Rawls and Vattimo: An Argument for Congeniality Between Political Liberalism and Hermeneutical Nihilism

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I will evaluate the relationship between the liberal political philosophy of John Rawls and the hermeneutical nihilism of the Italian philosopher and politician Gianni Vattimo. I will argue for congeniality as the best characterization of this relationship. In the first chapter, I will briefly describe the political philosophy of Rawls, highlighting those ideas which will be especially relevant to the following chapters. In the second chapter, I will detail the ideas of hermeneutical nihilism as put forth by Gianni Vattimo, consider the areas of intersection of this philosophical view with that of Rawls, and argue for congeniality on the basis of these intersections. In the third chapter, I will examine the potential compatibility of the two philosophies, though I ultimately conclude that compatibility is an inaccurate representation of their relationship. Finally, I conclude that the relationship between Rawlsian political liberalism and Vattimo’s hermeneutical nihilism is one of congeniality.
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Introduction

What is the relationship of the nihilistic, postmodern political philosophy of Gianni Vattimo to the metaphysically neutral political liberalism of John Rawls? Are the two necessarily hostile to one another? Are the two philosophies simply irreconcilable accounts of reality, axiomatically isolated bubbles describing different visions of the truth? Are they congenial accounts, in that they share similar starting points and converge on similar end points? Are they possibly even compatible, with all of the core tenets of one producing no conflict with the core tenets of the other?

I will argue that the most accurate characterization of the relationship between Vattimo’s hermeneutical nihilism and Rawls’ political liberalism is one of congeniality, defined as a convergence of the two philosophies in both their starting points and ending points. More specifically, congeniality describes the convergence of the two in their starting point of viewing irreconcilable pluralism as delivered by history and their political conclusions regarding an endorsement of liberal principles and consensus as a source of political justification.

This congeniality is contrasted with another possible relationship: compatibility, defined as a relation in which one of the two philosophies could accept all core tenets of the other without violating any core tenet of its own. Compatibility defined in this way is largely consistent with the term’s usage in other philosophical analyses which aim to identify the relationship between two systems of thought. This definition is not dissimilar from, to use a somewhat distant example from the philosophy of religion, questions regarding the compatibility or incompatibility of theistic religion with evolution.

Compatibility is considered here in relation to the question of whether or not the two
philosophies are mutually exclusive. Can one be both a Rawlsian political liberal and a hermeneutical nihilist without holding beliefs which are internally conflicting? Are there any core tenets of one which conflict with the other? These are the questions to which compatibility aims to provide an answer.

In general, two philosophies can be congenial but not compatible, and can be compatible without being congenial. To use the previous example, theism and evolution are sometimes framed as compatible, but never as congenial in the sense that I describe. They do not possess similar starting or ending points, as they are not concerned with the same thing. Obviously, there is a dissimilarity, then, in the above example and the subjects of this thesis. The philosophies of Rawls and Vattimo are both political, and both politically liberal. That is, they are concerned with largely the same thing. A congenial relationship in such a case increases the likelihood of compatibility between two philosophies, as certain core tenets, those which constitute their starting and ending points, must converge in order for congeniality to be an accurate description of their relationship. Congeniality, then, is concerned with the core tenets of each philosophy which constitute their starting and ending points, while compatibility is concerned with all core tenets of each philosophy. Core tenets are taken to be especially important ideas within a given philosophy on which multiple other ideas often rely or which multiple other ideas work to justify. While such a definition doubtlessly describes a plethora of ideas in each political philosophy, I am chiefly concerned in this thesis with the core tenets of each which constitute their starting and ending points, as well as those core tenets which are most likely to result in incompatibility between political liberalism and hermeneutical nihilism.
CHAPTER I: The Political Liberalism of John Rawls

The political philosophy of John Rawls is a subject about which a veritable subdiscipline of academic analysis and philosophical commentary has been published. The following analysis will briefly sketch the major elements of Rawls’ conception of liberal political philosophy as found in two of his major works, *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and *Political Liberalism* (1995). This is not to imply, however, that such account, or arguably any such account which purported to give due deference to every element of Rawls’ philosophy, will be comprehensive.

Beginning with *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls sets out to create a theory of political liberal philosophy which utilizes a construct called the original position. This thought experiment describes randomly selected individuals separated from reality by a veil of ignorance which deprives them of knowledge as to what social status they have, what specific religious or moral beliefs they possess, and what natural advantages or disadvantages they may have. These individuals who occupy the original position are then tasked with constructing the political rules of a society in which they are all willing to participate. This process is the theoretical source of Rawls’ two principles of justice, which he argues would be the reasonable result of the original position. In the last published version of the principles, they are described as being:

“(a) Each person has the same indefeasible claim to a fully adequate scheme of basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all; and
(b) Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: first, they are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle).”
(Rawls, *Justice as Fairness, A Restatement*, p. 42)

Rather than focusing on the merits of the two principles, I will focus primarily on a shift in Rawls’ political philosophy that is contentious both in its acceptability to many political philosophers and in its status as an actual departure from the substance of *A Theory of Justice*. Beginning with *Political Liberalism* and stretching into his subsequent work, Rawls establishes two positions which will be integral to much of the following analysis: first, he rejects the basis of a liberal political philosophy on the content of a comprehensive moral or metaphysical worldview, and second, he establishes a conception of political justification and stability in liberal, democratic societies.

