

April 2020

On Caputo's Interpretation of Interpretation: A Discussion of Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information

James Risser
Seattle University, jrisser@seattleu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/dsp>

Recommended Citation

Risser, J. (2020). On Caputo's Interpretation of Interpretation: A Discussion of Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information. *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenology*, 1 (1). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/dsp/vol1/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Duquesne Studies in Phenomenology by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

ON CAPUTO'S INTERPRETATION OF INTERPRETATION:

*A DISCUSSION OF HERMENEUTICS: FACTS AND INTERPRETATION IN THE AGE OF INFORMATION*¹

JAMES RISSER

Seattle University

The opportunity to discuss John Caputo's latest book, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* is a welcomed one. Over the years I have followed his work closely with great admiration. His work is always interesting to read, even on that rare occasion when I find myself in disagreement with him. More than interesting, as a philosopher Jack has an uncanny ability to write clearly and to make his subject matter lively. I attribute this liveliness in part to Jack's roguish manner of dealing with his subject matter – a style which has intensified in his later writings, as he has incorporated into his work some of the roguishness of that other Jack, Jacques Derrida. But make no mistake about it, Jack's roguishness is peculiarly American and not at all French – something that comes from the street and not the café. Jack manages to say what he wants to say playfully yet straightforwardly so that we are sure to see the point. So it goes without saying that in this clarity and liveliness there is always insight to be found. I always find myself learning something whenever I read Jack's work. The book we are discussing today is no exception to this characterization. Reading it has reminded me how much I have learned from Jack over many years and how I continue to learn from him still today.

¹ This paper and the response by John Caputo are the modified remarks from a book session at the 14th annual meeting of the North American Society for Philosophical Hermeneutics.

For those who are unfamiliar with this book, it was written under a mandate to provide an account of hermeneutics for a wider audience and to do so in relation to contemporary problems so as not to be just another book on hermeneutic theory for the specialist. Certainly the book does just that and it does so in an admirable and invaluable way. What he shows his broader audience is just how broad the scope of hermeneutics is for us today. In this book Jack effectively provides us with a further demonstration of what Gadamer calls the universality of hermeneutics: the claim that interpretation and understanding occur everywhere and are not restricted to the reading of texts. So what we find here is not just an account of Heidegger and Gadamer's theory of understanding with its appropriate application to issues in language, history, and art. In Jack's hands hermeneutics is also concerned with the place of interpretation in law and its importance for democratic life. It is also concerned with the place of interpretation in nursing care and, more generally, in the beliefs and practices constituting our postmodern world. In all this, contemporary hermeneutics is not at all a stodgy matter. Jack shows clearly how its essential task works against the grain in matters that a generation ago were only beginning to appear on the scene. Contemporary hermeneutics works against rule-governed information systems and the binary oppositions within philosophy and culture that enter into the entire system of political oppression. Contemporary hermeneutics works against the presumption of who we are (and thus how we interpret ourselves) when faced with the reality of artificial intelligence and the new questions about animality. And contemporary hermeneutics also works against the grain in the matter of religious life that now needs help to save it from itself. In this emphasis on being clear about a theory of interpretation and on the relevance of this theory for the world in which we live, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* is an important contribution to contemporary hermeneutic theory.

So, what exactly is hermeneutics for Caputo? Unmistakably, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* is an updated version of what Jack calls "radical hermeneutics." Such a hermeneutics does not limit itself to the hermeneutics of Gadamer or to the larger enterprise of a philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer taken together. With respect to its history and theory it is a hermeneutics of three principal figures: Heidegger, Gadamer, and Derrida. For Jack, the first two figures make a compelling case for a theory of interpretation that, in being cautious about certain attempts at objectivity, will insist on loosening the grip on the closure and settlement of interpretation. It is a theory of interpretation that places the emphasis on the ongoing "possibilizing" condition of interpretation. In a very clear summary chapter on Heidegger Jack highlights the key features of this particular hermeneutics. In being oriented to the "how" of Dasein, it is a hermeneutics that takes place in relation to Dasein's everyday concern that is itself a condition of factual life. The hermeneutic circle that characterizes the structure of interpretation unfolds from the "always already" of facticity. The more elaborate "existential-hermeneutic circle," which constitutes Dasein's self-interpretation, entails making a break with the

