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# HERMENEUTIC RESPONSIBILITY

## *VATTIMO, GADAMER, AND THE IMPETUS OF INTERPRETIVE ENGAGEMENT*

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Few fields of study have drawn more attention to questions of responsibility—moral, social, and political—than contemporary Continental philosophy. In recent writings, Gianni Vattimo has returned to focus on his radical, even revolutionary hermeneutical considerations of responsibility.<sup>1</sup> Within this context, his Gifford Lectures and related essays (published as *Of Reality: The Purposes of Philosophy*) address questions of hermeneutic responsibility elicited by the renewed philosophical interest in realism in our times. For Vattimo, as we shall see, it is our hermeneutical responsibility to resist, even to engage in interpretive conflict against, what he will describe as the “temptation of realism.” Both within the discipline of philosophy and in larger spheres of society and politics, realism is often lauded not only as, say, a metaphysical position but, moreover, as an ideal or even as an attitude.<sup>2</sup> ‘Realism’ often stands for belief in the progress of knowledge through research in the sciences, suspicion of intellectual sophistication that obscures the facts, and, accordingly, trust in sound common sense. Vattimo, by contrast, disavows

<sup>1</sup> See Stefano G. Azzarà, “Gianni Vattimo: From Weak Thought to Hermeneutics as a ‘Second Realism’ and the Philosophy of Praxis,” *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (Summer 2016), 703-722. I would also like to extend thanks to Silvia Benso, with whom I am currently collaborating for a Society of Phenomenology and Existentialism panel on the topic of hermeneutics and realism. Her work on Vattimo for this panel has helped me greatly to shape my ideas for this article.

<sup>2</sup> Within analytic philosophy, the identification of realism with an ideal or attitude may be especially typical of what is called “scientific realism.” See, for example, Anjan Chakravartty, “Scientific Realism,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

realism as a cover for complacency, a politically conservative, even reactionary, acceptance of the status quo. He therefore maintains that our hermeneutical responsibility is to pursue interpretations that interrogate and pose a challenge to reality so conceived.

In what follows, I wish to examine Vattimo's conception of hermeneutical responsibility toward the 'temptation of realism.' As we shall see, Vattimo identifies this hermeneutical responsibility with the pursuit of what he calls the 'ethical dissolution of reality,' that is, engagement in interpretations that weaken the hold of the being, or, as he will also describe this, the prevailing paradigms, of the present historical juncture. With this, as I shall argue, Vattimo's Gifford Lectures bring into focus an important, political profile of our responsibility to understand and interpret. In the broader context of the academy, hermeneutics is typically conceived as the study of interpretation, and, with it, philosophical questions about knowledge, language, and tradition. If hermeneutics is associated with responsibility at all, it is with the responsibility that attends dialogue with others and interpretation of texts: namely, the responsibility of 'hermeneutical charity,' and, by implication, the concern as much as possible to pursue agreement with the other. Vattimo, by contrast, suggests that our hermeneutical responsibility demands that we participate an emancipatory politics that challenges agreed-upon truths.

Even as Vattimo's Gifford Lectures shed important, new light on hermeneutical responsibility, however, his approach raises a difficult question about the hermeneutical impetus of our responsibility to challenge established paradigms. Vattimo suggests that we find such an impetus in the very quietism, or, as he puts it following Heidegger, the "emergency" of the "lack of emergency" characteristic of life under entrenched paradigms. In a final section, I suggest, by contrast, that this is not the only, or even the most original, impetus of our responsibility to challenge established paradigms. Returning to Gadamer, I argue that such an impetus is found originally in the displacement of our prejudices that arises from dialogue with those whose experience is precluded by such paradigms. Thus, paradigms are challenged not first through direct interpretive conflict, but, indirectly, through direct dialogue with the other.

## **1. Hermeneutical Responsibility as Conflict against 'Reality'**

Vattimo's *Of Reality* is comprised of lectures and essays that, taken together, have been characterized as a lucid introduction to his hermeneutics.<sup>3</sup> Vattimo clarifies his opposition to realism in the included essay, "The Temptation of Realism." This essay is presented in *Of Reality* as an "Intermission" between his "Leuven Lectures" and the more recent Gifford Lectures. In "The

<sup>3</sup> See David Vessey, Review of *Of Reality: The Purposes of Reality*, trans. Robert T. Valgenti (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, February 6, 2017.

