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Being and Information

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On the Meaning of Vattimo

A philosophy, such as Gianni Vattimo's, which cedes thought's quest for

certain knowledge of objective structures to interpretations of historically conditioned

circumstances, would seem to surrender its own claims to validity and relevance to

the vagaries of those circumstances. From this perspective, Vattimo's thought would

appear to have achieved the apogee of its relevance in the 'postmodern moment' of

the nineteen-eighties, when the hard-won lessons of his engagements with Nietzsche

and Heidegger allowed him to formulate a distinctive and coherent meaning of 'the

postmodern' in philosophy.[1] Despite the fact that Vattimo's weak thought was

distinctively philosophical, it arguably found itself confirmed in thousands of echoes

from every corner of contemporary academia and wider culture: the claims that there

is very little of Being as objective structure left, and that there are no truths, only

interpretations, appeared to resonate with the cultural *Zeitgeist* and legitimate

Vattimo's philosophy as an 'ontology of actuality.'[2]

By contrast, the current moment seems in many respects characterisable in

terms of a sustained critical backlash against postmodernism. Theses such as the 'end

of history' and 'incredulity toward metanarratives' are widely thought to have lost

their relevance after the terrorist attacks of September 11, and contemporary continental philosophy and the humanities generally seem to favour a return to metaphysics, to the import of the natural sciences, to materialism, the object, and to concepts such as the real, truth, and the subject. Diverse as they are, these themes are united by all being ones which the postmodern moment seemed on the verge of dissolving.[3]

How are we to understand the meaning and potential legacy of Vattimo's work, given the apparent dissolution of his own claims into the movement of history, and the current historical moment's seeming relegation of his work to irrelevancy? The position of philosophers and philosophies in a 'traditional' metaphysical mold here is by comparison relatively unproblematic: they can continue on doing their work of making ahistorical truth claims, entirely ignoring the historical, cultural currents which push them in and out of fashion. Yet Vattimo's philosophy, as we have noted, cannot position itself in such a way since it understands itself as an interpretation in, and as, history.

My answer would be that we may frame Vattimo's relevance in terms of a deeper and more sweeping understanding of history than the flotsam and jetsam of the cultural market (which of course operates within the academy, as elsewhere). In Heideggerian terms, Vattimo's philosophy is positioned in relation to historical destining (*Geschick*), or as Being-historical thinking (*Seynsgeschichtliches Denken*), which aims to uncover not just history's manifold and fleeting appearances, but its *essence* (*Wesen*). On this basis, I propose here a reading of Vattimo which seeks to focus attention on what I believe to be some of the key insights in his work, which concern the ontological constitution of *meaning* in the contemporary world. My subtitle should thus be read in the double sense of the genitive: the meaning of

Vattimo – his philosophical importance and legacy – lies in the reflections on meaning he has contributed. Within this rubric, I will argue that Vattimo's relevance and importance may be seen through his indights regarding *information*, and its link to Being (which for Vattimo, we may understand to be equivalent to meaning). These are insights which I believe must be extended and developed in order to accord to Vattimo the legacy that his work deserves. This line of interpretation is certainly not the whole meaning of Vattimo's work, but it is a thread which I do think an essential one.

The Meaning of Nihilism

For Vattimo, as for Heidegger, the attempt to understand Being is the attempt to understand how it is that things are meaningful at all, that is, to understand how meaning is ontologically constituted. As is of course well known, Heidegger believes this fabric of meaningfulness to be fragile, and he takes up Nietzsche's term *nihilism* to index the loss of meaning in the contemporary age. For Heidegger, this loss is equivalent to the 'oblivion of Being,' the occlusion of the *source* of the meaningfulness of things by the things themselves, standing out as meaningful. For Heidegger, this means both the philosophical forgetting of the meaning of Being through a forgetting of the ontological difference between Being and beings (taking a particular being as the highest and source of meaning for all others, as does the tradition he names 'metaphysics'), and the practical realization and completion of metaphysics in modern technology.[4]

Heidegger argues that the originary Greek meaning of Being is 'presence' - οὐσία (*ousia*) and παρουσία (*parousia*)[5] – and that this meaning has determined the history of metaphysical thinking about Being. Moreover, he insists that it is not enough that we retrieve this meaning of Being, which understands it through only one of its temporal modes (the present); we must develop a properly temporal and historical way of thinking Being such that all the various ways in which things come to be can be more adequately thought.[6] And as is well known (though, like most everything about Heidegger, not undisputed), the attempt to think beyond the 'metaphyics of presence' is what leads Heidegger, through the famous *Kehre*, to move away from the possibility of any transcendental, *a priori* determination of Being, even through an elaboration of *Dasein* in its ecstatic temporality, to a 'being-historical thinking.' The point here is that *Being and Time* seeks to think ontological temporality in a way which itself seems to be a fixed, atemporal structure, rather than allowing that this philosophical understanding of Being has itself come to light through an historical event (*Ereignis*) of Being, and is subject to passing away.

