

# Praxis and the Impossibility of Hermeneutics?\*

Reflections on Vattimo's *Beyond Interpretation*  
and "The Future of Hermeneutics"

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Ever tried? Ever failed? No matter.  
Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.

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**ABSTRACT:** Stefan Böhm wrote of Theodor Adorno, "Negative dialectics designates a position which includes its own failure, i.e. which produces the truth-effect through its own failure" (Böhm 2006 p.188). This essay suggests that key humanistic truth-effects arise from the inevitable "failure" of Vattimo's fundamentally "enlightenment" mode of hermeneutics. Is the inevitable consequence of Vattimo's philosophical endeavour the "weakening" of hermeneutics itself? Must hermeneutics fail to succeed? This argument is not so much critical of Vattimo's account of the relation between hermeneutics and *praxis* as a thinking with and through his reasoning. The approach acknowledges the enormous achievement of Vattimo's *The End of Modernity* which allowed Nietzsche's nihilism as a post-Kantian metaphysical scepticism to become tractable as a vehicle of historico-philosophical critique. Nietzsche, the first modern philosopher to make a career from deploying the concept of interpretation, initiates a movement of thought which through Vattimo's singular mediation comes, by implication, to question the possibility of hermeneutics itself. In addressing the very possibility of hermeneutics, or rather, its (inevitable) failure, our argument concerns fundamental horizon-questions concerning the future of hermeneutics. Would hermeneutics as an intellectual orientation prosper better if it were to pass over or to fall silent about the key questions of meaning and truth? As a "hermeneutical essay" the argument which follows is inevitably provisional. The concluding claim suggests that hermeneutics, as conceived by Vattimo should endure its own *kenosis* and that its defining concern with meaning and interpretation be abandoned in favour of participatory epistemology.

**KEYWORDS:** hermeneutics, failure, finitude, understanding, practice.

\* See G. VATTIMO, *Beyond Interpretation*, trans. David Webb, London, Polity, 1997, originally published as *Oltre l'interpretazione*, Laterza and Figli, Roma-Bari 1994, and G. VATTIMO, "The Future of Hermeneutics", in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander, Routledge, London 2015, p. 721–728.

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## 1. The Meaning of Hermeneutics: Early Questions, Later Answers

*Beyond Interpretation* is a provocative title. Hermeneutically speaking, there is always a “beyond” to interpretation, that is, more interpretation. This is the principle of hermeneutic excess: no interpretation will exhaust the possible determinations of meaning within its chosen target subject–matter: there is always more to be said. A substantive point is that only because we interpret, can the presence of what lies beyond it be disclosed as that which has yet to be interpreted. Put differently, the meaning of what interpretation brings to light will always lie ahead of itself, in what it reveals as the yet to be revealed. In effect, the beyond (*oltre*) of interpretation keeps interpretation open and goads it towards a future where it might be graced by the disclosure of the insight it craves.

The beyondness and futurity of interpretation bring two of Vattimo’s essays on hermeneutics into productive alignment: *Beyond Interpretation* and “The Future of Hermeneutics” which provides (ominously so for the hermeneutically minded) “The Conclusion” to Routledge’s *Handbook of Hermeneutics*. If, as *Beyond Interpretation* suggests, meaning lies in what surpasses interpretation, that is, in one of its as yet unrealised determinations, then, the meaning of hermeneutics does indeed reside in a disclosure already approaching. It is this spectre which Vattimo discusses as the “The Future of Hermeneutics.” This is not suggesting that he seeks to colonise that future. To the contrary, Gadamer’s reasoning seems to shape the argument: our present hermeneutic practices are implicitly guided by and drawn towards what they project as anticipations of their completeness. We will explore both the arc of Vattimo’s argument that links the 1997 volume and the 2015 essay and reflect on the implications of the conclusion of the latter essay, namely, that the future of hermeneutics must involve its transformation into a practical philosophy or philosophy of *praxis*.

The future of hermeneutics must take the form of the transformation of hermeneutics into a practical philosophy or philosophy of *praxis* [...]

There is no object proper to hermeneutical thought that is better understood, described or represented (as) through the development of hermeneutics into an explicit philosophy of *praxis*. (Vattimo, 2015, p. 727)

In important respects, Vattimo’s development of hermeneutics into an explicit philosophy of *praxis* is a response to a challenge laid down by Gadamer. In the essay of 1974, “Classical and Philosophical Hermeneutics”, an essay invited by editors of the Italian publication *Enciclopedia del Novecento* (1977), he writes,

Hermeneutics understood in this wider universal sense moves into the region of “practical philosophy,” a region which Joachim Ritter and his school, finding themselves situated in the midst of the German tradition of transcendental philosophy, tried to revive. Philosophical hermeneutics is aware of what it could mean to move in this direction. A theory of the praxis of understanding is obviously theory and not practice, but a theory of practices is still not some kind of technique, nor is it an effort to make societal practice more scientific. Rather, hermeneutics offers a philosophical reflection on the limits of all scientific and technical control of nature and of society. These limits are truths that need to be defended against the modern concept of science, and defending these truths is one of the most important tasks of philosophical hermeneutics. (Gadamer, 2007, p. 71)

Vattimo too infers that a “poetics” of hermeneutical reason offers soft-power resistance to the dictatorial tendencies of managerial thinking. However, the above passage reveals a Gadamerian prejudice that is not unproblematic for Vattimo’s espousal of hermeneutics as a philosophy of *praxis*. Hermeneutical reasoning may define itself by placing the (epistemological) “limits” of both science and technology into question but what of its own limits? If understanding is related to limit-experiences, how is *praxis* itself to be understood? What are its limits?

