

CONFUCIAN INSIGHTS FOR GIANNI VATTIMO'S  
SECULARIZED RELIGIOUSNESS

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## DEDICATION

This modest achievement is lovingly dedicated to my wife, Vicki. From Oklahoma to Honolulu to Beijing to Kansas, she has journeyed with me and never doubted we would reach the goal. The journey and the destination are sweeter because they have been shared with her.

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## ABSTRACT

As an exercise in comparative philosophy, this study seeks to bring early Confucian philosophy into constructive dialogue with the postmodern religious thought of Italian philosopher, Gianni Vattimo. I interpret classical Confucianism as an immanent worldview that does not appeal to categories of strict transcendence for its meaning, values and religiousness. Confucianism affirms the spirituality of becoming more fully human within the world. Vattimo is a hermeneutical philosopher in the lineage of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. He offers a historicist revision of Christianity that utilizes the metaphor of *kenosis* to signify the emptying of God's transcendence onto the plain of human relationships. Vattimo believes secularization is the inevitable outworking of the Christian message in society.

Vattimo's "weak thought" offers a post-metaphysical, nihilistic account of hermeneutics, religious experience and ethical conduct. He seeks a Gadamerian culture of dialogue in which truth is consensus among language users. Religious experience, for Vattimo, is a feeling of dependence upon the chain of messages received within the biblical tradition. In ethics, Christian charity, as the principle that best serves the reduction of violence, is the limit of secularization.

Confucianism offers constructive insights for Vattimo's secularized religiousness. I develop a Confucian "sagely hermeneutics" that focuses on the key role of wise listeners and interpreters in the community. Religiousness is considered under two rubrics: first, the sense of unity with and participation in cosmic order and, second, human interrelatedness and ethical responsibility. I suggest that an ecological sensibility

based on a Confucian/Daoist vision of human-cosmic unity enables one to see the world as enchanted or sacred. For human relationships, I recommend Confucian role ethics that begins in the family with *xiao* (孝), “family reverence.” In place of charity, I propose *shu* (恕) “putting oneself in another’s place.”

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## INTRODUCTION

The postmodern ethos engenders conversation among interlocutors separated by vast temporal and cultural distances. It is an atmosphere in which formerly disrespected (non-Western) and/or discredited (pre-modern) perspectives are valued as important contributions to the global exchange of ideas. This study seeks to allow voices from ancient China to speak into twenty-first century discussions about what it means to be religious. Specifically, I employ insights from the early Confucian canon to critique the thought of Italian philosopher, Gianni Vattimo. Can Confucians and postmodern European thinkers communicate across the historical and cultural chasms that separate their intellectual milieus? And, if so, what does each have to say to the other? My conviction is that these philosophers share remarkably similar questions and interpretations regarding what it means to be authentically human, regarding the relation of human beings to the cosmos and to what, if anything, lies beyond the natural world.

As an exercise in inter-cultural conversation, this study will apply Mencius' admonition to "look for friends in history." Mencius said,

The best Gentleman in the village is in a position to make friends with the best Gentlemen in other villages; the best Gentleman in a state, with the best Gentlemen in other states; and the best Gentleman in the Empire, with the best Gentlemen in the Empire. And not content with making friends of the best Gentlemen in the Empire, he goes back in time and communes with the ancients. When one reads the poems and writings of the ancients, can it be right not to know something about them as men? Hence one tries to understand the age in which they lived. This can be described as "looking for friends in history."  
(Mencius VB.8)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> D. C. Lau, trans. *Mencius*, (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 158. 孟子謂萬章曰：一鄉之善士，斯友一鄉之善士；一國之善士，斯友一國之善士；天下之善士，斯友天下

Postmodern philosophers like Vattimo, to the extent they are willing to listen to ancient voices, may discover in the early Confucian texts a worldview companionable to their own understandings of life in the world.

As a post-metaphysical expression of religiousness, Vattimo's thought finds significant points of contact with early Confucian spirituality. However, compared to Vattimo's philosophical context, Confucianism, unencumbered by the weight of the metaphysical categories enshrined in Western modernity, offers an environment more congenial to the ideas of religion and ethics without radical transcendence. Early Confucians and Daoists share an immanent cosmology according to which human religious and ethical experience are explained by reference to a cosmic totality of which human beings are a contributory part. There is no transcendent being or realm that exists independently of the natural world. Yet, there is a sense of transcendence when one reflects upon his or her role as a co-creator among the myriad beings of the universe. The Confucian texts, both in their attentiveness to human self-creativity and their emphasis upon social roles and relationships, portray human existence as deeply spiritual or religious. In its "this-worldly," human-centered spirituality, Confucianism offers significant insights for Vattimo's secularized religiousness.

Respectful dialogue between Anglo-European postmodern thought and early Confucian philosophy in China contributes to intercultural understanding in a globalized world. As the West struggles to overcome (*Überwindung*), or, in Vattimo's words, to

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之善士。以友天下之善士為未足，又尚論古之人。頌其詩，讀其書，不知其人，可乎？是以論其世也。是尚友也。



twist, distort or ironically accept (*Verwindung*),<sup>2</sup> its metaphysical inheritance, it stands to benefit from openness to, and dialogue with, non-metaphysical worldviews represented in philosophies of a non-Western provenance. This study is offered as a modest contribution to that conversation.

### **Catalysts for the Study**

Three philosophical and cultural developments serve as catalysts for this study: first, the so-called “return to religion” in Continental philosophy; second, progress in understanding among Western scholars regarding the nature of Confucian religiousness; and, third, continuing advances in the field of comparative philosophy, East and West.

### **The “Religious Turn” in Continental Philosophy**

It is difficult to identify precisely the occasion of the theological turn in Continental philosophy. As early as 1980, there began to be serious inquiry into the religious implications of Heidegger’s thought, particularly his later phase.<sup>3</sup> Following

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<sup>2</sup> See Gianni Vattimo, “Philosophy and the Decline of the West,” in *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, ed. Santiago Zabala, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 27-28. In contrast to Hegel’s dialectical overcoming (*Überwindung*), *Verwindung* is the term employed by Heidegger in his treatment of the West’s relation to its metaphysical lineage. Vattimo takes up and elaborates these terms in many texts and articles.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Richard Kearney & Joseph O’Leary, eds., *Heidegger et la Question De Dieu* (Paris: Grasset, 1980). This volume features papers presented at a conference titled “Heidegger and the Question of God” at the Irish College in Paris in 1980. Participants included Levinas, Derrida, Ricoeur and other “more orthodox Heideggerians.” Of the experience, Kearney writes: “It was an explosive cocktail as it happened; indeed, we unsuspecting Irish were told, after the event, that it was something of a miracle that such a diverse group of philosophers actually sat around the same table to discuss the relationship between phenomenology and God.” [Richard Kearney, *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004) 253-54.]

Heidegger's critique of onto-theology, philosophers began to theorize the possibility of thinking God apart from Being, of freeing religion from the metaphysical categories of philosophy. These explorations reexamined the boundaries that discourses of modernity had employed to demarcate the religious. By probing and questioning conventionally opposed concepts like sacred and secular, revelation and reason, transcendent and immanent and, even, philosophy and theology, continental philosophers sought new ways to account for human religious language and experience.

Heidegger's announcement of the end of metaphysics was, essentially, a restatement of Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God. Each observation was a way of saying that the Enlightenment project had reached an inglorious conclusion. Metaphysical speculation had failed to reveal "the true nature of things" and onto-theology had fashioned a wholly transcendent God—unknowable by finite minds and unaffected by human suffering. This metaphysical God is dead (Nietzsche), but, as Vattimo argues, the metaphysical God is not the God of the Bible (nor, it should be added, is the God of metaphysics the deity portrayed in other religious texts/traditions). The end of metaphysics signals the possibility of the renewal of religious belief.

The end of metaphysics and the death of the moral God have liquidated the philosophical basis of atheism. . . . In modernity, the theoretical reasons for being religious or not were associated with positivist or historicist metaphysics. God was denied either because his existence was not verifiable by scientific experiment or because he was a stage ineluctably overcome in the progressive enlightenment of reason. But the end of metaphysics has now discredited these metanarratives.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 17.

Jacques Derrida's early work on deconstruction ventured no application to questions of religion. His attack on "logocentrism" eschewed any and all attempts to establish an ultimate ground for language and thought. Derrida argued that language is purely self-referential. With no transcendental signifiers, the category "religion" would seem to be precluded. But, though Derrida, in typically enigmatic language, has said: "I rightly pass for an atheist,"<sup>5</sup> statements in his later writings have been seized upon as offering traces of transcendence or quasi-transcendence. In a paper delivered in 1989 under the oblique title, "Force of Law: 'The Mystical Foundation of Authority'," Derrida describes justice as that which is indeconstructible. "Justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible. No more than deconstruction itself, if such a thing exists. Deconstruction is justice."<sup>6</sup> Such language, in the view of some commentators, opens a space for consideration of a transcendent or religious dimension of reality.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 154.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: 'The Mystical Foundation of Authority'," trans. Mary Quaintance, *The Cardozo Law Review* 11 (1990), 945.

<sup>7</sup> But, John Caputo acknowledges the reaction of some against the "religious turn": "'Postmodern theology' has come of age. It now has its own countermovement, a new generation of philosophers marching under the flag of materialism, realism, and anti religion who complain that the theologians are back at their old trick of appropriating attempts to kill off religion in order to make religion stronger. A younger generation has become impatient with Derrida and with all the *soixante-huitaires*, the dead white elders who dominated continental philosophy for nearly half a century, fed up with their so called relativism and postmodern religion. They are tired of hearing about undecidability, religious turns, and the ethics of the other, and they are looking for a more hard-nosed, materialist, realist atheist line of thought. This presents a crisis for continental philosophy whose style of thinking from Kant to the present is being challenged by a new and in my view justified complaint that continental philosophy has been resistant to and defensive about the hard sciences. The crisis is all the more interesting because it has been set off in no small part by the so-called 'religious turn:' if

Derrida himself has welcomed the discussion of religious applications of his thought. When asked about his preference of theme for a colloquium held in Capri in 1994, Derrida, “almost without hesitating,” chose religion.<sup>8</sup> Participants at the colloquium included Derrida, Vattimo, Hans-Georg Gadamer and other philosophers from the Continent.

Postmodern dialogue about religion is characterized by epistemic humility, an appreciation for the provisionality of truth claims and, therefore, a disavowal of the quest for certainty, even about the meaning of the word “religion”. This tone or temperament is exemplified by Derrida’s remarks for the Capri colloquium,

*A hotel, a table around which we speak among friends, almost without any order, without agenda, without order of the day, no watchword save for a single word, the clearest and most obscure: religion. We believe we can pretend to believe—fiduciary act—that we share in some pre-understanding. We act as though we had some common sense of what ‘religion’ means through the languages that we believe . . . we know how to speak. We believe in the minimal trustworthiness of this word. Like Heidegger, concerning what he calls the Faktum of the vocabulary of being (at the beginning of Sein und Zeit), we believe (or believe it is obligatory that) we pre-understand the meaning of this word, if only to be able to question and in order to interrogate ourselves on this subject. Well, . . . nothing is less pre-assured than such a Faktum (in both cases, precisely) and the entire question of religion comes down, perhaps, to this lack of assurance.<sup>9</sup>*

Such language stands in stark contrast to modernity’s epistemological self-confidence in matters of religion.

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religion is where continental philosophy leads us, the argument seems to go, then so much the worse for continental philosophy!” John D. Caputo, “The Return of Anti-Religion: From Radical Atheism to Radical Theology,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11.2 (2011): 32.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, eds. *Religion* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), ix, 38.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” trans. Samuel Weber, in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 3. Italics in original.

In the ensuing years, reticence to speak and write about religion has been replaced by numerous conferences and publications on the subject. Gianni Vattimo has been an enthusiastic participant in this conversation. He has teamed with Derrida, Richard Rorty, John Caputo and others to publish essays and dialogues on religion in postmodern society.<sup>10</sup> Vattimo has also published monographs enunciating his highly original appropriation of Heidegger and Nietzsche for a secularized religious sensibility.<sup>11</sup>

Vattimo's positive affirmation of secularization distinguishes his thought from the mainstream of postmodern religious philosophy. In Derrida, Levinas and Ricoeur (to name only a few), the secularization of Western culture serves to point up the radical alterity of (divine) being. "In general, when it does not stigmatize secularization as an abandonment of the sacred or as a widespread sinful condition, theology recovers secularization only as the manifestation of the radical difference of God and earthly reality."<sup>12</sup> If, in contemporary culture, the recovery of religion is understood "only as openness to the wholly other", this would constitute a return to the God of dogmatic theology and speculative metaphysics. "It is the same old God of metaphysics, conceived of as the ultimate inaccessible ground of religion (to the point of appearing absurd) and warranted by his eminent objectivity, stability, and definitiveness—all traits belonging to

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<sup>10</sup> See the aforementioned volume from the 1994 Capri dialogues; also, Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). This is not to mention numerous other publications in Italian and other languages.

<sup>11</sup> See Gianni Vattimo *Belief*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and David Webb (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999) and Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 36.

the Platonic *ontos on*.”<sup>13</sup> To conceive of God or being in this way is to ignore the Christian inheritance of incarnation.

According to Vattimo’s understanding of incarnation, secularization in the West is the fulfillment of Christianity’s kenotic destiny; it is the outworking in culture of the Christian belief in the Incarnation, “the self-lowering of God.” In this weakening process, the sacred structures of Being central to modernity are dissolved, or de-sacralized. But, as Vattimo argues, this historical development is not antithetical to the Christian message. “If it is the mode in which the weakening of Being realizes itself as the *kenosis* of God, which is the kernel of the history of salvation, secularization shall no longer be conceived of as abandonment of religion but as the paradoxical realization of Being’s religious vocation.”<sup>14</sup> Richard Rorty comments that the idea that secularization is “the constitutive trait of authentic religious experience”,<sup>15</sup> is Vattimo’s “most startling and most important claim”.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, Vattimo’s religious philosophy favors immanence over transcendence and human inter-relationship over divine-human dualism. Later chapters will consider the implications of Vattimo’s views on secularization for ethical and religious experience. It is Vattimo’s immanent conception of Being that situates him as a productive dialogue partner with the Confucian tradition. Both Vattimo and the Confucian writers believe

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<sup>13</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 38.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>15</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Rorty, “Anticlericalism and Atheism,” in Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 35.

ethical behavior and religious experience are best explained without recourse to categories of strict transcendence.

### **Confucian Religiousness**

What is the nature of Confucian religiousness or spirituality? When compared to highly developed religious systems, or “religions”, Confucianism is conspicuous for its lack of elements common to other world religions, such as beliefs in a transcendent deity or deities, spirits and afterlife, sacred scriptures, vocational clergy or priesthood, and organized religious gatherings. Nevertheless, upon examining Confucian texts, some of the first European investigators were impressed by what they perceived to be markedly religious content.

The encounter of seventeenth century Jesuit missionaries with Confucianism and the ensuing confusion about the religious content of that tradition are well documented.<sup>17</sup> The Jesuits were the first (though certainly not the last) to interpret Confucian classics through a Western Judeo-Christian cultural lens. Western interpreters, bringing to their study of the Confucian texts a conception of religion shaped by their European context, imposed their own criteria of religiousness upon the texts and/or were blind to the (non-Western) religious sensibilities that suffuse Confucian thought.

For example, the Jesuits argued that Song-Ming Confucianism was a corruption of classical Confucian teaching. They observed that Confucianism, in its interaction with, and response to, Buddhism, had incorporated concepts alien to Confucian origins.

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Lionel Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions & Universal Civilization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997) and D. E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989).

This Jesuit strategy was motivated, in part, by the conviction that the early Confucian corpus contained traces of monotheism, natural religion and ethical teachings congenial to Christian morality. The missionaries were anxious to develop these areas of “common ground” for the purpose of extending the Roman Catholic faith. The Jesuit interpretation of Confucianism, and Chinese culture generally, was transmitted back to Europe by way of correspondence, official reports and translations of Chinese literature. Thus the popular image of Confucius as an exotic “pre-Christian” sage came to be embedded in the consciousness of the West.<sup>18</sup>

The tendency to interpret “the other” according to one’s familiar categories is not confined to the encounter of the West with Chinese culture and philosophy. But this proclivity, with regard to the Confucian tradition, has been astonishingly persistent, even down to contemporary translation of, and commentary on, Confucian texts. David Hall and Roger Ames comment on this phenomenon:

Current Western understandings of Confucius are the consequence of the mostly unconscious importation of philosophical and theological assumptions into primary translations that have served to introduce Confucius’ thinking to the West. These assumptions are associated with the mainstream of the Anglo-European classical tradition. In point of fact, . . . these assumptions have seriously distorted the thinking of Confucius.<sup>19</sup>

For example, when the Chinese character 天 (tian) is translated “heaven”, Western readers naturally read into the translation Judeo-Christian conceptions of the spiritual realm where God dwells. When 神 (*shen*) and 鬼 (*gui*) are translated,

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<sup>18</sup> See Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*, c. 2, “There and Back Again: The Jesuits and Their Texts in China and Europe,” 77-133.

<sup>19</sup> David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 7-8.



respectively, “god” or “deity” and “spirit” or “ghost”, a similar importation of Western meanings is difficult to avoid. Such mistranslations are reflective of eisegesis on a deeper level—the reading into Chinese texts Western notions of transcendence and a dualistic view of matter and spirit.

This study relies upon the growing body of scholarship that seeks to understand the early Confucian corpus within its native context, letting the texts speak their own distinctive religious language. In her introduction to the two-volume collection of essays, *Confucian Spirituality*, Mary Evelyn Tucker states:

The art of Confucian spirituality might be described as discovering one’s cosmological being amidst daily affairs. For the Confucian the ordinary is the locus of the extraordinary; the secular is the sacred; the transcendent is in the immanent. What distinguishes Confucian spirituality among the world’s religious traditions is an all-encompassing cosmological context that grounds its world-affirming orientation for humanity. This is not a tradition that seeks liberation outside the world, but rather one that affirms the spirituality of becoming more fully human within the world. The way of immanence is the Confucian way.<sup>20</sup>

This immanent cosmological orientation is realized in “the connection of the microcosm of the self to the macrocosm of the universe through spiritual practices of communitarian ethics, self-transformation, and ritual relatedness.”<sup>21</sup>

The essays gathered in *Confucian Spirituality* exhibit the wide diversity of opinion among contemporary scholars regarding transcendence as an element of Confucian thought. Tucker herself allows that “aspects of transcendence are not entirely absent from this tradition.”<sup>22</sup> That the “tradition,” i.e., Confucianism in its historical

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<sup>20</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker, introduction to *Confucian Spirituality*, vol. 1, ed. Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

development and interaction with other religious and philosophical forces, incorporated aspects of transcendence is not a subject of dispute. The debate centers, rather, on the question regarding what role, if any, transcendence plays in the classical texts of Confucianism. This question is central to any discussion of Confucian religiousness and will be explored in this paper. But even if one concludes that early Confucian texts are devoid of the notion of radical transcendence, this judgment does not preclude the possibility of a profound religiousness or spirituality.

### **Comparative Philosophy, East & West**

The field of comparative philosophy has undergone an evolution from an early unsophisticated ethnocentrism—“the West/the rest”—to a more sensitive, mutually respectful, dialogue among diverse traditions. This process has required Western thinkers to master new skills in listening, suspending judgment and opening themselves to unfamiliar, yet richly productive, new paradigms. When Eliot Deutsch was invited to serve as editor for *Blackwell's Companion to World Philosophies*, he initially declined the invitation, stating: “The whole idea simply betrayed the sort of ‘orientalism’ that comparative philosophy has for some time striven to overcome—by and large successfully. This ‘orientalism’ presumed that all philosophical traditions that were not defined as Western constituted an identifiable something simply in virtue of their being non-Western.”<sup>23</sup>

When Deutsch finally consented to work on the volume, he invited contributors from Chinese, Indian, African, Islamic, Buddhist and Polynesian traditions. This list is,

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<sup>23</sup> Eliot Deutsch, “Preface,” in *A Companion to World Philosophies*, ed. Eliot Deutsch and Ron Bontekoe (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), xii.

by no means, inclusive of all perspectives. But the objective was to provide a sampling of non-Western philosophical writings from a broad diversity of indigenous sources. He described the project to prospective contributors as follows:

It has become increasingly evident to many teachers and students of philosophy as well as to general readers that philosophy is not the exclusive province of the West; that indeed other traditions have a depth and range comparable to Western thought and exhibit distinctive features, the knowledge of which can enrich philosophical understanding and creativity wherever it occurs.<sup>24</sup>

Of course, cultural chauvinism is not just a Western vice, but a universal temptation. Intercultural understanding occurs only when each investigator seeks a perspective not limited to his or her native context. “One’s primary concern in the exploration of other traditions ought not to be that of simply finding more of oneself and what is familiar to one, but of learning about other possibilities of philosophical experience that can be opened up to one through cross-cultural encounter.”<sup>25</sup>

The culture of dialogue befitting postmodern intercultural relationships is a focus of Vattimo’s weak thought. The dissolution of strong metaphysical structures in Western philosophy should be accompanied by an attitude of openness and hospitality toward previously undervalued peoples and traditions. “Hospitality” in this context refers to the role of “listener” that Western participants are called to assume in the intercultural conversation. This is one of the implications of globalization for philosophical inquiry. If globalization is conceived negatively as Westernization or the ineluctable spread of capitalist economics, it will be nothing more than an insidious new manifestation of Western cultural imperialism. But if, among the multiple meanings of globalization, it is

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<sup>24</sup> Deutsch, “Preface,” xii.

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

understood to signify the unprecedented coming-together of ethnic and religious cultures in both geographical and cyber space, then new possibilities emerge for productive intercultural/interreligious dialogue. It is also evident that the pressures of globalization can result in antagonism and violence from perceived or real threats to ethnic and religious identities. This dangerous potential consequence serves as an impetus to intercultural dialogue and comparative studies in all fields.

As a metaphor for the cultural and religious pluralism of the world, Vattimo offers “Babel”—the biblical story of God imposing mutually unintelligible languages upon human society, thereby shattering the possibility of unified endeavor. Babel is the postmodern condition—the loss of a center, in favor of multiple, irreducible pictures of the world.<sup>26</sup> Whereas, in the past, Christianity sought to resolve intercultural conflicts through the imposition of its worldview, the erosion of its universalizing tendency means it can no longer present itself in this way.<sup>27</sup> Echoing Deutsch’s observation, Vattimo calls for Christianity to place itself in a cultural dialogue as an interlocutor with equal rights in relation to other cultures. He writes:

The postmodern dissolution of metanarratives (to use Lyotard’s expression)—the idea that the universality of reason characteristic of modernity has been discredited—leads Christianity to see itself as merely an internal element in the conflict among cultures, religions, and worldviews. . . . The condition for any authentic dialogue is that every interlocutor assume explicitly his own involvement by acknowledging to himself and to the other interlocutor his own prejudices, or more generally his own identity, without assuming at the outset that he knows more about the subject matter or that he might lead the dialogue toward predictable outcomes he knows in advance to be “true”.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 80.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 98-99.

Unfortunately, though Vattimo argues that the irreducible pluralism of human society compels us to seek understanding through dialogue, he has not devoted himself to the investigation of non-Western sources. In recent years, Vattimo has been a frequent speaker at conferences in Asia and at the 2005 East-West Philosophers' Conference at the University of Hawaii.<sup>29</sup> By his own admission, he comes to these events as one uninitiated in the fundamentals of Asian philosophy. Though he is an appreciative and open-minded interlocutor, his writings continue to reflect a startling bias toward philosophy as the product of Western civilization. This deficiency in Vattimo's thought, and the tendency toward his own brand of cultural chauvinism, will be treated later in this study.

### **Voices in the Conversation**

This paper is an experiment in cross-cultural, inter-textual conversation. The participants in the dialogue speak out of contexts so different as to seem, at points, incommensurable. Yet the exigencies of their times, both socio-politically and with regard to religious and philosophical developments, evoked from them strikingly similar observations upon the human condition and about what makes for meaningful human existence. A brief introduction to the voices involved in the conversation is in order.

#### **Classical Confucianism**

The Confucian side of the dialogue includes Master Kong himself, whose sayings are collected in the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), and successors in the Ru school whose

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<sup>29</sup> For example, the 2005 Beijing Forum (with Tu Weiming) and the Centenary of Tohoku University in Sendai, Japan, in 2006.

writings extend and amplify themes of Confucius' sayings. These core texts include the *Da Xue* (大學), the *Zhongyong* (中庸) and the writings of Mencius and Xunzi. While reflecting a lively diversity of views on many subjects, these texts are accepted as the classical corpus of Confucian thought, bound together by their common emphasis upon self-cultivation. Benjamin Schwartz comments that this emphasis is what distinguished the Confucian writings from the “five classics” inherited by the Ru.<sup>30</sup> He writes: “What is it that Chu Hsi and others will find in these texts? I would suggest that it is precisely support for the focus on inner cultivation—on the task of ‘making oneself good’ through constant self-scrutiny—a focus which they do not find in the five classics taken by themselves.”<sup>31</sup>

The lifetimes of the reputed authors of the Confucian core texts stretch from Confucius' birth in 551 BCE to the death of Xunzi sometime after 238 BCE. The authorship of the *Da Xue* and *Zhongyong* is not clearly established. But the various theories about their date, composition and possible revisions do not affect the settled status of these texts within the Confucian canon. In contrast, the Xunzi was not accorded canonical status for many centuries. Though a staunch defender of the Confucian way, Xunzi differed with Mencius in his estimation of human character. Mencius had emphasized that human beings were naturally good and needed cultivation to prevent degeneration toward evil. But Xunzi argued that education was necessary to overcome

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<sup>30</sup> The “five classics” include the *Chun-Qiu* 春秋 (*Spring and Autumn Annals*), the *Yi Jing* 易經 (*Book of Changes*), the *Shi Jing* 詩經 (*Book of Songs*), the *Li Ji* 禮記 (*Record of Rites*) and the *Shu Jing* 書經 (*Book of Documents*).

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1985), 405.

the naturally evil tendencies of human nature. When Mencius' position was affirmed as Confucian orthodoxy, the *Xunzi* was relegated to secondary status.<sup>32</sup> This judgment was formalized in the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE when Zhu Xi selected the Four Books (*Si Shu*, 四書), establishing them as the core curriculum for literate education and the basis for civil service examinations for 600 years.<sup>33</sup>

Confucius and his successors were absorbed in the quest for the meaning of human existence in the world. The larger cosmos and the ways of nature were not unimportant to them; but instead of giving their time to speculation about the natural world, they focused on ways to achieve harmonious and flourishing human relationships. A well-ordered community begins with the individual whose life is well ordered; therefore, self-cultivation is the vocation of every person. The love of study (*hao xue* 好學) is required of all who would advance from pettiness to spaciousness. In Confucius' time there was no academia in the modern sense of the term in which teachers could pursue their research and instruct classes of students. So Confucius founded his own "academy" in his home state of Lu where, in dialogue with students and scholars, he refined his humanistic thought. Known as China's "first teacher" (*xian shi* 先師), Confucius was reputed to have had thousands of students. This is surely a hagiographic embellishment, as Confucius was not especially famous during his lifetime. But we

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<sup>32</sup> Burton Watson, "Introduction to Hsün Tzu," in Burton Watson, trans. *Basic Writings of Mo Tzu, Hsün Tzu, and Han Fei Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 4-5.

<sup>33</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 589.

know that he had many students under his private tutelage and that some of them became influential in their own right.<sup>34</sup>

Concerned as he was with the conduct of individual and corporate human affairs, Confucius was anxious to find men of influence who would apply his philosophy in a program for constructive social and political change. At the time, China was fragmented into fourteen independent states competing for supremacy over the fertile plains of the Yellow River basin. The legendary peace of the Zhou period had disintegrated some two centuries before Confucius' birth. The lost values and harmony of the Zhou, enshrined in the songs of the *Shi Jing*, were what Master Kong aspired to see reinstated through the recovery of the *dao*. To this end, he sought out roles of public service; but he only held minor offices in the court of Lu. He once served as police commissioner, but after being insulted in the sacrificial rituals of the court, resigned and became an itinerant counselor, offering advice to officials in neighboring states.<sup>35</sup> But Confucius was not seeking the political advancement of one kingdom at the expense of others. His vision was for the wider peace that would result from restoration of the *dao* and extend to all humanity.

Confucius found within his own state all the violations of the normative order which so agitated his soul. He spent much time in the neighboring states of Cheng, Ch'en, Ts'ai, and Ch'i, seeking opportunities for public service and was everywhere frustrated. While loyal to his state, his professed "ideal" ambition, like that of many of the wandering intellectuals of the Warring States period which followed, was to advise princes on how to establish order within their own states as well as within the entire civilized world . . . However enfeebled the actual dynasty became, the tradition of the universal ecumene did not fade away.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Fung Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Dirk Bodde (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 39.

<sup>35</sup> Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 4.

<sup>36</sup> Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, 59-60.



The salient point for this study is that Confucius' philosophy was eminently practical. Its validation required that it be tested in actual human relations—through application in individual self-cultivation and community relationships. The ethical demand of his philosophy compelled Confucius to seek arenas where his thought could be embodied in practice. That he failed in this quest was certainly a grievous disappointment to him at the end of his life. It would be nearly 300 years after his death, during the Han Dynasty, that Confucius would be elevated to the status of cultural hero and China's "First Teacher".

The successors to Confucius continued their master's political activism. The texts in the classical corpus were composed during the Warring States period, before the unifying efforts of the Qin emperor and the longer peace of the Han. These practical philosophers were understandably preoccupied with the need to quell anarchy and restore order in the Middle Kingdom. Mencius was a "counsellor of the princes".<sup>37</sup> The seven books of the Mencius are largely the account of his interactions with the ruling authorities of several states—his advice to them and his estimation of their characters. Like Confucius, his historical mentor, Mencius retired from active life knowing that his influence upon the public affairs of his time had been negligible. Likewise, Xunzi included in his writings treatises on military affairs and the appropriate conduct for rulers. He served for a time as magistrate of a region in the state of Ch'u, but when the prime minister who appointed him was assassinated, Xunzi disappeared from public life.<sup>38</sup> For these Ru thinkers, a common pattern is observed: philosophers living in times of war and

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<sup>37</sup> James Legge, trans. *The Works of Mencius* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 23.

<sup>38</sup> Watson, "Hsün Tzu," 2.

disintegration seek the renewal of the harmonious order they believe was embodied in the Zhou period; failing to influence political rulers, they retire from public life with a sense of foreboding about the future; their philosophical achievements lie buried like gems to be discovered and treasured in a later age.

### **Gianni Vattimo, 1936—**

The postmodern philosopher selected for critique, Gianni Vattimo, has spent nearly his entire life in Turin, Italy.<sup>39</sup> He was born there in 1936, his father a policeman who died of pneumonia when Gianni was only a year old and his mother a tailor who worked at home. He attended Catholic schools and, from age twelve, went to mass each morning to receive communion. Vattimo became deeply involved in the Catholic Church, serving during his high-school years as a diocesan representative of the Student Movement's Catholic Action Group. Vattimo's interest in philosophy grew out of his desire to wed religion with political action, a theme that has remained consistent throughout his philosophical career. From his earliest involvement, he was a left-leaning political thinker, supporting the Christian Democratic Party and actively lobbying for national policy to shift toward social justice and the labor unions.

Vattimo's philosophical career began while he was still in his teens with his introduction to Umberto Eco. Eco was four years older than Vattimo and when the two met, Eco was at university studying with Luigi Pareyson, the noted Italian hermeneutic philosopher. Eco's introduction of Vattimo to Pareyson initiated a long and close

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<sup>39</sup> This biographical sketch is drawn from Santiago Zabala, "Introduction: Gianni Vattimo and Weak Philosophy" in *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, ed. Santiago Zabala (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2007), 3-34.

philosophical partnership that left an indelible stamp on all of Vattimo's thought.

Vattimo studied under Pareyson at the University of Turin and, after graduation, became Pareyson's research assistant. It was on Pareyson's insistence that Vattimo traveled to Heidelberg to study with Hans-Georg Gadamer in the early 1960's. (Vattimo translated Gadamer's *Truth and Method* into Italian.) After completion of his Ph.D. thesis, "Being, History and Language in Heidegger", Vattimo returned to the University of Turin in 1964 as adjunct professor of aesthetics.

During his distinguished career at Turin, Vattimo advanced to full professorship in 1966, succeeded Pareyson as the chair of aesthetics in 1974, and also served for many years as dean of the faculty. Through the decades of the 1970's and 1980's, Vattimo published a book nearly every year. He produced volumes on hermeneutics, aesthetics, Nietzsche and Heidegger. From the early 1980's, Vattimo concentrated on developing his notion of "weak thought". The impetus for this direction in his thinking came from two sources: the violent metaphysical rhetoric he observed in the letters of arrested Italian student activists in the late 1960s and Heidegger's concept of "ontological difference," which demonstrates the impossibility of an absolute philosophical foundation.

Commenting on this aspect of Vattimo's intellectual development, Santiago Zabala states: "The history of human emancipation as a progressive dissolution of violence and dogmas is the widest definition we can give of weak thought."<sup>40</sup>

In 1996, with the publication of *Credere di Credere*, Vattimo turns his attention to questions of religion. The volume, translated into English in 1998 with the title, *Belief*, is written in the first person and comprises Vattimo's reflections on his own "return to

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<sup>40</sup> Zabala, "Introduction," 18.

religion” as it mirrors that return in Western culture at large. The Italian title is best translated “I believe that I believe” or “believing that one believes”. The phraseology carries the sense of weakness that Vattimo thinks should characterize all religious affirmations in the post-metaphysical era.

In a manner reminiscent of the Confucian sages, Vattimo’s philosophical temperament has consistently moved him toward political activism. Beginning with his time as a teenager in the Student Movement’s Catholic Action Group, Vattimo has continually explored the application of his philosophical theories to public policy. Following the 1974 publication of his study on Nietzsche, *Il Soggetto e la Maschera (The Subject and Its Mask: Nietzsche and the Problem of Liberation)*, he was involved in various leftist political projects. But in the early 1990’s Vattimo became more intensely engaged in the *Tangentopoli* (“bribe city”) movement aimed at rooting out corruption in Italian politics. He became a regular contributor of op-ed pieces to Italy’s major newspapers and was an outspoken critic of Silvio Berlusconi’s regime from its inception.

In 1999, Vattimo declined an invitation from his party to run for the office of mayor of Turin, choosing instead to seek a seat in the parliament of the new European Union. He was elected and served five years in the EU Parliament, helping to draft the first constitution of that body. He served on the two EU commissions and the inter-parliamentary delegation to China. In his work on the EU constitution, Vattimo opposed the inclusion of language referencing Europe’s “Christian heritage.” Such language, supported mainly by Vatican and other Italian Catholic leaders, would have been a denial of the pluralism and secularism of Europe, Vattimo argued. He believes that this secularism is the outworking of Christian values. It is the charity demanded by the

Christian gospel that leads to inclusiveness, even of non-Christian traditions. To identify Europe as Christian would be to alienate believers in other religions within Europe and make it more difficult in the future for Muslim nations to consider membership in the EU.

Throughout his career, Vattimo's political activity has aimed toward building relationships and policies that are expressive of weak thought. He believes that foundationalism and strong metaphysical structures lead to violence and oppression. When one party possesses "the truth", its inclination is to impose its worldview upon others, even resorting to coercion. He says, "The real enemy of liberty is the person who thinks she can and should preach final and definitive truth."<sup>41</sup> "In general, a democratic regime needs a non-objective-metaphysical conception of truth; otherwise, it immediately becomes an authoritarian regime."<sup>42</sup> Weak thought finds expression in democratic structures that give a voice to all within the political community, not just the majority or the party holding power. This is the secularized demonstration of Christian charity and hospitality.