It is precisely this 'temporalisation of the *a priori*' which Vattimo elaborates in his exemplary reading of Heidegger, and develops for an understanding of the constitution of meaning in the contemporary age. Vattimo sees French philosophers of difference, such as Derrida and Deleuze, as developing theories of ontological difference (*différance*; pure difference) which effectively repeat Heidegger's early mistake by being *atemporal* structures which explain how difference operates temporally. In order to avoid this difficulty – and, as Vattimo puts it, to properly preserve the ontological difference between Being and beings – he insists on a historical interpretation of Being, whereby by Being *is* not, but rather sends or transmits itself through time. Being occurs as a transmission (*Überlieferung*) and as

'destining' (*Geschick*); it occurs as, and allows, the events of opening (*Ereignis*) which allow beings to appears as what they are, with the meanings they have for us as historically constituted *Dasein*.[7]: 'The world plays itself out in horizons constructed by a series of echoes, linguistic resonances, and messages coming from the past and from others (others along side us as well as other cultures).'[8] As this quotation indicates, it is this historical determination of Being as sending or transmission which leads Vattimo – following Heidegger and Gadamer – to emphasis language, a point to which we will return in more detail below.

Key to Vattimo's originality and significance is his decision to reject Heidegger's attempt to think a 'return' of Being, and to assert nihilism as the 'authentic' ontological condition of the contemporary age. According to Vattimo, nihilism as the oblivion of Being should be understood as the decline or disappearance of the *metaphysical* determination of Being as stable structure or enduring presence, such that there is in the contemporary world very little of Being in this classical sense left. This means, concomitantly, that meaning no longer persists as stable, closed horizons of meaning and value as it did in more autochthonous cultures, rooted in blood and soil, and that philosophy can no longer understand its purview as that of strongly grounded claims to knowledge of objective truths. Rather, Vattimo argues that the interpretation of Being as historical transmission, outlined above, is more consistent with the ontological nihilism that Heidegger decries than with the side of Heidegger's thought that longs for a return of Being, as though it might once again be 'present.'

Vattimo's decision to 'apologise' for nihilism means that nihilism is not only the negation of meaning, but that the nihilistic situation in which we find ourselves, in which Being is in oblivion, itself *constitutes meaning* in a certain way. Again, the

double sense of the genitive must be invoked: the meaning of *nihilism*, for Vattimo, is that there is a *meaning* of nihilism. As Heidegger emphasises, in fact, the forgetting of Being is not something issuing from the human, but rather, is Being itself in its default.[9] According to Vattimo this means the dissolution of the 'strong structures' of Being in the historical destining of its transmission, where meaning is constituted by the traces of the past which are handed down to us, and which are never present in their fullness. In this way, Vattimo thinks through not just Heidegger, but the Nietzschean meaning of nihilism as the death of God, and the question of what values should animate our lives in the wake of this death. While this move in itself presents a challenging originality, it is in Vattimo's meditations on the meaning of science and technology for the contemporary constitution of meaning, that the real interest of his work comes to the fore. We may begin to explore this through his confrontation with the Heideggerian *Ge-Stell*.

Ge-Stell *and Information Technology*

It's information technology which constitutes the essence of *Ge-Stell*, or at least one of its poles; thanks to it the *Ge-Stell* can offer a *chance* of overcoming metaphysics.

- Vattimo "Au-delà de la matière et du texte," 61.

Heidegger's well-known and influential philosophy of technology sees its essence as *Ge-Stell*, the 'enframing' which determines beings as available and exploitable resources (*Bestand*). Technology realises the project of modern

metaphysics, the Cartesian dream according to which man, as subject, becomes master and possessor of the world of manipulable objects.[10] True to his affirmation of a positive meaning of nihilism, Vattimo reads Heidegger as offering an interpretation of technology which would allow us to affirm it as a defining characteristic of our nihilistic epoch. In the collaborative biography *Not Being God*, Vattimo points to the origin of one of his own most important insights:

> There is a page in Heidegger that I have twisted and turned in every possible way, because it's the only one in which he says that maybe the new event of Being, an eventuation of Being different from metaphysics, can come about in the ensemble of the technological world, which may be the extreme point of damnation, the most total forgetting of Being, but might also turn out to be a first flash of the event. Surprising. Gadamer personally confirmed to me that when Heidegger made that statement during a lecture, it wasn't just an offhand remark. Indeed, he was perfectly well aware of the "scandalous" character of what he was saying. Except that he never said it again.[11]

The passage in question is from *Identity and Difference*. It reads, in part, as follows.

> What we experience in the frame as the constellation of Being and man through the modern world of technology is a prelude to what is called the event of appropriation. This event, however, does not necessarily persist in its prelude. For in the event of appropriation the possibility arises that it may overcome the mere dominance of the frame to turn it into a more originary appropriating.
>
> […]

The event of appropriation is that realm, vibrating within itself, through which man and

Being reach each other in their nature, achieve their active nature by losing those

qualities with which metaphysics has endowed them.

[…]

The appropriation appropriates man and Being to their essential togetherness. In the

frame, we glimpse a first, oppressing flash of the appropriation.[12]

Heidegger's now well-known German term translated here by Joan Stambaugh as

'appropriation' or 'event of appropriation' is *Ereignis*. In what way might the *Ge-*

Stell, the essence of modern technology, allow a prelude to, and a flash of, the

Ereignis, the event through and by which Being occurs and constitutes meaning?

