

John D. Caputo:

A Postmodern, Prophetic, Liberal American in Paris

Michael E. Zimmerman  
Tulane University

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There has never been a more lucid commentator on Heidegger's thought than John D. Caputo, and few have been as insightful. He has shed welcome light on even the most obscure Heideggerian utterances, and has also generated brilliant conversations, whose interlocutors include Heidegger, Derrida, Levinas, Kierkegaard, and Caputo himself in pseudonymous voices. In addition to remarkable clarity and intelligence, however, his literary voice contains generous portions of vitality, irony, and humor, all of which enable it to speak in tones unburdened by the spirit of gravity that afflicts the voices of so many American commentators on Heidegger's thought. One may readily discern aspects of Caputo's personality--gregarious and musing, unpretentious and impatient with obscurantism, humorous and compassionate, reverent and irascible--in his writings. Without having the benefit of this evocative, passionate, and sagacious voice for the past two decades, American continental thought in America would not have made the important strides that it has.

In this essay, I will first describe how Caputo's contemporary voice emerged in the process of a lengthy and increasingly critical dialogue with Heidegger. Sharing with the young Heidegger a devout Roman Catholicism, as well as an interest in mysticism, the young Caputo wrote insightful and appreciative commentaries on Heidegger's thought, even while struggling against the temptation of discipleship and seeking to establish his own voice. In the late 1980s, influenced by Derrida and Levinas, as well as by unsettling disclosures about Heidegger's political thoughts and deeds, Caputo began to demythologize Heidegger. In the process, Caputo's voice became ever-more inflected

with French deconstructive practices, prophetic Biblical concerns about mercy and compassion, and liberal concerns about political emancipation. I will argue that even though Caputo moved his intellectual orientation from Freiburg to Paris, his voice remains influenced by concerns of American liberalism, even though he rightly criticizes such liberalism for its arrogance and for its insensitivity with regard to those who continue to be systematically excluded in an incompletely liberal American society. In this essay, by “liberal” I mean the ideology of a society in which individuals are free to pursue their own well-being with minimal interference from the state, and with guarantees of human rights that are--at least in principle--universally applicable.

### The Catholic and Mystical Connections

Like Heidegger, the young Caputo’s philosophical interests were shaped by Roman Catholicism and by the conviction that modern rationality fails to provide an adequate way of understanding things. At this time, as Caputo was to write many years later, he was “already, and instinctively, trying to become a postmodern, to twist free of the tradition from Descartes to Hegel, before I knew what modernity was....”<sup>1</sup> As a graduate student, Caputo was astonished upon reading Der Satz vom Grund, which was in some ways the culmination of Heidegger’s deconstruction of an immoderate Western rationalism. Heidegger’s book focuses in part on the Rhineland mystic Angelius Silesius’ phrase, “The rose is without why, it blooms because it blooms.” Subsequently, in Caputo’s own writings, this phrase recurs evocatively, as a kind of meditative mantra. Like many liberal Catholics in the 1960s and 1970s, Caputo sought a more satisfying and expansive guide for faith and action than were found in the dogmatic strictures of the patriarchal Roman curia. In Christian mysticism and in the mystically-flavored thought of Heidegger’s Der Satz vom Grund, he found such guides.

Der Satz vom Grund contrasts domineering behavior, which is often justified by a grounding principle or ratio, with caring behavior, which allegedly ensues when a person exists “without why.” For Heidegger, this mode of existing ensues from being

appropriated by the groundless ground, the Abgrund that “gives” the ratio (Seinsverständnis) that holds sway in any particular historical epoch. In discovering the limits of the validity of all foundational claims, i.e., in realizing that the modern Western ratio is itself groundless and that--ultimately--things manifest themselves for no “reason,” human Dasein can “let things be” what they are. For later Heidegger, then, to be appropriated by (vereignen) the self-concealing, abysmal “event of appropriation” (Ereignis) constitutes authentic existence (Eigentlichkeit), just as for Eckhart and Aquinas union with the groundless divine mystery constitutes the highest mode of being possible for creatures.

Despite so insightfully describing the many analogies between Meister Eckhart and Heidegger, and between the mystical Aquinas and Heidegger, Caputo concluded that Heidegger’s thought is not mysticism, because Heidegger spoke of Dasein’s relation to Being, not of the soul’s relation to God.<sup>2</sup> The profane Heidegger’s thought provides none of the comfort offered by mysticism, for unlike Eckhart’s God, Being is not personalistic. The impersonal “play of Being” seems indifferent to the fate of humankind.<sup>3</sup> Attracted to Heidegger’s ontology of releasement, the young Caputo also had serious reservations about its lack of concern with “morality itself.”<sup>4</sup> Heidegger does not offer a way to move from primordial thinking to ethical behavior in everyday life, Caputo concluded. Indeed, so he informs us, Heidegger’s thought moves toward despair, because it leaves no room for hope.<sup>5</sup> In affirming Being’s impersonal world-play, Caputo remarked pointedly, Heidegger took a path no less demanding and dangerous than Nietzsche’s. More than a decade later, Caputo would argue that by ignoring the Biblical theme of moral obligation, and by developing instead a mytho-poetical “phainesthetics” of Being’s play with the Greeks and Germans, Heidegger strode resolutely into political catastrophe. Soaring in the ontological stratosphere, so Caputo would charge, Heidegger lost touch with the concreteness of suffering humans.