everyday. The break is a form of hermeneutic violence and is what every good hermeneutics must make. For Heidegger this break that occurs within the retrieval of factual life, extends, *a fortiori*, to the issue of the destruction of metaphysics. This destruction, as with all hermeneutic violence, is not literally a destruction but a way of pushing back against received interpretations that have become sedimented. If the later Heidegger then abandons hermeneutics, there is still the hermeneutics of the call of being that continues to keep matters unsettled and keeps us in the uncomfortable place of not being at home in the world.

Gadamer too wants to loosen the grip on closure and settlement in his philosophical hermeneutics, and what we find here is a much more interesting Gadamer than we find in Jack's earlier work. Jack makes it clear that Gadamer's hermeneutics does not intend to be the police for the humanities, and in regards to the experience of art it recognizes the limit of the authority of the original author when interpreting texts. Clearer still, in this particular hermeneutics, there is no pursuit of essence, but only an engagement with an ongoing living history. The fusion of horizons, which structures the interpretation of this history, is described not as a simple reunification with the past but as the "exposure to the shock of another time" in relation to which we are able to learn something about ourselves. And if hermeneutics still wants to talk about truth in this context, it wants to do so in relation to the play of dialogue, the "plasticity of discourse" that is always knee-deep in interpretation.

But if this version of contemporary hermeneutics makes a compelling case for openness and ongoingness, why do we need the third figure? Ultimately for Jack, this hermeneutics remains too tame, especially so for Gadamer, who speaks too much about understanding's relation to truth. Jack implicitly points to this tameness when he infers that this hermeneutics is only interested in letting the past tell us something through dialogue and how a consciousness of being affected by history simply means that we understand that we are formed by the history that we are trying to understand. In a nutshell, Jack thinks that deconstruction gives hermeneutics a chance to practice what it preaches, namely the exposure to the other. With deconstruction hermeneutics becomes a more radical hermeneutics—a hermeneutics with a sharper edge. But this does not mean that Jack wants to abandon hermeneutics for deconstruction. He is very clear on this point. If indeed hermeneutics is about our ongoing efforts to re-interpret our beliefs and practices and not that of a code-breaker for original meanings, deconstruction, he insists, has a part to play in this re-interpretation. It is to be complementary to hermeneutics and not posed as a corrective. Without deconstruction, which has its life in being able to see things otherwise, hermeneutics risks being naive; but without hermeneutics deconstruction risks running off the rails. Gadamerian conversation, in other words, can only get us so far; hermeneutics is benefited by a complementary element of critique. Such a broadened conception of hermeneutics is a radical hermeneutics where "radical" designates being able to take up the point of view of the outside; it designates being able to look at things otherwise, to look at what might have dropped through the cracks of tradition, to

point out the deeper conflicts in a text. The face of Hermes, Jack reminds us, has two faces: traditional interpreter and roguish interloper, both messenger and trickster. These two kinds of interpretation are intertwined just as hermeneutics and deconstruction are intertwined.

What then does a radical hermeneutics actually look like? Leaving aside Jack's remarks on religion in chapter ten, there are several broad prominent features of radical hermeneutics that we can point to. First, whether in relation to texts or history, a radical hermeneutics involves an exorbitant productive interpretation rather than a reproductive interpretation of meaning. As an engagement with tradition (both Gadamer and Derrida say they believe in tradition), this productive interpretation neither paralyzes tradition to always say the same nor does it consist of nothing but uninterrupted interruption. Rather, it is interpretation that situates itself between the commensurable and incommensurable, the normalized and the exceptional, the same and the other. In a radical hermeneutics "interpretation happens as intervention: an interpretation is an event of intervention upon the conventional."² Second, in this same spirit, a radical hermeneutics involves breaking the rules, so to speak. It is concerned with the individual case at the expense of the general rule that wants to institute sameness. Attending to the individual case is hermeneutics in relation to *phronesis*, as we see for example in nursing care. And by extension, in its work with language radical hermeneutics' break with rules is glaringly evident, for here interpretation is inseparable from the metaphorical character of language and its play that cannot be subjected to formalizable rules of language (or logic, for that matter). Third, a radical hermeneutics wants to be roguish in the manner in which this is portrayed by Gianni Vattimo in his notion of "weak thought" and by Richard Rorty, whose anti-foundationalism champions conversation without valorizing truth and objectivity.