Vattimo's philosophical project may be described as seeking a new vocabulary and conversation about ethics, politics and religious belief that are not based on metaphysical categories or epistemological foundations. He is a religious philosopher seeking a postmodern version of religion in which metaphysical structures are weakened in order to make room for authentic faith. His expression of Christian faith does not comport with any currently orthodox version of Christianity—Roman Catholic or

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<sup>41</sup> Vattimo, "Liberty and Peace in the Postmodern Condition," in *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 56.

<sup>42</sup> Vattimo, "The Age of Interpretation" in Richard Rorty & Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, 50.

Protestant. But that is not of concern to Vattimo. He writes, “For me the authenticity of Christianity lies in modern-liberal-socialist-democratic thought, in defiance of all the popes and cardinals. Postmodern nihilism is the up-to-date form of Christianity.”<sup>43</sup> This is Vattimo’s provocative and novel contribution to the postmodern religious conversation. He believes that nihilism means emancipation and that secularization is the fulfillment of Christian gospel.

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<sup>43</sup> Gianni Vattimo, with Piergiorgio Paterlini, *Not Being God: A Collaborative Autobiography*, [2008] trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 152.

## CHAPTER 1. HERMENEUTICS

### Hermeneutical Character of the Study

#### Hermeneutical Ethos of Postmodern Philosophy

This study is hermeneutical in four important ways. First, and generally, I acknowledge that the ethos of philosophy in the current era is inescapably hermeneutical. Globalization and intercultural exchange have brought to light conflictual interpretations that extend far beyond textual hermeneutics to include all the ways of being in the world experienced by human beings.

Hans-Georg Gadamer's objective in *Truth and Method* is to liberate the quest for truth from its confinement to scientific method and to expand the field of hermeneutics beyond its narrow application to the interpretation of written texts. According to Gadamer, the methodological approach is important for gaining quantifiable results in the natural sciences. But the human sciences, or human experience in general, is not amenable to the experimental method employed in the hard sciences. Gadamer writes: "The understanding and the interpretation of texts is not merely a concern of science, but obviously belongs to human experience of the world in general. . . . The phenomenon of understanding . . . pervades all human relations to the world."<sup>44</sup> Following Heidegger, Gadamer works from the premise that all human knowledge is historically conditioned. Even the scientific method, with its laboratory air of cool objectivity, does not provide an unprejudiced vantage point from which to evaluate evidence. In every field of inquiry, persons come to the challenge of interpretation with sets of pre-understandings, conscious

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<sup>44</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised edition, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum Books, 1989), 1.

or unconscious, that color their views of all experience in the world. Denial or ignorance of the effect of history leads to a deficient understanding of the phenomena under examination. As Gadamer states, “When a naïve faith in scientific method denies the existence of effective history, there can be an actual deformation of knowledge. We are familiar with this from the history of science, where it appears as the irrefutable proof of something that is obviously false.”<sup>45</sup> The effect of history is operative even when human beings are not conscious of it. But human understanding advances in relation to its awareness of historical effect, or, in other words, consciousness of the hermeneutical situation, which manifests itself in “*finding the right questions to ask*.”<sup>46</sup>

Enlightenment epistemology operated under the assumption that pure objectivity is attainable, but only if the prejudices and biases of the observer are eliminated. Gadamer works to refute the arguments for unmixed objectivity and to rehabilitate the notion of prejudice. “The recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust. . . . And there is one prejudice of the Enlightenment that defines its essence: the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power.”<sup>47</sup> When Heidegger speaks of tradition, he employs the term, *Überlieferung*, which should be understood not as a rigidly determining influence, but as “the active inheritance of the past as an open possibility.”<sup>48</sup> As Gregory Fried observes, “*Überlieferung* means ‘tradition’ in German, but we must hear this word broadly, not just

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<sup>45</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 301. Italics in original.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 272-3.

<sup>48</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, trans. David Webb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 90.



as ‘inherited customs.’ Literally a delivering over, a handing down, the *Überlieferung* passes on the existential horizons of Dasein’s having-been.”<sup>49</sup>

The Enlightenment project sought truth by asking, “What is the person making of her world?” The assumption was that the subject, unswayed by personal interests or cultural biases, could obtain pure empirical data through scientific observation and reason her way to self-evident truths by deductive syllogism. But the hermeneutical attitude asks, “What is her world making of the person?” The hermeneutical approach recognizes that all observation and interpretation are embedded in the cultural-historical milieu of the subject. Philosophical inquiry that is not cognizant of the roles of history, pre-understanding and prejudice is overlooking the primary forces that shape one’s conception of the world.

It is in this Gadamerian hermeneutical spirit that I seek the fusion of multiple horizons. The interlocutors in this conversation will be considered not as discrete voices disconnected from their respective historical moments, enunciating a “view from nowhere,” but as products of their cultures, philosophizing within inherited intellectual paradigms. The historicity of my own viewpoint is also acknowledged, not as negative limitation, but as the context that gives shape to my perspective on both the ancient Chinese and the postmodern worlds. As I encounter these texts, I seek to be aware of the ways my own prejudices bring certain words and passages to the foreground and cause me to favor one interpretation over another when the meaning is not immediately apparent.

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<sup>49</sup> Gregory Fried, *Heidegger’s Polemos: From Being to Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 102.

In his introduction to Gadamer's *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, David E. Linge describes the phenomenon of encounter with texts alien to the reader's milieu.

It is vitally important to recognize that the hermeneutical phenomenon encompasses both the alien that we strive to understand and the familiar world that we already understand. The familiar horizons of the interpreter's world . . . are as integral a part of the event of understanding as are the explicit procedures by which he [or she] assimilates the alien object. Such horizons constitute the interpreter's own immediate participation in traditions that are not themselves the object of understanding but the condition of its occurrence.<sup>50</sup>

Accordingly, the texts and passages an interpreter chooses to bring forward, the questions asked of those texts and the conclusions drawn from hermeneutical investigation are all influenced by one's historically conditioned perspective.

### **Vattimo as Hermeneutical Philosopher**

The second reason this study is necessarily hermeneutical is that it focuses on the philosophy of Gianni Vattimo who is a hermeneutical philosopher in the lineage of Martin Heidegger, Luigi Pareyson and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Vattimo calls hermeneutics the new "*koiné*" of intellectual dialogue. In his view, the demise of the enlightenment paradigm of knowledge and the recognition of the irreducible pluralism of world cultures give rise to an environment in which hermeneutics becomes a universal philosophical language. He writes: "In this role of *koiné*, hermeneutics comprises two aspects: the abandonment of metaphysical foundationalism (first philosophy, philosophy concerning principles, or concerning critical awareness of the a priori conditions of

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<sup>50</sup> David E. Linge, introduction to *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, by Hans-Georg Gadamer, trans. & ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), xii.

knowledge) and a concept of the world as conflict of interpretations.”<sup>51</sup> As common language or attitude, hermeneutics is the precursor to all philosophical thought in a post-metaphysical age.

Vattimo speaks often of “the nihilistic vocation of hermeneutics,”<sup>52</sup> enunciating an ironically positive view of nihilism. In his view, philosophical hermeneutics since Nietzsche has developed in line with the anti-foundational, anti-metaphysical trend of postmodern thought, according to which there is no unfiltered contact with “the world as it is”, no certainty based on self-evident truths and no god to reveal what is otherwise hidden. Nietzsche’s declaration, “There are no facts, only interpretations,”<sup>53</sup> reduces truth claims to provisional understandings relative to finite perspectives on the question at hand. Vattimo embraces the nihilistic consequences of post-metaphysical thought and sees nihilism not as a cause for meaninglessness and anomie, but as a source of humanity and emancipation.

In his exposition of the liberating vocation of nihilism, Vattimo first makes it clear that to say, “there are no facts, only interpretations,” is itself an interpretation. The truth of hermeneutics cannot be posited as a new, more accurate metaphysical description of the way things are. To do so would be to lapse into the discredited language of objective mirroring. Rather, hermeneutics is a philosophical theory of the interpretive character of every experience of truth—a theory itself subject to the historicity and contingency of all interpretations. Hermeneutical philosophers would agree on the point

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<sup>51</sup> Vattimo, “Hermeneutics and Democracy,” in *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 90.

<sup>52</sup> See Vattimo, “The Nihilistic Vocation of Hermeneutics,” chapter 1 of *Beyond Interpretation*, 1-14.

<sup>53</sup> Friederich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 38.

of the foregoing sentence; all knowers are subject to the dynamics of the hermeneutical circle. But there is marked divergence of opinion as to whether that circle is vicious or not. Brice Wachterhauser refers to this divide as “the hermeneutical fork.”

Stated in the most general terms possible, the hermeneutical fork divides those within the hermeneutical movement who think that hermeneutics, properly understood, implies the demise of traditional philosophy and those who do not. It is a difference between an essentially destructive, debunking program and a critical, constructive program. . . . What I am pointing to here is a division in the hermeneutical or “relativist” camp between those who think that it no longer makes sense to try to clarify such philosophically or rationally normative terms as truth, reason, reality, fact, object, value, good, right, correct, and so forth, and those who think this task is still worth pursuing.<sup>54</sup>

While philosophers like Vattimo and Rorty may follow the more “destructive, debunking” path of hermeneutics, it should not be assumed that the forebears they invoke also believe hermeneutics signals the end of traditional philosophy.

Gadamer, for example, believed that we can have reliable knowledge of the real world. To be sure, human knowledge is finite and fallible, subject to historical and linguistic conditions that relativize all perspectives. But this is not the same as saying that all perspectives are equally valid. As Wachterhauser explains:

While our best justifications are qualified by the fallibilistic awareness that we may be wrong, they are far from arbitrary and even further from an “anything goes” relativism. We can develop, apply, and retest criteria of knowledge that can give us enough reliable evidence or rational assurance to claim in multiple cases that we in fact know something and do not just surmise or opine that it is the case.<sup>55</sup>

Gadamer believed that language is the medium through which we experience our world. The world becomes intelligible as it is framed in the language(s) we think and

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<sup>54</sup> Brice Wachterhauser, “Getting It Right: Relativism, Realism and Truth,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 55.

<sup>55</sup> Wachterhauser, “Getting It Right,” 71.

speak. In *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Gadamer describes the “aspect of linguisticity that operates in all understanding.” He writes, “For language is not only an object in our hands, it is the reservoir of tradition and the medium in and through which we exist and perceive our world.”<sup>56</sup> Again, “[I]n all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own.”<sup>57</sup> And, though our knowledge of the world is mediated through language, for Gadamer, that knowledge makes real contact with the world. The world is intelligible and language is the medium through which we make sense of the world. “[T]he verbal world, in which we live, is not a barrier that prevents knowledge of being in itself, but fundamentally embraces everything in which our insight can be enlarged and deepened.”<sup>58</sup>

Vattimo’s choice for the nihilistic prong of the hermeneutical fork renders his philosophy vulnerable to the charge that it is excessively relativistic. As we will see, Vattimo responds to this charge with varying degrees of persuasiveness. This leads to his second qualification regarding the positive view of nihilism: Vattimo says that, on the one hand, to avoid seeing hermeneutics as a “purely relativistic philosophy of cultural multiplicity,”<sup>59</sup> and, on the other hand, to avoid the relapse into metaphysical description, we must adopt a theory of weakening.

In fact if hermeneutics is not accepted as a comfortable meta-theory of the universality of interpretive phenomena, as a sort of view from nowhere of the perennial conflict, or play, of interpretations, the (only, I believe) alternative is to think the philosophy of interpretation as the final stage in a series of events (theories, vast social and cultural transformations, technologies and scientific

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<sup>56</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. & ed. David E. Linge, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 29.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>58</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 444.

<sup>59</sup> Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 9.

‘discoveries’), as the conclusion of a history we feel unable to tell (interpret) except in the terms of nihilism that we find for the first time in Nietzsche.<sup>60</sup>

This is the history of the weakening, or *Verwindung*, of Being, elucidated by Heidegger. But Vattimo admits to a subversive reading of Heidegger on this point. Most, including Heidegger himself, understand his theory of the overcoming of metaphysics as an effort “somehow to prepare a ‘return of Being’, perhaps in the form of an apophatic, negative, mystical ontology.” Vattimo prefers what he calls “the leftist reading of Heidegger,” that of “the history of Being as the story of a ‘long goodbye’, of an interminable weakening of Being. In this case the overcoming of Being is understood only as a recollection of the oblivion of Being, never as making Being present again, not even as a term that always lies beyond every formulation.”<sup>61</sup> The relevant implication for hermeneutics is that we have made a “transition from the metaphysics of presence to the ontology of provenance”: “If one can speak of Being . . . , it must be sought at the level of those inherited openings (Heidegger also says: in language, which is the house of Being), within which Dasein, man, is always already thrown into its provenance. This, above all, is the nihilistic meaning of hermeneutics.”<sup>62</sup>

The liberty Vattimo takes with this minority interpretation of Heidegger illustrates the creative, constructive possibilities of the hermeneutical approach to texts. The historicity and thrust of Vattimo’s thought, while not blinding him to the mainstream interpretation of “the overcoming of metaphysics,” at the same time enables him to discover in Heidegger the potential for alternative readings. Whether or not such

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<sup>60</sup> Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 8.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 13

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

readings constitute a betrayal of Heidegger's intention is an unanswerable question. Once written, the text stands on its own, offering interpretive possibilities, some of which are conspicuous and some dormant. To draw forth from a text meanings and potentialities previously undiscovered or undeveloped is the interpreter's inescapable challenge and burden. If previous interpretations are viewed without question as finally authoritative, the reader has abdicated the responsibility to apply his or her pre-understandings and to see the text in the light of the history and genealogy of interpretation in which it is received. Umberto Eco calls this accumulation of understanding "the cultural encyclopedia comprehending a given language and the series of the previous interpretations of the same text."<sup>63</sup>

Finally, the reason nihilism should be welcomed, according to Vattimo, is because it frees human beings from the violence imposed by metaphysical categories and the hegemonic truth claims of one culture seeking to dominate others. Vattimo writes:

It is the dissolution of foundations (in which we can also recognize the moment of transition from the modern to the postmodern) that brings freedom. . . . Only that which sets you free is truth, and thus, above all else, the "discovery" that there are no ultimate foundations before which our freedom must come to a halt, as authorities of every sort, wishing to command in the name of these ultimate structures, have always tried to make us believe.<sup>64</sup>

Hermeneutics is the philosophical stance that fittingly reflects the pluralism of modern societies. Vattimo agrees with Rorty's comment that "the hermeneutical or Gadamerian attitude is in the intellectual world what democracy is in the political world."<sup>65</sup> The hermeneutical stance makes space for divergent points of view and, while consensus may

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<sup>63</sup> Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation: Tanner Lectures in Human Values*, ed. Stephan Collini (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 143.

<sup>64</sup> Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, xxvi.

<sup>65</sup> Rorty, Vattimo & Zabala, *The Future of Religion*, 74.

be achieved among a majority of interlocutors in a community of dialogue, does not entitle the majority to seek intellectual hegemony.

### **Confucianism as Hermeneutical Philosophy**

The third way in which this study is hermeneutical relates to the tradition of Confucian textual interpretation. The insights of hermeneutical philosophy, once accepted as valid, must be applied to all the texts and philosophical inquiry of every historical age, even those periods dominated by strong metaphysical structures. This is not to say that all interpretation is subject to the nihilistic implications of postmodern hermeneutics enunciated by Vattimo. Rather, it is a recognition of the epistemological limits that constrain philosophical endeavor. Accordingly, we should read the early Confucian corpus with an eye to locate hermeneutical elements.

In the Chinese philosophical milieu, it is unusual to find thinkers who claim to have forged new intellectual paths; rather, they profess conformity to a tradition. For Confucius, this was expressed in his avowed faithfulness to the values of the former Zhou kings. In turn, successive generations of Confucian scholars claimed to be steadfast expositors of the classical Confucian texts. In spite of these claims of fidelity to the original intent of the authors, the ensuing divergent streams of thought and conflictual interpretations illustrate the hermeneutical challenge even within a conservative tradition like Confucianism. Though Confucius and his successors did not understand their work as hermeneutical in the modern sense of that term, hermeneutical elements are clearly evident in their sayings and writings. I will cite a few examples from *Analects* and *Mencius*.



Confucius claimed that he did not advance new ideas. His life project was to promote restoration of the human morality and societal harmony manifest in the Zhou period (1111-256 BCE). The *Analects* is full of quotations and anecdotes attributed to the Zhou founders: King Wen, King Wu and King Wu's brother, the Duke of Zhou. Though some of his sources are lost to antiquity, Confucius often cites the *Book of Documents* (*Shu Jing* 書經) and the *Book of Songs*, (*Shi Jing* 詩經) for material describing the Zhou royalty and the quality of life under their sagely reigns. In *Analects* 7:1, he says, "I transmit but do not innovate; I am truthful in what I say and devoted to antiquity."<sup>66</sup> (述而不作, 信好古, 竊比於我老彭。 ) But there can be no doubt that Confucius was fully aware of the innovative content of his teachings. His disavowal of *zuo* (作), innovation, must be understood in light of that term's associations with sagehood. As Hall & Ames point out, in both the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) and the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), *zuo* means "to create" and is consistently associated with the Sage.<sup>67</sup> To claim *zuo* would be to aggrandize himself, a temptation Confucius strenuously resisted.

Another *Analects* saying relevant to this discussion is 2.11: "A man is worthy to be a teacher who gets to know what is new by keeping fresh in his mind what he is already familiar with."<sup>68</sup> (溫故而知新, 可以為師矣。 ) Lau's rendering here doesn't fully capture the historical sensibility of the text. The graph, 故, in this context refers not just to "the familiar," but to what is old or established, in the sense of what has gone before.

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<sup>66</sup> D. C. Lau, *The Analects* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1983), 57.

<sup>67</sup> Hall & Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, 259.

<sup>68</sup> Lau, *The Analects*, 13.

Ames and Rosemont translate this verse: “Reviewing the old as a means of realizing the new—such a person can be considered a teacher.”<sup>69</sup> Arthur Waley translates similarly and emphasizes the importance of the character, 溫, in this passage. It carries the sense of “warming up” or “reanimating.” “The business of the teacher is to give fresh life to the Scriptures by reinterpreting them so that they apply to the problems of modern life.” Hence, Waley’s translation, “He who by reanimating the Old can gain knowledge of the New is fit to be a teacher.”<sup>70</sup> As a hermeneutical statement, this quotation highlights the genealogical aspect of understanding. Every new experience or idea must be understood in relation to what has gone before. The “old” comprises the matrix according to which all “new” knowledge is received, interpreted and categorized.

Confucius’ philosophy clearly contains novel ideas not explicit in the texts of which he claims to be an uncreative exegete. For example, in extolling the harmony of the Zhou period and the character of its founders, Confucius presents *ren* (仁) as the integrating virtue required for ethical advancement toward sagehood. (Translators render the term, *ren*, variously as benevolence, love, goodness, humanity and authoritative conduct.) Confucius is a persuasive advocate for the recovery of *ren*. But scholars of Chinese classics are agreed that Confucius’ exposition of *ren* is not so much the recovery of a neglected moral category as it is the discovery of a new, or previously undeveloped, concept in Chinese philosophy. Because Confucius invests *ren* with new content, his followers constantly query him about its meaning. Ames and Rosemont describe this novel element in the *Analects*:

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<sup>69</sup> Ames & Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius*, 78.

<sup>70</sup> Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 90, n. 3.

The fact that Confucius is asked so often what he means by the expression *ren* would suggest that he is reinventing this term for his own purposes, and that those in conversation with him are not comfortable in their understanding of it. Confucius' creative investment of new meaning in *ren* is borne out by a survey of its infrequent, and relatively unimportant usage in the earlier corpus. *Ren* does not occur in the earliest portions of the ancient classics, and only three times in the later parts. This unexceptional usage compares with 105 occurrences in the *Analects* in 58 of the 499 sections.<sup>71</sup>

Wing-tsit Chan states: "The word [*ren*] is not found in the oracle bones. It is found only occasionally in pre-Confucian texts, and in all these cases it denotes the particular virtue of kindness, more especially the kindness of a ruler to his subjects. In Confucius, however, all this is greatly changed."<sup>72</sup> *Ren* as a particular virtue is transformed into a general virtue and becomes the main theme of Confucius' conversations with his interlocutors in *Analects*. In post-*Analects* texts, use of the term *ren* commonly reverts to the particular virtue of kindness or empathy. But, as Edward Slingerland notes, in *Analects*, *ren* is used "in the more general sense of 'Goodness', the overarching virtue of being a perfected human being, which includes such qualities as empathetic understanding (*shu* 恕) or benevolence (*hui* 惠)."<sup>73</sup>

Another pre-Confucian meaning of *ren* relates to "manliness" or one who is a model of strength for his particular tribe. In the *Book of Songs*, *ren* (仁) is an adjective referring to the appearance of a handsome, strong, aristocratic man. "Here come the

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<sup>71</sup> Ames & Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius*, 50.

<sup>72</sup> Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 16. (Contrary to Chan's claim, Ames finds evidence that *ren* is recorded in the oracle bones, but only rarely so. See Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 176.)

<sup>73</sup> Edward Slingerland, "Classical Confucianism: Confucius and the *Lun Yu*," in *History of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Bo Mou (New York: Routledge, 2008), 121.

hounds, ting-a-ling, and their master so handsome and good.”<sup>74</sup> (盧令令，其人美且仁。)

But, Slingerland detects only a faint residue of this meaning in the *Analects*. “One of Confucius’ innovations was to transform this aristocratic, martial ideal into an ethical one: *ren* in the *Analects* refers to a *moral* rather than a physical or martial ideal.”<sup>75</sup> Clearly, Confucius’ immersion in the Five Classics is revealing to him meanings not immediately apparent to others.

Another example of Confucius’ innovation (one that is closely connected with his idea of *ren*) is his revision of the accepted notion of the noble person or *junzi* (君子). Originally, *jun* meant chief, sovereign or ruler.<sup>76</sup> *Junzi* would, therefore, mean “son of a *jun*,” hence the application of this title to those who were of noble birth or sons of high ranking political officials. Confucius, however, is eager to forward the model of the common person who through love of learning and attention to social responsibility advances to a high level of moral achievement. It is not accident of birth, but strenuous self-cultivation, that defines the *junzi*. The prime example of such effort in the *Analects* is Confucius’ favorite disciple, Yan Hui, a student severely lacking in material means. The Master said of him, “How admirable Hui is! Living in a mean dwelling on a bowlful of rice and a ladleful of water is a hardship most men would find intolerable, but Hui does not allow this to affect his joy. How admirable Hui is!” (*Analects* 6.11)<sup>77</sup> Despite

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<sup>74</sup> Arthur Waley, *The Book of Songs: The Ancient Chinese Classic of Poetry* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 81.

<sup>75</sup> Slingerland, “Classical Confucianism,” 121.

<sup>76</sup> R. H. Mathews, *Mathews’ Chinese-English Dictionary*, Revised American Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1943), 241.

<sup>77</sup> Lau, *Analects*, 49. 子曰：賢哉回也！一簞食，一瓢飲，在陋巷。人不堪其憂，回也不改其樂。賢哉回也！

his low socio-economic status, Yan Hui was an accomplished person, as evidenced by his ability to consistently practice *ren*. “The Master said, ‘In his heart for three months at a time Hui does not lapse from benevolence [*ren*]. The others attain benevolence merely by fits and starts.’” (*Analects* 6.7)<sup>78</sup> The practice of *ren* enables a poor commoner to become a “moral aristocrat—an exemplar of ritually correct behavior, ethical courage and noble sentiment.”<sup>79</sup> By investing a familiar term with startling new meaning, Confucius instigates a societal reassessment of what constitutes an admirable life.

These examples from the *Analects* demonstrate the hermeneutical dynamic operative in Confucius’ philosophy. On the basis of Gadamer’s insights, we know that it is not possible to do what Confucius claims to do, that is, simply transmit ideas by rendering an impartial interpretation of texts. Confucius, whether consciously or unconsciously, is doing what all interpreters do; that is, on the basis of his own perspective and pre-understandings, he is extracting from texts ideas and themes that have relevance for his own life and times. His historical context provides the lens through which he “reads” not only the ancient classics, but also the texts and times contemporaneous with his own life. Reflecting upon the crisis of his epoch—the breakdown in civility and moral conduct and the consequent fragmentation of the empire—Confucius looks to the Zhou period and “sees” *ren* in the lives the Zhou royalty, even though *ren* is not explicit in the texts. Meanings that are hidden or latent within the texts are made conspicuous by the exigencies of the historical moment.

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<sup>78</sup> Lau, *Analects*, 49. 子曰：回也，其心三月不違仁，其餘則日月至焉而已矣。

<sup>79</sup> Slingerland, “Classical Confucianism,” 121.

Confucius' innovative interpretations of the Five Classics are not viewed as disingenuous; rather, the First Teacher is revered for having discovered within the familiar textual tradition kernels of ethical substance that provoked an axial breakthrough in China. This is a common pattern in the advance of intellectual ideas. Perceived novelty, upon examination, is revealed to be significantly connected to, and dependent upon, the values and thought forms that precede it. This is not to diminish the possibility and importance of novelty. But in order for innovation to be received, it must be thinkable and translatable in a historical language. The genius of an interpreter like Confucius is that he “read” the times accurately and utilized existing texts and vocabulary to introduce new ideas appropriate to his context.

John Berthrong describes the dual aspect of textual interpretation as diachronic and synchronic. He calls these “self-reflective moments” because neither of them can be undertaken without reference to the perspective and context of the interpreter. “The diachronic moment embraces an appeal to historical sensibility; it searches for the context of the text, the specifics and quirks of character and the vagaries of historical happenstance.” The appeal is to “something like an accurate, objective historical framing of the text in its historical context.”<sup>80</sup> The diachronic aspect places constraints upon subjectivity and seeks to avoid ahistorical reflection or excessive “reading into”.

The second exegetical moment, the synchronic, is that in which the interpreter “divines the meaning of the text in terms of the sensibility of the text itself.”

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<sup>80</sup> John Berthrong, “Weighing the Way: Metaphoric Balance in *Analects* 9:30,” in *Interpretation and Intellectual Change: Chinese Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective*, ed. Ching-I Tu (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005), 4.

If the diachronic moment is incurably historical, the synchronic is philosophical or theological. The synchronic text is a hologram of the whole thought world of the author or of the whole disciplinary community of authors and commentators, as would be the case for someone like Kongzi, who proudly announced that he was a transmitter rather than an innovator. This is the hermeneutical moment as a form of constructive philosophic achievement.<sup>81</sup>

This synchronic, constructive aspect is the Gadamerian fusion of horizons and, in part, explains why textual commentaries often reveal as much or more about the interpreter him/herself than about the historical understanding of the texts under consideration.

### **Hermeneutical Constraints of the Current Study**

The fourth and final way this study is hermeneutical relates to the manner in which I receive the ancient Chinese texts. Accepting that the hermeneutical is the appropriate philosophical attitude with which to enter into conversation among world philosophies, I seek to apply insights from the Confucian tradition to Vattimo's proposal. This is exceedingly complex: my view of the Confucian texts is through interpretive lenses shaped by contemporary scholarship and philosophical concerns alien to the context in which the Chinese classics were composed. Nevertheless, I propose to show strong affinities between Confucian religiousness and Vattimo's secularized religious thought. I agree with the suggestion of Hall & Ames, that a degree of anachronism is necessary and appropriate when seeking to show the relevance of Confucian insights for contemporary philosophical problems.<sup>82</sup> While effort is made to understand the context of a given author's world and the author's original intent, it is acknowledged that interpretation unavoidably involves *eisegesis*, as the interpreter's own temperament,

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<sup>81</sup> Berthrong, "Weighing the Way," 4.

<sup>82</sup> Hall & Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, 195.

worldview and pre-understandings delimit the horizons for the encounter with texts and traditions.

I take as fundamental the hermeneutical insight that an author's original intent is not fully recoverable and, therefore, and most importantly, the understanding of a text is the result of the fusion of horizons—of the text and of the interpreter—that is not identical for any two interpreters, nor for individual interpreters at different points of engagement with a text. Horizons are dynamic, changing over time as persons expand their understanding of their natural and cultural environments. Gadamer defined horizon as

the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons and so forth. . . . A person who has an horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon, whether it is near or far, great or small. Similarly, working out the hermeneutical situation means acquiring the right horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with history.<sup>83</sup>

As horizons are extended to include a more comprehensive understanding of the world, the interpretation of texts, traditions and situations are continually revised, leading to a more productive fusion of horizons.

Though an author's original intent may not be recoverable, this does not mean interpretation can proceed at the whim of the reader. Legitimate interpretations are constrained by scholarly grammatical and historical research, by reasonable consensus within a community of interpreters, and by the genealogy of understanding according to which a text is presented to the reader. The genealogical element is the history of

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<sup>83</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301-02.



interpretation within a given textual tradition that provides one with the vocabulary, questions and paradigmatic understandings that inform new approaches to a text.

In his erudite study of the *Analects* commentarial tradition, *Transmitters and Creators*, John Makeham describes the increasing layers of interpretation confronting students of the text.

[T]he *Analects* comes to us thoroughly mediated by two thousand years of ineluctable commentarial tradition. Without a commentarial context in which flesh is added to the very spare bones of the text, the *Analects* reads largely as a cryptic mixture of parochial injunctions and snatches of dry conversation. It is the commentaries that bring the text to life and lend it definition. The extent to which modern interpreters of the *Analects* are indebted to previous generations of interpreters, although impossible to quantify, is profound; yet only rarely is this legacy explicitly acknowledged. Commentators who believe that they can somehow interpret the *Analects* text without being influenced by earlier interpretations are deluding themselves.<sup>84</sup>

My purpose is to consider and critique Vattimo's thought in the light of Confucian philosophy. Or, to express it in terms more congenial to the postmodern ethos, I hope to draw these voices into constructive conversation. The emphasis, however, will be on discovering ways to improve Vattimo's religious philosophy by applying insights from the Confucian worldview. As the foregoing discussion attests, the conclusions will reveal much about my own interpretive lenses and the ways in which the texts under consideration have been presented to me.

### **Confucian Sagely Hermeneutics**

The search for hermeneutical dynamics within Confucian philosophy inevitably leads to a focus on the sage or *sheng ren* (聖人). The sage embodies the highest level of

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<sup>84</sup> John Makeham, *Transmitters and Creators: Chinese Commentators and Commentaries on the Analects* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), 1-2.

moral, aesthetic and spiritual achievement. In the *Analects*, Confucius confers sage status upon the ancient Zhou kings, Yao and Shun. There are no contemporaries to which he can point as exemplars of sagehood. He laments, “I have no hopes of meeting a sage (聖人). I would be content if I met someone who is a gentleman (君子).” (*Analects* 7.26)<sup>85</sup> Confucius makes no claim to be a sage himself (see *Analects* 7.33, 9.6); it is his followers who later bestow that honorific upon their master.

In the *Analects*, the sage is a ruler who perfectly manifests the virtues of *ren* (仁), *yi* (義), *li* (禮) and *zhi* (知). In so doing, he or she is able to promote harmony in the relationship between human beings and *tian*. Henry Rosemont summarizes the transformational role of the sage:

In addition to possessing all the qualities of the *junzi*, the *sheng* appear to see and feel customs, rituals, and tradition—the *li*—holistically, as defining and integrating the whole of human society, and as defining and integrating as well the human societies of the past and of the future. This seeing and feeling can only be described in our terms (not Confucius’s) as transcendent understanding, the capacity to go beyond the particular time and place in which one lives, coming to a union not only with our contemporaries, but with all those who have preceded us, and all those who will follow; a union, in other words of self and all others, at-one-ment.<sup>86</sup>

### The Etymology of 聖

The etymology of *sheng* (聖) is relevant to the discussion of Confucian hermeneutics. The graph is composed of three parts: an ear (耳), a mouth (口) and

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<sup>85</sup> Lau, *Analects*, 63. 子曰：聖人，吾不得而見之矣；得見君子者，斯可矣。

<sup>86</sup> Henry Rosemont, Jr. “Is There a Universal Path of Spiritual Progress in the Texts of Early Confucianism?” in *Confucian Spirituality*, ed. Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 192.

phonetic component, *cheng* (呈), which means to submit, to show or to appear.<sup>87</sup> In modern usage, *sheng* denotes a thing sacred or holy. In Confucian texts, *sheng* carries the sense of wise or sagacious, hence its application to sagely persons. In his etymological study of *sheng*, Ning Chen cites evidence from Shang oracle bones showing that *sheng* was originally drawn with only the ear and mouth components—sometimes including two mouths next to the ear—suggesting a meaning related to hearing and speaking.<sup>88</sup> If listening and communicating were associated with *sheng*, it is not surprising that, by the time of the Western Zhou period (1045-771 BCE), the signification had evolved to include intelligence and wisdom.<sup>89</sup>

In the writings attributed to Confucius, *sheng* acquires a richer, multivalent usage, but retains its connection with the original sense of listening and speaking. Hall and Ames cite the *Shuowen* lexicon in their description of the sage as both an aural receiver and an oral communicator.<sup>90</sup>

Perhaps most significant in this revised interpretation of *sheng* is that being a sage essentially entails communication: the sage is a master communicator. . . .

The sage is one who knows the nature and conditions of some one or some thing by listening, by “attuning his ear.” Speaking from that condition of attunement his words serve to further the harmonious engagement that true communication both presupposes and effects.<sup>91</sup>

Confucius said, “At sixty my ear was attuned.” (*Analects* 2.4) That the ears are the metaphor for attunement is evident in the artistic depiction of sages as god-like

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<sup>87</sup> 說文解字 (*Shuowen* Lexicon) Shuhai Wenyuan. <http://shuhai.dsturgeon.net/> Accessed April 2011.

<sup>88</sup> Ning Chen, “The Etymology of *Sheng* (Sage) and Its Confucian Conception in Early China,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 27, no. 4 (December 2000): 410.

<sup>89</sup> Stephen C. Angle, *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 14.

<sup>90</sup> Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, 257-8.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 259-60.

figures with protruding eyes and large ears. But attunement goes beyond mere hearing. It involves a responsiveness in relationships that enables the sage to perceive what others miss. Stephen Angle comments on the sagely attribute of keen perception:

Turning to the sage as virtuoso perceiver, various early thinkers stressed that sagehood was a consequence, in part, of achieving what one scholar characterizes as “superhuman perceptions.” These early views differed in how they understood the sources of sagely perceptiveness, with some emphasizing an attunement to subtle clues while others stress an unusual sensitivity to larger patterns.<sup>92</sup>

The subtle clues and larger patterns encompass aesthetic creativity, political acumen and, most importantly, ethical insight. Moreover, the sage conducts himself with a naturalness that belies the moral effort required to maintain harmony between earth and *tian*.

“Critical to this ideal of moral perfection is the ease or spontaneity with which sages act correctly; sagehood does not mean to conscientiously follow rules.”<sup>93</sup>

Angle identifies two aspects of “sagely ease” that are important for the case I wish to make for sagely hermeneutics.

(1) Different sorts of reactions count here as sagely actions. All are spontaneous, moral, edify others, . . . and in addition are apt expressions of the individual’s particular perspective on the situation. Still, (2) Confucius is better than the others because he is more flexible, less tied to a single perspective. Situational flexibility that enables one to bring out the best in a situation . . . is a hallmark of sagehood.<sup>94</sup>

The etymology of *sheng* reveals development from early associations with speaking/listening to wisdom/perspicacity, eventually infused by Confucius with profound moral and aesthetic content. The sage is one who listens, studies, reads and

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<sup>92</sup> Angle, *Sagehood*, 15.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 16. Angle is attributing sagehood to Confucius; though, as mentioned above, Confucius abjured such talk.

observes. The perspectives gained issue forth in spontaneous, novel, yet always appropriate, actions that provide exemplary moral leadership.

In his essay on *sheng*, Ning Chen takes issue with those who begin their investigations of the character with the *Shuowen* interpretation. In that lexicon, the presence of the *cheng* component leads some commentators to propose that *sheng* carries the meaning of “disclosing or making manifest.” Based on this interpretation, it is suggested (erroneously, according to Chen) that the sage is one who hears messages from heaven and discloses their meaning to those on earth.