Vattimo draws our attention to several key points.

First, he emphasises that according to Heidegger *Ge-Stell* is not all of *Ereignis*,

but only its prelude.[13] Moreover, '[w]hat constitutes *Ge-Stell* as a prelude to *Ereignis*

is its mobile and transitive character.'[14] That is, there is a constitutive instability, a

"shaking," in *Ereignis*. Vattimo explains that while the most obvious, and most

commonly understood, aspect of Heidegger's interpretation of the essence of modern

technology is "the governance of planning, calculation and potentially total

organization," in fact this is subordinate to "an *urging* as continuous dislocation," an

urging by which we are challenged and provoked.[15] In defence of this interpretation

of the unstable character of *Ereignis*, he emphasises a number of Heidegger's terms in

this passage, such as *Schwingen* (oscillation) and *schwebend* (fluctuating).[16] What he

sees as most significant, however, is Heidegger's suggestion that in the shaking,

oscillation and fluctuation of *Ge-Stell*, man and Being reach each other by "losing

those qualities with which metaphysics has endowed them." And in general,

according to Vattimo's reading of other texts of Heidegger's, the qualities alluded to here must by primarily *subject* (man) and *object* (Being).[17]

Vattimo's closest interpretation of this passage, to my knowledge, is to be found in the essay "Dialectic and Difference," which I have just been citing. However, it is elsewhere, in later writings, that Vattimo develops this possibility most fully and originally by identifying the prelude of *Ereignis* in *Ge-Stell* with the transition from machine technology to information technology. In the essay "Ethics of Communication or Ethics of Interpretation?", for example, he writes:

> This possibility, only glimpsed by Heidegger, might become explicit and recognizable only with the profound modification undergone by *Ge-Stell*, the world of the technical, *with the transition from mechanical technology to information technology.* It is well known that today the distinction between developed and underdeveloped countries is no longer made in terms of the possession of mechanical technology capable of bending, concentrating and overcoming the forces of nature, of shifting, dismantling and rebuilding. It is no longer a question of engines, but of computers and the networks connecting them which make it possible to control the more 'primitive' machines, that is, the mechanical ones. *It is not in the world of machines and engines that humanity and being can shed the mantles of subject and object, but in the world of generalised communication.*[18]

In the same essay, Vattimo explains how he sees the loss of subject and object taking place through information technologies.

First, the object:

Here the entity dissolves in the images distributed by the information media, in the abstraction of scientific objects (whose correspondence with real 'things' open to experience can no longer be seen) or technical products (that do not even make contact with the real world via their use value, since the demands they satisfy are increasingly artificial).[19]

And then, the subject:

Whereas the subject, on its part, is less and less a centre of self-consciousness and decision-making, reduced as it is to being the author of statistically predicted choices, playing a multiplicity of social roles that are irreducible to a unity.[20]

According to Vattimo's interpretation, then, machine technology concerns itself with the physical manipulation of nature, so implies a willing subject and dominated objects. By contrast, information technology disrupts the positions of subject and object, first because the object dissolves in multiplication of images which represent it, in the abstraction of scientific representations, and in the loss of reality of consumer products (we might think here of Jean Baudrillard's works from *The System of Objects* to *Symbolic and Exchange and Death*[21]).

It may seem that technological mastery, extended by technological developments (and information technology may be thought, on the cybernetic model, that by extending powers of communication we also extend powers of control), would lead only to a strengthening of the position of subject. However, Vattimo points to a 'dialectic' whereby this is in fact not the case: the very success of technology, indexed by the development and growing importance of information technology, means that the subject becomes involved in such processes, more 'objectified,' but also, as such,

subject to those mutations affecting the object itself in this situation. The position of the subject is thus also undermined, because it becomes less of a centre of self-consciousness and decision-making (think of the arguments of N. Katherine Hayles and others concerning 'distributed cognition'[22]), it plays a multiplicity of social roles that are irreducible to a unity, and because there is no centre of communication networks, and thus no hegemonic position for the subject to occupy in a world conditioned by such networks.

A further significant point Vattimo makes, in the essay "Au-delà de la matière et du texte," concerns the ambiguity we may see between subject and object if we follow the etymology of the term 'matter.' In addition to οὐσία, Aristotle used the term ὑποκείμενον (*hypokeimenon*) to designate 'substance.' In one sense, that of what remains the same in a thing as it undergoes change, Aristotle associates ὑποκείμενον with matter: it is the 'material substrate' which underlies a thing, and remains the same even as its accidental properties change.[23] As Vattimo notes, translated into Latin ὑποκείμενον became *subiectum*, the subject of modern metaphysics: so in the history of philosophy we see a transition from understanding the substrate, that which underlies, which provides stability and is immune to change, from the objectivity of matter to the subjectivity of the subject. Vattimo then notes how these terms are complicated in modern technology:

At the culminating moment of metaphysics, when it deploys itself totally as *Ge-Stell*, not only matter (re)becomes *hypokeimenon*, subject, but the subject also retrieves its characteristic of *hypokeimenon*, of matter. It is no longer only subject, but also possible object of manipulation and calculation.[24]

Adopting Vattimo's much-used term 'oscillation,' then, we may understand his thesis that subject and object break down in the *Ge-Stell* of information technology because the subject and the object pass alternately from pole to pole, the object taking on more features of the subject, the subject taking on more features of the object, ever oscillating (and perhaps at an increasing rate, as information technology continues to develop) until each of these terms becomes indistinguishable from the other, and both have lost those features which, in the modern philosophical tradition, determined them as subject and object in the first place.

