing the 'universal' human aggression onto itself and cathartically dispelling, for a time, the destructive tendency of mimetic desire. Because this mechanism really works, the scapegoat and the sacrificial rituals surrounding it are invested with an aura of sacrality. This sacrificial structure of traditional human societies is legitimated through the mythologies of the natural religions.

Girard therefore contrasts the *natural religions* of sacrifice with the Christian faith, because he thinks that Christianity is the religion that first unveils and abolishes (literally but not figuratively in the Eucharist) the scapegoat mechanism through its

doctrine of incarnation and the death of Christ (Vattimo 1999: 38). Traditional propitiatory doctrines of the death of Christ *emphasize* the sacrificial logic of Christ's death. Christ was given as a sacrificial lamb in order to redeem humanity from the wrath of a holy God, who is seeking to rectify human sinfulness. This is the *natural sacred* and Girard argues that Christ's death in fact unveils just this understanding of the incarnation. The death of Christ actually reveals and abolishes "the nexus between violence and the sacred" (ibid: 37). His crucifixion was a result of his preaching against this nexus. Natural religions are those that continue to reinforce the natural sacred and its sacrificial logic; while Christian faith is that which seeks to dissolve the link between the sacred and violence.

Vattimo affirms but also *extends* Girard's thesis, by ontologizing it, making it commensurate with Heidegger's critique of metaphysics. In a very important paragraph, Vattimo develops this identity between Girard's thesis, Nietzschean nihilism (death of God), and Heidegger's critique of onto-theology in the context of Christian history:

to move closer to a nihilistic recovery of Christianity, it is sufficient to go just a little bit beyond Girard by acknowledging that the natural sacred is violent not only insofar as the victim-based mechanism presupposes a divinity thirsty for vengeance, but also insofar as it attributes to such a divinity all the predicates of omnipotence, absoluteness, eternity and 'transcendence' with respect to humanity that are precisely the attributes assigned to God by natural theologies.... In short, Girard's violent God is from this standpoint the God of metaphysics, what metaphysics called *ipsum esse subsistens*, the summation in pre-eminent form of all the characters of objective being as thought by metaphysics. The dissolution of metaphysics is also the end of this image of God, the death of God of which Nietzsche spoke. (ibid: 38-39)

Vattimo's argument is that the natural sacred is not just the violent God of the natural religions, but also the God of philosophy, because there is a theoretical resemblance

between the violent God of the natural religions and the transcendent, objective God of philosophy. Heidegger's 'surpassing' of metaphysics and Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God thereby signal not just the end of the natural sacred, but also the end of the onto-theological God of philosophy.

In contrast to the God of the natural sacred and the God of onto-theology, the biblical God is the God of *kenosis* or incarnation (Vattimo 1999: 39). Vattimo adopts the Greek term *kenosis* from the author of the book of Philippians, who characterizes Christ's incarnation in terms of an emptying-out or making himself 'nothing,' etc. (2: 7). This Christian moment reflects the dissolution or de-substantialization of metaphysical referents like God. It signals the loss of substance in Christ. Thus, for Vattimo, *kenosis* signals not just the end of natural religion (as in Girard), but also the end of the God of traditional onto-theology: "the incarnation, that is, God's abasement to the level of humanity, what the New Testament calls God's *kenosis*, will be interpreted as the sign that the non-violent and non-absolute God of the post-metaphysical epoch has as its distinctive trait the very vocation for weakening of which Heideggerian philosophy speaks" (ibid: 39). *Kenosis* is understood as the abasement of God, in the sense that it signals the dissolution of God's transcendence (onto-theology) and the beginning of the God of history.

By rejecting the theological-philosophical link between Christianity and onto-theology, Vattimo transforms the context in which belief occurs. Belief is no longer the knowledge about a possible theoretical object such as a transcendent deity. The atheism-theism debate is thus rejected. Instead, Vattimo transforms the idea of the belief in God to be something more like a participation in cultural history: it is an existential response

to one's cultural historicity. In order to thematize this idea further, we should look at how Vattimo uses *kenosis* to make a positive identification between Christian history and secularization.

3) Positive Secularization

For Vattimo, the main implication of *kenosis* is that secularization constitutes a positive outworking of the Christian revelation (Vattimo 1999: 38-44). Because secularization is understood as a "drifting" from the "sacral origins" of Western civilization, and because Vattimo understands (through Girard) the history of Christianity as a drifting from the sacrality of the natural religions, secularization can be understood as the positive outworking of the Christian message of God's kenotic love (ibid: 41). This means that secularization is not just a rejection of the natural sacred within Christendom (authoritarian and dogmatic Christianity), but also that it is the recovery of the original Christian message of love and the reduction of sacrificial violence (ibid: 44). Vattimo therefore understands secularization as another instance of the Christian revelation of *kenotic love* (ibid: 47).

However, by identifying secularization and Christianity Vattimo also calls into question some of the most distinctive features of traditional Christianity. Because Vattimo connects the idea of *kenosis* with Heidegger's metaphysical critique, secularization erodes the dogmatic core of traditional Christianity. No longer can the Christian tradition claim to have revealed an objective understanding of being that allows it to naturalize its morality or to know 'the truth' about Christian doctrines or religious realities (ibid: 56-62). Thus, in order to avoid dissolving Christianity of all substance, Vattimo presents the message of God's kenotic love in Christ as the limit of the

secularizing principle (ibid: 62-65). The only truth that the Judaeo-Christian scriptures reveal is the truth of love: “the only truth revealed to us by scripture, the one that can never be demythologized in the course of time—since it is not an experimental, logical, or metaphysical statement but a call to practice—is the truth of love, of charity” (Vattimo 2005: 50-51). On the one hand, Vattimo *reduces* Christian faith to the bare and singular message of love. On the other hand, love constitutes the *limit* of secularization or demythologization. The Christian message cannot be reduced out of its call to love.

From the above review, we can see that Vattimo has attempted to re-think Christianity from a post-metaphysical perspective, by minimizing its onto-theological presuppositions and tendencies. One cannot think of his belief in terms of the ‘objectivist’ and foundationalist orientations of the God debate. Instead, he deconstructs the transcendent Godhead out of Christianity through his kenotic reading. He thinks that this raises the primacy of love and leads to the secularization of Christianity (and the Christianization of secularism). The content and the form of Vattimo’s belief is therefore ambiguous. Could we say, for instance, that he believes in God or that he believes in Christianity in the common parlance of the term ‘believing in’? What exactly does Vattimo believe? Could he even say that he has belief at all? Part II will present the argument that Vattimo has made in response to similar questions raised against him by Richard Rorty.

II. Vattimo’s Justification for his Belief

The ambiguity of Vattimo’s belief has been raised by a number of commentators (Depoortere 2008; Frankenberry 2007; Rorty 2005). Perhaps the strongest argument

against it has been presented by the American neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty (1931-2007). The strength of Rorty's argument follows from his familiarity with both Vattimo (they were close friends until Rorty's recent death) and his work.

The dialogue between Rorty and Vattimo has been published in a small volume entitled *The Future of Religion*. This book contains the major arguments that Rorty and Vattimo make against one another on the topic of Vattimo's return to Christianity and the sense of his secular or postmodern belief. In this chapter, I will present Vattimo's argument for his return to Christianity. Both Rorty's objection to the sense of Vattimo's belief and Vattimo's rebuttal will be presented in the next chapter. For now, the point is to clarify the broader logic of Vattimo's defence of his return to Christianity, a return that Rorty finds it difficult to defend on philosophical grounds. He thinks this, because he thinks that the philosophical basis for belief has been dissolved in postmodernity, because postmodernity takes religious belief out of the public game of giving and offering reasons for one's belief (Rorty 2005: 37-38).

Vattimo defends his Christian commitment against Richard Rorty in two consecutive moves. First, he establishes the post-Heideggerian context in which both he and Rorty write and think (Vattimo 2005: 43-47). Since Rorty is a neo-pragmatist that takes Heidegger as one of his major sources and allies, this is a good place for Vattimo to start. Vattimo's second move is where he would lose Rorty. Vattimo looks back into history from the post-Heideggerian philosophical conditions that he shares with Rorty, and argues that Christianity prepared the way for the Heideggerian project (ibid: 47-54). His conclusion is that western individuals *cannot not* call themselves Christians (ibid: 54). The implication of this conclusion is that in order to be consistent, we must

somehow believe in Christianity because it makes sense of our cultural and personal identities.