Temptation of Realism,” he presents his opposition to realism first of all as a rejoinder against the objections to hermeneutics that have been raised by realism. To be sure, he does not identify the philosophers or realist positions he opposes by name. It is clear, though, that he intends for his rejoinder to capture not only figures and positions associated with analytic philosophy but also proponents of realism with roots in the Continental tradition. In this, as David Vessey observes, “he is concerned with responding to Neo-realist criticisms of his views, perhaps most especially those put forth by his former student and current colleague Maurizio Ferraris.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Vattimo’s rejoinder thus may also concern related developments, such as the “speculative realism” of philosophers such as Quentin Meillassoux and Graham Harman.<sup>5</sup>

Vattimo’s opposition to realism is expansive but his target centers perhaps on metaphysical realism, the belief that things exist fully independent of mind, or, more broadly, intelligibility. Vattimo maintains that such realism is not only naïve but also dangerous. First, in a turn of argument familiar from Continental philosophy since Kant, he criticizes metaphysical realism as naïve. This is because metaphysical realism fails to account for the conditions that make possible the experience of reality in the first place. Now, it is true that proponents of the recent realist movements have challenged precisely this turn of argument—as Meillassoux refers to it, “correlationism.”<sup>6</sup> Vattimo, though, has none of it, instead as it were doubling down on the validity of the critique of naïveté. He writes:

In opposition to hermeneutics, and to the ontology that it presupposes (more or less explicitly and consciously), the realists are guilty exactly of too little realism: they do not manage to grasp and describe “adequately” the experience from which it arises, on which, if one prefers, it is grounded.<sup>7</sup>

Vattimo criticizes metaphysical realism not only because it is naïve, however. He moreover suggests that such realism is dangerous. This danger becomes evident, he thinks, from the social, political and professional-academic motivations that orient naïve realism. He asks, “What is there at the root of the need to speak of reality as something substantial...as a ‘fixed totality of mind-independent objects’?”<sup>8</sup> In answer, he cites, among other roots of realism, several that speak to the conservatism of the desire for realism. He writes:

The fundamentalist neurosis that follows the late-industrial society as the regressive reaction of defense against the postmodern Babel of languages and values, that is, realism

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> That Vattimo has Meillassoux in mind is suggested by Vattimo’s allusion in the Gifford Lectures to Meillassoux’s influential consideration of what he calls the “*arche fossil*,” that is, an item that has existed before the presence of human beings on earth. See Gianni Vattimo, *Of Reality: The Purposes of Philosophy*, trans. Robert T. Valgenti (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 84.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012, reprinted 2018), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Vattimo, *Of Reality*, 68.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 77.

as the possible ideology of the silent majority, or simply, among certain academic philosophers, the call to order of a philosophy that according to them ought to return to being, as in the times of prevailing positivism and neo-Kantianism...<sup>9</sup>

Metaphysical realism: it is not only the naïveté of belief in things that exist fully independent of mind, but, crucially, it is also the consequence of a dangerously conservative, even pathologically so, wish for a return to simpler and more stable times, both in societal and political relations as well as within the ivory tower.

Vattimo's critique of realism in the Gifford Lectures focuses, first, on the experience of truth. Vattimo recognizes that what Heidegger calls a "metaphysical conception of truth" is part and parcel of metaphysical realism.<sup>10</sup> On this conception, truth is grasped in terms of correspondence, as Vattimo puts it in classical terms, "the correspondence between *intellectus* and *res*."<sup>11</sup>