On the semantic level, the definition of the sage given by these scholars strongly implies that the character *sheng* is originally used as a noun in the sense of a religious person with the unusual and extraordinary capability of mediating between the supernatural world and human society. A more careful and thorough etymological and paleographic study, however, prompts the realization that *sheng* as a noun in Shang sources is free from any insinuation that it had to do with manifesting any message from above.<sup>95</sup>

Chen argues that the idea of the sage as a kind of oracle of *tian* is a late development and should not be attributed to pre-Qin understandings of *sheng*. He points out that Confucius himself restricted the title *sheng ren* to the ancient Zhou kings. “As far as the *Analects* is concerned, . . . there is no direct connection between the sage and Heaven.”<sup>96</sup> It was Confucians living after Master Kong who infused *sheng* with its more shamanistic associations. According to Chen, the idea that the sage functions as one who “discloses or makes manifest” should not be assigned to any of the earlier periods up to and including Confucius’ lifetime.

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<sup>95</sup> Chen, “The Etymology of *Sheng*,” 410. Those charged with this transgression include Hall and Ames, Rodney Taylor and Julia Ching. However, Chen has not read Hall and Ames carefully, for they do not subscribe to the brand of Confucian religiousness Chen attributes to them.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 416.

### The Function of 呈 in Sagely Hermeneutics

Chen has provided valuable etymological research and his conclusions are persuasive. But, I believe his argument about the evolution of *sheng*'s meaning misses an important point. Chen wants to disassociate *sheng* from the dimension of meaning offered by the *cheng* component; that is, "to disclose or make manifest." He believes the inclusion of *cheng* as a semantic element inevitably leads to overly religious interpretations of the sage's shamanistic role. But if this transcendental view is exchanged for the immanent ethos most congenial to the Confucian texts, the *cheng* component offers a key to understanding the sage's hermeneutical task. For the sagely hermeneutics I am proposing, the Confucian presentation of *sheng* is a brilliant innovation precisely because it eschews the transcendental disposition. The Confucian sage is not a passive conduit of heavenly messages. Rather, he or she is an active creator of meaning through thoughtful engagement with inherited wisdom and responsiveness to the demands of contemporary crises. The sage seeks to be, along with *tian*, a co-creator of a world that will be more flourishing for its future inhabitants.

Central to this co-creativity is the sage's role as an exegete of the times. Applying Gadamer's insight regarding the hermeneutical nature of all experience, the sage is one with extraordinary interpretive abilities. A detailed discussion of *tian* and transcendence will be undertaken in the next chapter. For the present line of inquiry, it will suffice to say that the Confucian conception of *tian* is immanent. As Thomas Berry describes it, "there is no reality separated from the integral functioning of the natural and human worlds." Rather, what is designated by terms such as *tian*, *taiji* or *dao* is "a mysterious

impenetrable depth of reality that is recognized in its effects but not encompassed in its being by human understanding.”<sup>97</sup>

In his capacity as *cheng*, the sage serves humanity as a focus of hermeneutical insight—one who discloses mysteries and makes manifest what is otherwise concealed. The hermeneutical sensibility brings into juxtaposition the closely related ideas of disclosure and interpretation. Interpretation is a form of disclosure accomplished, not from an acontextual, timeless vantage point, but by a sagacious listener-observer situated in a cultural-historical context that he or she is able to “see through” and elucidate for the community. As Confucius said, “The gentleman stands in awe of . . . the words of the sages.” (*Analects* 16.8)<sup>98</sup>

As a humanism, Confucian thought looks for truth as it comes to be embodied in, and communicated through, accomplished human beings—most notably, the sage. As one who interprets the world clearly and creatively, the sage becomes a lens through which others see and understand their world. This is not a once-for-all time achievement, but the appropriate interpretation for a particular historical moment. Though Confucianism is known as a textual tradition, I would submit that paradigmatic individuals (*sheng ren*) are more determinative for the contours and trajectory of the tradition than are the texts in which the teachings of those individuals are enshrined.

It is interesting to note that hermeneutics in the West also evolved out of early associations with oracular communication. The Greek god, Hermes, served as a mediator

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<sup>97</sup> Thomas Berry, “Individualism and Holism in Chinese Tradition: The Religious Cultural Context,” in *Confucian Spirituality*, ed. Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 43.

<sup>98</sup> Lau, *Analects*, 165

between the gods and humanity. Hermeneutics developed as the art of interpretation of divine utterances and sacred texts that, by their nature, were mysterious and often inscrutable. In its modern version in the West, hermeneutics has expanded from a narrow application to biblical interpretation to become the paradigm for philosophical inquiry in the postmodern world.

### **Tempering Vattimo's Nihilistic Hermeneutics**

There are aspects of Confucian sagely hermeneutics that are instructive for the nihilistic hermeneutics of Vattimo. Vattimo's hermeneutics are plagued by a remorseful tone. Though he believes nihilism leads to emancipation, his writings are filled with words like "weakening," "forgetting," "a long goodbye" and "convalescence." The last word is especially poignant, as Vattimo describes convalescence as "the fact of continuing to bear the marks of a disease of which one has been cured."<sup>99</sup> The word is connected to Heidegger's notion of *Verwindung* and implies the idea of resignation. According to this idea, metaphysics cannot simply be left behind; rather, it remains that from which we continue to recover. James Risser probes Vattimo regarding this aporia in his thought.

Insofar as it entails the dissolution of foundations and the restraints imposed by the logic of demonstration, it has something of the character of emancipation, where constraints are shed and we gain opportunities to choose.

How, though, is this emancipation and with it the task of philosophy to be understood? It would appear that without a logic of demonstration and

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<sup>99</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 127.



connection to a history of truth, philosophy has been eviscerated and is no longer capable of lending a hand in any emancipation that would be of real substance.<sup>100</sup>

Vattimo acknowledges the challenge of offering guidance for action in a thought world characterized by the “weakening of being.” But he contends that this predicament is to be preferred to the violence engendered by moral absolutism and the political hegemony of one group over another. However, increasingly called to answer charges of ethical impotence in his philosophy, Vattimo has sought to offer grounds for constructive engagement in the world. In his work, *A Farewell to Truth*, he offers the following:

Let me attempt a provisional conclusion by discussing what *Verwindung* might mean, as something more than the purely spiritual and subjective stance of a philosopher or public intellectual in the current situation. The sole examples to be found in recent philosophical literature are, in my view, Derrida’s conception of deconstruction and the principle of anarchy that animate Reiner Schürmann’s book. If he [or she] is to take seriously the task of conversion, the public intellectual, the philosopher, cannot limit himself to the practice of purely textual deconstruction, . . . Nor can she think anarchy in the same theoretical vein, practicing deconstruction as a way of distancing herself—genealogically, historically—from all the first principles that customarily dominated the metanarratives of the metaphysical tradition. A philosopher must convert in the sense that he [or she] cannot do otherwise than attempt to be in practical contact with all the phenomena of practical deconstruction of the still metaphysical order of his and our society. The latter cannot be radically overcome (no revolution of the world proletariat would have any chance of success within the real relations of power), but it can certainly be “*verwunden*-distorted” by the multiple anarchic initiatives of resistance springing up here and there within the *Gestell*, even without any (metaphysical) hope of constructing a new global order . . . This is perhaps the only possible conversion that we can attempt to bring about.<sup>101</sup>

This quotation may be taken as autobiographical in the sense that it alludes to Vattimo’s political activism; for examples, his opposition to the Iraq War, his criticisms

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<sup>100</sup> James Risser, “On the Continuation of Philosophy: Hermeneutics as Convalescence,” in *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, ed. Santiago Zabala (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2007), 184-5.

<sup>101</sup> Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 129-30. The Schürmann book to which Vattimo refers is *Heidegger On Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

of the Roman Catholic church, and his public excoriations of Silvio Berlusconi. These are offered as examples of the actions that must be taken by responsible persons. Yet, according to Vattimo, no claim can be made to objective ethical validity. The practical outworking of weak thought occurs from within the hermeneutical circle from which there is no escape. We are called “to stand within the circle without yielding to current opinion yet without pretending to be able to step outside it through an ‘objective’ vision of the thing to be known.”<sup>102</sup>

If I am correct in my characterization of Confucian sagely hermeneutics, it is an approach to ethical decision-making that is not encumbered by metaphysical baggage of the kind that haunts Vattimo’s philosophical thought. It would be fallacious to argue that there is no residue of religious belief and superstition in the Confucian texts. But this religious content is not determinative of the tone and substance of the this-worldly spirituality offered there. As his followers acknowledged, “The topics the Master did not speak of were prodigies, force, disorder and gods.”<sup>103</sup> (*Analects* 7.21) Confucius demonstrates a remarkable ability to show deference to the religious beliefs of his society, yet give single-minded focus to ethical problems pertaining to human relationships.

A Confucian sagely hermeneutics for the twenty-first century would apply all the salient features of *sheng* outlined in the foregoing discussion to the new challenges facing our globalized human community. The contemporary sage is one who listens, observes and applies his or her keen perception to formulate new solutions to the problems at hand. This *sheng ren* would avail himself or herself of all the resources presented by world

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<sup>102</sup> Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 32.

<sup>103</sup> Lau, *Analects*, 61. 子部語：怪，力，亂，神。

philosophies and the diversity of religious traditions. While cognizant of the provenance of his or her own perspective, the sage would not be especially beholden to, or bound by, a particular tradition.

One calls to mind accomplished persons like Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., the Fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso and Thomas Merton. Each of these sagely figures remained within his own religio-philosophical milieu while probing deeply the insights of other traditions to amplify his perspective on the world. Mahatma Gandhi was profoundly influenced by the teachings of Jesus on non-violence. Martin Luther King, Jr., in turn, drew inspiration for his civil rights work from Gandhi's philosophy of *satyagraha* (soul force). The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, supplemented his Buddhist philosophy with study of Western ideas. At the urging of the Dalai Lama, Thomas Merton studied *dzogchen* meditation and was attending a conference on Buddhism in Thailand when he died. Receiving the wisdom of their forebears from inside and outside their particular traditions, and applying that wisdom in innovative ways to the exigencies of their respective contexts, each of these individuals disclosed and made manifest truth appropriate for their times. Successive generations, having the benefit of looking through the lenses provided by these accomplished persons, see the world in new, more comprehensive ways.

If Vattimo were to learn from Confucian sagely hermeneutics, he would be compelled to overcome his cultural chauvinism and imbibe insights from traditions beyond the West. For example, when Vattimo makes statements to the effect that

philosophy must “recognize its own provenance in trinitarian theology,”<sup>104</sup> he betrays a surprisingly provincial view of intellectual traditions alien to his native milieu. In contrast, his acknowledged mentor, Martin Heidegger, engaged seriously with Daoist and Zen Buddhist thought with great benefit to his philosophical project.

Graham Parkes offers two reasons to accept the evidence that Heidegger was influenced by Daoist thought:

First, with the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927, he inaugurated the most powerful ‘destruction’ of the Western metaphysical tradition since Nietzsche—several years after becoming acquainted with ideas from a quite alien yet sophisticated philosophical tradition that had been unmetaphysical throughout most of its history. Second, the enormous enthusiasm for Heidegger’s ideas in East Asian philosophical circles, and the fact that his later thinking has so many patent affinities (some of which he himself acknowledges) with East Asian thought, suggest some kind of prior harmony.<sup>105</sup>

Heidegger recognized themes in Asian philosophy that resonated with his own convictions and helped to expand the scope of his inquiry. Since Vattimo affirms the anti-metaphysical thrust of Heidegger’s thought, one would expect Vattimo to share the keen interest of his mentor in the non-metaphysical stream of Asian philosophy. But he resolutely limits his sources to the Western, primarily Continental, philosophical tradition. Would Vattimo contend there is no philosophy outside the Christian West? Quoting Benedetto Croce, Vattimo has said, “We cannot not call ourselves Christians.” He means that it is futile to ignore his own Christian historicity. “As soon as we try to account for our existential condition, which is never generic or metaphysical but always historical

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<sup>104</sup> Gianni Vattimo, “The Trace of the Trace,” in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 91.

<sup>105</sup> Graham Parkes, “Rising Sun Over Black Forest,” in *Heidegger’s Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences On His Work*, by Reinhard May, trans. Graham Parkes (New York: Routledge, 1996), 84.

and concrete, we discover that we cannot place ourselves outside the tradition opened up by the proclamation of Christ.”<sup>106</sup> And yet, in a globalized world culture characterized by an irreducible plurality of perspectives and interpretations, it is irresponsible to disregard voices outside one’s native tradition.

Integral to Vattimo’s weak thought is the acknowledgment that the postmodern is a condition over which no single principle or narrative can continue to exercise domination.

How did we arrive at this? How did we arrive at ceasing to believe in history as something unitary and progressive, something that, as it moves along, is going forward toward completeness? When the colonial peoples compel us, in point of fact, no longer to be Eurocentric, because if there is a unitary line in history it’s the one we Europeans have drawn. Nobody ever dreamed that the unitary line of history went through China. It went here. The others were primitives, barbarians, underdeveloped.<sup>107</sup>

If all forms of culturo-centrism are dismissed, the appropriate philosophical attitude is one of openness, as expressed in the slogan Vattimo commends, “from universality to hospitality.”

There is no disputing that each person must be aware of the paradigm into which he or she has been thrown. Further, it is acknowledged that one can never fully escape that paradigm. But this does not prevent the creative appropriation of wisdom from other religious and philosophical traditions. Confucian sagely hermeneutics in a postmodern world offers interpretations based upon responsible listening, communicating and making manifest meanings from a multiplicity of voices.

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<sup>106</sup> Vattimo, “The Age of Interpretation,” 54.

<sup>107</sup> Vattimo, *Not Being God*, 112.

## CHAPTER 2. TRANSCENDENCE

### **The Debate Regarding Transcendence in Confucian Texts**

The Abrahamic religions of the West—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—have developed with foundational doctrines of transcendent being—of a God who is the source of the physical universe, yet exists independently of it. Recent scholarship in philosophy and theology has reexamined the Judeo-Christian notion of transcendence, seeking new ways to conceptualize the God/human relationship. In the quest for new ways to think transcendence, there is much to learn from non-Western philosophical and religious traditions. Because this study focuses on religiousness, a clarification is needed regarding what role (if any) transcendence plays in the theories under consideration. I hope to show that the notions of transcendence found in the early Confucian writings and in Gianni Vattimo's philosophy are sufficiently similar to motivate constructive conversation between the two schools of thought. Furthermore, Vattimo's struggle to articulate an immanent theology can be mitigated by insights from the early Confucian worldview.

### **The Argument for Transcendence**

The question regarding the element of transcendence in early Confucian texts has undergone a long and lively debate. This discussion has produced clarifications by authors representing the full range of positions on the issue. On one extreme are interpreters who see strong evidence of a kind of monotheism not incompatible with Judeo-Christian ideas of God. Julia Ching asserts, "Confucius's philosophy is clearly grounded in religion—the inherited religion of the Lord on High or Heaven, the supreme

and personal deity. This is so even though Confucius is largely silent regarding God and the afterlife.”<sup>108</sup> Kelly James Clark is another who finds significant parallels between Judeo-Christian monotheism and Confucian belief in *Shangdi* (上帝), which he views as coterminous with *tian*. In his article, “The Gods of Abraham, Isaiah, and Confucius,” Clark writes: “We contend that both the Hebrew and ancient Chinese worldviews came to countenance a single, supreme, and personal deity who providentially orders human affairs. . . . Like Yahweh, Shangdi/Tian is concerned for human welfare and exercises providential control over history at least partly through the raising up of conquering foreign kings.”<sup>109</sup>

Clark is a member of the U.S.-based Society of Christian Philosophers, an organization that has seized the opportunity afforded by China’s new intellectual openness to convene academic exchanges. Since 1994, the Society has teamed with philosophy faculty of leading universities in China in the annual “Symposium of Sino-American Philosophy and Religious Studies”. A popular topic of papers delivered at the symposia is the nature and history of Chinese religiousness and its similarity or dissimilarity to Western religiousness. Clark has been among those most determined to demonstrate that early Confucianism is a monotheistic cousin of Judeo-Christian religion. At a conference in Shanghai on comparative Confucian and American pragmatist philosophy, Clark argued against David Hall and Roger Ames’ a-theistic interpretation of Confucian religious thought.

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<sup>108</sup> Julia Ching, “What is Confucian Spirituality?” in *Confucian Spirituality*, ed. Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 82.

<sup>109</sup> Kelly James Clark, “The Gods of Abraham, Isaiah, and Confucius,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 5.1 (December 2005): 109.

In the Zhou period, although the term *Tian* (Heaven) was used far more frequently than *Di* to name the divine, early Zhou writings continue to refer to the divine as *Di* and *Shangdi*. *Tian* is simply *Di* or *Shangdi* by another name. . . . In the Zhou culture, *Tian* is not an impersonal, natural force but is a transcendent, personal, moral, and providential source and force.<sup>110</sup>

Confucius believed in *Tian* as an anthropomorphic Heavenly Supreme Emperor and as an independent, authoritative moral source; he believed that the Zhou cultural legacy was transcendentally or cosmogonically grounded. Given the Zhou background and Confucius's self-confession as a transmitter, we have prima facie reason to believe that Confucius aligns his religious beliefs with those of the Zhou.<sup>111</sup>

This approach to the early Confucian corpus is reminiscent of that employed by the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Jesuit missionaries, led by Matteo Ricci, who sought to deliver "Confucian monotheism" from its Neo-Confucian corruptions. Both Ricci and Clark are convinced that Confucian thought reveals a belief in strong transcendence.

A representative voice from within Chinese philosophical scholarship is Benjamin Schwartz, who also sees notes of strong transcendence in the Confucian corpus.

Schwartz acknowledges that the focus of Confucius in the *Analects* is on "the sphere of human action in the human world and that his central vocation is the restoration of the pristine normative order, which had been actualized in the past yet had been lost."<sup>112</sup>

Confucius' project is a soteriologically pragmatic one, that of closing the alarming gap between the way things are in society and the way they should be according to the

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<sup>110</sup> Kelly James Clark, "Tradition and Transcendence in Masters Kong and Rorty," in *Rorty, Pragmatism, and Confucianism: With Responses by Richard Rorty*, ed. Yong Huang (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 233-234.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 236

<sup>112</sup> Benjamin I. Schwartz, "The Ethical and the Meta-Ethical In Chinese High Cultural Thought," in *Confucian Spirituality*, ed. Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 57.



paradigm offered by the Zhou kings. However, Schwartz also highlights what he calls a “transhuman reality” that permeates the texts. He continues,

In neither Confucius nor the Buddha, . . . is there any real evidence that they do not accept some of the prevailing assumptions in their culture concerning the nature of the larger nonhuman reality in which they found themselves or that they had the notion of a total disjuncture between the human realm and the nonhuman realm. Thus, if one considers all the references in the *Analects* to the word *Heaven* one may raise all sorts of questions about the ambiguous ways in which the term is used. Yet in all its uses it points to a transhuman reality that we can neither bracket nor dismiss as a “manner of speaking.”<sup>113</sup>

This nonhuman realm of which Schwartz speaks relates to the human world as creative force, source of moral value and political order. “[T]he supreme god, or heaven, in contradistinction to nature and ancestral spirits who simply perform, as it were, the functions of their office in response to the prescribed sacrificial rituals, is conceived of as a transcendent ruler—a unifying moral will who sustains the correct order of the world.”<sup>114</sup> Schwartz finds in the *Analects* “considerable emphasis on [Confucius’] own relationship to ‘heaven,’ which is treated not simply as the immanent *Tao* of nature and society but as a transcendent conscious will interested in Confucius’ redeeming mission. Confucius looks to heaven for aid and support in reestablishing the *Tao*.”<sup>115</sup>

In his comparative approach, Schwartz finds in Confucian thought features shared in common with other world religions, namely, beliefs in a transcendent realm or being that is the creative source of the human world and is determinative of normative order in

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<sup>113</sup> Schwartz, “The Ethical and the Meta-Ethical,” 57.

<sup>114</sup> Benjamin J. Schwartz, “Transcendence in Ancient China,” *Daedalus* 104 (Spring 1975): 59.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

that world. Yet the order and harmony emanating from *tian* can be thwarted in the human world. In Schwartz's understanding, moral evil is the result of a "fatal breach" in the organismic whole," resulting from human ignorance or neglect of the mandate of *tian*. "In the human being, Heaven has mysteriously engendered a creature that has the ominous capacity to obstruct Heaven's immanent presence and to create disorder."<sup>116</sup>

### **The Argument for Immanence**

The opposite pole of the debate on transcendence/immanence is represented by Hall and Ames, among others, who argue that strict transcendence is conspicuously absent from early Confucianism. They define their terms in the opening section of *Thinking Through Confucius*: "Perhaps the most far-reaching of the uncommon assumptions underlying a coherent explication of the thinking of Confucius is that which precludes the existence of any transcendent being or principle. This is the presumption of radical immanence."<sup>117</sup> Hall and Ames acknowledge that the adoption of bipolar terms like "transcendence" and "immanence" is a capitulation to Anglo-American categories that are not shared by the Chinese worldview. But the terms are useful in making their point about strict transcendence.

Strict transcendence may be understood as follows: a principle, *A*, is transcendent with respect to that, *B*, which it serves as principle if the meaning or import of *B* cannot be fully analyzed and explained without recourse to *A*, but the reverse is not true. The dominant meanings of principles in the Anglo-European philosophic tradition require the presumption of transcendence in this strict sense.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Schwartz, "The Ethical and the Meta-Ethical," 59.

<sup>117</sup> Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, 12.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 13. In his most recent work, Ames offers a revised statement of this principle: "[S]trict philosophical or theological transcendence is to assert that an independent and superordinate principle *A* originates, determines, and sustains *B*, where

In the Abrahamic religions, this kind of transcendence is expressed in the idea of a self-sufficient, unchanging Creator who is independent of the creation.

In contrast to the language of transcendent principles so engrained in the Western tradition is the Confucian worldview that “requires a language of immanence grounded in the supposition that laws, rules, principles, or norms have their source in the human, social contexts which they serve. . . . The principles of order and value are themselves dependent upon and emerge out of the contexts to which they have intrinsic relevance.”<sup>119</sup> It is important to note that Hall and Ames’ claim about the absence of strict transcendence is limited to the classical Confucian texts, especially the *Analects*. They readily acknowledge that later developments in Neo-Confucianism incorporated metaphysical elements not present in the early Confucius corpus.

The presumption of radical immanence in the Confucian texts leads Hall and Ames to understand *dao* as a non-transcendent phenomenon, the achievement of human beings interacting with their natural and cultural environments. “At its most fundamental level, *tao* seems to denote the active project of ‘road making,’ and by extension, to connote a road that has already been laid and hence can be traveled.”

We shall argue that to realize the *tao* is to experience, to interpret, and to influence the world in such a way as to reinforce, and where appropriate extend, a way of life established by one’s cultural precursors. This way of living in the world, then, provides a road map and direction for future generations. Thus, for Confucius, *tao* is primarily *jen tao* 人道.<sup>120</sup>

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the reverse is not the case.” Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 212.

<sup>119</sup> Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, 14.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

“Road making” includes all the elements of culture that provide form and direction for human community: language, art, ethics, politics and religion. The cultural inheritance of a given era is received by most people as an unquestioned account of the way things are and the way life should be lived. However, thoughtful interpreters of any age understand that the road cannot simply be traveled, but must continuously be made through the creative appropriation and adaptation of the *dao*. Ames and Hall write:

To realize *dao* is to experience, to interpret, and to influence the world in such a way as to reinforce and extend a way of life inherited from one’s cultural precursors. *Dao* is “truth” in the sense that it entails *being true* to those who have come before, and living in the world in a way that *can be trusted* by those yet to come.<sup>121</sup>

On this understanding, *dao* is not rooted in the “nature of things;” nor does it descend from *tian* as divine law. Rather, *dao* comes into being as the result of a creative collaboration between human beings and the natural world.

Hall and Ames use the language of field and focus to schematize the Confucian concepts of *tian/ren* and *dao/de* (德). *Tian* is the field of existing things in the natural world. (*Tian* is treated as the functional equivalent of *tao*.) But *tian* should not be understood as a single context that contains all foci; there is no overarching whole. Human beings (*ren*) and other particulars are points of focus (*de*) within the unsummed totality of *tian*.<sup>122</sup> In this way, Hall and Ames immanent-ize the concepts most often viewed as transcendent in the Confucian texts.

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<sup>121</sup> Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Focusing the Familiar: A Translation and Philosophical Interpretation of the Zhongyong* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 63-64.

<sup>122</sup> Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, 238.

It is remarkable, but not surprising, that scholarly interpretations of Confucian texts are so widely divergent. Such is the hermeneutical challenge that confronts readers of texts that have for their provenance an ancient and alien culture. Are interpreters like Clark to be charged with an unwarranted reading of Judeo-Christian meanings into the texts? Is this a contemporary occurrence of the problem Hall and Ames attribute to the earliest Western interpretations of Confucius? They describe this problem in the “Introduction” to *Thinking Through Confucius*:

The prominence of the language of transcendence in considering the basic principles of Western philosophers tempts Anglo-European interpreters of Confucius’ thinking to employ such language in their analyses of the *Analects*. This has been particularly true to the extent that the major burden of introducing the Chinese classics to the non-Chinese world fell initially to Christian apologists with an inescapable commitment to the notion of transcendence.<sup>123</sup>

Or is Clark justified in charging Hall and Ames with their own “inescapable commitment” to a naturalistic, reductionist reading of Confucius? Clark writes:

Hall and Ames have a self-reflexive problem: they, too, must begin *where they are*. Have we any reason to believe that their interpretation of Confucius is not dictated by their own denials of transcendence? I suggest that their own naturalistic, existential, and pragmatic commitments have dramatically (and, I believe, implausibly) colored their interpretation of Confucius.<sup>124</sup>

This debate amply illustrates the phenomenon described above in the discussion of hermeneutics. All interpreters view a given text through lenses provided by their culture and education and colored by their religious, philosophical and ideological commitments. But, though the impress of culture is ineluctable, one can become aware and wary of the biases and predispositions he or she brings to the task of interpretation. Gadamer rehabilitated prejudice as a positive hermeneutical impulse. But prejudice

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<sup>123</sup> Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, 13.

<sup>124</sup> Clark, “Tradition and Transcendence,” 249, n. 20.

exerts positive force only when the interpreter is cognizant of prejudice and responsible to acknowledge the historical constraints upon his or her point of view.

### **Mediating Positions: Tu Weiming**

A middle ground between these contrary views is occupied by thinkers like Tu Weiming who see in the Confucian *tian* a transcendent entity that relates directly to human beings. Tu enunciates his understanding of Confucian transcendence in his exposition of the *Zhongyong* (中庸), taking care to distinguish the transcendent element from theism or belief in a personal deity.

Certainly the idea of theistic God, not to mention the ‘wholly other,’ is totally absent from the symbolic resources of the Confucian tradition. In exploring the issue of transcendence in Confucian religiosity, we must be careful not to impose an alien explanatory model or to introduce problems that are only peripheral to its central concerns.”<sup>125</sup>

Nevertheless, Tu chooses the problematic translation, “Heaven,” for *tian* and states that Heaven endows human beings with a moral nature: “*Chung-yung* [*Zhongyong*] asserts that human nature is imparted by Heaven, thus affirming the ancient Chinese belief in a purposive and caring Heaven as the ultimate arbiter of human affairs.”<sup>126</sup> On Tu’s reading of the text, it is through a dialogical relationship with the transcendent that human beings, in community, realize their full humanity.

The godlike sage is the co-creator of the universe not because the transcendent is totally humanized but because the human is ultimately transformed by means of a faithful dialogical response to the transcendent. The fiduciary community, as a defining characteristic of Confucian religiosity, is not governed by social ethics devoid of reference to the transcendent. On the contrary, the community based on

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<sup>125</sup> Tu Wei-Ming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiosity* (New York: SUNY Press, 1989), 116.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

trust rather than on contract is itself a sacred confirmation that human nature is ordained by Heaven.<sup>127</sup>

Tu employs a “discovery model” of human nature. On this reading, human nature is an essential aspect of persons that is endowed by “Heaven,” discovered by human beings and then developed in fiduciary relationship with their community. When human beings, through self-cultivation, together achieve a harmonious social order, they are conforming their values and behavior to a pre-ordained standard that is of non-human origin.

This brief summary shows that Tu employs the language of transcendence in his description of *tian*, but that he also emphasizes the immanent aspect of the unity of *tian* and human beings.

The relationship between Heaven and man is not an antinomic bi-unity but an indivisibly single oneness. . . . And *ch'eng* as the ultimate reality is not the unity of opposites but a continuous, lasting, and homogeneous whole. Despite the possibility of a conceptual separation between Heaven and man, inwardly, in their deepest reality, they form an unbreakable, organismic continuum.<sup>128</sup>

This leads Tu to speak of an “anthropocosmic unity” between human beings and *tian*. He says there is a “creative tension between transcendence and immanence: we are earthbound but also united with Heaven.”<sup>129</sup>

How are we to understand Tu’s amalgam of transcendence and immanence? Based on Hall’s and Ames’ definition of strict transcendence, if the existence and meaning of human beings cannot be fully analyzed or explained without recourse to *tian*, then *tian* is transcendent with regard to human beings. And to meet the test of strict

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<sup>127</sup> Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, 98.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

transcendence, *tian* must be fully analyzable and explainable without recourse to human beings. But this is *not* the case in Tu's account of anthropocosmic unity. He states:

It is true that human nature is imparted from heaven, but human beings are not merely creatures and heaven alone does not exhaust the process of creativity. In an ultimate sense, human beings, in order to manifest their humanity, must themselves fully participate in the creative process of the cosmos. They do not create *ex nihilo* (nor for that matter does Heaven), yet they are capable of assisting the transforming and nourishing process of heaven and earth.<sup>130</sup>

As co-creators of the cosmos, human beings exercise causal efficacy in their relationship with *tian* and, therefore, *tian* cannot be said to stand in a transcendent relationship to human beings. Tu is obviously working with a different notion of transcendence, namely, one that allows for a dialogical and inter-dependent relationship between *tian* and human beings. This is what Hall and Ames call an informal or casual use of the concept of transcendence. In their view such imprecise uses of transcendence to articulate the Confucian worldview “more often than not lead to serious confusion by permitting the uncriticized importation of the stricter senses of the term into one's arguments.”<sup>131</sup>

### **Mediating Positions: Cheng Chung-ying**

Another mediating view is offered by Cheng Chung-ying, founding editor of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, whose philosophical project, according to Robert Neville, is “to develop a contemporary speculative metaphysics and ethics funded primarily from

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<sup>130</sup> Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, 78.

<sup>131</sup> Hall and Ames, *Thinking From the Han* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 190.



the Chinese tradition.”<sup>132</sup> Cheng’s position is similar in some ways, but importantly different in others, when compared with Tu’s account.

Cheng holds to an immanent cosmology, but speaks of various kinds of transcendence within the totality of things. In his essay, “Classical Chinese Views of Reality and Divinity,” Cheng begins with the statement: “One may say that the whole development of the Confucian philosophy is premised on a fundamental understanding of the human being as a paradigm of reality and potential divinity.”<sup>133</sup> The idea that potential divinity attaches to human beings immediately distinguishes Cheng’s theory from all Western style monotheisms that draw a sharp line of demarcation between the divine and human realms.

Cheng begins with Chinese theories of divinity in the *Zhouyi* (周易) (*Book of Changes*). Two basic concepts, *taiji* (太極), the great ultimate, and *dao* (道), the way, provide the fundamental theory of reality in Chinese philosophy. All the processes of the myriad things in the world are subsumed under *taiji* and *dao*. “The sustaining source of this process of generation is called the *taiji*. The *dao* is *taiji* in its process aspect, whereas the *taiji* is the *dao* under its origination aspect. Together they refer to the same thing, namely, the totality of reality of creativity, change, and transformation.”<sup>134</sup> In its cosmogonic role, we should not think of *taiji* in the sense of *arche* or *ex nihilo* creative power; rather, it is the principle of ceaseless origination and regeneration of things. The

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<sup>132</sup> Robert Cummings Neville, *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 50.

<sup>133</sup> Cheng Chung-ying, “Classical Chinese Views of Reality and Divinity,” in *Confucian Spirituality*, ed. Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 113.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

theory of *taiji* is integral to Cheng's immanent conception of reality: by definition, there can be nothing beyond or outside *taiji*.

Reality is concrete, vivid, and holistic not only in the sense that all things are interrelated with a whole as originally defined by the oneness of *taiji*, but also in the sense that changes and nonchanges underlying the changes are organically part and parcel of the same thing and there cannot be strict demarcation or bifurcation between appearance and reality.<sup>135</sup>

The *Zhouyi* conceptions of *taiji* and *dao* present reality as an organismic totality in which human beings occupy a privileged place. "For the early Chinese the world of reality was confined to Heaven, earth, and ten thousand things among which the human person stands out as the most intelligent and the one capable of forming a tri-partnership with Heaven and earth."<sup>136</sup> Heaven, earth and the myriad things are not simply contained together within the cosmos; they are all interrelated and interpenetrating. "This is how immanence of Heaven in the nature of humanity leads to an interminable exchange between, as well as a unity of, humanity and Heaven."<sup>137</sup>

Cheng traces the historical development of what he calls the "daoization" of concepts of divinity in China. Beginning with the Xia era (c. 2000 BCE), there were references to *di* (帝) and *shangdi* (上帝), a personal god who oversaw human affairs and controlled human destiny from above. "It is clear, then, that the Lord on High as mentioned in the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing*) and the *Book of Poetry* (*Shijing*) is a supreme being who combines source of life and source of power in one person and who cares for the well-being of people (as his posterity) and the ordering of the state."<sup>138</sup> In

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<sup>135</sup> Cheng, "Classical Chinese Views," 115.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-9.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

other words, this deity is an ethnic or tribal god who, Cheng suggests, is the spiritual projection of a powerful and venerated ancestor.

In time, (probably coinciding with the Zhou conquest of the Shang) the worship of *di* was absorbed into the wider concept of *tian* and, though *tian* was also worshiped as powerful, life-giving and infinite, *tian* was depersonalized, paving the way for a fusion of the notions of *tian* and *dao*. “The *tian* eventually came to be regarded as the Way of Heaven (*tiandao*), which is manifested in nature and is to be realized as a moral command in man.”<sup>139</sup> Though Confucius occasionally speaks of *tian* as if it were a supreme moral being (reminiscent of *di*), the depersonalization of *tian* is clearly evident in the *Analects*. However, the full depersonalization of *tian* occurs in Daoism. The transformation of *di* to *tian* to *dao* demonstrates what Cheng calls a movement from a theory of personalized divinity to a theory of depersonalized reality. This is “divinity without theology,”<sup>140</sup> or, an “ontocosmology of reality which traces and reveals the activity of the divine in the creative productiveness and transformativeness of things,”<sup>141</sup> without recourse to notions of personal deity.

Cheng is now prepared to explain his original claim that human beings are “a paradigm of potential divinity.” Every thing in nature possesses a *shen* (神), which Cheng describes as the power to exert influence on other things. This applies especially to human beings. “A person who accomplishes great deeds and achieves exemplary virtues, and who is consequently respected and wields great influence during life, leaves upon his [or her] death his [or her] *shen* (or influence, . . .) to be worshiped or sought

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<sup>139</sup> Cheng, “Classical Chinese Views,” 126.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 125.

after.”<sup>142</sup> It is through positive influence that a person projects his or her power into the future after physical presence has ended. And in the case of an unworthy person with negative influence, it is hoped that their *gui* (鬼), or ghost, is relegated to the past.