In his pivotal work, Radical Hermeneutics (1987), inspired by Derrida's deconstructive critique of all yearning for origins, Caputo argues that Heidegger's nostalgia for the ancient Greek age when Dasein was allegedly nearer to pure presencing (ousia, physis), was inconsistent with his idea of Ereignis, according to which there are no privileged epochs, no eras that are somehow "closer" to Being. Ereignis names the self-concealing, groundless ground, that "gives" or "sends" the understandings of Being that govern particular historical epochs. Though Derrida's différance and Heidegger's Ereignis point to the same "cold, hermeneutic truth," namely, "that there is no truth, no master name which holds things captive," Caputo writes that

this same cold truth issues in different metaphorics in Derrida and Heidegger. In Derrida, it takes an emancipatory form, in Heidegger, a meditative one. Derridean emancipation means celebration, actively joining in the dance and enjoying the play into which all things are put. Moreover, Derrida carries his deconstruction of metaphysics into the marketplace, into the agora, gives it an ethicopolitical cutting edge, makes of it a praxis of protest. [...] Derrida is good at disrupting the claims of the powers that be, at disputing their authority, at confounding their claims and putting them into play.<sup>6</sup>

Caputo asserts an "undecidability" about whose way to prefer, Derrida's or Heidegger's.<sup>7</sup> Though agreeing that Heidegger's mystical-meditational challenges the power structures of technological modernity, he is troubled by Heidegger's "eschatological ethics," according to which Germany's greater proximity to the alleged ontological "origin" will provide the nomos needed to replace bankrupt modern "values." However appealing it may be in an age of social atomism and anomie, Heidegger's ontological Sittlichkeit would achieve social unity only by excluding or marginalizing the different: foreign, alien, and un-German. Enamored of ancient Greece, Heidegger ignored its dark side, including slavery and the debasement of women. Favoring social rank and

hierarchy, and contemptuous of the leveling effects of democracy, Heidegger could see nothing positive about Enlightenment modernity, including its assertion of universal rights for every individual. He would certainly have resisted Caputo's assertion that the Greek world and others like it "deserved the undoing [they] received at the hands of the Enlightenment...."<sup>8</sup> It is no accident that Heidegger's commentaries on Hölderlin's work studiously avoid mentioning the poet's passion for the French Revolution.

Caputo insists, however, that there are no innocent epochs. If the ancient Greeks had slavery, Enlightenment modernity has its own problems in the form of socially exclusionary binaries (e.g., male is superior to female) based on the metaphysics of presence. According to a Derridian "ethics of dissemination," even though we are deprived of firm foundations and absolute truths, and even though acting in the age of Gestell threatens to reinforce the grip of modernity's control obsession, we must nevertheless act ethically and politically, precisely by revealing that because there are no metaphysical props for powerful institutions, they can and must be challenged to be more inclusive, less domineering, and more respectful of every individuals. Social institutions are necessary, but they must be made to tremble, so as to be forced to recognize the gap between their promise and their delivery. An ethics of dissemination, denying that there is any "foundation" or "master name," fosters a Socratic ignorance consistent with humility and compassion, and seeks to keep systems and institutions in play in order to insure their flexibility and capacity for self-criticism..

Caputo observes, however, that even when Heidegger avoids metaphysical nostalgia, and even when he sees "the illusion of totalizing schemes which purport to know how to run everything," he fails to note that "the sociological equivalent of the destruction of the history of ontology is the critique of political systems."<sup>9</sup> Scarred by his political activity in the 1930s, and convinced that any contemporary action would only reinforce modern subjectivism, later Heidegger recommended a meditative openness to the possibility of the arrival of new gods to restore this desolate world. For Caputo,

however, a genuine “ethics of Gelassenheit” requires more than waiting; it also requires letting individuals be. Such an ethics is discernible in the mysticism of Eckhart, who reconciled his meditative life with an active ministry and important clerical responsibilities. Just as Eckhart maintained that the spark of God manifests itself in everyone, so Kant merged the idea of Gelassenheit with modern ideals of liberation and respect for all persons.<sup>10</sup> Despite appreciating aspects of Kant’s ethics, Heidegger never approved the liberal political application of Kant’s thought.

#### Recovering and Transforming Caputo’s Liberal Prophetic Voice

In the late 1980s, faced with damning disclosures about Heidegger’s politics, and primed by Radical Hermeneutics’ exploration of Heidegger’s anti-modernist foundationalism, Caputo began work on two books, which he published in 1993, Against Ethics and Demythologizing Heidegger. In these works, one hears a prophetic voice speaking now with a French deconstructive accent, now with an American liberal accent. This liberal-prophetic voice had not been prominent in Caputo’s earlier works on Heidegger and mysticism. Mysticism is one expression of the ineffable dimension of the Biblical divine, but another expression is prophecy, which calls for justice and compassion in a world of hatred and violence, that is, which asks that the impossible arrive.<sup>11</sup> Speaking with this liberal-prophetic voice, Demythologizing Heidegger is an act of intellectual patricide that separates Caputo from the father figure whom he both loves and hates.<sup>12</sup> Though affirming what remains valid in Heidegger’s thought, namely, its openness to the groundless free play of Ereignis, Caputo emphasizes what was missing, namely, the prophetic affirmation of justice, mercy, and compassion, an affirmation that might otherwise have dissuaded Heidegger from supporting a movement as violently exclusionary as National Socialism.

Caputo explains that after trading a conservative Catholicism for a Protestantism influenced by Pauline militancy and by Luther’s daunting “theology of the cross,” the young Heidegger based his analytic of Dasein on a hermeneutics of factual life experience

in both the early Christian community and in the Greek polis. However naive this attempt may have been, it had the virtues of 1) presupposing that insight drawn from Christian scripture and theology did not contaminate the original insights of Greek, and 2) assuming (e.g., Kant and Husserl) had made some important advance in rigorous (wissenschaftlich) thinking. In the 1920s, at least, so Caputo maintains, one could not yet discern the anti-modernism and the mytho-poetic privileging of ancient Greece that would come forth in the Heidegger of 1933. Unfortunately, early Heidegger's approach to Christian life experience emphasized the martial themes of Christian virtues of courage, fortitude, and vigilance over against the themes of justice, mercy, and compassion. one-dimensional. Like Luther, Heidegger believed that the bloody crucifix was a stumbling block, especially for theologians like Aquinas, who emphasized God's glory, splendor, power, and majesty.<sup>13</sup> And like St. Paul, Heidegger was taken with the martial idea of "putting on the breastplate of hope and the helmet of faith...."<sup>14</sup>

