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Abstract

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Review Essay

Irrationability and Gianni Vattimo's *The End of Modernity*

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Gianni Vattimo has a fatal attraction to modernity. He has a passion for it. He calls us about it and neither we nor he can get off the phone—the conversation seems endless. Imagine two lovers quarreling. Finally, Jack says to Jill, “this is the end; I don’t want to talk to you anymore!” Then, they go on talking. A friend might conjecture that Jack wanted to go on talking; that he did not want to end this relationship. Reading *The End of Modernity*, I come away feeling that Vattimo wishes to continue his affair with modernity.

I take Vattimo’s case as symptomatic. Like him, some postmodern critics invest heavily in anti-metaphysics. Perhaps philosophers should. That issue I will leave to philosophers and here address only the question of the value of Vattimo’s *The End of Modernity* for a postmodern cultural criticism. My view is that this work goes in a direction troublesome for a cultural critic who wishes to address the experiences of his or her constituency—*persons trying to survive a postmodern world*. For me the experience of the end of modernity is the body crying out, forging its own rhetoric. It is an experience of pain seeking words. It is not a cognitive experience entailing the deconstruction of the discourses of European philosophy since Plato. An anti-metaphysics is inescapably conceptual. Hence, it prolongs the death watch. There seems to be no end. The wake is indeed a wake. The mourners keep the mourned vital if not alive. By recalling over and over the life of the allegedly deceased, however critically, they revivify him in themselves.

In these remarks, I take Gianni Vattimo’s *The End of Modernity* as a point of departure for asking the question—can a postmodern praxis be derived from a modern logos? Specifically, what do Vattimo’s terms contribute to understanding an experience as painful as the end of modernity, the end of a way of life? I have become increasingly convinced that dethroning metaphysics in its own terms is merely to celebrate at its wake, thus endlessly postponing the funeral.

For instance, when Vattimo visited Miami University in the spring of 1990, my colleagues, responding to his book, raised questions in his own “anti”-metaphysical terms. On the one hand, this is a customary protocol. On the

other, as investments in repairing its structure through restructuring, as negations of its concepts, as ways of recuperating its logos, the very terms of the book preclude the end of modernity. I do not suggest that more telling questions could have been asked of him in some sort of meta-terminology. There is no such terminology. But often systematic uses of terms preclude questions from “outside” the system and thereby alternatives to it. Anti-metaphysics is metaphysics in reverse. You travel the same road when you turn about and go in the opposite direction.

Ordinarily, in reading texts made from a specific fabric of beliefs, critics have a choice to make. They can empathetically “dwell within” the pattern as defined or “break out” of the spell of those boundaries.¹ They do not have access to some other language or system that offers a higher perspective; rather she has “faith” or “doubt.” If readers have faith in a credo, then they make every effort to understand its terms and accept them on faith as insightful and heuristic. On the other hand, readers can doubt the value of the credo and distrust the insights its texts offer. They do not, thereby, assume a higher or better vantage point offered by an alternative system of beliefs. Their credo (like a television that’s not cable-ready) becomes less efficacious and they start to desire an alternative. Beliefs wear out, become outdated, lack the wherewithal to decode contemporary experiences.

Credos are like intellectual software. They are useful at one historical moment and then give way to other programs. To go from one conceptual software to another requires an act of faith. There are reasons to do so. But it is not that WordPerfect 5.1 has a meta-critical relation to Wordstar 2.0. Only that which you can do with one, you can’t do with the other. It may seem infelicitous or crude to speak about metaphysics as an outdated conceptual software, but it is hardly unusual to speak of concepts as tools, that is, as “wares” for our work. For me, it is a question of the work they can assist us in accomplishing. When persons use a given belief to govern their conduct, desires are either satisfied or unsatisfied. Essentialism is not a problem because it is a conceptual error, a flaw in our thought processes. As a way of thinking, it is outmoded. It doesn’t do the job for the desires that invoked its resources. Essences are poor tools for a post-modern world. In a world governed by Rorschach tests (“when I hold up this image and say this word, tell what you feel” says the ad exec to us like a spider to a fly), concepts blur experience. They are “infinitely interpretable.”