The question of limit shapes our discussion. We shall suggest (1) that the limits of *praxis* lie in what comes to us as future experiences of negativity. (2) Experiences of limit or, in Vattimo’s terms, moments of “weakening”, mark, we suggest, *both* the birth of “hermeneutic reflection” *and* the end of hermeneutics as a distinct method or mode of philosophy. Vattimo associates his philosophy of weakening with the transition of hermeneutics from “a rationally grounded understanding of texts” to “the thinking of a general ontology” (Vattimo, 2015, p. 727). Our substantive claim is that in the two essays under discussion Vattimo succeeds in a certain way of going “beyond” Vattimo. With all due consistency, Vattimo’s nihilistic reduction of metaphysics culminates in the weakening of hermeneutics itself.

Our thesis is simply stated: the formal impossibilities of hermeneutic practice culminate in the birth of hermeneutic reflection and, furthermore, that this birth marks the end of methodical hermeneutics as traditionally conceived. Vattimo’s argument that hermeneutics must become an explicit philosophy of praxis will, in its very exposition, dissolve any conception of hermeneutics as a specific method or conceptual device. Whereas Gadamer claims that hermeneutical philosophy dissolves itself into praxis, Vattimo’s position implies that praxis dissolves hermeneutical “philosophy” understood in any substantive sense. The implication is clear, the consequence of saying goodbye to truth and meaning is also having to bid a “farewell” to hermeneutics. How final this addio is, we shall see.

This essay will explore how the questions asked in the 1997 essay about “the beyond of interpretation” culminate in the principal claim of the 2014

essay that the future of hermeneutics resides in its transformation into a philosophy of *praxis*. For reasons that become increasingly clear, this paper is positively disposed to the practice–turn in hermeneutics. However, the conclusion of the 2014 essay that hermeneutics re–thought as a philosophy of practice that “will draw the world ever closer to being what for Hegel (and afterwards for Marx) is the place of the spirit, where the spirit feels itself finally (but never thoroughly) at home” (Vattimo, 2015, p. 727)<sup>1</sup> is, we shall argue, open to serious challenge. I do not intend to debate whether this remnant of Hegelian thought plays the role of a necessary organising fiction in Vattimo’s hermeneutics (much in the same way that Gadamer’s “anticipation of completeness” does in his). However, I will question whether the centrality of *praxis* in hermeneutics will ever succeed in allowing the hermeneutic agent to ever feel at home in the world. There is, perhaps, an analogy here between Schubert’s *Winterreise* and Vattimo’s argumentation: the consequence of dissolving hermeneutics as method is that the hermeneutical agent (the journeying spirit) can never return to itself. If the aim of *praxis* is to facilitate that return, then the question is simply whether hermeneutics construed as a de–alienating *praxis* is doomed to fail?

What renders Vattimo’s concluding appeal to *praxis* problematic is that (1) there is (literally) a world of difference between turning hermeneutics towards an explicit “philosophy” of practice and recognising the operation of *praxis* within hermeneutics. If the operation of *praxis* is recognised as driving hermeneutics towards the question of future orientated meaning, the future of hermeneutics can never, arguably, conclude. (2) If hermeneutics is turned towards an explicit philosophy of *praxis*, then, will it not have to confront what Gadamer calls “the indissoluble problem of its rational application”? (Gadamer, 2007, p.234). In other words, hermeneutic *praxis* always faces the possibility of its failure. (3) If hermeneutics is to be developed into a “philosophy of *praxis*” how does Vattimo avoid realising precisely the fear articulated in *Beyond Interpretation*, namely, that hermeneutics becomes just one philosophy amongst others? Let us turn directly to some of the key arguments in that text.

1. The conclusion is anticipated in *Farewell to Truth* where Vattimo writes at its close, “The absolute character of the spirit consists, for us, not in the fact (as the still somewhat Cartesian Hegel perhaps thinks) of being near to itself in the most total certainty and self–transparency but in constituting the only end which all objective attainments, the pragmatic truths, may aim as the authentic, never totally given, overcoming of every form of alienation.” p. 140. *A Farewell to Truth*, Columbia University Press, 2011.

## 2. Beyond Interpretation

*Beyond Interpretation* opens with an historical observation: in contemporary philosophy, hermeneutics has acquired an ‘ecumenical’ form so vague and generic that it is losing much of its meaning (Vattimo 1997, p. ix). Given the variety of philosophical thinkers associated with hermeneutics, Vattimo confesses that it is hard to avoid the thought that “the contemporary pervasiveness of hermeneutic seems to have come about at the expense of a dilution of its original philosophical meaning” (Vattimo 1997, p. 2). It is, of course, dangerous to invoke the notion of an *original* name for hermeneutics. If the Word was in the beginning, ambiguity, and hence hermeneutics has also been with us from the beginning. A Heideggerian move would be more appropriate: the origin of hermeneutics lies in what it originates. The argument should shift to the productivity of hermeneutics, to reflective on engagement and participation rather than on any notion of hermeneutics as a specific philosophy or method. What hermeneutic reflection occasions are epiphanies of the meaningful arising from the accidents of interpretative practice. However, we need a philosophical route to such a position. The initial steps derive from Vattimo’s question, what is the meaning of hermeneutics for contemporary philosophy?