Rawls contends that reasonable pluralism, or the state in which there exists a multiplicity of mutually exclusive comprehensive doctrines which seek to define ethical and metaphysical worldviews for their adherents, is a fact of contemporary life.¹ As such, liberal democratic societies cannot be governed by a set of political principles which is based on a single comprehensive doctrine itself. This is because, according to Rawls, the existence of reasonable pluralism means that some reasonable citizens will be led to reject any metaphysically-situated theory on the basis of disagreement with its metaphysical assumptions. Equally reasonable citizens will possess different comprehensive doctrines and, being committed to the truth of their doctrines about the good life, morality, religious truth, or otherwise, will not endorse a set of political principles which assumes the truth of a contradictory comprehensive doctrine. As such,

any attempt at creating a society in which the whole of the population affirms one comprehensive doctrine would result in an illiberal use of state force. Rawls states directly that,

a continuing shared understanding on one comprehensive, religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine can be maintained only by the oppressive use of state power. If we think of political society as a community united in affirming one and the same comprehensive doctrine, then the oppressive use of state power is necessary for political community. (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 37)

The answer to this problem for Rawls is to constrain political philosophy purely to the realm of the political. Any political conception, meant as a proposed set of fundamental governing political principles of a given society, cannot rest on a metaphysical or moral foundation of the type that would give reasonable citizens reasons to reject it that rise from their own comprehensive doctrines.² This criterion, which I refer to throughout this thesis as the idea of metaphysical neutrality, requires that Rawls’ subsequent political philosophy, and indeed the principles of justice which are their result, is framed as being functionally foundationless. Rawls’ political liberalism does not rest on a Kantian metaphysical doctrine, or any other for that matter, but is so constructed that reasonable citizens, affirming many different reasonable comprehensive doctrines, can affirm it for their own respective reasons.

The second new development in *Political Liberalism* is Rawls’ construction of a structure of political justification. This structure is a multi-faceted conception of the way in which political justification can be said to operate in a liberal society mindful of the fact of reasonable pluralism. This conception is explicitly stated by Rawls as not being a descriptive account of political justification as it actually operates in liberal societies such

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as our own, but rather it is a consideration of an idealized version of such a society. This model is meant to show both how the use of political power can be justified in a liberal society with all of its various commitments to constraining principles, and how such a society could achieve political stability.

A key element of this conception of political justification is the idea of a political conception. A political conception is a fundamental political principle or set of political principles which can be both endorsed by, and partially incorporated into, a wide variety of different comprehensive doctrines. The state of a political conception’s being supported by the majority of reasonable citizens via their comprehensive doctrines is that of an overlapping consensus. The overlapping consensus is what provides justification and stability to the political system, as it will be reliably supported and deferred to by reasonable citizens for the aforementioned reasons. Fundamental disagreements about political justification which will undoubtedly arise must be argued over in the arena of public reason, a realm in which political activities must be justified on the basis of public (or political) values and standards. These values are limited by a criterion of reciprocity, wherein they must be able to be assented to by reasonable citizens which affirm different comprehensive doctrines. The metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical principles of any specific comprehensive doctrine are disallowed as exclusive sources of justification for political action. Rawls’ conception of political justification in a liberal society operates as follows: reasonable citizens, committed to reasonable comprehensive doctrines, provide support to political conceptions (such as the principles of justice) by

3 Ibid., p. 35.
4 Ibid., p. 12.
5 Ibid., xxi.
6 Ibid., xlv–xlv.
reference to the ethical and metaphysical elements of their own comprehensive doctrines, but argue over the fundamentals of political action on the basis of commonly accepted public values.

A simplified definition of “reasonable citizen” in Rawls’ sense is that it refers to the readiness by such citizens to “propose principles and standards as fair terms of cooperation and to abide by them willingly, given the assurance that others will likewise do so.”7 Reasonable comprehensive doctrines are doctrines which reasonable people affirm. There are other important aspects of the reasonable citizen as Rawls conceives of them. One such component, acceptance of the “burdens of judgement”, will be considered in Chapter II.

Rawls’ attempt to justify political liberalism along lines which disregard universal metaphysical truth is echoed in Gianni Vattimo’s philosophy of hermeneutical nihilism. Contrary to pleading for metaphysical neutrality, however, the latter suggests disabusing ourselves of the very notion of universal metaphysical8 truth and instead weakening and twisting the foundations upon which much of philosophy stands.

7 Ibid., p. 49.
8 Hereafter, I use the term “metaphysical” in the loose sense that Vattimo regularly employs. Metaphysical is taken to refer to all objectivist, absolutist claims about truth, God, reality, morality, or any other subject. Ideas ranging from Kant’s categorical imperative to total relativism are considered metaphysical in the sense that they seek to offer a final account of the way that something ‘really’ is. This definition bears some resemblance, but is not quite synonymous, with Rawls’ usage of metaphysical in “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical” (1985).
CHAPTER II- Metaphysics, Motivation, and History: The Grounds for Congeniality between Hermeneutical Nihilism and Rawls’ Political Liberalism

This chapter seeks to explore the elements of Gianni Vattimo’s postmodern metaphysical and political philosophy, with particular emphasis on his writings The End of Modernity (1991) and Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law (2004). I will examine here the relationship between hermeneutical nihilism’s metaphysical and political views, and argue for the position that these views are congenial to Rawls’ political liberalism. Congeniality, again, is used here to describe a convergence in the starting and ending points of the two political philosophies. Congeniality thus defined leaves open the possibility that the two philosophies may diverge in areas which are not their beginnings and ends, as is certainly the case with Rawls and Vattimo. The first portion of this chapter will focus on Vattimo’s conception of hermeneutical nihilism and the integral role which history plays inside of it. The second portion will be concerned with the political implications of hermeneutical nihilism, and how those implications intersect meaningfully with Rawls’ political liberalism. As I will show, both Rawls and Vattimo possess the starting point of viewing irreconcilable pluralism as borne out by their respective historical analyses. They also arrive at similar political conclusions,
namely, an endorsement of similar liberal principles and an endorsement of consensus as a source of political justification.⁹

Before I describe Vattimo’s hermeneutical nihilism and its relationship to Rawlsian political philosophy, it is important to stop to consider in what sense it is that Vattimo considers himself to be participating in a system of philosophy that is postmodern. Postmodernism is, to Vattimo, best encapsulated by his idea of the dissolution of history. Postmodernism is not taken as the culminating finale to a linear progression of history (a view which Vattimo takes as being definitionally modern), but rather it is taken as being the end of attempting to construct a unified or universal history.¹⁰ Neither whiggish, progressive history nor the historical account of the dialectical materialist can be called an ultimate history, but rather an interpretation of history which is only partially true. The dissolution of unified history is present in the contemporary realization that a historical account focused on one aspect (such as politics, religion, or military) is only a history. Similarly, the supposedly objective, linear history which is of such great importance to the modernist conception is one historical narrative among many, being as it is influenced by the values, preconceptions, and political commitments of those who affirm it, or, as Vattimo puts it “completely conditioned by