On the basis his analysis of militant Christian factual life experience, Heidegger conceived of existential temporality as oriented toward an apocalyptic future of the coming parousia. In so doing, however, he ignored the central teaching of Jesus, namely, that the kingdom of heaven does not lie ahead in the future, but is already with us.<sup>15</sup> Unlike St. Paul, Jesus emphasized the importance of kardia, the heart, in offering mercy, compassion, and justice to the weak and the oppressed. Caputo persuasively argues that the Heidegger's turn toward a Jüngerian-Nietzschean rhetoric of manly hardness resulted not simply because he turned away from the Christian tradition, but because his martial account of that was already influenced by Greek aristocratic virtues of arete, nobility, and courage.<sup>16</sup> Soon abandoning altogether even the Pauline Christianity that constituted one pole of his earlier jewgreek explorations, and in orienting his thinking exclusively toward the Greek pole, Heidegger lost his balance and began mythologizing his thought.<sup>17</sup>

According to Heidegger's new mythology, which allowed him to link his philosophy with National Socialism, the ancient Greeks (like the modern Germans) were

privileged, insofar as they stood closer to the primal origin than do other people. Instead of being one historical epoch among a number of others, ancient Greece bore lingering traces of self-concealing a-letheia. Declining from this privileged beginning, Western history ends up in technological modernity, whose degenerate condition is revealed by its attitudes and institutions, including socialism, democracy, capitalism, rationalism, and utilitarianism. Having close spiritual ties to the Greeks, so Heidegger believed, Germany could turn things around for the West. Christianity, rooted in Judaism, was supposedly contaminating the West and was impeding Germany's attempt to make a new beginning that would be as great as that accomplished by the Greeks. The poet Hölderlin and the philosopher Heidegger, so the latter surmised, were chosen as the sites through which the tidings of the new beginning would first be heard. According to Caputo, Heidegger's rival geopolitical mythology "put father Parmenides and Heraclitus in the place of father Abraham and which made the Germans the people chosen by Being for special favor."<sup>18</sup> In thus privileging Nazi Germany, Heidegger himself helped to justify severe but supposedly unavoidable expedients, such as jailing political opponents and removing Jews from state positions. Such "expedients" later turned into mass death and destruction. Caputo writes:

The fateful, fatal flaw in Heidegger's thought is his sustained, systematic exclusion of [the] jewgreek economy in order to construct a native land and a mother tongue for Being and thought. It allowed everything that is ominous and dangerous about the question of Being to break loose with a fury and it threatens to scuttle the most important insights acquired along the Denkweg.<sup>19</sup>

Caputo writes that Heidegger's real philosophical issue was not Being, understood as that which "grounds" or "founds" a particular historical epoch, but instead the meaning (Sinn) of Being, that is, the temporal-historical (and thus non-foundational) context that makes possible any historical epoch's understanding of Being. Ereignis names the

groundless ground, the abysmal “event” of a-letheia by which “es gibt” Being, i.e., by which are sent the historically decisive conceptions of Being, ranging from Plato’s eidōs to Nietzsche’s Will to Power. Further developing a view broached in Radical Hermeneutics, Caputo shows that the postwar Heidegger did not necessarily privilege one epoch over the other, but concluded that there have been multiple “sendings” of Being, no one of which have been any closer to the alleged “origin” than any other. Indeed, all are characterized by concealment as well as unconcealment. People in each epoch are so shaped by the prevailing understanding of Being that they are oblivious to the self-concealing (a-letheic) event by virtue of which that understanding arises to provide each epoch’s topology of Being.

Caputo would have accomplished a great deal had he stopped with this act of demythologizing, but he took a further, more controversial step, influenced by Levinas and Derrida, but also guided by his own roots in prophetic Christianity and American liberalism. Caputo insists that Heidegger’s idea of Ereignis as the self-concealing “clearing” that sends each epoch’s understanding of the Being, is not prior to or more originary than ethics/obligation. “Ethics [or better: obligation],” we are told, “is at least as old as Being, if Being means clearing. On the view that I am defending ethics is always already in place, is factually there as soon as there is Dasein, as soon as there is a world.”<sup>20</sup> Having abandoned jewgreek thinking, Heidegger attempted to develop an “originary ethics,” but ended up with an ontological aestheticism. Enchanted by Greek aesthetic ideals, he developed a phainesthetics that celebrated the gleaming beauty of the ontological, while discounting the all-too-fleshly ontical. “In excluding the Jews,” Caputo writes, “[Heidegger] has, in the same gesture, excluded les juifs [i.e., what Lyotard means by all who are repressed, marginalized, excluded].”<sup>21</sup>

In Against Ethics Caputo writes: “Originary ethics results not in an aesthetic justification of life but in an aesthetic justification of Being without regard to life. Originary ethics shows an aesthetic indifference to life in the name of a higher, deeper,

more essential phainesthetic event.”<sup>22</sup> Heidegger’s “stupendous and terrifying neutralization of life itself” leads him to “a scandalous suspension of obligation itself....”<sup>23</sup> Phainesthetics is the logic at work when postwar Heidegger draws a number of sometimes shocking comparisons, e.g., mechanized agriculture is metaphysically the same as concentration camps; the self-concealment of Being is worse than the total destruction of life by nuclear war; and real homelessness involves not a lack of suitable shelters for human beings, but instead the withdrawal or self-concealment of Being.<sup>24</sup> According to Caputo, Heidegger’s aesthetics of Being and his concern to overcome the oblivion of Being, left him scandalously oblivious to the cry of the suffering other.<sup>25</sup>

Although one may quibble with this or that aspect of Caputo’s demythologizing, there is no denying that he has most insightfully demonstrated that Heidegger’s ruinous geopolitical mytho-poetics was linked in part to his obliviousness to Biblical doctrines of justice and mercy. Heidegger could not have predicted the awful ultimate consequence of his masculinist aestheticism, but can we, possessing as we do the advantage of historical hindsight, overlook such consequences when we entertain renovated versions of aestheticism? Does the combination of the (alleged) death of the Jewish/Christian God and suspicion regarding all metanarratives (including those proposing universal human rights) leave us in such a void, that either a fashionable nihilism or a proto-Nietzschean aestheticism are the only choices available to intellectual sophisticates?