Since the crux of the argument occurs in the second move, I will try to clarify and examine its concepts and logical structure.

A. Christianity as a Transcendental, Historical Condition of Postmodernity

Vattimo's argument that Christianity provides the transcendental, historical condition for post-foundationalist thinking has two components. First, Vattimo argues that Christianity should be the religion of universal love.

1) First Component: Christianity as the Religion of Universal Love

First, Vattimo argues that Christianity can only be universal if it gives up its claim to dogmatic foundationalism (Vattimo 2005: 49). The reasoning is interesting. Vattimo points to the increasing alienation that individuals feel towards the Church because of its insistence on outdated doctrines and a naturalized moralism. For instance, among other points, he acknowledges the alienation that many people feel towards the Church's sexist policies: refusing to ordain women in the clergy and thinking of God as a male. Also, he points to the ecumenical problem, in which religions vie over the ultimate truth about reality, which leads to antagonism within religions and between religions. Because it exacerbates the alienation and antagonism between people, Vattimo thinks that Christianity contradicts its universal vocation.

The point is that in order for Christianity to realize its universality, it must overcome the way that it alienates and causes antagonisms between people. And in order

to realize its universality, it must realize its fullest potential as the religion of universal love and fraternal dialogue. Otherwise, to continue to insist on a dogmatic onto-theological orientation would also ensure that Christianity continues to alienate and marginalize itself as an authoritarian institution. In other places, in order to legitimate this 'potentialization' of Christianity, Vattimo makes a sharp distinction between *Christianity* as the radical and anti-metaphysical message of charity and *Christendom* as the institutionalized, onto-theological legitimation of political and social power (Zabala 2005: 38).

Thus, in order to fulfill its universal vocation, Christianity must give up its claims to have founded its universalism through dogmatic foundationalism. The premises here go like this. (1) In order to realize its universal vocation, Christianity must submit its truths and beliefs to its basic message of universal love, which would include submitting them to processes of dialogue and consensual agreement. (2) Christianity should realize its universal vocation. (3) Thus, Christianity should submit its truths and beliefs to dialogical processes of love.

For Vattimo, *dialogue* can only occur authentically when each interlocutor is willing to risk their own presuppositions (2002a: 98-99). This means that each individual is not seeking to impose a pre-understood truth upon the dialogue. Rather, they are willing to be lead by the conversation to the truths that can be established through it. Remembering Vattimo's idea of proceduralism, this means that the premises of every dialogue, the common ground upon which it can occur, must proceed out of a negotiation between the participants. Thus, in order to enter into dialogue, and thus to be the religion

of universal love, Christianity must be willing to give up its dogmatic core in the process of dialogue.

This first sub-argument has presented Vattimo with a non-foundationalist logic that he thinks is contained within ‘authentic’ or ‘original’ Christianity. With this definition of Christianity in hand, Vattimo can now make his second point.

2) Second Component: Christianity as the Transcendental, Historical Precedent of Heideggerian Philosophy

Since Christianity is authentically non-foundationalist, Vattimo can now note the *historical precedence* that it sets for Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics and the non-foundationalist context of post-Heideggerian philosophy (Vattimo 2005: 51). While Rorty is sympathetic to Vattimo’s emphasis on love, he is not convinced that one should feel any closer to Christianity. His pragmatic orientation rather argues that religious believers *can* believe if they want, but only to the extent that they leave their religious beliefs in private, and thereby subtract them from the secular space of democratic societies and thus philosophical reasoning (Rorty 2005: 34-38).

By referring to his previous argument, Vattimo can now claim that Rorty’s own non-foundationalist thinking is made possible by Christianity: without Christianity, Rorty would have no resources with which to think non-foundationally, which allows him to pragmatically distinguish between private truth and public truth (Vattimo 2005: 51-52).

3) Vattimo’s Conclusion: Christianity as a Historical Condition

Vattimo is now in a position to make the following conclusion: individuals like him and Rorty “cannot not call ourselves Christians” (ibid: 54). Because he has argued that

Christianity is the historical precedent of post-Heideggerian philosophy, he can now argue that Rorty and others like him, and the West in general, *are* in fact Christian. However, this is a weak identification, because it implies a certain historicist outlook, in which we have *come through* our onto-theological heritage, which also includes other Greek, Medieval, modern, Jewish and Islamic elements (Caputo and Vattimo 2007: 102). Vattimo is not therefore saying that all westerners actually believe or should believe in the doctrines of the Church. Still, they should recognize their own historicity in terms of their cultural antecedents in the Christian (and the larger metaphysical) tradition. He writes, “so with respect to Rorty’s pragmatism, what I propose is an explicit appropriation of our Christian historicity” (Vattimo 2005: 54). In order to be consistent with his earlier premise, this explicit appropriation could only be the recovery of the basic Christian message of universal love.

B. Consequences for Belief

This last point raises the question about the relationship between this authentic Christian message and belief. Throughout the argument, Vattimo has been referring to belief. Now that we are clear about the structure and reasoning of the argument, we are in a better position to address the idea of belief that is dealt with sporadically within it.

Perhaps the best passage to note in this regard, is the way that Vattimo’s argument deals with traditional Christian belief-contents. First, he asks rhetorically,

But must we really believe in Jesus Christ only if we are able to demonstrate that God created the world in seven days or that Jesus himself actually rose on Easter morning and by extension that man is by nature one thing or another or that the family is by nature monogamous and heterosexual, that matrimony is by nature

indissoluble, that woman is incapable by nature of entering the priestly office, and so on? (Vattimo 2005: 53)

He then goes on, “It is far more reasonable to believe that our existence depends on God because here, today, we are unable to speak our language and to live out our historicity without responding to the message transmitted to us by the Bible” (ibid: 53).

In the rhetorical question, Vattimo rejects a form of belief that we could call traditional belief. The main characteristic of traditional belief is that it naturalizes and thereby places beyond dialogical processes certain reasoning strategies that establish particular belief-contents. This is a form of foundationalist thinking and Vattimo rejects it, which is why he presents it in rhetorical form.

His response to this rhetorical question presents an alternative form of belief according to the logic of his earlier argument against Rorty. One can see that he is still operating with an idea of belief. He still believes in God, for instance. But the reasoning behind this belief is very different from traditional belief. Now, it is “far more reasonable” to believe in God because we cannot think about or live out our lives as western individuals, without in somehow or someday, responding to the God of the Bible that we meet in our textual and cultural heritage. God or belief-contents are not theoretical objects available to be demonstrated and verified or falsified through foundationalist reasoning strategies. Vattimo’s rejection of onto-theology has subtracted this way of thinking about religious belief-contents. However, he is still insisting on believing in them, because they are a condition for understanding one’s personal and cultural identity. In order to distinguish traditional belief from this (Vattimo’s) idea of belief, I will now begin to call the former *strong* belief and the latter *weak* belief.

Vattimo offers an analogy to make weak belief more intelligible (2005: 53; Caputo and Vattimo 2007: 36). Weak belief is a form of cultural belonging and participation akin to one's reliance upon and conditioning by the literary canon. He says that taking the Bible away from the West (and his own personal life) would be like taking Dante away from Italian literature or Shakespeare away from English literature (Caputo and Vattimo: 36). The biblical tradition is the most important aspect of the literary canon, because one cannot subtract it from Dante or Shakespeare (or other literary works) without making them culturally meaningless (ibid).

Vattimo says that his weak belief in Christianity (and its doctrines) thus only amounts to the assurance that he cannot know his own cultural and personal identity without reference to the Christian tradition: "this means that to profess faith in Christianity is first of all to profess faith in the inevitability of a certain textual tradition that has been passed down to me. Take away the Bible and I would not be what I am" (ibid). There are no supernatural or transcendent claims for Christianity anymore. Rather, weak belief only relates to the belief-contents of Christianity in terms of the need to orient one's own identity in a cultural and historical trajectory. These thoughts indicate that Vattimo is thinking about belief in Christianity along the lines of a belonging to a cultural heritage.