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⁹ It should be noted that the analysis offered here is not the first to highlight the similarities of Rawls and Vattimo on the subject of both consensus and pluralism. David Rose, in his 2008 article “Postmodern Political Values: Pluralism and Legitimacy in the Thought of John Rawls and Gianni Vattimo,” argues for convergence between the two philosophies in largely the same areas which I describe. There are some key differences in Rose’s argument and the one offered here, as in, for example: the emphasis placed on the role of history in both political philosophies; Rose’s consideration of Vattimo’s ethical commitments (which I do not consider in detail); this analysis’s examination of the overlap present between Rawls’ duty of civility and Vattimo’s idea of equal respect as aspects of consensus; and this analysis’s arguments concerning compatibility. Nevertheless, Rose’s article is essential reading on the points of intersection between Rawls and Vattimo, and one which helped to shape the particularities of congeniality as argued for here.

the rules of a literary genre.”

Progressive, unified history is thus dissolved in a creation of many different historical narratives, none of which can be called objectively true.

Vattimo’s views on metaphysics are interrelated, as many of his ideas are, to the truth of nihilism and postmodernity. Metaphysical claims have, in his view, been stripped of their claims to universal truth by the Nietzschean “death of God” and the devaluation of the highest values. However, Vattimo breaks from many of his postmodern compatriots in that he does not commit wholeheartedly to discarding metaphysics altogether. Instead, Vattimo reluctantly recognizes that metaphysical positions cannot truly be discarded. He describes metaphysics as “the precondition of our every act and thought and [it] determines the very structure of the language we hope to use to get rid of it.”

In other places, he describes it as being “something which stays in us as do the traces of an illness or a kind of pain to which we are resigned.” The truths which motivate hermeneutical nihilism thus assign a new task to the philosopher, and likewise to the postmodern individual.

This task is to be found in the integral role of Vattimo’s interpretation of Heidegger’s Verwindung, which is the twisting and weakening of ideas in “a direction which is not foreseen by their own essence, and yet is connected to it.” In this way, Vattimo proposes that metaphysics, as well as ethics, religion, modernity, and many other highest values, can be recollected in a way which does not propose to overcome them, but yet does not prolong them in the same form. The essential characteristics of

\[11\] Ibid.
\[14\] Ibid.
Verwindung is that formerly absolute ideas are weakened, though still maintained in a weakened state. Vattimo’s views on postmodernism are perhaps the most illustrative example of this mechanism in action. Postmodernism as viewed by Vattimo is committed to the relative accuracy of the historical story told by modernism. After all, the former is viewed as emergent from the latter and carries its historical language and concepts within itself. However, postmodernism questions the validity of the very thing from which it emerges. In this sense, postmodernism does not overcome or surpass modernism so much as it deepens its consideration of modernism, and thus of itself, by questioning the absoluteness of modernist claims. This concept of Verwindung, and its component weakening of formerly strong principles, is integral to hermeneutical nihilism, not only in its views on metaphysics but also in its consideration of certain political principles.

Hermeneutics, as the philosophy of interpretation, is at the core of Vattimo’s thought. Vattimo frequently argues for a demonstration of hermeneutical ‘truth’ by analogy to two fields of human activity: art and rhetoric. He has typically devoted more work to the artistic analogy, which he argues demonstrates the idea of hermeneutical ‘truth’ as being, “transformation rather than … the representation of existence as it is—assuming that such an undertaking would be possible for someone living inside the specific order.”15 However, the rhetorical analogy yields somewhat more easily and revealingly to analysis, and, as such, will be the chief target of my consideration here. In doing so, I will have to trust that both analogies are illustrative of Vattimo’s concept of hermeneutical truth.

This rhetorical conception of hermeneutical truth is based largely on H.G. Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, wherein language is viewed as the mediator of experience.¹⁶ This mediator is in turn a historically-formed embodiment of the collective ethos of a society. Thus, language influences experience and is influenced by experience, creating a kind of feedback loop of interpretation which is hermeneutic ‘truth’. Truth as the idea of the opposite of error is discarded in favor of a truth which is rhetorical in the sense that it is "an art of persuasion through discourse."¹⁷ Collective consciousness, the linguistic, historical, and ethical undergirding of society, is, in this view, the basis of truth and judgement from which all members of society draw when they engage each other rhetorically. Vattimo sees this view of hermeneutical truth as demonstrating that "the experience of the true is the experience of belonging to language as the place of a total mediation of existence in the living collective consciousness."¹⁸ The artistic analogy is likewise inclined, as Vattimo states that the ‘truth’ of art is partially in that it exhibits the undergirding elements of the collective conscious, also referred to as a particular “historical world,” back to its own members.¹⁹

In what sense is this hermeneutic enterprise nihilistic? The answer lies in the degree to which Vattimo sees his philosophy as a “more radical hermeneutics” as compared to other alternatives.²⁰ Vattimo sees hermeneutic philosophy as being caught in a serious dilemma: either it commits itself to a “nihilistic ontology” of the type delivered by Nietzsche and elaborated on by Heidegger, or it accepts that it is merely a “technical...
discipline” which has little to say outside of area of specialty.\textsuperscript{21} Vattimo endorses the former, and argues that its fundamental thesis is to be found in the infamous Nietzschean assertion that “There are no facts, only interpretations. And this too is an interpretation.”\textsuperscript{22} Absolutes of all kinds, whether about metaphysical truth, historical narratives, or ethical values, are rejected as absolutes. Instead, as with unified history, they are all dissolved into a dissemination of interpretations. Foundational metaphysical claims suffer the most from this dissolution, as their necessary rigidity and absoluteness are discarded in favor of “weak” versions of themselves.\textsuperscript{23}

