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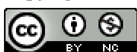

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John D. Caputo. *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information*. Penguin 2018. 368 pp. £9.99 GBP (Paperback ISBN 9780241257852).

In his novel *Underworld*, Don DeLillo dwells on the 'wordless shock' we are prey to when we lack the capacity to make immediate sense of experience (83). DeLillo also talks of 'the unseen something that haunts the day' (D. DeLillo, *Underworld*, Scribner 1998, 11). This 'unseen something' suggests a reference point in the social spaces we inhabit that could, perhaps, guide us when we are at a loss to understand the circumstances that confront us. To the extent that this is the case, DeLillo's concerns appear to intersect with those of the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger spent decades trying to make sense of 'Being': a practically significant but elusive (because ever-changing) reference point in our lives. Heidegger's efforts to throw light on Being occupy a central place in John Caputo's *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information*. Moreover, Caputo explains how these efforts shaped the thinking of a number of philosophers who followed Heidegger's lead (including Jacques Derrida and Hans-Georg Gadamer). Caputo does much to illuminate the concerns of these philosophers, each of whom was in the business of hermeneutics (which involves theorizing the ways in which we ascribe significance to the objects of our attention). However, more remains to be said when life blindsides us and we experience 'wordless shock' of the sort DeLillo describes.

Caputo devotes close attention to the method Heidegger identified as a means to dwell fruitfully on Being. This is the 'hermeneutic circle's we have it in our power to establish as we move between a mode of existence and our revisable understandings of it (34-36). By engaging in movement of the sort Heidegger describes, we can counter the danger he alerts us to when he talks of 'forgetfulness of Being' (R. Geuss, *Changing the Subject: Philosophy from Socrates to Adorno*, Harvard University Press 2017, 231). This danger arises when we sink uncritically into a mode of existence and do not bring into focus the 'inherited possibilities' for action that inhere within it (79). Caputo notes that, early in his career, Heidegger forged a link between the identification of these possibilities and the pursuit of an 'authentic' life on the part of the individual (50). He thus presented an account of 'situated freedom' (52). For individuals, according to Heidegger, have it in their power to fasten, self-consciously, on one or a number of the limited opportunities for action available to them. Caputo also tells us that, as Heidegger grew older, his commitment to an 'existential' individual (on a 'Kierkegaardian' model) faded (68). He embraced Meister Eckhart's notion of *Gelassenheit* ('letting-be') and argued that individuals should let go of their subjectivity in order to 'let Being be Being' (75). But, at the same time, they should, if they seek to live an authentic life, keep their 'hermeneutic ear close to the ground, pressed against the breast of lived experience' (35).

While Caputo finds in Heidegger someone who encourages us to pay close attention to context and the opportunities for action that lie within it, he identifies in Derrida means by which to exploit these possibilities. These means are interpretive and make up the complex practice to which Derrida (taking his cues from Heidegger) applied the label 'deconstruction.' Deconstruction involves two readings of the texts, practices, and other objects we scrutinize. The first of these readings reflects the influence of the years Derrida spent in the École Normale Supérieure (ENS). For it involves close reading (*explication de texte*)—the method for which the ENS is famous. Here, Derrida presents interpretation as a painstaking activity, or 'exorbitant' method that enables us to bring into focus the tensions that are at work in the texts, practices, and modes of existence we scrutinize (121). He adds that this first interpretation makes it possible for us to engage in a second and disruptive (or hermeneutically violent) reading (chapter 4). This second reading places emphasis on features of the

texts and other objects we examine that have, hitherto, enjoyed only a marginal status. To read a text in this way is to engage in the process of deconstructive reversal. This is because previously marginal considerations come to occupy a central position in the fields (textual, practical, etc.) of which they are constituent parts. While interpretative activity of this sort can reorient understanding in dramatic ways, it is a form of immanent critique. This approach to interpretation depends on the mobilization of resources that are internal to existing fields of inquiry and shows them to be 'auto-disruptive' (120). For this reason, a statement that Derrida made, while visiting Villanova University in the 1990s, is (as Caputo notes) less surprising than it may seem on first inspection. Derrida (at the time, the *enfant terrible* of Continental philosophy) startled his audience by describing himself as 'very conservative' (140).

