

From Heidegger and Hermes the Trickster to A.I. and a God Even Nietzsche Could Love

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Hermeneutics. Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information, signed by John D. Caputo, is a complex, yet accessible introduction in the field of contemporary hermeneutics. As the title suggests, the book seeks to clarify the role this line of thinking plays nowadays, “in the age of information”, when one can no longer ignore or fight against the technological advancements that bring about “a sea change in everything we do” (p. 20) and that sometimes outdistance many individuals, including (if not especially) philosophers. But before tackling this major challenge, the American author dedicates more than two hundred pages to painting a picture of hermeneutics in the 20th century.

It becomes obvious right from the introduction that the book is not intended only for a specialized reader: the text starts with basic observations concerning the distinction between facts and interpretations, followed by a neat display of what hermeneutics aims at, in a precautious, yet spirited series of FAQs. One may dare comment that such expositions of the standpoint of philosophical (radical) hermeneutics are

much needed, since dictionaries still reduce the term to definitions such as “the science of searching for hidden meaning in texts” (Thesaurus); “the branch of knowledge that deals with interpretation, especially of the Bible or literary texts” (Oxford); or even “a method or principle of interpretation”, exemplified by “a philosophical hermeneutic” (Merriam-Webster). In contrast, Caputo points out how a proper description of objectivity and a reasonable acceptance of the interpretational character of all understanding contribute to avoiding both dogmatism and relativism, which is translatable into our contingent world as follows: “Hermeneutics provides our best protection against the threat of tyranny, totalitarianism and terror in politics, and of dogmatism and authoritarianism in ethics and religion.” (p. 11) This bold assertion seems to sum up the motivation behind this book.

The author is, of course, referring to *radical* hermeneutics, which focuses mainly on *deconstruction*, on dissent, in the sense that it intends “to point out alternative explanations, to bring up anomalies, to question received interpretations, to suspect unquestioned assumptions.” (p. 10) Nevertheless, the line between a moderate hermeneutic approach and deconstruction is very thin and flexible: philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer – the epitome of cautious hermeneutics – often practise deconstruction; at the same time, writers such as Jacques Derrida – the champion of deconstruction – do, in fact, have a hermeneutic perspective, no matter how much they might struggle to avoid the word in their texts, convinced that their “exorbitant method” surpasses hermeneutics.

This is not to the disadvantage of either side. On the contrary. In Caputo’s words: “Without deconstruction, hermeneutics risks being naïve; without hermeneutics, deconstruction risks running off the rails.” (p. 10) Even if “a view from the margins” may prove to be more productive and closer to a democratic outlook, mainstream interpretations play their role.

The American philosopher beautifully portrays the two faces of Hermes, which never show up apart from each other: “Hermes the Straight Man, favoured by the mainstream, the

theologians, the more tradition-bound” and “Hermes the Trickster, favoured by the marginal, the outliers. [...] The view from the centre and the eccentric view.” (p. 16) Although the trouble-maker is preferred in a radical approach, both voices of the ancient gods’ messenger need to be listened to: “I do not want to abolish the pious Hermes. I am not trying to abolish interpretations (it’s the absolutizers who abolish) but to multiply them. I affirm throughout the two faces of Hermes, both traditional interpreter and interloper, both messenger and trickster, both courier and corruptor, both god of caution and god of risk-taking. The two interpretations of interpretation are deeply intertwined, the way hermeneutics and deconstruction are intertwined.” (p. 16)

Deconstruction is, in fact, derived from classical hermeneutics: “When Derrida coined the word *déconstruction*, a word which would really have legs in contemporary theory, this was a gloss on Heidegger, who was glossing Luther, who was himself glossing St. Paul (1 Cor. 1: 19), who was citing Isaiah, who had the Lord say, ‘I will destroy (apollo) the wisdom of the wise.’” (Caputo 2018, 54) Grasping it properly requires an overview of the broader context in which it was born. Caputo, therefore, starts with a discerning presentation of the most relevant works of Martin Heidegger, who pinpointed that “[i]nterpretation is not an isolated act, one thing among many that we do; it is what we are, the pivot, the crux of our being.” (p. 31)

Besides being the one with whom “contemporary or postmodern hermeneutics” began, the work of Heidegger also represents a hermeneutic challenge, not only due to his intricate language and complex thinking, but also because of his biography. There are two main aspects regarding the German philosopher that Caputo treats astutely. On the one hand, he reflects upon how the Heideggerian legacy should be perceived in light of his involvement with the German national-socialist movement, which became the subject of more and more heated debate beginning with the 1980s. On the other hand, he provides a critical insight regarding Heidegger’s own re-interpretation of his early work – i.e. *Being and Time* – in his

later texts, such as *On the Way to Language* or *Letter on Humanism*.