Vattimo's great insight here – and this, I contend, is one of the points of his continued relevance – is to see the crucial importance of the ontological shift attendant to the shift from machine technology to information technology, and to understand the ontological significance of information in terms of the breakdown of the distinction between subject and object. What this means for Vattimo, then, is that we may in fact find a way through Heidegger to embrace the contemporary technological world, not as one essentially ruled by metaphysical domination, but rather as allowing the possibility of a kind of postmetaphysical 'emancipation.' The passage through Heidegger is crucial, as it allows him to develop a position which is at once firmly opposed to the idea of technology as what allows human beings to take the position of *demiurgos* in relation to nature (an ideal of mastery still widely popular in non-ontological philosophies of technology), and to link technology and the world it is creating to an ontological conception of how *meaning* is constituted in this world (a consideration typically bracketed by non-ontological conceptions). For Vattimo, such a meaning is essentially linked to the multiplicity of messages transmitted by the information technologies of contemporary media culture, which he understands on a certain hermeneutic model of language.

Vattimo's work may be understood as a contribution to the 'linguistic turn' which is often thought to be the major characterising feature of philosophy (both analytic and continental) in the twentieth century.[25] Indeed, Vattimo seems to make the focus on language a key component of Being's self-dissolution in recent philosophical reflection, particularly in Heidegger's post-*Kehre* focus on language and the linguistic orientation of Gadamer's hermeneutic ontology. From both, Vattimo develops an interpretation which sees an identification of Being with language.

As Vattimo has noted on numerous occasions, this identification was crystalized for him in an interpretive choice concerning a particular line in *Truth and Method* he faced when translating the text.[26] The line in question is: 'Being that can be understood is language.'[27] The choice concerns whether, and how, to include the commas which accompany the German text, and the meaning that would result. The possible placement of commas is as follows: 'Being[,] that can be understood[,] is language.' Without commas (the choice of the English translators, cited above) the sentence seems to imply that *only* Being *that can be understood* is language, such that there would be a realm of Being which cannot be understood, and is not language. Vattimo's choice, however, is to emphasise the placement of the commas, allowing a reading which would mean: 'It can be understood that *Being is language*.'

For Vattimo, this identification contributes to the nihilistic 'ontology of decline' insofar as Being, dissolved in the fluidity of linguistic messages and the ambiguities

and play of multiple interpretations, means that Being can no longer be understood as a unified objective structure. Moreover, the linguistic interpretation of Being, in concord with Heidegger's *Geschick* and Gadamer's *Überlieferung*, contributes to its historicisation, insofar as what allows things to be what they are can no longer be conceived in terms of atemporal transcendental structures, but as the passing down or historical transmission of messages from the past, through tradition. According to Vattimo, the theses on language found in Heidegger and Gadamer mean that

> one should rather say that things are what they truly are, only within the realms of interpretation and language. In other words, a consistent formulation of hermeneutics requires a profound ontological revolution, because ontology must bid farewell to the idea of an objectified, external Being to which thought should strive to adequate itself.[28]

Importantly for our interests here, Vattimo extends this identification of Being and language in the context of his reflections on technology, by arguing that it is one of the implications of the transition from machine to information technology. Indeed, he claims that this transition coincides in important ways with the linguistic turn in philosophy. [29]

The 'flash of *Ereignis*' which becomes possible with *Ge-Stell* is then, for Vattimo, precisely the identification of Being as language, understood in its ontological vocation as a historical transmission which constitutes meaning, and which finds itself, in the actuality of the current epoch, in a nihilistic state not only insofar as Being is revealed *as* such a historical transmission, but insofar as it appears as multiple and conflictual interpretations, to which we are exposed by the increased transmitting power of information technologies. For Vattimo, then, what is most

important about information technologies is that they allow a transmission of messages, understood on the hermeneutic model of language as interpretations. The contemporary media society 'weakens' being insofar as it erodes the constitutive power of a *single*, relatively coherent tradition or cultural horizon to determine the meaning of things, and exposes us to increasingly *multiple* and inconsistent interpretations. For Vattimo, information technologies make possible a social reality in which – in a way with far wider implications than scholarly traditions of textual interpretation would suggest – hermeneutics becomes the *koiné* of our age.[30]

Following Gadamer, Vattimo argues that the *logos*, what gives thought meaning and direction, must in the contemporary era be understood as language itself.[31] Yet this is in the sense of *natural* language, the language which is used and is meaningful in the 'language-consciousness community,' as opposed to the specialised, technical, and formal languages used in the sciences and in specialised disciplines. Following his interpretations of Heidegger and Gadamer, Vattimo argues that the task of thought is to 'renew' – that is, give a meaningful interpretation to - the specialised 'language games' at the heart of the community of natural language speakers, to convert the purity, formalisation and exactness of these languages into the impurity and historicity of natural language. For Vattimo this means reappropriating the languages of technoscience, which often retain the modern metaphysical character of objective reference, in terms of the *historicity* of natural languages, and thus submitting them to the nihilistic destiny of Being. Moreover, he assigns to natural language the status of a *metalanguage*[32]; which, perhaps paradoxically, 'grounds' the ontological meaning of the various language games in the ungrounded, nihilistic historical destining of Being.