All interpretations are not equally valuable, however. Vattimo claims to reject absolute relativism just as strongly as he does any other absolutism.\textsuperscript{24} Instead, which elements of our historical heritage are to be valued or devalued as a source of ‘truth’ is decided on the basis of “whatever ‘really’ forms part of the legacy to which we feel ourselves committed.”\textsuperscript{25} The value of an interpretation relies on an accurate and persuasive historical account of one’s inheritance and one’s felt commitment to that inheritance. Vattimo claims that, “though a given interpretation could be preferable to others, this preference will not depend on anything external and capable of guaranteeing its objectivity but only on a positive recollection of its premises, that is, the history that produced it.”\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} The relevant question of whether or not hermeneutical nihilism is committed to an anti-realist, or expressly idealistic, metaphysics is considered in Chapter III.
\textsuperscript{25} Vattimo, \textit{Nihilism}, p. 46.
\textsuperscript{26} Vattimo, \textit{Hermeneutic Communism}, p. 71.
To summarize, ‘truth’ in the view of the hermeneutical nihilist is an act of rhetorical persuasion and transformation which takes place against the background of a collective consciousness which is shaped by the historical inheritance to which we are bound. The particular constituent parts of the historical inheritance are selected for by whether or not they are really a part of our heritage and the degree to which we feel committed to them. Vattimo sees this idea of ‘truth’ offered by hermeneutic nihilism as facing two major problems. The first problem is of serious importance to Vattimo, namely, whether or not hermeneutical nihilism entraps itself in a performative contradiction. This consideration does not bear overtly on Vattimo’s political philosophy, however, so I will not consider it in great detail here. 27 Vattimo’s second worry is that this conception of hermeneutic ‘truth’ threatens to revert to a mere endorsement of the values of the society in which truth claims are made, and would not easily permit changes to the ethical or linguistic elements of the collective ethos without a justification on historical or collective grounds. 28 Essentially, hermeneutical nihilism might lock societal development, truth, and privileged values into a conventional stasis of the type which it explicitly repudiates. 29

Hermeneutical nihilism’s view of ‘truth’ as fundamentally based on the collective consciousness in which it is situated seems to be, at least on its face, similar to Rawls’ idea of the background culture of public values. Rawls posits that the fundamental components of a liberal conception of justice are delivered to us through history and formed into a “background culture” of public values. 29 This is a “shared fund of

27 For Vattimo’s assessment of this problem, see the first two chapters of Of Reality, The Purposes of Philosophy by Vattimo.
28 Vattimo, End, pp. 140–141.
29 Rawls, Political Liberalism, p. 14
implicitly recognized basic ideas and principles” in agreement with which any legitimate political conception of justice must be. These conceptions seem to be suggesting largely the same point, namely that society’s reservoir of collective values, and the historical inheritance by which it is formed, can count as the source of information which is somehow privileged, though not equivalent to absolute truth. For Rawls, such privileged information includes fundamental liberal values such as equality, freedom, and justice. For Vattimo, privileged elements besides those of nihilism and hermeneutics are left largely undescribed, though his political commitments imply that he identifies many, but perhaps not all, of the same principles as Rawls.

The similarity of these positions is also evident in their apparent weaknesses. Vattimo’s worry about the possible stasis inherent in hermeneutical truth is a sentiment which is echoed in many of the critical positions on Rawls. Russel Hittinger, in his critical review of *Political Liberalism*, argues that, by choosing the existing values of liberal society as the criteria of a legitimate political conception, Rawls places a permanent constraint on the political decisions which can actually be made by reasonable citizens. Hittinger highlights Rawls’ assertion that, if a constitutional amendment were passed which proposed to replace the First Amendment with its opposite, the supreme court could reject the amendment solely on the grounds that it contradicts the historical tradition to which the court, and liberalism as a whole, is a part. Rawls, to some extent,

30 Ibid., p. 8.
31 This is a point noted by, and considered in greater detail in, David Rose’s article “Postmodern Political Values: Pluralism and Legitimacy in the Thought of John Rawls and Gianni Vattimo.” *Contemporary Political Theory* 7 (2008): pp. 416-433.
33 Ibid., p. 602.
locks potential political change in the enshrined values of the present, rendering it “static.”

This view of historical inheritance commits itself to a specific historical narrative, on the basis of which the criteria of political legitimacy are defined. Hittinger warns against this by way of example, arguing that, if one were to select conformity to the background culture as criteria for a political conception during the Medieval Era of Europe, one would likely develop a political philosophy which enshrined the elements of a medieval comprehensive doctrine.

Leif Wenar likewise criticizes Rawls’ enshrinement of the background culture on the basis that it commits reasonable citizens not only to deliberation within the confines of those values, but also to a particular conception of their own history. Wenar argues that Rawls’ conception of the background culture flows from his interpretation of the Christian Reformation and the historical improvement that reasonable pluralism demonstrates. This historical reading is in turn used as motivation for Rawls’ idea of the burdens of judgement, which are used as both a requisite for individuals to be considered reasonable and as a justification for the necessity of an overlapping consensus. The burdens of judgement are constraints on human reason which are taken to explain why reasonable people are in a state of permanent disagreement in their personal beliefs. Rawls describes some of the more obvious burdens of judgement as: 1) the scientific and empirical evidence which is relevant to important judgements is conflicting and complex; 2) even if agreement is reached on which questions are relevant, people may still disagree.

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34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., p. 590.
about their relative importance; 3) our concepts are often vague and open to exceptions, which means that must rely on “judgement and interpretation” in cases where there is disagreement; 4) personal experience weighs on our assessment of both important questions and their relevant evidence; 5) any single side on a given issue is composed of a wide range of composite views; 6) there is a limit to the number of perspectives which any social institution can incorporate.\footnote{Rawls, Political Liberalism, pp. 56–57.} The problem with the burdens of judgement, according to Wenar, is that they are meant as an explanation both for why reasonable pluralism exists, and as a defining feature of a reasonable person. Certain comprehensive doctrines, however, will not accept the burdens of judgement, Wenar submits, as they contain within themselves contrary explanations of why pluralism exists. Wenar argues that the burdens of judgement flow from a very particular reading of history, namely Rawls’ interpretation of the Reformation and its resultant fact of pluralism, and that reasonable citizens who accept the burden of judgement seem to be required to accept this reading.