Vattimo introduces his criticism of this conception of truth as correspondence by means of a rhetorical question. He formulates this rhetorical question in reference to what he calls a "famous principle" from Alfred Tarski's approach to truth for formal languages "according to which 'P' is true if and only if P. Translated, this means: 'it is raining' is true if and only if it is raining."<sup>12</sup> Some may find it curious that Vattimo turns to Tarski to formulate his rhetorical question about the correspondence view of truth,<sup>13</sup> as Vattimo is not concerned with the characterization of truth in formalized languages, and as Tarski's position is perhaps not the clearest-cut example of the correspondence view. Nevertheless, Vattimo introduces his criticism of the correspondence view with a rhetorical question he poses in terms of Tarski's formulation: "Does the second P really stand outside the quotation marks?"<sup>14</sup> For Vattimo, every sentence about something is interpretive; he observes the fact that, in Tarski's formulation, the quotation marks signify that it is an interpretation. For proponents of the correspondence view, what is interpreted—the second P—is depicted without quotation marks to signify that it is itself not an interpretation, or at least is not necessarily an interpretation, but instead something that exists independent, a bone fide *res*. What Vattimo's rhetorical question means to get at is that not only the statement, the first P, but also what is interpreted, the second P, is an interpretation—the second P, too, should be depicted in quotation marks.

Vattimo, then, holds not a metaphysical, but rather a hermeneutical, view of truth. Indeed, his hermeneutical view can be described as "radical," in that he maintains that not only our interpretations, but what we interpret—that is, what typically goes by the name of "reality"—is

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See David Vessey, Review of *Of Reality*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 83.

itself a product, result, or effect of interpretation. With Nietzsche, he maintains that “there are no facts, only interpretations. And this too is an interpretation.”<sup>15</sup> For Vattimo, an interpretation is true, if it is true, not because it corresponds with a mind-independent object. Rather, an interpretation is true, if it is true, in virtue of the possibilities of the language it draws on, and, with this, the communal and historically inherited context of meaning made available by participation in that language. As Vattimo explains,

...my interpretation is not born from zero, and has nothing to do with the encounter of a “subject” with an “object” in a one-to-one relation...I am not an isolated subject: I speak a language, I use a vocabulary and therefore a syntax and set of criteria for validity. In short, what gives “reality” to the facts that I interpret is the history into which I have been placed.<sup>16</sup>

If quotation marks demarcate an interpretation, then quotation marks are needed, too, for what goes by the name “reality” or “the facts.”

It is on the basis of his hermeneutical (indeed, as we have suggested, radical-hermeneutical) view of truth that Vattimo critiques the pretenses of realism. For Vattimo, truth is always a truth of interpretation. But, he argues, it remains possible to pretend that truth is a matter of correspondence with reality, with the facts, as long as one unquestioningly accepts the status quo “criteria of validity” as they remain in effect as a result of hermeneutical transmission in language.

Vattimo associates such unquestioning acceptance of status quo “criteria of validity” first of all with science, grasped in terms of disciplines that are directed by normative practices that define the scope and limits of objects of research as well as acceptable methods of research. He suggests, in allusion to Kant, that such normative practices comprise the conditions of the possibility of knowledge within a science. Thus, despite any pretense that such knowledge corresponds with reality—the facts—a science really only produces knowledge only of “phenomena,” in the sense of what appears “for us,” within such normative practices. Vattimo further develops his critique in an admixture of terms from Heidegger and Thomas Kuhn. In this, he elucidates the normative practices that define a science in terms of what the later Heidegger at one point refers to simply as “science,”<sup>17</sup> and what Kuhn refers to as a “paradigm” operative in the course of “normal science”:

...there is always enough light to distinguish a true proposition from a false one, at least if we refer to truths “of fact” that are such because they are formulated according to available criteria, something Thomas Kuhn would call “normal science,” in the realm of which problems are resolved by using accepted paradigms that are not subjected to critique.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 82-83.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

For Vattimo, the condition of the possibility of scientific knowledge—of what counts as a science and what counts as true and false within it—is given by established normative practices, or, a paradigm of normal science.

Vattimo’s critique holds just as much in the sphere of politics. Not only in science, but in society, too, prevailing criteria of validity comprise the conditions of the possibility of claims about things. Taking Vattimo’s use of Kuhn’s terminology one step further, we can say that in politics, too, it is the established paradigms that determine what counts, and what counts as true and false. —For example, one can pretend it is a “true fact” that one class of persons has a right to vote, has a right to reside within certain political borders, or has a right to health care, while another class does not, as long as one stays within given legal frameworks that make the distinction between classes valid.

