

John D. Caputo

TRUTH

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By

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John D. Caputo's book is one in a new series from Penguin called "Philosophy in Transit". The "transit" theme has a number of dimensions: the publisher announces that the authors use "various modes of transportation as their starting point", and the books will use this idea to represent some aspect of the current state of philosophy itself (a leading metaphor of Caputo's book is that truth is perpetually "on the go"). Furthermore, the publisher's description of these books as "commute-length" indicates when and where they expect people to read them. Future volumes – by Barry Dainton on "self", Susan Neiman on "why grow up?" and the ubiquitous Slavoj Zizek on "event" – are forthcoming.

What has truth got to do with modes of transport? Professor Caputo argues that "contemporary life, which is marked by modern transportation systems in which we can travel almost anywhere, and modern information systems, through which almost anything can travel to us, is much more pluralistic than life in the past". The fact that in real or virtual travel we encounter many different views of reality is supposed to threaten modernist or Enlightenment ideas of truth. Whereas modernism is committed to the idea that there is "one big story that covers all phenomena", contemporary travel and technology has enhanced our awareness of "multiple and competing interpretations of the world". This claim is at the heart of the postmodern conception of truth defended by Caputo.

According to one philosophical tradition originating with Aristotle, the notions of truth and reality are intimately connected: we speak the truth when we succeed in

saying how things really are. It is natural, then, to distinguish between truth and reality: what we say is true or false, but reality is out there whether we say anything about it or not. There can be many interpretations of reality, but not all of them can be true. Those who thought the Sun orbits the Earth had one interpretation; they were proved wrong. So the mere fact that there are multiple interpretations of the world does not threaten the idea that some are true and some are false. The existence of a plurality of viewpoints is perfectly compatible with believing in truth in the Aristotelian sense. But to believe in truth in this sense is not to believe that there is only one truth about the world; there may be many distinct true interpretations, just as there may be many false ones. Believing in truth does not mean believing there is only one big story or meta-narrative, to use Lyotard's term. Nor does it mean believing in certainty: we can obtain the truth about a given subject without being certain of it.

Caputo is perfectly aware of all this, and he does not really disagree. Since he does not think that merely having an interpretation is enough to make it true, he must think there is something to which interpretations are answerable. And so he does: some interpretations are more plausible than others, and our account of truth should accommodate this. So he should agree that the mere fact that there are multiple interpretations of reality — and that we can encounter them in literal or internet “transportation” — does not threaten the idea that true interpretations are those that say how things really are.

The transport metaphor is therefore a misleading starting point, and it is not a good way of illustrating Caputo's central themes. One of these is that philosophers have neglected important questions because they have been too concerned with the truth of propositions, assertions or claims. “Truth cannot be confined to propositions”, he says; there is a deeper idea of truth which is “not the truth of assertions, but truth as a thing to love, to live and die for”.

Caputo is quite right, of course, that we apply the idea of truth to things other than propositions. We speak of true friends, living in truth, and the true (along with the good and the beautiful) being the objects of the search for wisdom, and so on. These ideas cannot easily be reconfigured in terms of the truth of propositions. To

attempt this would be like objecting to Keats's remark that beauty is truth by pointing out that there are many true propositions which are not beautiful.

Caputo's main example of "non-propositional" truth is in the truth that religious thinking has aimed at (he has no patience with those who treat religion as a collection of propositions or dogmas). His own characterization of religion is in terms of "the restless searching heart in the midst of a mysterious world". Unfortunately this idea drags so many things along with it that it is hard to apply to any specific debates about the nature or cognitive and social role of religion. "If you do not have religion in the sense that I mean it", he proclaims, "then the only searching you do takes place in a shopping mall." Faced with this choice, any thoughtful person would have to classify themselves as religious in Caputo's sense. Yet this tells us nothing about, say, the difference between secular Europe and Christian America, even though many inhabitants of both places would count as religious in this sense.

Caputo's other main theme is his general postmodernist conception of truth, which he applies to propositional truth as well as to truth in his deeper sense. Although he sometimes suggests that postmodernism is a response to some specific historical events – the genocides of the twentieth century, for example – and he is happy to talk about "our postmodern times", in fact his considered view is that "modern and postmodern are best taken as contrasting styles of thinking we could find anywhere, any time". This seems right: the idea that conflicting perspectives on the world threaten monolithic styles of thinking is at least as old as the Protagorean claim that man is the measure of all things. The reasons Caputo gives for his postmodernism are ones that could have been given at pretty much any time in the history of human thought. So it is preferable to think of postmodernism as a decision to talk and think in a particular way, rather than a discovery about thought or the world. It is an attitude to the world that embodies an epistemic caution and scepticism about any attempt to say (in Caputo's phrase) "what is finally going on".