These criticisms of Rawls raise important questions for the hermeneutical conception of truth, given the similarity of their ideas on privileged principles emerging from a collective cultural fund. If the criticisms offered by Hittinger and Wenar can be reasonably applied to the linguistic hermeneutical conception of truth, it seems that hermeneutical nihilism may be guilty of the very thing which postmodernism warns against. Vattimo’s radical hermeneutics might enshrine the existent values of society as it stands on the basis of a specific reading of history, a specificity which postmodernism typically rejects.
Rawls’ political liberalism and Vattimo’s hermeneutical nihilism both have an important aspect of collective values, delivered by historical inheritance, which are integral to them, and both are subject to the same avenues of criticism on these points. This similarity on the subject of collective values will, upon entering the political sphere, be expressed as a commitment to a fact of irreconcilable pluralism as a political starting point for them both.

The political implications of hermeneutical nihilism are something to which Vattimo devotes a great deal of time and consideration in his many works. Ultimately, he envisions the ideas of hermeneutical nihilism as internally generating commitments to many of the classical liberal values such as democracy, freedom, and tolerance.\(^{38}\) Before one can examine the means of hermeneutical nihilism’s endorsement of these principles, it is necessary to consider its motivation for doing so. Vattimo states clearly that:

In the world without foundations, everyone is equal and the imposition of any system of meaning on others is violence and oppression, for it can never legitimate itself by referring to an objective order. The only possible foundation for the predominance of an order of meaning is force. (Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, p. 95)

The rejection of universal metaphysical truth by hermeneutical nihilism is translated, upon entering the realm of politics, into a resistance to violence and oppression. Vattimo sees claims to universal truth as, though not the exclusive source of political violence in western society, the undeniable source of many of its most abhorrent forms.\(^{39}\) Universal metaphysical truth claims, the fundamental aspects of which are not subject to questioning, propose to generate generalized theories upon which action is

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\(^{38}\) Vattimo, *Nihilism*, p. 19.

based. As such, Vattimo sees them as a source of oppressive control and authority, though their violence in particular is the result of something else: their inability, in the postmodern world, to be objectively legitimized.

Here again lies a substantial point of contact between the philosophies of Rawls and Vattimo. The fact of political violence is, to Vattimo, the result of the inability of universal metaphysical systems to satisfyingly justify themselves in light of postmodern pluralism and the dissolution of history. Rawls is committed to the strikingly similar view that the many discordant comprehensive doctrines of present liberal society have little to no chance of reaching a resolution.40 Such a convergence, Rawls submits, is a “practical impossibility”41 The degree of the intersection on this point is best illustrated by Rawls’ assertion in the introduction to Political Liberalism, where he states that:

What is new about this clash [of the Christian Reformation] is that it introduces into people’s conceptions of their good a transcendent element not admitting of compromise. This element forces either mortal conflict moderated only by circumstance and exhaustion, or equal liberty of conscience and freedom of thought. Except on the basis of these last, firmly founded and publicly recognized, no reasonable political conception of justice is possible. Political liberalism starts by taking to heart the absolute depth of that irreconcilable latent conflict. (Rawls, Political Liberalism, xxxviii)

Both Rawls and Vattimo see fundamental liberal principles as privileged alternatives to those based upon the absolutist claims of metaphysics. Both views are borne out of a certain reading of history, or, in Vattimo’s case, of the historical event of the nihilistic dissolution of history.42 Though Rawls does not outright state a justification for the view of resolution as an impossibility, the most consistent reading of it seems to be as stemming from his characterization of the historical developments of pluralism.

40 Rawls, Political Liberalism, p. xxx.
41 Ibid., p. 63.
42 Vattimo, Nihilism, p. 52.
This idea, combined with Rawls’ commitment to the idea of historical inheritance as the source of the liberal principles (to which this view of metaphysical irreconcilability is closely interrelated), demonstrates that history has quite a large role to play in his philosophy. Indeed, many critics and supporters of Rawls have viewed his philosophy as firmly historically contextualized.\(^{43}\) Political liberalism and the political applications of hermeneutical nihilism start with a recognition of a fact of irreconcilable pluralism, demonstrated through historical analysis.

Though both philosophies see irreconcilable pluralism as historically demonstrated, they disagree about the particular aspects of its nature. Rawls seems to conceptualize the necessity, or near-necessity, of current pluralism as the historically-substantiated result of the rational capacities of human beings. Vattimo, on the other hand, supposes that the fact of pluralism is generated out of the failure of universal truth. Close as these positions undoubtedly are, they differ in the degree that they generate a rejection of absolute truth. Rawls maintains neutral to the idea of ultimate metaphysical truth, while Vattimo rejects it altogether. Rawls supposes that liberal political philosophy must remain neutral to metaphysical disputes in order to accord with the fact of pluralism, while Vattimo views the fact of irreconcilable pluralism as necessitating a continued weakening and twisting of metaphysical foundations in order to delegitimize the violence which they produce. In their theories, however, these proposed solutions are viewed as being realized via similar means: consensus.

\(^{43}\) Besides the works of Hittinger and Wenar on this subject, see Jan-Werner Müller’s “Rawls, Historian: Remarks on Political Liberalism’s ‘Historicism’” for a more positive reading of the many roles which history plays in Rawls’ philosophy.
The importance of consensus in Vattimo’s conception is owed to the dissolution of metaphysical truth. Once one accepts that one cannot gain access to any universal or absolute truth, and realizes this of one’s fellows, then the only ground for social action becomes one firmly rooted on an ideal of equal respect. Seeing as no one possesses an absolutely true conception of reality, it can never be legitimate to impose one’s own views absolutely on others. The hermeneutical conception of truth is manifested here in the political realm. ‘Truth’ is not, in Vattimo’s view, an act of illumination via individual thought, but rather it is a fundamentally external act performed against a background of common values. Consensus holds a similarly privileged position in Rawls’ own political philosophy, and one of its defining features echoes Vattimo’s sentiment about equal respect. The duty of civility is viewed by Rawls as an obligation possessed by reasonable citizens to

be able to explain to one another on those fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason. This duty also involves a willingness to listen to others and a fairmindedness in deciding when accommodations to their views should reasonably be made. (Rawls, Political Liberalism, p. 217).