And what then are we to make of Jack's radical hermeneutics? What can be said for purposes of discussion? Here I want to raise two questions, and given my own public testimony to defend Gadamer's hermeneutics against the charge of conservatism, you can probably anticipate at least one of my questions. It is the question of whether the hermeneutic side of radical hermeneutics has been given a fair shake. I stand by my earlier remark that in this book we get a much more interesting Gadamer, so I have no intention of going back over old ground. To do so would be inappropriate to this occasion, and I'll say again that this book deserves much praise. Regarding what is said in this book then, I can't get passed Jack's claim that deconstruction is hermeneutics in a more radical mode; it is needed for hermeneutics to be radical since according to Jack no one has ever accused Gadamer of being a radical. Well, I have! I have always maintained that Gadamer's hermeneutics in comparison with prior hermeneutic theory, which includes Heidegger, is a radical hermeneutics. For Gadamer, thinking has to always question itself,

² John D. Caputo, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2018), 139.

and not necessarily for coming to agreement with others but for hearing what the other has to say. But I am not alone in this claim, so has Donatella Di Cesare, and so has Fred Dallmayr albeit in a slightly different context. It is interesting that all three have maintained that this radicality is explained in part by putting Gadamer in close proximity with Derrida. This proximity is justified not only by Gadamer's claim that Heidegger's *mit-sein* is a very weak idea of exposure to the other, but also by Gadamer's claim that "the horizon in the fusion of horizons is nothing that one ever reaches," that "the horizon of interpretation changes constantly, just as our vision horizon also varies with every step we take."³ The latter being a point Gadamer made in conversation with Derrida in Naples and which, by Gadamer's report, brought Derrida into agreement with him. Gadamer's proximity to Derrida is again noted by Gadamer in his 1994 essay on hermeneutics and deconstruction, where he makes the claim that he recognizes in the difficult Derridian formulation of concepts like "*dissemination*" and "*différance*" something similar to his effective historical consciousness or fusion of horizons.⁴

More often than not, when I mention this remark by Gadamer in conversations with others, as I am doing now, I have discovered by their raised eyebrows and blank stares indicating disbelief that Jack is not alone in his claim that, in effect, Gadamer's hermeneutics needs a supplement if we are to make use of it for a conception of radical hermeneutics. Obviously, it is not appropriate here for me to now present a paper on Gadamer's radical hermeneutics, but it is worth noting in the most general terms the basis for the remark. All through *Truth and Method* as well as in his later writings Gadamer continues to insist that his hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of finitude which is at once an experience of difference. What lies at the basis of this experience is the recognition that from the start human life is lived out in relation to the other. The meaning of our finitude, he tells us, consists not only of our being historically conditioned but of our being conditioned by the other. If we are embedded in a common world, such a world is still conditioned by the other. Such a world is at once a "fabric of heterogeneous elements," a multi-verse, a pluralism in the Arendtian sense, that not only has no escape but is not immune to a resistance to understanding. It is possible in the encounter with the other, which announced itself as a break, for there to be not just misunderstanding but also non-understanding. Such an encounter haunts my existence all the way down – I am even a stranger to myself and knowing this changes the character of my beliefs and practices. This is Gadamer's version of Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity, a version in which difference, but also ruptures and breaks, occur naturally within the effort of understanding. In recognizing this, the Gadamerian hermeneut is never at home in the world and is not unlike the

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy: Hans-Georg Gadamer in Conversation with Riccardo Dottori*, trans. Rod Coltman with Sigred Koepke (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2004), 61.