III. Conclusion: The Loss of an Object of Belief

The purpose of the foregoing was to demonstrate the way that Vattimo's Heideggerian reading of Christian history distorts his understanding of it. Namely, Vattimo attempts to subtract onto-theology from Christianity. As we have seen, this leads him to emphasize

the positive continuity between Christianity and such things as the death of God and secularization. Further, this onto-theological subtraction changes the form of belief itself. Belief is no longer ‘strong enough’ to secure God or any other religious ‘reality’ as an object or belief-content. For instance, Vattimo’s belief cannot be understood in the context of a debate about God’s existence, because belief is no longer about proving or disproving objects of belief. Rather, belief becomes weaker, in the sense that the believer can only point to the need to refer to traditional ‘belief-contents’ like God in order to orient and make sense of his or her cultural and personal identity.

Moreover, the point of such a radically new understanding of post-metaphysical belief is anchored in a project that hopes to recover the ethical impact of the authentic Christian message of love. For Vattimo, Christian love forms the backdrop against which all our critical, secular, and philosophical projects need to be understood. There is an inherent link between this secular understanding of Christianity and the ethics without transcendence that Vattimo is endorsing. We can now see that one of the key moments in this ethical project is a renewed evaluation of the relation of belief and its belief-content or object. I have shown how Vattimo’s notion of weak belief amounts to a type of ironic interaction with his Catholic heritage. He believes, but he believes not in an existent religious reality. Rather, he believes in the sense that he practically engages with and interacts with the vestiges of his cultural upbringing. The traditional contents of this Catholic heritage are taken with a certain existential distance. They can be critiqued, deconstructed and de-mythologized as potentially dangerous mythologies. However, this very de-mythologization is itself submitted to a larger *Christian* ethical project—that of love and the reduction of violence (including the natural sacred).

In the last chapter, we developed Vattimo's ethical project in terms of its de-formation of both the form and content of traditional ethical positions. We are now in a position to show more specifically the link between this ethical orientation and Vattimo's weak belief.

The two main moments in an ethics without transcendence are the de-formation of the *form* of traditional ethics and the re-formation of the *content* of traditional ethics. Once one has deconstructed the metaphysical basis of traditional ethics, it still offers a guide for duty and obligation, but now from a historicized perspective, instead of a metaphysical perspective. The discourse of duty (and ethics more generally) comes to one from one's cultural past as does rationality and the procedures that politics and the legal system follow. To think of it in a Heideggerian way, it comes from the past but meets one in the future, as the orientation of a projected future itself activates the contents of one's past in a certain future direction.

Now, the structure of Vattimo's weak belief shares this same ethical structure. First, it is de-formed from its metaphysical pretensions. That is, it loses its claims to be representing a transcendent religious reality. Unlike dogmatism, it has no pretensions to be representing a religious reality accurately so that its 'justification' is grounded beyond human discourse and in the religious reality as it is in-itself. Dogmatism refuses to acknowledge the finite condition of belief and guarantees itself with a purchase on an ultimate reality that retroactively justifies the believer in their certainty. Alternatively, *weak belief* gives up the pretense to be representing or securing access to a transcendent reality. It understands that it is completely historically based and does not escape its own historicity by reference to a transcendent object. The relationship between the subject

and the object has therefore been loosened or weakened as it is in Vattimo's definition of duty. This fundamentally changes the way that one thinks about the object of belief or the belief-content.

Second, now that subject-object schema has been weakened, the believer is open to hearing other voices that can speak about 'the object.' The object is now not so much an object, but a voice, a message, or a transmission. The loss of the object now opens up the possibility of authentically and vulnerably hearing voices for the first time. It is a vulnerable hearing because it cannot mediate the voice by referring it to object in-itself. Thus, in conversation, the interlocutors are not trying to come to a better representation of the object. Rather, they are trying to make their voice heard. The object is a rhetorical construct that arises out of the paradigms that they have inherited and are bringing into the discussion. This is why Vattimo's weak thought understands truth to be a rhetorical construction, given the discursive rules that historical, cultural, and institutional paradigms provide (Vattimo 1984: 161-162). But the main point is that the object recedes and is replaced by a voice that can now be heard, because the over-investment of the object has declined.

A conversation can now occur without any party gaining a metaphysical priority in the speaking. Any priority that is gained will be based upon their rhetorical ability to convince the others to recognize their voice *out of the other's own identity*. This is the establishment of *common ground through difference*. The convincing does not thereby reflect a pretension to the object in-itself. Nor does the conversation lead the interlocutors closer and closer to this transcendent reality. Rather, the object comes out of a shared history but one that needs to be 'verified' in and through the conversation.

But, again, the agreement does not bring us closer to the object in-itself. It rather brings us closer to the finitude of the other and the obligation that we have to heed their voice, because we are also claimed by a conviction of our own finitude. This is how plurality is preserved without relativism. The voice speaks from its own history, but each voice brings with it the hope and belief that all the voices can find common ground in their difference.

In terms of weak belief, we can now see more fully how Vattimo believes. He does not take religious belief-contents or objects (such as God's existence) to refer to an independent reality. Rather, the object of belief refers back to one's own cultural paradigm. In this way, it becomes a voice or the transmission of a voice. This weakens the air of sacrality that surrounds the belief-content and opens it up to critique. This then makes room for other voices to participate in a description of the 'object.' For instance, the belief-content of God's existence is thus not a theoretical object, but the opportunity for a discussion amongst interlocutors. Moreover, it raises the need to de-substantialize the object of belief so that there is room made for a conversation.

This understanding of the divine actually makes it a temporalizing and historicizing concept. It temporalizes and historicizes thinking itself. Because thinking no longer simply equates the divine with an externally existing object, it is free to recognize the finite conditions in which believing occurs. Believing recognizes that the divine voice comes out of the history to which one belongs. This means that instead of functioning as a metaphysical referent that de-historicizes thinking and belief as it does in dogmatism, in weak belief the divine voice speaks only historically and temporally. In other words, the divine becomes a historicizing and temporalizing voice. Atheists, theists

and even agnostics need to hear the voice in this way to be ethical in Vattimo's terms, because all of these are aligned with an objectivist framework that reifies the metaphysical way of thinking. In this way, the divine is only every a stable presence, instead of a voice that comes to one through a tradition and thereby becomes a symptom of one's own historicity.

In this sense, the divine actually temporalizes and historicizes one's thinking and one's relation to others. Instead of remaining a theoretical object, the divine becomes an ethical appeal to remember one's finite condition. A weak belief only 'believes in' the divine in this sense. It believes in the divine as the condition of one's own temporality. Thus, the *believing* aspect of weak belief is that it believes that one should see religious belief as an opportunity to come to a realization of one's own finitude, historical placement, and the paradigms within which one is thinking and acting, while also being open to hearing other voices speak. In this sense, belief is ethical, because it *believes that something should be the case*. However, this seems to suggest that all people in the west must believe in God, etc. But as we will see with Rorty, Vattimo does not seem to want to say this. He does not want to say that all people should become theists or that all people should be Catholics or even (somewhat) Christians. How then are we supposed to understand weak belief in terms of its prescriptive nature? How are we supposed to understand it as an ethical appeal?

Chapter 3: Weak Belief and the Distortion of Metaphysics

The previous chapter worked out the need to question the status of weak belief. Does Vattimo's argument simply require that western individuals recognize Christianity as a source of their cultural heritage?

This chapter will try to show that Vattimo does not intend his argument to be a universal *prescription for belief*, but rather, *a defence for the possibility of a belief that does not require universal prescription*. In order to show this, in Part I, I will review both Rorty's criticism of Vattimo's belief and Vattimo's response to Rorty. Then, in part II, I will argue that one therefore needs to turn the logic of the problem of weak belief away from the problems of traditional semantics, turning it rather towards the post-metaphysical logic that Vattimo uses. In this context, one needs to show the possibility of weak belief according to the conditions of Heidegger's notion of *Verwindung*.

Rorty's argument against weak belief and Vattimo's response in defence of weak belief constitute an important point of entry into the problematic of weak belief. It is important because it marks the negotiation between a traditional, metaphysically-inclined reasoning (Rorty's referral to traditional connotations) and a post-metaphysical attempt to overcome just such an orientation (Vattimo). The review of this debate will therefore raise the priority of the Heideggerian notion of *Verwindung*, since post-metaphysics gains its Heideggerian legitimacy through this concept.

I. Arguments For and Against Weak Belief

The last chapter raised Rorty's objection to Vattimo's use of the term belief, but it did not present it explicitly, nor did it present the particular response that Vattimo makes towards it. It was important at that time to develop the theoretical and philosophical terminology of the debate and also to clarify the reasoning strategy that Vattimo uses to defend his return to Christianity and, therefore, his weak, Christian belief. The following will now show how the specific details of weak belief get worked out in this debate.

