

THE INSISTENCE OF GOD: A THEOLOGY OF PERHAPS. By John D. Caputo. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013. Pp. xxi+307. Paper \$30, ISBN: 978-0-253-01007-0.

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AS A LEADING PHILOSOPHER AND THINKER IN THE FIELD OF Continental philosophy of religion, Caputo's latest book represents an important contribution to scholarship in this field. This book will receive wide reception as well as careful theological and philosophical reflection. The old adage notwithstanding, we learn much from the artwork selected for the cover of his book, Jan Vermeer's "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary." It depicts Jesus' visit to Martha's house found in the Gospel of Luke 10:38-42. The standard interpretation emphasizes Jesus' criticism of Martha for preparing him a meal—for tending to his animal needs, as Caputo says—instead of sitting, like Mary, at Jesus' feet, listening to his teachings. Though we cannot know from the painting that Caputo will reverse this interpretation, we soon learn that he follows Meister Eckhart's interpretation of this passage. Caputo writes, "Eckhart's Martha is a clue to everything I say" (20). In Caputo's repetition of Eckhart, Martha is the pivotal figure in the painting because she recognizes that the presence of Jesus in her home is a calling or solicitation that requires a response. Martha provides the principal concern for Caputo's text around the ideas of insistence and existence. Caputo, in attempting to advance beyond other contemporary philosophical approaches to theme of the *event*, characterizes insistence as the action of the event underway in the name of 'God.' The event calls or insists¹ in the name of 'God.' As such, insistence does not exist. He argues, in turn, that existence names our response to the demand of this calling, through which we make actual the solicitation of the event. So, Martha, to use Caputo's trope, "knows that insistence requires existence" (45). With this, Martha's hospitality for Jesus' animal

¹ Caputo uses 'call' and 'insist' interchangeable to bring together Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Marion (who place emphasis on the *call*) and Gilles Deleuze (who places emphasis on *insistence*).

needs indicates the kind of realism and materialism that Caputo advocates at the chiasm of God and humans, and humans and the non-human animal. Caputo's concern here is not ethics but the role of responsibility in religion. God insists and leaves "the existing to us, where the question of 'existing' is a matter of human responsibility" (15). Eckhart's Martha is his hermeneutic key for this responsibility.

Vermeer's painting also indicates an important philosophical starting point for Caputo. We know of Hegel's affinity for Dutch painting from his lectures on aesthetics. Hegel plays a definitive role throughout Caputo's text because Caputo's concern for radical theology develops from his reading of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. On his reading, Hegel breaks from 17th and 18th century rational theology when he focuses philosophical attention on the content of revealed religion (e.g., Trinity, Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension). In these representations, and not in any empty rationalistic formulations of religious belief, the concept (*Begriff*) is at work in religion. With this break, says Caputo, Hegel invents radical theology. If Caputo thus plays his hand as a 'closet Hegelian' in this text, his Hegel, we shall see, is anything but orthodox.

Beyond the cover of *The Insistence of God*, Caputo's text has many other creative folds or aspects. If these folds do not extend infinitely, they are legion. I will only be able to unfold some of them here. *The Insistence of God* is a *tour de force* of novel, provocative ideas expressed in Heideggerian, Derridean, and Deleuzian rhetoric. It reads like a manifesto for a new wave of Christian theologians who re-imagine theology under the name of *theopoetics*. *Poiēsis* replaces the *logos* of theo-logy because the *logos* intimates, for Caputo, a kind of thinking that is guided by a separation between God and humans or God and world. *Logos* fails to hear and to respond to the insistence in the name of 'God.' A poetics is a creative, descriptive discourse about the chiasm between God's insistence and our existence. In other words, we are integrally bound up in a mutually dependent relation with

God. God does not exist. We exist. God can only insist. God is the calling of the other for whom we are responsible. Our responsibility is to make actual the event that insists in the name of *God*. With this trope of the insistence of God, Caputo proposes a post-ontotheological religious discourse. By this I mean that God, for Caputo, is no longer a 'being,' much less the highest being looking down from on high. He has a deep suspicion of such two-world theologies. Rather, the insistence, calling, or solicitation of God has no being, agent, or thing behind it. The insistence is underway or gets itself called in the middle voice. God is not a being who is calling us. Instead, God is a name that houses a calling, an event, which cannot be confined to this name: *God*. Events can happen anywhere, but in religious discourse, *God* is a singular site of an event. With this starting point, Caputo limns the lines of his theopoetics through three Derridean-deconstructive "pills" that theology must swallow (19). Each pill elaborates the theme of chiasm, thereby portraying theopoetics as a kind of fractal: it is chiasm all the way down. In Part One of his text, he begins with the chiasm between God's insistence and our existence. In Part Two, he emphasizes the insistence of radical theology in existing confessional theologies before ending, in Part Three, with the chiasm between the human and the non-human, God and world, and science and philosophy.