There is substance to Vattimo’s initial worries. The context of his question concerns the manifest assimilation of hermeneutics within the array of traditional philosophical dogmatics. This renders hermeneutics as one method of interpretation amongst others. Vattimo’s criticism could be harsher. If hermeneutics is one of many methodological tools available to the human subject, it becomes a vehicle of the subject, a tool for over-coming hindrances and obstacles that challenge or, to use Wittgenstein’s phrase, its sense of knowing how to go on. Hermeneutics becomes a problem-solving tool kit. This minimalizes the ability of hermeneutics to put our instrumentalist pre-conceptions to the test. Worse, this “normalisation” of hermeneutics ignores the nihilistic “weakening” of the very subject-based tradition of epistemology that grounds such instrumentalism. Normalisation anaestheticizes “instrumentalist” hermeneutics to its status as a will to power.

The question, “What is the Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy?” is not *ex vacuo*. It emerges from within what Vattimo respectfully appropriates as Nietzsche’s history of nihilism coming to self-awareness.

What I relate is the history of the next centuries: I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism [...]

What does nihilism mean? That the highest devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; “why?” finds no answer. (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 4 and 9).

Nietzsche is not just concerned with a radical subjectivisation of truth claims. His observation that “a critique of being is still this being” suggests something ontological: critical thinking is enabled by and discloses a historical movement. Nietzsche’s “weakening” or worldly re-appropriation of the metaphysics of being is linked by Vattimo to Heidegger’s notions of weak Being and his related tactic of *Destruktion*. The occurrence of Being in Heidegger’s ontology is presented by Vattimo as a weak force, an unnoticed and marginal background event (Vattimo, 1997 p. 2–3). However, (and here the Biblical analogy is appropriate) such “weakness” “inherits” the earth (Vattimo, 1988, p. 86). Heidegger’s return to the question of Being is doubly apocalyptic. (1) *Apokalypsis* meaning “uncovering” is translated literally from the Greek as a disclosure of something hidden. (2) Apocalypse in the Biblical sense refers to the coming millennium of “end of age”. Heidegger’s revelation of the apocalyptic character of Being announces “the end to the age of philosophical modernity”. The related hermeneutics of *Destruktion* clears the edifices of metaphysics, their claims to truth having covered up and placed beyond remembrance the “forgotten question of Being”. The history of metaphysics emerges, then, as a palimpsest revealing many forgotten philosophical *pentimenti*. Vattimo’s hermeneutics similarly “weakens” the edifices of metaphysics, stripping them of their universal claims and exposing them as particular responses to the distinguishing questions of a particular time and age. Recovering the “truth” or the “meaning of hermeneutics” is, then, for Vattimo an act of participation, an act of localising and rendering-particular a contemporary meaning for hermeneutics. It animates a wider received tradition of questioning and is not the recovery of a supposed “authentic” original doctrine. To ask after the meaning of hermeneutics is, then, to turn to its effects, to turn to what it does or brings about as a practice and to participate in what the practice brings discloses. This is true of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. The logic of Vattimo’s case, however, implies a weakening of hermeneutics itself.

The historical logic of weakening (or what might be described as applicative dissemination) implies that hermeneutics, initially received as a philosophical category and then as a method, must itself become subject to weakening through the exercise of its own interpretive practices. In outline, we might say that the nihilistic logic of weakening announces itself with an act of epiphany, an announcement, or an evidential experience. Vattimo follows Pareyson in this respect: “If philosophy is the verbal and speculative translation of revelatory and ontological thought, its task is to vindicate the revelatory and ontological nature that every human activity, including practical action, can have in itself” (Vattimo, 2011, p. 185). However, once an evidentiary truth is hypostasised by philosophical or religious tradition as a substantive truth worthy of assimilation, the process of nihilistic weakening

commences. As Nietzsche understood, it is in the pursuit of truth that the will to truth discovers “truth” to be one of its own interpretations. Vattimo understands that this process neither ends in relativism nor subjectivism. Rather, the re-appropriation of a major philosophical category as having no metaphysical truth independent of its localised usages, renders the term “tractable” in various different discourses. Such usages are no longer dependent upon the general authority of fixed definitions or canons of meaning. Rather, part of a term’s history of weakening is the process of its dissemination into specific communities of debate. Weakening has a theological resonance: *Deus caritas est*. Just as God gave of himself by coming to earth in the form of his son, so too as in the history of weakening, the concepts of metaphysics are brought to earth in pragmatically utilisable ideas (Vattimo, 2011, p. 140). Vattimo claims, accordingly, that the process of weakening in which the “true world” is rendered a fable, does not result in more profound or reliable truth but gives way to a play of interpretations each of which are subject to negotiation and debate. This allows Vattimo to shift hermeneutical engagement towards socio-political contestation. It is a key move and suggests that a commitment to socially engaged interpretive *praxis* is a plausible way of escaping the disabling scepticism of deconstructive theory.

