Conference Report: 'St. Paul in Continental Philosophy' Staffordshire University, 6 June 2014

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Introduction

A conference was held at Staffordshire University on the topic of "St. Paul in Continental Philosophy" on 6 June 2014. Four papers were given: by Matthew Harris (Staffordshire University), Philip Goodchild (University of Nottingham), Jordan Dyck (Staffordshire University), and Denis McManus (University of Southampton). The content of these papers varied considerably, from Badiou to Vattimo, Schelling to Kierkegaard, and more besides. Thematically, items considered included Christianity's relationship with Judaism, eschatology, set theory, and existential fear. A fifth paper was scheduled, but unfortunately the speaker was unable to attend. This conference report will outline the rationale of the conference, before detailing both the arguments and the main ensuing points of discussion for each paper in turn.

Rationale

Contemporary continental philosophers have seen in St. Paul an anchoring historical authority in the western tradition that is inescapable and inexhaustible. Gianni Vattimo has turned to St. Paul's notion of *kenosis* in order to develop his account of secularisation. Alain Badiou, like Vattimo, grapples with the Heideggerian notion of

Being as 'event', leading him to explore the role of St. Paul in founding the universal within history. A generation before, St. Paul was a reference point for Jacques Lacan's philosophical psychoanalysis. Earlier still, both Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche, thinkers of paramount importance to Vattimo and Badiou, themselves had significant interest in St. Paul's place not only at the heart of European culture and thought, but also in the history of Being. There is, then, a tradition within Continental Philosophy of St. Paul's writings appealing to a scholarly audience beyond New Testament studies and Systematic Theology. Beyond the history of interest in St. Paul's work, themes within his letters speak to us with great resonance today. These include the role of personal encounter in shaping a mission when the personal is being drowned out by policies and procedures, to the notion of the universal in a globalised world.

Vattimo, *kenosis* and St. Paul

Matthew Harris' paper on Vattimo, *kenosis* and St. Paul began by outlining the background and philosophical style of Gianni Vattimo (b. 1936). Vattimo's Christian upbringing and gradual turn away from religion were emphasised, as well as his surprising 'return' to his Christian roots. 'Weak thought' (*pensiero debole*), Vattimo's philosophical style was briefly summarised. In short, Vattimo is a hermeneutical nihilist. He believes there are no facts, only interpretations, and this too is an interpretation, albeit one that Vattimo believes makes the most sense out of how things currently are. In the irreducibly plural world of mass communication, the highest values have valued themselves, expressed in Vattimo's conflation of Nietzsche's 'death of God' motif with

Heidegger's notions of the *Ge-Stell* and the end of metaphysics. A distinguishing feature of Vattimo's philosophy is his effort to connect nihilism with postmodernity; the end of modernity, with its logic of the new, means that one cannot merely replace the old 'highest values' with another set, not least because traces metaphysics inhabit the linguistic traditions that constitute that horizons of thought and expression.[1] For Vattimo, metaphysics is always violent as it silences questioning by reducing dialogue back to fixed first principles. Therefore, Vattimo regards hermeneutical nihilism as our sole opportunity for liberation.

After surveying Vattimo's general philosophical style of weak thought, his 'return to religion' was outlined. Philosophically, the two reasons why he has appealed to Christianity are to 'ground' hermeneutics historically and to yield an ethic for hermeneutics. Concerning the former reason, Vattimo became aware that hermeneutics could degenerate into an 'anything goes' approach to interpretation, appearing as a once-for-all theory that 'there are only interpretations.' Furthermore, it could lead to appeals to 'vertical' transcendence (which Vattimo would regard as metaphysical and therefore violent) or involve minority groups retreating into their communities of interpretation, pushing their interpretation in a 'strong' way. Instead, Vattimo has used Christianity to ground hermeneutics through the announcement of God's *kenosis*, a Pauline term for his 'self-abasement' in the incarnation and death of Christ that has generated a thread of weakening through secularisation which has culminated in late-modern hermeneutical

