

**Assessing the function of Irony in Continental Philosophy's Return to  
Religion: After the Death of God (The Vattimo/Caputo Dialogue)**

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## **Abstract**

John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo are two of the main thinkers in continental philosophy's return to religion. This return is accommodated by the basic theoretical framework of irony, which is predominantly an unspoken determinant upon textual meaning. In this continental sense, irony affirms and negates the subject matter that it speaks about. Adopting this framework, Caputo and Vattimo suggest that a new Christian-irony is desirable to avert a collapse back into the violence that results from metaphysics, either modern or classical, by remaining in deconstruction's loosely held wavering between theism and atheism. The question that remains to be proven, however, is whether their ironic method of writing is not inadvertently continuing the negative effect of the Nietzschean-Heideggerian paradigm by persisting with the literary style of writing that is intrinsic to it, even while openly refuting it by their affirmative Judeo-Christian surface content.

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## Introduction

### The Topic

#### I. Introducing the Dialogue

The dialogue between John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, which was organized and edited by Jeffrey W. Robbins for publication by Columbia University Press in 2007, is entitled *After the Death of God*.<sup>1</sup> This “good-humored” dialogical exchange, as Catherine Keller tactfully, yet allusively, describes it on the book’s back cover, involves an introductory essay by each author and then a subsequent responding question and answer exchange led by Robbins with each thinker in isolation. Overall, the dialogue examines the main highlights of the religious-philosophical programs of Caputo and Vattimo, and allows each of these two thinkers to assess the other’s program in relation to their own. The main topic of the dialogue involves a debate between the two regarding the manner by which each thinker believes that contemporary continental philosophy should realign with Christianity, since each believes that secularism has dangerously abandoned certain things worth preserving of religion. Thus, the dialogue appears to examine in broader terms the fashion by which Christianity and continental philosophy can or should combine. Our examination, in turn, shall critically explore the finer details of their application of such an appropriation by examining further the predominantly unspoken ways that literary form plays in such a return.

The importance of the dialogue is due to the fact that it unites two of the most influential theorists involved in what is being called “continental philosophy’s return to religion.” In examining the interaction of these two thinkers with one another, the underlying metaphysical commitments of the return to religion and postmodernism in general are themselves exposed through the argumentative mechanics of the encounter. In

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<sup>1</sup> Gianni Vattimo, John D. Caputo and Jeffrey W. Robbins, *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

focusing upon these mechanics, the current investigation shall thereby unveil the importance of reading such an encounter equally from the workings of its literary style, and not just from a content focused reading. This second level reading also bears importance for explaining the overall significance of the return in relation to religion in general, since it offers an informed perspective for evaluating the deeper theoretical justifications operating within such a merger between religion and contemporary post-modern theory. This examination is undertaken with the non-philosophically trained reader in mind, whereby the topic of irony is expected to be generally foreign to a religious studies audience, since a strong familiarity with 19<sup>th</sup> century continental philosophy is prerequisite to a working knowledge of such a topic.

The return to religion by continental philosophy is definitively a partial return, as it functions via a theoretical approach that we might loosely call continental irony. Normally it is simply referred to as irony, if referenced at all. The rhetorical forms of writing that such works of irony adopt determine the final meaning of such texts in generally unspoken ways through the operation of the formal writing devices therein employed. Knowing something of the connection that form plays in making meaning in these texts is critical to a proper understanding of the foundational matters at stake in the dialogue, the return, and in postmodernism in general. A *likely* symbolic cue of this reading of the Caputo and Vattimo dialogue is perhaps alluded towards from the start of the text, on the book's cover illustration. There on the cover is pictured an eclipse of the sun. Symbolically, we might read such an illustration to indicate that the solar principle of (Divine) Reason is eclipsed in a partial way by the lunar concealment. As we shall later explain, irony is an eclipse of rational and logical accounts, which is nonetheless never a complete eclipse.

When these symbols of reason and its other are approximately interpreted in the light of the aesthetic tradition such a depiction of the sun as a traditional symbol of reason and logic is akin to the essence behind the theoretical category of the form giving drive in art called "the beautiful." Such manifestations of art and culture are systematically illuminative or openly direct attempts at communicating logical meaning and affirmative conceptualization. In grammatical terms, such language is propositional, since it attempts to define attributes or traits directly, while trying to limit ambiguity of language's conveyance. Contrarily, the blockage of this illuminative power is more or less known by aesthetic



philosophy as invoking what is called an encounter with the sublime. The sublime is aesthetically speaking that which escapes or exceeds our intellectual comprehension or frameworks of meaning. This simple dualism of the sublime and the beautiful largely defines postmodern hermeneutics subsequently, since the paradigm is largely aesthetic or perspectivist in orientation. In sum, the beautiful is affirmative and attempts to speak in direct modes of communication or in propositional or identifying ways. The sublime points towards, or perhaps falls short at, the limitations of such communicative aspirations, since *it* in operation retracts the literalness or severity with which such affirmative propositions are made.

In connection to the previous statements, writing that affirms but also retracts propositional meaning is known as ironic writing. Postmodern theory at large is defined by such writing. This type of continental irony is not indicating the same thing as standard Anglo-American usage of the term “irony” would. Irony, in the Anglo-American sense, typically operates as saying one thing and meaning another. In distinction, the function of continental irony is double. Importantly, the presumption of a “true” or underlying meaning is abandoned by continental irony. In replacement, accounts waver in undecidability, as mere interpretations. In making this double faceted move, continental irony permits the *traditional* rational account of things a place, but equally it wants the irrational *account* exceeding things to equally destabilize the limitations of such propositional commitments. Reason, as the solar principle, is therefore eclipsed (Referring back to the text’s cover illustration). In this fashion, the rational and the irrational are each respected in ironic writing.

Generally, the formal use of this style of writing is unspoken and allusively underplayed. The use of formal cues of a secondary literary meaning are generally used by continental ironists without explanation of the form’s underlying function in determining the significance it plays upon textual communication. As a result, readers that do not exercise a degree of ironic detachment are liable to construct a meaning for a text that in the actual unfolding of its literary form offers no such meaning in a **definitive way**.

Problematically, ironic writers typically write in such an elusive fashion so as not to alleviate such misrecognitions, at the expense of their unwitting readers.<sup>2</sup>

The hypothetical goal of such writing offered by its practitioners as justification of its use is that it is supposed to undermine the violence of the rational mind. This violence is avoided by letting the rational and the irrational waiver between each other in the production of instable meaning, whereby strong commitments are weakened. The snare set for metaphysically strong readers in such misrecognition is the comic play of the ironist acting as a wise-*fool*. If we do not read the Vattimo/Caputo dialogue according to such an awareness of the function of irony then we will not understand the secondary significance of the exchange between thinkers. As a result, we will not be able to assess the amicability of the return to religion or of the socio-political objectives of post-modern theory in general without such consideration.

As we shall demonstrate, *After the Death of God* is not a dialogue that is undertaken in the typical form of an argumentative exchange of a definitively traditional type. In contrast, such ironic approaches to thinking and writing do not wish to overcome or synthesize contrasting points in the same way logical argument would like, which is problematic for the expectations of a non-ironically oriented reading. Such a traditional reading would theoretically anticipate that a critical dialogue would be argumentatively working towards a resolution or conclusion. The recorded dialogue instead between Caputo and Vattimo, however, offers no such guarantees or stable resolutions. When read with ironic awareness, it offers no final guarantees of sincerity nor can we establish a stable meaning or stance attributable to either thinker without reserve. According to such a second level reading, the sincerity of affirmative content becomes by default problematic.

In operating through the instability of irony, the dialogue is speaking through the

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<sup>2</sup> The admittedly ideal construct I am here employing in assuming the existence of “unwitting readers” of irony’s continental employment of formal device to develop a secondary level of textual meaning I borrow from Caputo’s employment of the same in his essay “Supposing Truth to be a Woman...” I use it in the same sense as one might metaphorically employ to point towards other generalizations about onto-historical events and ideal identities, such as when used to identify pseudo-groups like: “Christians, terrorists, or Nazis.” In generalizing about Judeo-Christianity, Christianity, and victims of irony, I am simply adopting the generalizations of my host authors and discourse.

deeper literary forces at work in the theoretical significance of the supposed *death* of God enacted in the later writings of the mature Nietzsche. Ultimately, we might say that our typical expectations of a critical encounter between thinkers are largely unsatisfied because the final meaning of the dialogue is disrupted by the play of irony. Irony in its instability makes the exchange between Caputo and Vattimo by textual default something of a *jestful* ruse of a critical encounter between thinkers. It is not that Caputo and Vattimo might not sincerely mean any of the things they say in the dialogue. They might. However, how can the ironically precautious reader definitively identify the authentic “Caputo” or “Vattimo?” Thereby, the typical expectations of formal argument are disrupted and disappointed by the instability of the wavering of the inherent open-ended textuality.

One legitimate response to such open-ended authors is to not take them seriously any of the time, all of the time. While I am not endorsing this stance fully, I think that we must always approach their affirmative commitments with the awareness that they are not meant in a strong sense. Therefore, this all or nothing stance is partially true, although not entirely. Basically, my methodological response is to leave the open-ended nature of ironic text alone, by recognizing it as *primarily* incomplete. This incompleteness is a call to existential individualism. In this call, we are to abandon all formulaic moral answers or systematic solutions. Individuals are thereby isolated before such moments of decision and left to think for themselves. This direction takes us away from the systematic and throws us down into the particular. My concern is that this formal redirect to the particular is risking another type of metaphysical violence, although it avoids the dangers of systematic ideological indoctrination.

As with complicating things for readers, once irony is set loose by an author they too are no longer in control of the meaning of their own textual message, because once literal communication is abandoned to the play of instable meaning the threat of the reader imposing his/her own idiosyncratic reading upon the text is always looming, if not inescapable. Thus, when ironic authors meet each other in dialogue is it unfair to assume that both thinkers are merely playing along with a stance they know to be guarded by irony’s lightheartedness? Once irony is in play, I suggest we cannot take anything they say without a grain of salt.

While the authors are not entirely secretive about the usage and function of irony in their individual meaning-making processes, the truth that the form's role enacts remains predominantly undisclosed to their *casual readers*. Such hypothetical readers would theoretically in error go looking for meaning and gravity that simply is not dependably there in any stable sense that traditional reading approaches would anticipate. While one might object that such instability is inherent to all textual meaning, which it admittedly is to a degree, it seems that irony and other deliberate literary embellishments of the death of the author impulse tend to intentionally aggravate the inhibition of repetition beyond mere happenstance ambiguities and miscommunications of straight forward communicative efforts of writing. For example, Oscar Wilde certainly is aiming to abuse the natural ambiguities of readership in his project outlined in *The Critic as Artist*, which is a definitively aesthetic text. The purpose for such intentional aggravation is deserving of careful consideration, considering the quasi proto-fascist literary origins they come from.<sup>3</sup> The end goal of such proliferation is to aggravate the sublime of little things by taking discourse down into the particular of the poetic or idiosyncratic, which can admittedly present interesting new ways of seeing old texts, but it also flirts with the stability of a more bluntly communicated *common* meaning. Admittedly, such a common meaning is nothing definitively **existent**, yet should we abandon all hope to the privatization of language in its definitive absence? Wilde and Nietzsche are certainly taking liberties with a partially valid insight for political reasons, whether we identify it with the conservative revolution, reactionary modernism, dandyism, or quasi proto-fascism.

Thus, there still remains a need to illuminate the function of irony's form in the operation of meaning-making processes as socio-political events, in order to avoid certain possible risks we might associate with the wider implications that such varyingly non-explicit strata of meaning might pose towards a hypothetically open and democratic social context. For Caputo and Vattimo this impulse is motivated by the desire to inhibit strong fascist and communist narrative tendencies from bearing fruition. In making this move of inhibiting a systematic narrative, they want to hypothetically hold the middle ground of a type of *left* sympathetic liberalism, or even for Vattimo, a *weak* communism.

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<sup>3</sup> Specifically I am thinking of Oscar Wilde's "The Critic as Artist" and the writings of Schlegel.

The risk involved is towards the possibility of unintentionally furthering the consequences of inhibiting the favourable tendencies that have unfolded in democratic societies due to communist and socialist ideals and narrative constructs, which themselves are a secular by-product of the social-gospel. To their credit the return to religion projects of Caputo and Vattimo recognize to a large degree the implications of an oversight of the social-gospel by traditional aestheticism, yet in order to balance this out they rely on form to keep things in the hypothetical center. They make this move to avoid the violence of a proletariat Marxism. While this type of protective check on metaphysical violence may block left wing and traditional right wing totalitarianisms, it is possibly not equipped to guard against what Sheldon Wolin calls the potential of an “inverse totalitarianism.”<sup>4</sup> The danger of such to weak thinking is that such a potential system, according to Wolin, would not depend upon the strong systematic or ideological commitments that Caputo and Vattimo are trying to destabilize. Post-structuralism’s pull down into the particular, oscillating, and fragmented vision risks mirroring this ideological situation, rather than challenging it. Explaining the significance of his distinction between classical and inverted totalitarianisms, Wolin says:

One of the most revealing contrasts between classic and inverted totalitarianism is in their treatment of what an inspired university president designated “the knowledge industry.” Under classic totalitarianism, schools, universities, and research were conscripted into the service of the regime... The primary task of all educational institutions was the indoctrination of the population in the ideology of the regime... Instead of collectivism, inverted totalitarianism thrives on disaggregation, on a citizenry who, ideally, are self-reliant, competitive, certified by standardized testing, but equally fearful of an economy subject to sudden downturns and of terrorists who strike without warning. Classical totalitarianism mobilized its subjects; inverted totalitarianism fragments them.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, the dangers that Wolin identifies in his conception of an inverted totalitarianism above are concerning when thought in association with irony and its tendency to fragmentation and privatization, despite its affirmative nods to a limited

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<sup>4</sup> Wolin, Sheldon. *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted totalitarianism* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ: 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Wolin, Sheldon. *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted totalitarianism* (pg. xvii and pg 196).

approval of the systematic and philosophical. Ultimately, the legitimacy of irony's balancing relies on a faith commitment, if we are to accept it or reject it. According to a classical/logical understanding, it does not work. As we shall further explain, the genealogical origins of continental theory first incubated and continue something akin or amicable to these fragmenting impulses to the present. Thus, we must read the Caputo and Vattimo dialogue from such an awareness of this tendency to the private/particular, if we are to entertain the possible risks its type of theorizing continues in preserving these literary traditions without a careful consideration of the formal functions therein operative.

## **II. Sketching the Historical and Theoretical Roots of the Return to Religion**

### **Religion is an Other of Modernism**

The basic idea behind continental philosophy's return to religion is most closely resultant from the post-structuralist critique against systematic exclusion, which in terminological form claims to make room for the *Other*. When poststructuralists talk about systems or systematic structures they are generally referring to socio-cultural groups or the ideas that orient them. These systems could be religious, philosophical, or ideological. In association, the *Other* of these groups and their ideas of systematic collectivity is in one prominent sense something excluded, unseen, unknown, or forgotten by such assemblies. Thus, like aestheticism's pseudo-concept of the sublime, the *Other* of post-structuralism is a pseudo category beyond experiential understanding that denotes a limitation of human interpretive capacity. The emphasis of such otherness is placed on the unforeseen beyond our expectations. In other words, the *Other* cannot ever be fully explained, because it defies understanding by definition, as something designating the realm of existence beyond rational account and understanding.

With the postmodern challenge to modern capabilities to objectively perceive or interpret things, the metaphorical nature of all knowledge comes to be (re)emphasized in continental thought. In this sense, the appropriateness of metaphorical thinking and writing are again rethought to be valued as more open-ended types of discourse and thought. This awareness recognizes that something always escapes human understanding. Thus, such openness, it is typically thought, leaves further possibilities likewise open to (re)think

existing tradition(s) in new directions. This rethinking is what Caputo and Vattimo are engaged in, in their respective reconsiderations of religion.

Along such postmodern lines of thinking, philosophy gives way to open-ended thought styles, such as poetry and metaphorical description. In distinction, traditional philosophy is interpreted by postmodernists as shutting down experiential receptivity and by inhibiting further possibilities of knowing and being. Postmodern theory likewise perceives such traditional philosophy to be a negatively exclusionary and totalizing system that would in error attempt to offer a complete explanation of reality, as in the Platonic or Hegelian sense. Contrarily, the unknown or subliminal currents of reality come to be more emphasized by the postmodern, where expectations of understanding are reduced by a more self-critical type of intellectual inquiry.