Vattimo’s thesis concerning weakening poses an irony. Both the secularisation of religion and the weakening of metaphysics are customarily associated with Enlightenment critiques of rationalist theology. Yet, “weakening” considered as a historical process reveals itself as a teleology of secularisation. This serves to re-appropriate theology from the negativity of Enlightenment critique and, what is more, to subject the latter to a weakening critique itself. Enlightenment reasoning may have dislodged theology from divine authority but such reasoning is itself tainted with the repressive authority of reason as a will to power. However, once “truth” becomes a matter of negotiation and interpretive exchange, truth as the “thus shall it be” of the powerful is formally weakened and made available to all who participate in social discourse. Enlightenment reasoning is, in effect deconstructed and surpassed by a theological teleology of coming-to earth. If, within this teleology, it is Enlightenment reason that secularises theology, it is a secularised theology which in turn democratises Enlightenment reason and underpins Vattimo’s appeal to *praxis*.

That Vattimo should appeal for a turn from hermeneutic theory to engaged *praxis* is consistent with the notion of the “*intellettuale organico*” or public intellectual, a notion which like that of *praxis* emanates from Antonio Gramsci (Benso and Schroeder, 2010, p. 136). The concept of *praxis* is first articulated in the modern period by August von Cieszkowski in the volume *Prolegomena zur Historosophie* (1838). This is described as “an auto-activity” (*Selbsttätigkeit*), that is, a liberation of action that opens up

the historical space of transformation and self-consciousness (Cassin, 2013, p.825). The connections with the German term *Bildung* are plain. Vattimo's own appeal to a *filosofia della prassi* derives from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (*Quaderni del carcere*, 1926–1937). Core to Gramsci's Hegelian notion of the state as an organically evolving process of cultural hegemony and democratisation, is the idea of an unfinished and uneven process concerned with bringing about a collective *praxis* (*ibid*). Jan Luis Segundo suggests that if thinkers are to be considered “organic intellectuals” of the common people they must be charged with understanding popular democratic aspirations and religious faith: the “intellettuale organico aims to understand a people's understanding of their political and religious faith and to explore and act on the social possibilities that reside within it” (Rowland, 1999, p. 133). Étienne Balibar comments,

It (*praxis*) essentially takes the form of a tendential transition between the passivity that class dominate imposes on “subaltern” social groups (what Gramsci calls “the economico–corporative stage”) and the “intellectual and moral reform” that is supposed to allow them to become actors in their own history (and in this sense seems to return strictly to the Aristotelian definition of motion: “The fulfilment of what is potential as potential. . .”). (Cassin, 2013, pp. 827–28).

The connection with Vattimo's history of weakening is clear. The role of the hermeneutic practitioner is to engage with the historical process of weakening religious and metaphysical ideas so as to allow them to be used locally and with emancipatory effect amongst the full diversity of the human community. An analogy with Liberation Theology is clear: whereas speaking in the name of the poor Liberation Theology uses the Bible “to dialogue with and engage with the oppressive reality of their community” (Rowlands, 1996, p. 132), Vattimo uses hermeneutic weakening to undo the political authority of received tradition. However, a key question remains.

Must not the dynamics of actual hermeneutic practice resist and undo the teleological framework that Vattimo sets for it? If hermeneutic practice is “an auto-activity” that opens a historical space of transformation and self-consciousness, what guarantees its compliance with the emancipatory framework of reasoning which allegedly guides it? Is it also assumed that “weakening” is inherently progressive? Furthermore, “weakening” is manifestly guided by values related to enlightenment and emancipation but are these terms immune from hermeneutic criticism? Given these questions, the meaning of hermeneutics remains unclear and, given its historical provenance, perhaps appropriately so. Furthermore, in the context of the history of nihilistic weakening, does the hermeneutics itself remain tractable? If meaning and truth become questions of negotiated consensus and communalisation, must we not meet with the dissipation of any universal



hermeneutical “philosophy”? What is more, if hermeneutic practice inevitably fragments, differentiates and disperses fixed meaning, why should it establish a momentum towards overcoming humankind’s alleged alienation from itself? Christopher Rowland describes *praxis* in the following way: “*praxis*: action, a term often used in liberation theology to describe the actions and commitments which provide the context for theological reflection (Rowland, 1999, p. xvii). Gadamer makes a similar point about hermeneutic reflection. However, he does so in such a way as to question the ability of *praxis* to arrive at any pre-conceived goal. All these points present as we shall see certain difficulties for Vattimo’s general position.

The essay *Beyond Interpretation* argues with good cause that hermeneutics is not just one amongst several “methods” of doing philosophy. Nor is it just a history of ideas but something more radical. If hermeneutics concerns itself with the question of meaning, both its own meaning and the meaning of its relation to philosophy must constantly be called into question: its being is always a being-in-question. If hermeneutics has a discernible identity it is a militant self-questioning identity. And yet to raise the question of meaning is to confess, as Heidegger knew, that one is already in and responsive to the wider play of historical and cultural meaning. It is to witness how what is at stake in that implicit play has raised itself explicitly into reflexive consciousness. However, the process of calling into question suggests a distance from what is questioned. This has important consequences for our argument.