With regards to the controversies concerning the German philosopher's biography, Caputo does not dismiss the accusations, nor does he deem them as grounds to rejecting the former's thinking. First, given the impact Heidegger had on 20th century both European and American philosophy, looking for a way around his work may prove fruitless, if not impossible. Hermeneutics itself took its ontological turn with Heidegger; avoiding his writings would only lead to an impoverished understanding of this field. Although one needs to keep in mind, while reading Heidegger, the philosopher's belief in "the spiritual kinship of the Germans with the ancient Greeks" and his conviction that "genuine and deep thinking could be conducted only by pondering ancient Greek and speaking modern German, which authorized the German nation to lead the world" (p. 28), "relocating his books from the philosophy section of the library to that of the history of National Socialism" (p. 29), as some suggested, would be a mistake.

Momentarily leaving this matter aside, Caputo goes on with a recap of the main aspects one needs to learn from Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity and the ontology of Dasein. Understanding that interpretation is a world-making and that we dwell in this thus conceived world is the bread and butter of contemporary hermeneutics. Assuming the hermeneutical circle is the most secure way in which one can begin questioning one's own presuppositions, not with the purpose of "*freeing* ourselves" of all assumptions, but in order to *renew* them, to project new understandings by "*revitalizing* our deepest resources." (p. 37) Authentic questioning is not driven by specific objectives, but by "the call of existential conscience", stirred by a pre-understanding of Dasein's outmost possibility – death. It is a call to striving towards authenticity.

After the mid-1930s, the accent in Heidegger's work moves from Dasein to Being. Caputo phrases the complex changes in the German philosopher's thinking as follows: "Dasein's projective understanding of Being is rethought as Dasein's standing-under Being's own advance, and Dasein's authenticity, being-its-own-self, now looks more like being-

owned by Being, and its being-in-the-world is being-in the historical world that Being sends its way.” (p. 69) It is from this perspective that his critique of how his own work had been perceived ensues. Caputo argues that the *Letter on Humanism* is not a “philologically faithful account of the 1927 text”, but “a hermeneutic reinterpretation or ‘retrieval’ (*Wiederholung*) of nearly all the major terms in *Being and Time*” (p. 81). These reinterpretations are marked by the “sending of Being” the German philosopher chooses to focus on.

This also has an impact on the way in which he conceives hermeneutics, on which he rather gives up after *the turn*. Even the hermeneutic circle is renamed as a “movement back and forth between language ‘itself’ speaking to us and humans speaking in response” (p. 80). By requesting his readers not to interpret the “‘as’ as a function of how human beings project but as the way that Being is given” (p. 81), the late Heidegger chooses Hermes the messenger over Hermes the prankster.

But the “sending of Being” is – for Caputo – “what most other people would call the tides of history”. Here is where one needs to be reminded of the author’s biographical circumstances and the assumptions related to them: “The call of Being turned out to be a pretty particular interpretation, namely, Martin’s own highly tendentious rendering of the history of the West, as if there were just one thing that could be named that simply.” (p. 82) This history mainly included the Greeks and the German poets and philosophers, as interpreted by Heidegger within his peculiar version of National Socialism. The need to *demythologize* the concept of the sending of Being suggests that the call of Being – a call for hermeneutic discernment – is itself in need of interpretation. This “It brings out a deeper structure of hermeneutics as the hermeneutics of the call, or [...] the *interpretive imperative*.” (p. 84, my emphasis)

The hermeneutic challenge posed by Heidegger is perhaps the most controversial among the perspectives introduced in this book, which is why Caputo’s approach has been presented here extensively. But exhibiting any insight concerning this line of thinking implies itself practising hermeneutics, which means listening to what the other has to

say (in this case Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida, Vattimo or Rorty), while being aware of the context (including the author's biography) and of the fact that what is spoken is spoken to me. The American philosopher shows this chiefly when discussing Derrida, the main source of his own radical hermeneutics.

Jacques Derrida himself avoids using the word "hermeneutics" because he "rashly" consigned it to a traditional sense, "treating it as a kind of code-breaker, a method of finding the one true meaning of a text." (p. 117) Nevertheless, he was very much aware of the fact that there are two sides to interpretation, both equally important, inasmuch as the one he favoured – the marginal, daring, exorbitant side – was not possible without the other – the faithful, reproductive side. The French philosopher experienced this as a teacher at ENS, where he was supposed to help his students prove an accurate understanding of a text along with originality. His "solution was to press the students to undertake a reading that would be a punishingly meticulous reconstruction of the original [...], but so close, so micrological, as to expose the hidden presuppositions in the text, which would in turn expose a conflict." (p. 118) A close reading was meant to reveal that the text is "divided against itself", opening the way for an original interpretation that started from such contradictions.