Even mountains and rivers have a *shen*, or influence, because of their significant roles in the lives of human beings. For this reason, they are respected and worshiped. “On the other hand, the *shen* of a human being who achieved great power of influence would be more vividly entertained in the minds of the relevant people and would thus become more an object of worship.”<sup>143</sup> The highest example of such influence belongs to the sage, whose transformative effect may, conceivably, continue throughout human history.

This, then, is Cheng’s idea of potential divinity in the classical Chinese tradition; it is to exert positive influence that outlasts one’s physical lifetime, continuing to elicit worshipful remembrance among the living. In the case of the most influential teachers and rulers, this veneration may actually take the form of religious cult, complete with temples, effigies and sacrifices. In this way, Cheng accounts for the language of “ghosts and spirits” without actually positing the existence of disembodied personal beings.

There is a lingering question as to how *tian* and *dao* relate to and interact with human beings. In Tu Weiming’s account, human beings are endowed by *tian* with an essential human nature. This endowment is fixed and stable not only for individual human beings, but also for humanity in general. Everyone receives the same human nature. This is problematic for Tu’s claim that *tian* is not transcendent with regard to

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<sup>142</sup> Cheng, “Classical Chinese Views,” 126.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

human beings. How does Cheng understand this relationship? Commenting on the opening statement from the *Zhongyong*, “What is endowed and mandated from Heaven is called the nature [of man],”<sup>144</sup> (天命之謂性), Cheng writes: “There is a functional unity between humanity and heaven. But . . . there is a deeper level of unity in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, namely, that the human person is endowed with human nature from heaven. . . . This means that human creativity is derived from heaven, and thus the human person is capable of forming a unity with heaven and earth.”<sup>145</sup>

For Cheng, the bestowing of human nature (*xing*, 性) is not a one-directional transaction from *tian* to human beings. While it is true that human beings receive their nature from *tian*, it is also true that human beings exert creative force upon *tian* that causes real change, however minute, in the totality of things. In the co-creative relationship of *tian* and human beings, there is a power imbalance owing to the strong determinative influence of *tian* on human beings. Nevertheless, *tian* also is undergoing an unending process of change as a result of its interactions with human beings and, therefore, *tian* is not transcendentally independent.

Cheng’s description of the *tian-ren* relationship draws from the process cosmology of Alfred N. Whitehead. According to Whitehead, within the being of God is contained every event that occurs in the universe. God contains the universe, yet is not identical with it. In this sense, God may be said to transcend the world. But God is also changeable, as the free decisions of human beings contribute to the consequent nature of

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<sup>144</sup> Cheng’s translation; brackets in original.

<sup>145</sup> Cheng, “Classical Chinese Views,” 130.

God. Whitehead's cosmology, according to Cheng, correlates well with the Chinese sense of the continual flux and creativity of the world.

In Whitehead we see a model of concrescence and concretion from the principle of creativity: it is in the nature of things that they come into being as realized possibilities (eternal objects) and presented as events or actual occasions. We may speak of a creative impulse as a constant of reality, and in a sense God in the Whiteheadian paradigm is conceived as such a creative impulse. But for Whitehead, God is also conceived as a limiting principle who would screen and restrain the advance of possibilities through His values and care for the world. It is not all possibilities that would be concretized. The restraint of God comes from the balance of the primordial and consequent natures of God. In a sense, reality is a web of interrelated actual occasions that must maintain a level of coherence that gives itself a sense of reality. Hence, creativity of reality is the realization of the potentiality of God in an open process of becoming and developing, coming and going.<sup>146</sup>

Cheng is not saying that the *tian* of early Chinese philosophy is analogous in every respect to Whitehead's God. Rather he is showing the parallel between a Chinese and a Western concept of the universe as an organismic whole—a whole within which are found elements of transcendence. *Tian* is a generative force in a transformative process in which *tian* also is transformed.

Tu and Cheng both argue for an immanent interpretation of the Confucian worldview. All things inhere together in an organismic totality, within which there is co-creativity, interaction and anthropocosmic unity. However, Tu and Cheng differ in the way they conceive the relationship of *tian* and human beings. Cheng affirms the constantly changing nature of both *tian* and human beings, though *tian* is transcendent in its function as a generative, initiating source. In contrast, Tu holds a more static view of the natures of both *tian* and human beings. He writes, "Precisely because their essence is

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<sup>146</sup> Cheng Chung-ying, "'Unity of Three Truths' and Three Forms of Creativity: Lotus Sutra and Process Philosophy," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 28 (December 2001): 454-5.

identical with that of Heaven are they said to have partaken their nature from heaven.” and he speaks of “the lack of any ontological gap between human nature and Heaven.”<sup>147</sup>

Unless Tu would allow that the essence of *tian* and human beings is subject to change based upon *tianren heyi* and co-creativity, it follows that *tian* stands in independent relationship to human beings insofar as human beings receive an unchanging endowment from *tian*. In whatever ways human beings “assist in the transforming and nourishing processes of Heaven and earth,” they apparently do not effect change in that aspect of *tian* that endows them with a fixed and stable human nature.

In summary of the views presented in this section, first, those who believe *tian* represents a strongly transcendent entity would posit a realm where *tian* dwells outside or independent of the bounded space of the natural world (e.g., Kelly James Clark, Benjamin Schwartz). This position is entailed by the view that *tian* is creator of the natural world.<sup>148</sup> Second, there are those who believe *tian* is within the natural world, yet bestows a nature (*xing*) on human beings. Tu Weiming understands that nature to be fixed and unchanging, while Cheng Chung-ying sees it as subject to change and able to effect change in *tian*. Lastly, an immanent understanding of the Confucian milieu requires that *tian* and *dao* be wholly explained within the natural realm, without recourse to eternal, unchanging entities of a non-natural, non-human origin (see Hall and Ames).

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<sup>147</sup> Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, 70.

<sup>148</sup> See, for example, Clark, “The *Zuozhuan*, considered a Confucian classic and part of the canon, was often attached to the *Analecets* as a key to understanding it. In it, the author (often alleged to be Confucius) ascribes love, concern, and creator of the people to *Tian*. . . . The transcendent, anthropomorphic, and personal nature of *Tian* is unquestioned here.” (“Tradition and Transcendence,” 240)

## **Thinking Transcendence in a Post-Metaphysical World**

### **The Challenge of Metaphorical Religious Language**

The language of “the beyond” is inherently problematic. In all religious traditions, adherents resort to metaphorical and analogical language to describe their experiences. Such language, though figuratively and poetically rich, is obviously not amenable to quantitative measurement or logical analysis, nor does it purport to be. Scholar of comparative religions, Mircea Eliade, discovered six methodological principles for the analysis of symbolic language across religious traditions.

(1) Religious symbols reveal a “modality of the real” that is not evident on the level of immediate experience. (2) Religious symbols point to something “real,” equivalent to “the sacred,” and imply an ontology. (3) Religious symbols are multivalent, expressive of a number of simultaneous meanings. (4) Religious symbols disclose a certain unity of the world, and provide a “destiny” and “integrating function” for human agents. (5) Religious symbols have the capacity for expressing paradoxical situations or structures of “ultimate reality” that are otherwise inexpressible. (6) Religious symbols not only unveil a “structure of reality” or a “dimension of existence,” but they also bring “a meaning into human existence.”<sup>149</sup>

Eliade is talking about more than simply linguistic symbols. His account would include non-linguistic religious symbols such as icons, physical gestures and works of art. But Eliade’s six principles are useful in this discussion because they identify aspects of religious language that are not specific to a particular religious tradition. Furthermore, the principles make no reference to divine beings or transcendence in the strict sense.

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<sup>149</sup> Summarized in Nancy K. Frankenberry, “Religion as a ‘mobile army of metaphors’” in *Radical Interpretation in Religion*, ed. Nancy K. Frankenberry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 171-2. The source of the six principles is Mircea Eliade, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism,” in *The History of Religions: Essays on Methodology*, ed. Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 86-107.



Therefore, Eliade's principles are amenable to an immanent understanding of religious experience.

A danger of metaphorical language lies in the temptation to reify the image, confusing the symbol with the reality it describes or to which it points. For example, when adherents of Abrahamic religions refer to God as "Father", they do not mean to suggest that the being worshiped as the creative source of all things is of masculine gender, having facial hair and male genitalia. Rather, this is a way of describing the character of God as protecting, caring and loving (qualities which are also captured in metaphors of motherhood). But there is a school of thought that contends that male gender is an essential aspect of the nature of God and is not to be interpreted metaphorically.<sup>150</sup> Such a reification of metaphorical language results in theological distortion and may lead to (among other negative consequences) oppressive and exploitative relations to women.<sup>151</sup> When Eliade states that religious symbols unveil "a structure of reality" or "dimension of existence," he does not mean that the symbols are literal descriptions. To cite another example, Dante's *Inferno* eloquently expresses Christian beliefs regarding sin and the afterlife; but, as a sample of medieval allegory, it is not meant to suggest that hell is an actual nine-level dungeon for the wicked.

Language of transcendence relies heavily on spatial metaphors to describe the "beyond" or the "otherness" of its object. Such language may be an aid in

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<sup>150</sup> See, for example, John W. Miller, *Calling God "Father"* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999).

<sup>151</sup> Vattimo concurs: "In the final analysis, if the Pope will not grant the priesthood to women, it is because the Bible calls God father and not mother, though even the Bible does set aside an important role for the Virgin Mary." (Vattimo, *Belief*, 76).

conceptualizing the inter-relations of being(s), but is fraught with problems because of the temptation to interpret such descriptions literally. The notion of transcendence arises when we construct a bounded space. Every beyond is a beyond in reference to something. The bounded space may be that of the self, the natural world, time or some other construct. We resort to conceptual schemes, representations and metaphors to describe the inside/outside, immanent/transcendent or dependent/independent relations among these bounded spaces.

Our vocabulary is constructed by way of our experience of the space we inhabit. We then employ this vocabulary to describe what is beyond the imagined boundary of our experience. Heidegger and others have exposed the “topological naïveté” of using spatial metaphors to describe transcendence. Strictly speaking, there is no outside and no inside; there is only the world into which one is thrown. Derrida, also, in his work on hermeneutics, avoids speaking of an “outside.” When he says, “there is nothing outside the text,”<sup>152</sup> he is speaking of both written texts and the text of reality that every person is compelled to “read” and interpret. For Derrida, there is no non-textual, or outside-the-world, vantage point from which to undertake the interpretive task.

David Wood has framed the problem of the language of transcendence as follows:

There is something seductive, compelling, and yet disturbing about the spatiality with which we are tempted to think transcendence . . . to think of the beyond of transcendence in spatial, or at least topological terms—that it represents a different terrain or dimension or level, a space beyond. . . .

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<sup>152</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; corrected edition, 1998), 158.

Connected to this spatializing temptation is a representational and objectifying temptation—a temptation to treat the transcendent as *something* that transcends.<sup>153</sup>

If Wood is correct, it is the human experience of bounded spaces that naturally leads people to inquire what, if anything, lies beyond the world of experience. The spatializing tendency is followed by the temptation to represent the beyond by objectifying and naming it—as God, *tian*, love, the Absolute. Terms like these are, by no means, synonymous. But, Wood continues,

“what they share is the idea that transcendence can be named, or at least successfully indicated, by a word. The word transcendence itself makes the same claim. Or perhaps we could say that it raises the question as to whether language, or a certain referential use of language, is adequate to the task of capturing whatever it is that leads us to posit a certain beyond.”<sup>154</sup>

### **Martin Heidegger’s Theory of Transcendence**

Heidegger was certainly correct in saying we need to take a deep breath when pursuing the topic of transcendence. In his exposition of the concept of *Dasein*, Heidegger sought a way out of the dilemma by suggesting that there is no beyond, that the experience of transcendence is really *Dasein*’s being-in-the-world. *Dasein* surpasses things by encountering them within a world.

Heidegger distinguishes two senses of transcendence, expressed in two conceptual contraries: the first is transcendence/immanence and the second is transcendence/contingency.

Regarding . . . the transcendent in contradistinction to the immanent, the latter is what remains within, by which is meant that which is in the subject, within the

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<sup>153</sup> David Wood, “Topologies of Transcendence,” in *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 170-1.

<sup>154</sup> Wood, “Topologies of Transcendence,” 172.

soul, remaining in consciousness. The transcendent is therefore that which does not remain within, but is without, what lies *outside* the soul and consciousness. What is outside the borders and encompassing wall of consciousness has then, spoken from the innermost yard of this consciousness, surpassed the enclosing wall and stands outside. Now insofar as this consciousness has cognition, it relates to what is outside, and so the transcendent as something on hand outside is, at the same time, that which *stands over against*.<sup>155</sup>

If the subject is thought of as a kind of box, the problematic of transcendence/immanence is that the barrier between inner and outer must somehow be crossed. “The problem arises of how to explain the possibility of such a passage.”<sup>156</sup>

The second binary opposition, that of transcendence/contingency, is most relevant for the present study, for it is the radical contingency of the human experience that gives rise to the longing for the beyond, for that which endures and for the unconditioned.

Heidegger writes:

Transcendence can be considered the opposite of contingency. The contingent is what touches us, what pertains to us, that with which we are on the same footing, that which belongs to our kind and sort. The transcendent, on the contrary, is what is beyond all this as that which conditions it, as the unconditioned, but at the same time as the really unattainable, what exceeds us. Transcendence is stepping over in the sense of lying beyond conditioned beings.<sup>157</sup>

The opposition of transcendence to immanence leads to the theory of knowledge, so Heidegger calls this conception *epistemological* transcendence. The opposition of transcendence to contingency leads to speculation about the Beyond, the Absolute or God, as that which expresses an infinite difference in degree of being; so this conception may be called *theological* transcendence. These two conceptions, says Heidegger, are usually conjoined in discussions regarding transcendence in general and all theological

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<sup>155</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 160.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 161.

metaphysics operates through the entanglement of these two problems. “This tangle of partially and falsely posed problems is continually confused in ontological philosophy and systematic theology; the tangle gets passed along from hand to hand and the state of entanglements gets further confused by receiving a new name.”<sup>158</sup>

Heidegger offers a solution to the entanglement by way of his inquiry into the nature of temporality and freedom. “For Heidegger, the horizon of temporality is the ultimate condition of [the] possibility of transcendence.”<sup>159</sup> The human person’s possibility of selfhood is worked out through the horizon of temporality that is experienced as past, present and future. “Horizon” literally means the circumference of the field of vision, but *Dasein* experiences horizontality as that which delimits and encloses. *Dasein* projects itself onto temporal horizons in the awareness of “having been” and the expectation of the “not yet.” Past, present and future are the “ecstasies” of temporality. Each *ecstasis* produces a horizon of possibility, but this horizon is not located in the sphere of the subject; “it is neither spatially nor temporally located.” “This ecstematic unity of the horizon of temporality is nothing other than the temporal condition for the possibility of *world* and of world’s essential belonging to *transcendence*.”<sup>160</sup>

The fundamental bearing of *Dasein*, Heidegger says, is a kind of “crossing over.”

*Dasein* surpasses things by encountering them within a world.

Because transcendence is the basic constitution of *Dasein*, it belongs foremost to its being and is not a comportment that is derived later. And because this primordial being of *Dasein*, as surpassing, crosses over to a world, we

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<sup>158</sup> Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, 162.

<sup>159</sup> Wood, “Topologies of Transcendence,” 173.

<sup>160</sup> Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, 208.

characterize the basic phenomenon of Dasein's transcendence with the expression *being-in-the world*.<sup>161</sup>

This sketch of Heidegger's theory serves the purposes of this study by providing an example of an alternative way to think transcendence. Heidegger shows us that, unlike other objects or animals that merely sit inside the world with no reflective consciousness, human beings are openly aware of the world and struggle with it. Graham Harman says that, "Dasein is actually *nothing but* transcendence."<sup>162</sup> Being in the world and aware of it means that human beings rise above the world. "Dasein is inherently something alien to nature; human existence is a fateful tear or rupture in the fabric of the world."<sup>163</sup> Only *Dasein* experiences the ecstasies of temporality. It remains to think through the ways in which Heidegger's proposal might help to resolve questions relating to transcendence in Confucian thought. But he has provided a crucial observation regarding the ways in which transcendence is tied to our experience of limits. When we encounter the boundaries of identity, knowledge, biological existence and consciousness, we are faced with opportunities to live authentically and courageously in the world or to retreat fearfully into inauthentic existence. I agree with David Wood's insight that "the significance of transcendence is always to be found in the character of our response to these various limits, and is always betrayed by understanding transcendence literally."<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, 166.

<sup>162</sup> Graham Harman, *Heidegger Explained: From Phenomenon to Thing* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2007), 51.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>164</sup> Wood, "Topologies of Transcendence," 175.

### Other Influences on Vattimo's Weak Thought

As outlined in the previous chapter, Vattimo follows Nietzsche and Heidegger in the post-metaphysical direction of their thought. Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God encapsulated his conviction that Western society had abandoned its belief in a transcendent moral and cosmic order. When values can no longer be based upon foundations in divine command or natural law, persons are left to devise their own systems of values and morals. Nietzsche's *Übermensch* is one with the courage to create new values within the moral vacuum of nihilism. Such values have no metaphysical anchor; instead they are an expression of the individual's will to power.

Heidegger juxtaposes Nietzsche's "death of God" announcement with the end of speculative metaphysics. Heidegger believes metaphysics, as conceived in the history of Western philosophy, is a misguided project. Metaphysics has confused Being with the presence of beings or objects, thereby occasioning the actual forgetfulness or oblivion of true Being. He identifies metaphysics with *onto-theology*, a term representing the effort, since Aristotle, to ground being in an absolute Being or uncaused cause. In his essay, "The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics," Heidegger says, "Since the early days of Western thought, Being has been interpreted as the ground or foundation [*Grund*] in which every being as a being is grounded."<sup>165</sup> As philosophy seeks a ground or all-founding Being, it naturally turns to the question of "highest Being," which becomes the God of speculative metaphysics. Seeking to answer the question, "How does the deity enter into philosophy?" Heidegger writes:

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<sup>165</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics," in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 32.

Because Being appears as ground, beings are what is grounded; the highest being, however, is what accounts in the sense of giving the first cause. When metaphysics thinks of beings with respect to the ground that is common to all beings as such, then it is logic as onto-logic. When metaphysics thinks of beings as such as a whole, that is with respect to the highest being which accounts for everything, then it is logic as theo-logic. . . .

. . . The onto-theological constitution of metaphysics stems from the prevalence of that difference which keeps Being as the ground, and beings as what is grounded and what gives account, apart from and related to each other; and by this keeping, perdurance is achieved.<sup>166</sup>

The perdurance of metaphysics as onto-theology is precisely what has reached a point of disintegration, according to Heidegger. The confusion engendered by onto-theology has prevented philosophy from considering Being as something that is not itself a being. At the same time, onto-theology has characterized the divine as a philosophical construct—a *causa sui*—lacking in qualities that would inspire worship or devotion.

Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god.

This god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as *causa sui*, is thus perhaps closer to the divine God. Here this means only: god-less thinking is more open to Him than onto-theo-logic would like to admit.<sup>167</sup>

So, the effect of both the “death of God” and the end of metaphysics is to undermine the foundations for belief in a transcendent *arche* or “self-caused cause” and, in so doing, to open the way for particular, historical and immanent forms of religiousness. In place of onto-theology, Vattimo calls for an “ontology of actuality,” a term borrowed from Foucault, who intended it as a turn to “events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are thinking, doing,

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<sup>166</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Onto-theo-logical Constitution,” 70-71.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.



saying.”<sup>168</sup> Whereas onto-theology sought to ground Truth (capital-T) in the unchanging essence of a supreme being, the ontology of actuality, according to Vattimo, looks for truth in the world of contingent events, where consensus is the fragile outcome of dialogue and interpretation.

Defined as the ontology of actuality, philosophy is practiced as an interpretation of the epoch, a giving-form to widely felt sentiments about the meaning of being alive in a certain society and in a certain historical world. I am well aware that defining philosophy as the Hegelian spirit of the age is like reinventing the wheel. The difference, though, lies in the “interpretation”: philosophy is not the expression of the age, it is interpretation, and although it does strive to be persuasive, it also acknowledges its own contingency, liberty, perilousness.<sup>169</sup>

The ontology of actuality comports well with Vattimo’s account of the weakening of being. Being is an event: not something that “is,” but something that “comes about” in time.<sup>170</sup> The truth of Being is not disclosed to the human mind as an objectively stable structure of the totality of things, undergirded by a demiurge; rather, Being reveals itself in the historical context of human experiences and relationships—especially in communication by language. Vattimo is not offering a linguistification of Being; rather, he believes Being reveals itself, becomes manifest, through language. In *Not Being God*, Vattimo writes, “Being . . . eventuates in language. But how? In conversation. In the living language, that is, that a humanity speaks. Naturally, it—Being—isn’t an offshoot of language, but that’s its mode of occurrence.”<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?” in *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley, et al (New York: New Press, 1997), 315.

<sup>169</sup> Vattimo, “Philosophy, Metaphysics, Democracy,” in *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 87-88.

<sup>170</sup> Vattimo, “Postmodernity, Technology, Ontology,” in *Nihilism & Emancipation*, 6.

<sup>171</sup> Vattimo, *Not Being God*, 109.

Vattimo's student and interpreter, Santiago Zabala, has developed this line of thought in his teacher's philosophy. Whereas Vattimo's interest in "the ontology of actuality" placed emphases on the "actuality" side of Foucault's formula, Zabala's focus has been on the "ontology." Zabala says, "[T]he idea for me was to find a concept of Being weak enough to surpass metaphysics in order to continue its journey. . . . I suggested "conversation" (which I still consider today the most suitable postmetaphysical remnant of Being)."<sup>172</sup> Vattimo has endorsed Zabala's work as "a brilliant intuition, drawn a bit from Rorty, a bit from Gadamer, but a fascinating novelty."<sup>173</sup>

The main idea of Zabala's exposition is that the locus of Being's eventuation is not language *per se*, but that use of language we call *conversation*. Heidegger had said, "Language is the house of being, which is appropriated and pervaded by being."<sup>174</sup> Gadamer expanded on this insight, pointing out that language is also the house of the *human* being, "where one lives, which one furnishes, and where one encounters oneself, or oneself in others." Language occurs in a community in which language users find their place in relation to one another. Community, for Gadamer, "is living together in language, and language exists only in conversation."<sup>175</sup> In community, persons catch glimpses of Being as they seek truth by means of conversation. In this phenomenon of human conversation, Zabala finds a concept of "worn out Being" weak enough to surpass

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<sup>172</sup> Columbia University Press, "Interview With Santiago Zabala: Author of *The Remains of Being*," <http://cup.columbia.edu/static/zabala-interview-the-remains-of-being> (accessed November 28, 2011).

<sup>173</sup> Vattimo, *Not Being God*, 108.

<sup>174</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism (1946)," in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeil, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 254.

<sup>175</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer in Conversation: Reflections and Commentary*, ed. & trans. Richard E. Palmer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.), 56.

metaphysics and provide an ontology of actuality. He writes: “Being is on the way to language because language’s nature is conversational, and only through conversation can Being be understood, because it comes into language in conversation and not the other way around.”<sup>176</sup>

When Zabala speaks of “Being on the way to language,” he is borrowing the language of Heidegger from the book, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, published under the English title, *On the Way to Language*.<sup>177</sup> In Heidegger’s thought, world and thing are not separate realities, but interpenetrate without dissolving together. World and thing are unified in “the between;” this “between” is where language resides. Language is being as it is viewed in the interplay of world and thing.<sup>178</sup>

In summary of Zabala’s position, being eventuates in conversation because conversation is the form of language that takes place in community where ideas are proffered, refined and where consensus is sought. This consensus does not result from the discovery of truth; *it is truth*. Zabala writes, “Wherever there is an authority that, in the guise of a scientific or ecclesiastical community, imposes something as objective truth, philosophy has the obligation to proceed in the opposite direction: to show that truth is never objectivity but always interpersonal dialogue that takes effect in the sharing of a language.”<sup>179</sup> For philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Rorty and Vattimo, “objectivity is a question of ‘intersubjective linguistic consensus’ between human beings

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<sup>176</sup> Santiago Zabala, *The Remains of Being: Hermeneutic Ontology After Metaphysics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 80.

<sup>177</sup> Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

<sup>178</sup> Harman, *Heidegger Explained*, 144.

<sup>179</sup> Zabala, “Introduction,” *The Future of Religion*, 8.

and not some sort of accurate representation of something that transcends the human sphere.”<sup>180</sup>

On first reading, the notion of truth as “intersubjective linguistic consensus” may appear hopelessly tenuous and relativistic. On this basis, are we not obliged to endorse as “truth” the opinions of any misguided collection of individuals, regardless of their agenda? For example, members of the Taliban have come to a consensus about their political goals and the ways to achieve them. According to their understanding of “truth,” the Quran justifies terroristic acts toward their enemies and violent oppression of women. Since, according to Vattimo, there is no objective moral basis upon which to discredit the Taliban’s belief system, is their “truth” to be accorded equal validity with the truths of other more mainstream communities of language users? Certainly, the members of the Taliban are convinced of the truth of their beliefs, and their conviction is reinforced by intersubjective agreement among their fellows.

It can be argued that all post-metaphysical accounts of truth are vulnerable to charges of subjectivism and relativism. But the foregoing paragraph would be a caricature of Vattimo’s theory of truth. He is not suggesting that any and all accounts of truth offered by groups of language users have equal cogency. Rather, he is explicating the post-metaphysical insight that truth-claims never make contact with the bedrock of reality. Truth claims are contextual and provisional, based upon the most acceptable interpretation of the evidence (experience) available.

Nietzsche’s dictum, “There are no facts, only interpretations,” is to be applied even in the realm of science. For, as Thomas Kuhn’s research on scientific paradigms

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<sup>180</sup> Zabala, “Introduction,” *The Future of Religion*, 4.

has shown, the natural sciences do not enjoy a privileged relationship to “the world as it is.” Kuhn defines paradigms as “universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners.”<sup>181</sup> In other words, the community of those best qualified to interpret the findings of scientific experimentation offer an explanatory model most adequate to account for the data gathered *so far*. But the scientific method is always open to new findings that may render previous paradigms obsolete. For example, Ptolemaic geocentrism gives way to Copernican cosmology and Newtonian mechanics surrenders to Einsteinian relativity. Each paradigm, in its time, is “true” in the sense of being the most comprehensive account available. Intersubjective linguistic consensus is achieved when a sufficient number of members in the scientific community agree on the conclusions of research.

But even specialists in a given field do not always achieve consensus. Though presented with identical data, their interpretation of the evidence may lead members of the community to different, even opposing, conclusions. For example, physicists seeking to unify the theories of quantum mechanics with general relativity are exploring the potential of string theory to offer a “theory of everything.” But string theory elicits widely divergent assessments, with some physicists refusing to consider it as serious science.<sup>182</sup> Where is truth in such cases? Is it an elusive property of the universe yet to be discovered? According to Kuhn, the goals of the scientific inquiry are more modest.

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<sup>181</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), x.

<sup>182</sup> See, for example, John Horgan, *The End of Science: Facing the Limits of Knowledge in the Twilight of the Scientific Age* (Boston: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1996).

By its own presuppositions, the scientific method allows that when “truth” is discovered, it will last only until a more comprehensive account, a new paradigm, is achieved.

Kuhn does not agree with everyone who has appropriated his thought to bolster postmetaphysical accounts of truth. In answer to charges of relativism, Kuhn describes his belief that there is progression in scientific research. Historical theories may be likened to branches on a tree, later theories developing naturally out of earlier ones. An observer would be able to tell which theory was older and which was the descendant. Kuhn writes, “For me, . . . scientific development is, like biological evolution, unidirectional and irreversible. One scientific theory is not as good as another for doing what scientists normally do. In that sense I am not a relativist.”<sup>183</sup>

But there is a sense in which Kuhn allows that his theory of scientific paradigms is relativistic, a sense that is most relevant for the present discussion. While Kuhn believes in scientific progress from one theory to another, he rejects the inference that this brings us closer to final truth. Kuhn is not a scientific realist.

[T]here is another step, or kind of step, which many philosophers of science wish to take and which I refuse. They wish, that is, to compare theories as representations of nature, as statements about ‘what is really out there.’ Granting that neither theory of a historical pair is true, they nonetheless seek a sense in which the later is a better approximation to the truth. I believe nothing of that sort can be found. On the other hand I no longer feel that anything is lost, least of all the ability to explain scientific progress, by taking this position.<sup>184</sup>

Kuhn’s insights on scientific paradigms are important for Vattimo’s theory of the weakening of metaphysical structures. Under the Enlightenment model, science was

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<sup>183</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, “Reflections On My Critics,” in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge: Proceedings of the International Colloquium in the Philosophy of Science, London, 1965, Vol. 4*, ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 264.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

ontologically privileged, presumed competent to reveal the nature of things. Though truth might prove elusive in ethics or the social sciences, the natural sciences, it was thought, were the province of certainty. But now it is recognized that scientific knowledge is subject to the same historical-contextual constraints as knowledge in other fields of inquiry. Vattimo contends that the historicity of scientific paradigms is not dissimilar to that which attends to non-scientific conceptions of truth.

The rise and fall of scientific paradigms are complex historical events, which cannot be explained according to the logic of the proof and of confutation. What occurs in our everyday language also occurs within science: we experience things in the world only on the basis of forms that we have inherited, together with the other forms of our existence.<sup>185</sup>

In all fields, including science, truth itself is becoming an affair of consensus, listening, participation in a shared enterprise, rather than one-to-one correspondence with the pure hard objectivity of things: this objectivity is only conceivable as the outcome of a social labor that binds humans to one another rather than to the “reality” of objects.<sup>186</sup>

It remains to examine in greater detail the way Vattimo develops his account of secularization in western culture. As applied to the question of being, Vattimo offers the Christian doctrine of *kenosis* as the theological metaphor that best captures the transition from transcendence to immanence. The following chapters will explore the ways religiousness is experienced and articulated from within an immanental worldview.

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<sup>185</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 6-7.

<sup>186</sup> Vattimo, “Philosophy and the Decline of the West,” 35.

### CHAPTER 3. RELIGIOUSNESS—THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SACRED

Following from the discussion of transcendence, the next two chapters deal with the central topic of the study: religiousness. As previously stated, an immanent worldview does not preclude the possibility of a rich spirituality. The Confucian texts and the philosophy of Gianni Vattimo offer examples of religiousness that do not appeal to categories of transcendence. I will examine how each of the two expressions accounts for religious experience and offers principles for ethical conduct centered on human inter-relationship.

#### Vattimo's Secularized Religiousness

Consistent with his “weak thought,” Vattimo makes no claim for the objective existence of the God toward which his creatural feelings of dependence are directed. “God” is a name, a construct mediated to him by way of the traditions that produced the historical moment in which Vattimo was born and educated. However, it is also true that Vattimo does not discount the possibility of God’s existence. He believes the grounds for insistence on God’s nonexistence have been discredited in the postmetaphysical age. What is called for is “weak thinking,” a philosophical stance that enables Vattimo to endorse the paradoxical statements: “Thank God, I am an atheist,”<sup>187</sup> and “We cannot not call ourselves Christians.”<sup>188</sup> Vattimo rejects religion embodied in the dogmatic theology and hierarchical authority of the institutional church and, in its place, offers a post-theological, radically historicized version of Christianity.

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<sup>187</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 96.

<sup>188</sup> Vattimo, “The Age of Interpretation,” 54.



### **Christian *Kenosis* as Dissolution of Metaphysical Structures**

Vattimo's theory of secularization is tied to his conviction that Christianity is inseparable from the history of Western civilization and, most importantly, from the decline of the West. For Vattimo, this decline "signifies the dissolution of the idea that there was a unitary significance and direction to the history of mankind."<sup>189</sup> Modernity was informed and energized by the myth of Western cultural superiority. Perceiving Enlightenment culture to be the apex of civilization, the West "felt itself called upon to civilize, as well as colonize, convert, and subdue, all the other peoples with whom it came in contact."<sup>190</sup> The sustaining metanarrative of early modernity conceived European expansion as a benefit to non-Western peoples, ushering them into the light of reason and the truth of Christian teaching.

But contained within the metanarrative of modernity were the seeds of its demise. Philosophies based on reason increasingly questioned the authority of scripture, popes and kings. Scientific discoveries dispelled mysteries and reduced the Almighty to a "God of the gaps." By late modernity, the myth of inexorable human progress had disintegrated. Among factors that made belief in progress impossible to sustain were continual wars between "enlightened" states, the failure of the colonial experiment and the recognition that the Eurocentric narrative was unable to accommodate the plurality of cultures in the world. All these developments led ineluctably toward secularization, described by Vattimo as the process of unmasking the sacrality of all absolute, ultimate truths. He interprets the history of modernity as "a weakening and dissolution of

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<sup>189</sup> Vattimo, "Philosophy and the Decline of the West," 21.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

(metaphysical) Being;” it is “the process of ‘drifting’ that removed modern lay civilization from its sacral origin.”<sup>191</sup> In religion, this process was constituted by “the Church’s loss of temporal authority and human reason’s increasing autonomy from its dependence upon an absolute God.”<sup>192</sup> In politics, the drift was seen in “the transformation of state power, from the divinely sanctioned to constitutional monarchy up to contemporary representative democracies.”<sup>193</sup> Though secularization brings with it certain developments that are welcome, it is not viewed as progress in the sense that a teleological view of history might ascribe to it; indeed, in a postmodern world, the myth of progress is exposed as a metaphysical prejudice.

In contrast to other hermeneutical philosophers of religion, Vattimo believes secularization is a good thing for society in general, and he sees the secularizing process as the outworking of the central truth of Christianity: the incarnation of God into the human life of Jesus Christ. The impetus for the dissolution of strong metaphysical structures comes from the text of the Christian gospel. If *agape*, or charity (self-sacrificing love), as taught and demonstrated by Jesus is the essence of the Christian message, it must be delivered from the violence inherent in ontotheological metaphysics and authoritarian ecclesiastical structures. From its early centuries, Christian theology had been infected with Hellenic philosophy, leading to a conception of God as pure intelligibility and the ground of existence. Heidegger, as quoted earlier, observed that humans are moved neither to pray nor to sacrifice to a god who is *causa sui*, the unmoved

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<sup>191</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 40-41.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

and impassive Supreme Being. Vattimo says we should welcome the death of this god and embrace the biblical God portrayed in Christ.

[S]ince God can no longer be upheld as an ultimate foundation, as the absolute metaphysical structure of the real, it is possible, once again, to believe in God. True, it is not the god of metaphysics or of medieval scholasticism. But that is not the God of the Bible, of the Book that was dissolved and dismissed by modern rationalist and absolutist metaphysics.<sup>194</sup>

Before considering Vattimo's use of the Christian doctrine of *kenosis*, it will be helpful to summarize the orthodox account of this dogma. It is based on a brief section in the *Letter of St. Paul to the Philippians* in the New Testament. In chapter 2, verses 5-8, Paul writes:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.<sup>195</sup>

The word translated “emptied,” is a form of the Greek verb, κενόω (*kenóō*), meaning “to empty” or “to make empty.” The noun form is κένωσις (*kénōsis*), from which the term “kenotic theology” derives. According to Trinitarian theology, Christ, the Son of God, is eternally preexistent and shares the divine essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit. For God to become human would necessitate a metamorphosis on a grand scale. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* states that *kenóō*, as applied to Christ, “can hardly mean that Christ negated himself, nor is it suggested that he aspires beyond his existing state. The point, then, is that Christ does not selfishly exploit his

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<sup>194</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 6.