The lifting into reflexive consciousness of what is at play in the interplay of interpretive processes, demarcates a point of distanciation. The emergence of reflective consciousness is, arguably, the emergence of hermeneutic awareness. Hermeneutic awareness of the arising of new possibilities in a text or situation is synonymous with the moment an interpretive engagement has failed. Nietzsche provides the precedent: the liberating awareness that anything is possible arises in the moment when traditional modes of approaching “truth” fail. This suggests that reflexive distanciation is a necessary consequence of hermeneutics considered as *praxis*. Gadamer suggests that the incommensurability of Being and knowledge guarantees that *praxis* will fail. Hermeneutic reflection in effect emerges in such moments of emergency. The link between the arguments of the 1997 and 2015 essay concerning the meaning of hermeneutics appeals, then, to a transition within hermeneutics itself, from hermeneutics conceived as a “rationally grounded understanding of texts” to the thinking of a general ontology.” The shift to hermeneutics ontologically conceived allows Vattimo to locate the process of interpretation in the historical, as part of and as an agency in the transformation of metaphysical and theological ideas into forms of socially engaged *praxis*. If so, the move to *praxis* effectively dissolves hermeneutics

as a “philosophy” or a philosophical method and, perhaps, justifiably so. More important, if hermeneutic *praxis* interprets texts of an emancipatory potential it will, as we shall presently argue, inevitably render their key terms problematic. The implications of these points must now be explored.

### 3. The Saving Weakness of Hermeneutics

*Beyond Interpretation* argues that hermeneutics is not a simply a poetic vocabulary: “the novelty and importance of hermeneutics ultimately consists in the affirmation that the rational (argumentative) interpretation of history is not scientific in the positivistic sense and yet neither is it purely “aesthetic”. The task of contemporary hermeneutics seems to be that of articulating in an ever more complete and explicit form, this original inspiration; which means furthermore the task of corresponding responsibly to the appeal arising from its inheritance” (Vattimo, 1997, p. III). The conceptual transition at issue is that which passes from accepting hermeneutics as the transmission and application of “received meanings” to regarding hermeneutics as the *praxis* of negotiating the meaningful. Formally, speaking the pursuit of such *praxis* will be compromised by the ontology that sustains it i.e. the incommensurability of Being and knowing. This suggests that in formal respects the “experience” of practice and its limits renders hermeneutics as a methodological *praxis* formally impossible.

Scepticism is not new to hermeneutics. What Ricoeur calls the hermeneutics of suspicion has long been a strong element in hermeneutic thought from Nietzsche, Marx and Freud through to Derrida. We might say that even without deliberating on the question of *praxis*, philosophical hermeneutics remains vulnerable to its own failure. The key points are as follows:

- a) *The Hermeneutical Differential*. To understand a subject–matter is to differentiate my understanding of what is understood from that which is understood. Understanding is not therefore a unitary but rather a differential process: it depends on an unclose–able differential space.
- b) *Hermeneutical Finitude*.
  - All understanding is finite, arrived at from a singular perspective, from a specific tradition, or outlook. It is, therefore, impossible to anticipate all the effects that an object–understood can may have across the range of perspectives that engage with it.
  - Understanding is finite because subject to change. The objects, processes and circumstances of our understanding are always in motion.

- Consciousness can never grasp the totality of the relations of which it is a part: we are always more than we will ever know ourselves to. Whereas for Heidegger, Being precedes and is in excess of the beings that know it, for Gadamer Being is not so much incommensurable with being known but exceeds all knowing.
- c) *Hermeneutical Incompleteness*: If all linguistic meaning is indeterminate, there is always more that can be said of a subject-matter. There is no formal closure to hermeneutics.
- d) *Hermeneutic Remainder*. From the above, follows the axiom of excess or remainder: any statement of “x” will always invoke “x+”, i.e. those unstated (speculative) determinations of meaning which enable any understanding of x (Davey, 2013, p. 110–112.)
- e) *Hermeneutical Incommensurability*: Given that the range of meanings attached to a subject matter is indeterminate, no finite interpretation of a subject-matter can be fully commensurate with its object.

Vattimo acknowledges many of these axioms: “the history of modern hermeneutics and, so far as we can imagine, also its future is a history of excess, the transgression of limits, or, to use another idiom, the history of continuous ‘overflowing’ (Vattimo, 2015, p. 722) These limiting axioms derive from the internal logic of hermeneutic procedures and render impossible any hermeneutic endeavour to make or endorse a universal truth claim or to it render it fully explicable. The purpose, here, is not to establish a hermeneutical *via negativa* but rather to mark its theoretical limits which, interestingly enough, are more discernible because of the key historical mover in Vattimo’s argument, the process of ontologisation itself.

The axioms summarised set the formal limits to hermeneutic reasoning. Because they are not just epistemological limits but ontological limits, they set the limits against which practical wisdom in hermeneutics becomes possible, that is, the wisdom that arises from the experience of hermeneutic failure. What Vattimo’s arguments clarify after Heidegger is that the ontologisation of hermeneutics spells the end of hermeneutics as an epistemological project. Interpretation can never formally overcome that which resists its capture i.e. that excess or remainder which will always taunt interpretation for its incompleteness. However, it could be suggested that the weak point of hermeneutical thought is also its saving grace. Only when practice stumbles on its hermeneutical limits are the humanising truths of practice not so much shown but demonstrated. The collision of hermeneutic’s epistemological projects with their ontological grounding will (inevitably) frustrate them. However, it is precisely at such points of

collision or failure that hermeneutical reflexivity arises. To state the matter more baldly, hermeneutic philosophy (considered as method) must fail in order that hermeneutic reflexivity can emerge. The failure of hermeneutic *praxis* broadly conceived, is the condition of the emergence of hermeneutic reflexivity, or better put, hermeneutic reflexivity is a truth–effect, the saving grace of failed practice.