Vattimo recommends his (radical-) hermeneutical conception of truth as an alternative to the correspondence view. Crucially, he recommends his view principally as a *responsibility*. This is the responsibility of interpretive truth, grasped as truth that calls into question, challenges, reconfigures, and, thereby, serves to weaken the hold of the unquestioned criteria of validity, the conditions of possibility or established paradigms, that allow us to keep up pretenses of truths of fact in the first place. In this, Vattimo recognizes that it would be inconsistent to recommend his hermeneutical conception of truth over the correspondence view on the ground that the hermeneutic view corresponds with the nature of truth more adequately than the correspondence view. The persuasiveness of such a recommendation would, after all, depend on the validity of what it rejects.<sup>19</sup>

Vattimo comments that his recommendation of this responsibility of interpretive truth has an “autobiographical” point of reference in his experience as a “believing or half-believing Christian.”<sup>20</sup> In this, he associates the responsibility of interpretive truth with the need for truth that he finds in the psalm, “*Redemisti nos Domine, Deus veritatis.*”<sup>21</sup> Here, it is our need for redemption that leads to our pursuit of truth. Of course, Vattimo’s relation to Christian doctrine is anything but orthodox, and “redemption” does not refer to any standard view of eternal salvation. Rather, he has in mind a need for freedom, grasped as a “more” than the already given order of things. Accordingly, this need is not satisfied by the freedom that can be achieved through knowledge that purports to correspond to such a given order of things, and not even by the mastery that such knowledge can give us over our circumstances within that order. Indeed, as he has it, the need for freedom is so excessive that it not only drives us to pursue truth, but, moreover, distinguishes truth as such. He writes:

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

When you pick apart every proposal for achieving liberation through knowledge of how matters really stand, knowledge of the rational order of the world, at the core of it you uncover an enormous metaphysical reverence for the necessity that transcends us: things are like that, they can't not be like that, and I may as well be content because I *have to be* content. Well, why on earth should I be content? In reality, "the truth will make you free" ought to be rephrased: not "that which is true frees me," but "that which frees me is true."<sup>22</sup>

The responsibility of interpretive truth originates in the need for redemption, for freedom—so much so, that this need for freedom dictates what truth is and what it means to pursue it through interpretation.

Vattimo, in any case, identifies the responsibility of interpretive truth with the pursuit of what he calls "noumenal" matters.<sup>23</sup> By this, he has in mind matters that cannot come into appearance through the established criteria of validity, the paradigms of normal science and normal politics. The responsibility to interpret concerns a possibility of truth that stands always against the paradigms, against the reduction of truth to what the paradigms permit to appear as "reality" or "the facts." Indeed, Vattimo suggests it is no surprise that the history of hermeneutics is tied to moral, social, and political upheavals of modern Europe, such as that of the Protestant Reformation. He observes that "if one reflects" on this example and others, "it also becomes clear that the problem of interpretation does not really 'arise' in determinate moments; it always accompanies the debate over the paradigms in use...."<sup>24</sup> The responsibility of interpretive truth takes shape in debate *about* paradigms in use, and cannot appear, or, at least, cannot appear clearly, from *within* those paradigms. Luther could not appear clearly from within the paradigm in use within the Catholic Church at the time; he could only appear under the criteria of validity available within that paradigm. On the basis of those criteria, he had the look of a heretic.

Vattimo's examination of the responsibility of interpretive truth leads to the claim that such responsibility is a responsibility to engage in conflict, indeed, paradigmatic-revolutionary conflict. Building on the idea that participation in interpretation takes shape as what Heidegger calls an "event," he observes that such an event "is not the happening of a successful experiment of 'normal science,' according to the paradigm in use; it is above all the paradigmatic revolution, the institution of a new historical horizon, the out-and-out birth of a new 'world.'"<sup>25</sup> For Vattimo, to interpret is nothing less than to participate in conflict that leads to paradigmatic change.

Vattimo observes that his characterization of hermeneutical responsibility runs contrary to what has made hermeneutics popular in our times. Hermeneutics, we may suggest, has come to be revered in our times as a call for humanistically inspired, open-ended conversation, an event of

<sup>22</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, ed. Franca D'Agostini, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 96.