<sup>195</sup> Philippians 2:5-8 (New Revised Standard Version Bible, 2011).

divine form but lays it aside to take the form of a servant. The preexistent Lord is the subject. He remains himself, but changes his mode of being.”<sup>196</sup>

Discussions of *kenosis* have focused on the questions, “Of what did the Son of God empty himself?” and “How were the divine attributes altered when Christ took on human form?” Certainly, the attributes of omnipresence and omnipotence (Christ’s miracles notwithstanding) had to be relinquished. Furthermore, there are passages in the Gospel accounts that suggest Christ was not omniscient. For example, he claimed ignorance regarding the precise dates of future events. Though the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) had affirmed the doctrine of the union of two natures in Christ—*truly God, truly man*—it remained unclear what it meant to say that Christ was “fully human” during the period of his incarnation. Some scholars argue that Paul’s use of *kenosis* is not intended to describe a change in the ontological status of the second person of the Trinity. Rather, self-emptying is a description of the sacrificial love of Christ that allowed him to suffer and die for the benefit of all humanity. Others insist that the incarnation required a forfeiture of qualities that are essential to divinity as traditionally understood.

In the biblical metaphor of *kenosis*, Vattimo finds a religious counterpart to the philosophical weakening of being. In the incarnation of Christ, the transcendent God pours himself out onto the plain of human relationships. As the prologue to the *Gospel of John* states, “The Word [*logos*] became flesh and lived among us.”<sup>197</sup> This immanentization of God’s presence finds its most stunning expression in the words of

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<sup>196</sup> Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. & abridged, Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 427.

<sup>197</sup> John 1:14 (New Revised Standard Version Bible, 1989).

Jesus to his disciples: “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, . . .”<sup>198</sup> As the movement of God corresponding to the end of metaphysics, *kenosis* redirects the quest for truth away from first principles grounded in supreme Being and toward communities of human beings, where truth is manifest in friendship and conversation.

The deity depicted in many postmodern theological accounts is a remote and transcendent being requiring a leap of faith for any who would believe in such a God. Vattimo criticizes these accounts as “theologies of the wholly other” and parts company with Levinas, Derrida and others who see secularization as a tragic fall, widening the breach between human beings and God.<sup>199</sup>

The philosophical reasons that lead us to recover religion . . . oblige us to be suspicious of an excessive emphasis on the transcendence of God, as mystery, radical alterity, and paradox. Only the “leap” of faith, understood as the acceptance of absurdity could correspond to that concept of God. In other words, God as the wholly other of which much of contemporary religious philosophy speaks is not the incarnate Christian God.<sup>200</sup>

Why does Vattimo privilege the Christian faith in his exposition of weak thought? He believes the event-like character of Being could not have been discovered except as the outcome of the biblical message of *kenosis*.

God is incarnated, *and thus* is first revealed in the biblical pronouncement that ultimately ‘gives rise’ to the post-metaphysical conception of the event-like character of Being. . . . If you will: it is the fact of the Incarnation that confers on history the sense of a redemptive revelation, as opposed to a confused

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<sup>198</sup> John 15:15a (New Revised Standard Version Bible, 1989).

<sup>199</sup> Vattimo writes, “For Derrida, the openness to the divine seems to have this meaning only: to say ‘*Viens*’ to someone of whom we know absolutely nothing.” (*After Christianity*, 37).

<sup>200</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 38.

accumulation of happenings that unsettle the pure structural quality of true Being.<sup>201</sup>

In other words, the postmetaphysical milieu into which the West has emerged cannot be understood apart from the recognition of its provenance in the Christian tradition.

Furthermore, Vattimo says it was the message of *kenosis* that was the catalyst for his personal return to religion: “I confess that I experienced the clarification of this notion of weak ontology as the ‘transcription’ of the Christian message as a great event, as a kind of decisive discovery. I believe that this is because it allowed me to re-establish a continuity with my own personal religious origin; . . .”<sup>202</sup> But this should not be taken to mean that Vattimo embraced the institutional practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Neither did he feel compelled to adhere to orthodox interpretations of scripture. For example, the *kenosis* text cited earlier, after describing the humiliation of the Son of God during the Incarnation, is followed directly by these words:

Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.<sup>203</sup>

Historic Christian teaching affirms that the *kenosis* was only for the human lifetime of Jesus. Following the “emptying,” there was a restoration to Christ of full status as God in heaven with the Father. Vattimo’s application of scripture is selective—not disingenuous, but clearly suited to the goals of his philosophical project.

It is important to distinguish Vattimo’s understanding of the “death of God” from other thinkers who have appropriated this notion for their philosophies. Vattimo

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<sup>201</sup> Vattimo, “The Trace of the Trace,” 92.

<sup>202</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 39-40.

<sup>203</sup> Philippians 2:9-11 (New Revised Standard Version Bible, 1989).

embraces Nietzsche's announcement for the same reasons Heidegger does so, namely, as the declaration in religious terms of a phenomenon that parallels the end of metaphysics in philosophy. "God is dead, and we have killed him," is Nietzsche's way of saying that a God who exists only as a human projection cannot be sustained when the morality based on God's existence has been betrayed and discarded by his followers. Thomas J. J. Altizer, however, interpreted the death of God literally, saying the crucifixion of Jesus represented God's "self-extinction," the pouring out of his spirit into the world. Utilizing Hegel's theory of the dialectical process of the self-negation of Being, Altizer sees *kenosis* as God's redemptive action, a shifting of residence by which God transforms the profane world by his sacred presence.<sup>204</sup> In this view, the movement from transcendence to immanence is something that actually happens in and through God, by God's own initiative.

While *kenosis* serves a central role in the thought of both Altizer and Vattimo, the latter is less Hegelian and more Heideggerian in his conception of Being. *Kenosis*, for Vattimo, cannot be a literal description of metaphysical events, for this would constitute a betrayal of weak thinking. Rather, *kenosis* offers an evocative metaphor for envisioning the shift from transcendence to immanence in the postmetaphysical epoch. The truth of *kenosis*/secularization is not advanced as the true description of reality, but as the interpretation most appropriate to the current historical moment. The Bible offers abundant stories, images and metaphors for thinking about God. Unfortunately, under the influence of Greek philosophy (and in the hands of ecclesiastical guardians of the

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<sup>204</sup> See Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The New Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 2002), 51-60.

faith) a predilection had been shown for images that portrayed God as remote, transcendent and unknowable. However, religious sensibilities at the end of the metaphysical era serve to foreground those scriptures that present earth-bound, human-centered pictures of divine activity. This is what Vattimo finds in the story of God's self-emptying in the incarnation of Christ.

### **Vattimo's Account of Religious Experience**

If secularization is the “constitutive trait of authentic religious experience,” as Vattimo claims, then what are the contours of secularized spirituality? If postmodern religiousness has been disentangled from religion—its laws, creeds and false certitude—how is the religious sensibility lived out in the present age? Vattimo's interpretation of religious experience draws heavily from Heidegger's “being-as-event” and from Friedrich Schleiermacher's treatment of religious experience. The following quotation cites both influences.

Is what Schleiermacher called the pure feeling of dependence the only sense left in the use of the term ‘father’? Probably yes, and once again this is the kernel that, in my view, cannot be an object of reduction or demythification; I am not sure why, but it is certain that my entire argument concerning the overcoming of metaphysics—which has led me to no longer speak of Being as the eternal structure—leads me to think of Being as event, and accordingly, as something begun by an initiative that is not mine. The historicity of my existence is provenance, and emancipation—salvation or redemption—consists in recognizing that Being is event, a recognition that enables me to enter actively into history, instead of passively contemplating its necessary laws. Once again, this is the meaning of the statement ‘I no longer call you servants but friends.’<sup>205</sup>

The book, *Belief*, from which this quotation is taken, is a deeply personal account of Vattimo's return to religion. As such, the book offers important descriptions of

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<sup>205</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 78.



secularized religious experience, as Vattimo understands it. First, Vattimo makes reference to Schleiermacher's "pure feeling of dependence." Like Schleiermacher, Vattimo seeks a validation of religious experience that is not dependent upon the dogmas of the church. Schleiermacher said, "Dogmas are not, properly speaking, part of religion: rather it is that they are derived from it. Religion is the miracle of direct relationship with the infinite and dogmas are the reflection of this miracle."<sup>206</sup> Schleiermacher was also reacting against the Enlightenment mentality that discredited any experience that did not conform to a Newtonian mechanistic view of the universe. Schleiermacher rooted religion in subjective feeling, the sense of absolute dependence that arises when human beings are confronted with their own finitude and contingency. In Schleiermacher's words, "The common element in all howsoever diverse expressions of piety, by which these are conjointly distinguished from all other feelings, or, in other words, the self-identical essence of piety, is this: the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or, which is the same thing, of being in relation with God."<sup>207</sup> Piety or the feeling of dependence on God is a species of experience that is different from, but not in conflict with, reason or science.

Vattimo invokes "the pure feeling of dependence" for different reasons than did Schleiermacher. Because the Enlightenment confidence in scientific method and self-evident truths has waned, Vattimo is not motivated by the need to reconcile science and

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<sup>206</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, 1799 edition, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), quoted in Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 18.

<sup>207</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. H. R. Macintosh, ed. J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, Ltd., 1999), 12.

faith. Furthermore, the erosion of epistemological foundations means religious authority no longer rests on the theological dogmas and papal pronouncements of the church. Postmodern nihilism opens the way for a return to religion, but not in the form of renewed metaphysical structures. Vattimo writes, “Religiosity can be defined only in Schleiermacher’s terms, as the pure feeling of absolute dependence on an infinitude, which obviously does not allow itself to be defined in positive or metaphysical terms.”<sup>208</sup>

Schleiermacher’s religious feeling is appropriated by Vattimo as a way of expressing what the “return to religion” means for him personally. It cannot be a “returning to the father’s house (as a Catholic discipline), filled with repentance, prepared to abase oneself and to mortify one’s intellectual pride.”<sup>209</sup> Rather, the return is an affirmation that the feelings of dependence Vattimo experiences are directed toward the God of the Christian scriptures (not the God of Greek philosophy, nor of speculative onto-theology), which is another way of saying his religious feelings are shaped by his own historicity within the tradition of biblical Christianity. In a published dialogue with Richard Rorty and Santiago Zabala, Vattimo describes this deep sense of connection to the tradition shaped by the sacred texts of Christianity.

Religion has always implied a sort of feeling of dependence and for me this is still valid because when I speak of the God of the Bible, I speak of the God which I know only through the Bible, which is not a subject outside, because my dependence on God is my dependence only on the biblical tradition, on the fact

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<sup>208</sup> Vattimo, “Nihilism as Postmodern Christianity,” in *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 48.

<sup>209</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 75.

that in the past they could not think without biblical conditions and meanings. So this is my creatural feeling, I depend on it, and I can't do without it.<sup>210</sup>

The weakening of the metaphysical structures to which religion has appealed for sanction of its doctrinal and ethical teachings does not undermine the possibility of strong religious feelings. On the contrary, Vattimo would contend that religious experience in a postmetaphysical, post-foundational age is especially poignant and filled with wonder because persons are compelled to confront the mysteries of existence without recourse to universal and self-evident truths.

Religiousness in the postmodern epoch must hold itself “within the horizon of [a] twofold sense of positivity: createdness as a concrete and highly determined historicity, but also, . . . historicity as provenance, from an origin that, as not metaphysically structural and essential, also has all the features of contingency and freedom.”<sup>211</sup>

Dwelling within this horizon is not easy. On the one hand, the consciousness of finitude and “createdness” can lead to the imposition of a “leap” into transcendence. Or, on the other hand, this awareness of historicity can take the form of reduction of the divine to historical determinism, in the way of Hegel.<sup>212</sup> The challenge is to preserve a sense of createdness and dependence (in Schleiermacher’s sense) without compromising the contingency and freedom that characterize authentic existence in the postmetaphysical age.

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<sup>210</sup> Richard Rorty, Gianni Vattimo, and Santiago Zabala, “What is Religion’s Future After Metaphysics?” in *The Future of Religion*, Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 77-8.

<sup>211</sup> Vattimo, “The Trace of the Trace,” 85.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

Vattimo's "twofold sense of positivity" is narrated most appropriately in the language of myth. Myth allows the positive connection of religiousness with a particular provenance without demand for a literalistic reading of the texts of that tradition. "In myth, as a general term for positivity are gathered all the typically positive elements of religious experience as it recurs in our present condition; elements that, like myth, are not wholly translatable into the terms of rational argumentation: for example, more than guilt and sin, the need for forgiveness."<sup>213</sup> "Forgiveness," a word and concept so intimately associated with the Christian faith, must be redescribed in terms amenable to secularized spirituality. Vattimo attempts the redescription as follows:

[I]t becomes more intelligible if we recognize that we all stand in need of forgiveness; not because we have broken sacred principles that were metaphysically sanctioned, but rather because we have 'failed' toward those whom we were supposed to love—God himself perhaps (who is not, as we have often been told, identical with the natural law) and the neighbour through whom God becomes present for us.<sup>214</sup>

Along with the sense of needing forgiveness, Vattimo cites other features of religious experience: how one confronts the enigmas of pain and death (one's own and that of others) and the experience of prayer, which he describes as "among the most difficult to translate into philosophically meaningful terms."<sup>215</sup> All of these are ways of encountering the radical contingency of existence, yet they are accompanied by a sense of belonging to the Hebraic-Christian tradition, albeit in a weakened sense.

The second key aspect of Vattimo's religiousness, following after, and closely related to, the feeling of dependence, is his experience and understanding of "Being as

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<sup>213</sup> Vattimo, "The Trace of the Trace," 86.

<sup>214</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 90.

<sup>215</sup> Vattimo, "The Trace of the Trace," 87.

event,” in distinction from “Being as the eternal structure.” In the quotation at the beginning of this section, Vattimo says, “[I]t is certain that my entire argument concerning the overcoming of metaphysics . . . leads me to think of Being as event, and accordingly, as something begun by an initiative that is not mine.” The event character of Being is experienced as the hermeneutic engagement of interpreting and being interpreted by texts, (“texts,” being understood in the broader sense of life experiences). “The experience of the postmodern subject—[Vattimo] claims—resembles that of an ‘interpreter’ who is not the author of his or her own text. In other words, there is an awareness of belonging to a chain of messages ‘as a moment of a process, which can never come to closure, which includes and transcends them’.”<sup>216</sup> Luca D’Isanto, in his Introduction to *Belief*, elaborates on Vattimo’s meaning:

The trace of the divine lies precisely in the initiative coming from the outside, to which the subject responds through an act of interpretation. . . . God is disclosed as a trace that makes itself felt in our language, and which appeals to us through the dialogical force of charity.<sup>217</sup>

The event character of being, as expounded by Heidegger, is only visible from the inside of a world. *Dasein* cannot be known by scientific observation; rather, it is an elusive, shadowy event that always exceeds and transcends any properties that might be ascribed to it. An event is experienced as that which summons and compels response, as in the “dialogical force of charity,” cited above by D’Isanto.

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<sup>216</sup> Luca D’Isanto, introduction to *Belief*, Gianni Vattimo, 7-8.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

Another of Vattimo's dialogue partners, John Caputo, in language sympathetic to Vattimo's project, says, "Events call and recall."<sup>218</sup>

An event is not precisely what happens, which is what the word suggests in English, but something going on *in* what happens, something that is being expressed or realized or given shape in what happens; it is not something present, but something seeking to make itself felt in what is present. . . . Accordingly, I would distinguish between a *name* and the event that is astir or that transpires in a name. . . . Names are historical, contingent, provisional expressions in natural languages, while events are what names are trying to form or formulate, nominate or denominate.<sup>219</sup>

Vattimo seeks to be especially attentive to the event astir in the name of "God." This name, too, is historical, contingent and provisional. It neither contains nor conveys the event harbored within it. But stirring within the name "God," and in the language of religious experience, may be the "trace of the trace" in which the event makes itself known.

In summary, Vattimo's account of religious experience emphasizes the feeling of dependence on God and the responsibility of hermeneutical engagement with the textual tradition of Western Christianity. The God upon which he depends is not the metaphysical God, but the event that transpires in the name of God and which addresses him in the "chain of messages" that is the Christian inheritance. Faithfulness in the postmetaphysical religious context is not expressed by obedience to divine law or adherence to ecclesiastical forms of worship and discipline, but takes the form of charity extended toward others in friendship and hospitality. The ethical content of Vattimo's religiousness will be considered in the next chapter.

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<sup>218</sup> John D. Caputo, "Spectral Hermeneutics: On the Weakness of God and the Theology of the Event," in *After the Death of God*, by John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 48.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48.

### **Confucian Religiousness: A Sense of Unity With and Participation in Cosmic Order**

As stated in the Introduction, I believe early Confucian thought offers resources for a deep religiousness within a historicist worldview. This section will consider selected texts that support this claim. There is an experience of awe and wonder when a person reflects upon his or her place within the totality of all that exists, or “the ten thousand things” (*wan wu* 萬物). Because this experience is sometimes described in language of transcendence, the exploration of Confucian spirituality must account for the language of transcendence present in the texts and at the same time preserve the immanent cosmology shared by Confucians and Daoists of the period.

Robert Cummings Neville has delineated three elements essential to any religious tradition. First, is “a mythic, philosophical, or theological *cosmology* defining the fundamental structures and limits of the world and forming the basic ways in which cultures and individuals imagine how things are and what they mean.”<sup>220</sup> Though “cosmology,” in its Western connotations, is foreign to the Confucian milieu, the texts reflect deeply upon the “myriad things” (萬物) and the place of human beings among them. Confucianism shares a “cosmology” with Daoism; therefore, I will also reference Daoist texts to help enunciate the holistic and unified order envisioned by these thinkers.

The second essential aspect of religious traditions is *ritual*. “Rituals are a finite set of repeatable and symbolizable actions that epitomize things a tradition takes to be crucial to defining the normative human place in the cosmos.”<sup>221</sup> Under this rubric, we

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<sup>220</sup> Robert Cummings Neville, foreword to *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism*, by Rodney L. Taylor (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), ix. Emphasis added.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

encounter the Confucian quality of *li* (禮), ritual propriety, which subsumes all the humane behaviors (*ren* 仁) that communicate care and respect between human beings.

Neville's third essential is that "a tradition have some conception and practical procedures for fundamental *transformation* aimed to relate persons harmoniously to the normative cosmological elements, a path of perfection."<sup>222</sup> In Confucianism, each of these three aspects of religiousness is inseparable from the others. It is the transformation of one's character through self-cultivation (*xiu shen* 修身) that renders a person capable of manifesting relationally and ritually appropriate conduct. Furthermore, the transformed person (*junzi*) who follows patterns of *li* comes into harmony with *tian* (*tianren heyi* 天人合一) and is able to contribute to *dao* (way-making).

In this section, I will focus on the first aspect, cosmology, though it is understood that owing to the holistic vision of Confucian religiousness, no single aspect can be treated in isolation from the others. As noted earlier, Confucius preferred not to speculate about non-human reality. "The Master had nothing to say about strange happenings, the use of force, disorder, or the spirits."<sup>223</sup> (*Analects* 7.21) His disciples lamented the paucity of their Teacher's comments on these matters: "Zigong said, 'We can learn from the Master's cultural refinements, but do not hear him discourse on subjects such as our "natural disposition (*xing* 性)" and "the way of *tian* (*tiandao* 天道)."<sup>224</sup> When Confucius does speak of *tian* and *dao* it is in connection with human conduct and the interrelations

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<sup>222</sup> Neville, "Foreword," x. Emphasis added.

<sup>223</sup> *Analects* 7.21. 子部語：怪，力，亂，神。

<sup>224</sup> *Analects* 5.13. 子貢曰：夫子之文章，可得而聞也；夫子之言性與天道，不可得而聞也。



of human community with its natural environment and the accumulated wisdom of ancestors. The following samples from the *Analects* serve to illustrate:

The Master said, “I think I will leave off speaking.”

“If you do not speak,” Zigong replied, “how will we your followers find the proper way?”

The Master responded, “Does *tian* 天 speak? And yet the four seasons turn and the myriad things are born and grow within it. Does *tian* speak?”<sup>225</sup>

In the statement, “I think I will leave off speaking” (予欲無言), the graph, 欲 (*yu*), contains an element of longing. “I *want* to stop talking,” or, “I *desire* to be without words,” are possible renderings. The Master’s reticence to speak owes to the Confucian reverence for words and names and to the concern that one’s speech is matched by deeds. Therefore, Confucius said, “The exemplary person (*junzi* 君子) wants to be slow to speak yet quick to act.”<sup>226</sup> Also, “The ancients were loathe to speak because they would be ashamed if they personally did not live up to what they said.”<sup>227</sup>

But, in the reference to *tian* and the rhythm of the seasons, Confucius reveals why he would be content to desist from words. In *tian*, the order of nature does, in fact, speak with great clarity, though not in human language. The fecundity of the earth, the harmonious progression of the seasons, the creative variety within the myriad things—all of these “communicate” in ways that can be received by human creatures. Reflecting the background cosmology shared with Daoism, Confucius is commending a life that is attuned to and cooperative with natural rhythms and patterns.

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<sup>225</sup> *Analects* 17.19. 子曰：予欲無言。子貢曰：子如不言，則小子何述焉？子曰：天何言哉？四時行焉，百物生焉，天何言哉？

<sup>226</sup> *Analects*, 4.24. 君子欲訥於言而敏於行。

<sup>227</sup> *Analects*, 4.22. 古者言之不出，恥躬之不逮也。

The classic texts of Daoism consider human beings in their relationship with, and responsiveness to, *tian*. The *Daodejing* commends a life of non-interfering participation in the creative processes of nature, as in chapter 7:

Heaven is enduring;  
the earth is long lasting.  
The reason why heaven and earth  
can be enduring and long lasting  
is that they do not live for themselves.  
Therefore they can live enduringly.

Therefore the sage  
takes back his own person,  
and will personally be in the front,  
keeps his own person out  
and will personally be established.  
Is this not because he has no self-interest?  
Thus he can bring his self-interest to completion.<sup>228</sup>

*Tian* is perceived as unselfish. In the cycle of the seasons, the earth repeatedly offers up its bounty to those who cultivate it. It is this lack of self-interest that the Daoist wishes to imitate. Therefore, when the sage does not seek to aggrandize himself, his own interests are, ironically, satisfied. Hans-Georg Moeller comments on this chapter of the *Daodejing*: “The sage models himself after the selflessness of nature and thus develops a paradoxical strategy. Because he has the least possible self-interest he qualifies as the leader of humankind. No one is as qualified as him [*sic*] for integrating humankind into the selfless but steady course of nature.”<sup>229</sup>

Another relevant passage comes at the end of chapter 25:

The Dao is great.

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<sup>228</sup> Hans-Georg Moeller, trans., *Daodejing* (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2007), 19. 天長地久。天地所以能長且久者，以其不自生，故能長生。是以聖人後其身而身先，外其身而身存。非以其無私耶？故能成其私。

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

Heaven is great.  
 The earth is great.  
 The king is also great.  
 In the land there are four greats—  
     and the king positions himself where they are one.  
 Humans follow the earth as a rule.  
 The earth follows heaven as a rule.  
 Heaven follows the Dao as a rule.  
 The Dao follows its self-so as a rule.<sup>230</sup>

The final line could be less awkwardly rendered as, “the way [models itself] on that which is naturally so,”<sup>231</sup> or, “way-making emulates what is spontaneously so.”<sup>232</sup>

The term, *ziran* (自然), is definitive of the immanent cosmology presented in these texts. For something to be *ziran* is to be so of itself. It is not the effect of some prior cause or originative force—it is self-creating or co-creating. This understanding is consistent with Wang Bi’s (王弼) third-century commentary on the *Daodejing*, which describes the “self-so-ing” character of *ziran*: “Heaven and earth abide by *tzu-jan* [*ziran*]. Without their doing or making anything, the ten thousand things themselves govern one another and put their affairs into order. . . . Do nothing (artificial) to the ten thousand things, and they will be at ease in their own functions; then indeed nothing will not be self-sufficient.”<sup>233</sup>

Wang Bi, a Confucian, sought to interpret Daoism in a way that highlighted the points of contact between the two schools. For Wang Bi, it was Confucius, not Laozi, who was the true sage, because Confucius, through his creative appropriation of the Zhou

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<sup>230</sup> *Daodejing* 25. 故道大，天大，地大，王亦大。域中有四大，而王居一焉。人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然。

<sup>231</sup> See D. C. Lau, trans., *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1982), 39.

<sup>232</sup> See Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, trans., *Daodejing: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Company, 2003), 115.

<sup>233</sup> Ariane Rump, trans., in collaboration with Wing-tsit Chan, *Commentary on the Lao-tzu by Wang Pi*, Monograph of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy; No. 6 (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1979), 17.

legacy, had arrived at the most comprehensive vision of *dao*. Wing-tsit Chan believes Wang Bi went beyond Laozi by shifting the focus from *dao* to *ziran*.<sup>234</sup> But if the *Daodejing* reflects a non-dualistic, immanent vision of the cosmos, the emphasis on *ziran* is not a departure from the spirit of the text. (It is worth noting that Wang Bi's naturalistic reading of the *Daodejing* comes quite early in the commentarial tradition and that it was offered by a Confucian.)

Chapter 29 calls the world a “sacred vessel,” (*tianxia shenqi* 天下神器). Laozi's counsel is to keep our hands off what is sacred—those who act on it harm it; those who try to control it lose it. Wang Bi's commentary on this chapter includes the following:

The nature of the ten thousand things is (characterized by) *tzu-jan* [*ziran*]. Therefore it can be followed (*yin*), but not acted upon; one can go along with it, but not hold it by force. Things have their constant nature. If one artificially acts upon it, one will surely fail. . . . [T]he sage realizes the (nature) of *tzu-jan*, and penetrates into the feelings of all things. Thus he follows (*yin*) and not acts, flows along and not interferes.<sup>235</sup>

I will return to this image of the “sacred vessel” as a central metaphor for the Confucian sense of religiousness. Though it is found in the *Daodejing*, it conveys the sacrality of life that attends the “this-worldly” vision of Confucian spirituality.

We may also look to the *Zhuangzi* for illumination on the relationship between human beings and their natural and cultural context. When Confucius says, “*Tian* 天 has given life to and nourished excellence (*de* 德) in me,”<sup>236</sup> he is attributing the quality of his own character to the generous effects of his natural and human environments. Of course, the nourishing effects of *tian* must be appropriated and cultivated by persons who love

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<sup>234</sup> Chan, *Sourcebook*, 317.

<sup>235</sup> Rump, *Commentary on the Lao-tzu*,

<sup>236</sup> Ames and Rosemont, *Analects*, 116. (天生德於予)

study (*haoxue* 好學) and desire to pattern their conduct after the generativity of the natural world and the wisdom of the ancestors. This is the sense captured by A. C. Graham's translation of the line from *Zhuangzi* 6.1, “知天之所為者，天而生也，” as, “Whoever knows what Heaven does lives the life generated by Heaven.”<sup>237</sup> Graham comments on this attunement to *tian*:

When thinking and putting our thoughts into words we are behaving as men; when attending and responding, in ways which we can never fully express in language or justify by reasons, our behaviour belongs with the birth, growth, decay and death of the body among the spontaneous processes generated by Heaven. We are then doing, without knowing how we do it, what Heaven destines for us.<sup>238</sup>

But there should be no thought that Daoism, or Confucianism, countenances a dualism of *tian* and *di* (earth) or *tian* and *ren* (human beings). Indeed, a key aspect of Chinese religiousness is the wonder arising from the consciousness that one is part of an integrated whole. Again from the *Zhuangzi*, “For the sage, there has never yet begun to be Heaven, never yet begun to be man, never yet begun to be a Beginning, never yet begun to be things.”<sup>239</sup> Yet, there is a tension between the sense of unity with the myriad things and the awareness that one can also be considered as a discrete entity, a one among the many. “How do I know that the doer I call ‘Heaven’ is not the man? How do I know that the doer I call the ‘man’ is not Heaven?”<sup>240</sup> (6.1)

Though Confucianism and Daoism are not in conflict in the main content of their correlative cosmological visions, they have markedly different emphases in the styles of

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<sup>237</sup> A. C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), 84.

<sup>238</sup> Graham, *Zhuangzi*, 16.

<sup>239</sup> *Zhuangzi* 25.3. 夫聖人未始有天，未始有人，未始有始，未始有物。

<sup>240</sup> *Zhuangzi* 6.1. 庸詎知吾所謂天之非人乎？所謂人之非天乎？

life they commend. Daoism focuses on the relationship of human beings with that part of *tian* comprising the natural world, while Confucianism is preoccupied with human beings in their relational context—both in their immediate relationships and in their responsiveness to cumulative human culture, which is also *tian*.

This dual aspect of *tian*—both natural and cultural environment—has been highlighted by David Hall and Roger Ames in their collaborative work on Chinese philosophy. Robert Neville calls Hall and Ames “philosophers of culture,” who “employ both categoreal contrasts . . . and narrative developments” to make generalizations about Chinese and Western cultures “conceived as wholes.”<sup>241</sup> But Hall and Ames are philosophers of culture in another sense of the genitive. They not only engage in comparative philosophy about culture, they also believe that philosophy is begotten of culture. All human thought is generated and constrained by historical and cultural factors. In *Thinking Through Confucius*, they write: “There is no longer history, there are ‘histories.’ These histories constitute ways of conceiving a (selected) present in relation to its effective past.”<sup>242</sup> This condition, lamented as nihilistic and relativistic in the West, appears to have been unproblematic for the Confucian milieu, which, according to Hall and Ames, was not afflicted by the quest for an objective vantage point above the vicissitudes of history. This reading of the Confucian texts should not be construed as an attempt to impose the postmodern condition on an ancient world. Rather, at the end of modernity, metanarrative interpretations of history, premised on transcendent principles,

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<sup>241</sup> Robert Cummings Neville, *Ritual and Deference: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a Comparative Context* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 138.

<sup>242</sup> Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, 335.

have broken down, allowing appreciation of the contextual dynamics of all human culture. On examination of the early Confucian texts, we find that the authors did not appeal to a power or authority above what was constituted in the *dao* passed down from cultural forebears.

For Confucius, knowledge is grounded in the language, customs and institutions that comprise culture. Culture is the given world. Thinking is cultural articulation that renders this givenness effective. There is no knowledge to be gained of a reality which precedes that of culture or transcends its determinations. The “world” is always a human world.<sup>243</sup>

Ames finds support for this interpretation in Tang Junyi’s (唐君毅) account of *tian* as the coalescence of natural and cultural elements. In Tang’s discussion of human nature (*renxing* 人性), he argues that “‘human nature is nothing but the unfolding of the natural and cultural processes themselves’ (*xing ji tiandao guan* 性即天道觀).”<sup>244</sup> Viewing *tian* and *dao* as functional equivalents, Ames employs Tang’s insight to clarify the meaning of Confucius’ pronouncements on *tian*; for example, *Analects* 7.23 (天生德於予): “It is the natural and cultural environment that has engendered the excellence in me.”<sup>245</sup> According to this understanding, human nature is not a fixed essence, endowed by *tian*, waiting to be discovered within each person. Rather, human nature is a cultivated disposition, artfully crafted by way of interaction with one’s natural environment and cultural inheritance. Ames elaborates on Tang’s position:

“Human nature,” then, is a generalization regarding the aggregating, purposeful yet open-ended disposition of human beings over time, and is nothing more or less than an expression of the ongoing attainment of relational virtuosity (*ren* 仁)

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<sup>243</sup> Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, 67.

<sup>244</sup> Quoted in Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 84). (English translations are Ames’.)

<sup>245</sup> Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 85.

within our inherited natural and cultural legacy (*tiandao* 天道). That is, the nature of each person must be recovered from and understood in terms of the continuous unfolding of the entire cosmos.<sup>246</sup>

It should be noted that reading *tiandao* (天道) as “natural and cultural environment” is Ames’ recommended translation and is not precisely required by Tang Junyi’s text. However, it is consistent with the general tenor of Tang’s comments on *tian* and *renxing* (human nature) to render *tiandao* this way. For example, Tang writes, “The Chinese as a people have not embraced a concept of “Heaven” (tian 天) that has a transcendent meaning. The pervasive idea among Chinese with respect to *tian* is that it is inseparable from the world.”<sup>247</sup> And, regarding the interaction of human beings with *tian*, Tang describes the relationship as one of mutuality and co-creative advance.

The term “*ming*” represents the interrelatedness or mutual relatedness of heaven and man. Therefore, if we wish to understand the meaning of the unity or non-duality of Heaven and man, the easiest and most direct approach will be to give a careful elaboration of the precise meaning of the term “*ming*” as it was used by the ancient Chinese schools.

Now, since *ming* as such is to be perceived in the interrelationship of Heaven and man, we can say that it exists neither externally in Heaven only, nor internally in man only; it exists, rather, in the mutuality of Heaven and man, i.e., in the mutual influence and response, their mutual giving and receiving.<sup>248</sup>

This insight regarding the human cultural aspect of *tian*, and related terms *tianming* and *tiandao*, is productive for understanding difficult passages that reflect both a particular focus and a “transcendent” dimension (in the sense that cumulative human culture transcends the individual). In *Analects* 9.5, Confucius speaks of the cultural

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<sup>246</sup> Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 129.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 211. 中國民族無含超絕意義的天的觀念。中國人對天有個普遍的觀念，就是天與地是分不開的。

<sup>248</sup> T’ang Chün-i (Tang Junyi), “The T’ien Ming (Heavenly Ordinance) in Pre-Ch’in China,” trans. Shien Gi-Ming, *Philosophy East and West* 11, no. 4 (January 1962): 195.



legacy, saying that which once was embodied in King Wen has been transmitted to Confucius and others who honor and seek to extend that legacy.

When the Master was surrounded in Kuang, he said, “With King Wen (文) long dead, does not our cultural heritage (*wen* 文) reside here in us? If *tian* 天 were going to destroy this legacy, we latecomers would not have had access to it. If *tian* is not going to destroy this culture, what can the people of Kuang do to me!”<sup>249</sup>

This anthropomorphic language attributes to *tian* the safeguarding of the patterns of society most conducive to human flourishing. Since *tian* has undertaken to preserve itself through accomplished persons over centuries of history, Confucius does not fear that *tian* will be destroyed through isolated incidents of barbarism. However, it is also true that Confucius acknowledged the deterioration of *dao* in his day and feared that the cultural legacy of the Zhou might be lost because it was neither respected nor practiced, especially by those in positions of political authority. After Confucius had abandoned public office to become a teacher, someone remarked about him to his students, “All under *tian* 天 have long since lost their way (*dao* 道), and *tian* is going to use your Master as a wooden bell-clapper.”<sup>250</sup>

But the cultural legacy has not vanished entirely. By virtue of their historical situatedness, the people of Confucius’ era have imbibed, to a greater or lesser extent, the inheritance of *tiandao* (天道) that traces back to the ancestral heroes of the Zhou.

Gongsun Chao of Wei asked Zigong, “With whom did Confucius study?” Zigong replied, “The way (*dao* 道) of Kings Wen and Wu has not collapsed utterly—it lives in the people. Those of superior character (*xian* 賢) have grasped

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<sup>249</sup> *Analects*, 9.5. 子畏於匡。曰：文王既沒，文不在茲乎？天之將喪斯文也，後死者不得與於斯文也；天之未喪斯文也，匡人其如予何？ (Confucius was mistakenly threatened because he bore a physical resemblance to an enemy of the people of Kuang.)

<sup>250</sup> *Analects* 3:24. 天下之無道也久矣，天將以夫子為木鐸。

the greater part, while those of lesser quality have grasped a bit of it. Everyone has something of Wen and Wu's way in them. Who then does the Master not learn from? Again, how could there be single constant teacher for him?"<sup>251</sup> (19.22)

As noted in chapter two, tradition, or the *Über-lieferung*, is, in Heidegger's words, "the active inheritance of the past as an open possibility." According to the understanding of *tian* and *dao* commended in this paper, the excellences of the sage kings Wen and Wu were embedded in the culture that was passed along to succeeding generations. The Confucian belief that anyone can become a *junzi* is predicated on this phenomenon. All members of a culture are shaped by the *dao* of that culture. Those of developed character (*xianzhe* 賢者) see their way through to the heart of this *dao*, while those of less-developed character (*bu xianzhe* 不賢者) grasp it only superficially.

