

KYIV-MOHYLA HUMANITIES JOURNAL

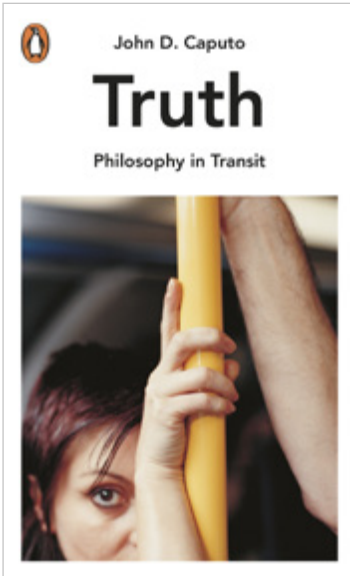
John D. Caputo. *Truth: Philosophy in Transit*. Penguin Press, 2013

Reviewed by: Serhiy Kvit

Source: Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal 1 (2014): 267–273

Published by: National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy

<http://kmhj.ukma.edu.ua>



John D. Caputo

*Truth:
Philosophy in Transit*

Penguin Press, 2013. 284 pp.

ISBN: 978-1-846-14600-8

Reviewed by Serhiy Kvit

John Caputo's book reveals the nature of modern philosophizing. The book's title, *Philosophy in Transit*, refers us to the extreme dynamic pace of our lives, where "the trip is the destination" (p. 19). In our time we can fly like a bird, and easily travel to any corner of the world without any problems, if of course, we have the money to do so. Modern mass communications and the Internet instantly transpose a person anywhere, even if one physically stays at home.

John Caputo states that this is how angels move in heaven. But no one knows how to exit this train in perpetual motion, with no set destination. Constantly moving in space, time, and the informational field (which often equates to moving in space and time), we go nowhere in particular. Similarly, it is difficult to identify and find an important, central, and ultimate truth. Its exact place is unknown. Constant movement seemingly denies the existence of this important location of truth.

We account for the fact that the modern world is overly dynamic and pluralistic. Anyone can be introduced to anyone else with ease. Similarly, requisite information about someone can be found if desired. The author presents two main views on this diversity: a universal concept,

as a product of modernism, and correspondingly, difference as a post-modern motif.

Modernists appeal to a system created by some central authority. This may be God or nature, depending on whether we go to church or not. Postmodernists consider a combination of things in the world like a web, with no definite beginning and end. If the former prefer rules and mathematical certainty, the latter approach, in their understanding of the world, the metaphor of James Joyce, which includes both the notions of chaos and cosmos. Thus, the postmodern ideal can be formulated as “chaosmopolitanism.”

While modernity adheres to specific rules and methods in ethics and science, postmodernism offers us flexibility and adaptability by proposing the idea of relativity, with no one truth. “The best way to think of postmodern thought is as a style, rather than as a body of doctrines” (p. 5). According to this view, many different truths struggle with each other, depending on language, culture, gender, needs, tastes, and the like. Therefore, “contemporary transportation systems do not merely cause traffic jams, they also jam our idea of truth” (p. 8).

Caputo draws a parallel between the polytheism of the ancient world, in particular the Roman political practice of tolerance, and today’s religious pluralism. Today’s tolerance, therefore, is not something entirely new. In antiquity, religious rites were a symbol of national self-identity. Later, in the Middle Ages, quests for wisdom virtually equated quests for God. A single divine plan was seen to link beauty and truth, which were religious and philosophical at the same time.

The integrity of centrality for the Fathers of the Church of St. Augustine consisted of the notion that the exercise of truth for him occurred together with the utterance, location, and voicing of the “inner word of truth.” “That is what his confessions are, both in the sense that by confessing, he is making something, making a book, producing the truth in the form of a public document that can be read by all of us, but also in the sense that he is doing something, namely, making a confession. Augustine is not only producing something made out of words but also

doing something with his words...” (p. 69). Please note that we are not referencing only the Christian faith itself. The process of the determination of truth by Augustine shows a special connectedness between his pre-existentialism, pre-phenomenology, and the tradition of ancient philosophizing, based on skepticism and critical thinking.