⁴ See Gadamer, "Hermeneutics Tracking the Trace," in *The Gadamer Reader*, ed. Richard Palmer (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 384.

interloper who is ill at ease in the “club of the like-minded” (a lovely phrase coined by Jack). If Trump practiced Gadamerian hermeneutics he would have to throw himself out of his own club! But Jack is not accusing Gadamer of promoting any club of the like-minded. To agree with the spirit of Jack’s radical hermeneutics, it may be then a matter of accusing Gadamer of an insufficiency, of not being vigilant enough to the danger of sameness, such that what is demanded of hermeneutics is the need for an active, intentional disruption in regards to making one’s way in life.

So, my remarks here are simply intended to shore up the association between Gadamer and Derrida against a slight slippage that I find in Jack’s book. Let me explain. At the end of his chapter “Derrida and the Two Interpretations of Interpretation” Jack notes the Derridian virtues of intervention, interruption, and disruption, as the ploy against ossification. Derrida prefers the figure of disjointedness, the crack, the fissure against Gadamer who prefers fusion. But I would argue that Gadamer’s fusion is a fissure, it is history continuing to tell us something different. Jack also notes here that Derrida, presumably against Gadamer, also wants to put the text at risk, to expose it to its future. But so too for Gadamer; he too champions the “to come” as Derrida himself acknowledges, at least in one context. In his memorial lecture given in Heidelberg a year after Gadamer died, Derrida speaks fondly of his friendship with Gadamer from which “he had the feeling of understanding better a century of German thought,” and, within the context of the theme of dialogue, he comments on Gadamer’s reading of a Celan poem. He notes that Gadamer acknowledges that his reading must take more than one interruption of the meaning of the poem into account, he must leave in suspense a series of questions that are “undecided, undecidable, on the threshold.” Derrida then confesses that he admires the respect Gadamer shows for the indecision, which seems to interrupt the decipherment of reading yet ensures its future. To quote Derrida: “Indecision keeps attention forever in suspense...keeps it alive, alert, vigilant, ready to embark on a wholly other path, to open itself up to whatever may come, listening faithfully...to that other speech.... [Interruption] gives its breath to a question that, far from paralyzing, sets in motion. Interruption even releases an infinite movement.”⁵ Derrida goes on to link this infinite movement to the infinity of hermeneutic dialogue which Gadamer recognizes as the sign of finitude itself. So, you see my point, in praise of radical hermeneutics I want to make Gadamer more of a Derridian than Jack does as a way of giving the very idea of radical hermeneutics greater force.

My second question then might appear to work against what I have just said about the close proximity of hermeneutics to deconstruction. The question is simple and straightforward: What

⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue – Between Two Infinities, the Poem,” in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 146.

exactly is hermeneutical about radical hermeneutics? As we have learned, with deconstruction hermeneutics simply becomes more radical; there is more of the prankster and not the messenger boy. In this respect, Jack claims that Derrida advances the cause of hermeneutics. But what exactly is this cause? If hermeneutics is still to be a message-bearer and Derrida wants to disrupt the message as a way of exposure to the other, how is this hermeneutics? Certainly it has to be more than a hermeneutics of suspicion since deconstruction is not actually looking for the message, even when it is hidden behind a false front. And yet, what we learn from Jack is the importance of the supplement that deconstruction provides. With this supplement there is now interpretation from the point of view of a roguish interloper where it has a critical edge, a playfulness in the spacing of difference, and a determinateness that stands in relation to a future that is not simply a presence to come. I grant that these features make for an interesting radical hermeneutics for our times, as Jack so clearly shows us in his tremendously insightful chapter on the post-human. And it matters little for my question that, in fact, the roguish Vattimo finds in Gadamer's hermeneutics that play of interpretation that offers itself as a true critical theory.⁶ But in all this, advancing the cause of hermeneutics, as I understand it, remains an open question. So, let me suggest an answer to my question that forms something like a supplement to the supplemented hermeneutics that is a radical hermeneutics.

