

[MJTM 23 (2021–2022)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

John D. Caputo. *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information*. Pelican Books 16. London: Pelican, 2018. viii + 359 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-241-25785-2. \$18.99.

Caputo's *Hermeneutics* presents a condensed introduction to the nature of interpretation in a postmodern setting, drawing upon the many decades that Caputo has worked on this topic.

The introduction begins with a succinct definition: "Hermeneutics is the theory that the distinction between facts and interpretation bears closer scrutiny" (4). It then introduces the field by using a "frequently asked questions" format with an imaginary interviewer. This dialogue progresses swiftly from the universal grasp of the category "interpretation," to its centrality to being human, to the practical goal of overcoming oppressive political systems. It also clarifies Caputo's core interest in the "postmodern" turn of the twentieth century onward (6–7).

The chapter overview provided in the introduction divides the body of the work into two parts. Part 1 orients the reader to key thinkers in postmodern hermeneutics, and begins with chapter 1, "How Heidegger Changed Everything: Reading *Being and Time*." Here Caputo provides an exemplary overview of the ethical challenges raised by Heidegger's Nazi sympathies and then reviews his early work on the fundamentally interpretive nature of existence in a given environment. The rest of the chapter provides an articulate survey of the key concepts in *Being and Time*, successfully de-mystifying the legendarily convoluted notion of *Dasein*. This discussion continues in chapter 2, "Heidegger Strikes Again: Hermeneutics and Humanism." It covers the later Heidegger, who rejected the traditional notion of subjectivity in favor of viewing Being as something that humans must timidly receive, in a matter not unlike some medieval mystics (74–75).

While many would interpret this phase of Heidegger as rejecting hermeneutics outright, Caputo boldly re-narrates the *Letter on Humanism* as a creative interpretation of *Being and Time* rather than being a thoroughgoing departure from it. Even though Heidegger's concept of the "call of Being" (82) was a reading of history reaching an evolutionary high point in Nazi Germany, Caputo makes a case that this work can nonetheless be fruitfully re-appropriated today by viewing it as a binding obligation to ponder one's historical circumstances.

Chapter 3, "Gadamer's *Truth and Method*: Philosophical Hermeneutics," is much more straightforward than the previous two chapters and walks through the major components of Gadamer's canonical study. Caputo develops in detail the notions of play as a fundamental metaphor for participating in and understanding art, the disruptive experience of truth as it "shocks" (103) one's very being in the event of the fusion of horizons, and, in the context of expositing language as "the ultimate horizon of experience" (109), the agency that a conversation itself holds over its participants. Caputo finishes this survey by foregrounding the interrelatedness of understanding, interpretation, and application.

Chapter 4 is entitled "Derrida and the Two Interpretations of Interpretation." It grounds Derrida's concept of deconstruction in his early work as an instructor who helped students prepare for philosophy exams. The challenges of being both an expert on key historical sources and demonstrating original thought led him to develop a way of conducting a "meticulous" reading of a text that would allow one to identify "hidden presuppositions" which "expose a conflict" (118). Caputo reads Derrida as advocating conventional historical interpretation followed by the more critical step of looking for gaps, bringing a text into conversation with new voices, and finding ways that the language itself may have exceeded the boundaries of the author's conscious intentions. Interestingly, this microscopic focus on the text rejects attempts to correlate it with an outside symbol system, as in the case of "psychoanalysis" (129). The illustrative oppositions of the rabbi and the poet, Rousseau and Nietzsche, and Husserl and Joyce flesh out the two poles of original meaning and the chaotic spawning of unforeseen significances. True interpreta-

tion takes place as one navigates in the void between these two points.

Chapter 5, “Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, and the Age of the Program,” moves rapidly through structuralism’s scientific approach to language (exemplified by Saussure) and Derrida’s consequent critique of its latent prioritization of speech over writing and unfeasible goal of formulating rules to explain all uses of language. Political concerns emerge in the final parts of the chapter, as Caputo notes that binary oppositions can be used to instill oppressive regulations and that the scientific assumption that all of reality ultimately operates based on mechanistic rules can easily lead to attempts to instill a “totalizing technologism” (166). Caputo concludes the chapter with some thoughts on artificial intelligence. Most significantly, true “artificial intelligence” would create “a hermeneutical being like us, not a machine” (169).