#### 4. Failures of Practice

The limiting conditions of hermeneutic understanding reveal a human–predicament: we cannot know it all. The epistemological scepticism of hermeneutic thinking stems from an ontological radicalisation of the part–whole relationship: our thinking is indeed part of a whole nexus of relationships which though it grounds our thinking, our thinking cannot grasp. Thus, the limits of hermeneutical thinking are as both Gadamer and Vattimo understand, the limits of managerial planning. Nevertheless, uncertainty drives the need for decisive action. Hermeneutics is always *translational* by nature: to apply the generalised understanding of literature, history, and science to pressing individual situations requires a practical turn. To his credit Vattimo notes how hermeneutics considered as *praxis* is inexorably wedded to the Kantian tradition of practical judgement. He comments,

Of Aesthetic and Hermeneutic rationality: It's a difference that picks up the question of the linkage in Kant between *The Critique of Pure Reason* and *The Critique of Judgement*. Although orthodox Kantians may find the proposition audacious, to me it seems clear that the Kantian intellect can function as an organ of objective knowledge of the world, that is, be universally valid, on the basis of the community that is established, in a manner ever historical and eventual, among subjects who share the aesthetic experience. Not just in their appreciation of the same works of art or natural beauty but in the acknowledgment of the same civil, religious and mythical models [...] (Vattimo, 2008, p. 136).

This observation is not developed though it offers clear philosophical grounds for the important claim that technical and practical judgement is more closely linked to aesthetical and rhetorical modes of judgement than is commonly supposed. Indeed, as Habermas understood, when it comes to social and cultural application, technology and science are dependent upon rhetorical judgements. Yet all practical judgements are fallible and not just because of the ontological limitations that circumscribe any action.

All practical judgements are, by definition, vulnerable to failure for three reasons. (1) Practice is obliged to treat the knowledge available to

it as complete and certain and, in consequence, always runs the risk of getting its judgements wrong. (2) Practice involves choice and decision between possibilities: such decisions are always potentially subject to refutation by events. (3) Practice delivers its products into an uncertainty of uses over which it does not preside (Gadamer, 1977, p. 201). This can lead to unexpected successes as well as unintended consequences: “every addition to knowledge is, regarding its significance and consequences, unpredictable” (Gadamer, 1996, p. 24). Particular practical judgements can always produce, in principle, entirely unexpected effects.

These observations suggest why any hermeneutical practice considered either as the application of a technique or as a method of understanding will always be potentially subject to possible failure. They imply that the moment of hermeneutic reflexivity coming into being is the moment when hermeneutic techniques or applied practices are experienced as failing. Put more strongly, hermeneutic reflexivity is a truth–effect of hermeneutic failure. In this respect, hermeneutics has something in common with Adorno’s thought: “Negative dialectics (hermeneutics) designates a position which includes its own failure, i.e. which produces the truth–effect through its own failure” (Böhm, 2006, p. 188). Gadamer’s account of the negativity of experience is, in this context, telling.

Any evidential experience or insight is inseparable from a moment of conscious experience. This is always an experience of self–consciousness — the “experience” is the experience that consciousness has of itself (Gadamer, 1989, 318). In this moment, the experiencer becomes aware of her experience, she becomes experienced (*ibid*). Heidegger, Gadamer and Vattimo all accept that in the experience of Being, art, poetry or music something fundamental is announced. Yet there is always something negative in such epiphanic events: “experience is always negative” and embodies the ancient axiom *pathei mathos* (learning through suffering). Thus, coming to self reflection, to hermeneutical reflection and to the experience of distancing are all the emergent consequences of practical failure. “Every experience worthy of the name,” Gadamer suggests, runs counter to expectation” (Gadamer 1989, p.318). We come to see things that we sense we should have seen and, simultaneously, become aware of our both our ignorance and of our arrogance. The formal asymmetry of Being and knowing underwrites the inevitability of practical failure and places a major qualification against Vattimo’s optimism that hermeneutic *praxis* offers a route to the overcoming of alienation. Not only is hermeneutical reflexivity born of practical failure but in its pursuit of *praxis* it is unavoidably subject to the possibility of further failure. The possibility of hermeneutic reflection is premised on the (formal) impossibility of hermeneutic practice.

Yet there is a positivity in the negative dialectic of hermeneutic experience. The moment of failure (which is also the moment of consciousness becoming self-aware) marks another truth-effect: the emergence of practical wisdom. The negativity of experience is synonymous with humans becoming aware of their finitude. In this, the limits of self-knowledge and practical reasoning are discovered (Gadamer, 1989, p. 321). In these moments of failure we do not so much as catch but become caught out by what is at play within our practices. In so many words, failure discloses the extent of the practical ignorance that underlies our practical engagements. We become undone by the incommensurabilities between being and knowing, between being and our conscious doing. The wise practitioner has, then, become aware of the extent of his past practical ignorance, of his blindness to what was and is at play in those judgements. The emergence of practical wisdom can be characterised, then, as the truth-effect of failed practice which has knowingly arrived at its limits. However, the wise practitioner also knows that he or she has become *knowingly* ignorant, that, all future practice must remain wisely circumspect of its limits and of the unavoidable likelihood of failure. According to this line of argument and contrary to Vattimo's own, hermeneutic reflexivity is born of the very practices that are meant to resolve alienation and distancing. However, the sporadic emergence of practical wisdom will, collectively, have one effect — the grounding of a democracy of failure.

