More Radical Hermeneutics. On Not Knowing Who We Are
JOHN D. CAPUTO

John D. Caputo follows up his previous, successful, and controversial Radical Hermeneutics. It is his conviction that we need More Radical Hermeneutics. Caputo’s message has not changed. He is back as a defender of post-modern anti-essentialism, which he characterizes as a serene, joyful memento mori of all theological and philosophical schools that still believe in the possibility of overcoming the intrinsic contingency of human intellectual constructions. Caputo describes himself as the advocatus diaboli, for he reminds the reader about the fact that human beings are dramatically and irrecoverably limited. Human physical and intellectual resources are no meta-empirical, meta-historical gift; they are no extraordinary key to unlock the eternal laws of the universe; they are no revelation of “the Secret.” (1) Human physical and intellectual resources are contingent, perspective-dependant, and survival-oriented tools given differently to each singular, unique, socio-historically located individual, which represents the exclusive ontological datum that we can ascertain. On this basis, radical hermeneutics becomes the only consistent philosophical attitude that Caputo can offer, namely a constructive disposition in favour of non-dogmatic interpretation, novelty, and diversity.

Caputo’s style has not changed. He still displays a vast erudition combined with a sagacious, brilliant writing, in which wit, insight, and irony conjoin with one another to create an intriguing and persuasive pattern of reflection. English and French literature, biblical studies, psychoanalysis, and medieval philosophy are equally valid sources of illumination. Critical studies, Christian hermeneutics, talking cure, history of philosophy are all activities that can be ascribed legitimately to Caputo. In truth, no specific disciplinary boundary is set, even if the backbone of Caputo’s forma mentis is unequivocally a philosophical one.

Caputo’s references have not changed. Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Martin Heidegger are still his philosophical “heroes,” namely authors who are not afraid of facing the radical contingency of the human condition. Other voices join theirs, though, to ensure that the panorama of postmodernism is adequately represented: Maurice Blanchot, Druceilla Cornell, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Francois Lyotard are all granted a place of honour in Caputo’s volume. Only one pezzo da novanta is missing: Gilles Deleuzes—and Caputo gives no reason for this exclusion.

The book is organized in three sections. The first one is devoted to a full-fledged exploration of his anti-essentialism, with particular attention to its main inspirers. The second one deals with three specific contexts to which his anti-essentialism can be applied, namely gender, natural science, and ethics. The third one tackles the issue of an anti-essentialist approach to religion, regarded as an
open-ended field of interpretative possibilities centred on the experience of faith. More accurately, the first section opens with a chapter on Foucault’s “hermeneutica negativa.” (17) i.e., a radical scepticism with regard to all forms of narrative claiming to have discovered “the Secret” of human nature. Madness, sexual deviance, and criminal behaviours are the fields that Foucault investigates to show the fictitious character of such narratives, which actually rest upon linguistic, social, and political constrictions of the existing diversity into forced identities. This dialectic between constrained identity and proliferating diversity is discussed further in the following three chapters on Gadamer, Derrida, and Rorty. Caputo praises these authors because of their brave admission of the constitutive contingency of human descriptions of reality. Although they recognize, or even share, the passion for knowledge that has inspired metaphysicians and theologians in the past, they are not driven away by it. They exemplify a wise, moderate, “felicitous nominalism” (30) which abstains from absolute claims of any sort, and which welcomes novelty as the positive face of human ignorance. Not knowing is not a fatal flaw, in fact, but rather it is the necessary condition for the flourishing of interpretative possibilities, explanatory attempts, revolutionary discoveries, idiosyncratic expressions of one’s self. Concluding, Caputo defines friendship, tolerance, and multiculturalism as the interpersonal, social, and political embodiments of the positive attitude of the authors listed above, their “felicitous nominalism.”

The second section begins with a chapter on anti-essentialism and gender. Following Drucilla Cornell’s studies on this issue, Caputo individuates in definitions, metaphors, and roles concerning gender a set of exemplary cases of forced identity that should be discharged in favour of a non-dogmatic attitude, which would be far more respectful of individual peculiarities, creative innovations, and changes in the forms of human interrelation (“sexuality without number” 149). The second chapter applies analogous considerations to the field of natural science, which Caputo interprets as an emblematic instance of hermeneutic procedures. Defending Thomas Kuhn from Weinberg’s attacks, Caputo reinforces the idea that natural science is organized as a socio-historical paradigm of explanation, which is bound to collapse whenever inexplicable phenomena, new methods, or new inventions come along. The section ends with a chapter on ethics as a philosophical praxis requiring a ruthless anti-essentialist reformulation. According to Caputo, too many contemporary ethical studies are aimed at creating uniformity of behaviour, prescribing the appropriate code of conduct, and proscribing any alternative. In this manner, he argues, plurality and novelty cannot arise or, if they do, they are likely to do so in dramatic ways. Caputo condemns, in particular, the notion of duty as overly limiting and paradoxically selfish: gratuitous giving and infinite responsibility are detected as the right, anti-essentialist antidote. They, and not duty, reflect the fundamental openness to diversity, to the unknown, to the future, which Caputo defines as the general attitude of the committed anti-
essentialist.

The third section deals with the issue of religion. In the first two chapters Caputo gives an interesting interpretation of the Christian faith as a form of radical hermeneutics. First, in fact, faith is based on the notion of not knowing “the Secret,” but believing in it nevertheless. Quoting Kierkegaard and Eckhart, Caputo praises uncertainty and ignorance as constitutive traits of the religious experience. Second, the exegesis of the Bible and, more strikingly, the mystery of Jesus’s Resurrection are read as interpretative exercises par excellence. The understanding of the Word is based, in fact, on provisional readings of signs, tentative interpretations of traces, inconclusive hypotheses on the significance of the spoken and the unspoken: “Undecidability is the condition, the quasi-transcendental condition, of faith, the thing that makes faith (im)possible, the impossible.” (220—1)

In conclusion, Caputo provides his readers with an insightful, valuable study of several aspects of contemporary postmodernism, both of deconstructionist and hermeneutic origin. His remarks on Derrida and, especially, Richard Rorty are extremely incisive and illuminating. However, his work suffers from a limitation typical of much postmodernism: optimism. Caputo, as before him Derrida, Habermas, and Rorty, assumes that diversity, pluralism, and democracy are going to promote human flourishing by their own virtue. Caputo describes even Foucault himself as a confident defender of these values, despite the fact that the French thinker is often seen as a desperate prophet of the tragic nature of human relations. Such a recurring stress on the intrinsic goodness of diversity, pluralism, and democracy represents the postmodern equivalent of an act of faith. It is not clear, in fact, why diversity, pluralism, and democracy should necessarily grant human flourishing, instead of destruction and life-reduction. As Caputo enjoys highlighting, we do not know what the future is going to disclose: maybe a better life, as he hopes, or maybe an endless nightmare, as most of past and present history seems to suggest.

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Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity / Martin Heidegger, Gesamtausgabe 63
JOHN VAN BUREN, trans.

Heidegger has said that the seminar notes Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity (based on the summer seminar he gave in 1923 at Freiburg), constituted the first notes for Being and Time. One cannot consequently overestimate their significance.