

Childhood as an Event: The Charm of a Spectral Past

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John D. Caputo understands the mood of education today, one marked by a pervasive sense of exhaustion. Individuals are dispirited, the discourse is tired and change seems futile. Stanley Cavell refers to this as a “disappointed or counter-romantic mood.”¹ For Caputo, like Cavell, this mood reflects our sense that the future is somehow closed to us; our attention is so fixated on the current educational situation that we cannot imagine other, future possibilities. Inspired by French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, Caputo seeks to offset such educational fatigue by offering a deconstructive analysis that opens up the future and renews educational possibilities.

Caputo aims to make the ordinary seem familiar, and the unquestioned seem extraordinary, strange, and questionable. To take “a familiar scene found with unhappy regularity in almost any school district in America and to redescribe it as a scene overrun by the aporias of contemporary French philosophy.” His hypothesis is deceptively simple. Education is haunted by the event. It is grounded in a hauntology that illuminates the *betweenness* of schools: those of us in schools are situated between the economy and the gift. We inhabit the school’s routines and mundane practicalities — schedules, bells, meetings, grading, and parent conferences — as well as its deepest mysteries — those memorable moments of recognition and discovery.

Caputo’s advice is performative: we are to accept his gift *and* give our educational economy a chance. Gifts are, to quote Caputo, “all gratuitous, extra, in excess of the economy, yet they are all absolutely necessary.” They are needed to “tear up the circle of the economy” and make way for an incoming event. The event is a “weak, fragile, and uncoercive” call of an unidentifiable source. Thus, it has a spooky, spectral, and indeterminate quality. Structurally speaking, the event is invisible, unforeseeable, indiscernible, uncontainable, and impossible. It is the specter of the “*to-come itself*.” The event exerts an erotic force, enticing us to live on its promises and provoking us to take life-changing risks. It undermines confidence in the fixity of our desires and teaches that everything is dangerous, including safety. The event exercises its “mysterious spectral operation” from beyond. To quote Caputo: “The event insists in and within what exists, prying open what exists in the nature of something unnamable.”

Caputo uses deconstruction to frame his analysis of the event and, in turn, uses his analysis of the event to frame deconstruction. Deconstruction, he argues, is this pressure of the “to-come” on the present. It is enacted “in the name of what is not deconstructible”: the absolute future or to-come itself. Deconstruction is a hauntological operation that keeps the economy in a state of optimal unease so that it remains open to the event. Deconstruction “restores to things the future from which they were blocked by the present.” It is a spooking that appropriately takes

place *within* such institutions as schools. The problems of education are, Caputo concludes, aporias of the event.

In my response to Caputo, I have taken my lead from another French philosopher, Michèle Le Doeuff.² Le Doeuff invites us to read philosophy anew by exploring the imagery that sustains thinkers' ideas. She teaches that images are essential to the expression of thought. They are drawn from ordinary life and are affecting because of their rich associations. Not only do images illustrate thought, making it more persuasive and compelling, but they can also complicate it in surprising and interesting ways. In what follows, I show how Caputo's imaginary can play a constructive role in developing his educational hauntology further. More specifically, I argue for the charm of an insistent inexistent past that calls for alternative hauntological operations.

Caputo briefly mentions, but does not discuss in depth, the possibility of our being "charmed" by "shadowy specters of the past." Yet, his language is replete with images drawn from childhood, including: "magic", "monsters," "ghosts," "nightmares," "invisible spirits that haunt the halls," "being afraid of the dark," "secrets," "strange noises in the night," "spooks," "spooking," and "spooky." These images appeal to our childhood fears: when we would ask to sleep with the light on and implore our parents to check cupboards for monsters. Caputo marvelously evokes the thrill and terror children experience when confronted by invisible creatures. His evocation is sweetly reminiscent. For, as adults, we are more inclined to fear for our livelihood, health, relationships, and sanity. Our fears reveal an extreme lack of security, whereas the fears we had as children — of the dark and strange noises in the night — reflect a feeling of *absolute* safety.³ It is the feeling that no harm will come to you regardless of what happens. I do not mean that children's experiences are any less authentic; they experience grief and delight like the rest of us. My claim is more modest. It is that spooks, spooking, and being spooked are largely the pastimes of children, which offer occasions to experiment with liminality in an otherwise secure and abundant world. The safer an individual is, therefore, the more available he or she becomes to invisible currents and spectral forces. It could be that Caputo's hauntology is made more compelling by his imagery, for it allows him to induce a feeling of absolute safety without having to make it theoretically explicit.

While I do not wish to conflate the existence of a child with the insistence of the event, their formal similarities are striking. Children are gratuitous and absolutely necessary. Birth is an event: it is the gift of chance and the chance of a gift. With each child, humanity is offered a fresh start to do something new. Furthermore, to be a child is to exert a weak unforced force. John Dewey writes eloquently about this in *Democracy and Education*. There he describes the social responsiveness and plasticity of children, concluding that their dependence is a (weak unforced) force for interdependence.