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[1] For the best introductions to Vattimo's thought, see Vattimo, *The End of Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1988), trans. by Jon Snyder, and Vattimo, *The Transparent Society* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1992), trans. by David Webb.

plurality. Using René Girard's anthropology, Vattimo has identified the 'sacred' with metaphysics. All strong structures have been weakened through *kenosis* which,

idiosyncratically for Vattimo, is God's message of friendship with his creation announced by Jesus. This friendship becomes internalised, feeding into Nietzsche's narrative of how the world became a fable: increasing subjectivity through inward focus weakens metaphysical objectivity. Ethically, Vattimo believes this inward, historical focus should make one open to other people who, like you, are Dasein; that one should display *caritas* (loving friendship) through listening to them. By virtue of reciprocal listening, a fusion of horizons should transpire, further weakening the traces of strong structures that are inescapable but capable of being 'twisted.'[2]

Harris went on to survey various criticisms of Vattimo's return to religion, focusing in particular on Anthony C. Sciglitano Jr.'s point that Vattimo has been essentially Marcionite in his approach to Christianity (Sciglitano 2013), especially because of how he has used the work of the twelfth-century abbot Joachim of Fiore who divided history into stages according to the three persons of the Trinity. Marcion, a second-century Christian writer based in Rome, thought the God of the New Testament was good whereas the God of the Old Testament was evil. Sciglitano sees Vattimo as adopting Marcion's distinction, running it through Joachim's stages of history in which the Age of the Father (the Old Testament) is superseded by the Age of the Son (the New Testament and the Church), which in turn is superseded by the Age of the Spirit.

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[2] For Vattimo's return to religion, see among other titles Vattimo, *Belief* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999), trans. by David Webb and Luca D'Isanto, and Vattimo, *After Christianity* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2002), trans. by Luca D'Isanto.

Whereas Joachim associated the Age of the Spirit with a future barefoot monastic order (that many decades after his death was interpreted as the Franciscans), for Vattimo, the Age of the Spirit is the current Age of Interpretation in which literalism (associated in particular with the Age of the Father) is weakened through spiritualising Scripture. The latter process involves creative interpretation, which should allow, for instance, women priests and homosexual married couples. Sciglitano sees Vattimo as amending Marcion's views slightly by contrasting ways of reading Scripture (literal/Jewish/Old Testament, through to spiritual/hermeneutical/contemporary) rather than different gods.

Harris spent the rest of his paper drawing upon resources within St. Paul's work, specifically 2 Corinthians 3:6, to show how Vattimo avoids some of the charges made against him by Sciglitano. St. Paul contrasted the 'Spirit' and the 'letter.' The letter kills, whereas the Spirit gives life. Joachim thought the third age was of the Spirit, not the Father (letter) or the Son (the Church). Vattimo, calls for spiritualisation of reading Scripture. Harris argued that the third comes to Vattimo from his reading of the 'signs of the times.' From our perspective, living now, it is impossible to believe in literalisms such as a bodily resurrection of Jesus. Can the Pope have dinner with the Dalai Lama and believe that there is a literal hell to which this Buddhist will be sent for not being a Christian? More than this, it is better to live *as if* there is a history of weakening, of secularisation as life-giving spiritualisation that is grounded in a text itself: the Bible. If, to use a phrase of Gadamer's that Vattimo himself employs, 'Being, that is understood, is language' (Vattimo 2010: 57), then we are reliant on textual tradition. In the West, all the classics go back to the Bible. Therefore, it is not a matter of Christianity

'superseding' Judaism, but a historical accident that we are situated in a moment in which there is plurality and that it can be traced back to a text – the Bible – which has a message of weakening at its core.