This move of emphasizing the unknowable that is made by postmodern theory opens a new possibility for rethinking the religious, because like literature, religion is philosophy's other. Religion is philosophy's other because it offers another story or way of interpreting reality that is distinct from the modern mind's supposed self-aggrandizing narrative about the potential of reaching an objective interpretation or knowledge, which postmodernism further argues is erroneously made by accepting the uncritical assumption that human rationality is the pinnacle of creation, or a guarantee to the direct knowing of reality. This abandonment of guarantees wants to recognize the limitations of all our interpretations. Thus, the primary target of postmodernism is modernism, and this opens for religion an opportunity of return, as an equally valid account.

Consequently, the theoretical term the *Other* as a pseudo-concept that points towards the limitations of human understanding necessarily has many applicable antecedents in literary and philosophical thought as something hinting at anything outside such accounts. In this way, the *Other* is that which defies epistemological or mythological systems and totality, or even immediate explanation and understanding in communication and meaning making. Thus, we might stretch the conceptual analogies of such a wide reaching *something*, which is definitively nothing, to include the various mythical manifestations symbolizing that outside the coherence making schemas of the Hebrew-Greek world order(s) of antiquity, which comparatively contrast a rational order opposing

an irrational flux, represented by chaos and folly or non-meaning and non-sense, as in Greek tragic art (particularly as re-envisioned by romantic thinkers). Likewise, as equally representing that outside of logical comprehension, we could also recognize in the ancient rhetoric of Longinus, the *Other* as something like the sublime as that type of speech which defied immediate or communicative discourse, which we might further designate as rhetoric.

In contemporary moral terms, the other has become more optimistically reinterpreted by poststructuralist and postmodern thinkers to be invoked for the sake of a call towards responsibility that can only come forth from the alterity outside our standards of normalcy and social inclusion, where excluded and repelled socio-cultural groups abide. The Jew, the homosexual, the “subaltern,” or the feminine are common instances of such excluded others the category commonly represents as living reminders of the insufficiencies that our systematic or totalizing moral expectations might neglect.

Consequently, for the postmodernist the *Other* is *Wholly Other*, meaning we can never get beyond the veil of illusion, nor the limitations of our own fallible projections that we place onto reality, events, texts, or other beings, to ever reach an immutable truth or full understanding of such things, since our limited creaturely perspective always misses the *thing-in-itself* outside our personal interpretations and horizons of experience and expectation.

In epistemological and biological terms, the idea of the Other is also descendent from various preceding instances from 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosophy that were thinking about the irrational, the libidinal, or the powers of something like an instinctual life force or Will mobilizing creation in contrast to a divinely operative Reason mobilizing life and cosmic order. The important kernel to know here is that these *Other* conceptions were something extra-rational, whereby **the rational order of the world is put into question in a fundamental sense**. Comparatively, in Freudian terms, the unconscious, which is contrasted with the conscious mind, is similarly akin to something like such aspects of the poststructuralist *Other*. All of these instances are somewhat akin because they share in being outside of rationalism’s (classical and modern) tidy logic of humanity being a rational animal (which prior to modernism’s detachment of the understanding of the



concept as something autonomously human it was understood as a reflection of humanity's connection with, and gift from, a rational divine Creator), or even beyond the prospect of the vision of the universe as a logical place wherein meaning itself is significant.

Basically, in communication, the Other like the sublime is that which defies rationality's or propositional speech's attempt to conceptualize or systematize understanding about reality, which is why its discourse is often associated with poetry, symbol, and metaphor by romantic thinkers and their descendants, because such types of communication are open ended or inexact in execution. As important to our purposes, irony is another instance of such non-totalizing communication, as we will later explain.

Thus, the *Other* is for the postmodern, in comparison, what escapes modernity's and classical metaphysics' attempts to encapsulate Reality into a coherent and contained tidy account. Its discourse wavers with the possibility that the human drive to make sense of things is perhaps itself merely a fable, whereby rationality itself is potentially only a mere mythological fabrication. This possibility, however, is only ever considered in the wavering. It never collapses into this nihilist vision completely. Thereby, rationality and irrationality waver in instability. Important for continental philosophy's return to religion is that the religious, in turn, becomes such a category of *Otherness* in relation to the rational/scientific projects of modern philosophy, which themselves have been unseated as metaphysical constructs with no solid grounding foundation.

### ***Death of God and Rationality Challenged***

In close approximation to such subsequent postmodern thought, Nietzsche's announcement of the *Death of God* is not a propositional truth claim, but a rhetorical proposal. Rhetoric of this non-propositional kind is a type of speaking the non-rational or non-logical. In other words, the matter is not concerned with making another metaphysical declaration such as the one necessary to champion an interpretive commitment to atheism overcoming theism, or irrationalism over rationalism. Instead, Nietzsche's *Death of God* is truly focused upon emphasizing again (in the wake of Kant and subsequent German romanticism) that all strong *interpretive* positions such as theism and atheism or rationalism and irrationalism must be undertaken with "a grain of salt," or with ironic

reservation, which is necessitated by the disappearance of interpretive certainties. **In short, the death of God announced by Nietzsche over a hundred years ago must be instead understood primarily as the death of a stable logical foundation for rational argument, rather than as a strong metaphysical commitment to atheism.** Knowing this distinction is critical to properly reading Caputo and Vattimo, along with other postmodern or continental thinkers, and this important point is underemphasized or even more often than not neglected by such discourses.

In this manner, Nietzsche is not just attacking God but also the philosophical grounds of secular or Enlightenment Reason, because he recognizes unlike most subsequent secular oriented thinking that the latter is dependent upon the former for justification. Enlightenment Reason is therefore rethought as a bastardized religious concept, when abandoned of its equally presumed metaphysical certainties, as more closely associated by medieval and prior thinkers. Nietzsche does this not by making irrationalism a new metaphysics, however, which complicates his writing style to be a type of non-metaphysical rhetoric, whereby it is metaphysical and non at the same time, without stability. In this post-logical world (which is not “post” definitively), writing becomes literature or poetic, rather than propositional or fact oriented. This type of writing precedes Nietzsche, as we will show, since one finds its most pronounced near contemporary form originally in the commencement of Romanticism in Germany, and then later in the work of the Danish “*philosopher*” Soren Kierkegaard. This type of non-systematic or non-conceptual thought continues through avant-garde literary currents into the postmodern, where **the form of writing is indicating a loss of center or reason and sense.** In connection, non-conceptual writing is a way of making room for the Other of logical and scientific writing, since conceptual thought tends to exclude by closing thinking down.

If there is no God, the universe is not a logical place. In association, the capacity of the intellect is not the zenith of existence that we have come to think. This aggrandizement of the human intellect was made more problematic for modernity through its oversight of an underemphasized transition from medieval rationalism to secular rationalism. The problem is that modernism neglects that reason is a metaphysical construct, or is metaphysically grounded. Problematically for philosophical modernism, this attack (announcing the *Death* of God) made by Nietzsche is, again, not just upon the supernatural

existence of the Judeo-Christian Deity. Even more radically and insidious to secular liberal society at large than is typically understood, Nietzsche's declaration is also an attack upon the secular or autonomous thinking individual that legitimated the French and American revolutions. In other words, Reason and logic are under a subversively *partial* attack. This attack occurs in a rearguard maneuver that the metaphysical thinker (i.e., the rationally or metaphysically dominated thinker) would not see coming. According to such non-logic, the secular rational orientation is equally a metaphysical dupe. **Reason, according to this logic, becomes qualified in the recognition that the boundaries between reason and unreason are not so clearly definable or sustainable.**

Largely unbeknownst to common contemporary intellectual understanding the counter-enlightenment points out, almost as quickly as the Enlightenment had distinguished them otherwise, that reason and logic are equally metaphysical constructs. This acknowledgement puts the Enlightenment's critical thinking subject under attack by reactionary/anti-democratic elements from near conception (this modern subject is Descartes' *Cogito, ego sum*, I think therefore I am). Again, this thinking essence is the Enlightenment subject, which broke free of the authoritarian dictate of a theologically legitimated social hierarchy. The adoption by continental postmodern thinkers of Nietzschean devices as a liberating force has, in connection, not surprisingly been questioned by various cautious critics such as John Milbank and Rene Girard.

### **Emmanuel Levinas and the Origins of the Critique of Modernist Exclusion**

Emmanuel Levinas was among the first near contemporary continental thinkers to use religion in such a light, as the *Other* defying the homogeneity of the modern tendency to systematize knowledge into totalizing and objectifying accounts, when he responds to the phenomenological approaches of Edmund Husserl and his more influential and politically reactionary student Martin Heidegger. In particular, Levinas was troubled by Heidegger's political affiliations with the far right in Germany leading up to and during the Second World War. Levinas made the connection between such political sympathies and what he importantly identified as Heidegger's ethically-negating ontological philosophy. Ontology for Heidegger is the study of Being, which would attempt to distinguish through negation

something ungraspable or unattainable beyond our projections of comprehension or observation onto being. In focusing on this unreachable hermeneutic ideal of knowing Being-in-itself (as a total comprehension of being as it is in an objective sense), Heidegger contrasts the failings of our projections to ever reach this unknowable truth. Ultimate “being” as such is effectively a Neuter, as a result of its unreachable exteriority to thought. Such a Neuter for Heidegger is “Being,” whereas our interpretations of it that unavoidably fall short are translated by his English readers to be the accounts of “beings,” with a lowercase “b.” In correspondence, in his 1961 text *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas warns of Heidegger’s approach:

To affirm the priority of Being over existents is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with someone, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the Being of existents, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom.<sup>6</sup>

In general, Levinas is suggesting here that Heidegger is prioritizing ontology as another first philosophy, and more importantly as an ethically negating metaphysics. In short, Heidegger’s ontology is like Nietzsche’s vision before him a complex and obscurantist type of perspectivism. These self-negating visions identify the shortcomings of all perspectives in contrast to the Neuter that is beyond them. Again, this Neuter is never reachable for thought. The theoretical move of bracketing this Neuter beyond experience is similar in function to negative theology. Only, what ontology is attempting to describe (without describing) via negation is *Reality*, or ultimate *Being*, rather than the Divine. The basic “negating to define” move is the same in Heidegger and negative theology. In negative theology, we can never know God, but only what God is not. Comparatively, the establishment of an unreachable Neuter with perspectivism would suggest the thing we can never know is ultimate *Reality* instead. Thus, Heidegger’s ontology works via a self-sacrificing move negating all other competing theoretical pictures. In this self-sacrificing move, all classical worldviews become insufficiently defunct in contrast to the sublime alterity that exceeds or evades them all. In short, it is a type of metaphysics in denial. To

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<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 45.

his credit, Levinas early on cautioned that making a neuter the first ground of thinking is equally metaphysical and furthermore morally suspect. Instead, Levinas argues that Judaism, as exercising a phenomenology of affinity, is as equally as valid as another metaphysics of the ontology of violence for grounding thinking and subjectivity, since both are metaphysical pre-commitments.

If Heidegger is merely offering another veiled metaphysics (perspectivism or the ontology of being) via the promise of a more objective expectation of understanding, then why should we prioritize an amoral vision of the world over a moral vision? Adopting either stance is a metaphysical leap. This question is the continued legacy that motivates the return to religion made by later thinkers in Levinas's wake. The Heideggerian/Nietzschean paradigm, however, continues to persist in function by defining the parameters of philosophical examination in this return. Thus, in connection, the return to religion is the ironic wavering between the Heideggerian/Nietzschean paradigm and ethical responsibility, as per the Judeo-Christian worldview, which reemerges in various expressions of poststructuralist form prior to the actual phenomenon we are terming the return to religion.

The contemporary return to religion by continental philosophy that both Caputo and Vattimo are part of refers more to a later reconsideration of Levinas's importance. This phase of the return to religion began during the nineties and early turn of the current century, rather than to any phenomenon that began immediately with Levinas himself. The distinction being that the first generation of continental thinkers influenced by Levinas tended to secularize his message. They did this by making the alterity less about religious exclusion than about socio-cultural exclusion in general. This emphasis on exclusion does remain consistent with a Judeo-Christian concern for the excluded and exterior, yet it also opens to other more morally questionable exteriors such as those impulses found in such poststructuralist predecessors like Bataille and Sade, where violence and perversion are also such exteriors.

According to the general vision prominent during this phase of continental thinking, Nietzsche is adopted as a socio-culturally liberating thinker. For example, Gilles Deleuze's vision of him portrays such a liberating Nietzsche, in his text entitled *Nietzsche and*

*Philosophy*, which was originally published in 1962. This same kind of pro-Nietzschean orientation can also be found in other such prominent “postmodern” writings. For example, such a Nietzschean orientation largely underlies the methodological approach of the early Derrida’s seminal texts *Of Grammatology* (1967) and his subsequently published collection of earlier essays from the same period entitled *Writing and Difference* (1978). Likewise, Michel Foucault’s poststructuralist phase of thought in general is defined by a similarly motivated Nietzschean approach, as per example, in his text *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1965). Additionally, Nietzsche’s perspectivist approach is likewise latent in the methodological framework operative in Jean Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979). Last, it also comparatively influences Jean Baudrillard’s methodological orientation in his definitively postmodern text *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981).

In this basic Nietzschean perspectivist tone, the common link between these various postmodern texts is an aversion to the rational account of things, along with aversions to attempts to systematize knowledge. According to this aversion, matters of social orientation are supposedly no longer thought through the modern framework. With Lyotard’s text in particular, the idea that the modern along with its philosophical foundation (Reason) merely manifestations another type of metaphysical account (metanarratives) becomes more widely emphasized to subsequent discourse. This recognition helps prompt the correlated reconsideration of religion as something not irrational. Instead, religion is reconsidered as functioning along the lines of what the structuralist anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss had earlier identified as operating from a different system of logic. Religion is thereby working from a different language game than the scientifically aspiring language of later occidental thought, while neither is any less mythological than the other.

Levi-Strauss, in such anthropological texts as *Tristes Tropiques*, therefore is a precursor to such postmodern thought when he emphasized that the various tribal systems of structural logic that he studied were based on merely *different* rather than primitive or obsolete uses of logic. For example, Levi-Strauss says: “Enthusiastic partisans of the idea of progress are in danger of failing to recognize-because they set so little store by them-the immense riches accumulated by the human race on either side of the narrow furrow on which they keep their eyes fixed; by underrating the achievements of the past, they devalue

all those which still remain to be accomplished.”<sup>7</sup> What the return to religion does in light of these considerations is brings religion back into the front and center of the discussion. This discussion operates from a hybrid concern against a hubristic rationalism and a concern for the integrity of alterity. In this regard for alterity, it promotes non-systematic modes of thinking and being, whereby now Judeo-Christianity is modernity’s alterity.

### **Other Critics of the Heideggerian-Nietzschean Paradigm as Precursors to the Return of Religion**

Attempting to identify all the critics of the Heideggerian-Nietzschean paradigm would be near impossible, undoubtedly. Consequently, what would make a comprehensive identification such a difficult task is the sheer influential reach of the two thinkers combined upon all subsequent thought that has followed them in the twentieth century. In other words, the Heideggerian-Nietzschean paradigm shows up in thinkers influenced by them, and furthermore it again reemerges in further critical responses to these thinkers on top of them in turn. Thus, we modestly offer in the following a few to merely sketch a preliminary context of the theoretical landscape that cultivated the return to religion, and a few others that help convey our concern with an uncritical adoption of a metaphysical commitment to certain risks accompanying the open proliferation of differences at the expense of solidarity that such a vision advances.

