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## Taylor and Vattimo on the Place of Culture in Political Practical Reasoning

### Abstract:

Philosophical hermeneutics has become an unavoidable reference in the field throughout the twentieth century but has seldom been extended to draw conclusions in the area of political theory. Two intellectuals that have contributed to such a project are Charles Taylor and Gianni Vattimo, although they exhibit some important differences in key aspects of this enterprise, both at the level of the conceptual premises and at that of the prescribed policies and objectives. Here I examine these thinkers' notion of tradition – an essential feature of hermeneutical theories – its ontological underpinnings, and the place each of them assign to it in sociopolitical decision-making, especially in the context of multicultural societies. In the end, I argue for the superiority of Taylor's model of understanding and employing tradition in current political and moral debates.

### Keywords:

Taylor, Vattimo, hermeneutics, multiculturalism, practical reason

### Introduction

Any hermeneutic theory assigns a central place to the interpretive process, and from its early stages (in the nineteenth century), the main proponents of the Modern formulation of this philosophical perspective have pointed out that all interpretation is not only an interaction between the “reader” and the “text” (broadly construed),

but that both are encompassed within a tradition which already embeds them in a network of meanings, values and a way of life.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps one of the best-known contemporary formulations of this idea is put forward by Gadamer in his *Truth and Method*, among other places.

If correct, this insight would have a significant impact on how we engage in our political life, where tradition should be taken into account in the process of practical reasoning, as opposed to the strategy of State neutrality that has come to be hegemonic in Western societies under the influence of (different brands of) liberalism. These considerations are compounded in our contemporary world, with more and more societies becoming increasingly multicultural and thus forcing us to deal with more than one tradition at once, as well as their reciprocal interactions. However, not many proponents of philosophical hermeneutics have devoted themselves to political theory, and those who have did not reach identical solutions.

In this paper I examine two hermeneutical thinkers that actually have delved into political considerations at some length: Charles Taylor and Gianni Vattimo. My chief concern will be to determine how each of them conceives a model of collective political reasoning that takes into account tradition-informed concepts and values. That is, how would one go about engaging in deliberation with other citizens which share one's own culture? And what about those who do not?

Through a comparative analysis of some key aspects of their works I aim to support two claims: first, that adopting a hermeneutical approach still leaves a large degree of indeterminacy in political matters, with a wide range of practical options remaining available; and second, that a (moderate) realist account, such as that exemplified by Taylor, proves to be a more promising basis for elaborating a proposal in the practical-political dimension, particularly in multicultural contexts.

Of course, reaching these conclusions requires us to go into some detail regarding what a cultural tradition is and how it shapes our interactions and interpretations, before proceeding to the specific political realm where – I will argue, along the lines of the hermeneutic approach – the very nature of practical reasoning does not – cannot – fundamentally change. Thus, taking seriously this image of human understanding and reason demands that we ask whether, in knowingly speaking from and through an inherited language and a particular way of life, we may purport to be trying to get at something real that someone from another culture would be able to grasp – albeit likely in different terms. If so, as Taylor suggests and Vattimo denies, a political dialogue built along these lines would have to be taken as an exercise in both interpretation and rational judgement, where intercultural dialogue does not foreclose the possibility of concluding the rightness or wrongness of at least some elements of one's own or another's reading of the problem at hand; though always provisionally and under the recognition of the limitations of any such judgement.

To these ends, the rest of the paper is structured as follows. In the next section I give a brief presentation of each philosopher's understanding of tradition or culture and its place as constitutive of our identity and our contact with the world. Then, I consider the metaphysical or ontological underpinnings of each theory, showing its relevance and practical consequences. Finally, in the last section, I present some of the main explicitly political articulations from each author regarding the place of culture and multiculturalism, before ending with some closing remarks.

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## Tradition and Culture as Constitutive of our World

Firstly, we need to specify the meaning that each of these philosophers ascribes to the terms in question, even though neither of them gives a clear-cut definition. In Taylor's work, the term "tradition" usually refers to some or other epistemological, methodological, or more generally philosophical perspective, although it sometimes applies also to artistic currents. It is in this sense that he talks – across the span of several decades of reflection, and just to give a few examples: – the "Cartesian tradition," "Graeco-Latin and Christian tradition,"<sup>2</sup> "expressivist tradition,"<sup>3</sup> "German poetic tradition,"<sup>4</sup> "Medieval tradition of Natural Law,"<sup>5</sup> and without a doubt the most repeated and consistent use of the term, the "epistemological tradition,"<sup>6</sup> by which he understands the naturalistic approach to knowledge that makes the impersonal natural-scientific method the definitive criterion of truth in all matters. That said, here we will focus on Taylor's use of "culture," as working interchangeably with "tradition." While not identical, this usage is justified inasmuch as a culture or a cultural tradition fulfills, in his thought, the same role of providing an unarticulated background understanding, an imaginary and/or a *sensus communis* – in a sense closer to Vico's and Gadamer's – on the basis of which we are able to understand and act upon the world and with others. At times, Taylor also expresses something similar through the Gadamerian notion of "horizon,"<sup>7</sup> and even "social imaginary,"<sup>8</sup> though this latter concept could perhaps be thought of as more limited in scope.<sup>9</sup> Conceptual and terminological volatility notwithstanding, for him, taking into account the cultural tradition remains of paramount importance to understand human actions, practices, and institutions.

This hermeneutical position is perhaps most transparent in the Canadian philosopher's staunch defense of an interpretive methodology in social sciences and his equally strong opposition to naturalistic scientism. Already in the beginning of his intellectual career in the 1950's and 60's, his first publications mounted an intense attack on behaviorism, but many of the same arguments would be later extended against its methodological successors. The core of Taylor's argument is that, unlike natural objects, human realities are intrinsically meaningful. It is not the case that a discrete act is performed and then, at a second point moment, meaning is

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2) Taylor, *Agency and Language*, 111–13.

3) *Ibid.*, 241.

4) Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 56.