The relationship between Vattimo’s hermeneutical nihilism and Rawls’ political liberalism is one of congeniality. Political liberalism and hermeneutical nihilism both begin with a recognition of irreconcilable pluralism, delivered and demonstrated via historical analysis. The two philosophies diverge in what they see as correct responses to this fact, however. Hermeneutical nihilism sees truth, political and otherwise, as radically contextualized in the historical and cultural background of the speaker. As such, it rejects any truth claims which purport to be objective or absolute. In Rawls’ political liberalism,

\[^{44} Vattimo, Nihilism, pp. 83–84.\]
\[^{45} Vattimo, Nihilism, p. 47.\]
the fact of reasonable pluralism commits his philosophy to a criterion of metaphysical neutrality which does not explicitly reject the possibility of absolute truth. The two philosophies reconverge in their political ending points, where they both endorse general liberal principles and consensus as the ultimate source of political justification. There still remains, however, the possibility that this similarity is even more significant than has been asserted here. Is it possible that the views of Vattimo and Rawls are in fact compatible with one another, as well as being congenial? This is the question to which I turn in the next chapter.
CHAPTER III- Congenial or Compatible: Considering the Limits of the Relationship

I have shown that the political philosophies of Rawls and Vattimo share both similar starting points and converge on similar end points, that is they possess similar, nonconflicting core tenets in these instances. A question remains, however, as to whether or not their differences outside of those areas can be reconciled. Is it possible that one of the philosophies could accept all core tenets of the other without violating any core tenet of its own, the concept referred to here as compatibility? In order to evaluate this possibility, I will describe those core tenets of political liberalism and hermeneutical nihilism which seem to be in tension with one another and consider whether they can be reconciled. The chief areas with which I am concerned in this chapter are Rawls’ apparent commitment to a particular historical narrative, his ideas on the legitimate international action of liberal states, and his commitment to metaphysical neutrality. All three of these positions initially appear to be in tension with some core tenets of hermeneutical nihilism such as the dissolution of history, the historical-cultural situatedness of truth, and the rejection of strong metaphysical claims. This is by no means an exhaustive list of the core tenets of either philosophy, but it is rather an attempt to identify those tenets which are the most likely to be in conflict with each other and thus to result in incompatibility.
The first area of apparent tension between the two philosophies is the use of a particular history by Rawls. As I noted in the previous chapter, many critics of Rawls have supposed that his historical reading of the emergence of liberal principles and the fact of pluralism is overly integral to his wider political philosophy. Hermeneutical nihilism, it must be imagined, would be the source of a similar though perhaps less severe critique. Hermeneutical nihilism does appear to allow for the endorsement of particular historical narratives, if sufficiently devalued. After all, the dissolution of history is itself a “global historical event” which Vattimo identifies with the birth of anthropology and the encounters between nineteenth century Europe and other cultures. Hermeneutical nihilism, however, is committed with such strength to the end of absolute historical narratives that it is willing to consider the truth of this historical event as a somewhat contingent historical interpretation. It would seem then that hermeneutical nihilism would at once support the recognition of the historically-situatedness of a philosophy like Rawls’ and simultaneously challenge its particular reading of history. Hermeneutical nihilism would demand a constant explanation as to why this historical narrative is the correct one to commit ourselves to, and why its identified liberal principles are parts of a tradition to which we are really bound in Vattimo’s sense. As it does to itself, Vattimo’s philosophy would threaten to force the Rawlsian to both devalue their own historical account while simultaneously arguing for its legitimacy. Could Rawls’ historical narrative, with its emergence of pluralism, implications for the burdens of judgement, and motivation for overlapping consensus, survive such a process? Perhaps so, if it were to strip itself of all pretense of universality or absoluteness and consider itself as one

46 Vattimo, *Nihilism*, p. 52.
possible interpretation among many, which is nevertheless privileged in that it describes a historical inheritance to which we are really bound. It is not clear that political liberalism and hermeneutical nihilism are incompatible on this point. In fact, Rawls’ portrayal of political liberalism as contextualized within the specific history of Western liberal democracies, and thus providing an account specifically for liberal democracies as opposed to all states, suggests that he may not find the above proposition disagreeable.

Another serious objection can be raised against compatibility on the basis of Rawlsian internationalism. Rawls, in his *The Law of Peoples* (1999), argues for a set of criteria by which the international actions of liberal states can justified. There, Rawls proposes, by way of a number of existent principles which are sourced from the “history and usages of international law and practice,” that the justified actions of a liberal state towards those which do not share its principles can be determined. This initially seems to constitute yet another area of serious divergence between political liberalism and hermeneutical nihilism. After all, how can a postmodern philosophy which is so committed to the historical and cultural situation of its own truth hope to agree to criteria which expand to cultures distinct from its own?

Vattimo’s philosophy has an ironic answer to this question. The ideals and operations of a democratic state are intrinsically endorsed by hermeneutical nihilism. Universal metaphysical truths are sources of political violence, and democracy is thus desirable as the only legitimate source of nonviolent political truth. This argument is analogous in nature to his argument for the intrinsic nihilistic endorsement of liberal values, but the elevation to democracy and violence allows for a certain level of

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detachment from merely intracultural justification. For societies that wish to have a political system which do not rely on violence and oppression, they will need democracy according to hermeneutical nihilism. This aspect of Vattimo’s philosophy does provide some support to the idea of justified international political action, as it establishes a criterion which is not as socio-historically situated as that of the complete catalogue of liberal values.