Not according to Caputo. In Against Ethics, an ambitious work that includes entries by pseudonymous authors, he offers a vision of responsibility that: 1) reappropriates Heidegger’s neo-mysticism in order to avoid all metaphysical soaring and deep grounding, whether Platonic, Thomistic, Hegelian, or Heideggerian mytho-poeticizing; 2) seeks to shuttle undecidably and in the best jewgreek manner between Nietzsche/Dionysius and Abraham; 3) appeals to the sheer, factual givenness of obligation (es gibt obligation; obligation happens); and 4) emphasizes Biblical appeals for

mercy and justice. Drawing from Heidegger even while deconstructing him, Caputo seeks not a mytho-poetics of Being, but rather a

“poetics of obligation,” a certain poetizing of carnal life, a quasi phenomenology of flesh, tuned not to orgasmic explosions (which have their place, and I am not against them), but to the call that comes over us when flesh is laid low, which is a deeply “jewgreek” idea disallowed by the Ideal of Greco-Germanic Purity (no infestation allowed).<sup>26</sup>

Into the prophetic Biblical perspective, Caputo introduces the mystical idea that events happen “without why.” In asserting that “obligation happens” without a deep metaphysical ground, and even without the mytho-poetic perigrination of Ereignis, Caputo draws on Heidegger’s quasi-mystical talk of the groundless ground.<sup>27</sup> Beneath ordinary life, Caputo writes, there is no foundation, logos, nous, nor Geist that goes “all the way down” and makes ultimate sense of things. Instead, the ordinary lives of ordinary people hang over an abyss of vulnerability, suffering, and catastrophe.<sup>28</sup>

In asserting that he is “against ethics,” Caputo seeks to deconstruct, make tremble, and otherwise show the limits of normative institutions and principles which, however necessary they may be, pay insufficient heed to the weak, the oppressed, and to all who fail to measure up to the norm. Eschewing even Levinas’s deep ethical backup, transcendent infinity, Caputo acknowledges that Nietzsche’s aesthetic celebration of the “innocence of becoming” remains an alternative to the prophetic call for justice. Caputo does not have too much sympathy for such aestheticism, however, including Heidegger’s ontological version, and prefers instead the “slavish, socialist, egalitarian, democratic, Jewish, Christian, feminine, and anarchical....” Let the aesthetes and the artists fend for themselves, we are told. Nothing, not even great artistic achievement or the history of Being, “justifies great quantities of suffering.”<sup>29</sup> Even though obligations happen “without why,” there is no avoiding the claim that they make upon us. “Obligation” he

concludes, “happens in the face in the facelessness, of Anaximander’s anonymous cosmic justice, the dike of Nietzsche’s cosmic dice game.” (p. 237)

Encountering Levinas and Derrida, exploring the prophetic dimension of Biblical faith, and pondering the roots of Heidegger’s Nazi politics, have enabled Caputo to articulate more forcefully the reservations that he expressed years ago about the moral dangers posed by Heidegger’s profane neo-mysticism. I greatly appreciate Caputo’s attempt to use Heidegger (along with Levinas, Derrida, and Lyotard) to think against Heidegger. Forced to choose between an ontological aestheticism and an ethics of obligation, I would opt for the latter. Nevertheless, at this point I would like to explore some possible limitations of that ethics and of Caputo’s analysis of Heidegger’s thought.

#### Critical Observations

Let me begin with a relatively minor point involves Caputo’s contention that Heidegger ignored the prophetic call for mercy and justice. Prophecy with this theme was first uttered by Isaiah; it is nowhere to be heard in Abraham’s accounts of his encounters with a God who promised reproductive fertility, but said nothing about mercy for the weak, oppressed, and innocent. Hence, Caputo’s tendency (he is hardly alone in this, of course) to speak of the God of Abraham as if He were a God of mercy and justice is misleading. God’s command that the Israelites, having been freed from bondage in Egypt, should carry out ethnic cleansing to obtain the land of the otherwise blameless Caananites suggests that the God of Abraham and Moses lacked justice and compassion. Indeed, the disturbing possibility exists that the idea of displacing existing populations in order to obtain divinely ordained land for the “chosen people,” an idea so deeply rooted in Western memory, recurred--mutatis mutandi-- in the views of the sinister political movement to which Heidegger lent support. Biblical prophecy, then, is a two-edged sword that must be wielded gingerly.<sup>30</sup>

A more substantive area of concern has been raised by Charles Scott in a review of Against Ethics. According to Scott, Caputo rightly submits ethics to a genealogical

critique, which demonstrates that ethics is a necessary, but oppressive attempt both to impose decidability, rule, order, and ground on that which is in some cases undecidable, and to cause suffering for those who do not conform to the norms demanded by ethical first principles and foundations. Scott maintains, however, that Caputo is unwilling to submit his idea of obligation to such a genealogical critique, which would (in Scott's view) disclose its historical origins in Jewish-Christian experience and thinking. Moreover, Scott maintains that Caputo does not shuttle back and forth "undecidably" between Greece and Jerusalem, between Dionysius and Abraham, but sides with the Biblical prophetic tradition. If Caputo wishes to describe himself as promoting jewgreek thinking, so Scott argues, the emphasis should certainly be on the "jew," not on the "greek."<sup>31</sup>

Replying that Nietzschean laughter, disdain for power-mongering institutions, and suspicion of otherworldly and foundational metaphysics do in fact influence his stand "against ethics," Caputo insists that he does move undecidably between the Greek and the Jewish/Christian. Though I see Caputo's point here, I think that he protests too much. Scott is right that in his role as a philosopher, Caputo does not provide adequate genealogical and critical examination of the Biblical prophetic tradition to which he is more drawn than to a renovated Greek aestheticism. But Caputo himself is right in asserting that too many American commentators on continental philosophy sing the praises of the neo-Nietzschean "Religion of the Death of God." Well aware that dogmatic religions require people to conform to the "one true way," and often support political regimes that repress, torture, and murder marginal groups whose very existence reminds the powerful of the limits to their pretensions, Caputo's prophetic voice disavows any appeal either to deep religious or to soaring metaphysical backup. As a religious philosopher (not merely a philosopher of religion), Caputo follows Levinas in insisting that obligation is imposed upon me, by the suffering face of the other, standing here and now before me. Following Derrida, Caputo insists that such obligation lacks a "transcendent" or "infinite" basis of the sort mentioned by Levinas.