5) *Ibid.*, 107.

6) Taylor, *Human Sciences*; Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*; and Taylor and Dreyfus, *Retrieving Realism*.

7) Taylor, *Agency and Language*; Taylor, *Human Sciences*; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*; Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*; and Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*.

8) Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*.

9) It is practically a trademark of Taylor's thought to reject what could be seen as an excessively analytic concern for precise and stable definitions, appealing to different concepts throughout his work to grasp diverse aspects of the same phenomena. Asked about how these terms relate to one another, he responded:

They refer to different aspects of the reality. "Horizon" is when you want to talk about the whole understanding of one culture regardless of what the issue is... The study of "mentalities" is in a similar way about the ethnographic dimension. I find the work of the "Annales"-School, especially Braudel and Ariés, particularly useful, without sharing all the structuralist implications. Now the "moral maps" that people build are defined by what we are constantly referring to as important distinctions, like "I'm being original, you're just being influenced by other people." These are moral distinctions of worth.

What all these things – "social imaginaries," "horizons," "mentalities," "moral maps" – have in common is an attempt to do some phenomenology. We attempt to understand how agents are understanding the world when they are acting in one or another way. Phenomenology and hermeneutics belong together. (Bohmann and Montero, *History, Critique, Change*)

Earlier, he had defined "social imaginary" as follows: "As well as the doctrinal understanding of society, there is the one incorporated in habitus, and a level of images as yet unformulated in doctrine, for which we might borrow a term frequently used by contemporary French writers: the social imaginary" (quoted in *Ibid.*).

projected onto it. On the contrary, some social practices would not make sense without reference to what the very actors think they are doing, as well as the shared character of those convictions and values. Democracy as a social practice and political regime would become incomprehensible if isolated from categories and ideas such as “citizen” and their basic equality, “sovereignty of the people,” “constitution,” and so on. Neither of these is a physical object that could be described with the conceptual tools of natural science and, more importantly, these shared meanings are constitutive of democracy as we now understand it. For the same reasons, social science analyses are context-dependent or culture-dependent: one would not be able to offer a universal, neutral description “from nowhere,” since those meanings and values are articulated in a particular, historically situated language and society, they would change – and the practice itself would be different – if we considered distinct cases, for example, ancient Athens and contemporary Germany, or even China and the United States today. Thus, social sciences need to recognize their interpretive character, the impossibility of adopting a truly neutral technical language and be aware that they cannot ever be completely value-free.<sup>10</sup>

The same fundamental attitude towards culture as shaping (and constitutive of) our relation to our world can be appreciated in Taylor’s discussions on language, another long-lasting topic of interest for him.<sup>11</sup> It would be impossible to summarize his insights into the philosophy of language in just a few lines but here again the main point for my present purpose is that our culture or tradition, language being its main (although not the only) medium, is always a holistic reality and partially constitutive of our understanding of ourselves and others.

In fact, most of his work can be seen – as per his own admission – as attempts to articulate the core elements, conceptions, and moral sources that shape our modern identity and culture. This is precisely what he sets out to do in his two longest and best-known books, *Sources of the Self* (1989) and *A Secular Age* (2007), each approaching the subject from a different angle, but maintaining a historical-interpretive method. In these and other publications, his aim is to provide a better understanding of this tradition or horizon in order to be able to recognize what is worthy of respect and adherence in its core values, but also to avoid or fight against the perils that stem from misinterpretations and its worst elements.<sup>12</sup>

If we now attend to Vattimo’s thought, tradition appears predominantly in his numerous discussions and elaborations on Heidegger’s philosophy.<sup>13</sup> As is well known, his own original project is informed by a complementary reading of Nietzsche and Heidegger. From the first he emphasizes (centrally, though not only) the assertion that “there are no facts, only interpretations.”<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the task inherited from such a realization is to subvert any and all absolute values and truths, thus calling into question the hegemonic Western philosophical and cultural tradition, from Plato onwards. But if this purpose could be understood as fundamentally destructive, the Italian thinker insists on a different understanding. Not only does he believe that there can be found in Nietzsche himself a different, affirmative, or constructive movement – with which I will not concern myself here –, but he also partially alters Heidegger’s own appreciation of Nietzsche, turning him in a precursor of (and contributor to) the very same Heideggerian task: of reconsidering the History of Being under the metaphysical tradition, and recovering a consciousness of the ontological difference. From this standpoint, tradition becomes immensely relevant, as a succession of worlds, epochs diverse possible “openings” of Being in time.

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10) Taylor, *Human Sciences*; Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 153–54; Smith, *Meaning and Modernity*, 120–22.

11) Taylor, *The Language Animal*.

12) Dallmayr, “Modernity Rescued.”

13) This is to a certain extent also true of Taylor, who explicitly recognizes that influence (Taylor, *Papers 1*; *Papers 2*; “Reply”; *Philosophical Arguments*; and *The Language Animal*), although it occupies for him a less central role than for Vattimo, for whom Heidegger is one of the principal sources.

14) Vattimo, *The Adventure of Difference*, 69–71; *Della realtà*, ch. 1.1.

Indeed, if Being is to be understood as giving itself or opening a “clearing” in order for one of the infinite possibilities of beings or worlds to appear before us then this is a happening or event and, as such, always historically contextualized. History can no longer be teleologically conceived in a Hegelian sense, but it becomes our way into the sequence or – perhaps better – collection of diverse donations of Being and corresponding worlds. What they have in common is their being an answer to the call of Being, but each intensely temporary, transitory, not steps in a grand scheme or process of progressive discovery of a selfsame truth.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Vattimo has been called a “left Heideggerian,”<sup>16</sup> in reference to his own project, widely known as “weak thought.” From the previous diagnosis he does not conclude that we should seek a new or more authentic theoretical formulation whence Being could be grasped in its plenitude. On the contrary, it is vain and misguided to expect a new overcoming (*Überwindung*) of our present situation. What we can and should strive for is a kind of resignation<sup>17</sup> (*Verwindung*) of the present world of *Ge-Stell*, that is, the reinterpretation and partial alteration of what already is, rather than the foundation of a radically new theory or mode of being. To this end, our tradition, even though originally metaphysical, remains a crucial element.