One might note, for example, the historical concern of the late Paul Ricoeur with the orienting devices of narrative and memory that work against the disintegrating effects of the threat of a meaningless flux of being and time. In one particularly relevant instance, for example, Ricoeur writes in response to the Nietzschean methodology of Hayden White’s radical historicism<sup>8</sup>, which would contrarily suggest that History is a flawed and futile project, because reality is too complex to ever objectively identify. Such a concern with rethinking memory and meaning are definitely influential in the return to religion, since as Ricoeur suggests the Judeo-Christian worldview is concerned with the histories of the poor

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<sup>7</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (Toronto, On: Penguin Books), 393.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 1* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 161.

and the oppressed. Ricoeur's three volumes of *Time and Narrative* reconsider the importance of such dangerous memories, in the spirit of Johannes Baptiste Metz, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's notion of a weak God, and in Walter Benjamin's conception of the messianic. The influence of these thinkers is evident in both Caputo and Vattimo's projects. Caputo and Vattimo are very aware of Christianity as a lived tradition, in the Gadamerian sense that Ricoeur is here in part employing in his own critical hermeneutic. Regarding the importance of narrative and mimesis, Ricoeur in specific summarizes his project in *Time and Narrative* as such:

The self of self-knowledge is the fruit of an examined life, to recall Socrates' phrase in the *Apology*. And an examined life is, in large part, one purged, one clarified by the cathartic effects of the narratives, be they historical or fictional, conveyed by our culture. So self-constancy refers to a self instructed by the works of a culture that it has applied to itself. The notion of narrative identity also indicates its fruitfulness in that it can be applied to a community as well as to an individual. We can speak of the self-constancy of a community, just as we spoke of it as applied to an individual subject. Individual and community are constituted in their identity by taking up narratives that become for them their actual history... this is borrowed from the history of a particular community, biblical Israel. This example is especially applicable because no other people has been so overwhelmingly impassioned by the narratives it has told about itself... The relation is circular-the historical community called the Jewish people has drawn its identity from the reception of those texts that it had produced.<sup>9</sup>

In a similarly cautious regard, the work of Christian anthropologist Rene Girard warns of Nietzsche and Heidegger's vision, and suggests there is something precious being cast aside in their attempts to go beyond such a moral theological vision in the modern attempt to go beyond the Judeo-Christian worldview. In connection, Girard's main theoretical contribution is the insight that Judeo-Christian thinking is unique from other mythological orientations of the world, which he identifies as often being exclusionary and violent. In contrast, Girard reconsiders how the Judeo-Christian vision sympathized with the victims of such exclusionary violence. Girard sees this mythological violence reemerge in near contemporary thinking via the Heideggerian-Nietzschean paradigm, in more elusive

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 3* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 247-248.



ways that are just as pernicious as the xenophobic tendencies of various pagan mythologies he examines from the past. On Nietzsche and deconstruction, Girard comments:

Nietzsche was the first philosopher to understand that the collective violence of myths and rituals (everything he named “Dionysos”) is of the same type of violence of the Passion. The difference between them is not in the facts, which are the same in both cases, but in their interpretation. The anthropologists investigating primitive societies were too positivist... In our days the “deconstructionists” reverse the positivist error. For them, only interpretation exists. They want to be more Nietzschean than Nietzsche. Instead of getting rid of problems of interpretation, they get rid of facts... While Dionysos approves and organizes the lynching of the single victim, Jesus and the Gospels disapprove. This is exactly what I have said and keep on saying: myths are based on a unanimous persecution. Judaism and Christianity destroy this unanimity in order to defend the victims unjustly condemned and to condemn the executioners unjustly legitimated.<sup>10</sup>

While Girard’s critique does not address the subtleties of the deconstructive position, his general concern is valid. The idea of somehow adopting Nietzsche as a socially liberating force, by beating him at his own game, seems risky. This risk is particularly concerning when we think that Nietzsche’s primary attack is not against modernity and democracy on the content level of his writing, but rather it instead is lurking in the operation of his style, which we shall explore later.

Coming from a similarly cautionary approach, John Milbank’s 1990 *text Theology and Social Theory* likewise warns about the Nietzschean motives underlying the equally metaphysical trappings of the secular mythological frameworks of strife/difference that constitute liberal ideology. Milbank identifies the danger of such a vision as latently harboring a type of violent neo-paganism. He believes such violence is inherent to contemporary methodological approaches of postmodern theory. For example, in his revised preface to the text, Milbank reflects:

In retrospect though, one can see yet more radical positivism which seeks actively to affirm the ungrounded ‘mythical’ content of difference beyond mere formal tolerance, with a continued attempt to re-inscribe some mode of stoic or Kantian formal resignation and collective agreement as to abstract procedures. This is as true in the end of Deleuze as it is more evidently true

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<sup>10</sup> Rene Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Ottawa, On: Orbis Books, 2001), 171-172.

of Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and even Badiou. These thinkers, therefore, were trapped in the liberal/positivist oscillation. In this respect it is important to notice that... more than once... that the soixante-huitarde thinkers in fact tend to tone down both the critical rigor and the amorality of Nietzsche and Heidegger. The attempt to bend their diagnoses of the historical sway of arbitrary power to the cause of 'emancipation' was never truly plausible. Moreover, recent research on Nietzsche shows that his entire project was, after all, a politically extreme right-wing one (even though not, anachronistically, a 'Nazi' one, nor even in every respect proto-Nazi). His slaves were real not allegorical slaves, his men of power real, wanton, lightly-cruel aristocrats, supposedly the most beloved of women. The crude Nietzsche was also the true one-and yet it was the genuinely critical one, following through on the implications of a realization that 'God' and 'the Good' are but human inventions... Our problem today then, compared with fifteen years ago, is that we are now far more honestly aware that the most incisive thinkers of modernity have belonged to the political right and that some of them were at least semi-complicit with Nazism: Joseph de Maistre, Auguste Comte, Donoso Cortes, Carl Schmitt, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and even Leo Strauss.<sup>11</sup>

While Milbank's radical Orthodoxy is not without its own potential problems, we also must appreciate that his recognition of the postmodern paradigm as equally mythical is important to our current examination, yet the specifics of how it is mythical we shall more specifically develop in this examination by looking at the role that form and literary device play in making meaning. What Milbank identifies is that the proliferation of differences is a mythology, yet he does not examine the technical operations therein operative.

With such a likeminded concern towards an unguarded proliferation of differences, we might also point to the work of David Tracy. Tracy, in comparison, warns about the danger of promoting seemingly progressive ideals without critical reserve or in a haphazard or injudicious way. On the subject, he specifically warns:

Pluralism-more accurately, perhaps, a pluralistic attitude-is one possible response to the fact of religious plurality. It is an attitude I fundamentally trust. But whenever any affirmation of pluralism, including my own, past and present, becomes simply a passive response to more and more possibilities, none of which shall ever be practiced, then pluralism demands

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<sup>11</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (revised edition; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), XIII-XIV.

suspicion. That kind is, as Simone de Beauvoir insisted, the perfect ideology for the modern bourgeois mind. Such a pluralism masks a genial confusion in which one tries to enjoy the pleasures of difference without ever committing oneself to any particular vision of resistance and hope.<sup>12</sup>

The danger is therefore that the promotion of pluralism or differences could itself be another type of ideological block against what Tracy calls visions of resistance and hope. More or less Tracy is concerned that such visions might potentially be lost in the throng of competing visions, which risks such visions of resistance and hope being undermined by a larger “genial confusion.” When we think of this concern alongside our consideration of Wolin’s notion of the potential threat of “inverted totalitarianism,” we must again reconsider the genealogical roots of such a program.

Before the current return to religion there were also preceding religious responses to the Nietzschean-Heideggerian paradigm that have influenced the conversation between religion and continental thinking. To begin we might identify various earlier attempts to develop a non-metaphysical Christianity. For example, the phenomenological approach of Jean-Luc Marion’s text *God Without Being* (1982), which is an attempt to think Christianity outside of the metaphysical trappings of the perspectivist approach of contrasting Being/beings in the unrealizable distinction of thinking beyond metaphysics. Marion’s strength is that he recognizes that accepting the perspectivist framework as a starting point of the conversation defines the parameters of truth. In other words, the language game that we are committed towards will determine the outcome of what logic we adopt in approaching such an encounter between postmodernism and religion. These pre-commitments are no less credal for postmodernism, although its tenants of truth are not invoking supernatural warrant. Nevertheless, as Milbank and Marion more or less suggest, we are dealing with another mythological account, which wants to control the parameters of truth and understanding.

In more theologically grounded manifestations, continental philosophy’s return to religion is more interested in Christianity as a lived tradition, rather than as an objective account or theological cosmology legitimated first by philosophical account. In this way,

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<sup>12</sup> David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 90.

the return believes that it does not have to decide between logics. It can be equally loyal to Christianity and perspectivism, since there is theoretically no exterior to tradition(s) to inhabit in indecision. Milbank and Marion more or less claim it does choose. In this communication breakdown, we see the gap between logics entrench.

The non-rational or non-philosophical/scholastic tendency of Marion is repeated by such thinkers such as Merold Westphal and to a certain extent by Ricoeur's successor Richard Kearney, although in differing ways. In general, they largely attempt this by trying to think the tradition again through the dangers of Heidegger by avoiding the question of metaphysics as something rationally grounded, thereby largely ejecting the "Greek" influence from the Hebrew-Greek worldview. In this sense, such theologies want to separate God from *Being*, and instead make God the God of The Book, or of Revelation. Incidentally, Caputo and Vattimo share in this endeavor.

Equally important to igniting interest in the concept of a post-metaphysical Christianity, albeit from an entirely different approach, is Thomas J.J. Altizer's theological movement known as Christian atheism, or radical Christianity. Altizer's theology is quite simply the attempt to preserve a Christian theology, in secular reconfiguration. Altizer believes this is necessary in the wake of the Death of God, which he believes is already a culturally imbedded event. Against this vacuum, Altizer wisely sees that there are still important things happening within Christianity and religious agency that should not just be cast aside. When he was writing during the 1960s, it seemed to him that society would give up on the metaphysical concept of God, yet this has not ever materialized in a large segment of the North American population. However, Church attendance is down significantly in many denominations, and those who would identify themselves as atheist or "spiritual" rather than religious has also increased.

Altizer's Christian atheism is largely consistent with many thematic elements of Vattimo's weak theology. For example, Vattimo also thinks his own theology through the Greek concept of kenosis and through the successionary theology of Joachim de Fiore. However, Vattimo claims no personal debt to him. Yet, Altizer's significance to the return to religion does not stop there. In comparison, Altizer has influenced the popular contemporary Slovakian continentalist, Slavoj Zizek. In his recent writings on the need for

a renewed atheist-Christianity, Zizek adopts various Altizerian motifs to his own ends. In specific, Zizek explores the need for a Christian atheism in his texts *The Fragile Absolute: Or Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting for?* (2001), *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (2003), and *The Monstrosity of Christ*, which he co-authored with John Milbank (2009). Zizek is not alone in his renewed interest for religion amongst other prominent European continental theorists. In addition, Badiou and Agamben both make contributions to the return to religion discourse. All of these texts primarily stand apart from our current topic at hand, however, since Zizek and Badiou are somewhat at odds with the post-structuralist paradigm in their own fashions, and Agamben's contribution is a critique of Badiou's text<sup>13</sup>. These three theorists are considered by many to be the leading continental theorists active today, and the fact that they are discussing the return, through primarily Altizer's approach, is indicative of where secular continental philosophy's broader interests in religion lie. In a revealingly consistent anecdote about the good luck properties of a horseshoe placed above one's door, Zizek conveys through the fictional owner of a country house something perhaps consistent with his interest in religion. In reply to the question why the horseshoe is above his door, the house owner says: "I have it there because I was told that it also works if one does not believe in it!"<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the return to religion made by Badiou and Zizek is less about religious wavering than the return made by Caputo and Vattimo, and more about the socio-political significance of its subject-orienting properties.

Another earlier key occurrence that we must identify as a precursor to the return to religion is what is known as the Heidegger affair, which first significantly put the Heideggerian-Nietzschean paradigm on the defensive in the mid-eighties in continental circles. The controversy was first caused by the publication of a series of critical texts that questioned the direct link between Heidegger and his actual involvement in Nazism. The most damaging of these texts was Victor Farias's text *Heidegger et le Nazisme* (1987).

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<sup>13</sup> See Badiou's *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford, CA; Stanford University Press, 2003) and Agamben's *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford, CA; Stanford University Press, 2005). Both are English translations of earlier French and Italian texts (1997 and 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Slavoj Zizek, *In defense of Lost Causes* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2009), 300.

Caputo himself, as we shall explore in greater detail subsequently, is deeply affected by this critique. In response, he turns from his earlier interest in Heidegger and mysticism towards a greater interest in Derrida and deconstruction. Derrida, however, as the most prominently recognized successor of Heidegger would defend the importance of the latter's thought in the wake of such antagonism, at least in part. The same continues to be true of Caputo and Vattimo in turn, as poststructuralist thinkers surviving Derrida and Heidegger, although Vattimo does not affiliate himself with deconstruction directly.

### **The Irony of Later Deconstruction and the Return of Religion**

As we have briefly indicated, the earlier Derrida from the era *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference* is the most Nietzschean, displaying by his more carefree usage of the disintegrative moods of the double sense of the instability of the affirmative/negating tandem of the deconstructive method (a result of its propositional wavering in his standard usage of irony). Deconstruction is often attacked due to the negating movement of its critique, which is more aligned with these earlier less affirmative works. Regarding the negative movement of deconstruction, Caputo defines deconstruction thus:

A "meaning" or a "mission" is a way to contain and compact things, like a nutshell, gathering them into a unity, whereas deconstruction bends all its efforts to stretch beyond these boundaries, to transgress these confines, to interrupt and disjoin all such gatherings. Whenever it runs up against a limit, deconstruction presses against it. Whenever deconstruction finds a nutshell—a secure axiom or a pithy maxim—the very idea is to crack it open and disturb this tranquility. Indeed, that is a good rule of thumb in deconstruction. That is what deconstruction is all about, its very meaning and mission, if it has any. One might even say that cracking nutshells is what deconstruction is. In a nutshell.<sup>15</sup>

Basically, Caputo in the above passage identifies the critical or negating movement of deconstruction, which would disrupt our assurances of meaning by pointing out the inner inconsistencies of our systematic or conceptual attempts to close off meaning into tidy accounts. Comparatively, in his earlier texts already mentioned, Derrida basically suggests

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<sup>15</sup> John Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 1996), 31-32.

that the stability of our cognitive building blocks and signs of communication are not guaranteed on stable epistemological or theoretical grounds, since our conceptualizations are not complete things-in-themselves. Thereby, conceptualizations thought by their thinker are no more finally evident to the thinker of such thoughts than to any external recipients of such thoughts. In short, Derrida questions the integrity of our basic building blocks of cognitive construction and meaning making. This era of deconstruction coincided with the continental tendency to interpret Nietzsche as a liberating thinker, which we briefly outlined earlier. This era continues in large part amongst Derrida's successors despite a more cautious regard towards Nietzsche's literal content.

The later Derrida, in the era of the post-Heidegger affair<sup>16</sup> (the mid to late 1980's and after), wanted to suggest in response to criticisms against him, as a direct heir of Heidegger and Nietzsche, that such philosophy was more abundant than a politically troubled reductionism might suggest. The emphasis that Derrida wanted to bring out in the wake of these concerns, from even his earlier work, was the ethical responsibility underlying all his deconstructive work, as a call of hospitality to the other as alterity. As we shall demonstrate, Caputo and Vattimo largely continue this project, or a variant of it.

Basically, Derrida's return to religion wants to keep the regard that religion has for this alterity and hospitality, while destabilizing the negative institutional and systematic aspects of it, in an affirming **and** negating movement. Caputo explains that Derrida, in doing this, has created a new messianism, which is his own personal religion.<sup>17</sup> This more affirmatively emphasized concern was combined with his personal regard for Levinas and his own inheritance from the cultural milieu of his French Algerian Judaic upbringing. In this fashion, Derrida's personal religion is constructed by a twin regard for affirmative and negating accounts about metaphysical systems of meaning, which makes his project a

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<sup>16</sup> Other political affiliations are brought to light in Deconstruction's affiliation with the politically suspect legacies of Paul De Man and the Yale School, along with the rightwing connections unearthed about Maurice Blanchot.

<sup>17</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 95.

hybrid of the Nietzschean-Heideggerian paradigm and the traditions that this negating critique encounters.

Derrida examines religious themes in his own project in such works as “Circumfession” (from the text *Jacques Derrida*, co-authored with Geoffrey Bennington in 1993), *On the Name* (1995), *The Gift of Death* (1996), and in “Faith and Knowledge,” which is an essay from the text he co-authored with Vattimo that is simply entitled *Religion* (1998). On top of these publications, we might also add Derrida’s recorded contributions in the various seminars on religion he partook in over the years like those at Villanova (1997-2004) or at the 2002 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature that took place at Toronto, approximately two years before his death.

Derrida unlike Levinas refuses in his reconsideration of religious ideas to contemplate a withdrawal from the singularity and indeterminacy of life back into any final metaphysical or systematic assurances. Instead, the Other of Derrida is “Wholly *Other*” without relinquishment, beyond its affirmation of the primacy of alterity, which is interpreted to have an ethical significance in conjunction with this gap between communicating individuals. This fundamentally hermeneutic orientation continues the perspectivism of the Nietzschean-Heideggerian paradigm, but now with a reconsideration of Derrida’s own religious heritage as accompanying the ethical import of alterity as hospitality. In this sense, Derrida wants to keep the aesthetic and the religious in mutual ironic suspension. In his terms, Derrida describes his balancing of traditions as follows, in his reply to Caputo’s question, at the AAR-SBL 2002 Toronto conference, about his conception of prayer:

On the one hand, a prayer has to be a mixture of something that is absolutely singular and secret-idiomatic, untranslatable-and, on the other hand, a ritual that involves the body in coded gestures and that uses a common, intelligible language... My way of praying, if I pray, has more than one edge at the same time. There is something very childish here, and when one prays one is always a child... There is another layer, of course, which involves my culture, my philosophical experience, my experience of a critique or religion that goes from Feuerbach to Nietzsche... I know this appears negative, but it isn’t; it is a way of thinking when praying that does not simply negate prayer.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cited in *Shakespeare, Derrida and Theology* (New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 2009), 11-12.