There was plenty of debate generated by the opening paper. The main area of contention was whether Sciglitano was right in his assessment that Vattimo had in fact constructed a metanarrative of weakening. Dr. Philip Goodchild questioned whether it was accurate to construct a narrative that places the Bible as the central text in the history of the West. Not only is the 'West' an anachronism, for the Bible owes so much to Near Eastern mythology and cultural history, but also because the Greek philosophical tradition has been equally influential. In response, Harris noted that Vattimo is not interested in reconstructive hermeneutics or historical criticism. As for Goodchild's second point, Vattimo acknowledges the 'dual' origin of plurality in the West in *Beyond Interpretation* where he compares and contrasts Aristotelian and Pauline archetypes. Whereas the former is metaphysical ('Being is said in many ways'), the latter is historical (Hebrews 1:1; 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets NRSV) (Vattimo 1997: 47).' St. Paul's 'kenotic' model is chosen by Vattimo as the archetype for contemporary hermeneutics as it yields the ethic of charity and is historical, not metaphysical because it is an announcement. In his work on Girard, Vattimo unifies the 'dual' origin of thought in the West (religious and philosophical) in his identification of the 'violent' God of onto-theology with metaphysics. Therefore, Vattimo is close to a form of hermeneutical pragmatism; it is unsurprising that he was drawn towards Rorty.

Essentially, Vattimo is building a history of western thought that suits the day. Elsewhere from the floor came requests for clarification of Vattimo's understanding of *caritas*. The main point is that one turns inwards through the message of friendship through brotherhood in faith (Dilthey's insight into the appeal of Christianity) which is gradually secularised to the acknowledgement that one should listen to others 'like you' (Vattimo 2007: 42), that is, historically situated weak thinkers. The question was then asked what about people who are *not* like you? This is indeed a problem with Vattimo's thought; what about 'reactive' nihilists who have used the liberation of metaphor to retreat into their own identities? Do we even try to listen to fundamentalists? Is Vattimo merely preaching to the converted in his return to religion, that is, to urbane, European weak thinkers?

St. Paul and Temporality: grace and eschatology

Dr. Philip Goodchild's paper dealt with the question of whether there could be an eschatological theology of philosophy for just some people, such as for the oppressed. To answer this question, Goodchild drew upon a variety of thinkers in his paper, such as Albert Schweitzer, Kant, Schelling and Kierkegaard. Schweitzer noted how the body of Christ was manifest in Jesus, indicating how 'the general is expressed in the individual' (Schweitzer 1931: 101). Jesus died and was resurrected; this has been understood eschatologically as a foretaste, an archetype, as hope for the messianic kingdom. What general principles were displayed through St. Paul? Could a philosophical notion of a time after the death of God be found in St. Paul and his thought? This could be an

attempt to build philosophy not out of comprehension or a worldview, but a lifeview. Whereas Kant thought only by inferences in logic and whatness, Schelling thought Kant 'assumed that there is no other philosophy than pure rational philosophy' (Schelling 2007: 147) and that his approach needed to be supplemented by a philosophy that is positive and about existence.

Goodchild attempted in his paper to clarify this difference between a positive philosophy and a life philosophy by suing the example of Socrates. Famously claiming to know nothing, Socrates in fact knew about *eros*. He could talk about the beautiful way of life while admitting he did know the meaning of the word 'beauty,' and he was rebuked for this apparent inconsistency (Plato, *Greater Hippias*, 304c-d). Goodchild says St. Paul's eschatology is like this, a knowing that is unknown. Theoretical reasoning is appropriation; Cartesian evidence is known by appropriation. It has a temporal orientation and is a recollection of the past. Life itself, though, is an investment of time rather than an appropriation of something as the past.