From this viewpoint, our world of total control, characterized by “the emergency of the lack of emergency,” makes it so that we are subjected to the expectation of constant advancements of techno-science but never a radically new way of responding to Being. If so, one would not be able to break away in some relevant sense by bringing about another “next step” which in some way derives further from the same premises. Instead, what Vattimo proposes is to engage in a never-ending going over our own tradition, our cultural history, our philosophical texts, although in a very different light. We would be reading into it to bring out the silent possibilities that every text contains, those that were not received and realized in our actual chronological history, but that nevertheless reside in it, so as to distort and weaken the certainty of the truths that have been imposed in our metaphysical sequence up until our days. By showing its partial and limited character, and by revealing them as only one among many possible interpretations, we open ourselves to a rather different relation towards the text and truth. We become aware of the contingency of our own world and of the many other potential worlds that reside in our History, even if they were silenced and forgotten. This attitude and work of remembrance the Italian philosopher calls “*Andenken*” and it makes quite clear that in his thought tradition also has a central role to play.<sup>18</sup> Through it, Being is constantly being weakened and remains as memory, rather than effective presence.

Now, as we can see from the brief descriptions above, tradition is ostensibly present in the thought of both authors under analysis. In each case, this is true at the level of the human ontological constitution, as well as in the process of theoretical and practical reasoning. That is to say, we are inherently historical beings, our identities unavoidably shaped by our social and cultural history; and we need to appeal to that very tradition in order to understand ourselves and the world around us, make decisions, and act accordingly. However, this presence is significantly different in each case, both in the weight it has over us and in the place we assign to it in our reasoning.

Taylor’s effort is to better articulate the moral sources already contained in our tradition in order to recognize their worth and adequately weigh them in our own decision-making. For tradition to perform that function, it needs to be assumed as one’s own that is to say, as a vital part of one’s own identity – and as rationally compelling for one’s practical reasoning. These are, of course, two distinct conditions whose truth is

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15) Vattimo, *The Adventure of Difference*, 167–68.

16) Woodward, “The *Verwindung* of Capital,” 77–78; Woessner, “Hermeneutic Communism?”

17) The term is difficult to translate, as Vattimo remarks, since it carries an idea of convalescence, of a twisting or a transformation while remaining the same.

18) Vattimo, *Adventure of Difference*, 120–32; *La fine*, ch. 10; *Adiós*, 38.

independent from each other. One could easily imagine the situation of a person who recognizes a moral value or source as part of her own history and nonetheless does not admit its claim as a binding reason which must be pondered in the process of decision-making. That is the case for those who describe themselves as “raised” within a religious denomination and having abandoned it or no longer practicing it; or those members of social sub-groups with dense normative structures who distance themselves (sometimes physically, by moving away) from their community of origin, and correspondingly altering their way of life. The reverse, someone who sees a value, norm or good as foreign to his own personal and social history and yet treats it as rationally binding is perhaps a rarer case. While conceivable in specific circumstances, in their ordinary life those moral sources would remain unknown for most people or, if known merely exotic, without being seriously considered or weighed in practical deliberations. That is not the same as affirming its falsity; it would be better described as simply not being taken into account, not being moved by them. This picture seems to me to correspond to everyday experience and it certainly makes sense within Taylor’s image of how our identity and reasoning process are shaped: against a more abstract and disembodied image of the rational thinker as one who simply considers all the evidence or merit of each argument and proposition, in abstraction of any contextual or biographical conditions, an agent that just “looks at the facts” impartially and objectively.

In Vattimo’s philosophy, we can see a similar starting position of our identities being constituted by our tradition. He does not offer a full-fledged account of the genetic process of individual identity. That being said, there is basis enough to assert that for him, building on Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s insight, it is in and through tradition that we receive the “message” of this or that particular and historically situated opening of horizons of meaning, whence any subsequent verification of truth is possible. Hence, canon and tradition have a privileged place in the general scheme of weak thought – although not as an original and mythical unity, but as interference and difference.<sup>19</sup> In this at least one can see a resemblance with Taylor’s position: for both of them our current orientation within and towards our world is strongly dependent on our historical tradition and culture.

Moving on to what we should “do” with tradition so conceived, here the dissimilarity with Taylor becomes more evident. For the Italian thinker too, our basic attitude towards our cultural history should be inquisitive, rather than merely one of passive reception. Even more, in some sense we are also attempting to articulate something that was previously not clear enough. So far, so good. But what we are trying to bring out in Vattimo’s *Andenken* is that which is different, which in some sense alters or twists the hegemonic understanding of said tradition for example, the metaphysical reading – and had so far been forgotten or ignored. Meanwhile, Taylor’s historical articulation of the moral sources of a culture seeks to clarify, to show in a better light that which is already there but has been perhaps misunderstood or confused. We could say that he attempts to give a richer and more authentic (or more truthful) image of what is already there in our modern culture. Both are trying to recover something that is buried deep within our historical tradition; however, in one case that which we seek is what distorts, what in some way deviates from its predominant interpretation, while in the other we try to purify and reinforce what is valuable in it.<sup>20</sup>

These contrasting attitudes rest, I believe, on the diverse metaphysical or ontological premises from which the philosophers are speaking. Therefore, in the next section I will summarily reconstruct those bases and show how they contribute to a better understanding of those attitudes towards cultural tradition.

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19) Vattimo, “Dialettica, differenza,” 23–28.

20) I am perhaps overemphasizing the point – we should bear in mind that Taylor’s work also usually entails rediscovering the plurality of possibilities, influences, tendencies and manifestations in a cultural tradition. In any case, it remains true that he does this in order to reinforce the positive aspects and ward off the perceived dangers of what already is our dominant tradition, rather than to undermine it or weaken it.