<sup>23</sup> Vattimo. *Of Reality*, 87.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

truth without constraints of system or method, and without pretenses of foundation. Within this milieu, Vattimo argues, Heidegger's original insight is lost that the event of truth involves interpretive conflict. Nowadays, hermeneutics is associated not with the responsibility to participate in such conflict, but, rather, as it were to make peace: to approach the other with hermeneutical charity in order to seek agreement. Vattimo suggests that this "irenic"<sup>26</sup> tone of hermeneutics today can be discerned in Gadamer, Rorty, and even Habermas. In Gadamer, as Vattimo argues, the hermeneutical experience of truth is oriented by the possibility of agreement as a "fusion of horizons," "the always provisional conclusion of a dialogue between diverse positions."<sup>27</sup> Rorty's pragmatic definition of truth, in turn, "easily leads back to this idea of agreement," and Habermas's "theory of communicative action is also part of this general dialogic atmosphere."<sup>28</sup>

To Vattimo's mind, however, what makes hermeneutics relevant is not the irenic focus on agreement. This irenic focus misses the need to which the pursuit of interpretive truth answers in the first place: the need for redemption, freedom, that drives us against established paradigms of normal science and normal politics. "Hermeneutics understood as a doctrine of 'dialogical' conciliation, stripped of the severity of dialectic, namely, conflict, is reduced to a hurdy-gurdy song."<sup>29</sup> If hermeneutics, the pursuit of interpretive truth, is to answer to the deepest needs that drive it, then it must be oriented by revolutionary conflict, not charitable reconciliation.

Vattimo elucidates the responsibility for such revolutionary interpretive conflict as a call for "the ethical dissolution of reality."<sup>30</sup> He characterizes this call for the ethical dissolution of reality as a feature of his claim that interpretation can take shape as "weak thought." Vattimo's notion of "weak thought" is perhaps the most influential aspect of his work and cannot be treated in detail here.<sup>31</sup> But, in the Gifford Lectures, Vattimo provides a summary, reminding us, first, that his notion of "weak thought" "is the result of a contamination (in the Latin sense, *contaminatio*, mixing) between the nihilism of Nietzsche and the ontology of Heidegger."<sup>32</sup> In this, he maintains that both Nietzsche and Heidegger see the history of Western philosophy as the "progressive development of nihilism."<sup>33</sup> In common parlance, the notion of "nihilism" is sometimes used pejoratively. Here, however, it is used affirmatively, as a process that slowly works through false idols of Western metaphysics and religion. Vattimo associates the completion of this progress

<sup>26</sup> Vattimo will use this term to describe hermeneutics oriented toward agreement at *ibid.*, 113.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>31</sup> For an insightful introduction to Vattimo that addresses his notion of weak thought, see Nicholas Davey, "Gianni Vattimo," in ed. Niall Keane and Chris Lawn, *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics* (The Atrium: Wiley and Sons, 2016), 429-434.

<sup>32</sup> Vattimo, *Of Reality*, 114.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

toward nihilism with Heidegger's account of the "event of being," which, in turn, he reads together with Nietzsche's idea of the "transvaluation of all values." To Vattimo's mind, the remembering of being as event, and, with it, transvaluation, does not occur all at once but rather unfolds gradually, as a historical process through which the ultimate groundlessness of our values comes to be exposed. He writes, "the return of Being, the remembering of it to which Heidegger invited us, consists in the progressive weakening of what is given as stable, value, principle, unavoidable given."<sup>34</sup> Interpretation, grasped as weak thought, is participation in this historical process.

Vattimo maintains that hermeneutical responsibility toward the ethical dissolution of reality is non-violent. This responsibility, then, is carried out through interpretive conflict that weakens established paradigms of normal science and normal politics. But, such conflict is, after all, interpretive, and, as he insists, has nothing to do with the pursuit of "material supremacy" over the other.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, such interpretive conflict comprises "a promotion of nonviolent human relations,"<sup>36</sup> because, as he holds, it aims to weaken the invisibility of those precluded from appearance and thus robbed of voice within established paradigms. Indeed, in view of this, Vattimo suggests that our responsibility for the ethical dissolution of the world through interpretive conflict is the "inheritor of the Christian ideal of charity."<sup>37</sup> Here, in Vattimo's hermeneutics, just as in the case of the conception of hermeneutical charity at issue in Gadamer, Rorty, and Habermas, the virtue of charity focuses on the other, and, specifically, allowing the meaning of a person or text to come into appearance. But, for Vattimo, the charity that allows the other to appear does not take shape through dialogue in pursuit of agreement. Rather, to Vattimo's mind, the charity that allows the other to appear requires political engagement; it takes shape through interpretive conflict that weakens those forces which leave the other in the shadows, silent.