Confucian religiousness as a sense of unity with and participation in the cosmic order finds eloquent expression in the *Zhongyong*. This text, traditionally held to have been authored by Confucius' grandson, *Zisizi* (子思子), expands upon themes latent in the *Analects*. The unity of *tian* and human beings (*tianren heyi* 天人合一) and the co-creativity that attends this relationship are prominent in the text. For example, chapter 22:

Only those who are absolutely sincere can fully develop their nature. If they can fully develop their nature, they can then fully develop the nature of others. If they can fully develop the nature of others, they can then fully develop the nature of things. If they can fully develop the nature of things, they can then assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. If they can assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can thus form a trinity with Heaven and Earth.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> *Analects* 19.22. 衛公孫朝問於子貢曰：仲尼焉學？子貢曰：文武之道，未墜於地，在人。賢者識其大者，不賢者識其小者，莫不有文武之道焉。夫子焉不學？而亦何常師之有？

<sup>252</sup> Chan, *Sourcebook*, 107-8. 唯天下至誠為能盡其性；能盡其性，則能盡人之性；能盡人之性，則能盡物之性；能盡物之性，則可以贊天地之化育；可以贊天地之化育，則可以與天地參矣。

The graph, 誠 (*cheng*), is a philosophically rich concept, the meaning of which is not fully captured by its traditional English rendering as “sincerity.” The *Shuowen* lexicon points to *xin* (信)—to trust, to believe or to be trustworthy—as an indicator of meaning. The lexical entry for *xin*, in turn, refers to back to *cheng*. So, on the surface, these terms are closely related, denoting genuineness, integrity, trustworthiness. James Legge states that the “Chinese themselves had great difficulty in arriving at that definition of it [*cheng*] which is now generally acquiesced in.”<sup>253</sup> It was Legge who, in his 1893 translation of the Confucian classics, first suggested “sincerity” as the best English equivalent of *cheng*. He writes:

The ideal of humanity;—the perfect character belonging to the sage, which ranks him on a level with Heaven,—is indicated by 誠, and we have no single term in English, which can be considered as the complete equivalent of that character. . . . Simplicity or singleness of soul seems to be what is chiefly intended by the term;—the disposition to, and capacity of, what is good, without any deteriorating element, with no defect of intelligence, or intromission of selfish thoughts. This belongs to Heaven and Earth, and to the Sage.<sup>254</sup>

Legge is describing *cheng* in the language of Christian virtue, as a quality adhering to the human soul, enabling the sage to mirror the goodness of Heaven.

Many interpreters since Legge have noted the inadequacy of “sincerity” to capture the multivalence of *cheng* as it is used in the *Zhongyong*. Benjamin Schwartz says that *cheng*, in the *Zhongyong*, is “both an ethical and an ontological category.”<sup>255</sup> Joseph

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<sup>253</sup> James Legge, trans., *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1971), 415. Though, it is difficult to see how Legge could know such a thing, considering that the *Shuowen* Lexicon was written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, CE.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 414-15.

<sup>255</sup> Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, 405.

Needham recommends that *cheng* remain untranslated.<sup>256</sup> A. C. Graham opted for “integrity,”<sup>257</sup> which is an improvement, considering the *Zhongyong*’s language of the interrelationship of *tian*, earth and human beings. Still, none of these translations express the active, participatory nature of *cheng* as it is described in the *Zhongyong*. Co-creativity requires active engagement that is transformative in its effects on other human beings and the wider environment. Tu Weiming elucidates the meaning of *cheng* as it relates to self-cultivation and the transformation of the world.

*Chung-yung* . . . maintains that if one cultivates to the utmost a particular goodness, one can also hope to exert a transforming influence in the universe. Although this again is predicated on the premise that only those who have attained the state of being absolutely sincere can transform others, the very process of becoming sincere may be conceived as a way of restructuring the world.<sup>258</sup>

According to Tu, *cheng* is a dynamic of human beings and of the myriad things. “Indeed, in *Chung-yung* not only human beings but things (*wu*) in general are also thought to be enactments of *ch’eng*. Since the cosmos is conceived as the effortless self-unfolding of *ch’eng*, nothing can come into existence without it.”<sup>259</sup> This leads Tu to posit *cheng* as a form of creativity, as “that which brings about the transforming and nourishing processes of heaven and earth. . . . [*Cheng*] creates in a continuous and unending process in time and space.”<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China (Vol. 2)* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 468.

<sup>257</sup> A. C. Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers: The Metaphysics of the Brothers Cheng* (London: Lund Humphries, 1958), 67.

<sup>258</sup> Tu Weiming, *Centrality and Commonality*, 78-9.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

These considerations lead Ames and Hall to take the leap, rendering *cheng* as “creativity” throughout their translation of the *Zhongyong*. This decision is based on the observation that “the Chinese world is better characterized in terms of process understandings than in substantive concepts.” In such a world, things (*wu* 物) “are to be understood as processes (happenings) and events (happenings that have achieved some relative consummation).”<sup>261</sup> The meanings of “sincerity” and “integrity,” understood as becoming one or becoming whole, are subsumed in “creativity,” when the latter is understood as “the dynamic, novelty-producing activities of the realizing human being in the activities of both self- and world-articulation.”<sup>262</sup>

This understanding of *cheng* as creative participation in the continuously transforming processes of the natural environment and the human community is integral to the religious sensibility of Confucianism. Only through such an interpretive lens can the spiritual dimension of passages like *Zhongyong*, chapter 32, be fully appreciated.

Only those who are absolutely sincere can order and adjust the great relations of mankind, establish the great foundations of humanity, and know the transforming and nourishing operations of heaven and earth. Does he depend on anything else? How earnest and sincere—he is humanity! How deep and unfathomable—he is abyss! How vast and great—he is heaven!<sup>263</sup>

Following the direction of Tu’s and Ames’ interpretation of *cheng*, when *zhicheng* (至誠) is translated as “extremely creative” rather than “absolutely sincere,” this and similar texts come to life as descriptions of the co-creativity that attends the relationship of *tian*, *di*, and *ren*. This is the “anthropocosmic unity” cited by Tu as the distinctive vision of

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<sup>261</sup> Ames and Hall, *Focusing the Familiar*, 32.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>263</sup> *Zhongyong* 32. 唯天下至誠為能經綸天下之大經，立天下之大本，知天地之化育，夫焉有所？肫肫其仁，淵淵其淵，浩浩其天。

Confucian cosmology. When a sagely person is creatively engaged as described in the above passage, he or she becomes an object of veneration— not only authoritative (*ren* 仁) and deep (*yuan* 淵), but even *tian*.

How can human beings be described as *tian*? By their unity with and participation in cosmic order. If *tian* is the totality of existing things, including human culture as received and transmitted by consummate persons, the sage is a microcosm of the order and harmony of the whole of *tian*. As Tu describes it,

[T]he Way of the sage does not merely “rise up to the height of heaven.” Since the ontological reality of man is none other than the ontological reality of Heaven, and since the *ch’eng* of the sage is the same as the *ch’eng* of Heaven, they can be fully united. The relationship between Heaven and man is not an antinomic bi-unity but an indivisibly single oneness. The sage as the most authentic manifestation of humanity does not coexist with Heaven; he forms a coincidence with Heaven.<sup>264</sup>

But Confucian co-creativity is not the result of simply acquiescing to the rhythms of the natural environment; nor is it passive reception of the dominant currents of society, for these may represent a neglect or corruption of *dao*. Rather, the Confucian texts consistently emphasize the strenuous effort required to become a co-creator, one who is both conversant with and contributory to the way of *tian*. As the Master said, “It is the person who is able to broaden the way (*dao* 道), not the way that broadens the person.”<sup>265</sup>

In summary, Confucian religiousness, as it relates to cosmology, is the sense of wonder and reverence before the reality of *tian*, together with the awareness that one is summoned to participate in the ongoing creative processes of the natural and human environments. In the solemn response to this call, human beings undergo the formation

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<sup>264</sup> Tu, *Centrality and Commonality*, 84.

<sup>265</sup> *Analects* 15.29. 人能弘道，非道弘人。

of themselves and the broadening of the way. This vision is, at the same time, profoundly spiritual and wholly immanent.

Ames calls this religiousness “a-theistic,” meaning that the Confucian worldview is simply not oriented toward questions of God’s existence or non-existence; it is non-theistic and non-transcendental. Accordingly, creativity is not understood as the power of one thing to determine another, as in *ex nihilo* creation by God. Rather, there is co-creativity, “in which ontological distinctions are abandoned in favor of cosmological parity among all things, and in which the unique particular and its environments are seen as mutually shaping, . . .”<sup>266</sup> The human person, as a unique particular, and all the myriad things are mutually shaping, co-creating, and in the human consciousness of these transactions lies the religious sensibility. Ames continues:

For classical Confucianism, “religiousness” in its most fundamental sense refers to a person’s attainment of a focused appreciation of the complex meaning and value of the total field of existing things through a reflexive awakening to the awesomeness of one’s own participatory role as co-creator.<sup>267</sup>

### **Seeing the World as Sacred**

An immanent conception of *tian* includes the natural environment and human culture, as these realities comprise the world in which individual human beings and communities find their way (*dao*). As noted above, the Confucian and Daoist experience

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<sup>266</sup> Roger T. Ames, “*Li* and the A-theistic Religiousness of Classical Confucianism,” in *Confucian Spirituality*, ed. Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 167.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

of this world is suffused with a sense of the sacred. “The world is a sacred vessel,”<sup>268</sup> (天下神器) says Laozi, in chapter 29 of the *Daodejing*. Therefore, do not attempt to rule or control it. This appeal, coming during the Warring States period (403-222 BCE), was prompted by a breakdown of social order and a wanton disregard for the sacred nature of the world. Warlords and bureaucrats were treating both territory and people as commodities, “seizing” (執) them to be used for advancement of personal and party interest, without concern for the deleterious effects of their actions.

Why do some people see the world as a sacred vessel, while others consider it only a common container, devoid of sacred meaning? The *shen qi* (sacred vessels) were ornate vases, pots, baskets and bowls used to present sacrificial offerings in the ancestral temples. In the *Analects*, when Confucius refers to Zigong as “a most precious and sacred kind of vessel,”<sup>269</sup> (5.4) he uses the terms *hu* (瑚) and *lian* (璣) to describe his young apprentice. Based on the *Book of Rites* (*Li Ji* 禮記), we know that *hu* and *lian* were names of vessels that furnished the Hall of Distinction (*Ming Tang* 明堂) during the Zhou Dynasty: “They had the two tui [*dui* 敦] of the lord of Yu (for holding the grain at sacrifices); the four lien [*lian*] of Hsia; the six hu of Yin; and the eight kwei [*gui* 簋] of Kau.”<sup>270</sup> Because the *hu* and *lian* were sacred vessels, Confucius’ words to Zigong can be taken as the highest approbation. Likewise, Laozi’s use of *shen qi* to describe the totality of existing things reflects a deeply reverential attitude.

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<sup>268</sup> 神器 (*shenqi*) is also translated as “spiritual vessel” (Ivanhoe), “spiritual thing” (Chan), and “spirit-like thing” (Legge). All of these translations would work for the point I am making.

<sup>269</sup> Ames and Rosemont, *Analects*, 95.

<sup>270</sup> James Legge, trans. *Li Chi: Book of Rites, Part 2* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2003), 38.



In the Abrahamic religions, *sacred* is a descriptor reserved for God and things consecrated to God. The world is bifurcated into realms of the sacred and the profane. Scriptures, temples, priests, sacrifices, rituals and icons partake of the holy nature of God by virtue of their sacral functions. Everything else is mundane or profane—from the Latin, *pro-fanus*, meaning “outside the temple,” or separated from the sphere of the sacred. In such a world, if the existence of God is called into question, the experience of the sacred is imperiled.

In his seminal work on the sacred in world religions, Mircea Eliade describes the phenomenon of sacrality as *hierophany*—“manifestations of sacred realities.”<sup>271</sup> This neologism is from the Greek words, *hieros*, meaning “sacred” or “holy,” and *phainein*, “to appear” or “to reveal.” Eliade offers this word as an alternative to “theophany,” which has the limited meaning of “an appearance of God.” A hierophany, on the other hand, occurs when “*something sacred shows itself to us.*”<sup>272</sup> As we saw in the last chapter, Eliade seeks a portrayal of religious experience that is applicable across religious traditions. His account of hierophany is equally valid for transcendent and immanent construals of the sacred. Eliade writes:

It is impossible to overemphasize the paradox represented by every hierophany, even the most elementary. By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain *itself*, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu. A *sacred* stone remains a *stone*; apparently (or, more precisely, from the profane point of view), nothing distinguishes it from all other stones. But for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality. In other words, for those who

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<sup>271</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Willard R. Trask, trans. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1987), 11.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, Italics in original.

have a religious experience all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality. The cosmos in its entirety can become a hierophany.<sup>273</sup>

Adopting Eliade's terminology, the hierophany of the Confucian outlook includes the whole of the natural cosmos together with inherited ancestral wisdom that has engendered the flourishing of human communities. But the hierophany should not be construed as an occurrence of something breaking into the world to show itself from outside the natural realm; there is no "outside" or "inside." The sacred "shows itself" when a person awakens to the reality of the world as an organismic whole and to the connections that obtain among the particulars within the totality of *tian*. To see the world (*tianxia* 天下) as a sacred vessel is to imbue it with value and to acknowledge that human life has meaning only as it is ordered in accordance with the patterns of *tiandao*.

This discussion leads to the affirmation that Confucian religiousness is a way of seeing. It is a spiritual vision of the cosmos and one's role in its creative progress. Such vision comes to those who through love of study (*haoxue* 好學) are able to penetrate the meaning of human existence. For Confucius, this study involved extended reflection upon the wisdom and social patterns of the Zhou period, with its mythic emperors, Yao, Shun and Yu. Confucius believes the renewal of these values will conduce to the greatest benefit of humankind and the wider cosmos. *Analects* 8:18-20 includes these lines exalting the Zhou heroes:

The Master said, "How majestic they were—Yao and Shun reigned over the world but did not rule it."

"How great indeed was Yao as ruler! How majestic! Only *tian* 天 is truly great, and only Yao took it as his model. How expansive was he—the people could not

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<sup>273</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 12.

find the words to adequately praise him. How majestic was he in his accomplishments, and how brilliant was he in his cultural achievements.”

“The excellence (*de* 德) of Zhou can be said to be the highest excellence of all.”<sup>274</sup>

Study (*xue* 學) brings perception or awareness (*jue* 覺); the student is awakened to see the picture of the world as sacred. The way in which Confucius describes the arduous path toward awakening<sup>275</sup> brings to mind Ludwig Wittgenstein’s remarks about “pictures” and the challenge of changing the ways we see. In *Philosophical Investigations*, paragraph 115, he writes, “A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.”<sup>276</sup> Wittgenstein uses “pictures” in various ways in his writings, sometimes indicating literal pictures and sometimes mental pictures. Indeed, in the Preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, he describes the volume as “a number of sketches of landscapes.”<sup>277</sup> David Egan argues that Wittgenstein sometimes uses “picture” as “a way of conceiving a matter.” In this usage, “pictures are like organizing myths, or conceptual bedrock, which play a substantial role in philosophical reasoning.”<sup>278</sup> As “bedrock” and “organizing myths,” pictures serve as conceptual foundations for communities who share an interpretation of the world. Wittgenstein is no foundationalist, but this use of “pictures” explains how some propositions can seem self-evident: they appeal to deeply engrained ideas within

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<sup>274</sup> *Analects* 8.18-20. 子曰：巍巍乎，舜禹之有天下也，而不與焉。大哉！堯之為君也！巍巍乎！唯天為大，唯堯則之。蕩蕩乎！民無能名焉。巍巍乎！其有成功也，煥乎！其有文章也！周之德，其可謂至德也已矣。

<sup>275</sup> See, for example, *Analects*, 1.14, 6.3, 19.5.

<sup>276</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), 48e.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, v.

<sup>278</sup> David Egan, “Pictures in Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” *Philosophical Investigations* 34, no. 1 (January 2011): 73.

communities united by shared forms of life. But pictures that serve as organizing myths are problematic because they are not typically the objects of conscious reflection. Rather, they are passively absorbed through the learning of a language and a culture. “The things that Wittgenstein calls ‘pictures’ tend to be the basis for reflection rather than the result of reflection. His concern with them is that they frequently escape critical notice because they lie so deep. . . .<sup>279</sup> The challenge lies in bringing these pictures to the level of conscious reflection so that the distorted and inauthentic can be exchanged for the clear and genuine. The process of breaking free from a picture that “holds us captive” often requires a redescription of the world utilizing a new vocabulary or a familiar vocabulary instilled with fresh meanings.

What are the criteria by which to judge the clarity and genuineness of one world picture over against another? For the Confucian, the criteria always relate to the things that are most conducive to flourishing human community. The chaos and violence of the Warring States period were directly traceable to the failure to perceive (*jue* 覺) the way of living efficaciously according to the *dao* that had been transmitted through the culture. But, as noted in the section on sagely hermeneutics, the picture of efficacious living is not gained only, or even primarily, through the study of texts. It is reflected in the lives of sages (*shengren*) who take *tian* as their model and achieve the highest excellence (*de*) of all.

As already mentioned, in the monotheistic traditions, God is holy and the things of the world are viewed as sacred only when they are connected to God. This principle has narrow and wide applications, depending on theological orientation. If emphasis is

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<sup>279</sup> Egan, “Pictures in Wittgenstein,” 63.

placed on the sinfulness and fallenness of the world, very little will be viewed as sacred. On the other hand, some traditions affirm the presence of God in the natural environment and in all human beings, believed to be created in the image of God. According to the latter view, the sense of the sacred is quite extensive, but it is still tied to belief in a transcendent God who communicates sacrality by his presence. It follows that when the existence of the deity is called into question, the sense of the sacred dissipates. This is the historical process, according to Vattimo, that has occurred in modernity. When the sacred, as that which is connected to God, is understood as something opposed to the world—to the profane—then secularization is desacralization. And, as we have seen, Vattimo contends that this process of desacralization is the outworking of the central Christian message. “All the phenomena of secularization in modernity, to the extent they represent a desacralization of the sacred, are the heritage of Christianity.”<sup>280</sup> The challenge for secularized religiousness in a postmetaphysical age is to recover a sense of the sacred.

The Confucian sense of the sacredness of the cosmos offers resources to fortify to Vattimo’s weak thinking. First, the notion of *tianren heyi* (the unity of *tian* and human beings) provides for a spiritual connection with the natural environment without recourse to first causes or divine *ex nihilo* creation. In light of evolutionary theory and new understandings of ecosystems, *tianren heyi*, as an expression of the essence of Confucian cosmology, leads to a productive ecological sensibility. Vattimo acknowledges the need to address issues of ecological degradation, but even in his writings on ethics, he does not develop this theme. For example, in advocating a political agenda based on weak

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<sup>280</sup> Vattimo, *Not Being God*, 152.

thinking, Vattimo says, “[a] nihilistic, nonmetaphysical left can no longer base the claims it makes on equality; instead the reduction of violence has to provide a basis.”<sup>281</sup>

“Equality” cannot serve as the basis because it will always be a metaphysical thesis claiming to capture a human essence. The proposed theoretical basis of the reduction of violence “puts the left in a much better position to become the vehicle for all the aspirations that are being expressed today . . . through the ecological movement and all the other efforts being made to establish a new relationship with nature.”<sup>282</sup>

How does Vattimo make application of the reduction of violence to the ecological movement? This is not his focus, so his statements are scattered and brief. As secularization spreads, Vattimo hopes for a “weak westernization of the world,” a softening of the effects of technology, markets and consumerism.

As a concrete example, this would mean accepting international limits to growth instead of making a fetish of competition as the only way of promoting it. (I am thinking of issues . . . like the destruction of the Amazon rain forest and other patrimonies of nonrenewable natural resources; the West has developed by consuming these resources to the point of threatening to destroy the planet; now it is asking so-called third-world countries not to go down the same road. Obviously this is an indecent request if it doesn’t entail the acceptance of limits and the sharing of costs on the part of the industrialized countries.)<sup>283</sup>

In this and other examples, Vattimo’s attention is on the need to exchange strong identities for weak ones and on the impact of environmental degradation on international relationships. The violation of the natural environment as an ethical concern is not the subject of investigation.

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<sup>281</sup> Vattimo, “Hermeneutics and Democracy,” 98.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 98-99.

<sup>283</sup> Vattimo, “Philosophy and the Decline of the West,” 34.

Some would say the lack of attention to ecological concerns is not simply a matter of Vattimo's predilection for other topics; rather, it is an inherent deficiency of weak thinking that it struggles to articulate the relationship of human beings with nature. Weak thought may lead to weak ecology. Commenting on this defect in postmodern social theory generally, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner say, "Postmodern theorists are helpful in showing how we are deeply enmeshed in technological, social and semiotic systems, but, . . . they fail to analyze our embeddedness in the natural world."<sup>284</sup> Deconstruction has provided the insight that our conceptions of the human relation to the natural world are socially and historically mediated.<sup>285</sup> Nevertheless, there remains a fundamental relation that calls for constructive reflection. Best and Kellner emphasize that postmodern criticism is directed "against *scientism*, not science; *technocracy*, not technology; and *rationalism* (or "logocentrism"), not reason."<sup>286</sup> The rejection of the Enlightenment's totalizing schemes does not preclude a holistic understanding of the natural environment, including the responsive and responsible place of human beings within it.

Mary Evelyn Tucker identifies four characteristics of Confucian thought that inform its application to environmental issues: "an anthropocosmic rather than an anthropocentric perspective, an organic holism of the continuity of being, a dynamic

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<sup>284</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997), 268.

<sup>285</sup> "The American Indians, for example, did not see the undeveloped parts of the natural world as 'wilderness'; rather, they saw every aspect of nature as suffused with a living spirit. The American settlers, by contrast, experienced the same wilderness as a hostile and desolate world that had to be subdued to erect the forces of civilization." (Ibid., 282, n. 3.)

<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 242.

vitalism of material force (*qi* 氣), and a comprehensive ethics embracing both humans and nature.”<sup>287</sup>

As a perspective that is anthropocosmic and holistic, Confucianism views human beings as a contributory part of the whole that includes the natural environment and all other human beings, past, present and future. Transformation is experienced as persons, individually and corporately, interact responsibly and creatively in their relationships, including their relationship with the natural world. The passage most often cited in support of a Confucian ecological sensibility is *Mencius* 6A.8:

Mengzi said, “The trees of Ox Mountain were once beautiful. But because it bordered on a large state, hatchets and axes besieged it. Could it remain verdant? Due to the respite it got during the day or night, and the moisture of rain and dew, there were sprouts and shoots growing there. But oxen and sheep came and grazed on them. Hence, it was as if it were barren. Seeing it barren, people believed that there had never been any timber there. But could this be the nature of the mountain?”<sup>288</sup>

It is clear from the context that Mencius is not writing about ecology. He is making a point about the need to protect human capacities, represented by the sprouts and shoots, and nurture them toward mature responsible behavior. But the passage is not without value for the discussion of the relationship of nature and human beings. The

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<sup>287</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker, “Confucianism and Ecology: Potential and Limits,” *Earth Ethics* 10, no. 1 (Fall 1998), reprinted online at The Forum on Religion and Ecology, <http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/confucianism/index.html> (accessed February 1, 2012).

<sup>288</sup> Bryan W. Van Norden, trans., *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2008), 151-52. 孟子曰，牛山之木，嘗美矣，以其郊於大國也，斧斤伐之，可以為美乎，是其日夜之所息，雨露之所潤，非無萌蘖之生焉，牛羊又從而牧之，是以若彼濯濯也，人見其濯濯也，以為未嘗有材焉，此豈山之性也哉。



human being is a hologram of nature—the part reflects and contains the whole.<sup>289</sup> As human beings must care for and nurture their bodies and their characters, so nature must be allowed to care for and nurture itself or be managed in a way that accords with its self-sustaining capacities. Mencius’ rhetorical question, “Could this be the nature of the mountain?” rises from the intuition that nature is vibrant and generative; it would not of its own course come to such a state. The degradation of Ox Mountain is a case of human interference and lack of proper husbandry.

John Berthrong contends that Mencius’ use of the Ox Mountain metaphor presupposes among his interlocutors a holistic understanding of the relationship of human beings and their natural environment. He writes,

Mengzi’s point is that neither the mountain nor human nature need be left in this sorry condition. What is needed is intelligent cultivation of human nature and sensible conservation on Ox Mountain. . . . The Ruist scholars believed that there could be a balance between human action and the environment. Just like human nature, nature itself needed careful tending. Unlike their Daoist rivals, Ruists believed that intelligent management of the natural world would allow for the flourishing both of nature and human beings.<sup>290</sup>

The flourishing that ensues from intelligent interaction with the natural world underscores the co-creativity at the heart of the Confucian vision of *tianren heyi*. As human beings interact with their natural environment, the goal should be enhancement. The Chinese character 修 (*xiu*), meaning to repair, to cultivate or to prune, is used of both things in the world and human character. Whether applied to the pruning of trees or the tending of gardens, to the repair of dilapidated roads or bridges, or to the cultivation of

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<sup>289</sup> See Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, 238-39, for this use of “hologram” to represent the *tian/ren* or *dao/de* relation in Confucianism.

<sup>290</sup> John Berthrong, “Confucian Views of Nature,” in *Nature Across Cultures: Views of Nature and the Environment in Non-Western Cultures*, ed. Helaine Selin (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003), 376.

human dispositions, the goal is always improvement upon existing conditions.

Turning to *qi* (氣), Tucker says it is “the unifying element of the cosmos and creates the basis for a profound reciprocity between humans and the natural world. Material force [*qi*] . . . as the substance of life is the basis for the continuing process of change and transformation in the universe.”<sup>291</sup> The concept of *qi*, though developed in a pre-scientific milieu, accords with evolutionary science in the contemporary world. Interpreters render *qi* variously as “material force,”<sup>292</sup> “vital force,”<sup>293</sup> or “vital energy field,”<sup>294</sup> to name a few. *Qi* in the Confucian texts corresponds, in part, to the natural energies and processes that produce and sustain sentient life. The awareness of evolutionary origins enhances the Confucian sense of embeddedness in the natural world. As Tu Weiming writes, “there is consanguinity between earth and us because we have evolved from the same vital energy that makes stones, plants and animals integral parts of the cosmic transformation. We live with reverence and a sense of awe for the fecundity and creativity of nature as we open our eyes to what is near at hand.”<sup>295</sup>

The secularized religiousness offered by Vattimo might see the world reenchanted through an appreciation of the organically intertwined relationship of human beings to the earth. This rechantment would not be based upon a renewal of strong metaphysical structures, such as creation, *arche* or natural kinds, which serve only to distance human

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<sup>291</sup> Tucker, “Confucianism and Ecology.”

<sup>292</sup> Chan, *Sourcebook*, 265.

<sup>293</sup> Cheng Chung-ying, “Qi (Ch’i): Vital Force,” in *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Antonio S. Cua (New York: Routledge, 2003), 615; and Tu Weiming, *Confucian Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985), 40.

<sup>294</sup> Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 56.

<sup>295</sup> Tu Weiming, “The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism: Implications for China and the World,” in *Confucian Spirituality*, vol. 2, ed. Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), 490.

beings from their natural environment. Rather, the sense of the sacred rises from the awareness of the continuity of being of which one is an integral part. This sense of awe is expressed in the *Zhongyong*, chapter 26:

The Way of Heaven and Earth may be completely described in one sentence: They are without any doubleness and so they produce things in an unfathomable way. The Way of Heaven and Earth is extensive, deep, high, brilliant, infinite and lasting. The heaven now before us is only this bright, shining mass; but when viewed in its unlimited extent, the sun, moon, stars and constellations are suspended in it and all things are covered by it. The earth before us is but a handful of soil; but in its breadth and depth, it sustains mountains like Hua and Yüeh without feeling their weight, contains the rivers and the seas without letting them leak away, and sustains all things.<sup>296</sup>

Tu agrees that Confucianism offers rich resources for an ecological sensibility.

But, in the spirit of the early texts, he says, “[W]e must transcend the view that earth is a profane matter, a soulless object, and a spiritless body.”<sup>297</sup> The world has given us birth and we are an inextricable part of the organismic whole. “The recognition that earth, our home, is alive and dynamically evolving encourages us to protect ‘Earth’s vitality, diversity, and beauty’ as ‘a sacred trust.’”<sup>298</sup> “The need is none other than the sacralization of nature.”<sup>299</sup>

The second aspect of *tian*, as considered here, is human cultural inheritance, and this, too, contributes to the sense of the sacred. The Confucian reverence for the inherited wisdom of the ancestors has interesting affinities with Vattimo’s attention to cultural

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<sup>296</sup> *Zhongyong* 26. 天地之道，可壹言而盡也。其為物不貳，則其生物不測。天地之道，博也厚也，高也明也，悠也久也。今夫天，斯昭昭之多，及其無窮也，日月星辰系焉，萬物覆焉。今夫地，一撮土之多，及其廣厚，載華岳而不重，振河海而不泄，萬物載焉。

<sup>297</sup> Tu, “The Ecological Turn,” 490.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 491.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 497.

provenance and his awareness of “belonging to a chain of messages.”<sup>300</sup> Confucius’ claim to be a transmitter rather than an innovator is partially explained by his awareness that there is no pure novelty in the realm of ideas. All Confucius’ teaching grew out of his strenuous study (*xue* 學) and reflection (*si* 思) on the culture of the Zhou, reflected in written classics, oral histories and ways of life. He is cognizant of being the blessed recipient of a cultural legacy that includes exemplars whose character (*de* 德) was a manifestation of the way of *tian* (*tiandao* 天道). The texts of the early Confucian corpus are leavened with exuberant declarations like this one from *Zhongyong* 27: “Great is the Way of the sage! Overflowing, it produces and nourishes all things and rises up to the height of heaven. How exceedingly great!”<sup>301</sup>

But religiousness is not only the realization of one’s cultural inheritance; on a deeper level, it is the experience of transformation that ensues when one embodies in his or her person the excellences of the ancestral forebears. Ames describes the achievement of those who advance from “mere persons” to sagehood: “For only a few, by coordinating and embodying in themselves the values and the meaning that distinguish some historical epoch of human flourishing, they have the ultimate distinction of becoming sages (*shengren* 聖人), and as such, sources of enduring cosmic meaning.”<sup>302</sup>

In Vattimo’s description, his religiousness derives from the experience of being addressed by the texts of the Christian faith. His dependence on God, he says, is his

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<sup>300</sup> See p. 103.

<sup>301</sup> *Zhongyong* 27. 大或聖人之道，洋洋乎發育萬物，峻極于天。優優大或！

<sup>302</sup> Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 85.

dependence only on the biblical tradition.<sup>303</sup> So, we can say that Vattimo's sense of the sacred has this in common with Confucian spirituality: they both rely on a cultural inheritance, a received content which is highly valued and bestows meaning on life. Furthermore, their respective cultural legacies are encountered predominantly in the form of texts: for the Confucians, the Five Classics; for Vattimo, the Judeo-Christian scriptures; and for both, the interpretive tradition following from those sources. In each case, the appropriation of the cultural inheritance involves the immense work of interpretation.

But, there are also deep differences. First, in the Confucian reception of the *dao* of the ancestors, the engagement is with persons; i.e., the exemplars encountered in the tradition, whether real or mythical, are viewed as models to be emulated. A way of life, characterized by *ren* (仁), *li* (禮) and *shu* (恕), is commended to all who would aspire to become accomplished persons. For the disciples of Confucius, following the way (*dao*) meant apprenticing themselves to their master to hear his wisdom and watch his behavior. The cultural inheritance is transmitted by way of exemplary lives.

Vattimo, in contrast, gives little attention to the need for embodied wisdom. Instead the appropriation of the past is by way of hermeneutical engagement with texts. And though Vattimo's "creatural feeling of dependence" is directed toward the God he encounters in the text of scripture, his citation of scripture is limited primarily to two brief passages. These verses (John 15:15; Philippians 2:7) are interpreted metaphorically and enlisted in the service of his weakening philosophy. While Vattimo traces his religious feelings to the Christian message, his philosophical role models are Nietzsche, Heidegger and Gadamer. This highlights the contrast with Confucianism. While the

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<sup>303</sup> See p. 100-101.

latter searches the cultural inheritance for wisdom on how to live efficaciously, Vattimo mines the religious and philosophical texts of Western civilization for intellectual inspiration.

This chapter has examined religiousness as experience—a sense of the sacred. Both Confucianism and Gianni Vattimo describe religious experiences without appeal to transcendent categories of being. In the next chapter I will explore religiousness as ethical conduct centered in human relationships.

#### CHAPTER 4. RELIGIOUSNESS—HUMAN INTERRELATEDNESS AND ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

The previous chapter considered Confucian religiousness as a sense of the sacred that comes from the experience of unity with and creative participation in the cosmic and human processes of change. The Confucian reverence for *tian* recognizes both the creative processes of nature and the shaping influences of cultural inheritance. Gianni Vattimo does not talk about “cosmic order,” but he does reverence the cultural inheritance that comes to him by way of the Christian tradition, reflected in its sacred texts. In relation to the natural world, I suggested that Vattimo’s secularization might undergo a re-sacralization through an ecological sensibility that recognizes human beings’ integral place in the environment. The natural world can be seen as “a sacred vessel” when we realize it has given birth to creatures capable of responsible engagement in its creative and productive processes. It is also true that the early Confucian texts do not probe deeply into *tian* as natural order. I borrowed from Daoist writings to supplement the description of cosmology shared by Confucians of the period.

The current chapter focuses on religiousness as ethically appropriate conduct in human relationships. This is the heart of Confucian spirituality. Because classical Confucianism understands personal identity as an amalgamation of significant relationships, Confucian self-cultivation involves whole-hearted investment in those relationships. Persons are called to responsible participation in a community that includes temporal forebears and descendents. Henry Rosemont describes this as Confucianism’s “human project.”

Classical Confucian spirituality . . . leads us to see ourselves not as autonomous individuals, but as co-members of several communities, who through sustained effort, are increasingly integrated into an ever-larger community, something larger than ourselves, which, for want of a better term I would call the human project. We must come to see ourselves as fundamentally, not accidentally, intergenerationally bound to our ancestors, contemporaries and descendants.<sup>304</sup>

Vattimo's secularized version of Christian spirituality also locates the project of self-creation within an irreducibly relational context. For Vattimo, the relational emphasis in ethics is, in part, the product of the deterioration of atomistic notions of human identity in Western civilization. If, as Vattimo asserts, "existence appears gradually to be losing any unitary significance" and "is diffusing into the multiple social roles that everyone finds themselves occupying,"<sup>305</sup> personal identity is discovered and constructed within these social roles. I will begin with a summary of Vattimo's postmetaphysical ethics.

### **Vattimo's Ethics of Continuity and Charity**

#### **Reduction of Violence**

Vattimo's objection to metaphysics is based more on an ethical motivation than an epistemological one. He writes, "We have sought to think Being outside the metaphysics of objectivity precisely for ethical reasons, and the latter must guide us in our elaboration of the consequences of a non-metaphysical conception of Being, such as an ontology of weakening."<sup>306</sup> He believes metaphysics is the philosophical expression of the will to power; but the inevitable weakening of being at the end of modernity

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<sup>304</sup> Henry Rosemont, Jr., "An Unintegrated Life Is Not Worth Living," in *Confucius Now: Contemporary Encounters with the Analects*, ed. David Jones (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2008), 162.

<sup>305</sup> Vattimo, "Postmodernity, Technology, Ontology," 9.

<sup>306</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 44.



dispels the inherent violence and domination of metaphysics. First, violence takes the form of authoritarianism in the exchange of ideas: “the violent refusal to be questioned, the authoritarian silencing of the other in the name of first principles.”<sup>307</sup> Second, there is physical violence and domination of persons, tribes and nations toward one another.