## Ontological Underpinnings

Even though I cannot offer here a detailed discussion of the metaphysical dimension of their systems of thought, a short presentation should suffice to trace the relevant connections. Beginning with Taylor, it must be noted that for most of his mature work he only gave occasional and marginal indications of his position on this issue. Many of his readers noted the tension inherent to affirming that crucial aspects of our identity are socially and historically constructed, as he shows regarding the modern self and culture, and at the same time presenting some stable or universal structure; such as our being self-interpreting animals, our linguistic capacity, our social character or the inherent practice of making “strong evaluations.”<sup>21,22</sup> In any case, his position did give enough indications of his refusal to collapse the entire ontological status of reality onto our perception of it, even moral realities which are intrinsically human-dependent. As he puts it in a commentary on *Sources of the Self*:

I hope this parallel may intimate to us that there is space to stand between a “Platonist” mode of moral realism, which would see the goods as standing quite independent of human existence, and as capable of formulation in a public language, on one hand, and mere subjectivism on the other. I am trying to stand in that space, which is why any equation of moral realism with Platonism seems to me to obfuscate things.<sup>23</sup>

This and other passages gave a clear idea that Taylor was committed to *sui generis* form of realism, both in respect to human/moral realities, as well as the external physical reality. As a result, his position has been called “appellative realism,”<sup>24</sup> “hermeneutic realism,”<sup>25</sup> “falsifiable realism,”<sup>26</sup> and “expressive realism,”<sup>27</sup> among other labels.

It was only in 2015 when he published *Retrieving Realism*, co-authored with Hubert Dreyfus, that Taylor’s metaphysical conception received a more thorough exposition. In this book the authors defend what they call a “pluralistic robust realism,” drawing in part from a Heideggerian reading – one quite different from that of Vattimo, as we shall see. Without being able to go over all the arguments that they offer to sustain their position against other alternatives, it should be noted that their theory claims that we have an embodied direct engagement with external reality, which rests on a background pre-understanding of what things are in relation to ourselves, our interests, intentions, and so forth. While this immediate contact with reality can be pre-linguistic or pre-propositional, it remains always framed by its insertion in a history, a social context, and a way of life.<sup>28</sup>

The main point I would like to retain for my present purpose is expounded in chapter six of the same book. When considering the impact of cultural difference in our relation to the world, the authors discuss

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21) Thoroughly explaining this concept would take us too far from our current focus. It is a central notion in Taylor’s anthropology that refers to the fact that all human agents make at least some evaluations of goodness and badness which are not treated as depending merely on their personal preference, but to an external standard which would be applicable as well to people other than themselves. While not completely objective, a judgement of this kind refers to some extra-subjective criterium. For a much more complete analysis of the concept of strong evaluation and its consequences, see: Laitinen, *Strong Evaluation*, and Meijer, *Taylor’s Strong Evaluation*, among others.

22) Taylor, “Reply,” 207–208.

23) *Ibid.*, 211.

24) Thiebaut, “Charles Taylor,” 131; “Introducción: Recuperar,” 27.

25) Gracia Calandín, “Legado filosófico,” 183.

26) Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 30.

27) Bellomo, *Lenguaje, verdad, libertad*.

28) Taylor and Dreyfus, *Retrieving Realism*, 102–106.

Donald Davidson's proposal of rejecting the distinction between conceptual scheme and content. In line with Taylor's long-standing convictions on this matter, they admit that, while understanding and agreement about the most immediate material objects could be relatively easy, linguistic and social realities are much more idiosyncratic and require one to be able to grasp the meanings and way of life in which they are embedded. Therefore, they consider that some kind of distinction akin to that between scheme and content is necessary so as to avoid falling into the danger of ethnocentricity, simply assuming that every "object" is already transparent equally to all of us. Still, they do not wish to abandon the possibility of an inter-cultural understanding. To this end, the model preferred is Gadamer's "fusion of horizons." It follows that, inasmuch as human agents share the linguistic capacity, and we are all dealing (in distinct ways, according to our culture), to the same contact with the world and with our own human condition, the possibility of mutual understanding always remains – although it is certainly not easy, nor is it always realized.<sup>29</sup> The same idea is reinforced from a different angle in chapter eight of the book, where the authors explain the "pluralistic" note of their realism, by which they mean that different and incompatible descriptions of reality could be all considered simultaneously valid without falling into antirealism, thus rejecting the claim that the natural scientific method provides the single legitimate method for a unified account of the world.<sup>30</sup>

As I said before, this presentation of the theoretical framework came to complete and systematize a view that had nevertheless been insinuated throughout the Canadian philosopher's previous works. For my present concern, and just to give a further clarifying example, let me just point out that he had on other occasions asserted that it is possible to make comparative judgements of the relative gain between two practical decisions or ways of life, both at the individual<sup>31</sup> and collective<sup>32</sup> level. This comparison would not rely on a standard objective methodology or procedure, but would still treat its conclusion as sustained by realistic or non-subjective reasons (in the sense of not being simply a matter of mere personal preference).

Let us turn now to Vattimo's conception on this matter. As we have seen before, he follows the Heideggerian usage of the term "Metaphysics" to designate specifically the Western philosophical tradition, from Plato onwards, that forgets the ontological difference and reduces Being to the presence of beings. This of course entails a number of relevant consequences, such as the subject-object scheme; the idea of truth as correspondence between mind (or, in some later formulations, of a proposition) and the thing itself; and, in its more recent iteration, the development of the modern scientific method and the reduction of the world (including human being itself, the *Dasein*) to mere resources to be managed and used, that is, the world of total control (*Ge-Stell*).