According to Vattimo, the development of the essence of *Ge-Stell* in information technology is linked to this priority of natural language because the

multiplication of messages it allows produces the ambiguities of interpretation associated with such language (as opposed to the exactness and unambiguity of specialised languages). In this respect, the key features of information technology for Vattimo are "symbolic forms," "languages," and "signs," which he calls the "matter" of such technologies. [33] Vattimo's hermeneutic ontology thus results in a kind of textualism, in which there is no 'objective structure' outside the play of languages and textual interpretations. Nevertheless, he argues against other philosophies of textualism, such as those of Rorty and Derrida, by insisting that there is something 'beyond' the text which gives direction to thought even as it interprets it, and this is Being itself understood as historical occurrence. Indeed, for Vattimo textualism itself must not be considered as a discovery of the objective nature of Being, but only itself as an *event* of Being, a way in which Being has brought itself to light in the present epoch. He writes:

> From this perspective, one can formulate the hypothesis, by way of provisional conclusion, that the dissolution-resolution of matter by signs, by language, by texts, is a moment in a process (which is the history of Being, and not only the history of texts) in which Being follows a destiny of 'weakening.' One can show that the history of modernity as secularisation (where it takes leave of the sacred and of the violence that it brings with it), contained in this process, to which the Nietzschean conception of nihilism, and the necessarily 'epochal' character of Heideggerian Being, allude.[34]

As Vattimo says here, the linguistic turn is understood from the perspective of his nihilistic hermeneutic ontology as "a moment in a process." Yet might it be that, since Vattimo wrote these words in 1985, this process has continued to develop, and that today we find ourselves in the midst of a different moment?

From the Linguistic Turn to the Informational Turn

Only when we turn thoughtfully toward what has already been thought, will we be turned to use for what must still be thought.

- Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 41.

The case for a shift from the 'linguistic turn' to an 'informational turn' has been made by some philosophers who work in the area which has recently become known as Philosophy of Information.[35] On a broad cultural level, such a turn seems justified by the increasingly pervasive impact of information technologies on the lives of people living in the most technologically advanced societies, as well as the importance the concept of information has come to have not only in computer science, but in areas as diverse as biological science (and thus our understanding of life itself), engineering (the artefactual world), the global market (the material economy), and the arts (electronic musics and literatures, video art and CGI, and so on). In philosophy, the concept developed rather narrowly within research in logic, epistemology, and language, but is now being presented by some as a broad new paradigm, or even a new *philosophia prima*, which would investigate not only the nature of information, and the various areas in which it has gained significance such as those just mentioned, but also its transformative impact on the nature of thinking and how we perceive ourselves as (post)human. Luciano Floridi, one of the most

prominent advocates of such an informational turn, presents its emergence as a logical progression in the history of philosophy, whereby the linguistic turn was inspired by reflection on the *domain* whereby information technologies are managed, before moving to the consideration of their *very fabric and essence*, information itself.[36] Floridi further identifies the informational turn with what he calls the 'fourth revolution,' which, after the revolutions of Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud, further decenters humanism by reconceiving human beings as informational agents ('inforgs') among others in a world conceptualised in informational terms.[37]

The meaning of this turn cannot currently be specified with a great degree of exactness, in no small part because there is still no agreement on the meaning (or range of meanings) that should be accorded the term 'information' (including how exactly it differs from language).[38] However, this state of open contestation over the meaning of information contributes to its claim to being a decisive concept for our current epoch, insofar as it presents itself as being something the meaning of which is *at stake*. If Being is to be understood, as Vattimo insists it is, as what is never fully present but is only historically 'transmitted,' and recollected, as what is declining and gives beings in the horizon of this decline, then we must see Being as what can be historically "recoded" according to the messages which arrive to us in a given era. In this light, I would like to propose that what Vattimo gives only a hint of (though an important hint) can be formulated in more rigorous and extensive terms by proposing that as the linguistic turn in philosophy turns into the informational turn, we can recode Being informationally and understand the deepening of nihilism not just as something occurring now, in the twentieth-first century, but as a process of dissolution we can now see as the operative factor in the twentieth century, subtending the linguistic turn itself.