If success in modern popular culture individuates, failure promises a collective bond. In this respect, Vattimo and Gadamer are similarly orientated "spiritually." For Gadamer, failures of judgement and an attendant awareness of previous short-sightedness brings what he defines as a "religious experience": the human is stripped bare and revealed in all its fragility (Gadamer, 1989, p. 357). Whereas he emphasises the Classical dimensions of the experience — "it is ultimately a religious insight — the kind of insight that gave birth of Greek Tragedy" — Vattimo stresses the Christian — the nakedness of all humans before their weakness. Let us return to our main theme.

Hermeneutical reflection has to be thought of as emerging from and being a consequence of moments of failure within that practice. It is neither a meta-reflection on practical involvements nor a separate commentary on them. The value of Vattimo's approach to hermeneutics is that it offers a "weakening" of hermeneutics, a dissolution of its status as a methodological tool and a revaluation of it as a speculative revelation of our mode of being. It is not, therefore, a question of "a hermeneutics of practice" but rather of a "hermeneutical thinking" (a dwelling on the meaning, purpose or direction of one's practices), thinking that is an element of and an essential accompaniment to practice and its disclosures. Adapting one of Gadamer's remarks,

we might say that, Hermeneutic) reflection is the capacity to adopt a certain distance towards oneself and is not the same as a relation of opposition towards an object. Rather, hermeneutic reflection is brought into play in such a way that *it accompanies the lived performance of task*: hermeneutic reflection is a capacity to sustain thought *along with* the performance of a task. A tangential remark is also made by Gadamer in the 1983 essay “Citizens of Two Worlds”: hermeneutics as

practical philosophy is not the application of theory to *praxis* [...] but arises itself from the experience of *praxis* due to the reason and reasonableness inherent in it (Gadamer, 1992, p. 217).

Hermeneutic reflection is, then, the coming to be reflectively aware of what is performatively at play in the *practical* experience of understanding (Gadamer, 1996, p.245). This implies that the experience of distancing, alienation and failure is in-dissociable from reflexive hermeneutic consciousness. Yet Gadamer insists, “this distance [...] is what closest to us as human beings: “it is the distance within which we live.” (Gadamer, 1996, p. 58). The conclusion is problematic for Vattimo’s optimism. If hermeneutical reflection arises as a “truth effect of practice”, there is no resolution to nor an over-coming of the differences and the distanciations that are at the root of practice. If hermeneutic reflection cannot dissolve the excess and incommensurability that it depends on for its being, Vattimo’s dream for hermeneutics as a philosophy of *praxis* is challenged. Since differentiation, excess and incommensurability constitute the very being of hermeneutic reflection, there is, it would seem, no way that such reflection “will draw the world ever closer to being what Hegel (and afterwards for Marx) is the place of the spirit, where the spirit feels itself finally but never thoroughly at home” (Vattimo, 2016 p. 727)

### **Conclusion: The Practice that Makes a Difference**

Perhaps it is Vattimo’s strong allegiance to Heidegger’s notion of a destiny of Being that prompts him to choose his “authenticity” as residing with commitment within and hence furthering the “destiny-tradition” of post-metaphysical (Christian) secular thought. Given Vattimo’s insight into the *cul-de-sac* of deconstructive hermeneutics — the anything-goes nihilism of indifference — his commitment to a hermeneutics of *praxis* is not without justification. If *Beyond Interpretation* culminates in the *scepsis* there is only interpretation, the question becomes what interpretation do we knowingly chose? Vattimo argues we are already essentially involved in a process into

which we are always already thrown — the history of weakening which is the destiny of Being — and that we have to remain true (authentic) to this process. “The theoretical choice for hermeneutics and the specific choices of our interpretive activity have to be guided by listening attentively to the messages of the *Schickung*” (Vattimo, 1997, 109). This is the context in which the 2014 essay on “The Future of Hermeneutics” commits to a philosophy of *praxis* which is presented as a willful and engaged continuance of the process of opening which constitutes an on-going emancipation from the repressive structures of religion, metaphysics and politics. On one level, Vattimo is surely right. Choice and commitment is always demanded of human beings. Only loyalty to chosen values offers an escape from deconstructive scepticism in which anything can be said about anything. But is a commitment to the values of post-Christian Enlightenment secularism the only a viable response to Heidegger’s announcement of the event of Being? Even if it were, would that commitment not be constantly undermined by the internal dynamics of the very hermeneutic practices employed to realise those values? However, although Vattimo can claim that this commitment to a post-Christian Enlightenment secularism is a legitimate outcome of a history of weakening, that history is but one reading of that event. Heidegger certainly associates the eventual nature of Being with the inauguration of historical epochs but it is precisely that eventual nature (and its associated doctrine of the withheld) which installs the incommensurability between Being and knowing. This suggests another understanding of Being, one which is closer to the process-philosophies of Heraclitus, Nietzsche and Nishitani and one which emphasises the fact that Being is essentially a *mysterium* which though it may reveal itself *post-factum* in history, nevertheless, escapes all historical reduction? The incommensurability between Being and knowing which Gadamer quietly insists on is bound to question (as it clearly does) the folly of all human planning and social prediction and to ask in consequence whether a Marxist conception of social organisation is but another managerial form? In contrast, the notion of nothingness which is at the heart of Buddhist approach to eventual Being is ethically open to the wonder and mystery of *all* beings in their joys and suffering independent of historical or social circumstance. These points reveal a more fundamental contrast between Vattimo’s and Gadamer’s conception of hermeneutic practice over the issue of whether tradition is to be mobilised politically or whether tradition is something that we participate in but can never instrumentalize.