Part One delineates "the strange grammatology or poetics of the 'perhaps'" (19) by discussing the meaning of "God, perhaps" and the chiasm between God's insistence and our existence. The adverbial *perhaps* is said in many ways throughout his text. *Perhaps* is used to attune us to the call that is underway in the name of *God*. The name *God*, a "metonym for the event" (36), is the calling of a future whose temporal modality is always already to-come (*à venir*, 4-5). This futural to-come exceeds any phenomenological horizon, making this event uncontainable and unforeseeable. By attuning us to the to-come, the perhaps exposes us, not to possibility, but to something more radical, "to a possibility that for all the world seems impossible" (6), that is "the possibility of the impossible" (11). A theology of *perhaps* is, then,

a response to “the fear and trembling before the uncontainable, for the unforeseeable” (8), that is, before and for the event. This response to the insisting event in the name of God is fraught with the fragility of *perhaps*—we may or may not respond. Similar to Derridean *différance*, the *perhaps* marks the fragility of a theopoetics of the event. For Derrida, *différance*, in part, indicates the fragility of language insofar as language is a play of signs in which what we want to say (*vouloir-dire*) or what we mean when we speak is always in deferral through the different traces or signs by which we try to say what we mean. Structurally, language lacks the signified (i.e., what we mean). The signified is always, then, deferred. In a similar way, says Caputo, to respond to the event with *perhaps* means that we may or may not take up responsibility for the event insisting in the name of *God*. Our response may always be deferred. This fragility can also be seen through Caputo’s name for God: *Perhaps* (35). This locution is an attempt “to open thinking and practice to God, to the event that is playing itself out under the name of God, to what we desire in and under that name” (10). Yet, the adverbial *perhaps* in “God, Perhaps” (35) is a reminder that the claim of the event is not “contracted to that name” and is not “identified with that name” (10). For, if we can say that “the event is God, then the event ceases to be an event and becomes something that I have added to my repertoire, brought within the horizon of my experience, knowledge, belief, identification, and expectation, whereas the event is precisely what always already, structurally, exceeds my horizons” (10). The fragility of *perhaps* marks the chiasm between God’s insistence and our existence as a delicate, dangerous interplay whose being is always may-being (*peut-être*).

Caputo unpacks the mutual dependence of God and humans through prayer and hospitality. These are two sites of the interplay of God’s insistence and our existence. Prayers are always prayed in the midst of a precarious situation. Humans pray to God “*in extremis*” (33), that is, in times of “[d]ifficulty, disability, indecency, disease, and death” (46). God is precariously situated because God’s insistence may or may not be heard and met with a

response. He writes, “God *needs us* to happen at all. [...] The responsibility for God’s existence falls upon us and has to be cast in the future active participle: it remains to be seen whether God will have been or whether God will be stillborn” (36). Like prayer, hospitality means to say, ‘Come,’ to the unforeseeable, that is, to the event harbored in God’s name. To say ‘come’ to the event means, following Derrida, to welcome the other who may, in fact, be a threat. God’s insistence is like “a divine stranger who needs food, shelter, and clothing,” which only we can provide (42-43). Eckhart’s Martha is the paradigm of this “hospitable agency” (49). She responds to the presence of Jesus by caring for his immediate, material needs.

Part Two names this theology of perhaps a radical theology or theo-poetics. Radical theology never exists on its own because it always finds itself in a particular, existing, confessional community. Radical theology insists in these confessional communities by calling their confessional theologies to hear and to heed the call of the event, which pushes confessional dogma beyond its limit. Caputo aims to follow “the traces of the name (of) ‘God’ in confessional theological discourse” (20) by rehabilitating a particular, peculiar Hegelianism through his critical readings of Catherine Malabou’s Hedieggerian-Hegel (126-127) and Slavoj Žižek’s Lacanian-Hegel (136). Here, he stakes out his own position amidst scholarly debates among Malabou, Žižek, and Milbank.

The confessional theologies of various Christian communities are the factual experiences in which ‘God’ insists and by which ‘God’ exists through the radical theologians inhabiting them. Radical theology is always found embedded in an already existing confessional community’s *croyances*: their beliefs, practices, and reflections on these beliefs and practices. In contrast, radical theology has neither dogma nor particular practices because it is always insisting at the fringes and in the shadows of confessional theologies, thereby pushing them to their limits. Radical theology is ‘radical’ because it uproots and displaces the

croyances of confessional theology in favor of affirming, not its own *croyances*, but a deeper faith (*foi*) in events that insist in the *croyances* of confessional theologies. This affirmation of a deeper faith is radical theology's poetics.