It is interesting that Derrida points out that his line of thinking appears negative, but isn't. Basically, we once again either take the matter of irony's mutual disruption and affirmation on faith or not. If we do not, then we will be charged with not understanding or not seeing, much like Heidegger would dismiss critics of his later thinking. Thus, we either have eyes to see and ears to hear or we do not. It cannot be explained logically.

In association, Caputo elsewhere explains that Derrida's thought can be described as being "JewGreek."<sup>19</sup> Caputo uses this term "JewGreek" with the ironic emphasis that Derrida employs in describing his project above. Such irony is supposed to keep the negative consequences of each commitment at bay, and it is the basic underlying structure of Derrida's later quasi-phenomenology or quasi-idealism that constitutes his subsequent theoretical turn to a religion with/out religion. In such a religion with/out religion, the wavering of propositional presence and absence disrupt immediacy, or the closure of judgment, yet continually do so with a regard to the primacy of the alterity that grounds them. In hermeneutic terms, the liberating impulse motivating this move is not trying to speak for the *Other*, but instead makes way for the *Other* via hospitality. This hospitality is afforded via a non-conceptualizing type of speech. On the subject, Caputo comments:

Derrida's "religion," like everything else in Derrida, obeys the strange logic of the sans, where everything is sans voir, avoir, sans savoir. The sans is never simple negation since it always involves a repetition or reinscription of what has been crossed out (...) so that the repetition never does entirely do "without" what it is repeating, even as it never perfectly repeats what it does without. Derrida's religion sans religion vividly embodies the post-secularity of the postmodern critique of the *Aufklärung*, its non-reductionistic openness to religious structures or forms of life that previously would have been ground up by reductionistic Enlightenment critiques.<sup>20</sup>

On the formal level, Derrida stays with the aesthetic device of the ironic method, while on the discursive or rhetorical level of the content he offers his morally directed agenda of keeping metaphysical thinking open to alterity. Conveying the apparent benign

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<sup>19</sup> Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997)

<sup>20</sup> John D. Caputo, "Philosophy and Prophetic Postmodernism: Toward a Catholic Postmodernity," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 74 (2000), 549-568.

goals of this style, Smith reiterates, in the following, the basic justification of this continued usage of irony by deconstruction:

By calling into question the linguistic ideal of immediacy and one (univocal) language-which is, in a way, at root a desire to be without language-deconstruction has sided with Yahweh at Babel. If Derrida has seemed to introduce “confusion” into philosophy, it has been this kind of prophetic confusion which is really an affirmation of plurality and difference.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, as Smith suggests of deconstruction in general, we might add in association that the advocated goal of deconstruction’s return to religion is to liberate alterity. Deconstruction does this by promoting liberation from the privileging tendency of a stable hermeneutic or logically privileged meaning. The supposedly liberating impulse of this impasse of the wholly other is hypothetically achieved by the rise of the particular (i.e., the subjective or contingent). In this sense of liberating thought, deconstruction wants to avoid sealing off or finalizing systematic accounts. It always wants to keep discourse open ended, which is why it is post-structuralist, because it wants to avoid structural totalities, in the same vein of Levinas’s critique of the modern. Instead, competing voices are left in conflict, whereby no resolution is attempted.

It is according to such individualized response that the pursuit for answers to religious questions for both Vattimo and Caputo ends too, with the solitary reader before semblances and the play of meaning that their texts enact. This *liberation* of the reader from the authority of the classical author means such writings will finally offer their readers no metaphysical assurances or definitive or strong commitments beyond that to alterity. Even a commitment to alterity itself is in turn not a stable commitment either, since this too is hypothetically made to waver in “undecidability.” The open ended situation this places the reader in is a type of quasi-messianic anticipation, which is nevertheless kept in balance by the mutual offering and retraction of irony. Describing the shift to a messianic consciousness emphasized more in later Deconstruction, Caputo says:

It is clear to anyone with a Jewish ear, to anyone with half an ear for the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, that this whole thing called “deconstruction” turns out to have a very messianic ring. The messianic tone that deconstruction has recently adopted (which is not all that recent and not

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<sup>21</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 53.

only a tone) is the turn it takes toward the future. Not the relative and foreseeable, programmable and plannable future-the future of “strategic planning”-but the absolute future, the welcome extended to an other whom I cannot, in principle, anticipate, the tout autre whose alterity disturbs the complacent circles of the same.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the post-structuralist messiah can never arrive but we continually prepare for the *event*, which makes Derrida’s religion with/out religion a type of affirmative hope that is undefined. This hope Caputo points towards in his usage of the deconstructive imperative to the Other: “Viens, Oui, Oui.”<sup>23</sup> This affirmative side of deconstruction, contrary to his earlier description of the negating definition of deconstruction, Caputo here again explains is what defines deconstruction in a nutshell, which is an ironically made imperative itself.<sup>24</sup> In other words, through irony it is both things in isolation, negation and affirmation, although it is such in an instable way. Even though deconstruction includes in such a vision the renewed validity of a kingdom to come,<sup>25</sup> as in Caputo’s work in specific, it perhaps problematically appeals to such plays towards meaning in the invocations of the ebbing moments of deconstruction’s method. This is how deconstruction is both affirmative and negating of a subject, as per such instable conceptual manifestations as the messianism with/out messianism, and religion with/out religion. The essence of deconstruction’s relinquishing of authorial control upon textual meaning and argumentative progression nevertheless relegates its recipient back into the flux of time without metaphysical certainties, where the reader becomes the co-writer of meaning.

Basically, the later Derrida’s category of a religion with/out religion claims to want to keep the device of hope open to the *Other*. Deconstruction justifies this move as breaking the oppressive and failed reign of a supposedly wanton enlightenment Reason, which it claims to do as an indefinite call of responsibility (attentiveness to alterity). This call of responsibility calls to us from the primordial intent of the something equally pre-

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<sup>22</sup> Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 156.

<sup>23</sup> Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 157.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 26.

rational that originates via the communicative drive, or the primacy of alterity. It is co-determinant and with(in) our basic conceptual building blocks of meaning and sense. What exactly deconstruction is appealing to in this open hospitality is not entirely clear, since this would compromise it as something beyond the rational mind, which is why it is not the “plannable” future, but is instead the “absolute” future towards which it keeps open, and also why it hints at a general invocation of a something akin to a democracy *to come*, yet not exactly.

Thus, deconstruction is a roundabout affirmation of the limits of the ideological parameters of the cosmopolitanism of liberalism itself, as a rhetorical affirmation of particularity and difference. As we shall come to demonstrate, Caputo and Vattimo are heavily influenced and connected with the Nietzschean-Heideggerian paradigm and with furthering Derrida’s concern for a religion with/out religion. The return to religion made by continental philosophy is an ironic suspension of these two traditions of influence, both the Nietzschean-Heideggerian, which we might also call perspectivism or aestheticism, and the religious-moral. Together, the two equally metaphysical orientations are ironically disrupted by post-structuralism’s aversion to rational totalities and conceptual closure.

### **III. Hypothesis**

The form of writing in the Caputo and Vattimo dialogue determines the meaning of the text in ways that a content analysis reading cannot properly understand alone. This particular style of writing takes its methodological influences from various literary movements that commence with, and succeed German romanticism, yet the key performative occurrence that takes place within them is the loosening of propositional exactness, which is an invocation of the sublime. In this sense, the postmodern is the return of political rhetoric. In doing this, the postmodern utilizes this disruption of propositional communication in order to avoid totalizing or completed types of discourse, which it suggests is favourable to avoid the violence that results from the ostracizing and exclusionary tendencies that accompany strong metaphysical belief systems. The problem that remains is whether or not the postmodern is not creating through the rhetoric of the sublime another type of authoritarianism, an inverse type of one, albeit garmented in a

politically correct sounding version of the Nietzschean-Heideggerian paradigm.<sup>26</sup> The advance that the discourse of the return to religion makes, nevertheless, is that it wants to avoid the moral whitewashing of the Nietzschean-Heideggerian paradigm proper, which it attempts to do by bringing back Judeo-Christian themes into the contemporary philosophical conversation.

Caputo and Vattimo want to keep the Nietzschean-Heideggerian paradigm and the Judeo-Christian theological paradigm in ironic suspension, whereby each of the dangerous tendencies belonging to both extremes is held in check by the wavering between accounts, which is deconstruction's method. This aversion by deconstruction to a theological authoritarianism is an understandable desire, yet the irresolvable problem that remains is whether or not subjecting Judeo-Christian tradition to ironic reservation does not in fact play right into the hands of the Nietzschean-Heideggerian paradigm anyway? While a certain degree of irony (in the sense of it being a critical disposition towards interpretation) is perhaps unavoidable to the postmodern thinker, there remains a need to emphasize the dangers that accompany the tradition from which such language and methods come from. By highlighting the operations of these unwritten determinants of meaning, this examination will attempt to shine a light on the dark places of contemporary thought that pose the possible danger of cultivating a formal elitism that such unspoken operations might hazard, as Foucault and even Vattimo have warned of, when Vattimo disassociated himself from deconstruction's method.<sup>27</sup> These differences, however, are less significant than Vattimo would have us here believe. Thus, this examination will contextualize the Vattimo and Caputo debate in these terms, in order to offer the reader a didactic and informed approach to understanding the sources of such thinking and writing, along with a glimpse at the complex originating motives that accompany them.

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<sup>26</sup> In his reply to Derrida's criticism of his text *Historie de la folie*, Foucault (1972) makes the "damning" criticism of deconstruction that it "gives the master a limitless sovereignty, and simply teaches students to repeat and reproduce his words." (David Macey, "Deconstruction," *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 87)

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* Macey also there says of Vattimo: "Vattimo, who is no means unsympathetic to deconstruction, remarks (1994) that it often resembles a form of virtuoso performance art, and a common criticism is that the authority of the virtuoso is the one thing that is unchallenged." (Same as above)

#### IV. Methodology

The methodology of the following examination is quite simply crafted. We shall examine each thinker by the dual impulses that constitute their ironic stances. Specifically, we shall examine both according to the Nietzschean-Heideggerian paradigm, and then we shall examine how they match this impulse with the affirmative instances of a content of reappropriated Judeo-Christian tradition. Together, the two voices are held in ironic suspension. Thus, our method is to read the dialogue, and the discourse of return from an ironically conscious hermeneutic.

The second methodological anchor that is utilized is the distinction between propositional and non-propositional communication. This distinction is a particular manifestation of the dual impulses that propel the ironic method, which are rational and non-rational utterance or writing. Like the yin and yang symbol of Eastern philosophy, however, these two principles are never fully distinguishable from their counterpart. In the Western tradition, these forces are associated with the Apollonian and the Dionysian, commencing it appears with German romanticism, which we will further explain. The basic underlying theme that can orient the reader theoretically in this examination is the dynamism of the rational and irrational, in what amounts to irony's rational-irrational style of writing; which, regardless of whatever the particular manifestations this tandem might emerge within, the basic commitments are always the same, with neither side of the discourse gaining prominence at the expense of the other.

The basic distinction is a microcosm of the contemporary epistemologically understood universe at large, which to the postmodern is without theological certainties, including, very important to note, the existence of a rational order underlying things. In this sense, all knowledge becomes **rational-irrational**, rather than simply rational or irrational. Not understanding the role of irony in this distinction is what leads critics of postmodernism, such as Richard Wolin to miss the point or stylus of the rational/irrational compromise.<sup>28</sup> To say something is rational or irrational is a metaphysical commitment,

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<sup>28</sup> See Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

which means irony wants to avoid metaphysical solidification. The basic question fueling this examination is whether or not irony can avoid becoming a type of “metaphysics in denial” itself simply by exercising the powers of rhetorical slight of hand? The second question succeeding this first question is whether or not the Nietzschean-Heideggerian paradigm is not in fact such a metaphysics that defines the final possibilities of the return to religion?

### **Outline of the Chapters**

In the first chapter, which is entitled “The Death of God and the Rise of Aestheticism,” we shall examine the basic constituents and theoretical antecedents of the Nietzschean-Heideggerian paradigm. More specifically, we shall examine the fallout of the Counter-Enlightenment and Romanticism, whereby rhetoric returns to take the place of strong or metaphysically guided philosophy (classical and modern). In this section, we will furthermore explain the rhetorical origins of the sublime as that which is outside rational account, and identify various important historical forms it takes in aesthetic theory before it takes its current form in postmodernism.

Viewed from the light of this tradition of aesthetics, we shall then explain the significance of the Apollonian and Dionysian drives in art, as aspects of Nietzsche’s ironic writing style. We shall further outline how these drives originated in German romanticism and passed through Kierkegaard, before they reach their most recent form in postmodernism. Following this brief look at such prominent ironists of the past, we shall then go into explaining how irony was understood originally to be a new type of mythology by the Romantics. This “new mythology” was intended to fill what they and their successors feared would be the void of religion’s social function. In addition, the rise of literature and ironic writing corresponds with the decline of systematic philosophy, which meant the rise of the particular, or what Nietzsche would later dub the “solar inversion,” and what Heidegger called Nietzsche’s metaphysic of “consummate subjectivity.” These phenomena will be examined as precursors to existentialism and postmodern concern for the particular and the isolated contra the general or systematic.

After describing some of the key forms that the theoretical fallout of metaphysics takes in literary movements, we shall try to get to the bottom of defining irony, while evaluating its ability to pass for being fundamentally a means to speak without collapsing back into metaphysical error. This concern then leads us to evaluate the centrality of form in the construction of meaning, and evaluate and distinguish what is meant by aestheticism, as *art for art's sake* as a social-moral agenda contra the continued centrality that form plays on meaning. The basic aim of the first chapter is to offer a “crash course” in irony and the post-romantic impulse to overcome metaphysics, while examining the theoretical warrant of such impulses, in order to contextualize the significance of the Nietzschean-Heideggerian paradigm in both Vattimo’s and Caputo’s independent projects, and their dialogue.

Chapters two and three will examine the particulars of Caputo’s theoretical program based upon the division of examining the Nietzschean-Heideggerian tendency operative in the ironic form of his writings, contra the affirmative way he incorporates Judeo-Christian themes and concerns within this theoretical backdrop. In specific, chapter two will examine the theoretical framework of Caputo and deconstruction’s use of irony. Chapter three will then examine the ways that Caputo utilizes specific Judeo-Christian content, along with illuminating how such theoretical commitments from the previous chapter underlie and finally determine the end meaning of such literal affirmations of content and meaning.

Chapters four and five will mirror the two prior chapters, except they shall instead examine the particulars of Vattimo’s program. Like chapter two did for Caputo, chapter four will examine the theoretical framework of Vattimo, which will lay bare how Vattimo incorporates the Nietzschean-Heideggerian framework into his approach, by identifying the foundations of his own theoretical commitments within and beyond his return to religion. Then much like chapter three for Caputo, chapter five for Vattimo will go into the particular usages of the content of the Judeo-Christian tradition in conjunction with these methodological parameters as again laid out in the previous chapter. In this fashion, the theoretical chapters will follow to the bottom the theoretical commitments made by each thinker, evaluating the helpfulness and potentially harmful aspects of them towards religion and political narrative identities of solidarity. The applied chapters will introduce the reader to the application of such commitments, as in the Judeo-Christian appropriation of



such dual commitments. In these applied chapters, we shall introduce an overview of each thinker's "theological" program, with a particular regard to the operation of irony therein functioning to determine final meaning of each vision. In dividing both thinkers into two independent examinations, my other hope is to demonstrate to the reader how the mutual affinities that the role of content and form enact in both Caputo's and Vattimo's projects, while also emphasizing the differences of their mutual appropriations of post-structuralism and Judeo-Christianity.

Chapters six and seven will then likewise examine successively Caputo's arguments and then Vattimo's arguments in their textual dialogue entitled "*After the Death of God.*" In this section, we shall examine each thinkers arguments in the dialogue in isolation according to the ironic framework we have presented them both in earlier, along with comparing such commitments from the dialogue according to what each does independently in their own earlier work, and then according to what one another say about each other. The basic aim of this examination is to pinpoint how irony, as form, predefines each thinker's role in the dialogue, along with reexamining how it complicates the apparent meaning of the surface content of both their larger projects in relation, and also in comparison to the even larger significance of the return to religion in general.