Hermeneutical responsibility toward the ethical dissolution of the world, finally, is a "'duty' that one never completes."<sup>38</sup> Instead, it comprises an "ethical-political program" that engages in the dissolution of the established paradigms of normal science and politics that delimit "reality" and "the facts" in the first place.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 118.

## 2. Conflict, Dialogue, and the Impetus of Interpretive Engagement

Vattimo's Gifford Lectures and related essays bring into focus a distinctive, political contour of hermeneutical responsibility, one that highlights the political stakes of the contrast between hermeneutics and realism. In this, Vattimo's call to engage in interpretive conflict with established paradigms of normal science and politics thus also complements his recent return to themes of Marxism.<sup>40</sup> For, as his approach suggests in the Gifford Lectures, our engagement in such interpretive conflict is part and parcel of an emancipatory politics. He writes:

Contrary to the letter of Marx's famous phrase about philosophers who only interpret the world...it is precisely by interpreting the world—and not by pretending to describe it in its given 'objectivity'—that one contributes to its transformation.<sup>41</sup>

To be sure, as Vattimo argues, the responsibility to participate in such interpretive transformation of the world is a demanding one. It is not enough to stand by and bear witness to those remaindered by established paradigms while such remaindering remains hidden from those who continue to accept the paradigms as an inalterable "reality." On the contrary, the responsibility to participate in interpretive transformation requires that we take it upon ourselves to challenge, and persist in our challenge, against such complacency. In characterizing our participation in the interpretive transformation of the world as participation in being as an event, he writes:

The truth sets us free and redeems us...only insofar as we participate actively in its event by committing ourselves to the conflict. I already recalled that the human, according to one of the more grandiloquent images of Heidegger, is the "shepherd of being." He is not the lord of it, but in many ways he is responsible for it. If he does not decisively assume his own responsibility, that of making truth happen at the expense of conflict, it is Being itself that gets lost in the metaphysical forgetting.<sup>42</sup>

For Vattimo, our engagement in emancipatory politics is not a form of mastery or control, but neither is it a passive affair. It demands of us that we take the responsibility actively to participate.

Even as Vattimo makes an important, new hermeneutical contribution to current discussions of political responsibility, though, his account also raises difficult questions. One of these questions, perhaps, is about the broader wisdom of Vattimo's call for a shift toward a hermeneutics of conflict. Certainly, his critical concerns about the orientation of "dialogic" hermeneutics toward agreement are instructive. But, we may still wonder whether the shift to a hermeneutics of conflict can better contribute to an emancipatory politics than, say, a reconsidered

<sup>40</sup> See Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

hermeneutics of dialogue that takes orientation less from concerns about agreement than from the power of dialogue respectively to bring interlocutors' prejudices into question. This issue can be brought into focus by consideration of what, in Vattimo's account, first awakens our responsibility to participate in interpretive conflict. Vattimo's account suggests that such interpretive conflict concerns noumenal matters, that is, precisely what is precluded from appearance by established paradigms of normal science and politics. But, what, then, awakens the responsibility to engage in interpretive conflict on behalf of something that, *sensu stricto* and initially, at least, does not appear? What, in short, is the hermeneutical *impetus* for us to take responsibility to engage in such conflict?

Vattimo suggests that the hermeneutical impetus to engage in interpretive conflict with established paradigms is that we come to feel ill-at-ease within the "reality" they produce. He writes, "If one raises the question of the difference between facts and interpretations, it is because one is not at ease with paradigms in use. We do not feel at one with this group, in society, with the pursuits shared by 'everyone' but not by us."<sup>43</sup> Vattimo clarifies our feeling of being ill-at-ease in reference to a strange sense of emergency evoked by Heidegger's statement from *Contributions to Philosophy* that the "only emergency is the lack of emergency."<sup>44</sup> For Vattimo, Heidegger's statement applies today as much, perhaps even more, than it applied to his own times. Vattimo's idea is that life is now characterized by the ever-tightening grip of established paradigms. To his mind, our uneasy feeling at what Heidegger calls the "lack of emergency" is a consequence of this tightening grip: the paradigms in use have become so recalcitrant, so stable and ordering of "reality," that nothing is any longer able to appear as a challenge to their validity. Political upheavals, economic crises—none of them appear so urgent as to bring into question the paradigms in which, and, perhaps, in virtue of which, they transpire.