Vattimo’s work seems at first glance to give us ways of coping with a post-modern world by exploring the inadequacies of modern conceptions of our experiences. The dilemma of the end of modernity is that the world has changed in a radical way that calls for a new way of “being in the world,” he remonstrates. But the issue is whether we should or shouldn’t change our conceptions of experience, and it is difficult to see how a discussion of the inadequacy of our conceptions of artistic and scientific understanding at the highest level of philosophical generality can incisively address problems of

conduct when they are so remote from it. You might ask, why narrow the problem of a rapidly changing world to the issue of conduct. Consider the changes that are taking place according to Vattimo—secularization, commercialization, reification, simulacrizization (26). We live in a world that wages wars and elects presidents through electronic media campaigns. We live in a world dominated by access to electronic technologies. We live in an increasingly electronic environment. Consider our future. We live in a world that is ecologically unsound and which seems more and more likely to choke off our existence (pun intended). I claim that our survival does not depend upon concepts but upon the ability of intellectuals to motivate their constituencies to change the world by changing their conduct in it. My skepticism about thinkers like Vattimo is that their constituencies are only a tiny group of like-minded intellectuals who speak the same language. The problem with Vattimo's terms is that they are too metaphysical despite his disclaimers (not only outrageously abstract, arcane, involuted) to affect any other constituency than the readers of Western European philosophy. To continue to address the question of the end of modernity in the language of "anti-metaphysics" is to think at an historical standstill. Metaphysics concerns the most general level of thought possible: the concept of 'Being' is the exemplary instance of such generality. Discourse that attempts the highest possible level of generality is suitable to purposeful reductions of experience like mathematics or physics or cybernetics or even Artificial Intelligence. Such generalizations operate well with rules of logic to produce speculations about controlling experiences through a very limited number of its variables. One difficulty with metaphysics is that it attempts to use such formulations to explain the complexities of experience. Medieval theologians thought this enterprise was legitimate because God was, after all, pure idea and man was like him in spirit.

What bothers me about Vattimo is that he still uses such formulations to address the complexities of experience as if those complexities could be controlled by limiting them to a small number of variables—e.g. the desire to interpret (find meaning). Such desires seem to me to permeate modern thought—e.g., Freud/sexuality. Modern thought seems governed by a structuralism that construes explanation as a dynamics—somewhere in the depth of the structure lies the cause and if we can generalize it, then we explain ourselves. This strategy of explanation I regard as essentialistic.

Vattimo writes that "Being is nothing other than the transmission of the historical/*geschichtlich* opening that constitutes for every historical being, *je und je*, the specific possibility of access to the world." What kind of an "opening," what kind of "access to the world"? Not access for me, not for my students, and not for the carpenter whose arrival interrupted my typing the previous sentence. And, if not for me and them, then there is no opening *to* anything that matters *to* us and most certainly not to a "world" I know mostly from my TV screen.

In his chapter on "The Death or Decline of Art," and in parallel passages

about poetry and science, Vattimo claims to be saying exactly the opposite of what I attribute to him. He writes,

Like the whole of the heritage of metaphysics, the death of art cannot be understood as a 'notion' which could be said to correspond (or fail to correspond) to a certain state of things, or which is more or less logically contradictory and could therefore be replaced by some other 'notion,' or whose origin, ideological significance, and so on could be explained. It is instead an event that constitutes the historical and ontological constellation in which we move. (52)

But what is the "event" of the death of art? We learn from this essay that it is bound up with increasing aestheticization of our experiences—including the history of science (95)? But who participated in this event? This "event" is constituted only by Vattimo's description of it. Theorists describe the experiences of theorists. I have no doubt that it is possible to experience the end of modernity as "the infinite interpretability of reality," to experience the death of Art as its "inaugurability," to experience the philosophy of science as "the aestheticization of its history," but I cannot bring myself to believe that this experience pertains to my students. It may sound odd for me to say this because it seems almost palpable that students believe in the infinite interpretability of reality. But that's just it. They do—at the level of common sense, at the level of their concrete, material, everyday practices. But that is not the level at which Vattimo understands the experience. For him the experience is an experience of Being. It takes place in a completely different register of experience from everyday practices. For students, "the infinite interpretability of reality" is a guide to their conduct with friends and enemies. Theorists sometimes seem to assume the role of "organic" intellectuals for the human race.

In his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* did Kuhn dissolve Kant's distinction among histories and "aestheticize" the history of science? "Aestheticize?" Perhaps, by analogy. Similarly, Vattimo accepts Heidegger's view that the "essence" of technology must be sought in something other than technology. Here metaphysics becomes poetry. The attempt to "overcome" metaphysics leads to an "illogical" "application" of it. We understand "essences" metaphorically. But what if I say this is awkward poetry? It does not engage my feelings. It is not resonant. It lacks suggestiveness. I am not persuaded that I should deal with the problems of technology poetically. And maybe that's because it's poetry about concepts rather than people.

Who is to be included in the "we" who are concerned with "the shattering of the poetic word," its inaugurability?

The meaning of the inaugurability of the work of art can be granted greater or lesser importance according to whether one thinks of poetry in the same way as one thinks of the Bible, the great national epics, or the ground-

breaking works of our civilization (the Greek tragedians, Dante, Shakespeare, Hölderlin, and so on), or whether one tries instead to test the definition even on 'minor' works of art—in which case this inaugurability might be understood above all as the originality or as the irreducibility of the work to whatever has already been" (67).