## Chapter 1: The Death of God and the Rise of Aestheticism

The Death of God is more problematic to the secular thinking subject than standard atheistic and scientific thinking typically assumes. Not only do we lose the guarantee of morality and ethics, but we also lose the guarantee of sense and meaning, which opens up a whole new kind of opportunity for deceptive speech. The loss of center that the death of God supposedly enacts is therefore also the loss of an intelligible whole, which gives rise to the contingent rush and anarchism of the particular, where meaning and sense are finally let loose, with the return of rhetoric. We have already said in introduction that this problem is what Nietzsche sets out to foremost aggravate in his aesthetic promotion of the rise of the particular as unique and youthful, which is instigated by his commitment to reactionary politics that were indisputably anti-democratic. The connecting insight that is dormant here is that Christianity as a social practice, and the progressive motivations behind the Enlightenment, are from one and the same benevolent postulate, which is nonetheless an insight particularly advocated by Vattimo. However, Vattimo advocates such in his poststructuralist language of a new enlightenment, which may not be enough. This language of a new enlightenment is not unique to postmodernism, but is, in part, a byproduct of what is called by Isaiah Berlin the counter-enlightenment, which means we should be careful in assessing a continued promotion of it, even if only partially.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the aim of the present chapter is to identify the elements of this tradition, in order to contextualize the dual metaphysical positions that are held in ironic suspension by postmodernism's return to religion. The first of these metaphysical positions is the Judeo-Christian tradition, which needs no introduction for a religious studies audience, while the second is the Nietzschean-Heideggerian paradigm, which does require some prerequisite background explanation to understand where it has come from and what it hopes to enact.

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<sup>29</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "The Counter-enlightenment," in idem, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

## **The Counter-Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Postmodernism**

Berlin identifies what we are essentially speaking about in what he calls the aesthetic/skeptical tradition of counter-enlightenment, which he believes is the more subversive and clandestine of the two reactions against the Enlightenment, with the other reactionary response coming from the conservative ecclesial authority. In his identification of the aesthetic/skeptical movement, Berlin lays out several key thinkers and ideas that define the development of a reactionary political counter-revolution.

Many of these thinkers have been very influential in developing the postmodern worldview. For example, in his essay on the counter-enlightenment, Berlin speaks of the influential roles of David Hume's empiricism (with its consequences for philosophy's capacity of making logical arguments from universally valid axioms). He also speaks about Giambattista Vico's theory of cultural development and perspectivism (along with his denial of a timeless natural law). Also worth mention in connection to our current topic, Berlin speaks of Johann Georg Hamann's promotion of such non-universal concepts as the "individual," "uniqueness," and Hamann's emphasis on the "inner personal life" (instead of upon "theories or speculations about the external world").<sup>30</sup>

Comparatively, Andrew Bowie explains that Hamann is importantly responsible for firstly revealing the limits of the Enlightenment concept of reason, which he did through his conception of language.<sup>31</sup> Language, as we will come to demonstrate, comes to play a major role in the evolution of later continental philosophical-literary thinking. The basic tendency that Bowie identifies in Hamann's critique of language is that it, as medium to interpretation, never quite gets at identifying things as they "fully" or "really/truly" exist. Instead, language is recognized as a complication of full understanding, which is consequently always recognized subsequently as limited. In sum, we see in these anti-enlightenment thinkers the undermining of the easiness of the enlightenment perspective, in complicating interpretation and its ideal of the universal.

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<sup>30</sup> Berlin, "The Counter-enlightenment," 1-9.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Also worth consideration to our purposes, Berlin identifies in the romantic ideology the kindred tendencies of anti-rationalism and the promotion of intuitive or impassioned orientations of being, contra the rational ideal. Accompanying such influences of romanticized thinking, the underlying ontological understanding of the universe was in many cases being similarly rethought to be a type of self-developing, primal, non-rational force. According to such a framework, it was suggested that the intelligibility of the universe could only be grasped by letting go of such “grasping,” as something that might be rationally comprehensible or desirable. Instead, a non-grasping type of thinking was advocated for to open up or allow the intuitive powers of the drive governed body a refined imaginative-creative impulse. This impulse was the property of a quasi-priestly caste of newly conceived romantic poets, philosophers, and statesmen, as manifestations of the mysterious creative power manifested.<sup>32</sup> However, demonstrating the complexity and inconsistency of romanticism itself beyond such generalized characteristics, Berlin further complicates the picture by identifying two main contrasting interpretative drives within this broader metaphysical disposition. According to this description, we can see how the well defined parameters of a progressive romantic impulse are not easily separated from the contrastingly pessimistic one so far described. Specifically, Berlin says:

While some, like Schelling and Coleridge, conceive this activity as the gradual growth into self-consciousness of the world spirit that is perpetually moving towards self-perfection, others conceive the cosmic process as having no goal, as a purposeless and meaningless movement, which men, because they cannot face this bleak and despairing truth, seek to hid from themselves by constructing comforting illusions in the form of religions... or metaphysical systems that claim to provide a rational justification both for what there is in the world and for what men do... This doctrine, elaborated in Schopenhauer, lies at the root of much existentialism and of the cultivation of the absurd in art and thought, as well as the extremes of egoistic anarchism driven to their furthest lengths by Stirner, and by Nietzsche (in some of his moods)<sup>33</sup>, Kierkegaard (Hamann’s most brilliant and profound disciple) and modern irrationalism.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Berlin, “The Counter-enlightenment,” 17.

<sup>33</sup> Here Berlin demonstrates his apparent awareness of irony operative in the tradition.

<sup>34</sup> Berlin, “The Counter-Enlightenment,” 19.

Thus, we see in this dual tradition of romanticism the origins of the shifting postmodern perspective, which evolves into a combination of both impulses via irony. Combined with the influence of the ethical-political pessimism of Joseph-Marie de Maistre, Berlin identifies the second type of romantic vision, the pessimistic one, as commencing in the wake of the supposed decline of religion as a sociological replacement. The threat of a complete relativism was thought to be a danger to social hierarchy and order, and it was to be necessarily combated by a newly stylized cultural elite. The need for such an elite, as Berlin says, is that de Maistre thought: “Men are not made for freedom, nor for peace,” as the Enlightenment had contrarily argued.<sup>35</sup> Instead, de Maistre believed that “Such freedom and peace as they have had were obtained only under wisely authoritarian governments that have repressed the destructive critical intellect and its socially disintegrating effects.”<sup>36</sup> It is from de Maistre’s counter-enlightenment warning of a call for a restriction of the critical intellect that we must also consider the origins of the political implications of subsequent retractions of full disclosure, as with irony’s double movement. Comparatively, in what is called the “crisis of modernity,” art and the artist had the duty of dimming the light of reason (the destructive critical intellect) and calculative thinking, which would be replaced by a new *non-knowledge* (italics added) cultivating a new art that also resulted in a technocratic/lay distinction similar to that fostered by prior medieval theocratic models.

Thus, it is this notion of a fallible and destructive critical intellect that postmodernism in part champions, via its inheritance of these counter-enlightenment tendencies. Often, these tendencies are attributed to the postmodern via the acquiescing influence of Horkheimer and Adorno, who, in the name of progressive thinking, followed the reactionary thinkers of the conservative revolution in their post-war condemnation of reason. This development of largely associating reason with oppression it would appear is merely one more reincarnation of the romantic motif of *le male du siècle*, again in vogue, but now being blamed as the cause of the misery and death that occurred in the early to mid twentieth century. In this manner, the blame for the twentieth century’s devastating

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<sup>35</sup> Berlin, “The Counter-Enlightenment,” 22.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

colonial and revolutionary wars (along with the moral outrage resulting from such mechanized genocides as the Holocaust) is placed upon the scapegoat “Reason.”

In contrast to Horkheimer and Adorno, near contemporary historians such as Georg G. Iggers and Jeffrey Herf believe that this reading of the German context is inaccurate. For example, Herf says, “Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis overlooked this national context and generalized Germany’s miseries into dilemmas of modernity per se. Consequently, they blamed the Enlightenment for what was really the result of its weakness.”<sup>37</sup> While Igger’s suggests, comparatively, “The path from the Enlightenment to Auschwitz was infinitely more complex than Adorno or Foucault made it appear and was deeply indebted to the antimodernism of its opponents.”<sup>38</sup> What Iggers and Herf say is partially true and this is very important to consider, yet contrarily the postmodern is not simply anti-Enlightenment, which also must be considered, and makes what they are saying partially in error too. In other words, according to the ironic disposition that postmodernism takes in regard to its stand on the Enlightenment, it is both a critique of the Enlightenment, and a continuance of a more modest enlightenment, yet how far this ironic wavering between Enlightenment and counter-enlightenment moods is to be let loose, in order to gain some kind of hypothetical progressive benefit, is another matter.

As we will lay out in this chapter, the subject seems to take on a new relevance considering the primacy of form in what romanticism termed the “new mythology,” where the effect of form takes priority over the proclamation for a chastised enlightenment by another means, i.e., largely synonymous with the mechanics of an anti-enlightenment device, which in general we might call the literary ploys of rhetorical “parabasis” (going aside, astray, or digressing), or, in one particularly important example, via the detours of irony’s affirmative moments. The present chapter will explain all of these developments in order to make clear what the potential threat that deconstruction’s double movement harbors in its return to religion, despite its surface rhetoric of balancing the negative

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<sup>37</sup> Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 10.

<sup>38</sup> Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 147.

tendencies of the aesthetic with the prophetic-messianic. The link to keep in mind is that this self-described “new mythology” is unavoidably a metaphysic (i.e., a mythological event/paradigm), which is why modernism is not ever overcome, merely *verwindung*, or twisted in ironic fashion. In the same manner, we are never past the modern or modernism in our attempts to twist our way into the postmodern, which too is a type of coming that never arrives.

In correspondence, it is as a participant from this pessimistic tradition that Nietzsche is speaking from (a point inadequately neglected by the postmodern appropriation of him), when he rediscovers the aesthetic/epistemological implications of God being hypothetically *dead*. Thus, the aesthetic agenda that his work harbors is much larger than Nietzsche alone, since such a likeminded current predates him by at least a hundred years. \*d\* Consistent adoptions of aestheticism encompassed a wide range of philosophers, painters, musicians, poets, and other avant-garde contributors prior. The importance of this tradition in the Caputo and Vattimo dialogue is that it is one metaphysic that is at work in the skeptical flow of the return to religion’s ironic stance, where the prophetic Judeo-Christian (a more religiously focused variant of the poststructuralist) is the other. In connection, irony is the language of the *death* of God, where writing gives affirmative and negating predications about things. Irony is thereby through performance or textual enactment the other of reason through the device of form rather than through a logically developed argument, which would be self-refuting. In clarification, irony is not simply unreason, or reason’s classically understood opposite. Instead, irony is reason/unreason. It is important to repeat,\* the weak/deconstructive position is not thoroughly aesthetic, because it is *speaking* the return to religion, in an observantly cognizant concern for the maintenance of Judeo-Christian values, in response to what we might identify as aestheticism proper (this distinction will be developed throughout the present chapter), yet still the concern remains that the form harbors more problematic implications than are properly considered.

The hypothetical difference between the two tendencies of postmodernism is supposedly maintained within the declarative distinction of “mythologizing differently,” where one discourse (the reactionary anti-enlightenment) speaks about the Will to power and the other (the poststructuralist return to religion via a new enlightenment) of its opposite via the prophetic madness of kenosis and the Kingdom of God. Following this line

of logic, Vattimo and Caputo are *perhaps* even further away from the aesthetic tradition proper than Derrida himself. This possibility is conceivable according to their nearer proximity to the prophetic tradition than deconstruction was in Derrida, who rightfully passed for an atheist, at least in content based terms. In form, however, they are consistent with the ebb and flow of Derrida's maintenance of *undecidability*, which is further complicated because Derrida is likewise largely consistent with Nietzsche and the Romantics in the stylistic production of an ironic form that necessitates a promotion of the particular at the expense of the systematic.

This continued technical observance of the avant-garde writing style makes a complete distinction of deconstruction from aestheticism problematic, yet arguably also the reverse. Thus, the return to religion made by continental philosophy is a content based return, which maintains an ironic wavering between the religious and the aesthetic. The aesthetic is another religious commitment, however, make no mistake. It is another metaphysic, with its own high priests and its own ritual observances. The deconstructionist knows this metaphysical contamination is unavoidable, and plays one metaphysic off against the other so, hypothetically speaking, neither stance gains prominence. Yet, in adopting the formal mechanics of aestheticism, the aesthetic in the operation of its formal mechanics and final unrelenting wavering prevails always at least in part, if not by default entirely.

Therefore, the meaning of the adjective of "*weak*" in the program descriptors of both Vattimo and Caputo, in weak thought and weak theology, applies in relation to the signification of "*weakness*" as it relates to the undermining skeptical impulse of the retracting withdrawal of irony's **ebb** (give) and flow (take) of meaning. In this sense, the aesthetic is associated with many things that point towards the opposite of meaning and order, and brings the element of chaos into the accounts of philosophy and theology in order to make them waver in the face of such potential meaninglessness, all in order to avoid the radicalism inherent to strong belief systems. Yet, the aesthetic is not simply the negation of order and meaning, it also is the give and take of meaning on the level of the form of writing, which deconstruction and the return to religion continue to enact in the irony of their method. In other words, the language of aestheticism is ironic, which is the language of the *death* of God, which is not definitive, but also ironic. In other words, irony



is a performative or enacted mythology or metaphysic, whose effect is the disruption of stable representational meaning or argumentative development.

What the prophetic/messianic impulse of deconstruction gives, ironic laughter withdraws, in the secret that form enacts in the postmodern text. This form is not a new thing, since it is theoretically speaking as old as antiquity (classical skepticism and paradoxical religious insights akin to Taoism and Zen koans), but it predominantly takes importance again in the wake of the Enlightenment, in what we have identified in Berlin's identification of the counter-enlightenment thinkers and their affiliates. In sum, we are speaking about the death of philosophy and the return of rhetoric.

### **The Death of Philosophy and the Return of Rhetoric and the Sublime**

There are many facets of this return of the rhetorical, but let us commence with the topic as it is best introduced, as the enactment of a type of speaking that wants to take the rational mind outside of itself, in order to influence without an appeal to logic or audience consent. Basically, what the return to rhetoric brings back into the fold is the return of the sublime, which is one of two central aesthetic drives in the making of meaning, or the craft of rhetorical writing/speaking. The second drive is given the appellation of the beautiful, as described in Edmund Burke's aesthetic treatise on *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). Yet, Burke is not the origin of the concept of the sublime, since this is a rhetorical device that is traceable back to at least antiquity; yet, before going back to identify such particular thinkers, it would perhaps be helpful to explain what we are roughly talking about.

What is the sublime? Philip Shaw explains that the word is derived from the Latin term "*sublimis*," which combines the roots "sub" (up to) and "*limen*" (lintel, literally the top piece of a door).<sup>39</sup> He further explains that the term is used to invoke the "idea of infinity" that is "beyond words."<sup>40</sup> Additionally, Shaw remarks, "In broad terms, whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding, whenever power of an object or event

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<sup>39</sup> Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, then we resort to the feeling of the sublime.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, the sublime is that which is outside of logic and sense. Shaw further explains, “As such, the sublime marks the limits of reason and expression together with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits; through this very defeat, the mind gets a feeling for that which lies beyond thought and language.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, Shaw identifies that the sublime is enacted by a failure of thought, which he also explains is a rhetorical method that does not attempt to “persuade or please us,” but instead it is a “discourse of domination.”<sup>43</sup> In clarification, he adds, “it seeks to ravish and intoxicate the audience so that a grand conception may be instilled in the mind without any bothersome appeal to reason or justice,” which “carries the hearer along with it involuntarily, and by a kind of violence...”<sup>44</sup> In this sense, Shaw identifies the sublime as a type of rhetorical communication that “strikes an audience with wonder (*ekplexis*).”<sup>45</sup> He further explains that the sublime is “a mode of speech that is indeterminate or without form, a quality that renders the pedagogical aspect of the work extremely problematic.”<sup>46</sup> In this sense, he adds that sublimity “refers to the moment when the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated.”<sup>47</sup>

The first expression of such rhetorical method to currently be known to survive is found in a Greek treatise called *On the Sublime*, which is commonly attributed to a rhetorician identified as Pseudo-Longinus, and the treatise is thought to have been written sometime between the first and third centuries C.E. Longinus, in this treatise, suggests that “great writing” does not persuade, but instead “takes the reader out of himself.”<sup>48</sup> As Shaw

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<sup>41</sup> Shaw, *The Sublime*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Shaw, *The Sublime*, 13-14.

<sup>44</sup> Shaw, *The Sublime*, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Shaw, *The Sublime*, 13.

<sup>46</sup> Shaw, *The Sublime*, 12.