In fact, Vattimo comes, perhaps unsurprisingly at this point, to very similar conclusions to Rawls’ regarding the legitimate international action of liberal states. Vattimo rejects the idea of international action based on any conception of “natural human rights,” though he does endorse the idea of legitimate use of international force by liberal states.48 It does not contradict hermeneutical nihilism, Vattimo supposes, to admit that organizations such as NATO and the European Union can act legitimately to stop acts of violence such as Slobodan Milosevic’s abuses in Serbia and Kosovo.49 The key here for Vattimo, and for the political implications of hermeneutical nihilism, is that these organizations can act legitimately because they are in some sense representative and democratic. The political conclusion of hermeneutical nihilism regarding consensus as a form of political justification is expressed here internationally. If anything, Vattimo may expand beyond even the scope of Rawlsian internationalism, stating as he does that the contemporary left should “defend the reasonableness of the dream of a world democratic state.”50 It should be noted, however, that Vattimo is much less accommodating to the

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49 Ibid.
50 Vattimo, *End*, p. 112.
idea of individual democratic states imposing their own democratic and liberal values on other societies which do not share them.  

It seems, then, that the divide between hermeneutical nihilism and Rawls’ political liberalism on the issue of international action is not as sharp as it would first appear. They both see international law and the bodies which enact it as sources of legitimate international action by liberal states. There are certainly meaningful distinctions between the two, with Rawls’ usage of human rights and nontoleration for outlaw states as potential examples. Whether or not such differences are insurmountable hurdles to the prospect of compatibility rests as a somewhat open question, to be resolved either by an expansion of hermeneutical nihilism’s allowance of legitimate international action or by a shrinkage of political liberalism’s.

The last and most obvious objection to the idea that Rawls could base his principles of justice upon hermeneutical nihilism is that it violates the rule of metaphysical neutrality, which Rawls supposes is a necessary criterion for a political conception. This is not a trivial commitment, but rather it is baked into Rawls’ conception of political justification inside liberal democratic societies. He explicitly states that justice as fairness is to be understood at the first stage of its exposition as a freestanding view that expresses a political conception of justice. It does not provide a specific religious, metaphysical, or epistemological doctrine beyond what is implied by the political conception itself.

(Rawls, Political Liberalism, p. 144).

Furthermore, a political conception attempts to “leave aside philosophical disputes whenever possible” and “avoid philosophy’s longstanding problems.”

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Philosophical positions regarding the ranking of moral values, the nature of truth, and many other longstanding disputes are neither affirmed nor denied by a political conception. This idea of metaphysical neutrality is taken by Rawls to undergird the stability of an overlapping consensus. In order for the principles of justice to be the successful target of an overlapping consensus, they must be able to be integrated into and supported by existing reasonable comprehensive doctrines. In order to do this, they must not contradict the beliefs of those doctrines about longstanding philosophical disputes, or else they will be rejected by the reasonable citizens who affirm the doctrines.

Hermeneutical nihilism seems to be categorically nonneutral about many such disputes. It provides an account of ‘truth,’ though certainly not in an absolute sense, and it denies the absolute truth claimed by many existing reasonable comprehensive doctrines. If the philosophy which produces the principles of justice accepts the core tenets of hermeneutical nihilism, this would seem to prevent the principles from being the target of an overlapping consensus. Are there ways in which this problem might be alleviated?

The first possible objection to incompatibility on these grounds might be to deny that hermeneutical nihilism does in fact violate metaphysical neutrality. Vattimo claims both that he does not assume an antirealist, or expressly idealistic, metaphysics, and that hermeneutical nihilism sees itself as one interpretation among many. Perhaps then, hermeneutical nihilism is not a metaphysically nonneutral philosophy per se, but is similar to Rawls’ own conception of the principles of justice as a module of sorts which can fit onto existing comprehensive doctrines.

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the apparent necessity of hermeneutical nihilism’s rejection of absolute claims. Vattimo claims that the political applications of his philosophical thesis are “possible only on condition…that God is dead and that the eternal structures of values have been unveiled as a lie.”

Are the two above statements consistent with one another? Perhaps, if one takes Vattimo to be saying in the first instance that in the a priori abstract he has no commitment to the truth or untruth of realism. However, the historical occurrences of the death of God (the weakening of all absolute truth claims) and the dissolution of history give rise to hermeneutical truth. Hermeneutical truth then rejects absolute and universal truth claims as fundamentally misguided. In Vattimo’s conception, nonneutral claims seem to be a necessary component of hermeneutical nihilism, and of its political implications.

A second objection to incompatibility might be to assert that, while hermeneutical nihilism does violate metaphysical neutrality, it does not prevent the creation of an overlapping consensus. Hermeneutical nihilism’s consideration of itself as an interpretation may insulate itself from contradicting the beliefs of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. A proponent of compatibility might argue that the non-universal nature of this metaphysical view is what may allow it to dodge Rawls’ reasons for metaphysical neutrality. The supporter of compatibility could argue that this particular philosophy does not claim to be true in the way that other comprehensive doctrines do, and thus that reasonable citizens would not see this as a legitimate competitor against their own beliefs. As such, they would have no reason to reject it. This objection,

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56 Vattimo, “Nihilism as Emancipation.” p. 23.
however, rests on a misreading of hermeneutical nihilism as it relates to metaphysical neutrality.

In order for reasonable citizens to accept a Rawlsian political conception which accepts the truth of hermeneutical nihilism, they would have to grant that it does not claim to be in possession of the same type of truth as their own comprehensive doctrine claims to offer. This aspect of Vattimo’s metaphysical views is not limited to only itself, but applies likewise to all metaphysical doctrines. Hermeneutical nihilism considers all metaphysical doctrines as failing to possess absolute truth, and thus any reasonable citizen which accepted that the nihilistic, postmodern metaphysical view was not in possession of universal truth would have to accept this on the same grounds which would de-universalize the truth claims of their own comprehensive doctrine. It seems unlikely that any Christian, Marxist, or Kantian who was not previously committed to the idea of the de-universalized truth of their own beliefs would accept it here.