In this sense, the philosopher is a strong opponent of ontological and epistemological realism, and has repeatedly warned against the dangers he perceives in such a theoretical framework.<sup>33</sup> One of the main drives behind the project of weak thought is, precisely, the conviction that a strong notion of Truth entails different kinds of violence. Firstly, of course, there is that metaphysical violence implicit in the forgetting of the ontological difference: if the actual presence of beings is the total extent of their Being, it follows that one should strive to grasp them in their fullness, their essence, and as a stable and universal description of its defining properties. An essence, to be so, should evidently be invariable and complete, as Platonic Forms already illustrated. This excludes both the possibility of an alternative account of the object being equally correct, and the historically conditioned character of said essence. That is, any and all descriptions deemed not in accordance with the truth

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29) Ibid., ch. 6.

30) Ibid., 155–60.

31) Taylor, *Human Sciences*, 181–82; *Philosophical Arguments*, ch. 3.

32) Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, ch. 8.

33) Vattimo, *Adiós*.



are relegated to the residual category of falsity, which carries a negative value and is rejected or discarded. This also negates the constitutive historicity of truths, which carries a conservative bias: any new opinion or interpretation would have to legitimate itself by showing that it either develops further what was already implicit in the established truth or reveal the held opinion as false and hence supersede it. And this is especially problematic when predicated of human beings themselves, seeing how, once a given characterization of human natures is accepted as true, all deviations from it would become unnatural and, consequently, immoral. Correspondingly, the metaphysical tradition also requires for an appropriate method to discover the essential or objective truth. Be it the superiority of *episteme* over *doxa* or the contemporary scientific method over rhetoric, or artistic or religious ways of knowing, if there can be only one true or essential description of reality, then there can be only one method that reliably gives that answer. The modern, developed aspect of Metaphysics as techno-science, however, takes these “theoretical” dimensions of violence in a more clearly practical direction, and to its logical conclusion – that is not to say that the aforementioned ontological and epistemological violence are merely an intellectual phenomenon without practical manifestations in human life – in reducing every natural being, including human agents, to objects that can be manipulated, administrated, and so on.<sup>34</sup>

The description of the violence of Metaphysics so far is deeply Heideggerian, but Vattimo incorporates his Nietzschean influence to emphasize the connection between metaphysical violence and practical, physical violence in socio-historical contexts. The argument put forward here, in its most concise form, is that the same belief in some absolute truth or other has inspired violence between individuals and groups so as to safeguard and impose said truth, thus justifying the harm done and the force used. Even nowadays this holds true, of which he gives a few examples: the appeal of the Catholic Church to natural law in order to influence public ethics and positive law, the justification of Western wars and military intervention in order to uphold democracy or human rights, or the self-declared scientific laws of economy used to promote neoliberal public policies as inevitable.<sup>35</sup> In a further step, in his more political writings of the last fifteen years, the author links the forgetting of ontological difference to Marxian dialectics and Walter Benjamin’s “losers” of History. This sociopolitical twist makes the connection even more explicit, the argument resting on an assimilation of the forgotten or foreclosed interpretations and those marginalized in society in a political and/or economic sense. In other words, just as a metaphysical truth is held to the exclusion of alternative interpretations, those who might have held those interpretations are excluded in the name of the established one.<sup>36</sup> I will come back to some of the political implications in the next section.

Conversely, the proposed weakening of the category of truth is inspired by an ethos of tolerance and solidarity – one of many affinities between his thought and Rorty’s, which would help bring about a more pacific inter-personal, social, and international dynamic.<sup>37</sup> Significantly, Vattimo does not sustain the superiority of his ontological proposal on the claim of it being a true, more correct, or a more adequate description of reality. That would, of course, incur a performative contradiction. Instead, his argument relies on his interpretation being more in line with our own postmodern experience, rather than due to a founded “rational” belief. It is no more than an event, a historical experience and, as such, only one interpretation among others, but one with which we identify and that resonates with us.<sup>38</sup>

This short ontological excursus allows us to better understand the role cultural traditions occupy within each philosopher’s system of thought. For Vattimo, its value lies in that it presents us with one of infinite possible

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34) Vattimo, “Dialettica, differenza,” 4–6; “Conclusion”; *Adiós*, ch. 3.

35) Vattimo, *Essere e dintorni*, ch. 1.

36) Vattimo, “Dialettica, differenza,” 15–16; *Adiós*, 32; Vattimo and Zavala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 37–43.

37) Lindsey, “Vattimo’s Renunciation.”

38) Vattimo, *Essere e dintorni*, ch. 6 and 10.

clearings of Being, with no hierarchical order among them nor any trans-cultural or transcendent contribution. It is certainly relevant, even necessary, to study and to go over it to the extent that it lets us grasp better how our own world and our own reception of Being came to exist, as well as other unrealized potential interpretations that remain hidden within it. But, in any case, there is no “lesson” to be learned other than gaining consciousness of our own tradition’s contingent character, its limitations, and partiality. Meanwhile, Taylor sees in every culture the locus of a potential relative gain in different dimensions of human life. He agrees with Vattimo that History does not exhibit any kind necessary sequence, much less linear progress. Nevertheless, a given culture or tradition may present a better embodiment of some aspect of human nature and its interaction with external reality – albeit always in its own, historically conditioned way; no one could simply take another culture as a blueprint or an instruction manual to be copied to the letter. As a result, both our cultural tradition and those of others could in fact prove to contain a positive element to be recognized and, ideally, incorporated into our way of life.

With this in mind, I now turn to the place traditions could have specifically in political deliberation, especially in a globalized and multicultural world.

### Politics in a Multicultural Society

From the description of the previous sections, it should be evident that both analyzed authors recognize the need for taking into account the role of cultural tradition at the level of political and institutional decision-making, as opposed to a liberal<sup>39</sup> insistence on State neutrality. That said, the reasoning has been far from straightforward on this matter for each of them.