Derrida and Heidegger receive more of Caputo's attention than Gadamer. However, Caputo makes plain Gadamer's centrality to his exposition by identifying him as enriching our understanding of Heidegger's hermeneutic circle. Gadamer does this by conceiving of it as a 'conversation' (104). In this conversation, we discover that 'recontextualizable' (textual) resources, if they are 'any good,' can speak to us 'again and again' (99-100). Caputo explores the implications of this analysis by reflecting on the way in which historians go about their business. Historians seek to deliver accounts of the past that satisfy a test of 'disinterested objectivity' but, instead, present us with 'datable' interpretations (88). Moreover, these (and all other) conversational contributions become elements in a past that 'put[s] *us* into question' as it 'answers [us] back' (104). Gadamer identifies this process as yielding a 'fusion of horizons' (103). In this fusion, he finds 'a third thing' that is neither the past nor the present (and that, in the absence of conversation, could not have come into existence) (103). Caputo also notes that participants in conversation on the model Gadamer describes are carried along in a 'flow' that becomes the stuff of a tradition that they join and play a part in elaborating (110).

Caputo impresses on his readers the affinities between Gadamer's thinking and that of Heidegger. They are plain to see when, for example, Gadamer finds in the language that makes conversation possible 'Being that can be understood' (108). Being, however, often resists understanding. Consider the thought-processes that Heidegger seeks to capture in the idea of the hermeneutic circle. These thought processes, while linguistic in form, may lead not to understanding but, rather, to perplexity. This typically happens when our linguistic resources are inadequate to the task of making the objects that confront us readily intelligible. This is a topic on which Caputo is suggestive. In a regrettably brief passage of text, he argues that we should develop the capacity to which the poet John Keats applied the label 'negative capability' (226). Keats argued that we exhibit negative capability when we endure 'uncertainties, mysteries and doubts, without an irritable reaching after fact or reason' (John Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Penguin 1977, 419). To this end, we should reflect on the resources at our disposal (particular traditions of thought) and consider how to apply them (quite possibly in innovative ways) to the circumstances we face.

Caputo could usefully have said more on negative capability. This is because it has relevance to the task of keeping our 'hermeneutic ear close to the ground, pressed against the breast of lived experience.' This is a task on which the novelist and essayist, George Orwell is a spur to reflection. Orwell encourages us to adopt what he described as a 'belly-to-earth' approach to things that lie outside our experience (R. Colls, *George Orwell: English Rebel*, Oxford University Press 2013, 45 and 247, n 139). By this he means that we should strive to think 'wordlessly' when we contemplate them (so as to 'let the meaning [that confronts us] choose the word') (G. Orwell, *Essays*, Penguin 1970 [1968], 358). Here, Orwell invites the criticism that the mental operation he describes is impossible. For the categories we need to make sense of experience only assume a definite shape when we give them a linguistic form. However, we can read Orwell as urging us to resist resort to a

particular form of words when we seek to respond adequately to wordless shock as DeLillo describes it. Another way of putting this point is to identify Orwell as a nominalist. For he is determined to find the words that will cling most aptly to the textures of phenomena. But before we make use of our expressive capacities, we should seek to take the fruits of raw apprehension seriously and (to draw on Heidegger) think 'without presupposition' (W. Eilenberger, *Time of the Magicians: The Invention of Modern Thought*, *1919-1929*, Allen Lane 2020, 50). If this reading of Orwell is broadly correct, his account of belly-to-earth thinking is a useful adjunct to Keats on negative capability. This is because he dwells on a form of mental discipline that negative capability clearly presupposes (but that Keats does not bring into focus).

Whether we face interpretive challenges that induce wordless shock or more modest ones (where we hesitate before making a choice between plausible interpretative possibilities), Caputo points us in the direction of practically useful resources. In their respective ways, the trio of Heidegger, Derrida, and Gadamer prompt us to treat the understandings that have shaped our thinking as a source of guidance. Here, the past takes on the appearance of a practical guide: a source of reasons for action ('inherited possibilities' with claims on our attention). Receptivity to such reasons suggests a readiness to assume that the past should exert a continuing influence over the future. More particularly, it suggests a conservative practical outlook. This is something that Derrida faces up to when he describes himself as 'very conservative.' We could also apply this phrase to the philosophical contributions of Heidegger and Gadamer. However, if we are to make effective use of the body of thought Caputo examines, we need the open-mindedness and mental discipline that Keats and Orwell encourage in their respective accounts of negative capability and belly-to-earth thinking.

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