Although applauding Caputo's intrepid effort to affirm that "obligation happens" without transcendent ground or infinite/divine dimension, I am not convinced that it succeeds, and I wonder whether--in his heart of hearts--Caputo believes it himself. Only the fool says in his heart, "There is no God," and Caputo is no fool. Understandably, Caputo has no interest in an otherworldly, onto-phallo-centric God, but can he truly do without the notion of the groundless Divine that both transcends and is immanent in all phenomena? Following Levinas, Caputo maintains that the face of the Other imposes moral obligation upon us, but unlike Levinas, Caputo seeks the source for such in the sheer fact of suffering flesh itself. That such factual, ontical givenness cannot impose moral obligation, however, is the basis for dictum, "Is does not imply ought." In and of itself, the sheer fact that there are suffering, marginalized humans does not produce a moral obligation, any more than the sheer fact of an extraordinarily colorful sunset can produce an aesthetic judgment of beauty.

Why is it that (most) other mammals are not seized by moral obligation in the face of suffering flesh? The answer may lie in Kant's dictum, "Ought implies can." Heidegger might interpret this in the following way: only beings capable of understanding Being can be open to the moral claim made by the Other. Perhaps moral obligation is an aspect of our "thrown" situation that Heidegger overlooked, and perhaps obligation arises along with capacity for understanding Being arise together, but Caputo has not adequately demonstrated that ethics/obligation is prior to ontology. Why does Caputo reverse the ontology-precedes-obligation (or "ethics," understood in his non-metaphysical, non-foundational sense) that he seems to have favored in his first two books on Heidegger? Because he concluded that Heidegger's decision to support National Socialism reflected disturbing trends within Heidegger's own thought, trends that prevented him from giving sufficient weight to moral responsibility. In Against Ethics, Caputo attempts to explain how moral obligation is imposed.

One is fixed by an obligation. You cannot mount it or surmount it, get a distance on it, get beyond (jenseits) it, overcome (überwinden) it, or lift it up (aufheben). It is older than we are, at least as old as Being or Truth or the Spirit or the Will to Power. We cannot transcend it, because it is transcendence itself. We are the ones transcended, overcome, lifted up or put down, overtaken, thrown. Obligation is the sphere of what I did not constitute. Obligation is a kind of Abrahamic Befindlichkeit.<sup>32</sup>

How are we to define “transcendence” in this passage? Heidegger called “Being itself” transcendence pure and simple, by which he meant both that Being surpasses all entities, and that it makes possible any encounter with entities as such. Is “obligation” that which goes beyond any entity and which makes possible any ethical encounter as such? If so, obligation must be read in a way analogous to Levinas’ reading, which affirms the infinite. In agreeing with Derrida’s suspicion of such infinity, however, Caputo is hard pressed to define transcendence in a way that enables it to do the work required if it is to play a role analogous to Heidegger’s notion of transcendence. I appreciate why Caputo resists metaphysical and theological doctrines of transcendence, but I believe that--despite own intentions to the contrary--he risks affirming a fleshly-ontical immanentism that is may be the metaphysical opposite of transcendentalism.

Caputo criticizes Heidegger for ignoring the “merely” ontical, including corporeal pain, material deprivation, and political oppression, and for valorizing instead the ontological. Heidegger maintained that consuming ever greater amounts of entities will never slake Dasein’s thirst for Being. This assertion calls to mind the Christian notions that it is better to lose the whole world than one’s soul, and that one does not live “by bread alone.”<sup>33</sup> Virtually all religious traditions affirm that ontical concerns--including concern for personal, familial, and group survival--are not necessarily the most important. The ontical, material, or phenomenal domain is informed by and points beyond itself to

the non-material, the non-manifest, the transcendent. At times, of course, emphasis on the transcendent can lead to ascetic otherworldliness, which generates a lack of concern for miserable material circumstances that is every bit as reproachable as the ontological aestheticism criticized by Caputo. Such failings, however, do not annul the validity of the universal religious conviction that the proper attitude toward “things of the world” can only be achieved by an adequate relationship to that which both embraces and transcends the world.

Buddhism argues, for example, that identifying too closely with the corporeal, and thus failing to discern the transcendent, leads to greed, craving, violence, exploitation, and suffering. If I conclude that I am nothing more than this sensate body, I set out to defend it at all costs and to satisfy its boundless desires. Preoccupied by my own fear and craving, I cannot let the other person show up as a suffering Other, but instead as an animated object, to be manipulated, enjoyed, or destroyed. Justice and compassion arise spontaneously as a person becomes more attuned to the sacred dimension that both embraces and transcends the ontical. The Mahayana tradition avoids the dangers of otherworldly escapism by affirming that nirvana (transcendent realm of bliss) and samsara (immanent realm of suffering) are “the same.” Far from being effaced, however, the presence of the transcendent illuminates every aspect of the immanent. Compassion arises precisely to the extent that one sees through the illusion of the separate-self sense and discerns the absolute emptiness and co-dependence of all phenomena.

According to those claiming experience in these matters, such unusual perception requires a dramatic enhancement of perceptual capacity. Heidegger, too, maintained that nonordinary moods such as Angst, joy, and terror can trigger off authentic temporality, which in turn not only allows entities to show up in richer, more variegated ways, but also enables Being and nothingness to manifest themselves, however indirectly. In ordinary life, Being and temporality do not show themselves, though we understand them well enough to deal with entities as entities. Responding appropriately to the

transcendence announcing itself in and as the Other, then, requires a transformative experience, called “grace” in the Christianity, “enlightenment” in Buddhism., and “authenticity” in Heidegger, though the latter’s understanding of personal phenomena seems to have been limited. Discussion of such transformative experience, which appeared in Caputo’s first two books, is not evident in Against Ethics, even though its deconstructive repetition of the prophetic strain of Judaism and Christianity draws on Angelius Silesius’s phrase, “the rose is [and obligations happen] without why.”