Like language, information is a modality of the thinking of Being we can now identify in the history of philosophy at least since Plato.[39] From our current position, we can interpret what now appear as key ontological factors trans-epochally, as Vattimo indicates in the following passage:

> To think, to hear, to recall an event is not to see it speculatively from the exterior, but to be inside transmitting back towards the moment where it has taken place in the past and forward towards its future possibilities.[40]

In fact, we may see a shift from the linguistic turn to the informational turn as a further step in the process Vattimo identifies as an 'ontology of decline.' Following the logic of this decline allows us to offer an interpretation which differs to some degree from Vattimo's, not on the basis on stable structures, but as Being seems now to show itself, no longer as *language*, but as *information*. What then can we say about the difference between language and information? While Vattimo extensively discusses both language and information technology in his interpretations of Heidegger, to my knowledge he gives little consideration to what Heidegger himself wrote about the relation of language and information *qua* information (and not simply information *technology*). We may approach the topic of language and information by looking at what Heidegger had to say on the issue.

In his essay "The Way to Language," information is seen as a particular view of, or treatment of, language. (Significantly, this essay was presented at a seminar on language at which Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker presented a talk entitled "Language as Information."[41]) Specifically, for Heidegger language as information is natural language submitted to a formalised reduction. In ways clearly linked to his discussion of the reduction of nature to *Bestand* by *Ge-Stell*, he writes:

Speech is challenged to correspond to the ubiquitous orderability of what is present. Speech, when posed in this fashion, becomes information. It informs itself concerning itself, in order to establish securely, by means of information theories, its own procedure. Enframing, the essence of modern technology that holds sway everywhere, ordains for itself a formalised language – that kind of informing by virtue of which man is molded and adjusted into the technical-calculative creature, a process by which step-by-step he surrenders his "natural language."[42]

For Heidegger, the essential character of language relates to the original meaning of saying as 'showing,'[43] and it plays a key role in the event of Being by which beings come to light as they are in the world we inhabit. Language for Heidegger is not primarily an instrument of communication or a calculus of concepts, but part of the process by which beings, including the human speaker who uses language, shows up as what they are. As he puts it, '[w]e not only *speak* language, we speak *from out of* it.'[44] According to Heidegger, this ontological vocation of language seems to require the ambiguities of natural language, and he sees the concept of *information* primarily as the appearance of *Ge-Stell* in the realm of language, just as its key role in cybernetics – the crowning achievement of *Ge-Stell* – would suggest.[45]

If we now reflect on Vattimo's meditations on *Ge-Stell*, we might immediately see that a question is raised about the status of language and information in Vattimo's work. In short: if information is *Ge-Stell* in language, and if *Ge-Stell* finds its opening onto postmetaphysical possibility in *information* technology, then must not thought which would pursue a path of fidelity to Vattimo's reconsider the relation between language and information as thought by Heidegger? And, more significantly, might not this line, if pursued rigorously, seriously question Vattimo's own fidelity to Being

as language, understood primarily on the traditional model of hermeneutics, as the natural languages of cultures and human interpretations?

As far as Vattimo's discussions of the question of natural and formal languages goes, he seems to follow Heidegger in situating the positive ontological capacities of language solely on the side of natural language and, by implication, sees formal languages – including 'information,' as Heidegger understands it – only as a threat to this ontological vocation. Indeed, as we have seen, for Vattimo formal languages need in some sense to be *brought back* into the ontological fold of the natural languages. What constitutes the difference between natural and specialised languages in Vattimo's account seems to correspond with what Heidegger understands of information, that it is a *formalisation* of natural language. However, Vattimo sees the task of renewing specialised languages in natural language as one which *information technologies* are able to accomplish, because he sees them primarily as instruments for the transmission of linguistic messages, which include those of natural languages; he does not penetrate deeper into how information as such (as described by information theory) changes the nature of such messages, nor how it in fact also works to break down the metaphysical subject/object opposition.

Vattimo's argument that specialised languages must be reappropriated by natural languages is indeed a coherent way of thinking how such languages may not only be nihilistic in the negative sense, but may have an ontological, meaningful dimension as well. And yet, retaining this focus on language, I would argue, limits the nihilistic dissolution Vattimo asserts to a kind of *humanism* with respect to how meaning may be constituted – not the humanism of a subject, to be sure, but the humanism of a natural language spoken in a human community.[46] To understand the changes of the contemporary world, we need to develop further the line of thought

Vattimo has opened up, to challenge the position of natural language specified by Heidegger and Gadamer, which acts as a source and central space for the grounding of meaning. The *meaning* of meaning must itself be questioned, and the constitution of meaning must be opened to processes which are purely informational, and which are not recuperable in natural languages.

Recoding Metaphysics[47]

Vattimo himself indicates a dissatisfaction with Gadamer for his continued humanism in relation to science when he writes the following:

> Philosophical reflection on science should be historical reflection on the aftermath of the transformation of our existence by this strain of cultural activity. Naturally, this stance is part of my overall attempt to think in terms of the ontology of actuality, to answer the question: what of Being in a world in which the empirical, experimental, mathematical sciences have developed along certain lines and yielded certain technological results?
>
> In this respect, I disagree squarely with the traditional image of the philosophy/science relationship, especially as Gadamer portrays it in *Truth and Method*, and Heidegger too, though Heidegger is more astute … [….]