Taylor has indeed defended the legitimacy of at least some degree of political and legal promotion of certain culturally and morally dense values. That is one of the reasons for his being labelled a “communitarian” thinker amidst the liberal-communitarian debate of the 1980’s and 1990’s.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps the best example is his stance on the language policies to protect and preserve the French language in his native Quebec. At a theoretical level, his position on this matter is presented in a 1992 conference titled *The Politics of Recognition*, which would later be edited and published in a book together with commentaries by other prominent scholars, and become a frequent reference in the field of multiculturalism. There, Taylor traces the philosophical sources that lead to our current conception, that appropriate recognition of a cultural minority is due, and that its denial or distortion should be considered akin to causing harm to that group – inasmuch as our identity, both individual and collective, is formed on the basis of recognition by others. Consequently, he criticizes a procedural liberal approach to the problem, which prioritizes the principle of equal individual rights over the recognition of difference. Against it, he proposes an alternative model that would still be liberal in its guarantee of fundamental rights, but which would allow for the political adoption of substantive collective ends or goods, even if partially restricting some minor ramifications of those rights.<sup>41</sup>

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39) As is generally known, “liberalism” is a disputed and semantically polyvalent category. Since it would be impossible to even begin to summarize that long-standing theoretical debate, I can only state that in this paper I will take the term to mean a philosophical-political position whose key aspects are a concern with protecting individual rights, upholding the rule of Law equally over every citizen as well as those in government positions; and (crucially, to my present purpose) an approach to moral diversity based on establishing a consensus on publicly shared, procedural principles of justice, while keeping the different ethical conceptions of the good life relegated to the private sphere and out of the political public sphere, where legislative and public policy decisions are discussed. John Rawls’ *Theory of Justice* would be a paradigmatic example of such a position.

40) Neil and Paris, “Communitarian Critique.”

41) Taylor, “Recognition,” 60–61.

It should be noted that already in this essay and in other subsequent publications Taylor is plainly aware of the issue of multiculturalism.<sup>42</sup> He is not writing in support of mono-cultural nations, recommending that they close off any route that would put in danger their internal homogeneity. Quite on the contrary, the issue at stake is how to better respect and provide adequate recognition to those minorities in a multicultural society whose tradition would be in danger of being simply integrated – not necessarily in a forceful or coercive way – by the hegemonic majority.<sup>43</sup> But such a situation leads to an important theoretical question: does this demand for equal recognition presuppose that we ascribe the same value to every culture (or that we abstain from making any judgement at all)? His answer is that there is no need to simply assume as much; we should grant a presumption of value to every culture, but that does not prevent us from making critical judgements.

One ground that has been proposed is a religious one. Herder, for instance, had a view of divine providence, according to which all this variety of culture was not a mere accident but was meant to bring about a greater harmony. I can't rule out such a view. But merely on the human level, one could argue that it is reasonable to suppose that cultures that have provided the horizon of meaning for large numbers of human beings, of diverse characters and temperaments, over a long period of time – that have, in other words, articulated their sense of the good, the holy, the admirable – are almost certain to have something that deserves our admiration and respect, even if it is accompanied by much that we have to abhor and reject.<sup>44</sup>

This goes in line with what he had already said (and would continue to say) in other works about the possibility of intercultural evaluations and the identification of positive and negative elements in any one of them. The process to achieve judgements of this kind is complex and difficult, and I cannot offer a detailed description here.<sup>45</sup> What I would like to point out is the implicit premise that what each culture may have to contribute could only be discerned against some sort of common standard, which – as we have seen in the previous section – requires a specific kind of realist outlook. In other words, what we judge good and worthy of imitation in another culture is so because it portrays more clearly a way to realize some aspect of our common human nature or to relate to the world. We do not have, of course, a complete or final image of that nature, nor could we (or any culture) claim to have the best characterization across the board – that is, to embody in their way of life the best possible realization of human nature (so far) in every relevant dimension – but that is precisely why we perceive what we learn from that tradition that is distinct from ours as a relative gain: something becomes clearer in the exchange, and that something refers to a reality independent of our own perception, although we lack any definitive method to define it.

Meanwhile, Vattimo cannot ignore the weight of tradition as a conditioning factor of political life either. However, for him multiculturalism is one of the factors that explains the current postmodern climate (among others). The multiplicity of voices resulting from decolonization, the development of mass media and multicultural societies disrupts the modern aspiration to a single unified narrative of reality and frees up a great

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42) Modood, "The Majority."

43) This moderates in some measure the anti-liberal thrust of the project. In fact, its practical consequences could be much less illiberal than one could expect, if we attend to some of its applications, such as Taylor's own participation in the Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences and the recommendations given in its final report (Taylor and Bouchard, *Building Future*).

44) Taylor, "Recognition," 72–73.

45) I have given a fuller account of this subject in: Saiz, *El diálogo*, ch. 7.

number of interpretations that had been hitherto silenced (that is, their exponents oppressed). This is desirable, as it breaks the hold of the metaphysical image of truth and frees us for a different attitude.<sup>46</sup> That being said, what we can learn from the contact with other cultures is the relative character of every narrative, including our own, rather than a positive substantial value, in keeping with Vattimo's nihilist attitude towards Being. That is why, even if we have a tradition that is constitutive of our identity, it provides no strong reason to act or decide in practical reasoning. Two discrete but related arguments converge: in the first place, our tradition acts an unavoidable reference simply because we do not have another anchor point, but since we are aware that it is not "true," there is no call to enforce politically this or any other cultural way of life; additionally, given that multiculturalism is beneficial, inasmuch as it produces an erosive effect on any established tradition, we could not legitimately adopt a singular set of values in our policies to the exclusion of others. As a result, Vattimo's notion of democracy during the last decades of the twentieth century was mainly procedural, precisely because that model reduced to a minimum any sort of substantial moral commitment as well as allowing for all voices to be expressed almost without restriction.<sup>47</sup> This may seem paradoxical in light of his rejection of liberalism but his aversion at the time was directed not so much towards democratic decision procedures, but against the tendency to see in the liberal regime the ultimate and definitive universal political regime.