Vattimo believes such violence is inseparable from metaphysical conceptions of capital-T, “Truth.” He writes: “Anyone claiming to tell me the absolute truth is demanding from me unquestioning submission.”<sup>308</sup> “Not all metaphysicians have been violent, but I would say that almost all large-scale perpetrators of violence have been metaphysicians.”<sup>309</sup>

In his book, *The Transparent Society*, Vattimo credits Nietzsche and Heidegger with exposing the myth perpetuated by speculative metaphysics. “[P]erfect freedom is not that described by Spinoza, and does not lie in having a perfect knowledge of the necessary structure of reality and conforming to it—as metaphysics has always dreamt.”<sup>310</sup> The picture of reality as a well-founded rational order is a “reassuring myth” of primitive humanity. “Metaphysics is a violent response to a situation that is itself fraught with danger and violence. It seeks to master reality at a stroke, grasping (or so it thinks) the first principle on which all things depend (and thus giving itself an empty guarantee of power over events).”<sup>311</sup>

In place of ethics based on metaphysical principles and ultimate foundations, Vattimo commends an “ethics of provenance;” not a particular provenance given

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<sup>307</sup> Vattimo, “The Ethics of Provenance,” in *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 46.

<sup>308</sup> Gianni Vattimo, “The Future of Religion,” in *A Farewell to Truth*, trans. William McCuaig (2009; New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 77.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>310</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, trans. David Webb (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 7.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

preference above others, but the recognition that, in an age of irreducible pluralism, historical provenance becomes the only valid source of ethical sensibilities. (And, though Vattimo does not acknowledge it, the family should be considered an integral part of each person's historical provenance. I will comment on this point later in the chapter.) "If philosophy is still able to speak about ethics rationally, meaning in a way responsible to the only referents that still count—the epoch, our heritage, our provenance—it can do so only by taking as its explicit point of departure (and not as its foundation) the condition of nonfoundedness in which we find ourselves thrown today."<sup>312</sup>

Vattimo also characterizes this approach as an "ethics of finitude" that is responsible to critically select from its cultural legacy the values, maxims and ideas that can be productively applied in ethical decision-making. An ethics of finitude retains its nihilistic orientation by resisting all urges to claim ultimacy or universality for its "principles." Vattimo holds that when we understand that ethical "rules of the game" are a cultural inheritance rather than nature or essence, "such rules can still hold good for us, but with a different cogency—as rational norms . . . , rid of the violence that characterizes ultimate principles (and the authorities who feel themselves entrusted with them)."<sup>313</sup> The reduction of violence is the criterion according to which we choose which artifacts of our cultural heritage may be carried forward in a post-foundational epoch. This determination, says Vattimo, is made "under the sign of a rationality understood as

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<sup>312</sup> Vattimo, "Ethics of Provenance," 40.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

discourse-dialogue between defenders of finite positions who recognize that that is what they are and who shun the temptation to impose their positions on others . . .”<sup>314</sup>

The contemporary examples of violence cited by Vattimo can be traced, he believes, to the persistence of strong metaphysics and foundationalism in religion, politics and international relations. First, the preemptive war on Iraq, led by America and Britain, was largely justified on the suspicion that Saddam Hussein possessed or was preparing to manufacture weapons of mass destruction. But an additional underlying philosophical premise was the belief that the Iraqi people needed to be liberated into the experience of Western-style liberal democracy. Vattimo contends that the enemies of Karl Popper’s open society<sup>315</sup> are found, in any era, in those who claim to ground politics in some final truth. The liberal-democratic mentality has accepted Popper’s thesis, but failed to apply it to the relation between politics and truth.

Neither Bush nor the neoconservatives who shaped White House policy rejected Popper’s theses; indeed they regarded his theory of the open society as one of their own founding principles. Yet they felt themselves entitled, like the philosophers in Plato’s *Republic*, to steer the world, with force if necessary, toward the liberty that only the vision of truth can guarantee.<sup>316</sup>

Second, Vattimo is vehement in his denunciations of the policies of the Roman Catholic Church, which continues its refusal to approve contraceptive birth control, marriage for priests and ordination of women. Going all the way back to Galileo and Copernican cosmology, the church has clung to a vision of the natural world that is in

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<sup>314</sup> Vattimo, “Ethics of Provenance,” 46.

<sup>315</sup> In 1945, Karl Popper published *The Open Society and Its Enemies* in which he denounces all teleological interpretations of history in favor of a liberal democratic society characterized by freedom of information, protection of human rights, orderly transition of power and continuous work toward new political solutions.

<sup>316</sup> Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 2.

conflict with science, as in the creation versus evolution debate. A church that persists in authoritarianism and is out of touch with ethical and intellectual issues creates a barrier to faith. Vattimo understands why adherents are rejecting the pronouncements of the papacy.

[M]any believers stumble when they find themselves rationally unable to accept the sexual and family ethics preached by the pope, just as they found totally unacceptable John Paul II's repeated prohibition on the use of condoms, in disdain of the potentially lethal effects such a ban might have, or may indeed have had, on a world ravaged by AIDS. What keeps on recurring is the "scandal," in one form or another, of Christian preaching claiming to dictate the "truth" about how matters "really stand" with nature, mankind, society, and the family: God is the foundation, and he speaks through the Church, which has been authorized by him to decide in the last instance.<sup>317</sup>

A third example of violence engendered by essentialism is found in the phenomenon of fundamentalism, generally considered. By definition, fundamentalisms claims to possess Truth, to the disparagement of rival interpretations. The end of metaphysics, secularization and increasingly globalized culture are factors that cause ethnic, national and religious identities to feel threatened. In some cases, fundamentalism is a defensive response to such threats. Describing these resurgent fundamentalisms, Vattimo says they may be understood as "neurotic [defenses] of identity and belonging in reaction to the indefinite widening of horizons entailed by the culmination of the epoch of the world picture."<sup>318</sup> If fundamentalism becomes the dominant response to the conflict of interpretations in a world of irreducible pluralism, Vattimo fears we risk "terrible new

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<sup>317</sup> Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 51.

<sup>318</sup> Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 39-40.

wars of extinction.”<sup>319</sup> He believes this risk is avoided as the emancipatory character of nihilism is understood and embraced.

### **Hermeneutical Ethics of Continuity**

If the world is understood as a conflict of interpretations, does this not lead to a celebration of the Nietzschean will to power and the dangerous possibility of violence and struggle in the effort to advance particular interpretations? As Vattimo points out, “The interpretations that lead to violent struggle are those that do not recognize themselves as such—and which, as in the tradition, regard other interpretations simply as fraudulent and wrong.”<sup>320</sup> Vattimo believes this danger is mitigated by the nihilistic vocation of hermeneutics, the decision for which is a distinctly ethical choice that “avoids the recurrent temptation to ‘return’ to a stronger (more reassuring and also more threatening and authoritarian) sense of the real.”<sup>321</sup> If the meaning of Being is dissolving into the manifold of interpretation, we survive this dissolution by embracing what Vattimo calls an “ethics of continuity” that eschews transcendentalist metaphysics on the one hand and relativism on the other.

In his exposition of nihilistic hermeneutics, *Beyond Interpretation*, Vattimo contrasts the ethics of continuity with an ethics of communication, represented by Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel, and an ethics of redescription, represented by Richard Rorty. Habermas and Apel developed their theories of communicative action and discourse ethics based on the Kantian notion of the universalizability of moral action.

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<sup>319</sup> Vattimo, “Liberty and Peace in the Postmodern Condition,” 55.

<sup>320</sup> Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 28.

<sup>321</sup> Vattimo, “Postmodernity, Technology, Ontology,” 20.

However, in contrast to Kant, they believe unconditional moral obligations cannot be arrived at through private reflection, but must be tested through inclusive and reasonable discourse. Apel emphasizes the language in which our experience of truth is embedded. Habermas broadens his consideration to include the entire *Lebenswelt* or lifeworld in which action and discourse occur. Both would affirm a necessary relation between truth and consensus, where consensus requires ethical attitudes of respect and tolerance for the views of others.

Habermas sought “to develop a more modest, fallibilist, empirical account of the philosophical claim to universality and rationality.”<sup>322</sup> His reconstruction of Kantian theory aimed at a “more naturalistic, ‘postmetaphysical’ approach.”<sup>323</sup> Nevertheless, Vattimo objects to the traces of transcendental metaphysics he finds in the ethics of communication. The approach of Habermas and Apel calls for a transparency of communication—all moral action must be defensible to others on the basis of a shared rationality. Kant’s categorical imperative is modified by the requirement that maxims and norms must be submitted to everyone to test claims to universality. The principle of universalization holds that “for a norm to be valid, the consequences and side effects of its general observance for the satisfaction of each person’s particular interests must be acceptable to all.”<sup>324</sup> In contrast to Kant, the “emphasis shifts from what each can will

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<sup>322</sup> James Bohman and William Rehg, "Jürgen Habermas", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2011 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/habermas/> (accessed May 2, 2012).

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), 197.

without contradiction to be a general law, to what all can will in agreement to be a universal norm.”<sup>325</sup>

Habermas’ goal of consensus achieved through discourse is a positive advance over the strong transcendental framework of Kant, but it does not go far enough in disavowing essentialism with regard to human nature and reason. Vattimo asks,

Can one cultivate the ideal of an absolute transparency of communication while remaining faithful to the basic conditions, namely the interpretive character, of the experience of truth? The ideal of transparency, of the elimination of every opacity in communication, seems to be perilously close . . . to the conception of truth as objectivity determined by a ‘neutral’ subject [modeled] on the form of ‘metaphysical’ subjectivity incarnated most recently in the ideal of the modern scientist.<sup>326</sup>

Vattimo’s emphases on finitude and provenance mean that any formulation of Kant’s categorical imperative can only be carried forward as a weak principle, stripped of “dogmatic residue.”<sup>327</sup> The respect we owe to the other “is not in the least grounded in the presupposition that she is a bearer of human reason equal and identical in everyone. . . . Respect for others is, above all, recognition of the finitude that characterizes all of us and that rules out any complete conquest of the opacity that every person bears.”<sup>328</sup> This, for Vattimo, is the nihilistic outcome of postmetaphysical hermeneutics that removes every possible legitimation of violence toward others.

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<sup>325</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 67.

<sup>326</sup> Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 33.

<sup>327</sup> Vattimo, “Ethics of Provenance,” 46.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

Rorty's "ethics of redescription"<sup>329</sup> (Vattimo's phrase) is a near antithesis of the ethics of communication. The goal in Rorty's liberal democracy is the reduction of cruelty and, like Vattimo, Rorty believes we are less likely to visit cruelty upon one another when we discard metaphysical notions about essential human nature. Instead of seeking a transcendental anchor in universal norms, Rorty advocates an "ironist" approach that seeks ethical and political solutions based on their usefulness and success in promoting solidarity among ever-widening constituencies. These solutions are not based on natural law, self-evident truths or human nature; rather, they are historical contingencies that should be constantly reviewed and freely exchanged when newer and better ideas are discovered. "Contexts provided by theories are tools for effecting change. . . . Any tool is replaceable as soon as a handier, less clumsy, more easily portable tool is invented."<sup>330</sup> In the liberal utopia envisioned by Rorty, philosophical theory and argumentation are replaced by narrative and redescription. Instead of seeking propositional truth, the liberal ironist searches for new vocabularies that allow for continual redescription of ourselves and the world. Rorty writes,

It would amount to what . . . I call the "contingency of language"—the fact that there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible* vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and feeling. A historicist and nominalist culture of the sort I envisage would settle instead for narratives which connect the present with the past, on the one hand, and with utopian futures, on the other. More important, it would regard the realization of utopias, and the envisaging of still

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<sup>329</sup> Vattimo writes, "While it is true that Rorty is careful not to frame his theory of redescriptions as an ethical proposal, there is nothing in his texts to prohibit this reading." (Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 34-35)

<sup>330</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 221.



further utopias, as an endless process—an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom, rather than a convergence toward an already existing truth.<sup>331</sup>

Vattimo sees the call for continual redescription as a clearly hermeneutical approach to ethics, associated with the languages persons employ to frame their worlds. Rorty sees continual innovation as a good thing; but the movement toward new horizons is inhibited by the old vocabularies in which outmoded paradigms are embedded. The creative geniuses of history are those who look beyond the literal meaning of established vocabularies, who deploy Nietzsche's "mobile army of metaphors" to generate compelling new theories.<sup>332</sup> In Vattimo's estimation, Rorty elevates the work of redescription to the level of ethical responsibility. Vattimo writes:

It seems that to some extent both Rorty and Foucault, like Nietzsche before them, adopt the principle that if in the age of nihilism there is still a duty that we can recognize as coherent, it is not that of respecting the table of existing values, but that of inventing new tables of values, new lifestyles, new systems of metaphors for speaking of the world and of our own experience.<sup>333</sup>

The redescriptions Rorty esteems most are those that constitute a dramatic break with existing milieus. This is where Rorty's romanticism is most evident; i.e., there is little or no continuity with existing conditions. What is prized is "the new, the unheard of, the 'stroke of genius' . . . ; and the more it is aware of its complete unfoundedness and ungroundability, the more highly it is valued . . ." <sup>334</sup> Vattimo thinks the redescriptions of Nietzsche, Nabokov, Proust and others Rorty cites, are not as ironic as Rorty supposes. The inspiration behind hermeneutics, for Vattimo, is that even the work of the most

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<sup>331</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xvi.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>333</sup> Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 35.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

innovative thinkers must be grounded in a context: “interpretation is the articulation of something understood, and thus the response to a call whose source, in Heideggerian terms, lies in the historico-destinal thrownness in which Dasein is located.”<sup>335</sup> Rorty has allowed a metaphysical element to creep into his philosophy by promoting a philosophy of the creative genius, not as something established in nature, but as a “vitalistic celebration of creativity.”<sup>336</sup>

Vattimo’s ethics of continuity draws upon the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and, Vattimo believes, encompasses the motives of both the ethics of communication and the ethics of redescription. In the first case, Gadamerian ethics is premised on the value of dialogue, albeit a model of dialogue that is not based on an ideal of transparency. And, in the second place, redescription is affirmed, but as a feature of the interpretive character of every encounter with an inherited textual legacy. It is the application of this legacy (laws, religious messages, works of art, historical documents) to the present situation that “constitutes authentic Being.” Ethical life, in Gadamer’s view, is “the integration of everyone’s single experiences into a continuity of individual existence that can only be sustained on the basis of belonging to a historical community which . . . lives in language.”<sup>337</sup> The community is malleable and evolving, not something isolated in space or time. The work of integrating individual experiences in the cultural horizons that sustain them is never finished.

Based on Gadamer’s rehabilitation of prejudice and his emphasis on the appropriation of one’s own historicity, Vattimo frames the ethics of continuity

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<sup>335</sup> Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 36.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*

nihilistically, as “the call to place single experiences within a network of connections that seem to us to be oriented towards the dissolution of Being, and thereby towards the reduction of the authority of presence.”<sup>338</sup> This weak philosophy of culture serves as a safeguard against the reappropriation of strong identities in the form of fundamentalisms or communitarianisms. To accept the nihilistic legacy commended by Vattimo is to see ourselves as members of a community: “heirs, and therefore relations, daughters, brothers and friends of those to whose calls we must now correspond.”<sup>339</sup> Thinking that is not beholden to an authoritarian source of truth is freed to respond to others on the basis of their actual needs.

Vattimo concludes his presentation of the ethics of continuity by asking which idea within the nihilistic tradition of the West could be most fruitfully reappropriated to express the call of hermeneutical ethics. This choice must be loyal to its own provenance and, lest it amount to a futile substitution of one metaphysical value for another, it will be necessary to thoroughly recast the term in a weakened, unfounded frame. Vattimo makes the controversial choice for the principle of Christian charity.

### **Charity as the Outworking of Nihilistic Ethics**

In ethics, as in other areas of his weak philosophy, Vattimo struggles to provide justifications for his arguments. Even if metaphysics has been persuasively unmasked as a source of violence and cruelty, this is not sufficient to motivate his choice of the reduction of violence as a normative principle in ethics. Frits de Lange comments on this aporia in Vattimo’s ethics: “If there no longer exists an ontological and moral hierarchy,

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<sup>338</sup> Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 39.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

and our morality is not rooted in an order of being . . . , if we are all free and equal to create our own meaningful universe, then, Nietzsche has clearly analysed, there is only an endless play of forces left.”<sup>340</sup> Vattimo recognizes this and acknowledges that the reduction of violence is a “theoretical ‘foundation’”<sup>341</sup> that is not proved, but only “assumed for interpretive purposes (on the basis of arguments that are never more than rhetorical, verisimilar, etc.) . . . .”<sup>342</sup> In answer to his own question, “Is there any more to the ethics of finitude than exhortation?” Vattimo responds, “If Hume’s law is—in some sense—valid, ethics can never speak the language of hard proof. And ethics is utterly conditional upon Hume’s law; it can only command, exhort, and judge as long as that which must be done is not (a) fact.”<sup>343</sup>

It could be argued that Vattimo’s unfounded choice for the reduction of violence is ironic in the style of Rorty and decisionistic in a manner similar to Habermas. Does the ethics of continuity provide a meaningful framework for the complexities of human relationship? De Lange thinks not: “As long as it can only fall back on a decision, not further explained, to withhold ourselves from the violence of self-affirmation, the moral substance of Vattimo’s ethics seems to be very thin.”<sup>344</sup> It is in Vattimo’s theological turn to the principle of charity that his ethics acquires a positive content that is plausible within the provenance he values.

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<sup>340</sup> Frits de Lange, “Kenotic Ethics: Gianni Vattimo, Reading the ‘Signs of the Time’,” in *Letting Go: Rethinking Kenosis*, ed. Onno Zijlstra (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang Publishers, 2002), 53.

<sup>341</sup> Vattimo, “Hermeneutics and Democracy,” in *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 98.

<sup>342</sup> Vattimo, “Ethics of Provenance,” 47-48.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>344</sup> de Lang, “Kenotic Ethics,” 54.

Though distinctly religious in origins and associations, Vattimo treats the rediscovery of charity as a philosophical outcome of hermeneutics: “As the nihilistic implications of its own premisses are developed, hermeneutics encounters charity and so rediscovers its own links with the Western religious tradition. This is no accident. It is simply another, probably more radical, way of experiencing its own concrete historicity, its belonging to modernity . . . .”<sup>345</sup> If we can no longer think of truth as the correspondence of ideas with the hard objectivity of the world as it is, we are left with a Gadamerian culture of dialogue in which “listening to what others have to say counts for more than measuring objects with precision.”<sup>346</sup> Vattimo characterizes this development as the movement from *veritas* to *caritas*.

What is the meaning of “charity” as Vattimo employs the term? In Italian, the word is *carità*, which is closer to the Latin, *caritas*. *Caritas* carries broader connotations than the English “charity,” which is associated with almsgiving or support of the poor. Charity (*caritas*), as used by Vattimo, “refers to grace and love or generosity of spirit and the act of self-giving upon which genuine charity is properly founded.”<sup>347</sup> Charity is informed by Vattimo’s understanding of *kenosis*—the self-emptying of God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. It is a life lived for the sake of others, or, for the sake of the community in which one participates. Luca D’Isanto, translator of Vattimo’s *Belief*, summarizes the author’s view as follows: “[I]f charity is understood in the light of kenosis, the self-exhaustion of God, then it constitutes the most sublime act of

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<sup>345</sup> Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 42.

<sup>346</sup> Vattimo, “Philosophy and the Decline of the West,” 35.

<sup>347</sup> Gianni Vattimo, “Toward a Nonreligious Christianity,” in *After the Death of God*, by John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 182, n.8.

abandonment for the sake of the other. To participate in the hermeneutic experience, then, might mean to welcome the other in the name of the dialogical principle of charity, that is, by listening to the non-violent reasons of the other.”<sup>348</sup>

Vattimo credits the work of René Girard with providing the vital insights for linking the kenotic message of Christianity with weak ontology and nihilistic hermeneutics.<sup>349</sup> In his book, *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard presents his theory that, in the development of human civilizations, what is considered sacred has an intrinsic relation to violence. He claims that victimization or scapegoating mechanisms are at the origins of primitive religion. When competition for limited goods precipitates violence, a sacrificial victim is chosen to become a focus of aggression. Because the sacrifice results in a (temporary) cessation of hostilities, the victim is invested with sacred attributes and becomes a cultic object. The pattern of sacrifice becomes accepted as a necessary aspect of religion.<sup>350</sup>

Though these characteristics of primitive victim-based religion are found in the Judeo-Christian scriptures (especially in the Old Testament), Girard believes the incarnation of Jesus Christ carries the message of liberation from the cycle of violence. Jesus preached and modeled peace, kindness and freedom from vengeful retaliation. He was not sent to be a “sacrificial lamb” for the appeasement of God’s wrath. Rather, Vattimo notes, “Jesus came into the world precisely to reveal and abolish the nexus between violence and the sacred. He was put to death because such a revelation was

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<sup>348</sup> Luca D’Isanto, introduction to *Belief*, 14.

<sup>349</sup> See, for example, *Belief*, 35-36.

<sup>350</sup> See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), chapters 1 & 2.

intolerable to a humanity rooted in the violent tradition of sacrificial religions.”<sup>351</sup> On this reading, the incarnational Christ event is a suitable religious metaphor for the debilitation of metaphysical structures that engender violence.

Along with “an active commitment to diminish violence in all its forms,”<sup>352</sup> charity is embodied in hospitality and listening in the midst of the conflict of cultures and interpretations. Hospitality is the spirit of openness and welcome toward others, particularly those of different cultural and religious backgrounds. In the past, the West sought to Christianize other peoples through the imposition of its beliefs and morality. In contrast, a secularized religiousness turns from ecclesiastical hierarchies and dogmatic truth claims toward a comparative dialogue with other cultures in which all participants have equal privilege to be heard. Vattimo writes,

Hospitality . . . is not realized if not as a placement of oneself in the hands of one’s guest, that is, an entrustment of oneself to him [or her]. In intercultural or interreligious dialogue, this signifies acknowledging that the other might be right. If Christian identity, applying the principle of charity, takes the shape of hospitality in the dialogue between religions and cultures, it must limit itself almost entirely to listening, and thus to giving voice to the guests.<sup>353</sup>

Hospitality must be expressed in the constitutions and laws of nations, in opposition to the privileging of particular ethnic or religious identities to the detriment of others. This does not mean that religious elements (for example, Christmas holidays or the symbol of the crucifix) have to be disallowed in the interest of secularization. These observances are unobtrusive tokens of the religious origins of Western civilization

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<sup>351</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 37.

<sup>352</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 51-52.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101.

“within the context of a development toward secularization.”<sup>354</sup> However, if adherents of particular religions seek to preserve strong identities of a dogmatic or fundamentalist form, the visibility of such “signs” will need to be further reduced. Vattimo speaks hopefully of his own European context:

Christianity will be able to further the constitution of a united Europe, and ultimately perhaps a united world, only if it develops its own essence as a religion of charity and not of dogma, adopting a stance of openness to all religious cultures and mythologies, keeping faith with the spirit of hospitality and dissolution of the violence of the sacred that is the core of the preaching of Jesus.<sup>355</sup>

An often-repeated claim by Vattimo is that charity constitutes a limit to secularization. Everything else in the religious tradition is subject to deconstruction or demythologization. The mysteries, creeds and morality of Christianity undergo desacralization in the process of postmetaphysical weakening. But charity survives. Vattimo explains:

The modern world was formed by applying and transforming, and sometimes also mistaking, the content of our tradition, principally the biblical tradition. How far are we authorized to take this transformation? Are we free to do whatever we please? No, because in Scripture we also find a limit to secularization in the discourse of charity, the very thing that guides desacralization.<sup>356</sup>

If charity is not preserved as a limit, there is nothing to prevent the reemergence of authoritarian structures that are prone to violence. Charity guides the “progressive reduction of all rigid categories that lead to opposition, including those of property, blood, family, along with the excesses of absolutism.”<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 102.

<sup>355</sup> Vattimo, “The Future of Religion,” 86.

<sup>356</sup> Vattimo, *Farewell to Truth*, 75.

<sup>357</sup> Vattimo, “Toward a Nonreligious Christianity,” 45.



As the limit to secularization, charity is Vattimo's only formal ethical principle. He acknowledges this when he compares charity to Kant's categorical imperative, "which does not command something specific once and for all, but rather applications that must be 'invented' in dialogue with specific situations and in light of what the holy Scriptures have revealed."<sup>358</sup> I have already noted that Vattimo carries forward Kant's categorical imperative only as a weak principle stripped of "dogmatic residue."<sup>359</sup> But if charity serves as the limit of secularization, it is worth inquiring whether it may not be construed as a transcendent principle within Vattimo's ethical theory. Is Vattimo succumbing to the impulse to posit at least one "strong" component within his otherwise weak philosophy? Frederiek Depoortere believes Vattimo has betrayed his own convictions on this point:

It . . . seems that *caritas* turns out to be something absolute, something transcendent, namely a principle that is valid always and everywhere and, as a consequence, is not bound to time or place. In Vattimo's weak thought, however, there is no place for such an absolute principle, because weak thinking dissolves every fixed meaning of humanity and the world into a thoroughly contingent, historical and local occurrence.<sup>360</sup>

Vattimo's treatment of charity as the limit of secularization recalls Derrida's (in)famous statement: "Justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible."<sup>361</sup> Derrida distinguishes law from justice. Law is deconstructible, and necessarily so, if progress is to be made in politics. Justice is that in virtue of which deconstruction takes place. However, it is impossible to experience justice, and that is what gives it its mystical quality. Simon Critchley calls Derrida's language about justice

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<sup>358</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 66.

<sup>359</sup> See p. 145.

<sup>360</sup> Frederiek Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy: Gianni Vattimo, René Girard and Slavoj Žižek* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 20.

<sup>361</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law," 945.

“quasi-transcendental,” but stops short of assigning a fully transcendental conception to him: “In Derrida’s more habitual vocabulary, justice is an ‘experience’ of the undecidable. However, and this is crucial, such an undecidable experience of justice does not arise in some intellectual intuition or theoretical deduction, rather it always arises in relation to a particular entity, to the singularity of the other.”<sup>362</sup> We should never confuse our deconstructible formulations of law with un-deconstructible justice.

Perhaps Vattimo should follow a more Derridean path in his treatment of charity. Vattimo does not say, “Charity, if such a thing exists . . .”; rather, he posits charity as a formal principle, the irreducible limit of secularization. Though he locates the origins of charity in the particular provenance of Western Christian culture, he universalizes charity as an ethical principle for all cultures. In so doing, charity assumes a strong character within what is portrayed as weak philosophy. Peter Jonkers criticizes this move as inconsistent with the nihilistic trajectory of Vattimo’s thought:

[T]he limiting of secularization by the commandment of love is nothing but an *arbitrary decision on the part of Vattimo as an individual*. Once thinking begins to unmask every representation of the sacral, as well as the sacral itself, . . . it cannot stop short at the commandment of love as something sacrosanct anymore. If one wants to do this nevertheless, then such a decision appears from the perspective of radical nihilism as *an expression of violent arbitrariness*.<sup>363</sup>

In identifying charity with the kenotic Christology of Christian tradition, Vattimo has not followed his secularization theorem to the end. A concept of other-regarding love that is the product of intercultural, interreligious dialogue would be more congenial to the

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<sup>362</sup> Simon Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Derrida, Levinas, and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999), 99.

<sup>363</sup> Peter Jonkers, “In the World, but not of the World: The Prospects of Christianity in the Modern World,” *Bijdragen* 61/4 (2000), 386. Quoted in Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, 20. Italics in original.

dialogical climate he envisions. As Vattimo asserts, there is no word in any language that is free of associations within that language. But Vattimo's explicit linking of charity with the biblical tradition of the West shows that desacralization has not completed its work.

The Christian principle of charity (*caritas*; or *agápē*, in Greek), by virtue of its associations with the self-emptying (kenotic) love of Christ, is an altruistic concept, calling for a spirit of self-giving to the point of self-sacrifice. Vattimo avoids the language of sacrifice, except when describing the incarnation of the Son of God. This is understandable, given his endorsement of the work of René Girard and his interest in distancing himself from the archaic notions of sacral victims. But, even without the more extreme sense of self-sacrifice, charity, as a central motif of the Christian inheritance, cannot easily be divested of its altruistic connotations. In the consideration of Confucian ethics, I will suggest that *shu*, "putting oneself in the place of others," as understood in the classic texts, is a more practicable and humane principle for human relationships.

### **Confucian Religiousness: Human Relationships**

#### **The Role of Family**

My purpose in this final section is to offer constructive criticism of Vattimo's ethics from the perspective of Confucian thought. The Confucian way focuses on appropriate behavior within specific relationships, beginning with the family. Personal identity is constituted by and shaped within fundamental roles—parent to child, sibling to sibling, ruler to subject, teacher to disciple and friend to friend. The relationships beyond family, though vitally important in the development of character and growth toward becoming an accomplished person (*junzi* 君子), are subsidiary to and modeled upon the

primary roles within the family. Philip Ivanhoe comments on this radial ordering of relationships:

[T]he family served as the basic paradigm for the well-lived life. However, the moral life did not end with the family. One had roles to fulfill in society as well. There were parallel obligations to king and state which, though never superseding, were fashioned on the model of those to parents and family. . . .

. . . The obligations to one's family were most important because for Kongzi they were the earliest and strongest bonds human beings form. They were also regarded as the source of our social obligations; our obligations to others were developed out of and modeled on the family.<sup>364</sup>

The Chinese graph expressing the attitude and conduct appropriate in family relationship is 孝 (*xiao*), variously translated as “filial piety,”<sup>365</sup> “filial devotion,”<sup>366</sup> “filial conduct,”<sup>367</sup> and “family reverence.”<sup>368</sup> A person's development toward fully responsible ethical behavior in all roles and relationships begins with learning *xiao* at home. Roger Ames describes the way *xiao* functions in character development:

In the *Analects* we find repeatedly the same radial structure of personal cultivation that is expressed in the *Great Learning*, where the vision of the consummate life emerges from immediate family relations and is then, as a direct extension of family roles, extrapolated to inform one's dealings with the community more broadly. Indeed, just as family is the pervasive metaphor in the Confucian worldview, familial reverence (*xiao*) is both the means and the end as well as the inspiration for and the consequence of Confucian learning. . . . Given the central role of the family in Confucianism, appropriate family feelings are the ground from which our pathways through life emerge. The expectation repeated several times in the *Analects* is that one embarks on this journey with one's

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<sup>364</sup> Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mengzi and Wang Yangming*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 1.

<sup>365</sup> Legge, trans., *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean*, 139.

<sup>366</sup> Burton Watson, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 20.

<sup>367</sup> Ames and Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius*, 77.

<sup>368</sup> Henry Rosemont, Jr. and Roger T. Ames, *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence: A Philosophical Translation of the Xiaojing* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 87.

parents, and never during their lifetime ventures far from them either in person or in spirit. The Confucian life is a family life lived together.<sup>369</sup>

The feelings and behaviors attending *xiao* continue even after a family member has died. For, though the person is no longer physically present, he or she continues to occupy the role of one's father, mother, brother or sister. The deference and respect owed them in life are to be sustained after their deaths. This reverence is demonstrated through faithful participation in rites and ceremonies honoring the deceased family members.

The *Da Xue* (*Great Learning*) passage to which Ames refers comes at the opening of the treatise. The work, traditionally attributed to Confucius, describes how cultural heroes ordered the kingdom by beginning with themselves and their families.

The ancients who wished to manifest their clear character to the world would first bring order to their states. Those who wished to bring order to their states would first regulate their families. Those who wished to regulate their families would first cultivate their personal lives. Those who wished to cultivate their personal lives would first rectify their minds. Those who wished to rectify their minds would first make their wills sincere. Those who wished to make their wills sincere would first extend their knowledge. The extension of knowledge consists in the investigation of things.<sup>370</sup>

The order is then reversed, beginning with the investigation of things (*ge wu* 格物) and progressing outward through personal, family and political order: “. . . when the family is regulated, the state will be in order; when the state is in order, there will be peace throughout the world.”<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 183.

<sup>370</sup> Wing-tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 86. 古之欲明明德於天下者先治其國。欲治其國者先齊其家。欲齊其家者先脩其身。欲脩其身者先正其心。欲正其心者先誠其意。欲誠其意者先致其知。致知在格物。

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

The question naturally arises, “How is it that personal cultivation and well-regulated families can effect order in the wider social and political arenas?” A teacher (reputed to be Confucius) asks this very question at the beginning of the document called *Xiaojing* (*The Classic of Family Reverence*):

Confucius was at leisure in his home, and Master Zeng was attending him. the Master said, “Do you understand how the former kings were able to use the model of their consummate excellence (*de*) and their vital way (*dao*) to bring the empire into accord (*shun*), and how the people on this account were able to attain harmony (*he*) and to live with each other as good neighbors so that those above and below alike did not resent each other?”

Master Zeng rose from his mat to respond and said, “I am not clever enough to understand such things.”

“It is family reverence (*xiao*),” said the Master, “that is the root of excellence, and whence education (*jiao*) itself is born. Sit down again and I will explain it to you.”<sup>372</sup> (Chapter 1)

The teacher then proceeds, through the eighteen brief sections of the document, to explain the ways properly ordered family life is extended to effect order and harmony among neighbors and subjects of the kingdom. “This family reverence, then, begins in service to your parents, continues in service to your lord, and culminates in distinguishing yourself in the world.”<sup>373</sup>

The attitudes and behaviors inculcated in children from earliest years are the seeds of mature humanity (*ren* 仁) embodied in *li*. Hope for societal order and harmony begins at home, where family members learn proper attitudes toward authority. This is the thrust of Master You’s comments in *Analects* 1:2:

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<sup>372</sup> Rosemont and Ames, *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence*, 105. 仲尼居，曾子侍。子曰：「先王有至德要道，以順天下，民用和睦，上下無怨，汝知之乎？」曾子避席曰：「參不敏，何足以知之。」子曰：「夫孝、德之本也，教之所由生也。復坐，吾語汝。」

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.* 夫孝始於事親，中於事君，終於立身。

It is a rare thing for someone who has a sense of filial and fraternal responsibility (*xiaodi* 孝弟) to have a taste for defying authority. . . . Exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having taken hold, the way (*dao* 道) will grow therefrom. As for filial and fraternal responsibility, it is, I suspect, the root of authoritative conduct (*ren* 仁).<sup>374</sup>

Benjamin Schwartz observes that in the Confucian vision of family influence, “authority comes to be accepted and exercised not through reliance on physical coercion but through the binding power of religious, moral sentiments based on kinship ties.”<sup>375</sup> Schwartz’s point about “religious and moral sentiments” is important because it highlights the affective content of *xiao*. Filial conduct is more than appropriate outward behavior; it includes feelings of affection and respect. In *Analects* 17:21, the three-year mourning period recommended by Confucius is attended by genuine feelings of remorse, feelings which are traced to affections originating during the first years of a child’s life. The Master criticizes Zaiwo for lacking such feelings toward his parents.

Zaiwo inquired, “The three-year mourning period on the death of one’s parents is already too long. If for three years exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) were to give up observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮), the rites would certainly go to ruin. . . .

The Master replied, “Would you then be comfortable eating fine rice and wearing colorful brocade?”

“I would indeed,” responded Zaiwo.

“If you are comfortable, then do it,” said the Master. . . .

When Zaiwo had left, the Master remarked, “Zaiwo is really perverse (*bu ren* 不仁)! It is only after being tended by his parents for three years that an infant can finally leave their bosom. The ritual of a three-year mourning period for one’s parents is practiced throughout the empire. Certainly Zaiwo received this three years of loving care from his parents!”<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> *Analects* 1.2. 有子曰、其為人也孝弟、而好犯上者鮮矣、不好犯上、而好作亂者、未之有也。君子務本、本立、而道生、孝弟也者、其為仁之本與。

<sup>375</sup> Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, 70.