The key point for Gadamer here is that

truth lies in the experience of common, non-specialised language, which governs scientific language as well. This is the overriding aspect for Gadamer. Fundamentally, his stance is always a defense of humanism ...'[48]

In fact, then, Vattimo is already part-way towards the view for which I am arguing, at least implicitly, since he insists (and this against Gadamer and traditional hermeneutics) that the messages of the sciences and technological disciplines also have an ontological character. However, he seems to accord them this character *only insofar as they gain a cultural reception or philosophical interpretation*.

Heidegger's view, which Vattimo seems implicitly to endorse, implies that information is just one mode of language (it is formalised, unambiguous language). However, the key point I want to argue here which would shift this line of thought further (from the linguistic turn to the informational turn) is to insist that information is *not* reducible to language. Information incorporates modes such as those discovered in the transmission of DNA, in the specialised discourses of electrical engineering, of the code of computer programming languages, and in multiple other ways *which play a role in constituting reality*, even though they are meaningless from the point of view of natural languages. It is information, understood in such a pluralistic sense, which is truly subverting metaphysics by breaking down the subject/object divide, subjectivizing the object and objectifying the subject.

For example, it is not – or not only – because some particular 'object' is subject to multiple interpretations meaningful to a human community that it loses its character of objectivity, but because it can be 'represented' in terms of code which can be read be machines and used to transform, manipulate, and even produce and reproduce the object. For example, an object (re)producible by a 3D printer no longer has the objective character of a unique thing here and now in front of a subject, but

has the more fluid character of a code which can be transmitted and stored on multiple platforms, and used to implement processes of different machines which would physically produce identical objects.

Similarly, the subject loses its character of subjectivity not only because it loses a possible position of hegemony in the conflict of interpretations and must become a decentred, mobile hermeneut, but because the concept of what it means to be human is changing under the developments of cognitive and other sciences. Even considered weakly, the interpreting subject is perhaps not adequate to the image of the human as a complex material arrangement in which consciousness is identified in some way with brain and nervous activity, and the very interpretations we make of the world are understood to be conditioned by physical mechanisms and neural processes of which we are only just starting to become aware. It can of course be argued, as Vattimo does, that science and its messages need to be interpreted according to cultural openings, or Khunian paradigms,[49] but what is much harder to show is the way that the *constitutive power* of what is revealed is reducible to such interpretations.

Understood as the nihilistic destiny of language, information does not so much *reduce* the semantic richness and ambiguity of natural languages to the impoverished formal precision of informational code, as remove natural language from the position of ontological *grounding* which it arguably retains for Heidegger and Gadamer. The most significant implication of this move – that of the linguistic turn to the informational turn – is to open the human sciences more fully to the natural sciences, and to the possibility of a 'posthuman' future. The nihilistic destiny of meaning involves precisely a loss of "symbolic forms," insofar as they constitute a rich cultural horizon – they are emptied out, but also multiplied, such that our experience of meaning as such in the information society becomes quite different. Vattimo's work

should lead in the direction of showing that information is not simply the 'enframing' of natural language, but has its own ontological dimension and vocation, and concomitant role in the nihilistic ontology of decline. This, indeed, is Vattimo's greatest insight about meaning – that nihilism *as such* is the meaning of the current age, and that it is a potentially positive meaning – and this, I would argue, is the meaning of Vattimo which must be elaborated through a thinking of Being as information.

Vattimo opens the way for the philosophical tradition of hermeneutic ontology to accord a welcome to science and technology, to which this tradition has typically opposed itself and sought to defend a uniquely human(istic) meaning. Science and technology are arguably the most powerful forces in the contemporary world determining the meaning of what we are, and the increased awareness of the need to think these ontologically is one of the defining features of the current epoch. As I have argued here, *information* may be understood as the bridge between traditional hermeneutics and the capacity to think the broad ontological meaning of science and technology. Vattimo opens the way, but we must take up and extend his thought to give his legacy meaning, by developing more fully the consequences of hermeneutics beyond interpretation, a philosophy beyond the subject.[50]

1 See for example Vattimo's essay "Nihilism and the Postmodern in Philosophy" in *The End of Modernity*, trans. John R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

2 See Vattimo, "Postmodernity, Technology, Ontology" in *Technology in the Western Political Tradition*, ed. A.M. Melzer, J. Weinberger, and M.R. Zinman (London; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

3 I have in mind here, among other things, the current popularity of philosophers such as Alain Badiou, who has influentially reformulated concepts of the subject and truth, philosophies such as speculative realism (Quintin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Graham Harman) which seeks to overcome the Kantian heritage and assert that thought can access the real, and the 'new materialism' in the arts and interdisciplinary humanities which seeks to explore the active potentiality of the objective, nonhuman world.

4 For Heidegger's ontological interpretation of nihilism, see "Nihilism as Determined by the History of Being" in *Nietzsche, vol. IV: Nihilism*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

5 Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, 2nd edition (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 66.

6 Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 229.

7 For example, he writes: "Ultimately, the difference between being and beings, called the ontological difference, leads much further than even Heidegger expected. This difference means first of all that being *is* not. Entities are what can be said to be. Being, on the other hand, *befalls*, or occurs. We truly distinguish being from beings only when we conceive of it as historical-cultural happening, as the instituting and transforming of those horizons in which entities time and again become accessible to man, and man to himself." "Dialectics, Difference, and Weak Thought," trans. Thomas Harrison, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 10 (1984), 156.