Chapter 6 is entitled “The Roguish Hermeneutics of Vattimo and Rorty.” It begins with Vattimo’s “weak thought” (176), in which traditional metaphysics is implausible and interpretations are judged based on their role in facilitating non-violence, conversation, and democracy. Christianity can hence be re-interpreted in a manner that dispenses with its dogma yet views “modern democratic institutions” as “the political enactment of the gospel of love” (180). In Rorty’s pragmatism, “truth” is equated with “successful speech acts” (183) but the ethical values of “solidarity” and “compassion” (185) are still important and can be supported by “conversation” (185–86). Caputo finishes the chapter by reflecting on key commonality of Vattimo and Rorty, namely, that they advocate involvement in an open-minded process of discussion for overcoming problems.

Part 2 of *Hermeneutics* reviews some select case studies of global issues where hermeneutics is “at work” (18). It begins with chapter 7, “The Call of Justice and the Short Arm of the Law.” It unpacks the later Derrida’s thought on ethics, in which justice itself lies beyond deconstruction although it does not properly exist but instead issues a ghostly summons. The law (and its various institutional instantiations), on the other hand, is never perfectly just but always leaves its interpreters in difficult

situations of weighing competing principles. Complete justice is impossible, but this nonetheless calls everyone to make decisions that involve careful consideration of individual circumstances and to overcome the mindlessness of callously just “following the rules” (208). Chapter 8, “Gadamerian Nurses,” profiles case studies of hermeneutics as it operates in the healthcare system. Perhaps the most compelling section of this chapter is the discussion of the issues involved in caring for the parents of children with terminal illnesses. While it is not meaningful to issue a propositional answer to the question of why a child died, such an “impossible” situation can drive a parent towards an “unthinkable” calling that infuses meaning into their life rather than simply drowning in mourning. Pedagogically, Caputo notes that the sensitivity to care for people in these situations can only be instilled by encouraging the fortitude to engage with the unknown rather than relying on fixed procedures or methods.

Chapter 9, “The Spectre of the Post-Human: Have We Ever Been Human?” deals with some of the questions raised by artificial intelligence. Plato and Aristotle located the human essence in rationality, a viewpoint that could easily lead to a computer replacing a human, since both human rationality and digital machines are fundamentally forms of sign systems. Conversely, it can be argued that embodiment is necessary for humanity to truly be itself. In the current situation where the use of technology for tasks such as manipulating the genetic code could easily lead to disastrous effects, it is important that technology be guided towards ends that support the openness of possibilities rather than creating a rigid, closed system.

Chapter 10 is entitled “Postmodern, Post-secular, Post-religious.” It addresses the acute problem of meaning faced by many in the world today who have rejected traditional religion but nonetheless desire a sense of transcendence. Here Caputo draws from Vattimo’s stance that life contains “something that demands interpretation” (276) over and above the propositional categories of theism, atheism, and agnosticism. The discussion eventually turns to a consideration of Tillich’s accusation that classical theology is “blasphemous” (288) since God is “being itself” rather than a “supreme being” (291). In this framework, the

ethical imperative comes from the “unconditional” (291), which is the impulse towards the “affirmation of life” (292) apart from all consideration of remuneration. Caputo draws the discussion to a close by explaining why he prefers Derrida’s notion of the “undeconstructible” (298) to Tillich’s “unconditional” and summarizing Vattimo’s secular re-incarnation of religion, in which life has a fundamental “undecidability” (300) without need of the supernatural.