In *Beyond Interpretation* Vattimo argues,

If hermeneutics has no source of validity beyond its belonging to an *Überlieferung* which is specifically that of modern thought, its relation with this tradition will



have to be thought in different and far more positive terms than those which characterise Gadamer's position in *Truth and Method*. (Vattimo, 1997, p. 109).

Vattimo argues that hermeneutics must be conceived as an attempt to grasp the meaning of the transformation (of the idea) of Being that has been produced as a techno-scientific rationalisation of our world. He concedes that the meaning of history is not a fact to be recognised. Nevertheless, "the guiding thread of history appears, is given, only in an act of interpretation that is confirmed in dialogue with other possible interpretations and that, in the final analysis, leads to a modification of the actual situation in a way that makes the interpretation 'true'" (Vattimo, 1997, p. 109). However, despite the qualification, the argument still amounts to the appropriation of a tradition by a populist majority and what it conceives as the emancipatory end of its collective history or destiny. As Kolokovski warns any instrumentalisation by the majority has a hint of authoritarianism about it. Gadamer overtly avoids such instrumentalism and rightly so (see Kolakowski, 1972)

Tradition for Gadamer is the world already at play within our experiences of culture and language. Tradition broadly conceived as the transmitted enabling pre-conceptions of our thinking and speaking transcends both but can never be contained by either. Though it may be moderated post-factum by the judgements that it facilitates, Gadamer's notion of tradition represents a structure more radical than that which Vattimo claims to guide modernity. Despite his debt to Heidegger, Vattimo remains socially and politically an Enlightenment figure. Gadamer's response to history is at once both more classical and more protestant, classical in the sense that he is concerned with how the historical past challenges our contemporary pre-conceptions and protestant in as much as he eschews any collective response to those challenges. Not only does Gadamer's overwhelming sense of historical finitude make him sceptical of any form of organised social planning but his emphasis on dialogue neither aims at consensus nor at a collectively agreed "truth". Rather, participating in collective debate is to be brought to a point whereby we may begin to conceive of our individual horizons differently. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics remains dominated by the classical virtue of reflective distance. Vattimo's hermeneutics is shaped by a different virtue: its *praxis* aims to articulate and fulfil a historical drive towards the elimination of distancing and alienation. In such matters, Vattimo's and Gadamer's notion of hermeneutic practice are profoundly at odds.

Before we turn to the positive inheritance of Vattimo's argument, a concern about the idealistic dimensions of his emancipatory *praxis* remains. How does Vattimo protect it against disillusion and disappointment? In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche speaks of the "disaster slumbering in the womb of theoretical culture." This concerns arriving at what is, in effect, a

hermeneutic limit. Nietzsche knows that the circles of meaning attached to key subject-matters such as Being, truth, Enlightenment or emancipation from suffering, offer no point from which they can be definitely surveyed and grasped. Their meaning can never be fully realised. Logic seemingly coils up at such boundaries: interpretation can never grasp its object. The limit of the intelligible marks the beginning of the unintelligible: promises of truth and the socially transformative are forever postponed and compromised. There is an irreducible if not tragic tension in Vattimo's conception of hermeneutic *praxis*. On the one hand, whilst hermeneutic weakening moves towards the ideals of an emancipated rational society free of alienation, the very hermeneutic practices which seek to realise those ideals will inevitably problematise them. The viability of Vattimo's emancipatory hermeneutics of *praxis* depends on how and to what extent this tension can positively negotiated without engendering the disillusionment and despair that Nietzsche foresaw as the destiny for such projects.

However, there remains much in Vattimo's late appeal to a hermeneutics of *praxis* that is of value. The hermeneutics of *praxis* is of value not because of its aspiration towards a social enlightenment but because of the points where interpretive practices fail. Only by participation in the unrealisable practices of hermeneutics can we be brought to see beyond our immediate horizons and be forced to confront the unexpected. The life of understanding lies in its constant and unpredictable motion: any end-point would inevitably bring an end to the life that depends on such movement. The key point is knowing what hermeneutic *praxis* does, what its effects are. *Praxis* moves to fail better: failure is not refutation, but the uncovering of previously unseen possibilities in the way we grasp our concerns. Here we get to the crux of our argument. It is the adjunctive failures of *praxis* that are key to opening other possibilities for understanding and breaking the complacent habits of expectancy. In this context, pursuing a political *praxis* certainly has value in galvanising a programme for action but hermeneutically speaking the political aims of the *praxis* are secondary to its consequent and unexpected effects. The value of a practice is not what it aims at but what its inevitable failure will give rise to regarding both the emergence of tempering wisdom and the unexpected transformative insight it brings. In this respect, practice makes a difference because its failure allows to understand differently. Emphasising the political aims of a *praxis* must, hermeneutically, bring disappointment. By way of contrast, promoting engagement in a *praxis* because of the indirect changes in understanding it might effect, always holds the promise of educative and spiritual transformation. Which is emphasised by a practice makes, hermeneutically speaking, all the difference.

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