<sup>376</sup> *Analects* 17.21. 宰我問，三年之喪期已久矣。君子三年不為禮，禮必壞。子曰，食夫稻，衣夫錦，於女安乎。曰，安。女安，則為之。宰我出。子曰，予之不仁也，子生三年，然後免於父母之懷，夫三年之喪，天下之通喪也，予也，有三年之愛於其父母乎。

In Confucian thought, there is no personal identity apart from the social roles that are constitutive of the self. Since there is no essential human nature endowed by transcendent forces outside culture, it is in familial and societal relationships that one “finds” oneself. The relationally constructed self originates in the family, extends to the neighborhood and wider community, and becomes inclusive of the nation or *guojia* (國家) (*jia*, meaning family or household). Through responsible participation in the social roles attending each extension of the widening circle, a person has the potential of becoming consummately human. Those who enter fully into this process of self-constitution may become *da ren* (大人), great or accomplished persons, while those who fail to engage responsibly remain undeveloped; they are *xiao ren* (小人), small or petty persons, like Zaiwo who was *bu ren* (不仁).

In Vattimo’s ethics of provenance, he consciously neglects the most basic of personal origins—the family. In his consideration of the cultural and historical factors that shape a person’s view of self and the world, he fails to acknowledge the culture of family and its constitutive role in the formation of human beings. Clearly, Vattimo’s reaction is against the family as traditionally defined—a nuclear family with monogamous, heterosexual parents or extended generational families living together. This understanding of family continues to be perpetuated by the Roman Catholic Church based on biblical revelation and natural law. Vattimo believes the continued propagation of this idea is a kind of fundamentalism that needs to disappear in the postmetaphysical age of weakened identities.<sup>377</sup> The respect we owe each other is based only on our shared

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<sup>377</sup> Vattimo, “Hermeneutics and Democracy,” 91.



finitude, which removes all pretexts for violence or cruelty toward each other. Vattimo writes:

I may note that there are no positive reasons here on which to found such respect (itself indefinite in any case). Not, for example, the recognition that we are all essentially equal, that we are offspring of the same father, that my life depends on others, or anything like that. Such reasons reveal their vagueness and unsustainability the moment they are enunciated explicitly: only a prejudice based on family could justify a command to love your brother; or an egoism based on biological species the idea that I have to respect the other because she is made like me; or egoism pure and simple when we are commanded to respect the other because our own survival depends on her; and so on.<sup>378</sup>

Vattimo argues that the ecclesiastical and governmental authorities' adherence to the traditional definition of family is a form of violence against homosexual, bisexual and transgender persons, who, by virtue of their deviation from the natural, are unable to meet the test of true family. Vattimo says this view dehumanizes individuals and is a violation of the ethics of charity: "This isn't just the usual message of tolerance: it's the ideal of the development of human society through the gradual reduction of all the rigidities that set us against one another, including the instinct of property, blood, family, and all the problems associated with the excessive absolutization, in defiance of charity, of things naturally given."<sup>379</sup>

Vattimo is certainly not exceptional in his disdain for family as a locus of ethical development. Generally speaking, Western philosophy has viewed the influence of family as inhibitive of free and unprejudiced thought. On this view, family ties, while something to be enjoyed as part of one's non-professional, non-academic life, should not be a distraction from the pursuit of truth. Considering that Confucian thought not only

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<sup>378</sup> Vattimo, "Ethics of Provenance," 47.

<sup>379</sup> Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 79.

includes family relationships as factors in personal and ethical development, but also sees those relationships as a primary determinant of social and cosmic order, it's not surprising that Western philosophy has been dismissive of the classical Chinese worldview. Ames comments on this glaring omission in the history of philosophy:

Undoubtedly, this persisting indifference to the importance of the perceived “partial” relations that emerge from family feeling is closely aligned with the assumed centrality of impartiality as a necessary condition for ethical conduct pervasive among those philosophers who would look to universal principles, objective procedures, impersonal teleological uniformities, and moral reasoning as the ultimate source of and warrant for moral order. Such a disinterest in family as a measure of moral order in the Western philosophical narrative contrasts starkly with the Confucian worldview in which family is *the* governing metaphor, and in which in fact *all* relationships are familial.<sup>380</sup>

Vattimo's claim that the traditional definition of the family has become obsolete is not to be disputed. “Traditional nuclear family” now describes a minority of households in many countries of the world. Single parent families, blended families, same-sex marriages and adoptive families are common variations.<sup>381</sup> Such arrangements, though foreign to the ancient Chinese milieu, do not preclude the application of Confucian filial principles. The essence of *xiao* is respect and care for the persons with whom one shares life in a “family,” whatever shapes it might take. Broken and dysfunctional families abound and family members, especially children, bear the negative consequences of this failure. But where family members are committed to be responsible in other-regarding relationships, the educative and character-forming potential of the family can be realized.

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<sup>380</sup> Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 153.

<sup>381</sup> A single adult living alone is an increasingly common form of household. Because filiality requires the presence of others for its exercise, this form of life would not be valued in the Confucian mind.

Vattimo focuses on the over-arching narrative of Western civilization as the historical-cultural context that defines its inhabitants. But embedded within the diversity of lifeworlds comprising the West are the familial environments that constitute the earliest formative contexts for every person. If metanarratives have given way to local and particular stories, and if the ontology of actuality espoused by Vattimo is based on the contingent events that have led us to constitute ourselves as thinking, speaking and living persons, then the influence of family origins and relationships cannot be overlooked.

Vattimo recounts his personal family experiences of joy, longing and mourning in his autobiography, *Not Being God*: “I ardently wanted to have a normal family. And I miss not having had one, not having one even now. I would be happier today if I had one.”<sup>382</sup> And on the subject of loss, he writes:

I’ve outlived those dearest to me, outlived my family.  
For the first time, I’m alone.  
And I’ve become an expert in a very special literary genre, the obituary. . . .  
. . . I only cry when I reread the obituaries. The feeling of loss, once formulated, moves one even more profoundly.<sup>383</sup>

Confessions like these testify to the universal human experience of deep attachment to and affection for those with whom we share life in family. The genius of the Confucian way is its recognition that family relationships, properly ordered, are the source of deeply beneficial formative influence. The family provides the ideal environment for learning the excellences commended by Vattimo—charity, hospitality and listening are best modeled in the context of daily family life. As Ivanhoe affirms,

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<sup>382</sup> Vattimo, *Not Being God*, 134.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-117.

“Proper parents are not just providers of food, clothing, and lodging for their children, and good children do more than simply provide material support for their parents in old age. All the members of a morally good family play their parts informed by general attitudes of mutual love and respect.”<sup>384</sup>

### **Confucius’ Single Thread: Putting Oneself in the Other’s Place**

The Confucian understanding of the relationally constituted self sees the individual as a participant in a complex web of relationships. Appropriate conduct in these relationships is not based on a rigid moral code, but on careful and creative attention to situations and persons in the flux of events. The *Analects* notes an occasion when Confucius answered differently to the same question posed to him by two of his disciples.

Gongxi Hua said, “When Zilu asked the question, you observed that his father and elder brothers are still alive, but when Ranyou asked the same question, you told him to act on what he learns. I am confused—could you explain this to me?”

The Master replied, “Ranyou is diffident, and so I urged him on. But Zilu has the energy of two, and so I sought to rein him in.” [11:22]<sup>385</sup>

Confucius was not dispensing stock answers to questions. Because he knew his students well, he responded based on his insight into what would be most helpful to each, given their respective temperaments. In so doing, Confucius models the virtue which is called “the single strand” that binds his way together: *shu* (恕).<sup>386</sup> *Shu* is a dynamic capacity for

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<sup>384</sup> Ivanhoe, *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition*, 2.

<sup>385</sup> *Analects* 11.21. 公西華曰，由也問聞斯行諸，子曰，有父兄在，求也問聞斯行諸，子曰，聞斯行之，赤也感，敢問。子曰，求也退，故進之，由也兼人，故退之。

<sup>386</sup> See *Analects* 4:15. When Confucius said, “There is one single thread binding my way together,” his disciple, Zengzi, explained that the thread was actually composed of two strands: *zhong* (忠), doing one’s utmost, and *shu* (恕).

responsiveness to the needs of another. It is translated as “reciprocity,”<sup>387</sup> “putting oneself in the other’s place,”<sup>388</sup> and “using oneself as a measure to gauge others.”<sup>389</sup>

Ames highlights the intuitive, non-rational sensibility at work in *shu*: there is a role for “affective inquiry—a knowing through feeling—that requires a weighing of the circumstances with empathy and concern.”<sup>390</sup> *Shu* can also be understood as *deference*, “both in the sense of deferring action until we overcome uncertainty in our moral inquiry, and in the sense of taking under consideration the interests of others in that process.”<sup>391</sup>

In *Analects* 15:24, Confucius further amplifies the meaning of *shu*:

Zigong asked, “Is there one expression that can be acted upon until the end of one’s days?”

The Master replied, “There is *shu* 恕 : do not impose on others what you yourself do not want.”<sup>392</sup>

Though the texts that speak of *shu* are few in number, we have sufficient information to understand *shu* as a mature relational acumen that enables persons to imaginatively put themselves in the place of others. To the extent one is able to achieve *shu*, he or she will become a center of beneficial interpersonal transactions. Because relationships are seldom between persons who share proportionate character, “reciprocity” is not the most apposite translation of *shu*. The most fruitful relationships always involve some degree of reciprocity, but accomplished persons do not extend caring actions toward others on the condition of like treatment in return. However, there is a conceptual reciprocity

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<sup>387</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean*, 109; Burton Watson, *The Analects of Confucius*, 109.

<sup>388</sup> Ames and Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius*, 92.

<sup>389</sup> D. C. Lau, *Confucius: The Analects*, 74.

<sup>390</sup> Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 196.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>392</sup> *Analects* 15.24. 子貢問曰、有一言、而可以終身行之者乎。子曰、其恕乎、己所不欲、勿施於人。

contained in *shu*. To put yourself in another's place, to not impose on others what you yourself don't want—these attitudes/actions proceed on the assumption that persons are due reciprocal consideration in their relations with each other.

The term, *shu*, appears twice in the *Analects* and once in each of the *Mencius*, *Da Xue*, *Zhongyong* and *Xunzi*. It is intriguing that, in spite of minimal textual material, *shu* has acquired an elevated status as a key character trait presented in the Confucian canon. This, without doubt, is due in part to the strong commendation of *shu* attributed to Confucius. But there are other justifications for the inclusion of *shu* among the excellences of the Confucian way, not the least of which is its close relation to *ren* (仁). In *Analects* 6:30, Zigong asks Confucius about the nature of *ren*. Though he doesn't reference *shu* in the passage, the Master's response to Zigong shows the integral relationship between *ren* and *shu*.

Zigong said, “What about the person who is broadly generous with the people and is able to help the multitude—is this what we could call authoritative conduct (*ren* 仁)?”

The Master replied, “Why stop at authoritative conduct? This is certainly a sage (*sheng* 聖). Even a Yao or a Shun would find such a task daunting. Authoritative persons establish others in seeking to establish themselves and promote others in seeking to get there themselves. Correlating one's conduct with those near at hand can be said to be the method of becoming an authoritative person.”<sup>393</sup>

“Correlating one's conduct with those near at hand” is a phrase that captures the relational skill associated with both *ren* and *shu*. The graph 仁 (*ren*) contains the “person” radical, combined with the number “two.” It is straightforwardly a depiction of human

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<sup>393</sup> *Analects* 6.30. 子貢曰，如有博施於民，而能濟眾，何如，可謂仁乎。子曰，何事於仁，必也聖乎，堯舜其猶病諸。夫仁者，己欲立而立人，己欲達而達人。能近取譬，可謂仁之方也已。

beings together in relationship. The elements of the *shu* (恕) graph include the character *ru* (如), which means “like” or “similar,” and *xin* (心), meaning “heart mind.” Those who achieve skill in relationships unify their behavior and feelings in coordinated responsiveness to “those near at hand.” As consummate persons, they are thoroughly versed in *li* (禮), ritual propriety; but utilizing *li* as a guide, their empathetic responses manifest the creativity and imagination necessary to “put oneself in another’s place.”

The *Zhongyong* passage containing *shu* cites *Analects* 15:24 and elaborates on the way *shu* functions in relationships.

The Master said, “The proper way (*dao* 道) is not at all remote from people. If someone takes as the way that which distances them from others, it should not be considered the proper way. In the *Book of Songs* it says:

In hewing an axe handle, in hewing an axe handle—  
The model is not far away.

But in grasping one axe handle to hew another, if one never looks directly at the axe handle in one’s hand, the handles still seem far apart. Thus the exemplary person (*junzi* 君子) uses one person to mold others properly, and having thus improved upon them, goes no further.

Putting oneself in the place of others (*shu* 恕) and doing one’s best on their behalf (*zhong* 忠) does not stray far from the proper way. ‘Do not treat others as you yourself would not wish to be treated.’<sup>394</sup> [*Zhongyong* 13]

Noteworthy in this passage is the affirmation that *dao* is present where persons are engaged in activities to bring out the best in each other. And, conversely, if persons have separated themselves from such relationships, they cannot be said to be near the proper way. Character is not shaped in isolation. Just as one grasps an axe handle to hew a new

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<sup>394</sup> Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Focusing the Familiar: A Translation and Philosophical Interpretation of the Zhongyong* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 94. 子曰：道不遠人。人之為道而遠人，不可以為道。《詩》云：伐柯伐柯，其則不遠。執柯以伐柯，睨而視之，猶以為遠。故君子以人治人，改而止。忠恕違道不遠，施諸己而不願，亦勿施於人。

axe handle, exemplary persons (already formed to a great extent) can be effective in shaping others. Whether axe handles or persons, that which is shaped should resemble that which shapes it. The *junzi* perseveres in this work until the desired improvement is achieved. This is the outworking of *shu*, which motivates persons to do their best (*zhong* 忠) on behalf of others. Such activity is not far from (不遠), which means “very near to,” the proper way.

Considering the direction of Vattimo’s ethical thought, the Confucian virtues *ren* and *shu* offer other-regarding traits of character well suited to the culture of dialogue and hospitality Vattimo commends. If the cultural trend is away from metanarratives to local narratives and away from final Truth to truth as consensus, the value of *shu*, “putting oneself in the other’s place,” would be evident in the way it promotes active listening and creative empathetic response. Antonio Cua describes aspects of *shu* that highlight its appropriateness for an environment where trust is valued over truth.

Confucius’s idea of *shu*, that is, “Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire” . . . may be construed as a counsel of *humility* and *modesty*. While humility is compatible with just pride, it is a desirable moral attitude, because one’s claim to knowledge about what is good for oneself and another must be proportional to accessible information and experience. While such knowledge may provide grounds for a claim for its significance for future conduct, reasonable persons would avow their sense of fallibility or humility.<sup>395</sup>

Vattimo’s choice of charity as the principle to govern relationships has much to commend it. But the strong links between charity and the *kenosis* of God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ means charity is inevitably associated with self-sacrifice, cross-bearing and altruistic actions. The Confucian outlook would support sacrificial

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<sup>395</sup> Antonio S. Cua, “The Ethical and Religious Dimensions of *Li*,” in *Confucian Spirituality*, vol. 1, ed. Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 260.



behavior in situations where it is appropriate, but these are exceptional and not to be taken as a model for everyday relationships. According to the Confucian understanding of the self, if I give myself in sacrificial ways to another, I am not acting only on my behalf; when I act sacrificially, I am also sacrificing my wife's husband, my daughter's father, my parents' son and so forth. The socially constituted self of Confucianism cannot easily make unilateral decisions that adversely affect a center of significant relationships for the people in one's life.

It is interesting that Wing-tsit Chan and Tu Weiming both translate *shu* as "altruism."<sup>396</sup> This seems to me an infelicitous rendering. Altruism carries strong connotations of selflessness, a sentiment not present or required in the Confucian vision of flourishing families and communities. The dynamic we find operative in *ren* and *shu* issues in mutually beneficial acts of service and bonds of relationship. As the above quoted passage affirms, "Authoritative persons [*renzhe* 仁者] establish others in seeking to establish themselves and promote others in seeking to get there themselves."

Vattimo would do well to enter the dialogue among world philosophies and religions, where he would discover resources well suited to his philosophical project. His choice of charity as the principle to carry forward from the cultural inheritance of the West might profitably be exchanged for the "golden rule" from the teachings of Jesus: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you,"<sup>397</sup> or Jesus' quotation of the Old Testament command: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>398</sup> These core

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<sup>396</sup> See Wing-tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 27, 44; Tu Weiming, *Centrality and Commonality*, 14.

<sup>397</sup> Matthew 7:13 (New Revised Standard Version Bible, 2011).

<sup>398</sup> Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39 (New Revised Standard Version Bible, 2011.)

biblical teachings satisfy Vattimo's felt need for ethical principles that are mined from the provenance of the West. But they come without the theological baggage that encumbers charity and they find common ground with other traditions (like Confucianism) that have their own versions of ethical maxims strikingly similar to the "golden rule" of Christianity. Furthermore, these principles are fully "secular" in the sense that they do not rely on religious stories or mythologies for their content.

This raises, once again, the troublesome privileging of the Christian tradition in Vattimo's writings. If the favored metaphor for weakened, immanent philosophy is the incarnation of Jesus Christ, does this not impose a serious difficulty upon Jewish believers, who may see it as an attempt to assimilate Judaism into Christianity? Though he cites the "Judeo-Christian revelation" for the announcement that "God is not violence but love,"<sup>399</sup> the hyphenated inclusion of the Judaic side of revelation does not mask Vattimo's decided preference for Christian images. And this problem is even more acute for Islamic readers of Vattimo, who share Abrahamic origins with Judaism and Christianity, but are omitted from Vattimo's characterization of Christianity and Western democracy as the bearers of world hospitality. The privileged place given to Christianity is, in fact, a violation of hospitality and diminishes the cogency of Vattimo's presentation.

John Caputo, who finds much to commend in Vattimo's weak thought, is troubled by the historical periodization he reads in Vattimo's description of the religion of the Father that gives way to the religion of the Son that leads, eventually, to the age of the

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<sup>399</sup> Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 85.

Spirit, in which we now find ourselves.<sup>400</sup> Caputo fears this becomes, for Vattimo, another “grand narrative” or “overarching history” that is “selling us another metaphysical bill of goods under the name of demythologization.”<sup>401</sup> Caputo, whose “theology of the event” turns on the distinction between names and events, states, “the hesitations I feel about Vattimo center around how ‘strong’ the names of Christianity and the Incarnation remain in his thought, where such strength comes at the cost of the event, whose most important effect is to weaken any such names.”<sup>402</sup>

Vattimo’s maturity as a world philosopher would require the consideration of models for dialog and integration among diverse religious and philosophical traditions. All interlocutors in this conversation bring their own “chain of messages” and “ethics of provenance” to which they are historically connected. But this does not preclude the possibility of interchange leading to new conceptions of life together in the world. As Cheng Chung-ying observes, “It is clear that, despite the fact that a world religion has a particularity of historical beginning and development, its futurity is not bounded by its historicity.”<sup>403</sup>

Cheng utilizes resources from East and West, namely, the *Yijing* portrayal of origination and change, together with the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, to propose a model of constructive harmonization among world religions. He does not

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<sup>400</sup> See Vattimo, *After Christianity*, c. 2, “The Teachings of Joachim of Fiore,” pp. 25-39.

<sup>401</sup> Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics,” 82.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>403</sup> Cheng Chung-ying, “Toward an Integrative Religious Pluralism: Embodying Whitehead, Cobb, and the *Yijing*,” in *Deep Religious Pluralism*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 210.

advocate a reduction of pluralism, but an integrative pluralism, based on three levels of understanding:

1. To see the theoretical and practical differences of existing religions such as Christianity and Buddhism.
2. To see the theoretical and practical complementarity of different existing religions in light of an underlying philosophy of being and becoming.
3. To see all religions as steps toward a comprehensive philosophy of being, becoming, humanity and the world.<sup>404</sup>

The objective of such an integration, according to Cheng, would be to show that “all religions are to be regarded as integral parts of a holistic developmental process of humanity and its understanding of the world.”<sup>405</sup>

Cheng’s model is but one example of a creative proposal for interreligious dialog and integration. His work honors the Confucian value of “harmony without sameness.” Confucius once said, “Exemplary persons seek harmony not sameness; petty persons, then, are the opposite.”<sup>406</sup> Such an approach offers unexplored potential for the Gadamerian culture of dialogue and hospitality Vattimo envisions.

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<sup>404</sup> Cheng Chung-ying, “Toward an Integrative Religious Pluralism,” 212.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> *Analects* 13:23. 子曰：君子和而不同，小人同而不和。

## CONCLUSION

This paper has undertaken to bring the philosophy of classical Confucianism into creative dialogue with the postmodern thought of Gianni Vattimo. My thesis has been that Vattimo's secularized religiousness has much in common with the humanism of Confucius. Both schools of thought rely on an immanent worldview that locates sources of meaning and value within the natural and cultural environments human beings inherit, inhabit and pass on to future generations. I have suggested ways that the Confucian worldview could broaden and strengthen Vattimo's thought.

There are three main catalysts for this study. The first catalyst is the so-called "return to religion" in popular culture and in continental philosophy. This return is seen both in the resurgence of various religious fundamentalisms around the globe and in the renewed interest in religion-related topics in the intellectual world. To the extent that rationalism and scientism fostered skepticism toward religious claims, the demise of the Enlightenment paradigm of knowledge has served to reopen questions related to religious knowledge and experience. As Vattimo has said, "The end of metaphysics and the death of the moral God have liquidated the philosophical basis of atheism."<sup>407</sup>

The second catalyst for this study is the recognition that Confucianism, though a worldview without transcendence in the strict philosophical sense of that term, is a distinctly religious form of life. Many foreign interpreters have imposed upon the Confucian texts religious concepts and categories foreign to the ancient Chinese milieu. But there is a growing body of scholarship that is allowing the texts to speak for

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<sup>407</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 17.

themselves. And what is discovered is a spirituality that is realized in “the connection of the microcosm of the self to the macrocosm of the universe through spiritual practices of communitarian ethics, self-transformation, and ritual relatedness.”<sup>408</sup> The Confucian texts include references to deities, ghosts and spirits, but these turn out to be venerated ancestors and the continuing influence, good or evil, of influential people even after their deaths. There is no appeal to a realm or power beyond the natural cosmos.

The third catalyst is the field of comparative philosophy, particularly Chinese-Western comparative studies. Globalization and the rise of China have brought the Middle Kingdom into the consciousness of everyone in the global village. It is important to understand and appreciate the thought world of China. Old stereotypes and colonial attitudes must give way to respectful dialogue between cultures. By bringing China’s “first teacher” into conversation with a 21<sup>st</sup> century continental philosopher, I hope to show the relevance of an ancient worldview for challenges of the contemporary world.

Chapter One described the hermeneutical dynamics of this study. First of all, postmodern philosophy is thoroughly hermeneutical because it acknowledges the interpretive character of all human experience. Hans-Georg Gadamer moved the field of hermeneutics beyond written texts and showed how “the phenomenon of understanding . . . pervades all human relations to the world.”<sup>409</sup> Furthermore, he argued for the positive role of prejudice and pre-understandings. The interpreter is immersed in and shaped by the world she seeks to understand. Because there can be no purely objective point of

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<sup>408</sup> Tucker, introduction, 3.

<sup>409</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 1.

view, to fail to take into account the role of prejudice in interpretation actually clouds one's perspective and inhibits understanding.

Vattimo is a hermeneutical philosopher who acknowledges his intellectual debt to thinkers like Luigi Pareyson, Gadamer, and Martin Heidegger. Vattimo believes the inevitable outcome of hermeneutics is nihilism. But he takes an ironically positive view of nihilism, contending that it leads not to despair but to emancipation. It is only when we are freed from the dogmas of the church and the academy that we have the opportunity for a reduction of the violence that is inherent in foundational conceptions of truth. Because Vattimo opts for the deconstructionist application of hermeneutical theory, his philosophy is vulnerable to charges of relativism. When he defends his thought against relativism, he often betrays his weak philosophy by positing strong principles.

It is important, also, to note that Confucianism is a hermeneutical tradition. It is a philosophy that relies on the interpretation and reinterpretation of texts that are viewed as authoritative for the tradition. Confucius, claiming to be a traditionalist, formulated a radically new application of material he gleaned from the Five Classics. And, since the texts attributed to Confucius, Mencius, Zisizi and Xunzi were composed, Chinese philosophers of diverse interpretations have all claimed fidelity to those texts.

But, though Confucianism is a textual tradition, it is also a humanism and, as such, looks to exemplary human beings for inspiration. At the most advanced level of self-cultivation is the sage. The sage is one who, according to Henry Rosemont, is able to “see and feel customs, rituals and tradition—the *li*—holistically, as defining and

integrating the whole of human society.”<sup>410</sup> I explored the etymology of *sheng* (聖) to show how the sage is one who listens, studies and observes in ways that lead to spontaneous and novel actions that are appropriate and beneficial for the community. Rather than a passive agent, the sage is an active creator of meaning through thoughtful engagement with inherited wisdom and responsiveness to the demands of contemporary crises. The sage seeks to be, along with *tian*, a co-creator of a world that will be more flourishing for its future inhabitants.

Based on this, I proposed a Confucian sagely approach that would energize the remorseful, convalescent tone of Vattimo’s hermeneutics that owes, in part, to his cultural chauvinism. The sagely interpreter would avail himself or herself of all the resources presented by world philosophies and the diversity of religious traditions. Vattimo should follow the example of others from the West, notably Heidegger, who greatly benefited from their study of Asian philosophy.

Chapter Two addressed the volatile question regarding transcendence in the Confucian texts. There are interpreters who find elements not only of transcendence, but also of monotheism in the style of the Abrahamic religions, with an anthropomorphic creator god, who exercises providential care over the earth. On the other end of the spectrum are thinkers like Roger Ames and David Hall, who see no strict transcendence in the early texts. There are also interesting mediating positions that attribute to *tian* and *dao* transcendent characteristics, but within an immanent framework. Tu Weiming describes the relationship of human beings and the cosmos as an “anthropocosmic unity,” but ascribes to *tian* a determinative role in endowing human nature. Cheng Chung-ying

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<sup>410</sup> Rosemont, “Is There a Universal Path?”, 192.



also interprets Confucianism to say that human beings receive their nature from *tian*, but human beings also exert creative force upon *tian* that effects change in the totality of things. Because of this, *tian* does not stand in a transcendent relationship to human beings.

Chapter Two also considered the challenge of religious language and the persistent temptation to reify the metaphors we employ to describe notions of transcendence. Spatial metaphors are often utilized to describe what lies beyond the boundaries of experience. But, as Heidegger has shown, there is no inside or outside; there is only the world into which one is thrown. *Dasein* transcends by projecting itself onto the temporal horizons of past, present and future. Our longings for transcendence are tied to our experience of limits, especially the limits of biological existence. According to Heidegger, we live authentically by embracing “being toward death,” but we resist the temptation to interpret language of transcendence literally.

Being is experienced, not through contact with a non-human reality that lies beyond the space/time continuum, but in the everyday interactions among people in a community of language users. Vattimo’s student, Santiago Zabala, has applied the insights of Gadamer and Heidegger to the phenomenon of human conversation. Being eventuates in conversation because conversation is the form of language that takes place in community where experiences are shared, ideas are submitted to others and consensus is achieved. As Thomas Kuhn and others have shown, even the hard sciences advance from one paradigm to the next by way of consensus among the language users best qualified to evaluate the available evidence. Though Kuhn would allow that later

paradigms represent progress because of their adequacy and comprehensiveness, this does not mean those paradigms have brought us closer to final truth.

Chapters Three and Four addressed the central question of the study, seeking to identify the ways in which Confucianism and Vattimo offer a spirituality that is immanent and human-centered. In Chapter Three, I outlined Vattimo's theory of secularization. He defines it as the process of unmasking the sacrality of all absolute, ultimate truths. In Western modernity, developments in science and philosophy precipitated a loss of confidence in religious dogma, ecclesiastical authority and the divine sanction of monarchies. A new mythology depicting inexorable progress under the banners of science and reason also eventually lost credence in the light of continual wars and the failure of colonialism.

Vattimo not only believes that secularization is a good thing, he contends that it is the outworking of the core truth of the Christian gospel: in Jesus Christ, the transcendence of God has been poured out onto the plain of human relationships. The guiding metaphor for this discussion is *kenosis*, the self-emptying of God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In this metaphor, Vattimo finds a religious counterpart to the philosophical weakening of being. This is nothing less than a revisionist, post-ontotheological account of Christianity. Yet, Vattimo claims he is still a Christian believer, of sorts. He describes his religious sentiments in Schleiermacher's terms, as a feeling of dependence upon an infinitude that cannot be defined metaphysically. Vattimo attributes his religious feelings to the "chain of messages" that addresses him from within

the biblical tradition. The experience of the postmodern subject “resembles that of an ‘interpreter’ who is not the author of his or her own text.”<sup>411</sup>

Turning to Confucian spirituality, I described it as a sense of unity with and participation in cosmic order. Because Confucianism and Daoism share a cosmology, I cited passages from Daoist texts that commend a life of non-interfering participation in the creative process of nature. Zhuangzi said: “Whoever knows what Heaven does lives the life generated by Heaven.”<sup>412</sup> And Confucius echoes this sentiment in his statement: “*Tian* has given life to and nourished excellence in me.”<sup>413</sup> I take *tian* and *dao* to stand for the totality of the natural and cultural environments that shape the life of human communities. This interpretation is consistent with an immanent cosmology, but also accounts for the language of transcendence that is common in the texts. The natural and cultural environments, in their cumulative effects upon individuals and communities, are experienced as grand, timeless and transcendent.

The Confucian religious sensibility derives from the realization that, though *tiandao* is great and mysterious beyond comprehension, individual human beings have the potential to participate in the ongoing creative processes of the cosmos. In the *Zhongyong*, we encounter the fullest expression of co-creativity through active engagement that is transformative in its effects on other human beings and the natural environment. For those who grasp the *tianren heyi* nature of existence, the world becomes an enchanted place, a “sacred vessel,” (天下神器) in the words of Laozi. This is a way of seeing that comes to those who love to study (*haoxue* 好學), that is, read, watch,

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<sup>411</sup> D’Isanto, “Introduction,” 7-8.

<sup>412</sup> Graham, *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters*, 84

<sup>413</sup> Ames and Rosemont, *Analects*, 116.

listen and meditate upon, the messages that come by way of moral exemplars, authoritative texts and the ways of the natural world.

Confucian this-worldly spirituality offers resources to help fortify aspects of Vattimo's weak thinking. First, the deep connection between human beings and the natural environment, expressed in notions like *tianren heyi* and anthropocosmic unity, finds confirmation in evolutionary theory and the science of ecosystems. An ecological concern based on immanent understandings of the cosmos is underdeveloped in Vattimo's writings. Secularization opens the way for a reenchantment of the relationship with nature, not based on strong metaphysical structures such as creation, *arche* or natural kinds, but on the understanding of the continuity of being, of which every individual is a contributory part. Second, a contrast is seen in the way Confucianism and Vattimo receive their respective cultural inheritances. For Confucianism, the cultural inheritance is transmitted by way of exemplary lives. Whether historical or mythical, the sage heroes of antiquity were viewed as models to be emulated. In their turn, Confucius, Mencius and others were also elevated as icons of moral achievement. Though Confucianism is a textual tradition, the texts are valued because they portray the *dao*, the way of life, of these cultural heroes. Vattimo, in contrast, appropriates his cultural inheritance by way of hermeneutical engagement with texts and ideas. While Confucianism searches the cultural inheritance for models of wise and efficacious living, Vattimo peruses the religious and philosophical texts of Western civilization for intellectual inspiration. The Confucian value of embodied wisdom is instructive for a postmodern philosophy that struggles to offer concrete guidance for ethical behavior.

Chapter Four considered religiousness as human interrelatedness and ethical responsibility. The foremost ethical principle offered by Vattimo is the reduction of violence. In place of transcendent ethical principles, Vattimo offers an ethics of provenance, based on historical situatedness within a plurality of cultures. There are no claims to ultimacy or universality. The ethics of provenance, emphasizing human finitude, removes all bases for violence or cruelty toward other human beings. Vattimo also describes his position as an ethics of continuity, in which we choose from our cultural inheritance those ideas and principles that can be fruitfully reappropriated and recast in a weakened, unfounded frame. The choices must be guided by the principle of the reduction of violence. Vattimo selects the principle of Christian charity.

Charity, says Vattimo, is the outworking of nihilistic ethics. He understands the principle as “grace and love or generosity of spirit and the act of self-giving upon which genuine charity is properly founded.”<sup>414</sup> It is life lived for the sake of others. Along with “an active commitment to diminish violence in all its forms,”<sup>415</sup> charity is embodied in hospitality and listening in the midst of the conflict of cultures and interpretations. Charity constitutes the limit to secularization, for without this limit, there is nothing to prevent the reemergence of authoritarian structures that are prone to violence. As a non-deconstructible principle within Vattimo’s ethics, charity takes on a strong, transcendent character that is inconsistent with the tenor of weak thought.

Confucian ethics offers constructive insights for Vattimo’s ethics of charity. The Confucian way centers on ethically appropriate behavior within one’s social roles and

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<sup>414</sup> Vattimo, “Toward a Nonreligious Christianity,” 182, n. 8.

<sup>415</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 51-52.

relationships, beginning with the family. *Xiao* (孝), “filial devotion” or “family reverence,” is the attitude that allows character development within the various family relationships. When one has learned deference and reciprocity within the family, he or she is thereby prepared to engage responsibly in the wider community of neighbors and citizens. For Confucianism, it is not inaccurate to say that cosmic order begins at home.

On this point, the contrast between Confucianism and Vattimo could not be sharper. Though Vattimo reverences the cultural inheritance, he fails to acknowledge the culture of family and its constitutive role in the formation of human beings. In fact, Vattimo believes identities based on blood and family are examples of “excessive absolutization, in defiance of charity, of things naturally given.”<sup>416</sup> If, as Vattimo contends, metanarratives have been exchanged for local and particular stories, and if the ontology of actuality espoused by Vattimo is based on the contingent events that have led us to constitute ourselves as thinking, speaking and living persons, then the influence of family origins and relationships cannot be neglected.

Finally, Chapter Four concluded with a comparison of the Chinese virtue, *shu* (恕), with Vattimo’s principle of Christian charity. *Shu*, reciprocity, deference or putting oneself in another’s place, is what Confucius called “the single strand,” along with *zhong* (忠), that bound together all his teaching. *Shu* is portrayed as a relational acumen that allows persons to imaginatively put themselves in the place of others. Confucius’ commendation of *shu* is followed by his version of the Golden Rule: “Do not impose on others what you yourself to not want.” (*Analects* 15:24)

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<sup>416</sup> Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 79.

Vattimo's preference for charity and *kenosis* as guiding ethical ideas illustrate his illegitimate privileging of the Christian tradition. Adherents of other world faiths are justified in their suspicion that Vattimo is not heeding his own call to hospitality toward non-Western and non-Christian neighbors. *Shu* is, in many respects, the Chinese counterpart of the other-regarding attitudes Vattimo calls for in his ethics of charity. And it avoids difficulties associated with his choice of charity. The strong links between charity and the *kenosis* of God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ mean charity is inevitably associated with self-sacrifice, cross-bearing and altruistic actions. The principle of *shu*, as putting oneself in another's place, is fully secular in the sense that it is free of associations with religious stories or myths for its meaning.

This project has endeavored to show that the ancient Confucian worldview has relevance for contemporary society. By bringing Confucius and his fellow *Rujia* philosophers into conversation with a representative postmodern thinker, Gianni Vattimo, I have demonstrated that there are ideas in the Confucian texts that merit serious study and consideration by Western philosophers struggling to come to terms with the shifting thought-world of a postmetaphysical age. With its world affirming philosophy of co-creativity with *tian* and its richly textured understanding of human interrelatedness, Confucianism is one of the voices to which Vattimo could listen with great benefit to his philosophical project.

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