What makes us (or some of us) feel ill-at-ease, then, is, ultimately, the confinement of our freedom entailed in the tightening grip of established paradigms. Vattimo writes, "...what makes us feel this lack, this want, is...[this:] lack of emergency means lack of liberty, the identification of Being with the present order of entities and of thought as the mirroring of the world as it is."<sup>45</sup> The impetus for us to take hermeneutical responsibility is precisely the restlessness we feel whenever the grip gets so firm that we experience the quiet, the all-too-quiet, assimilation of suffering to the logic of established paradigms, as if such suffering is not merely "unfortunate," but "inevitable," an incontrovertible consequence of "reality," "the way things are."

Vattimo's account of our hermeneutical responsibility can, then, be characterized as an especially timely and powerful iteration of what Paul Ricoeur called a "hermeneutics of

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>44</sup> Gianni Vattimo, "Emergency and Event: Technique, Politics, and the Word of Art," trans. Caterina Mongiat Farina and Geoff Farina, *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Fall 2015): 583-586, here, 583. See also Vattimo, *Of Reality*, 108.

<sup>45</sup> Vattimo, *Of Reality*, 108.

suspicion.”<sup>46</sup> With this, Vattimo reminds us that the feeling of being ill-at-ease, that is, our feelings of ethical, social, and political discontent, is itself a call to hermeneutic action.

Yet, we may nevertheless question whether the impetus to take hermeneutical responsibility is found, or found only, in what Vattimo treats as the “emergency of the lack of emergency.” Vattimo maintains that the impetus for us to take hermeneutical responsibility is, and really can only be, found in this uneasy quiet. This is because the impetus to take hermeneutical responsibility refers always to something “noumenal,” in Vattimo’s sense, as something that can only be testified to indirectly, in distortions, due to the firm grip that established paradigms have over what counts as “reality.” As he describes such distortion of testimony, “[t]he emergency we now miss can only be felt inside the ruling world, as dysfunction, disturbance, and interruption, a *parole* that acquires meaning in its ability to disturb the quiet of the *langue*.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, in view of the firm grip of established paradigms over what counts as “reality,” our feeling of unease and whatever the unease refers to will, initially at least, itself even seem out of place, unreal.

But, it is not at all obvious that the “emergency of the lack of emergency” is the only, or even most original, description of our hermeneutical responsibility to challenge established paradigms. Quite to the contrary, another description of the impetus to take hermeneutical responsibility can be discerned in Gadamer’s “dialogic” approach to hermeneutics that Vattimo himself has criticized. Now, the other impetus I find in Gadamer’s “dialogic” approach is *not* the wish to seek agreement. Vattimo’s criticism of Gadamer, to the extent it holds of Gadamer, raises a number of important concerns.<sup>48</sup> Rather, the other impetus, as I wish to show by way of conclusion, is found in Gadamer’s claim that “dialogue,” or, hermeneutical experience, originates in the displacement of our prejudices.

Gadamer, as we recall, develops his philosophical hermeneutics at least in part as an attempt to advance the ontological turn in hermeneutics achieved by the early Heidegger’s discovery of the hermeneutics of facticity. In this, Gadamer follows Heidegger’s view not only that hermeneutics concerns the art or science of understanding and interpretation, but, more originally, that the being of existence (*Dasein*) is itself hermeneutical. For Heidegger, however, existence is “ecstatic”—it has no foundation in transcendental subjectivity, instead, enacting itself always in reference to the situations in which it finds itself. Accordingly, understanding has no transcendental basis but is always made possible and limited by fore-structures conditioned by such situations. Gadamer, in *Truth and Method*, further develops Heidegger’s idea through the claim that understanding is always made possible and limited by prejudices. As Gadamer gives

<sup>46</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970).

<sup>47</sup> Vattimo, “Emergency and Event,” 585-586.