If we really can decide to talk in the postmodern register, however, then we can also decide not to. We can recognize that there is chaos, but we can try and find as much order in it as we can. We can recognize that there is ambiguity, mess,

polysemy, unclarity, multiple perspectives and all the rest; but we can decide to uncover as much constancy of meaning as we can, and find the best ways of evaluating the different perspectives on the same world. Sometimes Caputo seems to agree. In an effective discussion of interpretation, he emphasizes that all truth depends on interpretation in the sense that we always have to select and conceptualize the things we are trying to find out about: there is no presuppositionless truth. But nonetheless, he insists, some interpretations are better (more plausible) than others.

Being “better” is always a matter of being better for some purpose. If we are interested in undermining some traditional certainties or dogmas, then we might find the postmodernist emphasis on ambiguity and multiplicity attractive. But if we are trying to find out how things really are in some area, then we will want to restrict the range of plausible interpretations in other ways. Cosmologists do not consider Bertrand Russell’s sceptical hypothesis that the universe was created five minutes ago; but a philosopher interested in epistemology and the foundations of knowledge might do so.

Understood in this way, there is really no such thing as the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment idea of truth. The Enlightenment idea of truth – as opposed to the things the Enlightenment thought were true – is just Aristotle’s idea: we speak the truth when we say how things really are. The critique that Caputo describes is not of this idea, but of the ideas like the following: context-free interpretation, absolute certainty, dogmatism, ultimate moral or epistemological authorities, and one grand meta-narrative. But someone who accepts the distinction between truths about reality and reality itself is not obliged to accept any of these dubious ideas. Those who are interested in finding out how things are in some domain will attempt to clarify the questions under discussion and put to one side perverse, vexatious or irrelevant interpretations of these questions. In doing this, they do not have to suppose there is only one final story of reality.

Caputo’s postmodernists are not so interested in clarification and categorization. They are sceptical about systematic attempts to classify the world;

Caputo dismisses this as “bucket” thinking. For this reason all they can really do is chase the tail that is wagging the postmodernist dog: for any attempt to clarify, classify or categorize some aspect of the world or experience, the postmodernists can show by wordplay or ingenious interpretation how this classification rests on other classifications that are also subject to their sceptical challenge. And the same could be said, as Caputo admits, of the classification of epochs as postmodern or modern.

It is sometimes objected that the problem with postmodernism is that it is self-refuting. If you claim that all truth is dependent on a standpoint, from which standpoint do you say that? If the claim is made from the postmodern standpoint, then it makes no universal demand on us; but if it is a universal claim, then there is at least one truth that is not dependent on a standpoint. Caputo’s book shows what is wrong with this objection. Postmodernism, in his version, does not present any doctrine, but rather an attitude: look for complexity, paradox, contradiction and ambiguity, and be sceptical about all attempts at universal, systematic categorization. The problem with this kind of postmodernism is not that it is self-refuting, but that it gives those who do not get excited by contradiction and ambiguity no motive to accept it.

Paradoxically, then, Caputo has done a fine job of clarifying and classifying the postmodernist approach to truth and reality. His readable and eloquent book is an excellent guide to the outlook common in a certain strain of continental European philosophy. His neglect of other areas of philosophy is disappointing – there is no mention of Bernard Williams’s *Truth and Truthfulness*, a subtle discussion of the purpose of truth which would have fitted in well with some of Caputo’s themes. *Truth* is also strikingly parochial: Caputo remarks, for example, that the “luminaries of postmodern thinking, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Deleuze” are now being attacked by the exponents of a “new brand” of materialism and realism that “charges them with failing to think through what is going on in contemporary mathematical physical sciences”. According to Caputo, this new brand is “spearheaded” by the young French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux. Meillassoux’s position is interesting, but it is

bizarre (and misleading to Caputo's intended audience) to single him out for special mention when scientifically-informed realist materialism has dominated much of 20<sup>th</sup>-century English-language philosophy, and has already been worked out in painstaking detail in the work of philosophers such as W.V. Quine and David Lewis.

If postmodernism is supposed to demonstrate how parochial all our concerns and commitments are, then it should not be surprising that postmodernism itself is as parochial as all other philosophies. The commuters reading John Caputo's book should adopt a postmodern scepticism towards its postmodernism; and they might balance their reading with a look at a less postmodernist book, such as Simon Blackburn's *Truth: a guide for the perplexed* (2005).