INTERVIEW WITH GIANNI VATTIMO

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1. You mentioned that you did not consider yourself a philosopher; rather you consider yourself a teacher of philosophy. You say that philosophers are always on duty. I am wondering whether you can tell us more about what you mean by this.

Yes, philosophers are always on duty because of the political dimension of philosophy. Can a philosopher forget about the reality that surrounds him? I do not think so. Scientists can do this because they do not need to think, only to calculate, as Heidegger explained. Philosophers, instead, belong to the realm of reality that surrounds them and know they are living in it. They are not something different. A philosopher cannot look at his own problems in the way a scientist would because he knows he is always involved, his arguments will always be an involvement (this is also the case for the scientist). This, of course, does not mean philosophers do not make political errors; on the contrary, it does mean that to think about their own philosophical problems is a duty, a response to a call. It is the philosopher that *must* (duty) keep in mind that, for example, there are no facts, but only interpretations, and that the solutions that he proposes will always be contingent to the paradigm that holds them.

2. Some philosophers (e.g., Luce Irigaray) currently propose that men and women need to find the richness in our differences, reject the command to be humans that has been passed down for centuries, and adopt for ourselves the identity of men and women; in other words, to fragment the concept of human, thwart it, and come up with the concepts of 'man' and 'woman.' In this case, there is an invitation to 'be a man!' and 'be a woman!' An invitation, and not a command. Would you say this method of inviting rather than of commanding is a kind of weakening of the strong notion of 'man'?

Let me first say that Irigaray is absolutely correct: difference should be our only value today. And it must be our only value if we do not want to perish through ethnic wars. If difference is not understood as a value, we could fall

back into the old metaphysics believing that man is an essence, and the same is true for woman. Instead, 'man' is just a way to indicate a difference and in its difference he can become relevant to others, but certainly not because of his essence. As far as the difference between 'commanding' and 'inviting,' I would certainly favour the second, which implies the possibility for the other to reject my invitation. If Bush would have invited the people of Iraq to be invaded, they would probably have rejected it. This is why he did not invite them; rather, he commanded an invasion. We need to develop this ethics of invitation, which can be done by weakening those essences that oblige us to command. Levinas and Derrida have taught us a lot about this.

3. At the talk you gave at Queen's we did not have time for you to give us your thoughts on the weakening of the strong notion of religion and of the stronger notions that it encompasses. I would like to offer you a space here to share your thoughts on this with us.

Weakening the strong notions of religion is like looking into the future of religion. In the book I co-authored with Richard Rorty (who was not only a close friend, but, with Derrida, the philosopher closest to weak thought) we realized that it is only by weakening the notion of command (as we discussed above) that religion can have a future. In order to weaken this doctrinal category of the Church we need to recognize how it is like the metaphysical notions of 'God,' 'Good,' or 'Evil' that surround it. Most people reject religion because of priests who still pretend to be the only ones authorized to interpret the Bible and, in doing so, also feel empowered to command people's lives. Our life can only be commanded by ourselves. Priests can help; they can invite us to do things differently, but they cannot command. Also, this has a lot to do with the duty of the philosophers that you mentioned above. The philosopher must recall that a command by God must come from one's interpretation of the Bible, which will be linked to the time that each one of us lives. For example, the Pope's too-literal interpretation of the Bible still makes him reject the priesthood for women because Jesus indicated it, but he forgets that in Jesus' times, women were treated practically like animals, and were not allowed to make any decisions in society. Today, we have finally been emancipated from these metaphysical (and racist) beliefs and discovered that women are even more intelligent than men are. If a woman today can (and often does) do the work of a minister better than a man, why can't a woman become a priest?

4. You also talked about the strong notion of unity and how it is a dangerous force because it is a superpower in the world: we are all now subject to one government, one law, one police, one language, etc. But, those of us that agree with you on weakening strong notions, are we also not one?