A. *Rorty's Criticism of Vattimo's Belief*

Before proceeding to give Rorty's specific argument against Vattimo's weak belief, Rorty's own attitude toward religion should be briefly explained. Although Rorty shares an enthusiasm for Vattimo's weak thought because of its non-foundationalism, he nevertheless cannot imagine why Vattimo would want to become a Christian again. He agrees with Vattimo that one cannot prove or disprove religious realities, but for Rorty this does not constitute a reason to return to Christianity (2002). While Rorty acknowledges the right for individuals to believe whatever they want in private, he thinks that the authoritarian structure of religious belief should be thoroughly dismantled because it is dangerous to the dialogical principles of democracy (Rorty 2005: 33). This would amount to a complete de-institutionalization of religious practice and the complete privatization of religious belief. He terms this his anticlericalism.

While Vattimo shares the idea that one cannot think about religion in terms of its objective reality without committing political and social violence, he does not think that such a position needs to necessarily entail the end of public confessionality or the

philosophical engagement with the Christian tradition. Rorty thus acknowledges that the main difference between him and Vattimo is in their senses of what they take to be 'holy' (2005: 39-40). For Vattimo, the holy is tied up with the event of Christ's life and death, while for Rorty, the holy is bound to "the hope that someday, any millennium now, my remote descendents will live in a global civilization in which love is pretty much the only law" (ibid: 40).

Of course, Rorty's orientation influences his critique of weak belief. He acknowledges the 'weakness' of Vattimo's belief (ibid: 34): Vattimo does not believe in God because he can prove God's existence, or even because he has complete faith in God's existence even though he cannot prove it, but rather because he finds himself "becoming more and more religious," so Vattimo supposes, that he "must believe in God" (ibid). But Rorty thinks that this is the wrong way for Vattimo to present his relation to Christianity: "I think that Vattimo might have done better to say: I am becoming more and more religious, and so coming to have what many people would call a belief in God, but I am not sure that the term 'belief' is the right description of what I have" (ibid).

Rorty objects to the use of the term belief because of the traditional connotations that it carries (ibid). Traditionally, when one says that one believes something to be true, this implies that everyone should believe it too. By virtue of its truth, all truth-seeking subjects would acknowledge this belief's truth as well. But Rorty correctly recalls that Vattimo in no way wants to say that all people should believe in God or that they should become Catholics (ibid). Thus, Vattimo should not describe his relation to Christianity in terms of belief.

The basis of the argument presupposes that what one takes to be true, must also be taken to be true by all other truth-seeking subjects. In the next section, I will show how Vattimo's response to Rorty rejects this very assumption.

B. Vattimo's Response to Rorty

Vattimo's response to Rorty is contained in the argument that was presented in the last chapter. To review, Vattimo presented a two-point strategy in defense of his post-metaphysical, weak belief (Vattimo 2005: 53). First, he asked rhetorically if one could only believe in traditional religious contents if they can be demonstrated through foundationalist logic. The implied answer was no. Remembering the distinction I introduced, we could say that there is a form of belief that is not *strong* belief.

Foundationalist logic and strong belief do not exhaust the possibilities of believing.

Second, Vattimo described his (weak) belief in terms of the reasonableness of believing in traditional religious contents on an alternative, non-foundationalist basis. This basis was said to be in the historical-transcendental conditioning of one's existence and self-understanding. It was at this point that I noticed that weak belief seems to be a form of cultural belonging and participation. Weak belief is a form of cultural participation because it interacts and engages traditional religious practices and beliefs as a received cultural heritage. Such religious discourse provides the conditions of one's own identity. I then raised the question as to how this would distinguish between believers and non-believers, since this could be considered true for everyone in the western world. For instance, does this mean that all people must believe in God in some way, in order to understand themselves correctly? This would contradict Vattimo's

attempt to remain a pluralist, who denies that his belief in God implies that everyone should believe in God. As we can see, this is a form of Rorty's objection, because it calls into question the validity of weak belief on the basis of how it makes sense of traditional, strong belief. In order to generalize and conceptualize it, I will term this problem as the *semantic problem*, since it relies upon the colloquial semantics of the traditional notion of belief.

The distinction between strong belief and weak belief constitutes Vattimo's answer to Rorty. It is interesting because it implies that those who are unconvinced by weak belief remain *too metaphysical*. After drawing the aforementioned analogy between weak belief and the literary canon, Vattimo notes that the weakness of his argument might remain unconvincing to unbelievers such as Rorty (Vattimo 2005: 53).

His reasoning is that

the authority of such an argument seems insufficient only because we have not yet fully developed the antimetaphysical consequences of Christianity itself; because we are not yet nihilistic enough, in other words Christian enough, we still oppose the historical-cultural cogency of the biblical tradition to a natural reality that supposedly exists independently of it and with respect to which the biblical truth is obliged to 'prove itself' (ibid).

Seen from this defense, Vattimo seems to be arguing that Rorty's argument—that Vattimo should not use the word belief (even weakly)—is still too metaphysical or foundationalist.

Remembering that Rorty's objection was based upon a notion of truth that was singular because it was universally true, and required all individuals to acknowledge it as *the* truth, we can see Vattimo rejecting this notion of truth in his quote. An independent, natural reality requires that religious belief would justify itself by verifying its truth-

claims or belief-contents in regards to how this reality is in-itself. However, the post-Heideggerian orientation is aware that this already relies upon an interpretation of being that we have come to talk about as foundational, because it thinks that it can represent reality truthfully and thereby deduce and legislate what *should be believed*. This is strong belief, which we have seen that Vattimo has already rejected. Vattimo thereby justifies the possibility of weak belief by rejecting the legitimacy of a metaphysical logic to determine the identity and truth of reality once and for all.

Vattimo's response to Rorty shows that Vattimo wants to present an alternative form of belief based upon a rejection of metaphysical (strong) belief. Vattimo's weak belief intends to be post-metaphysical. Extracting the logic from this argument, his point can be paraphrased like this: if it is denied that belief can be post-metaphysical or weak, then one would be implying a necessary link between Christianity and metaphysics. To imply such a necessary link can itself only be established through metaphysical thinking, since only metaphysical thought can presume to define an identity once and for all. Thus, to deny the possibility of a post-metaphysical instantiation of belief is to be thinking too metaphysically.

Vattimo is saying that a form of belief is possible which does not legislate its truth like strong belief does. Thus, in response to Rorty, Vattimo would say that by defining belief in terms of its traditional usage, and thereby limiting the possibility of Vattimo's usage of it, Rorty's idea of belief is still too metaphysical, because it denies the possibility of a post-metaphysical instantiation of belief. To clarify this, we could say that Vattimo denies that his argument for his belief in Christianity necessarily implies a prescriptive notion of belief. Rather, he ascertains that there is a form of belief that does

not necessarily need to be universally prescriptive. He is therefore defending the possibility of this non-prescriptive belief, what I have been calling post-metaphysical or weak belief.

We can see here that Vattimo's defense of weak belief relies upon the distinction between metaphysical thinking and post-metaphysical thinking. In the Heideggerian context in which Vattimo is working, the possibility of post-metaphysics is established through the idea of *Verwindung*. The idea of *Verwindung* is itself quite nuanced, because it does not denote a simple passage beyond metaphysics, as we will see in the next section. In order to evaluate Vattimo's response to Rorty, we will therefore have to have reference to its theoretical conditions in the notion of *Verwindung*.

II. From the Semantic Problem to the Problem of Possibility

The sense of weak belief needs to be worked out through Vattimo's understanding of Heidegger's idea of a post-metaphysical relation to metaphysics, since it is this precise relation that determines how we should understand the distinction between metaphysics and post-metaphysics. In the Heideggerian tradition, the word that captures this relation is *Verwindung*. However, upon explicating the meaning of *Verwindung*, it becomes apparent that it complicates the idea of a strong, historical cleavage between metaphysics and post-metaphysics. This complication will call into question the very possibility of making a distinction between strong belief and weak belief, because it problematizes the relation between metaphysics and post-metaphysics in a way that asserts a continuity between them. In the end, we will displace the main problematic facing weak belief

away from Rorty's semantic problem and towards its theoretical conditions in the Heideggerian notion of *Verwindung*.