Aside from wondering why Shakespeare is "groundbreaking" (and no women are) and even if I knew what ground was broken, making an experience into an abstract abstraction (inaugurability) is a trait of modernism. Postmodern persons (people who are alive) who retain this modern trait may have difficulties coping with their world.

The End of Modernity is a provocative book. On the one hand, it confirms my sense that we are living in a postmodern era. On the other, I do not *experience* the "end of modernity" in quite the way it is proposed in this volume, nor in the way this book is addressed by my colleagues. As a work of philosophy, the book appropriately deals with "the end of modernity" as a concept. At the same time, given the conceptual link between "post-history" and "the end of modernity," this concept has to be understood as the interpretation of an experience, albeit an experience of a rather small group of people. It is at the level of self-experience that I find myself resisting Vattimo's analysis. The experience Vattimo presupposes is more of an intertextual linking of his thought with other postmodern thinkers (which also characterizes the manner in which it is addressed) than it is an account of an experience anyone is likely to have. One then wonders, since we are in "post-history," if the concept is relevant to anyone other than a reader of the thinkers it links?

When Vattimo thinks about the end of modernity, he reflects on the meaning of a concept and its conceptual history. He wants to "see" the post-modern "as an experience of the end of history" (4). But, he perceives his conceptions—"the" post-modern as a "way of being aware" of post-history (4-5). He perceives Nietzsche; he perceives Heidegger; he perceives Gehlen's post-history—"the condition in which progress becomes routine" (7). He sees this as a "speaking together" in which an awareness that the new is no longer perceived as the new is mentioned. This experience is one of *not* "feeling oneself as a moment that has been conditioned and sustained by a unitary process of events"—"an experience that is possible only for modern man" (10). Rather, the post-modern experience is feeling that "everything tends to flatten out at the level of contemporaneity and simultaneity" (10). Oddly, he applauds the "valid" founding of such "observations" on "empirical data" (12) because he does not wish to reduce such experiences to "'subjective' emotions and feelings" (12). This is a thinker thinking about how people might feel if they read what he read.

For Vattimo, the experience of the end of modernity is the experience after which nihilism as a mode of thought beyond metaphysics is "our only chance" (20).

Verwindung, which we experience as the sole possible form of post-metaphysical thought, is not only a matter of thought: rather, it concerns Being as such. This is another clear implication of the thought of both Nietzsche and Heidegger: nihilism is not only an 'error' of the mind but a destiny of Being itself. (179)

But what is the experience "after which" nihilism becomes a way of thinking?

This [*Verwindung*] may appear to be a very abstract generalization, but it is no longer so if we translate *Verwindung* into a term which is much more familiar to historians of Western civilization, namely the term 'secularization.' (179)

Vattimo's delineation gives us the surface of the experience of secularization or commercialization in the sense that it takes the experience to be an entirely conscious one. The *experience of postmodernity* hinges upon an experience of "the infinite interpretability of reality"—"the endless labour of interpretation of every aspect of existence" (xxi), upon "profound revision and transformation" (179) of our notions. He claims it is "a new experience" which is not catastrophic. Indeed not. An experience of the infinite interpretability of reality is, in many respects, the opposite of a crisis. Interpretations are marketable (though not in all cases profitable). A "historical" crisis is a crisis only to the extent that it is threatening. The loss of ultimate values (Gods, Truths, Beauties) threatens the self. Infinite interpretability does not. Moreover, interpretations, much less explanations, are not, experientially, infinite; they are as finite as the persons who interpret or explain.

The question "why" is so disconcerting because it can be asked over and over again. Finally, as Wittgenstein observed, one runs out of answers. This seems to me to be the crucial moment, a moment that can only be reached by trying to answer the question "why." This moment of "having no answers," of having been driven to exasperated silence, reveals commitment. When parents reach this crux as a consequence of the innocent persistence of their children's questions and say, "Because I said so," they reveal themselves in their self-interest. This moment reveals interests. It is a moment in which one experiences the absence of reasons and the appearance of one's irrationality. It produces unreasonable responses. To ward off the moment, persons sometimes offer rationalizations that seem to forestall the advent of having none. Using the language of anti-metaphysics to offer an ironic counter-thesis to Vattimo's, I can say that my experience of the end of modernity is one of "irrationality," of having run short of reasons. The end of modernity, for me, is an experience of a crisis in belief. I can no longer believe what I once crucially did. I no longer have faith in what I thought grounded my thinking. There are no grounds for history or for progress.