<sup>47</sup> Shaw, *The Sublime*, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1991), 4.

points out, “In Longinus’ view... listeners and readers are ravished or, more disturbingly, raped by the power of words.”<sup>49</sup> In correspondence, Longinus himself further claimed that truly great writing “can be pondered again and again; it is difficult, indeed impossible to withstand, for the memory of it is strong and hard to efface.”<sup>50</sup> Contrastingly, Longinus suggests that bad writing uses “excessively concise language,” which maims grandeur.<sup>51</sup> Instead of such conciseness, Longinus recommends that periphrasis contributes to greatness.<sup>52</sup> In other words, Longinus suggests that language is great by making it strange, and by delaying a comprehensive meaning. In giving examples of great writing, Longinus offers excerpts in his own text from such classical authors as Sappho and Homer. For example, regarding the writing of Sappho, Longinus says:

Do you not marvel how she seeks to make her mind, body, ears, tongue, eyes, and complexion, as if they were scattered elements strange to her, join together in the same moment of experience? In contradictory phrases she describes herself as hot and cold at once, rational and irrational, at the same time terrified and almost dead, in order to appear afflicted not by one passion but by a swarm of passions... her working them into one whole which produce the outstanding quality of the poem.<sup>53</sup>

The important detail to note in our discussion of irony is the way that Sappho combines contradictory phrases and creates a moving poem that is fragmentary in effect, taking the reader beyond immediately evident understanding into the sublimity of failed description that creates via contradiction an intensely sublime description that invites open ended meaning without crudely offering too much. Important to consider in correspondence to such an approach to writing is Longinus’s use of the sublime as a discourse of domination, and Foucault’s condemnation of deconstruction mentioned earlier considered alongside what he identifies more or less as its similar usage of the sublime.

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<sup>49</sup> Shaw, *The Sublime*, 4-5.

<sup>50</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 54.

<sup>52</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 39.

<sup>53</sup> Cited in Shaw, *The Sublime*, 18.

Therefore, beginning with the political rhetoric of Longinus, the discourse of the sublime is intended to separate a speaker from his/her audience through the deliberate creation of perplexity. This effect is caused by the artful use of the ebb and flow of communicative semblances of meaning, which is exacerbated by gaps in a communicative exchange. The communicative promise of authorial meaning is left unfulfilled, but it is insinuated to carry a reader through the labyrinth of the rhetorical performance, where exits and finish lines somehow leave us retracing ground looking again for a meaning that has textually evaded us. In many cases, we are left trying to piece together parts of the text to create a larger meaning for the greater text, but this larger meaning is not there, except as an invocation of the sublime. Again, this invocation of the sublime is the suspension of the critical mind idealized by de Maistre.

Comparatively, Longinus examines the sublime elements of Homer's description of a nautical disaster, when he says, (Homer) "does not limit the danger to one moment: instead, he draws a picture of men avoiding destruction many times, at every wave; he forces and compels into unnatural union prepositions which are not easily joined..."<sup>54</sup> In the conveyance of the sublime through the wild and ecstatic, Longinus also interestingly equates such rhetorical devices with the effects of the musical flutes of the eunuch priests of Cybele the Asiatic Earth-Mother, which are themes that will remerge in German Romanticism and Nietzsche. On this mythical topic, Longinus says, "Does not the music of the flute stir the emotions of an audience, take them out of themselves, fill them with Corybantic frenzy, and by its rhythmic beat compel who hears it to step to its rhythm and identify himself with its tune... the notes of the lyre, though they express no meaning, often cast a marvelous spell..."<sup>55</sup> In comparison to the conveying power of music to move a hearer in ecstatic compliance, Longinus also, amongst several other devices of generating the sublime in writing, promotes utilizing hyperbaton.<sup>56</sup> Explaining the term, Longinus says of it, "It is an arrangement of words or ideas which departs from the normal sequence, and

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<sup>54</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 19.

<sup>55</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 51.

<sup>56</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 33.

it is, as it were, the true stamp of living passion.”<sup>57</sup> Explaining what he means by such living passion, and how to invoke it, Longinus continues:

In real life men who are angry, frightened, resentful, under the influence of jealousy or the like (for emotions are numerous, indeed innumerable, and no one can say how many there are) always jump from one subject to another, mention one thing and often rush to something else, throw some irrelevant statement in between, and then come round again to their starting point, as their vehemence, like a changing wind, drives them in every direction... The best writers imitate this aspect of real life by means of hyperbata. For art at its best is mistaken for nature, and nature is successful when it contains hidden art.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, the give and take of subject matter via hyperbata mixed with other deferring techniques away from evident meaning create the kind of violent sublimity that Longinus wants to enact upon his thunderstruck recipients, and such is a hidden art that would portray itself as nature. Simply put, in such instances the critical function is disarmed, and audience compliance is likely to grant authority to the speaker simply by forfeited relinquishment. This is the discourse of authoritarianism, because it has no logical explanation to offer as to why matters should be as they are, and not otherwise, which means such discourse wants to avoid such topics all together. It is a swindle, and therefore a necessarily subliminal or “hidden art.” As Longinus begins to conceptualize, there are many rhetorical techniques to rob the mind of awareness. In these techniques we see a thread running back through literary modernism and into various similarities adopted by postmodern literary motifs that are suggestively liberatory, yet the origins of these techniques suggest that they were not so intended in their formative motives. Originally, as Longinus indicates, the sublime is enacted as a political discourse of authoritarian impulse, which we will see arise again, particularly in Symbolist and Aesthetic flirtations with private meaning and with their withholding from the wider reading public of a stable content based referent. Instead of working to communicate a direct or underlying message such texts in Longinian fashion instead worked to cultivate a mystique around the charismatic and sphinx-like knowledge

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 33.

of unrequited authorial or textual meaning. This motivation is later best exemplified in Stephan George's notion of "Secret Germany," which also reemerges in Lacan's notion of the psychoanalyst's/Master's discourse, and in Leo Strauss's esotericism. The sublime is in this way a detour into perplexity. In other words, ideology becomes a labyrinth of non-knowledge that would titillate de Maistre.

With the rise of Christianity and the reign of larger monarchies, the concept of truth as a unified and structural thing takes precedence throughout the medieval period up until modernity and the Enlightenment, when such structures of authority are questioned with the rise of mercantile and financial powers. During the medieval period, the notion of the sublime is equated with the grandeur of the monotheistic God, whose unknowable and infinite nature legitimates an ethical beyond, accompanied by a standardizing and grounding context for thought. In other words, as Shaw says, the Christian sublime is the essence of the "mystical" which importantly conveys "a sense of divine truth, beyond the veil of words," where the "breakdown of reason and expression" were instead "indicators of a higher or spiritual realm."<sup>59</sup> The Enlightenment, in association, erroneously detached the metaphysical concept of reason from its original religious context, and thereby created a new metaphysics altogether of autonomous reason.

In the reactionary response, the skeptical tradition of the counter-enlightenment aspires to take the impulse of the Enlightenment's commitment to critical thinking beyond its helpfulness, in a collapse of goal oriented or systematic thinking. One such counter-enlightenment thinker is Edmund Burke, whose aesthetic of the sublime and the beautiful, which we have briefly mentioned above, is in Longinian fashion a weaving of the powers of hyper-magnification, confusion, and obscurity all prescribed as required to enact their collective purpose of confounding sense and meaning. Burke, however, as the intellectual descendant of Longinus, is the key initiator of the return of the rhetorical sublime following the Enlightenment, via the modern rise of the proliferation of the particular as perplexity.

Typically, reason is associated with the metaphor of light, while ignorance or folly is associated with darkness. In standard terms, the Enlightenment critique of religion charges it of obscuring life by the distraction of another realm or afterlife, yet the story is

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<sup>59</sup> Shaw, *The Sublime*, 3 and 28.

not so simple. Take for example Richard Price's political pamphlet *Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (1789), Shaw points out that Price therein adopts the typical Enlightenment analogy of light being the counter to the authoritarian initiative to snub out understanding through darkness. Specifically, Shaw says, "Light becomes a liberating sublime, driving out the false, oppressive sublime darkness and obscurity through which kings terrorize the people."<sup>60</sup> In comparison, however, Shaw links Burke's qualification of this simple dichotomy to entail a further, deviously self-sacrificing complication, if taken to an extreme.

While Burke does in standard fashion think that darkness is perhaps the traditional type of subliminal device, Shaw points out that Burke also recognizes that light too can be subliminal if taken to an extreme. In specific, Shaw explains, "such a light as that of the sun, immediately exerted on the eye, as it overpowers the sense, is a very great idea... Extreme light, by overcoming the organs of sight, obliterates all objects, so as in its effects exactly to resemble darkness."<sup>61</sup> In comparison, Shaw likewise points out elsewhere Burke's preference for the English constitution over the French system, because Burke believes that it maintains "awe, reverence, and respect" via its complexity.<sup>62</sup> Burke elsewhere says in comparison that "it is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration."<sup>63</sup> Likewise worthy of our current considerations, and further demonstrating his consistency with Longinus, Burke also says, "the mind is hurried out of itself by a crowd of great and confused images, which affect because they are crowded and confused."<sup>64</sup> In essence, the type of sublimity that is darkness we might equate with the obscure of the sublime, yet beauty is its other possible manifestation of instigating

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<sup>60</sup> Shaw, *The Sublime*, 67.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Cited in Shaw, *The Sublime*, 66.

<sup>63</sup> Edmund Burke "A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful," in *The Portable Edmund Burke* (Toronto, ON: Penguin Books, 1999), 67.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

perplexity through the deployment of a radical light, which Burke is invoking in his appeal for crowded and confused images. Therefore, the sublime operates by taking thought to things that are above logical comprehension, but **also to things that are below it**, down into the flux of living matter, down into the particular, let us say. On the topic, Burke suggests:

When we attend to the infinite divisibility of matter, when we pursue animal life into these excessively small, and yet organized beings, that escape the nicest inquisition of the sense; when we push our discoveries yet downward, and consider those creatures so many degrees yet smaller, and the still diminishing scale of existence, in tracing which the imagination is lost as well as the sense; we become amazed and confounded at the wonders of minuteness; nor can we distinguish in its effects this extreme of littleness from the vast itself. For division must be infinite as well as addition; because the idea of a perfect unity can no more be arrived at, than that of a complete whole, to which nothing may be added...<sup>65</sup>

Thus, Burke says that the key to maintaining perplexity is avoiding unity or completion. The impulse to prevent such a complete whole or a perfect unity is to be avoided, Burke further says, in his prescription for the utilization of the aesthetic drive of the beautiful (representational art) in conjunction with that of the sublime (non-representational art). Burke continues to describe the proper employment of this drive by speaking about it in other metaphorical accounts. According to such metaphorical musings, the underlying nature of such beauty is that it is a quality in bodies. Two of such expressions that Burke identifies that can be artistically influenced are: for example, 1) the use of colour and 2) the shape of things, or their flow of lines. On the usage of beautiful lines, Burke explains that they should not be “composed of angular parts,” or “so their parts never continue long in the same direction,” but instead they should “vary their direction every moment, and they change under the eye by a deviation continually carrying on, but for whose beginning or end you will find it difficult to ascertain to a point.”<sup>66</sup> In this insight, we see the intellectual predecessor to the Romantics and Heidegger’s notion of detouring the affirmative accounts of representational art, which is a type of twisting of

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<sup>65</sup> Burke, “A Philosophical Inquiry,” 75.

<sup>66</sup> Burke, A Philosophical Inquiry, 79.



accounts, not too unlike the operation of irony's turning. In further describing how this might work, Burke gives the example of the illustration of a beautiful bird. In specific, he describes it:

Here we see the head increasing insensibly to the middle, from whence it lessens gradually until it mixes with the neck; the neck loses itself in a larger swell, which continues to the middle of the body, when the whole decreases again to the tail; the tail takes a new direction; but it soon varies its new course; it blends again with the other parts; and the line is perpetually changing, above, below, upon every side... the variety of the surface, which is never the for the smallest space the same: the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix or whither it is carried.<sup>67</sup>

Continuing with his bird theme, Burke explains that the effect of this giddy unfixing of reference makes it “impossible to fix the bounds” on the objects we view, which he ties in with his prescription for the use of colour: he thereby explains that the same principle applies in the “dubious” use of such, which he finds particularly agreeable in such instances as “in the necks and tails of peacocks, and about the head of drakes.”<sup>68</sup> Incidentally, peacocks were a stylistic theme of later aestheticism, where artists like Oscar Wilde follow Longinus and Burke's program of detouring communicative meaning by abandoning classical margins and regulations to tarry in the complexity of life and the particular. In connection, note how Burke recommends that the usage of colour should mirror nature's “infinite variety” of them, doing so that “it may be somewhat difficult to ascertain them...”<sup>69</sup> Additionally, regarding the proper employment of their hues, Burke similarly recommends that clean and fair colours are preferable rather than dusky or muddy (*earth* tones), and that light and mild (weak) colours are more appropriate. Is it a stretch to assume Burke is hereby figuratively suggesting in these prescriptions of colour usage something akin to later aestheticism's and New Criticism's tendencies to overlook temporal

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<sup>67</sup> Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry*, 79-80.

<sup>68</sup> Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry*, 81.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

social contexts and concerns in favor of focusing upon magnifying the stylistic and floral qualities of texts?

Continuing in this admittedly allusive and figurative tone Burke further warns that if strong and vivid colours are used, they are to be “always diversified,” in order that “the strength and glare of each is considerably abated.”<sup>70</sup> In such a prescription, Burke is effectively calling for a weakened content, or one that is contextually situated in the proliferation of differences that will undermine the unifying principle of any one vision in isolation. Understood alongside Burke’s political commitments to the counter-enlightenment, we must consider what advantages such a promotion of the proliferation of differences and a weakening of content might harbor in relation to later avant-garde writing approaches, and to some tendencies of deconstruction and postmodernism, particularly those inherited from the Nietzschean-Heideggerian paradigm.

Consequently, the reason Burke gives for making this new approach to achieving sublimity he says is: “These are, I believe, the properties on which beauty depends (subtle diversity in form and content or lines and colour); properties that operate by nature, and are less liable to be altered by caprice, or confounded by a diversity of tastes than any other...”<sup>71</sup> Is the operation Burke is here invoking something akin to a precursor of the romantic new mythology, a truly modern type of sublimity? Thus, Burke’s reactionary program is a combinatory aesthetic that utilizes the ebb and flow of the two impulses of art: the beautiful and the sublime, which are again another manifestation of our identification of the presence/absence tandem that is working in art. They are, in short, the give and take of meaning, or the semblance thereof, which was prescribed by Longinus prior. When these two aesthetic drives reappear in German romanticism shortly thereafter, they are renamed the Apollonian (after the god of order and reason) and the Dionysian (after the god of fragmentation, frenzy, and the mystical oceanic). Later, they are then subsequently (roughly a hundred years later) taken up in the aesthetic theory of the young Nietzsche. Through Nietzsche, these two impulses carry forth through high modernism into the postmodern, until we arrive at Caputo’s distinction of them as the supposed Messianic and

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Dionysian varieties of postmodernism, which he identifies as championing two types or orientations of difference. In another sense, as we shall come to subsequently outline, these two impulses are much akin to the affirmative and negating movements of irony's double movement.

### **Defining the Dionysian and the Apollonian Drives in Art**

What exactly the two tendencies of the Dionysian and Apollonian are is not entirely certain because they are an artistic conception, or metaphorical constructs, rather than "philosophical" ones. Thus, there is a degree of uncertainty that eludes definition for both tendencies, but nevertheless they do have certain relatively identifiable traits, particularly in the work of Nietzsche, which is a development of Schlegel's own borrowings of them from Burke and Longinus. Helpfully, Ruben Berrios and Aaron Ridley attempt to succinctly define the two movements. First, in setting out to define them, they explain that the two must be understood via three aspects: the metaphysical, the epistemological, and the aesthetic.<sup>72</sup> Basically, with these different facets taken into account, we must therefore keep in mind that the same mythical devices operate on different planes of meaning, but that they are referring back to the same metaphorical constructs of predominantly an ordering principle and a disordering one.