A. *A Post-Metaphysical Relation to Metaphysics: Verwindung*

In the first and second chapter, we saw that Heidegger thinks of metaphysics as the history of the forgetting of being. To *overcome* (*Überwindung*) metaphysics would thus imply that we need to simply remember being, figure out what it is, and represent it as such. But from the perspective of the concept of *Verwindung*, it is not quite as simple as this. For, as one can see, this repeats the problem that Heidegger thinks that metaphysics has always committed through onto-theology: thinking of being as a representable object that can be fully present before the 'eye of the mind.' In order to complicate his notion of a post-metaphysical relation to metaphysics, Heidegger rejected the supersessionist connotations of overcoming by rejecting the dialectical term *Überwindung*. Instead, he chose to use the more complex term *Verwindung*, which means distortion, twisting or incorporation. Heidegger says, "Overcoming is worthy of thought only when we think about incorporation" (Heidegger 1973: 91).

One of Heidegger's translators, Joan Stambaugh, has described the difference between *Überwindung* and *Verwindung* in terms of incorporation in a way that Vattimo would probably appreciate. She says,

when something is overcome in the sense of being *überwunden*, it is defeated and left behind. This is not the sense Heidegger intends here. When something is overcome in the sense of being *verwunden*, it is, so to speak, incorporated. For example, when one 'overcomes' a state of pain, one does not get rid of the pain. One has ceased to be preoccupied with it and has learned to live with it. Thus, to overcome metaphysics would mean to incorporate

metaphysics, perhaps with the hope, but not with the certainty, of elevating it to a new reality. (ibid: 84)

To *incorporate* a pain is not to undergo a complete recovery, but rather to learn to live with it. One could think of arthritis. After years of living with arthritis, the pain has not gone away and perhaps it has even gotten worse. However, to use a popular phrase, one can ‘come to peace’ with the pain, accept it, and learn to take it as significant for one’s own life. Thus, the healing that occurs is not a complete convalescence, but more like a deepening of the pain’s significance.

I think this is a fairly good description of the way that Vattimo understands the sense of *Verwindung* as well. Like Heidegger, and because of his own confrontation with Italian terrorism, he is skeptical of philosophical positions that seek to revolutionize our relation to the past through a complete supersession or break. He does not think that we can any longer think with the revolutionary logic of *Überwindung* (Vattimo 1984: 158-159). For Vattimo, *Verwindung* ‘repeats’ metaphysics “while radically changing its meaning” (2004: 39). There are thus two aspects of his idea of *Verwindung*: (i) repetition and (ii) the changing of the meaning of metaphysics. He tends to express these two aspects of *Verwindung* with the dyadic expression the “acceptance-distortion” of metaphysics (Vattimo 2010: 82). For Vattimo, the theoretical conditions of *Verwindung* presuppose that thinkers are inclined to accept and distort metaphysics.

What then does it mean to be post-metaphysical? At least, it does not mean a passage of time beyond metaphysics. The very possibility of thinking at all is given through the very history of metaphysics itself, which westerners have inherited by virtue of taking their place in western history. In the next chapter, we will re-visit this problem in more detail. For now, it is enough to note that the post-metaphysical conditions from

which Vattimo is thinking *do not imply a historical cleavage* between metaphysics and post-metaphysics. Rather, there is a historical continuity between them, which is expressed in *Verwindung*'s sense of acceptance and repetition of metaphysics. This continuity calls into question Vattimo's argument that defended weak belief through a distinction between metaphysical (strong) belief and post-metaphysical (weak) belief. We are now in a position to offer a more substantial statement of the problematic facing Vattimo's weak belief.

B. *The Problem Statement*

In Part I, I traced out the debate between Rorty and Vattimo as it relates to the use and sense of Vattimo's idea of belief. Rorty objected to Vattimo's weak belief, because of its traditional connotations, which are misleading because Vattimo is not using the term belief in a traditional way. Then, we saw that Vattimo would respond to this claim by arguing that he could defend the possibility of weak belief by distinguishing between a metaphysical form of belief and post-metaphysical form of belief, which I have been calling strong and weak belief, respectively. However, because this distinction between strong and weak belief itself relies on the validity of the distinction between metaphysics and post-metaphysics, I determined that we need to have recourse to the Heideggerian concept of the nuanced term *Verwindung*. By defining this concept of *Verwindung* as incorporation (Staumbaugh) or acceptance-distortion (Vattimo), we noted that there is a necessary historical continuity between metaphysics and post-metaphysics.

Thus, if *Verwindung* denotes a certain historical reliance upon metaphysics, then weak belief cannot simply negate or reject metaphysical belief in order to demonstrate its

possibility. This is because if it simply negates a position as metaphysical, it will be contradicting one of the theoretical conditions of *Verwindung* as acceptance-distortion, which would negate its own need to accept metaphysics in some way. Instead of simply rejecting metaphysics, as an un-nuanced distinction between strong and weak belief would imply, it is necessary to complicate the distinction so that it accounts for how weak belief accepts strong belief.

Thus, according to Vattimo's own theoretical premises, and in light of Rorty's semantic argument, there is the possibility of offering a more substantial problematic for the defense of weak belief. This problematic does not evaluate Vattimo's argument according to the traditional, metaphysical limits on the semantics of belief, but rather it evaluates the possibility of weak belief according to the theoretical conditions that present the possibility for its distinction from traditional belief.

III. Conclusion: The Transformation of the Problem and the Need for a Weak Distinction

I have been arguing throughout this chapter that Vattimo's idea of weak belief needs to be distinguished from the idea of belief that Rorty has been arguing for. This amounted to two results. First, I determined that Vattimo's idea of weak belief needs to be distinguished by its possibility to be a non-prescriptive form of belief. Second, attending to Vattimo's counter-argument against Rorty, I decided that in order to distinguish weak belief from traditional belief, we must do this by working it out in relation to the concept of *Verwindung*. In short, we must *show* how weak belief is related to strong belief in the history of belief. This raises the need for a weak distinction that will be developed in the

next chapter. We will see how this weak distinction allows us to make sense of Vattimo's own formulation of weak belief as believing that one believes.

However, there is another problem that we could say arises out of this determination of weak belief as non-prescriptive. In previous chapters, we have been looking at the ethical nature of weak belief. We saw that Vattimo's idea of ethics requires a criterion for action based upon a non-foundationalist logic: namely, the non-metaphysically established guides of traditional ethics. History as a 'working cultural paradigm' provides the measure for action. Vattimo's nihilism does not lead to an un-negotiable and in-surpassable ethical relativism. It offers a prescriptive moment, just like the glutton who could recognize his 'duty' to be to give up his compulsion to eat. Clearly, this presumes a prescriptive imperative. So, given this prescriptive form of ethics, why is weak belief not also prescriptive? If as I have argued, Vattimo's ethics *is* prescriptive, and ethics provides the horizon for his idea of weak belief, then how can I now hold that weak belief is non-prescriptive?

I also previously asked if Vattimo's weak belief requires all westerners to, say, believe in God. In the foregoing, I showed that Rorty raised this same issue in his rejection of Vattimo's belief. To return to Rorty's objection, we can now note an important conflation in Rorty's argument. Rorty premises his argument on two points. First, belief implies a prescriptive moment. Second, Vattimo does not intend his beliefs to be prescriptive. Rorty does not therefore think that Vattimo should characterize his relation to Christianity as one of belief.

However, now that we have understood that Vattimo denies that Rorty's prescriptive notion of belief can limit the possibilities of a post-metaphysical belief, we

can now begin to understand the problem with Rorty's argument. The main problem occurs in the second premise. It is true *on a certain level* that Vattimo's belief is not intended to be prescriptive. However, because this is only true *in a certain sense*, this statement needs to be complicated. While Vattimo's weak belief *is not* prescriptive of traditional belief-contents, it *is* prescriptive of their post-metaphysical instantiation. That is, on the one hand, Vattimo would not want to promote the idea that people should believe in God or take up Catholicism in any traditional way. Once again, he does not think that belief works that way post-metaphysically. It does not have a substantial object to grasp onto. Vattimo himself does not believe in this object-centered way. On the other hand, Vattimo *does* very much want individuals to recognize how religious traditions are temporal and historical conditions which deeply affect the way they conceive of the world and interact with other people, whether they feel a fidelity with this religion or not.