The crisis of irrationability reveals you to yourself. You find yourself saying things like "because I say so." But the crisis does not always end in self-interest. Sometimes, it ends with remarks like "because I care," especially when the question "why" has to do with interpersonal relations. In this case, the crisis reveals pain. Pain for the pain of another. Persons have been known to do quite unreasonable things out of care. But caring in Vattimo, as in Heidegger, is metaphysical.

Vattimo characteristically writes ". . . the true substance of the crisis of humanism is the death of God" (32). In these remarks he treats experience as an inference from a concept that is true. This is a top/down form of thinking, a deduction, that allows him to generalize historically. But, his best claim to our attention is to configure our experience. If we experience "the crisis of humanism" analogously as "the death of God," then we accept Vattimo's view of "the end of modernity." Persuasion is, as he himself points out, necessary. Yet, though he calls for persuasion, his rhetoric concerns the overcoming of metaphysics, the overcoming of a particular mode of intellection. Curiously, in this overcoming, the older term reasserts itself, for instance, in the expression "true substance." Anti-metaphysics is called rhetoric but remains metaphysics. As anti-metaphysician, Vattimo, now understands his past to be a time when he was an unacknowledged (by himself) rhetorician and the present as a time when he acknowledges his "true" vocation. Nonetheless, his sentences do not change. Metacommentary is added to the older remarks like a new wing to an old cathedral. He still looks for the "true substance" of the crisis of humanism. What would happen if the sentence simply read "the crisis of humanism follows from the death of God"? Or, perhaps, the experience of no longer having any reasons follows from an inability to believe in God. Better yet (clearer), for those who no longer believe in God, there are no ultimate reasons. The rhetoric of Vattimo's sentence, "the true substance of the crisis of humanism is the death of God," obfuscates (is less clear to a potential audience than it might be). But, Vattimo's implied reader prefers his sentence in all its allusiveness. It is a readership that wishes to couch interpretations of their experience in philosophic terms. For an un-implied reader like myself, it is as though in Vattimo extraordinary labor is required to arrive at the position many people who do not read philosophy take for granted. For most people, not having any reasons because they no longer believe in God is not a crisis.

In my experience (the only one I can vouch for), having no ultimate reason is less a crisis than running out of reasons. That God does not exist to provide me with an ultimate reason for Being is not experienced by me as a crisis. I experience crises at points at which I no longer have reasons because I ran out of them. I am left helpless. I do not know what to do next because I do not have a reason to do any one thing. Nonetheless I often act despite this and often passionately, not knowing why. Or, I don't act and "things" happen to me. I was recently ill. It appeared to be quite serious. Innumerable tests were given to me by many doctors. They did not know why I was ill. This was a crisis for me. Then

I got better. They did not know why but I did. This was less a crisis for me. I no longer needed a reason. That there was no explanation no longer mattered. Am I to infer from Vattimo's work that what happened to me was a crisis because I can no longer believe in God? Or, that there is no ultimate reason (God) to explain what happened? In one sense, I can say "of course." But only because of my past—having grown up as a Catholic who was taught to believe in God. But, at present, I do not need an *ultimate* reason—any reason will do. It's the fact that I can run out of reasons and still have to act that disturbs me. Or, more accurately, that I can have no reasons and still be motivated to act. Or, better still, that I can have reasons and act otherwise, that reasons are not what they used to be.

Nor is it simply that I can be irrational. It is rather that what I do is no longer either a sin or a virtue (the latter disturbs me most). Sins and virtues are states in which there are reasons for my irrationality. More importantly, reasons for the irrationality of those who wish to harm me by manipulating me through my own culture to smoke, eat, drink, and drive myself to death. Now it becomes difficult to interpret others. Why do they do what they do? I can't count on any explanation. Reasons have little force. It is my ability to behave irrationally that disturbs me because it makes me like those who wish to harm me. I am not similarly bothered that there is no god for me to be like in spirit. If there is nothing to understand, why do I write? Why bother? But I want to understand even when I can only hope that I will. This is my irrationality at work. Here overcoming (*Verwindung*) comes into play. If I can accept this about myself—that I want what I fear I cannot have, then I can deal with the need to act *as if I could*. This seems to me to be the critical moment: being able to act imaginatively. The better world I seek is *imaginary*, but nonetheless I can address this impossibility. In addressing this impossibility, I act *caringly*.

I could act uncaringly. I can let affairs become what they will. But, if I do so, can I also accept that others may follow suit. Worse, that they are ahead of me—that they have been acting without reasons for some time. I cannot trust them. I have run out of reasons for trusting them. This feeling reaches crisis proportions.

Quoting Nietzsche no longer suffices.

Note

1. I borrow this distinction from Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 195ff. His terms are "dwelling in" and "breaking out."