Drawing on Kierkegaard, Goodchild emphasised the power of the unseen: 'The more he loves the unseen, the more he will love the men he sees' (Kierkegaard 2009: 158). Rather than appropriating and seeking this-worldly pursuits (materially or in terms of knowledge in the theoretical sense) there will be a chiasmic inversion; the first will be last, and the last will be first. Instead, again following Kierkegaard, God will infinitise every moment one invests in God (Kierkegaard 2009: 352). This, of course, links with how St. Paul felt

about God, thinking not of the flesh, but of the Spirit (Romans 8:5). The general expressed in the individual in the case of St. Paul is the importance of Christ-mindedness, spending time thinking in the style of Christ. Customs such as circumcision, abstaining from eating pork, idol worship, were of no importance for St. Paul. Like Socrates, he would have been regarded as an atheist, as guilty of impiety. Rather, Christ-mindedness, of being given up for death for Jesus' sake (2 Corinthians 4:7-12) is important for St. Paul; being given over to the Spirit away from this world, spending time in the mindset of Christ in obedience even until death in the faith that God the unseen will infinitise every moment. This will give hope to the persecuted (1 Thessalonians 1:4-6).

The question was put to Dr. Goodchild whether there would still be room for a literal afterlife in this eschatological schema. In reply, Goodchild saw no reason why not, although he admitted that he had not yet thought out the precise relationship between Christ-mindedness way of investing time and an afterlife. A related question was posed concerning whether it was possible to have Christ-mindedness as a style of thinking without being a Christian or even hearing about Christ. Goodchild thought it was possible, although the uniqueness of the Christ event then is up for debate: why, then, call this style of thinking 'Christ-mindedness'? A third question was directed to Dr. Goodchild about the division between theoretical and life philosophy; is it too much of an oversimplification? What about, say, the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle in which knowledge as appropriation (say, of the forms) was related directly to how one lives one's life? One can think of the Allegory of the Cave in which knowledge of the Good,

St. Paul in Continental Philosophy

gained through reflection and recollection, affects conduct; the escaped prisoner acting as the individual in which the general is expressed, returning to the cave to educate the other prisoners (ultimately, Socrates here is the individual). Dr. Goodchild responded that this unification of styles of thinking was possible in the ancient world. Since Kant, however, we have been accustomed to distinguishing between theory and practice.

Badiou and the Event of Pauline Theology

Jordan Dyck's paper draws on Badiou's philosophy of the event in order to show how the death of Christ is more important for Badiou's St. Paul than commentators usually realise. In his book on St. Paul, one can interpret Badiou as rejecting the importance of Jesus' message (which removes him from Vattimo's St. Paul) (Badiou 2003: 33), and he has been criticised for paying unusually little attention to the significance of Christ's death for St. Paul (Boyarin 2009: 113). Rather, the resurrection is the most important part of St. Paul's message taken over by Badiou. Nevertheless, Dyck's paper showed how by relating Badiou's understanding of the twin importance of Jewish and Greek thought for St. Paul to Badiou's own ontology the death of Christ can function as a way of putting the notion of the event to the forefront in order to act as a model for faithfulness to the event.

After surveying Badiou's ontology, Dyck spent time outlining the 'situation' in St. Paul's time. In Badiou's language, the Greek/Jewish discourse of Nature/Law was the state of the situation in the context in which St. Paul lived. A 'situation' is any part of the

multiplicity presented as consistent; it is the multiplicity counted as one. When multiplicity is counted as one by something (in this case, by Nature/the Law), that count presents one with a state of the situation. Every set includes a set that itself includes no elements that belong in the original set, which makes it the 'void.' The task is naming a set that has no elements in the count-as-one. The void in the situation, of the count-as-one of Law/Nature with which St. Paul was presented, was the righteous gentile. In this situation, the hegemony of Jewish Law and the gentile ethics founded on Nature (a view commonly held by Stoics, Epicureans and more groups besides), the gentile could not, in the eyes of the Jewish rabbis, be righteous through the law it did not know or by nature (as gentiles were not circumcised). Dyck holds that Romans 1:18-32 – a long paragraph that disparages gentiles for a variety of sins, including idol worship – is speech in character, and the give-away is that St. Paul's attitude towards gentiles ('Greeks') is always positive elsewhere. Indeed, Dyck remarks that Romans 1:16-17 was written by St. Paul as if formerly salvation was only for the Jews, but now includes the Greeks also.