So, we would need to correct Rorty. True, Vattimo does not want to try to convince, for instance, an atheist to believe in God. However, it is also true that Vattimo *would* want to convince that atheist to learn to think of the divine in other than an object-oriented framework. In this sense, Vattimo's weak belief is prescriptive in that it requires a de-formation of traditional beliefs. However, the re-formation of the content of these beliefs is now open for discussion and depends upon the paradigms within which one is working. Vattimo does then think that everyone should believe in God in the sense that God now becomes an *ethical index* for becoming aware and cognizant of one's own historical condition. In the last chapter, we determined that this was still belief, because it was a belief that things should be this way. We therefore know that it is still a

believing, even though it does not refer to an objectively established ground. It is a belief that ethics should direct us towards a re-formation of traditional religious contents now orientated to a post-metaphysical viewpoint. However, it is weak because it cannot universally prescribe exactly how things should be in every situation; it cannot offer a definitive statement about how to re-form the content of the divine as this ethical index in every case. The re-formation of the content of belief, needs to be carried forward out of the immanent conditions brought forth in each situation, and by the singular voices that participate within it.

Thus, on the one hand, Vattimo's weak belief is not prescriptive; but on the other hand, it does appear to be prescriptive. I will return to this problem in the next chapter after we have worked out the logic of *Verwindung* a bit more carefully.

Chapter 4: Weak Belief and the Decline of Certainty

The theoretical conditions of *Verwindung* raise the need to think about belief in terms of a weak distinction. If weak belief can be weakly distinguished from strong belief, then we will have solved the problem raised in the previous chapter. In order to accomplish this, the following chapter will first, in Part I, seek to establish the basis of such a weak distinction according to the parameters of Vattimo's weak thought and the Heideggerian notion of *Verwindung*. Then, in Part II, I will attempt to trace out this weak distinction in terms of the decline of certainty in belief itself through Vattimo's concept of 'believing that one believes.'

I. The Possibility of Weak Belief

In the previous chapter, we presented a substantial problem that weak belief faces. According to Vattimo's response to Rorty, we should be able to justify weak belief by referring to the distinction between metaphysical and post-metaphysical belief. However, as we have shown, the conditions of *Verwindung* as the acceptance-distortion of metaphysics cannot justify a distinction between strong and weak belief through a *simple* rejection of the former and assertion of the latter, because this would be inconsistent with the sense of the acceptance of metaphysics contained within the notion of *Verwindung*. The logic of *Verwindung* itself, which presents the proper Heideggerian formulation of the relation of metaphysics and post-metaphysics, requires a certain historical continuity within this relation.

Yet, if it is possible to establish the conceptual basis for a weak distinction, out of the conditions of *Verwindung*, then not only can we begin to understand the relationship between metaphysics and post-metaphysics, but we can also begin to weakly distinguish strong and weak belief. Thus, assuming that I can establish such a distinction, I should also be able to demonstrate the possibility of weak belief.

A. *The Possibility of a Weak Distinction*

The possibility of establishing a weak distinction arises out of the conditions of *Verwindung* and specifically out of the relationship between its two main sub-concepts as determined by Vattimo: acceptance-distortion. The relationship between acceptance and distortion in *Verwindung* is essential to a proper understanding of it.

1) The Priority of Distortion in *Verwindung*

Previously, I mentioned that one might be tempted to think that Heidegger simply means that we must remember being, as if we could represent it, return it to our consciousness and therefore grasp it again. Again, this is not the proper way to think of ‘remembering being.’ A better way to think of the forgetfulness of being is the way that Vattimo formulates it: “not only have we forgotten what Being means, we have forgotten that we have forgotten” (2009: 17). This exaggeration implies a certain distance from being that Vattimo thinks we need to keep in mind. He therefore says, “we cannot remember Being; all we can do is remember having forgotten it” (ibid: 23). In other words, we are fated to only ever remember that we have forgotten being; we can only ever think *with*

metaphysics, as the forgetting of being. This thinking will then simply be a remembering of this forgetting, our relinquishment to the history of metaphysics.

This form of remembrance works implicitly with the concept of *Verwindung* in the background. If remembering being denotes the objective of post-metaphysical philosophy, then to say that one can only remember the forgetting of being is to interpret the history of metaphysics in a way that *already* distorts it. This is clear simply from the common understanding of metaphysics, which takes the idea of being as one of its main topics. To represent metaphysics as the forgetting of being is thus to deny that metaphysics has thematized being properly. Yet, in order to be metaphysics, it must present a representation of being (onto-theology), which means that it (according to its own persuasion) has represented being. To deny that metaphysics represents being properly (even by representing it at all) *distorts* the idea that metaphysics is the representation of being, which is exactly what it claims to be.

When Vattimo says that we can only remember that we have forgotten being *through metaphysics*, this means that to accept the history of metaphysics as the forgetting of being *is to accept metaphysics in an already distorted form*. The statement implies that one accepts metaphysics *only insofar as it is understood as the forgetting of being*. Metaphysics is only accepted *to the extent* that it is the history of the decline of being, exactly the opposite of what metaphysicians and philosophers have represented it as.

While sequentially, the priority or placement of the terms does not matter, the emphasis still remains upon the qualification of distortion. Even if one says that one

accepts metaphysics as it is and then distorts it, the distorting aspect of *Verwindung* still receives a *qualifying priority*.

This is fairly intuitive, when one thinks in terms of the claim to ultimacy that metaphysics makes with its onto-theological constitution. For onto-theological metaphysics, there is nothing more ultimate than the ground of being, since if there were something more ultimate this would condition the ground, and thus be the ground's ground, etc. Thus, the representations of being as the ground of beings needs to claim to have reference to the ultimate in order to secure itself as a correct representation of the ground of beings. But the entire project of Heidegger's critique of metaphysics was intended to deconstruct this claim to ultimacy, by de-grounding it.

Reiner Schürmann, one of Heidegger's commentators and a thinker very close in theoretical orientation to Vattimo, argues that Heidegger rejects the claims to ultimacy that metaphysics makes by showing the temporal nature of its representations of being. Like Vattimo, Schürmann shows that Heidegger distorts metaphysical regimes of their ultimacy, which denies their claims to have represented being in full presence. Taking on Kant's plea for the liberation from a self-incurred tutelage made in his "What is Enlightenment," Schürmann carries the metaphor into a Heideggerian context: "For radical phenomenology, Western man has *incurred* his tutelage by endowing some of his representations with ultimacy. *Release* from such self-incurred tutelage can only come from reason's undoing what it has itself set up" (Schürmann 1987: 8). In other words, phenomenology as the *Verwindung* of metaphysics needs to undo the ultimacy which metaphysics claims for itself.

Metaphysics seeks to ground being in an ultimate representation, while Heideggerian philosophy seeks to de-ground being. The distortion of metaphysics out of its pretensions to ultimacy is the prior qualification for the acceptance of metaphysics.

Thus, Vattimo's statement and the concept of *Verwindung* must presuppose the qualifying priority of distortion over acceptance. To mark this with writing, we can turn the qualifying priority of distortion into a sequential priority in Vattimo's dyad acceptance-distortion: *Verwindung* is a *distorting-acceptance* of the history of metaphysics as the forgetting of being.

2) The Forgetting of Being as Metaphor for the Finitude of Being

To say that metaphysics 'forgets' being is only the predominant metaphor that Heidegger and Vattimo use to describe what happens or is happening to being during the history of metaphysics. Vattimo is not very happy with this metaphor, since it suggests that we could remember or recall being. For Vattimo, post-metaphysical thought "never renders being present but always already 'gone'" (Vattimo 1984: 159).

Because of this ambiguity of the idea of remembering being, Vattimo changes the metaphor. As given in weak thought, Vattimo's own favourite metaphor is that of growing weak, growing old, decline, caducity or debility. The reason for this is because he thinks that the lesson of Heidegger's critique of metaphysics is that there is a gradual departure, withdrawal or relinquishment of being itself: the history of being needs to be thought about as an "indefinite type of ongoing subtraction, a weakening, a taking-leave, or long farewell" (Vattimo 2010: 84). The aging or departing metaphors are thus perhaps better because they explicitly connote the passage of time and the conditions of finitude. And since Heidegger's project was an attempt to think being out of the condition of time

and finitude, instead of the ultimate representations of a timeless and immutable ground of being, I think Vattimo has a point here.