Perhaps this problem, created by Rawls’ commitment to metaphysical neutrality, may be avoided by asserting (as many critics of Political Liberalism have) that he himself violates this criterion. Such an objection often identifies certain ideas offered in Political Liberalism as surreptitiously included elements which are not neutral, but are rather carried over from a comprehensive Kantianism. Metaphysical neutrality, then, would not be a real core tenet of Rawls’ political liberalism.

There is an important distinction to be made here, however. If Rawls does indeed violate the principle of metaphysical neutrality, does he violate it in the same way(s) as Vattimo? If Rawls’ vision of political liberalism surreptitiously includes nonneutral aspects of a comprehensive doctrine, then it is stands to reason that he is actually
committed to whatever those aspects entail rather than to metaphysical neutrality. The establishment of the principles of justice would, if this critique holds, rely on these nonneutral commitments rather than metaphysical neutrality. Those commitments, however, are not compatible with certain core tenets of hermeneutical nihilism.

There are many components of Rawls’ philosophy in which critics suppose he crosses a line into non-neutrality. For the sake of brevity, I will consider only one such instance of possible violation in detail: Rawls’ fundamental view of the citizen as free and equal. It should be noted, however, that the arguments offered below would plausibly apply to many other instances such as his account of moral psychology, the burdens of judgement, and the definition of objectivity offered in relation to overlapping consensus.

In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls states outright that the original position (which generates the principles of justice) is an interpretation of Kant’s supposition that moral legislation must be “agreed to under conditions that characterize men as free and equal rational beings.” In *Political Liberalism*, he is similarly explicit, though he has added a condition of reasonability, and replaced the concept of the individual with that of the citizen. He states there that the original position starts “with the fundamental idea of a well-ordered society as a fair system of cooperation between reasonable and rational citizens regarded as free and equal.” The concept of citizens as free and equal is indeed a core principle of Rawlsian philosophy in that it is closely tied to the original position out of which the principles of justice are produced.

If we take this fundamental conception of the individual/citizen as free and equal to be violative of the rule of metaphysical neutrality, as critics of *Political Liberalism*

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have suggested, then we commit Rawls to the former as a core principle instead of the latter. Hermeneutical nihilism, I submit, will be just as, if not more, incongruent with this nonneutral commitment. Vattimo makes it clear that he is opposed to metaphysical principles which are unquestionably offered and enshrined in political systems, but his philosophy is specifically inhospitable to the idea of equality as a fundamental metaphysical supposition. Vattimo states that,

A nihilistic, nonmetaphysical left can no longer base the claims it makes on equality; instead the reduction of violence has to provide the basis. The reason is obvious: Equality will always be a metaphysical thesis, and as such liable to confutation, because of its claim to capture a human essence given once and for all. (Vattimo, Nihilism and Emancipation, p. 98).

This is not to imply that hermeneutical nihilism is opposed to equality as an aspect of liberalism, but rather that it cannot be offered as a metaphysical presupposition. Vattimo states that “we must build conditions of equality that, indeed, are not given ‘naturally.’” If Rawls’ conception of citizens/individuals as free and equal is non-neutrally metaphysical, and is thus to replace metaphysical neutrality as a core tenet in a formulation of his reasoning, then it will likewise find itself at odds with the core anti-metaphysical commitment of hermeneutical nihilism.

It is important to note that this observation offers problems for yet another possible route of objection which the supporter of compatibility might take. If such a supporter were to consider tossing out both metaphysical neutrality and the possibly violative aspects of Rawls’ philosophy in order to replace them with hermeneutical nihilism, then they would be left without both a core component of Rawls’ conception of

\footnote{For one such example, see Ian Adams. “The Inevitability of Political Metaphysics.” Journal of Political Ideologies 4, no.3 (1999): 269–288.}

\footnote{Vattimo, “Nihilism as Emancipation,” p. 23.}
political justification as offered in *Political Liberalism* and the basis for the original position itself. It appears, then, that there would be little left of Rawlsian thought in such a formulation.

If metaphysical neutrality is in fact a core, unviolated tenet of Rawlsian political liberalism, then hermeneutical nihilism’s violation of it poses a serious threat to compatibility. Even if that tenet is violated by Rawls himself, however, a tension remains between the two. In such a case, Rawls and Vattimo would be committed to nonneutral positions which are incongruent with each other. Either with metaphysical neutrality or the principles which possibly violate it, there are core tenets of Rawlsian philosophy which stand as incompatible with those of hermeneutical nihilism.

Rawlsian political liberalism and Vattimo’s hermeneutical nihilism are not compatible in the sense that one philosophy could accept all core tenets of the other without violating any of its own. While the problems posed by Rawls’ particular historical reading and his liberal internationalism might plausibly be resolved, the metaphysical neutrality to which Rawls commits any political conception is incompatible with hermeneutical nihilism’s rejection of absolute truth claims. The two philosophies are congenial to one another in that they converge in both their starting and ending points, but all core principles of one cannot be accepted by the other without violating at least one of its own core principles.
Conclusion

What is the relationship of the nihilistic, postmodern political philosophy of Gianni Vattimo to the metaphysically neutral political liberalism of John Rawls? The two are not necessarily hostile to one another. Neither are they axiomatically isolated philosophies which have no meaningful point of intersection with one another. Rather, the two philosophies are congenial. They possess both similar starting points and similar ending points. The political philosophies of Vattimo and Rawls both begin with a view of irreconcilable pluralism as delivered and demonstrated by their analyses of history. They both converge on similar end points, that is in their political conclusions of endorsing liberal principles and viewing consensus as a source of political justification.

The divergence of at least one core tenet in each philosophy, metaphysical neutrality for Rawls and the rejection of absolute metaphysical claims for Vattimo, creates a problem for their potential compatibility. Hermeneutical nihilism is not neutral in the way that Rawls’ political philosophy demands, nor is Rawls’ political liberalism, either if it is committed to neutrality or if it is committed to the metaphysical aspects of some comprehensive doctrine, capable of rejecting absolute metaphysical claims in the way that Vattimo’s philosophy demands. They are congenial, yes, but not compatible.
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