According to Badiou, St. Paul blends the Jewish and Greek discourses into one (Badiou 2003: 42). This was not St. Paul's idea, but was simply the state of the situation: a single discourse of false totality; one with which, as Badiou notes, 'a universal logic of salvation cannot be reconciled' (Badiou 2003: 42). Jewish beliefs in a creator God easily blended with Greek ethical thought. Into that situation, an event, the resurrection of Christ, named a void, which opened the gap for a fidelity and a new presentation of the situation. While Badiou thought 'Jew' and 'Greek' named dispositions and indicated a way forward for the transformation of the subject, Dyck related the interplay between

St. Paul in Continental Philosophy

Jewish and Gentile deeper into Badiou's thought, particularly paying attention to how the set theory in Badiou's ontology could be used to highlight the importance of Christ's death more than Badiou usually does. In St. Paul's literal reading of the Torah, a good Jewish man who was captured by an enemy and crucified is essentially abandoned by the Torah; as a Jew, included in it, but no longer presented by it. Jesus became condemned by the Law, so when he resurrected (a proof that he is justified by God), the idea that those outside of the Law are not justified was revealed as false, and the event named the void of the law-abiding gentile, allowing them to be seen. Secondly, Jesus was condemned as a blasphemer by Jewish religious elites, which was the worst Jewish religious sin. He became someone who was counted as Jewish but excluded from all positives of being Jewish. In this way when he resurrected he named the void of those who are by nature un-Jewish yet still justified – Jesus became the righteous gentile of Romans 2.

For Dyck, the faithfulness of Christ is the faithfulness to that which enabled the void to be named, that is, the event of Christ's death and resurrection. St. Paul is a militant of an event, the content of which is fidelity to an event (Christ's faithfulness to God's plan of his crucifixion, for St. Paul). Dyck argued that Pauline theology is not just an example of Badiou's notion of the event, but is actually an example of someone trying to turn Badiou's notion of the event itself into an event. It is the eventalisation of the event. Pauline theology acts a model for today, as Badiou would wish, for being faithful to the event does not mean promoting some general Christian virtue such as 'faithfulness,' but

instead means naming the void today, such as in the situation of 'economics' (which functions today very much like 'Nature' did in St. Paul's day). Dyck went on to show how that he believes Badiou's St. Paul opposes all of Badiou's Evils because St. Paul was gripped by a truth process in which Christ embodies the void across every possible social, political, and religious situation because the set of Law/Nature was universal. The impact of the universality of this presentation of the void, and of the event naming it, was so wide that it shattered St. Paul's entire philosophical framework, inducing him as a new subject who was capable of insisting on the nonexistence of the ethical and political grounds of all of western philosophy and religion stretching out before and in front of him.

The main point for discussion arising from Dyck's paper was the extent to which Badiou's interpretation of Pauline theology depends on his ontology, in particular his use of set theory. Dr. Goodchild stated that set theory no longer has much currency in mathematics, and that Badiou's reliance on set theory for notions such as inclusion, counting-as-one, and also the void, is a weakness in his approach to Christianity. For Goodchild, this is a fatal weakness, for there is no reason to see the righteous gentile as the void that needed to be named by an event. As such, there is no need also to regard Jesus' death and resurrection as a display of faithfulness to the event of making Badiou's notion of the event itself into an event that could become a model for transforming subjectivity in today's world. Indeed, as a separate point Goodchild questioned whether this reading runs the risk of anachronism; how could Pauline theology (or even Christ himself) try to turn Badiou's notion of the event into an event if Badiou had not yet

written about the event? Whilst Christ is the eternal *logos* this is still some feat! Harris responded by acknowledging that while set theory is no longer held to be of much account by contemporary mathematicians, the use of set theory by Badiou within his ontology could be heuristic to direct attention to the ways in which situations can be interrupted by events that bring to consciousness that which had been overlooked or were invisible given prior conditions. As such, Dyck's insights into St. Paul and his theology being a model (Christ being faithful to death) can still stand, especially as St. Paul's Christ is a particularly powerful figure in his weakness by representing the void to a set with universal pretensions; it gets no more universal than nature.