When I speak of childhood I have in mind what we mean when we say: "I appreciate the child in you" or, "unless you become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." I agree with Jean-Jacques Rousseau that

childhood is unknown and yet we are compelled to imagine it based on experiential and cultural influences. In this sense, childhood is an example of an inexistent but insistent spirit. It is “a spectral shape which never is what it is, is never what is present.” As with democracy, no actual childhood reflects what we call for when we call for childhood. None of us has had equilibrium or experienced “the peace of presence.” The difference in the case of childhood, as compared to democracy, is that it is inevitably and structurally past. To be an adult is to have once been a child. Childhood insists as the “before” or the “past beyond the past.” It does not imply menace or risk and there is no anxiety or fear associated with it. Childhood charms instead of haunts. It whispers in the middle voice that we are absolutely safe, calling for our unqualified consent. It has a force that is aesthetic rather than erotic. It is the dream simply of “what-is,” irrespective of the “maybes,” “might-bes” and “perhapses.”

The Romantic tradition conceives of childhood as receptivity to mystery that finds expression in gratitude, joy, and wonder. The significance of childhood is its promise of the possibility of seeing “the world” differently. For the Romantics, childhood represents a capacity for “giving over” to a reality that withdraws from understanding and control. It is, to borrow a phrase from Christopher Cordner, “an open-hearted presence to the abundant givenness of the world.”⁴ Childhood reveals a certain fullness of heart — one might even say love, if it is taken to be unconditional — as the child appreciates the absolute and not merely the relative value of all things. In the words of Rainer Maria Rilke, to resemble the child is “to have faith in the most beautiful surprises.”⁵

My hypothesis about childhood bears on Caputo’s analysis of teaching for the event. He argues that it is characteristic of the event that we cannot bring it about. We can, however, conjure spirits that keep the economy open. Within the context of education, this means that teachers must figure out how to be a weak force and engage “the spooky dynamics of a haunting spirit.” Caputo concludes that schools are mobilized by a spirit that reserves the right “to put anything and everything in question.” These questions need not lead to answers, for the goal of the new enlightenment is to expose ourselves to what is dark and unknowable. As a result, schools are places of “uncanny and unnerving instability.” They leave students profoundly “disturbed and provoked.” Caputo writes:

By the time we are done with [students], they will never be the same. Their lives will be destabilized; they will have lost their equilibrium. They will see ghosts everywhere. Everywhere questions, suspicions, longings, doubts, dreams, wonders, puzzles where once peace reigned. Nothing will be simple anymore. They will never have any rest. We have come to bring the hauntological sword, not the peace of presence.

I am drawn to the idea that the event is the self-evident end of education. I can accept that teachers and students must ask questions that engender non-knowing and open-endedness, for the sake of the event. I am less satisfied either that the hauntological sword is all that teachers bring to the pedagogical scene or that the ultimate effect of education is disquiet and unrest. If it is true that teachers hover between a “future beyond the future” and a “past beyond the past,” then education

is realized outside the world of time, in a “time beyond time.” Education occurs in “no-time”: not part of a chronological or developmental sequence but as *possibility*. Teaching the event involves keeping available the world that may be *and* the world that was, travelling forwards *and* backwards without a path; educational departure and arrival are always imminent but endlessly deferred. Teaching the event requires that the “time beyond time” reaches out to the “world beyond world” in a spirit of questioning *and* affirmation.

Two brief final comments. First, teaching the event implies that schools should also be places of stability and constancy, inspiring students with calm fortitude and serene contentment. There should be mirth, laughter, and gratitude to complement the longing, suspicion, and puzzlement. Second, I have yet to identify the hauntological operation that ushers in the spectral “before.” If questioning is the new enlightenment’s hauntological sword, what is its shield? What induces us to wonder *at* the world? I suspect the hauntological shield will have something to do with the rituals and moments of silent inactivity that punctuate the life of a school — and that are also outside the economy. Here I have in mind such ordinary occasions as taking attendance, turn-taking, personalizing and emptying lockers each year, and solitary walks along school halls. Might these be educational analogues of prayer? Caputo draws on the language of theology — grace, miracles, angels, and God — but does not mention prayer. Is there a place for prayer in his educational hauntology? To ask Caputo this question is to annul his gift, as warned. Caputo might not have been elected to the school board, but I hope he stays in school, performing his magic, spooking philosophers of education and whispering promises of an educational future.

1. Stanley Cavell, “The Future of Possibility,” in *Philosophical Romanticism*, ed. Nikolas Kompridis (New York: Routledge, 2006), 21.

2. I am inspired by Michèle Le Doeuff but do not adhere to her methodology.

3. Ludwig Wittgenstein describes and analyzes this feeling of absolute safety without associating it with childhood; see his “Lecture on Ethics,” *Philosophical Review* 74, no. 1 (1965): 3–12.

4. Christopher Cordner, “Gaita and Plato: Goodness, Love and Beauty,” in *Philosophy, Ethics and a Common Humanity: Essays in Honour of Raimond Gaita*, ed. Christopher Cordner (London: Routledge, 2011), 58.

5. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters on Life*, ed. Ulrich Baer (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), 73.