Caputo elaborates on this poetics through his "headless Hegelianism" (92). He thinks that Hegel gets two things right: (1) his focus on the faith-based, revelatory content of religion as what is most philosophically interesting because (2) something important is happening in this content. This is about all the Hegel he wishes to stomach because Hegel, ultimately, prevents the possibility of the event with the concept (*Begriff*) and sublation (*Aufhebung*). They disallow "the aleatory aspect of the event" (120). The event, not the *Begriff*, is underway in religion. Religion, then, "is a *Vorstellung* of which there is no concept" (92). Only by excising the *Begriff* and *Aufhebung* is an event possible for a Hegelian philosophy of religion.

Caputo develops this excision by reading with and against Malabou and Žižek. Malabou allows for the chance of an event in Hegel's philosophy by arguing that each stage of Spirit's path to self-knowledge is exposed to contingency and chance, that is, to events. However, Malabou, Caputo says, withholds the Hegelian *Aufhebung* from this event-ful tychism. She retains the *Aufhebung* as the *telos* of Spirit. Regardless of the contingent means of Spirit's development, Spirit is, nevertheless, headed toward a foreseeable end. The means may be event-ful, but the end is not. For an event to be possible, however, the means and the end must be open to the coming of that which cannot be foreseen. For Caputo, this means, for example, that the death of God must possibly be the end of God *tout court* and not simply a transformation of God. He requires the possibility of God's death to be a live option, to borrow William James's phrase, because without the necessity of this possibility, we have no chance for an event. The means and the end must be open to the event, which is unforeseeable. The *perhaps* accompanying our response opens God to this possibility of really dying. If we do not respond, we

kill God (133–135). Caputo turns to Žižek because Žižek’s reading of Hegel resurrects the “atheistic death-of-God,” thereby ridding of the Hegelian *Aufhebung* (137). However, Žižek takes this too far. He prevents “the event from below” (136). He focuses, not on a primordial victory of Spirit in the end, but on primordial loss from the very beginning. Spirit becomes a matter of pure presupposition, fiction, or fantasy, which makes events into a matter of sheer decisionism or merely what we construct. Žižek’s events become too preoccupied with various *croyances* and not in the event itself, not in the *foi* that lies deeper than any single belief (144). By displacing Hegel’s *Begriff* and *Aufhebung* with a faith in events, Caputo presents his poetics as hardly Hegelian but, nevertheless, inspired by Hegel. His poetics of the event is “a thinking that tries to put itself (*stellen*) forth (*vor*) in a discursive formation, or rather to put forth an event, to formulate an image, a picture, a story, a body of tropes that gives word to the event, to provide insistence with a discursive existence” (115). This Hegelian philosophy of religion “provides a poetics of the event that is being nominated and denominated [...] in the name of God” (116).

In Part Three, Caputo returns to Eckhart’s Martha to present a “new religious realism and materialism” by rethinking Continental philosophy’s approach to science (22). After all, *God* is a name of the insisting event, “whose existence can only be found in matter, space, and time” (22). This extends the chiasmic-fractal to the human and non-human, God and world, and science and philosophy. The middle voice in which “something is getting itself called in and under the name (of) ‘God’” has precluded our identifying this calling with any caller (171). This means that the reach and dimensions of this calling are indeterminate. So, Caputo asks, “Is it God calling from beyond the world—or is it the world calling under the name of God? Does God call through the world—or does the world call through God?” (171). Caputo leaves these questions intentionally unanswered in order to emphasize that the insistence of *God* is also the insistence of materiality, animality, and machine. Not only is God insisting, but also every

distinct other “lays claim upon us in a genuinely demanding way” (174).