The two types of interpretation are an answer to the interpretive imperative and "imply a deeper responsibility by which both are subjected to a deeper call." (p. 134) It is an inescapable call, which "lays claim to us, so relentlessly as to constitute the very thing, if there is such a thing, that makes us who we are we, who do not know who we are, we who are defined by this very unknowing and by this very question." (p. 141)

The interpretive imperative is manifest especially in the face of the impossible. Caputo exemplifies this with the help of a lecture about justice, held by Derrida at a Law School in the United States. The deconstructionist surprisingly announces early in his speech that justice is undeconstructible. The affirmation was soon enough clarified: justice does not exist, therefore, it cannot be deconstructed. "Justice is a hermeneutic call for action, not a Categorical Imperative but a softer sigh, a gentler lilt, like the quiet whisper of 'perhaps'." (p. 194) In

opposition to the real force of law – which may very well be deconstructed –, there is only “the spectre of a justice to come”. In this sense, “hermeneutics is always and necessarily *hauntological*, and never ontological.” (p. 196, my emphasis) It is a practice made possible by the impossible. “What gives interpretation a cutting edge, the thing that triggers hermeneutical intervention, is the undeconstructible, which is the impossible.” (p. 198)

A hermeneutic approach is the answer to the interpretive imperative, to the call for action that arises in the face of the impossible, in situations which cannot be calculated, when the outcome cannot be predicted. Interpretation occurs “between the calculable and the incalculable”. To interpret “means to negotiate the price (*inter + pretium*) between the two, but without the benefit of an algorithm that would guide us.” (p. 215) This is the thesis Caputo tests in relation to concrete situations such as the practice of the law or nursing – a field within which many practitioners have already turned their attention to the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer.

The last three chapters of *Hermeneutics. Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* explore the issue of post-humanism on the background built in the previous sections. One of the first remarks Caputo makes in this respect is that the “old debate between materialism and idealism is obsolete. We are in fact neither a machine nor a ghost-in-a-machine, neither a pure spirit nor a clunky set of gears but a *tertium quid*, a third thing that no one ever thought of before – bits of information. Complex, delicately tuned biotechnological information – processing systems. Cyborgs” (p. 249). Instead of feeling threatened by the uprise of virtual reality and artificial intelligence, one should become aware that these are continuations of “the most ancient system of virtual reality we have devised”, which is language itself (p. 251). A “disembodied version” of human intelligence “interpreted as a complex formal system transferable to other material substrates”, comparable to AI, sees the body not even as an external container of a spirit, but as a “replaceable substrate of a formal system”. However, without intending to formulate a definition of “humanism”, Caputo emphasizes that even

communication is always “embedded and embodied in the material medium”, which “saturates the message”. It is never disincarnated. A materialist and biological account of human intelligence is, therefore, more plausible. Such a version recognizes “how much of being-human is non-formalizable and non-programmable”, and it is here that hermeneutics finds its place.

The conclusion that conceiving human intelligence as embodied implies the “non-formalizable and non-programmable” aspects of being human may seem to be a leap, serving the old human hubris so neatly avoided so far in the book. Nonetheless, inasmuch as formalizing or programming all aspects of human behaviour (including the way history is to unfold) does not appear conceivable, the assertion is useful and insightful, especially with regard to the scope of hermeneutics.

Before concluding the book, Caputo remains faithful to his original interest in “the state of religion in the postmodern world” (p. 275) and suggests a deconstruction of the “modernist divide between religious and secular” (p. 279). In such a context, neither theism, nor atheism, not even agnosticism stand up. The American philosopher finds an approach to religion that is appropriate to current times in the works of Paul Tillich, who lays the background for what he calls “the post-religious”. Tillich replaces the idea of God as “a Superbeing” with that of “the ‘ground of being’, the deepest source and foundation of all beings.” (p. 291) The Christian existentialist argues that genuine religion “is a matter of ultimate concern, of being seized by something of ultimate or unconditional worth”, thus cutting through “the binary opposition of the religious and the secular” (p. 293). Just like the undeconstructible justice Derrida was talking about, the unconditional does not exist, but which receives symbolic expression in particular circumstances. “[T]he challenge is to feel about for – to interpret – the unconditional that is being symbolically expressed in the concrete conditions under which it presents itself, and not to confuse the two.” (p. 296) With such an approach, Caputo believes, one gains “a new vitality, a new spiritedness that preserves the lightness of life, the undecidability of a fluctuating experience.” (p. 300) It preserves

“the endless questionability of lives, which means the endless interpretability of our lives.” (p. 307) The name of God would be “the name of everything that is *possible*, up to and including the impossible” – a God even Nietzsche would love.

Even for a reader who is not keen on theological matters, this last chapter and the conclusion of the book constitute at least a great example of how radical hermeneutics work. All in all, Caputo manages to illustrate the role of hermeneutics in quite diverse manners: from the exercise of understanding Heidegger, Gadamer or Derrida, to seeing it at work within concrete contexts, such as the judicial system or within medical care; from making sense of how one is to perceive the rapid technological changes that took over our lives, to offering a reasonable account of religion still possible nowadays.

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