In his recent works, from 2007 onwards, Vattimo has published a number of more politically focused texts. This facet had been marginal up to that point,<sup>48</sup> but these more explicit formulations also seemed to alter some of his earlier points of view.<sup>49</sup> In *Hermeneutic Communism*, co-authored with Santiago Zabala, he expands on his previous criticisms of liberal democracy; in it explicitly connecting its foundation on presumed universal moral, political, and economic truths, with its violent and exclusionary tendencies (both internationally and domestically). Instead, they propose a recovery of the ideal of communism, albeit not one modeled after the soviet experience, which remained too metaphysical in its claim to being "scientific" or bringing about an inevitable final moment of History. On the contrary, communism can now only be spectral, having suffered a process of weakening itself, functioning more as a normative ideal than a regime to be realized and become fully present.<sup>50</sup> We can still see some continuity with the ontological-political attitude delineated above in that the authors still remark on the continuity between democracy's procedural consensus and the hermeneutical "right" of the weak to advance their own interpretations. But while that connection remains, it becomes clear that the Italian thinker now sees it utterly divorced from the actually existing liberal institutions and practices. In their words:

Genuine liberalism is only possible if human beings are given infinite freedom for their own re-creation. This is the reason that a tolerant society is one in which achievements will be determined by the plurality of conversations with different linguistic communities instead of the imposition of a liberal state, as with the invasion of Iraq.<sup>51</sup>

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46) Vattimo, *La società trasparente*, 7–20; Harris, "Vattimo on Culture."

47) Giorgio, "La portata politica di Vattimo"; Ginev, "Post-Metaphysical Hermeneutics."

48) With the exception of *Il soggetto e la maschera* (1974). It should also be noted that, although not articulated in dedicated theoretical publications, Vattimo did have an active practical participation in political life since his youth, culminating in his service as a member of the European Parliament in 1999 and again in 2009. See Zabala, "Introduction: Vattimo."

49) Rivera, "El fin del pensamiento débil," 60–61.

50) Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*.

51) *Ibid.*, 106.

This diagnosis leads them to embrace the Latin American populist<sup>52</sup> experiences of Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva or Rafael Correa. Even if they are not to be made into a model for the rest of the world to imitate – as this would only reproduce the mistake of the current liberal approach – they offer an example which allows other societies to open themselves to the possibility of new and original ways to engage with democracy. This further development of Vattimo’s political philosophy has been praised by some and criticized by others of his commentators. Among the critics, it has been argued that, while hermeneutics do have an affinity with democracy, it is a mistake to link it so specifically to any particular regime or political ideology;<sup>53</sup> others have contended that the choice of examples is questionable, as the particular cases praised in the book do not seem to embody truly “weak” hermeneutical attitudes, even though they may empower the “weak” in a sociopolitical sense.<sup>54</sup> In any case, Vattimo’s opinion on this issue does not seem to have changed in the last publications before his recent death.<sup>55</sup>

Regardless of its historical-political evaluations and commitments, the fundamental notion remains that a proper hermeneutical nihilistic practical proposal starts from a reflection on our own cultural tradition – in this case, on its moral and political elements, which are part of the tradition no less than its artistic side – which provides the conceptual framework but does not offer any definitive reason to act. On the contrary, political consensus is best reached by a weakening of any claim to truth and adopting a charitable attitude towards the others. At this point, we can clearly appreciate the tension between the theoretical and practical models of the philosophers analyzed. Taylor, on the other hand, believes that a better articulation of our own tradition and its enrichment by contact and comparison with other cultures provides us with substantial reasons to decide and act politically (as well as individually). For that dynamic to work, one must go through the difficult process of coming to understand a partially alien conceptual scheme – which is by no means an easy task – and subject it and his own to critical examination, one that would not contrast it with an external or objective criterium, but that would result in a conviction of the greater adequacy of one interpretation or the other, at least in a limited aspect.

Another way to get at the different approach of each model is to consider the type of discursive practice the authors choose as paradigmatic for the interaction between traditions, particularly those of dialogue and conversation. Certainly, those terms appear in the intellectual production of both authors, sometimes used indistinctly and aimed at the same thing: the inter-subjective or social character of interpretation and identity, as opposed to a monological model of reasoning and evaluation. However, when they are distinguished, the tension stems from dialogue being associated to a rational process that puts forward contrasting arguments to reach a more solid or true conclusion. Conversation on the other hand, usually refers to a more contingent (eventual, one could say) occurrence, where each party simply learns about diverse points of view, without any truth-seeking purpose, nor the need to establish a superior interpretation.

Taylor uses the notion of dialogue and conversation usually as analogues. The task of learning another “language,” immersing in a different culture and eventually reaching a fusion of horizons is rewarding precisely because it grants those who undergo it an expanded and richer viewpoint that, nonetheless, remains coherent. Hence, it requires a rational effort of integration and evaluation, comparison and conceivably rejection of some aspects of the other. This cannot be done by appeal to a third, neutral language or point of view, only by engaging in an open discussion from the basis of our current worldview. What moves us to go through with this effort and adopt the new and expanded horizon is, in part a moral motivation of respect

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52) The term is not Vattimo’s. I use it here not in an evaluative sense, but following the meaning of Ernesto Laclau’s theory of populism.

53) Malpas and Malpas, “Politics, Hermeneutics, and Truth,” 27–28; Martin, “Hermeneutic Politics.”

54) Perkins and Gillespie, “Between Weak and Practical.”

55) Vattimo, *Essere e dintorni*, ch. 12.

for the other, but also the perception that something is gained in the process, and this resulting position better articulates our shared human condition or reality, being in this sense truer.