In one sense it is quite true to say that Derrida advances that cause of hermeneutics insofar as the task of hermeneutics is to take up the demand of interpretation, which is more than a simple ongoing retrieval of messages. The subtle distinction I am drawing here by placing the emphasis on the demand serves to link the cause of hermeneutics to the ethical broadly understood as the living and sharing of human life. As we learn from Jack, the roguish interloper is not just a trickster, just as Derrida is not the anarchist that some have pictured him to be. As Jack notes, for Derrida not everything can be deconstructed. Justice cannot be deconstructed; in fact, deconstruction is justice. Our trickster is quite serious and makes someone like Rorty look like a dilettante in matters of interpretation. Although Jack does not say this explicitly, Hermes the rogue is actually trying to do some good, not unlike a roguish Socrates. Deconstruction wants to locate itself in the space of justice that is at once the unrelenting demand of interpretation *before* the law.

This implicit ethical dimension is also found in the roguish hermeneutics in nursing care. But this care is not simply a matter of a practice that attends to the individual within the institution – the demand of interpretation before the law; it is also the demand of interpretation that issues from an implicit ethical dimension in listening to what the other has to say. And here there is no simple bearing of a message, but a complicated crossing over where one begins to carry the world

⁶ See Gianni Vattimo, "Gadamer and the Problem of Ontology," in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsward, and Jens Kertscher (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 305-6.

of the other, as Derrida notes in his homage to Gadamer. It is this crossing, with its demand of interpretation, that I take to be the cause of hermeneutics – a crossing that has no interest in forming unions, notwithstanding the natural affective bonds that are generated in care. In a sense, this complicated crossing is what we undergo in the process of thinking properly understood. It is what we find in the implicitly ethical thinking that Arendt calls for in opposition to the non-thinking, the non-interruptive formulations of the bureaucratic and, more importantly, of the political that we see in the Trumpism of our day. It is, to paraphrase Gadamer, thinking that contains deferral and distance, otherwise it would not be thinking.⁷ But more than this, the crossing over from one to another that begins to carry the world of the other, which is witnessed in a very modest way in hearing what the other has to say, remains oriented to a communicative event. In this regard hermeneutics is inseparable from the idea of participation, as sharing of the other's otherness, which extends beyond a simple humanism. The cause of hermeneutics, in Gadamer's words, is to "learn to experience otherness and human otherness as the 'other of ourselves' in order to participate with one another."⁸ I think this emphasis on sharing in the communicative event is what separates hermeneutics from deconstruction.

And yet, it is still possible to see how a radical hermeneutics continues to advance the cause of hermeneutics in this regard. Surprisingly though it is effectively missing from Jack's book. This is not a criticism of the book since it would be unfair to Jack to demand that he include every aspect of a radical hermeneutics in this particular book. The book is already over three hundred pages, so what I am suggesting now by way of a supplement is simply for discussion purposes alone. To be brief and to conclude: quite simply, the complicated crossing over that is the demand of interpretation is a pressing issue for us today in a world that has expanded across cultures. A postmodern hermeneutics has to be able to give an account of this crossing over that remains a form of communication. Such an account, which does not escape from the difficulty of the transfer, can neither assimilate differences nor posit identity (the "we" on the other side) in a way that reinstates a metaphysics of subjectivity. It is in the acknowledgment of the difficulty of the transfer that I think Derrida continues to advance the cause of hermeneutics. What Derrida reminds us of is precisely the strangeness of the stranger. He makes us shudder at the difficulty of welcoming the stranger, who, when crossing the threshold, must inevitably displace ourselves from the home. But then again, hermeneutics has always been about this kind of wayfarer.

⁷ See Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Logocentrism," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane Michelfelder and Richard Palmer (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 125.

⁸ Gadamer, *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 236.