<sup>48</sup> I have tried to address questions about Gadamer’s notion of dialogue, or, as I treat it, conversation, and the problem of agreement in Theodore George, “Are We A Conversation: Hermeneutics, Exteriority, Transmutability,” *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 47 (2017): 331-350.

emphasis to the point, “the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.”<sup>49</sup> For Gadamer, understanding, because bound up in facticity, begins always in prejudice.

On this Gadamerian view, the impetus to understand and interpret arises from the confrontation with something, characteristically a person or text, that displaces our prejudices. Now, despite the many differences between Vattimo and Gadamer, there appears to be substantial continuity between Vattimo’s notion of “paradigms in use” and Gadamer’s notion of “prejudice.” What Vattimo calls a “paradigm” would, in effect, be the source of what Gadamer would call an individual’s “prejudices.” Moreover, there appears to be substantial continuity between Vattimo’s and Gadamer’s views of the affects that comprise the impetus to engage in interpretation. In Gadamer, as in Vattimo, such an impetus is described in terms of disturbance; Gadamer, for his part, focuses not on unease, but, comparable experiences of pain and disorientation.<sup>50</sup> Yet, with this, Gadamer’s “dialogic” hermeneutics suggests an alternative mode of interpretive engagement against established paradigms. Gadamer, of course, does not speak of challenging paradigms per se. But, his approach is relevant insofar as what Vattimo calls paradigms would shape our prejudices. With this in mind, Gadamer’s approach suggests that established paradigms would be challenged by dialogue insofar as dialogue can bring into question paradigm-shaped prejudices. For Gadamer, though, hermeneutical experience does not challenge paradigms directly, as it were without the consultation of those that such paradigms preclude from appearance. Instead, paradigms would be brought into question in consequence of dialogue with those others who challenge the paradigm-shaped prejudices we have. Here, what challenges paradigms is dialogic; specifically: listening to the other, to those whom the paradigms have excluded—and, indeed, thus to those whom we, too, have perhaps excluded until they have helped us to challenge our own paradigm-shaped prejudices.

### 3. Conclusion

Contemporary Continental philosophy draws attention to a diversity of questions about our political responsibilities, ranging from calls for the pursuit of political emancipation to considerations of our responsibilities toward historical memory and matters of inter-generational justice. Many such discussions rely on insights into political responsibility from movements of Continental philosophy with historical and philosophical affinities to hermeneutics, such as phenomenology, existentialism, and deconstruction. Vattimo’s elucidation of our hermeneutical

<sup>49</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem,” in *A Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 82.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second revised edition, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1995), 356 ff.

responsibility toward the “ethical dissolution of reality” stands as an important contribution to current debate from the movement of hermeneutics. Moreover, as I have tried to show, Vattimo’s considerations bring into relief further points of hermeneutic contrast about political responsibility that can be derived from figures such as Gadamer. Taken as a whole, I hope, the present inquiry therefore also suggests evidence that current discussions of our political responsibilities may benefit from renewed attention to resources from the tradition of hermeneutics.

Vattimo’s identification of our hermeneutical responsibility with the “ethical dissolution of reality” is, in any case, distinguished by the radicality of its rejection of establishmentarian politics. Given what seems, at least, to be an increasing, global dissatisfaction with the political status quo in our times, the appeal of Vattimo’s approach is difficult to miss. He calls for us to engage in conflict—to be sure, interpretive, non-violent conflict—against the very “reality” that has led to our dissatisfaction. Still, we might worry that Vattimo’s call for interpretive conflict is as much an invitation to increase the volume of our already very loud political culture as it is a plan to loosen the grip of such “reality.” The appeal of a Gadamerian call for dialogue, if less clarion, is perhaps nevertheless just as convincing. Grasped as a point of contrast with Vattimo, Gadamer’s hermeneutics suggests that paradigms are challenged indirectly by our direct dialogue with the other, those whom paradigms have excluded from appearance. No doubt, such dialogue does not necessarily take place in the public square or behind a megaphone. And, no doubt, such dialogue demands much of us personally, as it unfolds not in out-and-out opposition against paradigms, but with the displacement of the residue of such paradigms within ourselves, in our own prejudices. But, the challenge posed by dialogue thus runs deep, born of the pursuit of self-understanding and solidarity with the other.