In a search for the truth, faith wages war against reason and the scientific approach championed by the Enlightenment, denying religion. We should not forget that the elevated calls of the French Revolution for “liberty, equality, and fraternity” led not only to the liberation of the oppressed sectors of society, but also developed an attitude to mass murder as a “statistic” (Stalin’s phrase). We have every reason to associate the invention of the guillotine at the end of 18th century with subsequent 20th century genocides, which marked the beginning of the Russian Revolution of 1917. For in both cases we encounter mass murder, ideologically presented as the removal of certain obstacles on the road to the “benefitting” of all mankind. Thus, common sense and Pure Reason on their own may not suffice.

Which is why John Caputo reminds us that: “Pure Reason has a low tolerance for anything that is not Pure Reason, which is, I offer, a bit unreasonable” (p. 22). He warns against the rejection of religion in favour of Pure Reason, referring not to a denominational approach, but “Augustine’s idea of the restless searching heart in the midst of a mysterious world” (p. 49). The author does not want to deal with a variety of reasons for religious hatred. He turns to the metaphor of frogs, whose population is being reduced and who have become the object of interest of ecologists. In order to save the frogs, attention to the issues and phenomena of an entire ecosystem is required.

Thus Caputo notes that religion appears as a hybrid of some specific elements of knowledge (truth), ethics (good) and art (beauty). All these components, combining together into one whole, create a key to understanding what is happening in broader culture. Everything we say about religion is repeated in other areas such as art and ethics, and in everything that creates a wider conception of our lives. “My hypothesis is that religion is a clue to the travels and travails of truth, not the truth of assertions,

but truth of as a thing to love, to live, and to die..." (p. 52). Thus, truth can be correlated not only with the findings of scientific research, but the importance of the experience of truth in an existential and cultural sense must also be kept in mind.

Much attention in the book is devoted to the figure of Jacques Derrida, whose biography has much to do with the vitae of the founder, St. Augustine. His work largely took place against the backdrop of the greatest of the Church Fathers, including the heretical desire to formulate a "religion without religion." Both were born in North Africa, later ending up in Europe. "Never before in the history of philosophy has a philosopher travelled more than Derrida, or done more work on the road, in hotels, abroad planes, encircling the globe many times over. He said he always felt welcome 'elsewhere'; that he was, as he put it, 'not identical with himself'" (p. 72). We see that the figure of Derrida serves as the best example for both John Caputo's book, and postmodernism as a style of philosophizing.

This style remains in confrontation to the ideas of the Enlightenment and Pure Reason. In order to distinguish between modernist (to distinguish from the modern) and postmodern discourses that converge on their close attention to the original style, attention to the concept of repetition, that is referred to in an explanation by Caputo of Martin Heidegger, is needed: "Repeating the possible rather than actual" (p. 94). Producing interpretations and meanings, postmodernism appeals to different languages, tastes, and contexts that enable distinction through a mutation of established meaning. This method of understanding opened up possibilities for Derrida of finding the evidence in language and history, which was not really present, but might have been.

Modernist thinking gives rise to this essay as an embodiment of the author's unique style. The essay utilizes an archetypal metaphor – important for understanding the specific nature of man. Returning to John Caputo's reasoning, Bernstein's *West Side Story* is a repetition of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. This immutability of metaphor facilitates the telling of an ordinary human story and enables the existence/finding of

the truth. As such, the repetition becomes phenomenological in nature and does not identify plurality with relativity.

A Postmodernist would have paid attention to the multiplicity of context (the reality of time and the names and character of the protagonists), each time placing the author (who may conceptually play no role, only wanting to rid himself of the control of previously expressed opinions, rather than creating new precedents) and reader to opposing positions of understanding.

The Modernist (essayist) might have insisted on the archetypal nature of a human love story that characterizes human relations in different historical periods and national flavours. Basing ourselves on John Caputo, who likes to compare the figures of Augustine and Derrida, we can affirm that they are both united by a unique style of thinking and writing. From this point of view they emerge as essayists. The difference between the two philosophers is rooted in respect for the principle of the multiplicity of interpretations.