Presupposing that by "we" you mean all those millions of dissidents to the empire, it is true. We are under one government or, to be more specific, under one empire with its language and functions, but we are also different from it. We are different because we do not seek that unity that holds the empire together since what characterizes us all is a repugnance to universal political, religious, and economic principles—these belong to modernity. After all, the so-called 'no-global movement' (which I consider the only hope for the future of politics), instead of imposing modern universalism, requests respect for postmodern particularity. In this way, difference, and not unity, is what unites dissidents; this is also what makes it so difficult to have a unique voice. With respect to some issues, this voice has been heard, for example, with respect to Iraq, or the G8 meetings; concerning other issues, it is more difficult.

5. You told us that in the "ontologie de l'actualité" that asking oneself what being is means to ask this in one's specific historical condition. I have always been fascinated by an account of being far away from my own historical condition. Aristotle's « 'being' is said in many ways » (to de on legetai men pollachōs). It seems to me that his pluralistic methodology flows quite well in our time, and that it may even allow for pluralistic and 'weak' notions that could allow us to weaken considerably the strength of the current state of affairs in politics, education, science, etc.

I could not agree more. It is our historical condition that establishes or dictates our day, epoch or life. And, it does so not by setting out an agenda, but by conditioning us through our own history, which is made out of many different factors that cannot oppress us because this history is our nature. Moreover, our nature is only our historical account of it, not an essence, which, just as Aristotle's being, can be said in many ways. Another important point the ontology of actuality helps us to avoid is that of considering politics as a scientific discipline. On this view, politics demands continuous modification, keeping us up

with the changes of society or the state of the planet. Politicians today who continue to believe that family only means a woman and a man that reproduce are on the wrong path; there are also families composed only of men or women who, for example, want to adopt children. We need today to adopt all those millions of orphans, and stop generating children in an epoch of overpopulation. The ontology of actuality helps us to stay up-to-date with those changes that constitute our culture without making them an eternal trait of it.

6. We know that your recent autobiography* (Non Essere Dio, *Not to Be God*) *is now available. Could you tell us how you look at the experience of telling one's life to others in a book, especially writing it with someone else (in this case Piergiorgio Paterlini)? How would you describe the experience of searching for events in the past, arranging them, connecting them, and giving an account of them to someone else, and ultimately giving it to others in a form that will survive your own life?

Well, first of all I would never have written my own autobiography. It's just something I would not do. So I'm quite lucky that Paterlini had the idea and suggested that I write it with him. It was a very nice experience. Many thoughts came back to me, and this helped me organize my memories. Also, the fact that Paterlini actually wrote it allowed me to not get emotionally involved. Many people liked the book and thought they could see right through me. In a way, as you say, I was giving my memories to someone else; it is a way of reminding me of "*non essere Dio* (that I am not God)." I am now writing another book with someone. This time it is strictly about political philosophy. My disciple Santiago Zabala was asked by Columbia University Press whether we would be willing to write a response to the books by Negri and Hardt, and we decided to try it out. It is becoming something very different from a response to the confused books by Negri and Hardt. We have actually forgotten about them and are outlining something much more interesting: the political project of hermeneutics. What would a politics based on the conflict of interpretation look like? Of course, one never knows if a book will work until it is finished, and we are not even sure we will finish it, but it is looking good for now; we have called it *From Within*. It will be a harsh criticism of capitalism and its military empire, which is reducing all of us to servants.

7. I am wondering whether you would like to comment on your experience of being involved in politics. Is this something that, in your opinion, is necessarily joined with the practice of philosophy in our times? Can one do philosophy without politics, or vice versa?

As I said above, philosophy has a political dimension that must be confronted. But, as Rorty used to say, "philosophy is a bad master of politics, but a good servant," i.e., it can help politics open its eyes. My experience as a European MP allowed me to recognize how it is just a game of power; politics is power, and if you want to make real changes it is better to enter those movements, groups, or missions that have nothing to do with political parties. Someone who has tried to push things in this direction is Hugo Chávez. In Venezuela he sponsored groups of people (who do not have to be part of a political party) to go on missions to help poverty-stricken sectors of society. Political change can only come from within.

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