Caputo discusses the compelling nature of the human face, but surely he would admit that zunächst und zumeist people do not encounter the profundity of face of the Other. Instead, we interact with one another within the confines of conventional social practices, which conceal such profundity and that often reinforce (though perhaps unwittingly) exclusionary ends. Christian nature mystics such as Jonathan Edwards maintain that sin constricts perception, thus concealing the transcendent glory radiating in and through every creature. Grace frees one from sin, according to Edwards, thereby opening the capacity for apprehending the transcendent in the immanent.<sup>34</sup> Analogously, in ordinary life, obligation of the kind described by Caputo cannot readily show itself, because we are often not open to it. Genuine obligation can reveal itself and make its claim upon us through the face of the Other, but only if the face is allowed to reveal that it embodies what both transcends and embraces all creatures.

Caputo eschews this quasi-Levinasian approach, because--like Derrida--he seeks to affirm justice and obligation without appealing to concepts such as “infinity” and “transcendence,” which are (allegedly) metaphysically inflated. But is such an affirmation really possible, even and especially if it is supposed to occur in the neighborhood of the prophetic tradition, for which the transcendent, the wholly Other, was taken for granted? Can Isaiah’s justice and Jesus’ mercy, dependent as they are on the fatherly God, really be sustained within a viewpoint for which even the theological via negativa is suspect?

Perhaps, but perhaps also only by way of an endless deferral that begins to resemble a bad infinity.<sup>35</sup>

If Caputo's renunciation of transcendence and infinity requires scrutiny, so does his renunciation of myths and metanarratives about origins and goals. He rightly criticizes Heidegger's geopolitical myth because it led to political catastrophe, and there is good reason for his criticism of modernity's progressive narratives, which have led both to environmental disaster and to the Gulag. In relinquishing both Heidegger's idea that some epochs are closer to the alpha, and modernity's idea that some epochs are closer to the omega, "We get rid of dominating historical mountain peaks, not for a flat plain but for a populous range of competing peaks."<sup>36</sup> Even though criticizing aspects of modernity, including its grand narratives, Caputo affirms that modern myths about human rights and democracy have improved the lot of much of humankind. In the place of grand progressive narratives, however, Caputo envisions the emergence of many "small myths" with "salutary and emancipatory aims," presumably including his own myth of jewgreek justice.<sup>37</sup>

There is good reason to be concerned about the domineering potential of progressive narratives, but I wonder whether Lyotard's postmodern petits récits and Deleuze/Guattari's "thousand plateaus" can generate the emancipatory--dare I say "progressive"?--consequences that Caputo plainly prefers. Traces of a progressive orientation may be discernible in his remark that "the occlusion of Being in the epoch of Subjektivität seems to go hand in hand with the discovery of political and ethical liberty, with ethical and political emancipation."<sup>38</sup> One way of interpreting this sentence is to say that emancipatory politics emerge as modern humankind no longer orients itself toward the past, toward a defining origin, and instead toward an open, democratic future in which--ideally--all people can fulfill themselves while contributing to the overall improvement of the human condition. Moderns assert that full human emancipation and self-realization are not only preferable to the aristocratic values of class-structured

societies, but are also the goal toward which humankind was striving. The political excesses to which such progressive universalism have sometimes led have long generated protests on behalf of local communities, languages, and customs threatened with annihilation by the “universal” impulse of modernity.

Today, most communitarians and universalists appreciate the complexity (for Caputo, “undecidability”) of celebrating cultural difference, on the one hand, while both adequately defining and preserving universal rights, on the other. The best contemporary debates are not between (reactionary) ancients and (ruthlessly progressive) moderns, but between different kinds of moderns/postmoderns, between those (rightly) upholding universal norms, and those (rightly) deconstructing such norms on behalf of those who may be oppressed by them. Caputo envisions one possible world that could emerge from the demythologizing gesture that emphasizes undecidability. This world is

a multilingual, multicultural, miscegenated, polymorphic, pluralistic world without national-ethnic unity, without the unity of a single language or a deep monolingual tradition. It is a world of gay rights and feminists, of radically democratic, anti-hierarchical, anti-elitist structures, with a pragmatic view of truth and principles, and in which children would be educated not in a classical Gymnasium but in free public institutions with schools in which Andy Warhol would get as big a hearing as Sophocles and Aeschylus, schools filled with computers and the latest technological advances, schools that make a particular effort to reach the disadvantaged.<sup>39</sup>

This voice speaking in this passage belongs to what may be described as a postmodern liberal American Democrat who prefers both cultural pluralism and meritocracy, and who demands that people compete on a playing field leveled by government programs assisting the poor and otherwise disadvantaged. Caputo sometimes seems to confuse this specifically liberal, progressive, meritocratic world, in which

multiple cultures are encouraged to flourish alongside one another, with the idea that history generates multiple world epochs, no one of which is better (because closer to the “origin” or moving in the direction of the “goal”) than any other. In fact, however, the very idea of cultural pluralism that Caputo celebrates, arose only within the modern, liberal West.

In a potentially suicidal extension of the Western liberal ideal of tolerance and pluralism, many postmodern thinkers undermine the West’s universalistic-emancipatory aims by suggesting that Western liberalism is just one political-cultural world among many others. Let a hundred cultures bloom, so say a number of voices. But only postmodern modern liberal could make such a suggestion. Certainly it is not much heard in Korea, China, Serbia, Croatia, Rwanda, Syria, and Nigeria, where “culture” means the national/tribal/sectarian practices (social, economic, religious, cultural) to which everyone is expected to conform under threat of reprisal. Embracing Caputo’s multicultural vision would require that a country adopt either some version of liberalism or else a genuinely democratic socialism, one “with a human face.”