Weak thought thus makes time and finitude the transcendental condition of all beings by making being itself subject to finitude. Vattimo writes, “What might it mean to think being under the aegis of mortality and passing away? It would mean that the transcendental, or that which makes any experience possible, is nothing less than caducity” (Vattimo 1984: 159). To say that caducity, which is the weakness of old age, is the transcendental condition of beings, means that what constitutes all possible phenomena is their decline, finitude or growing weakness.

3) The Conceptual Basis for a Weak Distinction

The priority of distortion in *Verwindung* and the transcendental condition of being as finitude provides the conceptual basis for a *weak distinction*. The difference between the metaphysical and the post-metaphysical does not amount to a complete discontinuity within the history of metaphysics. Post-metaphysics, as the *Verwindung* of metaphysics, denotes the *distorting-acceptance* of metaphysical history as the decline of being. Post-metaphysics thus represents itself as a continuation of the decline of being that is the history of metaphysics. It can only become itself, through a continuity (acceptance) of this decline. However, it cannot say that it is exactly the same as it once was, but that through the conditions of finitude, it is only *relatively* the same. Its difference with metaphysics only occurs to the extent that it has already distorted (or been distorted) *through* the history of metaphysics as the decline of being. This distortion at once places it in continuity with metaphysics, thereby accepting it, and also changes the significance of metaphysics, by reducing its ultimacy.

Through the decline of being, which is at once an identity and difference with metaphysics (a distorting-acceptance), post-metaphysics can be weakly distinguished from metaphysics. It is only weakly distinguished, because it can only become what it is (post-metaphysical) through the affirmation of its continuity with metaphysics. *Through* an inseparable, but weakly distinguishable relation, post-metaphysics stands in line with the tradition of metaphysics *by participating in its finitude, which is made possible by the decline or finitude of being itself.*

II. Weak Belief as Believing with Uncertainty

The weak distinction between strong and weak belief no longer implies a contradiction of the conceptual conditions of *Verwindung*, because the continuity denoted between the two terms is established through a prior, qualifying difference (distortion): one which occurs with the passage of time, thus its imperfect tense. Weak belief is not *exactly* the same as strong belief because it is a weaker version of strong belief; it has already been distorted through the passage of time. However, one could also say that it is the same as strong belief *in some way, because it is participating in the decline of belief itself.*

By taking the decline of being as the transcendental perspective of belief, one could say that the distinction between strong and weak belief does not so much establish a pure difference (or epochal transition) in the history of belief, but rather establishes the weakness of belief itself, indicating that the passage of time, the withdrawal of being (metaphysics), *freezes into* the transition that we can discern between strong and weak belief without relinquishing their *relative* identity or their relative *identities.*

To make this argument more simply, we could say that a weak distinction implies that weak belief *only becomes weak through the decline of the strength of belief itself*, which denotes both the acceptance of metaphysics as the decline of being in belief and already implies the rejection (distortion) of strong belief's ultimacy. To characterize strong belief's ultimacy, we could say that the decline of belief's strength occurs with reference to the decline of its *certainty* about itself. I think that this is exactly what Vattimo is trying to express with his phrase 'believing that one believes,' his favourite formulation of weak belief.

A. *Believing that One Believes*

Vattimo says that the ambiguity of the phrase 'believing that one believes' reflects the ambivalence carried within the word belief itself. Vattimo writes that belief can have two senses: it can mean both to have "faith, conviction, or certainty in something;" but it can also mean "to opine—that is, to think with a certain degree of uncertainty" (Vattimo 2002a: 1). Ambivalently, *belief can mean both to have certainty and to be uncertain*. Vattimo says the phrase believing that one believes is composed of these two senses: the first term is to be understood in the sense of being uncertain; while the second term is to be understood in the sense of being certain (ibid). In terms of certainty-uncertainty, the phrase thus can be understood as *being uncertain about certainty*. Since believing that one believes is *the* prominent formulation of weak belief, the relationship between certainty and uncertainty seems to be the most important trait of the post-metaphysical transition from strong belief to weak belief. By translating the phrase being uncertain about certainty, the phrase suggests that the relationship between strong and weak belief

can be characterized as a transition from certainty to an uncertainty of certainty itself.

One could say that the phrase means to say that one is becoming uncertain about certainty itself.

1) Strong Belief as Certainty

According to the above analysis, strong belief would be that form of belief which would be certain about itself. If belief occurs propositionally, then the belief-content, such as God's existence, would be understood to be *secured* through belief. Belief thereby conquers uncertainty by making its opinion (belief-content) a matter of knowledge, at least to the believer. As knowledge, the belief-content becomes certain.

Vattimo's understanding of the relation between strong and weak belief is confirmed and supported by Heidegger's genealogy of the history of truth. In the *End of Philosophy*, Heidegger traces out the history of truth as the history of the subject becoming certain about its knowledge. His analysis argues that certainty is not just an addition to knowledge, as if one's knowledge of something could become more and more certain. Rather, he argues that certainty "becomes the authoritative mode of knowledge..." (20). This means that what one deems to be true, that which can be said to be a point of knowledge, must previously have been grasped with and in an *assured certainty*: "certainty thus first and alone determines the reality of what is real..." (21). He also argues that this idea of truth as certainty is passed down by the Christian tradition through religious belief or faith. The (in-)security of one's salvation depends upon the extent to which faith has or has not secured one's salvation (ibid). In order to avoid the believer's insecurity, to secure his/her sense of the certainty of his/her salvation, in the

history of Christianity faith becomes more and more a matter of securing the knowledge of one's salvation in the assurance of certainty.

This Heideggerian reading of belief fits nicely with the sense of strong belief that Vattimo is attempting to deconstruct with the phrase 'believing that one believes,' since they both imply that it is not so much the contents of belief that become uncertain (although this follows as well), but rather that *belief itself* becomes uncertain about certainty. To become uncertain about certainty, therefore means to become uncertain about the need for certainty in belief. This is exactly what I have earlier thematized as the decline of the being of belief itself, characterizing it as the becoming of weak belief through the decline of the ultimacy of belief. It results in believing with uncertainty.

2) Weak Belief as the Ontological Priority of Uncertainty in Belief

I would argue that the philosophical significance of Vattimo's concept of weak belief, especially as captured in the phrase 'believing that one believes,' is that it demonstrates the ontological priority of uncertainty in religious belief itself. This means that with the decline of being in metaphysics, religious belief declines as well. As we have seen, this decline of belief itself should be characterized for Vattimo in terms of the decline of being certain about certainty itself, which is contained in the term 'believing that one believes.' This means that one can both believe in a religious sense and still be uncertain about one's belief-contents, because uncertainty is the transcendental condition of religious belief after the end of metaphysics.

III. Conclusion: Becoming Ethical Believers

I thereby propose that Vattimo's concept of weak belief is defensible and desirable because it formulates and identifies the possibility of a form of belief that is (i) consistent with the theoretical conditions of *Verwindung* and (ii) finds this justification in the condition of the finitude of belief itself, which is the ontological condition of being uncertain and therefore (iii) does not necessarily imply that all people must share it, although it remains a weak, religious belief.

To recall the main significance of both this argument and Vattimo's weak thought in general, weak belief offers the possibility and extols the desirability of *becoming ethical believers*. I have already defined the terms of Vattimo's understanding of ethics in relation to weak belief. First, weak belief loses its object. Second, it becomes open to listening to voices that constitute one's own cultural paradigm and the voices of others that belong to other cultural paradigms. Yet, it is still belief, because the messages it receives from the tradition speak of an ethical situation that should be the case. Namely, Vattimo *believes* that religious beliefs should be markers or indexes of one's cultural situatedness. Thus, to believe in any belief-content is to believe that it should provide a duty to listen to what it tells one about one's historical condition.

Also, I have shown that there is a tension between weak belief and Vattimo's ethical orientation, because while weak belief is not prescriptive in the strong sense, it seems that Vattimo's ethics are. In order to understand how weak belief is ethical, we need to understand how ethics are prescriptive for Vattimo. To recall the maxim by which Vattimo defines the positive content of de-formed ethical duties, he says, the value to be realized in a good action, to which we are dutifully bound, is "precisely the negation

of the definiteness of the given...” (Vattimo 2004: 70). Earlier in this thesis, we discovered that this de-forming of ethics leads to the ‘loss’ or negation of an independent object existing in-itself. It simultaneously leads to the placement of all predications of the object within a cultural and historical paradigm. This then opens up the possibility of hearing other’s voices for the first time, that is, in a way that they can affect and condition one’s own understanding. The guiding task for ethics is to realize and actualize the weakening of the object by placing it in a hermeneutic arc. This sounds very abstract right now. But the point is that any concrete ethical prescription is actually *a prescription for a non-prescriptive object* or for the recognition of the voice of the other.