This renewed approach to the cosmos extends his *theo*poetics to *cosmo*-theo-poetics. His poetics is also attuned to the events underway in the cosmos. He delineates this cosmo-theo-poetics with a realism and materialism commensurable with contemporary science. This delineation represents an important turn in current Continental debate over the relation between philosophy and science. In this, Caputo offers a critical appropriation of the speculative realist’s critique of Continental philosophy, namely, that Continental philosophers have not wanted to learn from science, but have only wanted to contain it critically, believing that science does have philosophical import of its own. He seeks to save Continental philosophy from this criticism by developing interpretations of “objectivity,” “correlationism,” and “nihilism.” He demands that the “really real reality” (*Phaedrus* 247c7), which has concerned philosophy at least since Plato, is this material world, in which we find ourselves, and nothing more. Caputo does not hold out for a realer reality or *another* world *out there*. The only world is this world *here*. So, though Caputo draws on Plato’s language to refer to what is “really real” (197), he challenges Plato’s flight from the world of appearances by arguing that the *material* world is what is really real. The concepts of “objectivity” and “correlationism” allow Caputo to distinguish two ways of inflecting and approaching our reality. Scientists approach the world through their claims of objectivity. These claims are the best ways that we currently have for describing the material, real world through mind-independent entities. This means, not that objectivity is wrong, but that science, namely physics, has become metaphysics insofar as physics and mathematics are inflections of the real in the sense of “the world that is there whether we mind it or not” (213). The correlate of the objectively real is, what I am calling, the chiasmic real of poetics. This inflection of reality emphasizes the human relation to the world and to all that is in the world. The “reality of the real suffers not a loss from our presence but a gain. The real has [...] acquired another stratum of

reality with a texture and complexity all its own” (211). He maintains that Continental philosophy does not regard the correlation of knowing and the known as a corruptive, unilateral relation, wherein the real turns out to be a fabrication of subjective experience. Rather, this correlation maintains a bilateral relation, according to which a change in one engenders a change in the other. Scientific, hermeneutic, and phenomenological inflections of reality are not fictions and fabrications but intensifications of our really real world. The real is accessed through interpretations of it. We need science for widening our world *and* poetics for describing our relation to this world (215).

Caputo employs recent accounts on the beginning of life and the end of the cosmos from physics to provide an account of religion as being-toward-*entropic*-death. Though the nihilism of cosmic death provides speculative realist Ray Brassier the opportunity to say that life is laughable, the entropic death of the cosmos provides Caputo the opportunity to say that life is more livable. Life is marked as “the meantime” between the Big Bang and entropic death (224). This liminal state between the grace or chance of life and the entropic event has two consequences. First, entropic, cosmic death intensifies existence because the transience and finitude of things is “the condition under which we hold them dear” (227). Second, our situation in the meantime shows that life is to be lived, following Eckhart, “without why” because life is in no need of a ground, reason, or explanation outside of itself (238). The being-nothing of nihilism is the being-for-nothing of life because life is not *for* anything else other than itself (238, 240). Life is for life now, not for another life to come. Cosmic death proves to be a quasi-transcendental for a faith (*foi*) in life and existence as an event without why.

Caputo’s *Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* is a theological appropriation of recent developments in Continental philosophy that illumines the richness of our existence in the here and now. He continually interprets the Jewish and Christian Bible, as well as developments in the history of theology through Hegel,

Heidegger, Deleuze, and Derrida. What makes Caputo suspicious about religious discourse is its history and penchant for a dualism between life now and life in heaven, between earth and the afterlife, between life and resurrection. His suspicion stems from the fact that this dualism has horrendously affected how we have treated the earth and all that live on it, including our human and non-human counterparts. He seems to think that all Christians who follow a confessional theology are inevitably tempted to fall back into such a damaging dualism. This temptation is certainly a problem of which Christianity should be chary and for which Caputo's deconstructive theo-poetics is important. Even Jesus warns of this temptation. He tells his disciples, "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3 NRSV). This is the only place in the Christian Bible where "eternal life" is given a kind of definition. Moreover, nothing about this passage and the verses that surround it suggest that "eternal life" need be something outside of, external to, or beyond the world in which we live. Jesus seemed to believe that we could come to know God in this life. Therefore, this passage may suggest another possibility for understanding the relation between life and afterlife, one that does not necessarily cut off hope for a life after death and does not posit a dangerous dualism between the two but, instead, blurs the lines between life and afterlife. If eternal life consists in knowing God, as Jesus suggests, then it begins precisely in the here and now. So, our eternal life is, *perhaps*, the life we know and live right now and, *perhaps*, a continuation of this life.

I suspect that this last emphasis on continuation would, in Caputo's eyes, be an example of the old dualistic eschatology rearing its ugly head again insofar as any hope for life after the life we live on our material, real world may be an indication of a falling back into a dangerous dualism. Yet, succumbing to this temptation can be avoided. For Caputo even keys Christian hope to the to-come in such a way that the to-come galvanizes us now in the present. Both Christians and Jews "live in the time of the 'to-come'" (151). For the Christian, this means that "the Messiah has

already come, but that means we ourselves are called upon to carry out the messianic event, to bring it to completion, to occupy the messianic position, as a way to make ready a *second* coming, where [...] everything turns on what is coming” (151). The time of the event is, indeed, to-come. But the pressure of this to-come infuses the present and galvanizes us to action, to responsibility.

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