Under the metaphysical aspect, specifically, the Dionysian is the name of the "dark 'primordial unity'," which Berrios and Ridley associate with Schopenhauer's concept of the Will (the underlying reality of the world that is "a blind force which constantly strives for an unattainable resolution, and so serves merely to perpetuate further meaningless striving").<sup>73</sup> In comparison, they suggest that the Apollonian at the metaphysical level is the name for the "false, illusory, or for 'mere appearances'" (in the sense of Schopenhauer's categories of cultural representation).<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Reuben Berrios and Aaron Ridley, "Nietzsche", in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 76.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

As an epistemological aspect, they say that the Dionysian stands for a state of cognitive “intoxication,” where such a flux is “a state in which the deepest and most ‘horrible truth’ of the world is glimpsed,” yet to “face it fully would destroy” a person.<sup>75</sup> In essence, we are glimpsing something akin to Hume’s primordial chaotic soup of immediate existence, where our representations or categories of meaning are abandoned to the thrush of meaningless sensory stimuli, in a state of schizophrenic vertigo. In contrast, Berrios and Ridley explain that the Apollonian on the epistemological level stands for the “dream-like state in which all knowledge is knowledge of surfaces.”<sup>76</sup> In short, the Dionysian represents the irrational sublime beyond our epistemological categories, while our Apollonian projections contrarily are the mythemes of the form giving devices of reason and logic, as aspects of the creative/artistic drive.

From the aesthetic aspect, Berrios and Ridley explain that the Dionysian is what is “meant by the ‘sublime,’ the overwhelming, awe-inspiring and yet elevating experience of things which exceed rational apprehension.”<sup>77</sup> In contrast, they say that the Apollonian on the aesthetic level of being is “the beautiful, the world experienced as intelligible, as conforming to the capacities of the representing intellect.”<sup>78</sup> Again, what is important about these distinctions is that they show how the two categories of presence/absence in the generative process of art making are operating on different levels, yet represent the same forces that were present in Burke’s aesthetic program.

Comparatively, Andrew Bowie more simply describes the two drives as follows: “The (Dionysian) is the force of creation and destruction, the (Apollonian) that which makes possible form and order.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, aesthetically speaking, the Dionysian is here again described as the sublime and the Apollonian as the beautiful. On the metaphysical level, the Apollonian is the metaphysical and the systematic, while the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Andrew Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 44.

Dionysian is the collapse of such form and order: falling into chaos and irrationality, which brings forth another type of ruin to making the world intelligible. However, what complicates the Dionysian beyond merely equating it with irrationalism is that it is not simply irrational, but rational-irrational, in ironic temperament. This distinction is very important in defending against arguments that would pin the accusation of irrationalism against such types of romantic *logic*, and their formal descendants, including the ironic tendencies of deconstruction. In clarification of what we are getting at, Bowie explains the following about the duplicitous nature of the Dionysian:

The problem is that any characterization of the Dionysian must rely on the Apollonian. A characterization of the Dionysian must rely on formal rules and structures to make sense. There is, then, an inherent contradiction built into the attempt to say anything about the Dionysian: by fixing it in language one misses its essential nature. Invocation of the Dionysian consequently requires an appeal to ‘intuition,’ which is accessible only to non-conceptual modes of thinking. This will be why Nietzsche links the Dionysian to music, which cannot be fully explained in conceptual terms. The question of the tension between intuition in this sense... and conceptual thinking is vital throughout the history of modern German philosophy.<sup>80</sup>

This aesthetic implication of the Dionysian is very important. The distinction it offers, putting the Dionysian out of bounds from conceptual thought, by making the Dionysian only “sayable” via the Apollonian, has defining implications to the various subsequent later derivatives of these mythical forms. This distinction is centrally important to understand the technical moves of irony and of deconstruction. Thus, deconstruction and irony are in one sense another invocation of the same aesthetic drive, the Dionysian, as the collapse of form and order, which is still necessarily affirmative in another, since it requires a host form or system to disrupt, and can never get beyond metaphysics itself. In other words, this mythical account of the “unsayable” Dionysian is the catch upon which most subsequent arguments against the charges of relativism or irrationalism are refuted by postmodernism and its various antecedents, because such are not fully Dionysian. Furthermore, attempting to speak about the Dionysian is by definition a missed attempt, much like deconstruction, because it is not available to rational thought or discussion.

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<sup>80</sup> Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy*, 94.

Instead, the form of speaking is ironic, Apollonian-Dionysian, which remains consistent with the Dionysian in the end, because it is a parasitic mythical construct, which has many guises. The main argumentative moves of postmodernism are bastardized and obscured invocations of this insight, brought forth in new contexts and under the guise of new outer garments, where each succeeding ironist merely charges the last predecessor as having been too metaphysical in his/her thinking. In making this charge, they willingly fall prey to the affirmative movements of their predecessor's irony, while neglecting the negating qualification of such claims. When we read the sublime "unsayable" quality of the Dionysian/retractive drive through the lens of its genealogical antecedents, particularly through the motives of Burke and Longinus, we must question the political implications of the impulse to take the critical function to a state of rational breakdown via the lightning bolt of sublimity, which calls for silence and wonder in one's audience, rather than logical deliberation.

Adding to the confusion, in the later Nietzsche, the strong appearance/reality distinction of Schopenhauerian metaphysics is rethought by Nietzsche's insight that such a notion as the real world (Will) is itself abolished, which is likewise a rethinking of the Apollonian-Dionysian as impure unities that are necessarily interconnected in a Janus type hybrid of oscillating (non)meaning.<sup>81</sup> As Berrios and Ridley explain, "On this new conception, the appearance/reality distinction is not a distinction between two logically differentiated 'worlds'... but a distinction that falls squarely within the ordinary, everyday world of actual experience."<sup>82</sup> The implication is that we are unable to say something is false according to such a real world, which makes the truth a lie, and allows for the proliferation of representations without appeal to the accountability required by such a verity. The implications of this insight can damage, yet they can also empower, which makes a straightforward rejection of them problematic. However, we must not undermine the identification of this danger as not presenting a commitment, since it is a stance, albeit only partial, or necessarily qualified.

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<sup>81</sup> Berrios and Ridley, "Nietzsche," 76-77.

<sup>82</sup> Berrios and Ridley, "Nietzsche," 77.

Berrios and Ridley, in comparison, further clarify that “this later conception of art-as-lie/lie-as-truth is structurally identical to the Apollonian,” as “thoroughly detranscendentalized.”<sup>83</sup> In distinction from the early Nietzsche, the unbearable truth of the Dionysian metaphysic (life is meaningless chaos) is immediately abandoned in the later Nietzsche, because he identifies that the Real world is merely one more fable. The new supposedly guilt-free fable that Nietzsche proposes in its place is the rise of Apollonian (beauty) proliferation, which is how lies became the truth. The distinction is very slight, but the transition is one from chaos and a meaningless and cruel universe as metaphysical truth to one as the inescapability of aesthetic device in the play of meaning, as an unavoidable manifestation of the Apollonian/beautiful. We might argue that such an original distinction made by the early Nietzsche misses the Romantic’s original ironic delivery of such an original chaos, but this nonetheless is where the distinction is supposedly made. In postmodern terms, this insight of the lost original mutates into the insight that everything has become the play of surface meaning, “pastiche” and “schizophrenia” as Fredric Jameson would identify the impulses, where the true essence of things lost is entirely abandoned to the creative play of simulations.<sup>84</sup> What I am suggesting in turn is that this insight of the play of surface meaning is not discovered by Nietzsche or subsequent postmodern thinkers, but merely repeats the original Romantic insight, which is often read bluntly to “reinvent the wheel” by another name. While this reading of Romanticism is not explicit, one can implicitly read such a consistency throughout the tradition to the present.

In other words, the distinction of the Dionysian as the true ground vs. the disappearance of the true ground is the supposedly hypothetical underlying difference between romantic and postmodern irony, along with their two slightly different understandings of the sublime, although the basic rhetorical effect remains the same. To a large degree Nietzsche is far less original than often depicted by postmodern discourse, which does not typically go back further in explanation of the romantic or aesthetic/rhetorical origins of his thought. Certainly, as we have demonstrated, the aesthetic

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<sup>83</sup> Berrios and Ridley, “Nietzsche,” 78.

<sup>84</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” *Amerikastudien – American Studies* 29.1 (1984), 283.

power that Nietzsche supposedly *discovers* is also already more or less an existent possibility in the aestheticism and rhetoric of Burke and Longinus.

Reflecting on Nietzsche's treatment of the subject, Bowie thinks upon the rhetorical necessity of the Dionysian within the Apollonian through his examination of Euripides, which is promoted it would be said for "the good of society," and this is of course to be taken in the context of the Nietzschean anti-democratic sense of the term "good." Specifically, Bowie says of the subject: "In Euripides' play, *The Bacchae*, from which the idea of the Dionysian derives... the result of trying to control or exclude the god Dionysian is a terrible revenge, a 'return of the repressed', which destroys the social order."<sup>85</sup> In order to avoid this supposed fate, Nietzsche reportedly suggests that "Dionysus's destructive effect on human society makes clear the need to integrate the power of the Dionysian into how societies deal with the world, because excluding it will eventually lead any human form of order to destroy itself."<sup>86</sup> Thus, Bowie identifies that Nietzsche's adoption of the Romantic myth of the Apollonian-Dionysian is inherently concerned with maintaining "social harmony." In other words, the intellectual importance of Nietzsche is that he thinks through, and continues, the same political/aesthetic project of these earlier rhetoricians, of cultivating a return to authoritarianism, by making the world strange through a new mythology of art. What makes Nietzsche a useful origin to the aesthetic and postmodern tradition is his own method of writing, which is more cunningly complex and sublimely evasive than either Burke or Longinus were prior.

### **Nietzsche's Mirror and the Play of Irony**

One very good and didactic reading of Nietzsche's program is Linda L. Williams's text, *Nietzsche's Mirror: The World as Will to Power* (2001). Describing what Nietzsche is up to, Williams explains:

My reading of Nietzsche has him promoting vision making, rather than trying to elevate his vision to God-like status. But of course he seems to

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<sup>85</sup> Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy*, 44.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*



want to have it both ways-to encourage those few ‘great’ persons not to capitulate to ‘the norm’ and to create their own visions and to encourage the adoption by others of his own vision... the fact you can read Nietzsche either way reveals his philosophy... and the key to it is his style of writing.<sup>87</sup>

First, note that Williams warns us that the key to understanding Nietzsche is through examining his style of writing, which will later motivate our own reading of Caputo and Vattimo. Second, note that Williams is explaining that Nietzsche, like Caputo and Vattimo, is an ironic writer, whose meaning is instable, and open to perpetual reader re-interpretation. Williams calls Nietzsche’s style of writing “mirror writing,” which she suggests is such because it is a style of writing that reflects the values of the reader back upon themselves through the play of the text.<sup>88</sup> In connection, if we can trace back a writer’s influences to Nietzsche, we must in association be on the guard for such a play upon stable meaning, otherwise they have bluntly misread Nietzsche.

In comparison, in one of his early essays, Caputo explains that “True *style* thus means to believe nothing, to be a skeptic,” which furthermore means “to be liberated from the hermeneutic illusion of a single truth, a single meaning,” and “adopt a strategy of writing which means to write with stylus, the stiletto which punctures the illusions of metaphysics.”<sup>89</sup> Alluding that we are dealing with the usage of irony, Caputo further identifies, “Woman in Nietzsche’s text is subject to an ‘undecideable oscillation’ which cannot be stabilized. But then that of course is the point: the style, the stylus, the Dionysian thrust of the text.”<sup>90</sup> The term “*Woman*” in Nietzsche’s sense of it, is here merely another politically incorrect manifestation of the terminological play of metaphor, substituted for the term designating the withdrawal of meaning or the Dionysian (the flow of irony’s ebb and flow, or give and take). Caputo explains that this style of writing is what Derrida calls

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<sup>87</sup> Linda L. Williams, *Nietzsche’s Mirror* (Landham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 108.

<sup>88</sup> Williams, *Nietzsche’s Mirror*, 108-109.

<sup>89</sup> John D. Caputo, “Supposing Truth to be a Woman...: Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Derrida,” *Tulane Studies in Philosophy* 32 (1984), 17.

<sup>90</sup> Caputo, “Supposing Truth to be a Woman,” 18.

“*le coup de don*,” which is “striking by means of the gift,” or “to take by giving.”<sup>91</sup> The youthful Caputo furthermore identifies that the point of Nietzsche’s text is not just that it “offers of truths where there are none,” but rather **the point is** “its disruptive effect” (This point will become critical later when we examine Caputo’s own use of irony in consideration of this remark).<sup>92</sup> Regarding this type of writing’s effect, in his investigation of Nietzsche, Caputo further explains that to the “dogmatic philosopher” the “*woman-truth*” is unrecognizable, which guarantees his predestined failure, because:

He knows nothing about the elusiveness and playfulness of woman-truth... He is all gravity, she playfulness. He is earnest, she dissimulates. He is credulous. She is a skeptic... She understands the power... the allure of a shadow, where that only puzzles the dogmatist... And he will never discover her secret; for it could never be true, on the philosopher’s account, that there is no truth. He is systematically blinded to her strategy. So whenever the philosopher-knight charges, he is unseated by her style, by the tip of a sword which he never saw coming... The secret of woman-truth which insures her superiority is thus a paradox: Truth in a naïve and straight forward sense is a fiction. And woman, being herself a creature of fiction, device, art, artifice, illusion, ornamentation cannot be fooled at her own game.<sup>93</sup>

Williams, in correlation, further suggests that mirroring operates in Nietzsche to reveal “the sublimated prejudices and values of his readers,” which she further suggests “challenges the assumption that a text can have only one, true meaning.”<sup>94</sup> The reader is thereby rhetorically led to take the “master-type morality” position, as an independent creator, over the “slave-type morality,” which would be adopted in following another person’s program or vision of truth. To his fellow *Übermensch* (supermen/overmen) creators, Nietzsche tempts by flattery. For example, he says, “When your gaze has become strong enough to see the bottom of the dark well of your nature and your knowledge, perhaps you will also behold in its mirror the distant constellations of future cultures.”<sup>95</sup> In

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Caputo, “Supposing Truth to be a Woman,” 15.

<sup>93</sup> Caputo, “Supposing Truth to be a Woman,” 16.

<sup>94</sup> Williams, *Nietzsche’s Mirror*, 109.

<sup>95</sup> Cited in Williams, *Nietzsche’s Mirror*, 110.

a way, Nietzsche writes for everyone, because no one would think less of themselves, and everyone likes to be in on a secret.

In this sense, Williams explains that Zarathustra is a “(re)creating,” since he has “become the god of creation-not the creation of the physical universe, as the Biblical God, but the creator of his interpretive/evaluative reality... He revalues all his values.”<sup>96</sup> The creative-destructive impulse that this project unbounded is the “eternal recurrence,” which Williams suggests “has more to do with loving our ability to interpret and reinterpret our reality and values than with embracing a vast, fixed cosmology.”<sup>97</sup> In this frame of mind, Nietzsche says, “For ‘the’ way-that does not exist. What I believe is revealed by eternal recurrence...”<sup>98</sup> This way suggests that “meaning and value” of the “past are open to total creativity.”<sup>99</sup> This prescription for a proliferation of interpretations is glaringly reminiscent of Burke’s aesthetic call for the proliferation of colours, which might reduce the potency of any one in particular, and as Tracy similarly warns such a condition might risk invoking a “genial confusion.” What is troubling about Nietzsche’s prescription for such a “democratic/anarchic” proliferation of interpretations are his indisputably reactionary objectives that are underlying such an invocation, which are equally rabidly anti-democratic and anti-Christian. The problem for our current consideration here is in evaluating the significance of finding in postmodernism the very same impulse of such a deliberate confusing of language, as inherent in the tower of Babel narrative.

The death of God, and the proliferation of *fables*, as the metaphysic of the mythology of non-imitative or non-systematic art, must therefore also be considered according to these convergences of intent. As writings that communicate via (non)logic, like the Apollonian-Dionysian, however, there is no plumbing the depths of Nietzsche’s thought or irony. Caputo, when contemplating this instability, warns “there is no resolving these competing conceptions within the text itself,” which also means that “Nietzsche has

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<sup>96</sup> Williams, *Nietzsche’s Mirror*, 120.

<sup>97</sup> Williams, *Nietzsche’s Mirror*, 123.

<sup>98</sup> Cited in Williams, *Nietzsche’s Mirror*, 115.

<sup>99</sup> Williams, *Nietzsche’s Mirror*, 116.

no mastery over his own text.”<sup>100</sup> Resolution is a product of logical development, while irony is an invocation of the failure to, or really the desire to not communicate, which is the chaotic or monstrous unbounded. In this sense, irony, chaos, and the (non)communicative are the same “beast” in different guises and at different levels of manifestation.