8 Vattimo, "Dialectics, Difference, and Weak Thought," 157.

9 See for example Heidegger's essay "On the Question of Being" in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

10 See Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993).

11 Gianni Vattimo with Piergiorgio Paterlini, *Not Being God: A Collaborative Biography*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 114-115.

12 Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 36-38.

13 Vattimo, "Dialectic and Difference" in *The Adventure of Difference*: *Philosophy after Nietzsche and Heidegger*, trans. Cyprian Blamires with Thomas Harrison (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 172.

14 Vattimo, "Dialectic and Difference," 173.

15 Vattimo, "Dialectic and Difference," 173.

16 Vattimo, "Dialectic and Difference," 173-74.

17 Vattimo, "Dialectic and Difference," 174.

18 Vattimo, "Ethics of Communication or Ethics of Interpretation?" in *The Transparent Society*, trans. David Webb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 116. Italics mine.

19 Vattimo, "Ethics of Communication or Ethics of Interpretation?", 116-17.

20 Vattimo, "Ethics of Communication or Ethics of Interpretation?", 117.

21 Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 2005); *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1993).

22 See for example N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 288-91.

23 See for example Aristotle, *Physics* A, 190a-b.

[24] Vattimo "Au-delà de la matière et du texte, : La dissolution de la matière dans la pensée contemporaine," trans. Federico Benedetti and Paolo Antonelli in *Matière et philosophie: architecture, science, théorie*, ed. Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1988, 59-60.

[25] See for example Richard Rorty's Introduction to *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*, ed. R. Rorty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1967]). Of course the view that the linguistic turn is the most distinctive feature of 20th Century philosophy is not uncontested. For one currently popular dissenter's view, see Graham Harman's essay "Object-Oriented Philosophy" in *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Zero Books, 2010).

[26] See for example 'The Story of a Comma' in Gianni Vattimo, *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, ed. Franca D'Agostini, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 56-58.

[27] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989 [1960]), 475.

[28] Vattimo, "Gadamer and the Problem of Ontology" in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honour of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnswald, and Jens Kertscher (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 301.

[29] Vattimo "Au-delà de la matière et du texte," 61.

[30] See Vattimo, "Hermeneutics as Koine," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 5 (2-3), June, 1988, 399-408. On the society of mass media, see Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, trans. David Webb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). Chapter one, "The Postmodern – A Transparent Society?" paints a general picture of the interpretive pluralism enabled by mass media as a kind of emancipation, while chapter two, "The Human Sciences and the Society of Communication," draws links between academic and broader social developments along the lines sketched above.

[31] Vattimo "Au-delà de la matière et du texte," 63-4. He references Gadamer's *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

[32] Vattimo, *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, 79.

[33] Vattimo "Au-delà de la matière et du texte," 61.

[34] Vattimo "Au-delà de la matière et du texte," 67-8.

[35] See Frederick Adams, "The Informational Turn in Philosophy," *Minds and Machines* 13.4 (2003): 471- 501 and Luciano Floridi, *The Philosophy of Information* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[36] Floridi, *The Philosophy of Information*, 25.

[37] See Luciano Floridi, *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[38] For a brief overview of this issue, see Floridi, *The Philosophy of Information*, 30-32.

[39] Perhaps most obviously, by exploring the links between the role of 'form' in in*form*ation and Plato's εἶδος (*eidos*) and ἰδέα (*idea*). For a sketch of some of the ways we can see the concept of information operative in the history of philosophy, see Anthony F. Beavers, "A Brief Introduction to the Philosophy of Information" (2012), <https://www.academia.edu/1230161/A_Brief_Introduction_to_the_Philosophy_of_Information> (last accessed 20 July 2015).

[40] Vattimo "Au-delà de la matière et du texte," 67.

[41] Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, "Language as Information" in *The Unity of Nature*, trans. Francis J. Zucker (New York: Farar, Straus, Giroux, 1980). [1959]

[42] Heidegger, "The Way to Language," 420-21.

[43] Heidegger, "The Way to Language," 410.

[44] Heidegger, "The Way to Language," 411.

[45] On language, information, and cybernetics, see also Heidegger's essay "Traditional Language and Technological Language," trans. Wanda Torres Gregory, *Journal of Philosophical Research* XXIII (1998): 129-145.

[46] Vattimo writes that "hermeneutics actively grasps being's vocation of giving itself, and increasingly so, as the truth of *human language*, and not as thing and datum, *Gegenständigkeit*.' "Gadamer and the Problem of Ontology," 305. Italics mine.

[47] For this section I have appropriated the title of Giovanna Borradori's edited anthology *Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy* (Evanstone: Northwestern University Press, 1989).

[48] Vattimo, *The Responsibility of the Philosopher,* 51-2.

[49] Vattimo, "Gadamer and the Problem of Ontology," 304.

[50] This is of course an allusion to some titles of Vattimo's books. *Al di là del soggetto* [*Beyond the Subject*], (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1981), translated as *Consequences of Hermeneutics* by Peter Carravetta (forthcoming with SUNY Press) and *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, trans. David Webb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).