The jewgreek myth of cultural difference has roots not only in Kierkegaard’s Old Testament vision, but also in the Christian prophetic tradition that helped to democratic impulses in early modern England and Holland, that inspired early American settlers to flee England in search of religious freedom, that gave substance to the anti-slavery movement in the nineteenth century, and that was reinvigorated in the brilliant civil rights oratory Martin Luther King, Jr., in the twentieth century. Hans Blumenberg’s well-known reservations notwithstanding, democratic modernity is in part a secularization of the Christian doctrine of the equality of all persons before God.<sup>40</sup> The ideologies of the American and French revolutions inevitably influenced the thought of Parisians like Derrida and Philadelphians like Caputo, even though both thinkers voice understandable suspicion of liberal ideology, which has been used simultaneously to conceal and to justify the colonizing and oppressive impulses of Western countries. In my opinion, one

may not use these unsavory practices to conclude either that the emancipatory potential of liberalism has been exhausted, or that it never really existed. Nevertheless, Caputo is right to insist that American liberalism is far from realizing even its own somewhat limited aims, much less the more exalted ideals of the prophetic tradition.

Conceding that he “would energetically defend the idea of egalitarian freedoms and emancipation as in the modern notion of democracy,” Caputo now eschews the cheery, optimistic liberalism of Radical Hermeneutics.<sup>41</sup> Far from regarding America as “city on a hill,” an example to the nations, as Puritan John Winthrop remarked long ago, Caputo states “more messianically, more prophetically, that the city on the hill is to come, essentially to come, structurally to come, that it will never show its face, and that it would be the height of injustice to suggest that it is present....”<sup>42</sup> In Against Ethics, he follows Derrida in promoting a “new Enlightenment,” one that takes into account the suffering of the Other and that “puts responsibility (to the other) before rights (of the self), heteronomy before autonomy, patience before agency.”<sup>43</sup> In his post-liberal, post-critical post-Enlightenment vision, Caputo would put the Bill of Responsibilities after the Bill of Rights.<sup>44</sup>

There is much here with which I can agree, especially Caputo’s criticism of the self-satisfied American liberalism that struts about after the fall of communism, and his call for the “inconceivable” arrival of genuine, unalloyed freedom for all. Still, some concerns remain. For one thing, it is not clear to me that putting heteronomy on top of autonomy accomplishes what Caputo hopes it would, for heteronomy and autonomy are two poles of a problematic dualism. In my view, rights and responsibilities arise together; neither can exist in any significant sense without the other. If one is seeking a new Enlightenment, would it not be better to seek the non-duality spoken of in Buddhism or Christian mysticism, in which neither self nor other are privileged?

Another concern is that, despite his ostensible support for aspects of liberalism, Caputo has grown suspicious of its progressive narrative that has sometimes been

(mis)used to justify social oppression and ecological destruction.<sup>45</sup> From his messianic-prophetic viewpoint, history not only has no particular origin, but it has no particular direction; hence, there has been no real human progress or development. What occurs, then, is endless differentiation. Accordingly, liberal democracy is just another self-important, self-congratulatory, provincial, cultural myth parading itself as something special enough to be spread throughout the world. In my view, however, liberalism--including Caputo's postmodern, prophetic version thereof--is not just one voice among a host of others, but in many ways a better voice, precisely because it is willing (in principle, at least) to recognize the specialness and worth of the other voices, even if they do not often exhibit such tolerance in return. Nothing would contribute more to the diminution of suffering in the world today than the global embrace of universal liberal ideals, especially the "rights of persons."

I do not wish to suggest that liberalism is the highest socio-political stage that humankind may attain. I do believe, however, that liberalism is an important phase in the evolutionary process of generating ever more integrated, less violent, less exclusionary societies. Even after taking into account postmodern antifoundationalism, then, I envision the possibility that history involves a developmental trend, in terms of which some cultural ideals and practices are superior to others, not just different. Despite qualifications and hesitations, Caputo appears to believe this, too, which is why in Against Ethics he celebrates with authority the jewgreek myth of universal pluralism. He also rightly emphasizes that myths, narratives, and good stories provide signposts and guides for life in this confusing and dangerous world, but--perhaps sharing Heidegger's critical view that metaphysics wrongly attempts to "tell a story" about the origins of things--Caputo overlooks compelling contemporary narratives that supports a progressive-evolutionary view of life.

These narratives are drawn from contemporary scientific accounts of cosmogenesis and cosmic evolution, according to which the universe has the inherent

tendency to generate self-conscious, carbon-based forms of life, which can ask why there is something rather than nothing.<sup>46</sup> Although ignoring these narratives, which may be capable of affirming “meaning in history,” Caputo does not altogether disregard cosmological issues. Instead, in *Against Ethics*, he entertains a cosmological idea that led to so much nihilism and despair on the part of European intellectuals at the turn of the last century: the idea that our entropic universe is headed for “heat death.” Apparently, however, Caputo does not take seriously what is being said by so many contemporary scientists and theologians, who argue not only that intelligent life is found throughout this vast cosmos, but that the emergence of such life was an inevitable development in a universe configured in the way that ours is. After more than a century of philosophical and scientific positivism, the idea is now reasserting itself that the universe exhibits elements of design. It is possible to devise a cosmology that describes the Divine as that which not only lets things “present themselves” in the sense of being created, but also in the sense of letting them “present themselves” through the humans and other beings that in some respects instantiate Divine openness/creativity. Aspects of such a cosmology are discernible in absolute idealism, which could be improved by the addition of Heidegger’s insights into the disclosive dimension of “presencing.”<sup>47</sup> According to such idealism, which in Western versions has been greatly influenced by Biblical eschatology, the cosmos in general and humankind in particular strive to manifest the unmanifest, i.e., moves toward the goal bringing the Divine to historical self-understanding. I do not have time here to show the extent to which the Divine is to be understood here not as absolute presence, but as absolute absence.