By contrast, Vattimo has in some passages explicitly rejected the dialogue model he associates with Platonic metaphysics and realism, in favor of a Rortyan conversation, based on a charitable attitude towards the other.<sup>56</sup> Even when he does use the term “dialogue” he makes clear that it should be inspired by an ideal of increasing freedom, rather than finding truth. For example, multicultural dialogue in postmodern pluralist societies should go hand in hand with the acknowledgment that any truth is built within a shared paradigm and should seek to uncover what remains unsaid in those messages and speakers who pretend to be communicating an objective truth.<sup>57</sup> The process of reaching a common decision under this model would be better described as partly a negotiation, partly a sincere and charitable exchange of opinions, guided by the principle of not excluding any voice. Even if one considers there to be a satisfactory paradigm under which to work, the question remains: without any fixed criteria to sustain the decision taken, how would one defend it against criticism and, more importantly, how would one be able to challenge it? Vattimo himself provides an illuminating example. The Nüremberg trials and the human rights language should be accepted, he states, not as being true or being based on a substantially real value, but only out of fidelity to our determinate historical situation.<sup>58</sup>

Moreover, during this latest period of his thought and writing, he seems to have privileged the opportunity for change and the corresponding conflict it may carry over the possibility of agreement. Indeed, he has remarked that although philosophical hermeneutics has been commonly associated to dialogue and consensus, in the vein of Gadamer and Habermas, it becomes necessary to remember that any event of Being, any clearing or, in a different language, any change of paradigm, comes about as an irruption, with its quota of conflict and opposition. Against a world signed by neutralization and the lack of emergency, he wants to emphasize this revolutionary character.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps it would be excessive to say that these assertions change the nature of his philosophical and practical project, but I would venture that they are the result of the Italian thinker’s incapability to answer the question made above. If one does not have any criterion on which to build a criticism of the established, the move to challenge the *statu quo* will inevitably adopt the form of an unjustified break with the hegemonic paradigm, simply to put forward another as new and distinct, but not in any way more rational or realistically better. The force that would support the new social and political reordering would be a spontaneous adherence from those who identify with it or a conflictive imposition on those who do not.

## Conclusion

What I have tried to show through the comparative presentation of the thought of Taylor and Vattimo is the promising but indeterminate potential of a hermeneutic approach to politics, especially in a multicultural world as ours is increasingly becoming.

Through the analysis of each author’s use of the concept of tradition or culture, their underlying ontological position and their consequent political translation, one can appreciate a number of coincidences as well as some relevant disagreements. Both philosophers recognize the historically and socially constituted character of our identities, rooted in a cultural tradition that provides our basic conceptual and moral framework in our dealing with the natural and human world. Both point out the limited and particular nature of these traditions,

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56) Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 24–26.

57) Vattimo, *Adiós*, 11–13.

58) *Ibid.*, 78–79; Vattimo, *Della realtà*, ch. 3.4.

59) Vattimo, *Della realtà*, ch. 3.3; *Essere e dintorni*, ch. 18.

such that there cannot be a single linear progress nor can one be said to be straightforwardly superior, and deny that natural science can provide an alternative point of view completely exempt from these constraints. On the political dimension, both promote respecting and engaging with difference, while remaining open to questioning and eventually modification of one's own outlook.

These similarities notwithstanding, there is a significant contrast in what each of them believes is being conveyed in and through tradition. Where Taylor sees diverse ways to express a single reality and a common human nature, which means that they could describe and realize it in better or worse ways; Vattimo instead speaks of alternative and incommensurable worlds or clearings of Being, which could not be qualified nor compared in any way, since each of them has its own event of truth as *Aletheia*. Vattimo's attitude toward tradition is nihilistic, resulting in the task of reviewing and twisting it to find alternative meanings and interpretations, weakening it. Taylor, on the other hand, tries to articulate the values and goods contained in tradition to better understand them, incorporate them into our life, identify misinterpretations and correct its shortcomings. The coincidence on questioning the tradition leads to two quite distinct ways of doing so, and the dialogue or conversation with others, in turn, contribute to them accordingly: being a source of potential epistemological and practical enrichment in one case, being a reminder of diversity and insurmountable dissimilarity in the other.

My argument, concisely put, is that a realist conception such as Taylor's gives us a more convincing motivation to engage in inter-traditional or inter-cultural dialogue, and a more solid and consistent criterion to guide our political decision-making. In the first place, the ethos of respect and non-violence that Vattimo espouses certainly seems attractive for many of our contemporaries, but he relies exclusively on that epochal climate and spontaneous identification with those values. There is nothing to be said to anyone who does not already assume them as their own. Should an individual or group not share that basic outlook, there would not be anything to do other than force them to comply, paradoxically falling back into violent imposition (as it seems to happen with his latest statements of the need for a conflictive altering of the reigning paradigm in favor of the oppressed). Then, at the level of practical reasoning, Vattimo's nihilist approach does not provide us with a norm for decisions and actions, especially in the political domain. This would not be perceived by him as a failure on the part of his theory, since its precisely these kinds of universal rules that he is exposing as a fundamental cause of violence, but as a result; every single political agreement, rule, or right remains precarious and subject to constant renegotiation. While multiculturalism is viewed as desirable, each cultural tradition cannot actually make a rational contribution to the debate; they would all be regarded with a kind of aesthetic fruition, rather than as positions with a potential claim to rational superiority, that is, to be seriously considered as a binding reason to act. Taylor, for his part, also shirks eternal and unchanging rules as such, but in allowing for each historical society and culture to potentially provide some superior understanding of one or some dimensions of our human existence, he opens the door to some more stable convictions to guide and order our common life and, at the same time, gives a stronger motive to listen to each culture's arguments as containing a potentially binding principle even for those who have not been raised as members of that group<sup>60</sup>.

If this is so, I believe that hermeneutic practical proposals should be more aware than they have been so far of the relevance of some realistic ontological and epistemological underpinnings for them to be politically sound in today's pluralistic societies.

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60) That is the case – Taylor believes – with human rights. He finds them to be a historical gain that is unlikely to be abandoned or reverted going forward. See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 397; *A Secular Age*, 419; Taylor and Dreyfus, *Retrieving Realism*, 163–64. Compare this with Vattimo's stance on this matter, expressed above. This of course does not mean for Taylor that everyone should just accept the language and conceptions of human rights such as we now articulate and practice them in the West; on the contrary, the painstaking work of translation, contrast, and eventual fusion of horizons with other cultures remains always necessary. See Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 105–23.

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