The author devotes considerable attention to the criticism of the Enlightenment, which in history mediates between the religious understanding of truth and the postmodern situation. Copernicus, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and even the Romantic poets showed “how Reason ended up looking foolish” (p. 115). For John Caputo, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche act in the roles of “postmodern prophets” (p. 156). “By the end of the nineteenth century, we were left with a choice between the madness to which Pure Reason had led and a salutary madness which had reacted against it” (p. 196). Both philosophers, maintaining Christian positions, or denying them, establish a place for man and culture in the search, experience, and realization of truth.

Caputo relates truth in a postmodern situation primarily to the hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger, the “language games” introduced by Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the idea of “paradigm shifts” developed by Thomas Kuhn. In the search for truth, they put forward phenomenological, linguistic, and socio-cultural factors. John Caputo emphasizes that the postmodern reality of truth does not reside somewhere in a place outside of us. Similarly, it does not belong to only one specific context or a particular thinker.

The author actualizes the ancient concept of love for the truth in the postmodern age. “When I speak of the love of truth, the eros or desire of truth, I am saying this is something we are, not something we decide to do. I am saying that the moment someone says this is the truth, this is democracy or science, sexuality or ethics – the one true interpretation, then the flow of truth is cut off, the borders are closed, he event is prevented, the life of interpretation is crushed, the future is shut down and replaced by anxiety about the future. The police of truth have arrived” (p. 243). The modern global world is characterized by a new quality of intertextuality, the interconnectedness of everyone with everyone else. We cannot ignore the differing from our point of view, and associated with unfamiliar for us cultural contexts: those who existed in remote epochs, live on another continent, in another country, or otherwise belonging to a different social group of our society.

According to Caputo, we are moving towards post-humanism, which is approaching after postmodernity, when we go beyond the global world. “The horizons of what we mean by earth and sun, space and time, by matter and even human life itself have begun to undergo a transformation whose measure we have not yet taken” (p. 246). He even states that in the present age of new information technologies, amidst the general picture of the world that has emerged through revolutionary scientific discovery, “more and more it looks like even we are information, which is why the present age does not shirk from calling itself ‘post-human’” (p. 248). Permanent place of residence becomes an illusion. We no longer stop or enjoy rest from the voyage. We cannot even stand firmly on the ground. Our point of contact is not good old terra firma, but the Spaceship Earth.

Because of the extent of the ignorance and uncertainty associated with understanding the “info-techno-science will,” John Caputo appeals to faith and religion: “I do not mean a confessional faith that is supposed to save us, but a more radical faith that puts us at risk” (p. 257). He calls for reading the most important philosophical texts in the terms and concepts of the new age. It is also pursuant to accept the post-human

will not as the destruction of man, but as its re-creation and universal re-contextualization.

“Truth to tell, we do not know who we are – and that is who we are” (p. 258). Caputo emphasizes that “as the motto of my hermeneutics is that we get the best results by facing up to the worst” (p. 259). In this existential situation, his mind turns to the most lofty. He states that we perhaps may not need God to receive grace, but need grace itself to feel the presence of God. Even regardless of what we mean by using the word “God” in our religions. The concept of grace appears more important to the author. This is a word from a new dictionary. The author allows us to look for the definition of the concept of what happens around us in a qualitatively new reality.

Finally, John Caputo returns to the figures of St. Augustine and Derrida. They embody for him a certain metaphor of understanding. “It should be clear by now that when I speak of a certain odd and irregular ‘religion’ or of ‘loving truth’ I am not being comforting or sentimental; I am talking about negotiating an abyss” (p. 261). Neither of them is aware of what truth they love and seek at the time that they love and seek their own God. Truth is not given from the beginning, it is found in the process of the search. The truth of their difference lies in this not knowing, which drives the thinkers forward to further thinking and understanding.

In his conclusion John Caputo comes closest to the position of Friedrich Schleiermacher on the universal appeal of hermeneutics. Because the key value in any field of human endeavour acquires lack of misunderstanding as such, this must be overcome by the efforts of the interpreter. Let us recall, that similarly, according to Heidegger, man lives to understand. According to Caputo, all of us, like Augustine and Derrida, regardless of our individual preferences, can find common faith for the journey in this complex and changing world through understanding, and maintaining the classical horizon of the “love of truth.” Perhaps this represents the independence of man from any velocity, distance, and circumstance with which he deals.