Take the glutton example again. It is the glutton’s duty to minimize their fixation on the object (food) so that this anti-cathexis makes room for him or her to be touched or conditioned by the voices of concern that evaluate the food differently. If this occurs, the object begins to lose its overly-invested significance for the glutton and begins to loosen its grip on the glutton to the extent that he or she is not blindly following their own compulsive desire to eat. If this occurs, the glutton is now free to see food from a different angle or hear about it from different perspectives from their friends, family and teachers. The object loses its prescriptive status, but the voices to which the glutton listens gain a prescriptive tone.

But here’s the key point. Now that the object is determined out of the different paradigms that each voice brings to bear in the conversation, the object that they are presumably talking about, does not refer to an exterior object in-itself. It rather *refers back to the voice* of the one speaking about it. The duty is not to the object itself, but to developing the conditions in one’s own life to be able to hear ‘with ears to hear’ the voice

of the other as significant for one's own life. Thus, Vattimo's ethical prescriptivism is actually a non-prescriptivism with regard to the object, except insofar as the object refers to the significance and value of the voice that one can hear existentially. Once again, the object becomes a voice, a message, or a transmission that inflects the voice of the one speaking.

Seen in this light, there is no inconsistency between Vattimo's weak belief and his form of ethics. Weak belief is only prescriptive to the point that it is non-prescriptive about the object of belief or the belief-content. Take again the example of God's existence. Vattimo does not think that everyone should believe in God in the West, except insofar as this God really conditions one to think historically about their own beliefs. The belief-content 'God' is not an object to be believed in the traditional sense of the term. Rather, this God object is declined, so that to believe in God does not mean to believe that there is an existent God somewhere in reality whose existence can be thought about objectively. If this God 'existed,' then it would have to be true for everyone. But for Vattimo, to believe in God instead means to lose the peremptoriness of God as an object of knowledge. To weakly believe is to lose the certainty that accompanies dealing with belief-objects. This loss of certainty and the becoming uncertain of belief marks the point in which belief does not refer to an object, but to the *historicization* of believing itself. Thus, both a theist and atheist need to become uncertain in the sense that they need to give up their objective way of dealing with belief. This is belief's ethical impact: it requires a loss or anti-cathexis of belief as corresponding to an objective reality.

The point is not that everyone in the West must now believe in God as an object of belief, but rather that weak belief loses its object so that God can only orient one

within history. In this *weak* sense, yes, everyone who has been influenced by Christianity, should believe in God, because it is an ethical task to become cognizant of the way that religious history constitutes one's own history, even if one is 'secular.' But this prescription is not towards a particular, single object in-itself, but rather to the need for individuals to lose their need to think of God like an object. In doing so, they open up different possibilities for understanding God, according to their own experience and their heritage and according to those with which they are in dialogue. So, while weak belief is prescriptive in that it declines traditional ways of knowing and believing, it is also non-prescriptive because it opens up the possibility for understanding God as a condition of one's historical existence, in dialogue with others.

For instance, for Vattimo even an 'atheist' can weakly believe in God's existence. The ethical duty for the atheist is to stop thinking about God as an object of proof. In loosening up their relation to the God-object, they will also lose their fixation on disproving God's existence and find their own existence conditioned by a historical understanding of God. They can now hear their own history through the idea of God as a historical condition. Further, they can now begin to hear the voice of other through this historical idea of God. They can begin experiencing God in a non-objective way.

Politically, these observations imply that weak belief allows one to continue the critical political project that Vattimo endorses. Since traditional strong belief has historically functioned as an ideological tool of the powerful, weak belief provides a radical political alternative to the ideological effects of strong belief. If Frederic Jameson's prescription to "always historicize" constitutes a radical task for intellectual practice, then weak belief can help us in this regard. By the definition worked out above,

weak belief is both ethical and historicizing. In fact, it is belief by virtue of the ethical appeal to historicize one's own life *through* the context of a religious provenance. It believes in this provenance, in the effects of belief, even if it does not believe in the reality of its doctrines. Even for secular individuals, this remains a prescriptive moment, because by indentifying themselves as secular, they could potentially miss how their religious provenance actually constitutes their own conception of secularity.

On a more radical level, weak belief allows one to continue the an-archic project that Vattimo promotes. Weak belief can help one understand how it is that they can participate in a religious heritage without turning it into another site of metaphysical pretension. Weak belief asks one to believe in belief as a process of working with and working through the religious beliefs that form the background of one's historical existence. By turning religious traditions towards a post-metaphysical framework, weak belief reduces the fixation upon objectivity that plagues the reign of the technocracy to which we belong. It gives us a way to think of religion that can help us combat this propensity to see the world from out of the Heideggerian Enframing. As such, it simultaneously contributes to the call for justice as the reduction of violence in the world, because it allows us to hear other voices and their ideas of the divine without reactionary fear.

Moreover, throughout this thesis I have been alluding that weak belief revolutionizes our idea of the philosophy of religion. The so-called God debates that occur both in pop culture and in academic contexts are premised on a metaphysical, object-centred orientation. Both theists and atheist, and even agnostics, take God as a theoretical object that can be proved, disproved, or whose existence can be left undecided

because of a lack of evidence. Weak belief implies that this entire industry is premised upon metaphysical postulates that need to be deconstructed. As I have been arguing, within weak belief, it is impossible to think of the divine as an object. The task is rather to relinquish that form of thinking about the divine, so that one can learn to hear the divine as a voice within a tradition that constitutes one's own condition for being in the world.

Further, the fideism of much negative theology also presumes a metaphysical standpoint. As we saw in Chapter 1 with regard to Emmanuel Levinas' ethics, Vattimo is very sceptical of negative theology and its paradoxical leap of faith. Upon further reflection, it is easy to see why. From this fideist perspective, faith simply secures access to an exterior object that exists somewhere beyond human discourse. This is the famous Kierkegaardian leap of faith. Of course, this again presumes an object-centered orientation. Faith and belief both secure the believer's access to the reality of a truth outside of their discourse, no matter how negatively it is designated. For Vattimo, this position is in danger of reifying the link between the natural sacred and violence because it closes down human discourse about the divine instead of opening it up to a certain listening to the divine as it is given in and through history in diverse modes.

I have already noted that weak belief implies that even 'non-believers' must try to come to terms with the way that one or many religious traditions influence their social life. This raises the main difference between Vattimo and Rorty's idea of secularism. For Rorty, religion is simply dangerous to society. This is a strong statement, one that Vattimo's philosophy could not presume to make, because it does not presume to be able to identify an identity once and for all. Rorty's statement also tends to presume the

effectiveness of a strong distinction between the public and the private realm, an air-tight distinction in which religion does not seep into the public realm once it has been relegated to the private world. Of course, this presupposes a supersessionist logic that reminds one more of *Überwindung* than the more nuanced *Verwindung*. This logic allows religion to remain in the blind-spots, so to speak, of social critique and ethical concern.

Weak belief, on the other hand, understands that religion should not just be *historicized*, but, just as importantly, it should be understood as *historicizing*. The difference here is subtle, but crucial, because it signals the difference between a supersessionist logic like Rorty's and Vattimo's Heideggerian orientation. On the one hand, religion is reduced of all substance and turned into a performative construct, which can be relegated at will. On the other hand, religion is taken to be a paradigm that precedes intellectual and social practice. As a result, it historicizes the thinker, not just *visa versa*. In other words, religious heritages are irreducible moments in history that produce social effects, which arise within intellectual practice itself. This is why it is so important to recognize the religious provenance out of which secularity arises: predominantly through the Christian West. One must keep in mind that secularism is liable to be taken as a Christian construct by non-Christian others, unless it is open to non-Christian instantiations. In order to promote dialogue cross-culturally, there is a need to remember the religious heritage to which one belongs. Only then can one offer them up as premises to be changed in and through dialogical procedure. Thus, in response to Rorty's anticlericalism, Vattimo's weak belief prescribes a historical consciousness that takes religious history into account and makes it a vital aspect of

secular life. In short, weak belief promotes one's belief in belief, as it recalls the historical effects of belief that need to be worked through and opened up to dialogical processes within secular life.

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