Chapter 11, “A Quick Review: What is Postmodern Hermeneutics in a Nutshell?” reiterates some of the key points: all of life evades ‘hard facts’ and requires interpretation, an act that precedes the narrow confines of traditional philosophy or theology. Everyone has a sense of being summoned to understand and respond to what is around them. Furthermore, this sense of a summoning must be explicated using “symbols” (313) even though an ultimate resolution never comes. The book concludes with “A Conclusion Without a Conclusion: A God Even Nietzsche Could Love,” which returns to the question-and-answer format of the introduction to articulate Caputo’s radical re-interpretation of Christian symbolism. God is the “promise of the future” (319) and prayer becomes a disposition of affirmation towards “the promise of the world” (322). Meanwhile, the endless proliferation of interpretations drives us into the future. The back matter contains a section listing further reading on the major topics and thinkers covered, followed by the endnotes and an index.

There is much to appreciate in this compact volume. The chapters in the first part provide more than a simple overview. They provide examples of interpretation in action as they boldly read these figures (particularly in the cases of Heidegger and Derrida) in ways that the authors themselves may not have anticipated or intended. Many comparable survey works on hermeneutics do not treat Heidegger’s thoughts on ecology and technology or Derrida’s work on ethics. The inclusion of Vattimo is particularly laudable, as he is not commonly treated in comparable introductory volumes on hermeneutics (for example, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], which ends with Rorty and Fish, or

Bradley H. McLean, *Biblical Interpretation and Philosophical Hermeneutics* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012] whose closing chapters cover Levinas followed by Deleuze and Guattari). The application chapters in part 2 are also quite insightful, as they help the reader see the real-world impact of these theories. Somewhat more broadly, this book should be mandatory reading in any apologetics curriculum, as it brilliantly sets forth the worldview of much of the West today, in which the traditional “proofs” of the existence of God or the veracity of Scripture are dismissed as being not so much false as simply irrelevant.

Some critical interaction is still required, however. As a whole, this work exudes the kind of arrogance that assumes that alternative platforms are so self-evidently wrong that they do not need to be argued against. The aspiration towards objectivity in modernism is frequently brought out as a punching bag, but the possibility that Plato could have been correct about the existence of immaterial forms, for example, apparently does not even merit consideration. The explanation of Derrida’s deconstruction is tremendously readable, but perhaps at the risk of over-simplification and the neglect of specific examples from Derrida’s own work. Caputo does not deal with key critiques of deconstruction, such as the possibility that Derrida fundamentally misunderstood Saussure (see John Martin Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989], 18–66) or that the concept of deconstruction itself is incoherent and itself dependent upon the very oppositions it critiques (see Robert Wicks, *Modern French Philosophy: From Existentialism to Postmodernism* [Oxford: OneWorld, 2003], 207–16).

From a confessional evangelical perspective, other questions emerge regarding the program advanced in *Hermeneutics*. Caputo implicitly assumes that traditional religious belief has no place in a truly open-minded dialogue (for a robust case to the contrary, see Stanley E. Porter and Jason C. Robinson, *Active Hermeneutics: Seeking Understanding in an Age of Objectivism* [London: Routledge, 2021], 150–54). Although Caputo rejects the “new atheists” (278) as such, he nonetheless reiterates many of their conclusions: heaven and hell obviously do not exist

(283) and basing moral conduct on the prospect of punishment or reward in the afterlife is childish and immoral (292). In some areas his advocacy for the generous consideration of multiple viewpoints rings hollow. Although the hard sciences involve interpretation and do not simply produce raw facts (8) just as in the humanities, it is still self-evident that the progressivist interpretation of the climate crisis is correct (13–14, 56; cf. Porter and Robinson, *Active Hermeneutics*, 29–30). Caputo’s model also has little to say to someone who sincerely desires something different. One could easily say “So what?” to the injunction to hear a call to openness. Indeed, in the modern west many have recently turned to different forms of extremism, as the meaning and purpose offered therein seems more appealing than the bland comfort of western pluralism. Finally, the call for dialogue itself offers little help for reconciling genuinely divergent platforms or visions of the good.

In spite of the shortcomings noted above, *Hermeneutics* remains a standout book in the flood of introductory works on the subject. It will be of great benefit to students of all the subdisciplines of theology.

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