Obviously, the issues involved here are enormously complex. No one can be certain about whether history has a “meaning” or “purpose,” or whether divine providence plays a role in history. I share with Caputo, however, the faith that talk about such providence is intelligible talk. In addition, however, more so than he, I believe

that one can also speak intelligibly about evolutionary/developmental trends in cosmic and human history. Development and providence do not seem entirely antithetical, at least in my view. One thing on which Caputo and I certainly agree, however, is this: Heidegger's historical vision is consistent neither with progressive liberalism nor with providential intervention on behalf of the suffering other. I hope that these critical remarks are read as an invitation for Caputo to continue his profound inquiry into the mysteries that led him to study philosophy in the first place. For those of us who have been so influenced by Heidegger's thought, the undeniable flaws of which cannot cancel out its equally undeniable greatness, Caputo has long been a guiding light. Fortunately, since this essay constitutes not a eulogy but a critical appreciation of a philosopher who is still very much alive, we may look forward to further Caputian efforts to speak of that which cannot adequately be uttered.

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<sup>1</sup> John D. Caputo, "On Mystics, Magic, and Deconstructionists," unpublished ms., 2.

<sup>2</sup> John D. Caputo, The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1978), pp. 250ff.

<sup>3</sup> John D. Caputo, Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 280-281.

<sup>4</sup> Caputo, The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought, 201.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>6</sup> John D. Caputo, Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 192.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 254-255.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 264-267.

<sup>11</sup> The following point is worth noting, however. In his classic Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), Gershom Scholem maintains that, according to Kabbalism, prophecy arises precisely in the highest mystical state of union with God. There is not space to pursue this issue further here.

<sup>12</sup> John D. Caputo, Against Ethics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 227.

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<sup>13</sup>On early Heidegger's relation to Luther's theology of the cross, see John van Buren's excellent work, The Young Heidegger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 160ff.

<sup>14</sup>John D. Caputo, "Reason, History, and a Little Madness: Towards a Hermeneutics of Christian Historicality," in Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, 68 (1994), 27-44; citation is from 30. This beautiful essay reveals that Caputo would have been an outstanding preacher, had he pursued his interests in the priesthood.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Caputo, Demythologizing Heidegger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 55ff. Concerning Jünger's influence on Heidegger's thought and politics, see my book, Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

<sup>17</sup>Though later Heidegger conceded that his path of thinking was shaped by his encounter with Biblical theology and hermeneutics, he did not see fit to include in his Gesamtausgabe the early Freiburg lectures, which were shaped by analyses of Christian mystics, St. Paul, St. Augustine, Luther, and Kierkegaard.

<sup>18</sup>Caputo, Demythologizing Heidegger, 181. Despite eschewing prophetic themes of mercy and compassion, Heidegger did draw upon tropes and metaphors from the tradition of Biblical prophecy. Consider the following reading: Appropriated by Ereignis as the instrument through which modern Dasein was to be reminded that it had fallen into idolatry (worship of and fascination with entities) and had turned away from the ultimately important (Sein/Seyn/Ereignis), Heidegger was a voice crying in the

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technological wilderness. He wrote as if the world wars were ontological retribution for humankind's degeneration into the animal craving for security, power, and wealth, just as the Babylonian captivity constituted divine punishment for Israel's failure to keep its part of the covenant. Corresponding to the Biblical covenant was the originary manifestation of Being to the early Greeks, the original appropriation of Dasein by Ereignis. For covenant-oriented prophets, obedience to the transcendent Origin (Yahweh or Ereignis) is both more important than and the condition for well-being in the creaturely or ontical domain. For more on this topic, see my essay "The Religious Dimension of the 'Destiny of Being'," in Stephen Skousgaard, ed., Phenomenology and the Understanding of Human Destiny (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981).

<sup>19</sup> Caputo, Demythologizing Heidegger, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>21</sup> Caputo, Against Ethics, 161.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 56ff.

<sup>25</sup> Caputo, Demythologizing Heidegger, 143-144.

<sup>26</sup> John D. Caputo, "Infestations: The Religion of the Death of God and Scott's Ascetic Ideal," Research in Phenomenology, XXV, 1995, 261-267; citation is from 266.

<sup>27</sup> Caputo, Against Ethics, 231.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid..

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 234-235.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 235-236.

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<sup>30</sup> On this topic, see Jack Miles' excellent book, God: A Biography (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

<sup>31</sup> Charles Scott, "Caputo on Obligation without Origin: Discussion of Against Ethics," Research in Phenomenology, Vol. 25 (1995), 249-260. See Caputo's reply in the same volume, "Infestations: The Religion of the Death of God and Scott's Ascetic Ideal," 261-268, which is followed by Scott's own reply, 269-272.

<sup>32</sup> Caputo, Against Ethics, 26-27. My emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> See my earlier commentary on Caputo's critique of Heidegger, "The Limitations of Ontological Aestheticism," The Southern Journal of Philosophy (1989), XXVIII, Supplement, 183-189.

<sup>34</sup> William James catalogued countless non-ordinary experiences in which people reported that their attitude toward the Other was forever changed, for now they saw the transcendence manifesting itself in and through the Other.

<sup>35</sup> For a very helpful treatment of Derridian attitudes toward negative theology, see Harold G. Coward, Derrida and Negative Theology (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

<sup>36</sup> Caputo, Demythologizing Heidegger, 31.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>40</sup> See Hans Blumenberg, The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).

<sup>41</sup> John D. Caputo, "Laughing Through My Tears," unpublished essay, presented at the October, 1996, SPEP Conference at which an earlier version of the present essay

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was read.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>44</sup> Caputo develops these themes in more detail in Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997).

<sup>45</sup> Representatives of French neo-liberalism include Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut.

<sup>46</sup> From a large and growing literature, one may select Michael A. Corey, God and the New Cosmology (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993); Paul Davies, The Cosmic Blueprint (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989) and The Mind of God (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992); and David Ray Griffin, ed., The Reenchantment of Science (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988).

<sup>47</sup> Synthesizing in a remarkable way insights from Western idealism and Eastern thought, Ken Wilber has developed such a cosmology. See his remarkable work, Sex, Ecology, Spirituality (Boston: Shambhala, 1995).