Being-Towards-Death and Owning One's Judgment

Professor McManus' paper drew an ingenious comparison between St. Paul on the last judgment and Heidegger on authentic Being-towards-death in order to draw out more of what the latter saw in the former. For McManus, Heidegger regarded St. Paul's notion of being able to stand before God as a model of the challenge of being able to stand before oneself. St. Paul was scornful of people who were trying to calculate the time of the *parousia*, the last judgment: 'About dates and times, my friends, we need not write to you, for you know perfectly well that the Day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:3).' Under the guise of being religious through reading the 'signs of the times', being watchful and calculating, these individuals were in fact trying to escape God's judgment; if one 'knows' when the *parousia* will come, one will be able to 'get

one's house in order'. In other words, those trying to estimate the timing of the second coming had a guilty conscience and could neither stand before God, nor themselves.

Inauthentic being, activity dispersed into the 'They,' is for Dasein like those individuals against whom St. Paul was writing trying to escape God's judgment: one is only escaping oneself. Fallenness, with its inauthentic activity, is an attempt to evade the thought of death: 'they push away […] death into the realm of postponement.' Death (*Tod*), for Heidegger, is not the same as physical demise (*Ableben*). The former is 'the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein' (Heidegger 1993: 250). One's demise is a single event, whereas one's death, for Dasein, is something with which one is always coming to grips, even if often [and, for some people, only] in an evasive manner. Insofar as one 'runs ahead' towards one's death and back to one's beginning, death can individualise Dasein through anticipating, choosing resolutely. Rather than focusing on the precise details of the *parousia*, one could use the notion of the *parousia* as a stimulus for getting one's life in order all of the time so that when the *parousia* happens does not matter. Analogously, the less one worries about one's death as a demise, the more one can see death as the end of possibilities as a way in which Dasein can 'choose itself and decide to subject every concern to an original choice' (Heidegger 2011: 36). This choice is not an inward turn away from the world, but a 'taking action' which, like the person living under the idea of the *parousia*, involves interaction with the world. The authentic sets on with what they believe is right, not because the 'They' have marked something out as good or right but because they have made their own resolute decision. Equally, the early Christian of St. Paul's fledgling Church community would have acknowledged the

parousia as framing and focusing their efforts, but they would have aimed to make themselves right in God's eyes (and their own) by doing what was Christ-like, not because they are trying to evade God's judgment by calculating the end time. In both cases – Dasein and the early Christian – the common factor is 'owning' one's judgment (McManus' reading of *Eigentlichkeit*).

Questions for Professor McManus, in the main, focussed on his understanding of the word 'death' for Heidegger. In particular, Dr. Goodchild asked whether 'death' was an *existentiell* or an *existential* of Dasein, for without death as the former the latter would not have its sting as an end of all possibilities. Professor McManus acknowledged that there is some overlap between these concepts and a degree of reliance of 'death' on 'demise.' Nevertheless, the main point for Heidegger is not focussing on bodily death, with all the fears of the unknown that rely on inauthentic, second-hand religious or philosophical beliefs. Rather, death is existential for Heidegger in the sense that the certainty of an end to possibilities that individualises Dasein and enables it to resolutely decide for itself. It was also asked by Harris whether in the case of St. Paul there were genuinely historical reasons why some people were waiting for the second coming at the time, such as Jesus himself predicting he would return within a generation. Professor McManus acknowledged this, although he mentioned that this does not necessarily affect his argument; why were people keenly expecting him to return at a certain point?- Again, concern with the precise timing implies these individuals were unable to stand before God and themselves.

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