### **Kierkegaard, Irony, and Postmodernism**

Besides Nietzsche, the other main ironist that postmodernism associates itself with, as claimed in our introduction, is Soren Kierkegaard. There is supposedly a difference between Nietzschean and Kierkegaardian postmodernisms, as outlined by Caputo’s categories of messianic and Dionysian postmodernism. Kierkegaard, in spite of this distinction made by Caputo, is still quite interesting for our concerns because of the many similarities he shares with Nietzsche. When it comes to postmodernism’s interest in Kierkegaard, however, even more interesting are his original differences from Nietzsche. The interesting thing is that these are downplayed by certain impulses from subsequent postmodern theory that is tempted to reject certain aspects of Kierkegaard it does not like. The change, however, makes this postmodern Kierkegaard into what is then by default a friendly Nietzscheanism, despite the differences inherent to the original thinkers. The fundamental distinction between these thinkers is that Kierkegaard, much like Levinas, thinks of difference as a worldly limitation transcended by a revealed religious truth, while Nietzsche thinks that difference is insurmountable, a yea-saying, since we can never get outside of the play of representations, or the aesthetically primary worldview. In other words, Kierkegaard’s irony is transcended by immortal God, while Nietzsche’s irony is an affirmation of the *Death* of God, and the loss of truth it implicates in tow.

What is particularly interesting about Kierkegaard is that he identifies the playfulness of the aesthete with a type of morally vapid existence, in what is a critique and continuance of romanticism, of which he playfully points beyond, in his other two competing modes of existence: the ethical and the religious. Caputo does a good job outlining the subtleties of Kierkegaard’s thought, in his text *How to Read Kierkegaard*

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<sup>100</sup> Caputo, “Supposing Truth to be a Woman,” 17.

(2007), while explaining the relationship that his and Derrida's approaches maintain in comparison.

As Caputo suggests, Kierkegaard thinks that aesthetic existence is a "dead end," because it is a "moral nightmare... which is what induces in us the need for a higher point of view."<sup>101</sup> In defining aestheticism via Kierkegaard, Caputo explains that "the whole idea of 'aestheticism' is to station oneself decisively in the field of indecision and freedom from choice."<sup>102</sup> Caputo adds that for the aesthete the objective writing/living is to "abide strictly in the sphere of possibility, to remain eternally young, with an eye that sees possibility everywhere, while taking shelter from the harsh winds of actuality."<sup>103</sup> In connection to Nietzsche's idea of the eternal return, we might compare what Caputo next describes of Kierkegaard's understanding of aesthetic temporality to entail. In specific, Caputo suggests that for Kierkegaard, "The aesthete's life is volatilized into a series of discontinuous moments, governed by the rule of forgetting whatever is unpleasant about the past and recalling only its pleasures, and of reducing the future to a new supply of possible diversions," which means that "the aesthete lacks the unity of existence conferred upon" a life that would be structured by the 'decisiveness of a choice.'<sup>104</sup> The central example of such a moment of choice for Kierkegaard is the marital vow, which Caputo also explains.<sup>105</sup> As the moment of choice, Caputo explains that the marital vow is thought by Kierkegaard to be "charged by the enduring commitment to the vow," which is a repeating forward.<sup>106</sup> In comparison, Caputo explains that "the religious is a repetition carried out in virtue of the absurd, one altogether in God's hands."<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> John D. Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007), 30.

<sup>102</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 27.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 30.

<sup>105</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 37.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 51.

Caputo prefers reading Kierkegaard as “a kind of revolutionary anti-philosophy that turns philosophy’s head in the opposite direction, toward the lowest and least and last among us—the subjective, the personal, the existential, the singular, the little ‘fragments,’ as Climacus (pseudonym for Kierkegaard) put it, that Hegel’s vast ‘system of philosophy omits.’”<sup>108</sup> In focusing upon these elements of Kierkegaard, Caputo follows Derrida in “defending the exception as itself an ethical category,” where “no ethical obligation may be reduced to the mechanical application of a universal rule.”<sup>109</sup> This defense of the exception is proposed by postmodernism in contrast to what it sees as, in Caputo’s words, “a distorted conception of religion that emerges in the last years of” Kierkegaard’s life, “where the demands of God above are so overwhelming that they can completely annul the significance of life on earth.”<sup>110</sup> Caputo further deems this problematic he says because “instead of maintaining its tensions, the dialectic collapses.”<sup>111</sup>

The movement from an aesthetic life to one of religious faith is partially examined by Kierkegaard in his text *Either/Or*, which in typical ironic fashion is what Caputo calls “a Chinese puzzle of boxes inside boxes.”<sup>112</sup> The left-handedness, or aesthetic complexity, of this puzzle prompts Mark C. Taylor, in his essay, “Text as Victim,” to ask: “who is the author of *Either-or*?”<sup>113</sup> The difficulty of answering this question is that the text does not offer a stable argument or logic that we might identify as an author’s intent, but instead “we discover a seemingly endless chain, an infinite proliferation of authors,” and thus *Either/Or* is not even a text, but is instead “a plurality of texts within texts,” where such plurality creates “a labyrinth from which there appears to be no exit...,” instead we are offered

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<sup>108</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 17.

<sup>109</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 55.

<sup>110</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 52.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Cited in Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 23.

<sup>113</sup> Mark C. Taylor “Text as Victim,” in *Deconstruction and Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 61.

“Self-effacing author(s) presenting self-effacing conclusions...”<sup>114</sup> The ironic death of the author is the death of God in miniature, or in Kierkegaard’s case in wholly otherness, which again is in both cases an epistemological sophistication, rather than a metaphysical commitment.

George Pattison identifies this aesthetic writing style (with the death of the author) as the self-aggravating “comic situation,” where the deeper one reflects on the motions of the text, the “more infinite the comic situation becomes inside itself... the dizzier one becomes, and yet one cannot stop staring into it.”<sup>115</sup> Further reflecting on the aesthetic effect of such texts, Pattison continues to explain, by citing Kierkegaard, that “The enjoyment that such infinitely empty reflection occasions is... like the enjoyment that comes from a man gazing at the swirling shapes made by his tobacco smoke-ininitely enjoyable and altogether meaningless,” which is a view labeled by Kierkegaard as “docetic” and “acosmic,” because it is “an attempt to suspend all ethics.”<sup>116</sup> Thus, as Pattison demonstrates, Kierkegaard is aware of the moral problems with ironic writing and aestheticism.

In rectification of the problem, Kierkegaard interprets that there are three different possible compartments in life, as partially alluded to above. These three possible existential stages that a text or an author might adopt in intent, or in life, are: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. *Either/Or* deals primarily with the two first stages, while *Fear and Trembling* takes us into the religious stage. The interesting thing about Kierkegaard is these stages are not merely systematically evident or progressive in the Hegelian sense, but instead waver in uncertainty. As Merold Westphal warns about Kierkegaard’s writing style, “there is appropriation as well as negation, and Kierkegaard is never simply anti-Hegelian.”<sup>117</sup> In correspondence, Caputo says of *Either/Or* that the text is meant to “taunt

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<sup>114</sup> Taylor, “Text as Victim,” 61-62.

<sup>115</sup> Cited in George Pattison, “Art in the Age of Reflection,” in *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 85.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Merold Westphal, “Kierkegaard and Hegel,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 101.

the Hegelians,” because “Kierkegaard is *playing* on the central Hegelian tenet that the principle of movement in the ‘System’ is the power of the negative embodied in the principle of contradiction,” where “movement is described by Hegel as the negation of a prior affirmation.”<sup>118</sup> Usually, such Hegelian movement, works via a progress to “a higher unity of the affirmation and negation;” which, Caputo explains, are normally “nullified in their abstract opposition to each other and lifted up into a higher and concrete unity.”<sup>119</sup> In contrast, Caputo explains that the aesthete does not adopt a thesis at all, which means that “he does not have to suffer the blows of an antithesis.”<sup>120</sup> Thus, Caputo further says of the aesthetic disposition, “By not taking a stand or making a decision, he does not have to withstand negative consequences.”<sup>121</sup> It is interesting in connection to note that Caputo claims that his own affinity to working with Derrida and deconstruction was quickened by his understanding of Kierkegaard.

The ways that Kierkegaard and postmodernism propose to get beyond the negative consequences of aestheticism are however not definitively same. Continuing what we were speaking of above, Caputo explains that “In postmodernity, Kierkegaard’s category of the exception is widened beyond its religious scope... For it is just in virtue of its ‘singularity’ that each thing is inscribed in a field of aesthetic, ethical, and religious transcendence that commands our respect, a transcendence that would honor the world God has created instead of regarding it as a place that has been blackened by God... to wean us for eternity, as Kierkegaard says at the beginning of *Fear and Trembling*...”<sup>122</sup> Thus, what Caputo is inadvertently recommending of Kierkegaard is that we read him more according to the Nietzschean impulse of promoting the singularity of life philosophy/existentialism. This vision is a promotion of the singular over the systematic, or in terms not expressed: the individual over the collective. The difference is that “singularity” is redescribed as “the

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<sup>118</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 25.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 55.



exception,” yet the particular is the exception of the systematic, which leaves one to wonder if we are not simply renaming the same Kierkegaardian aesthetic smoke rings in more politically correct garb.

In *Fear and Trembling*, contrastingly, Kierkegaard examines the existential paradox of Abraham’s situation in God’s call for the sacrifice of Isaac as a response to the religious calling of the absurd. Abraham’s response of a religious leap into the absurd (killing Isaac because God “told” him so) troubles Caputo. He demonstrates this fear when he declaratively states/asks: “*Fear and Trembling* appears to realize the worst fears of those who are troubled by Kierkegaard’s view that ‘truth is subjectivity’. Is something true just so long as you are deeply and passionately convinced that it is true? Is that not the very definition of fanaticism?”<sup>123</sup> Caputo then adds, “What goes ultimately amiss in Kierkegaard is that he believes temporal existence does not have the stuff, the substance, the wherewithal to withstand eternity if ever eternity makes an unconditional demand upon it, as God here demands the absurd of Abraham.”<sup>124</sup> In other words, Kierkegaard is made more like Nietzsche, minus the politically incorrect rhetoric of the Will to power, which is equally rhetorically counter-balanced by such talk about ideas like the messianic and religion with/out religion, which comprise the ironic-Christian promise. Caputo and Derrida, therefore, in contrast to what Caputo himself identifies as the historical Kierkegaard, want to keep the tension between time and eternity in suspense, in order to promote “giving life its existential passion.”<sup>125</sup>

### **Comparing Postmodernism, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard**

Common to both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in this promotion of the particular, however, is an “ultra-conservative” agenda that wanted to alert us “to the downside and dangers posed by democratic institutions.”<sup>126</sup> This is where form (aestheticism) becomes a

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<sup>123</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 46.

<sup>124</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 52.

<sup>125</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 109.

<sup>126</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 83.

mythology, or ideological commitment. In connection, Caputo says of Nietzsche's reactionary response that he believed that "the antidote to the leveling tendencies of the nineteenth century was art, especially the tragic art of the ancient Greeks."<sup>127</sup> What Caputo also comparatively identifies as operative in the ironic approach of Kierkegaard's writings is a concern that modern bourgeois life was making "everything safe and easy," which Kierkegaard felt needed to be counteracted by restoring "life to its original difficulty."<sup>128</sup> Similarly, Caputo further explains of Kierkegaard that he, like Nietzsche and Heidegger, "feared the existing individual would be lost in a cloud of anonymity and by means of large numbers (a crowd) enabled to escape what each individual faces singularly in his own life-a personal decision."<sup>129</sup> The antidote to this danger, Caputo says, for both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard was "the intensity of a passionate singularity."<sup>130</sup> In an attempt to distinguish these tendencies, Caputo proposes the following distinction between Nietzsche and Kierkegaard's advocacy of singularity. Where Kierkegaard interprets such singularity as "an event of inwardness, of standing alone before God," Nietzsche "regarded such exotic singularities as... a piece of cosmic luck" ( a "purely pagan and aesthetic formula").<sup>131</sup> Yet, the distinction lies in Kierkegaard's invocation of the supernatural intervention of God, which Caputo has already suggested he thinks dangerous and fundamentalist. Therefore, Caputo's Kierkegaard does not hold up this distinction between thinkers.

This distinction does have legitimacy for the historical Kierkegaard, and it does apply to Caputo's affirmative content that is speaking about another kind of postmodernism that is inspired by "Christian politics that drew upon the Jewish prophets."<sup>132</sup> For the historical Kierkegaard, however, such a religious singularity is not temporal. As Caputo elsewhere explains, Kierkegaard distinguished this singularity as a "*deeper* equalization,

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<sup>127</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 88.

<sup>128</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 90.

<sup>129</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 83.

<sup>130</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 88.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 99

where no matter what our outer circumstances, we are, each one of us, taken singly, absolutely equal-before God.”<sup>133</sup> According to such an otherworldly line of thinking about equality, Caputo observes that Kierkegaard would revealingly ask: “Imagine the madness were the man to confuse himself with his costume?”<sup>134</sup> Regrettably, when it comes to the world, which is a “stage,” the costume is exactly the matter of importance, while Kierkegaard’s solipsistic self is merely ephemerally daydreaming. Thus, Caputo more or less demonstrates that he is aware that Kierkegaard is a problematic resource for drawing upon a socially progressive “preference for the poor,” but in fairness there does seem to be something more akin to it in his natural association towards Judeo-Christian prophetic concerns, due to Kierkegaard’s final leap of faith into the religiously absurd. The problem that remains, however, is that we have already demonstrated such a leap is not where postmodernism is going. Thus, what is the distinction between Nietzsche and Kierkegaard then?

Caputo offers in explanation his account of the two lines of postmodernism, which we have already in passing mentioned. In his examination of Kierkegaard, Caputo distinguishes the two positions as: 1) leading from Kierkegaard to Levinas and Derrida, contra 2) the other developing from Nietzsche to Foucault and Deleuze.<sup>135</sup> What is interesting about Caputo’s mention of his distinction here is the rapidity with which his ironic withdrawal of meaning is enacted in comparison to other places where the distinction is again made, which we will examine in the subsequent chapter. In connection, he quickly qualifies his two lines of postmodernism, warning, “I say ‘roughly’ (regarding the tenability of the two pronged distinction of postmodernism) because any version of postmodernism would be critical of the thoroughgoing ‘inwardness’ of Kierkegaardian subjectivity, which postmodernism critics treat as one of the fatally flawed axioms of modernity.”<sup>136</sup> Again, we will come back to this question when in the next chapter we

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<sup>133</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 93.

<sup>134</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 95.

<sup>135</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 88.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

examine Caputo's use of irony, but for now, let it suffice that the ebb and flow of irony is at work, and Caputo is not fully being straightforward with us. If his distinction between the prophetic and Dionysian postmodern collapses back into irony, what is left but the workings of the form taking priority over the content of his message?

Another instance of leading us at least partially astray, whether intentionally or not, is when Caputo suggests that Kierkegaard's "attack on traditional philosophy produced a new philosophy, philosophy-under-attack, one that in Kierkegaard's case dislodges philosophy from speculation and lodges more deeply into the tortured texture of concrete human experience than was heretofore possible."<sup>137</sup> Caputo is partially correct that Kierkegaard is generally regarded as one of the origins of existentialist emphasis on "the concreteness of life," yet as we have previously shown the roots of this idea date back at least to the German romantics, and their creation of romantic irony, which is really a twisting of focus of the program of sublimity advocated by Burke and Longinus. Not taking the Romantics and the great avant-garde literary trends that succeeded them into account seems to risk decontextualizing the historical relevance of the subject.

### **German Romanticism, Irony, and Postmodernism**

While Caputo and Vattimo predominantly limit the origins of their conversation to the high priests of the postmodern (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger), before such thinkers there were the Jena romantics. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger are heavily indebted to them, although this goes largely unacknowledged. The Jena romantics are the thinkers, also known as the German Romantics, which are the also often unacknowledged source of British Romanticism, which is more widely known about in the Anglo-American academy. Yet, if not read from the context of their German origins, these British romantics are not fully understandable, according to the movement they largely champion that more or less began in Germany. In short, the importance of the German romantics is that they are

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<sup>137</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 80.

one of the main sources of the literary backlash against the aspiration for full illumination espoused by the Enlightenment, and its philosophical program.

On the subject, Claire Colebrook explains of the Romantics that “What they were against, predominantly, was reason and the enlightenment restriction of reason to a universal human norm.”<sup>138</sup> In particular, the German Romantics are commonly associated with the group of literary thinkers also connected with the literary journal called the *Athenaeum*, which was published from 1798-1800. Individual thinkers associated with this journal include: Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel, August Wilhelm Schlegel, Dorothea von Schlegel, Karoline Schelling/Schlegel, Novalis, August Ferdinand Bernhardt, Sophie Bernhardt, Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, A. L. Hulsen, and K.G. Brinckmann. The main writers of the movement are the Schegel brothers and Novalis, while Schleiermacher is more famous for his work in religion and hermeneutics outside the journal. In general, the romantics were highly influenced by Burke, which is evident in the stylistic workings of their writing. Such writing is convoluted, fragmentary, and infinitely ironic. In fact, they are the root of what we properly call irony, in the continental sense of the word (what is commonly called, not surprisingly, Romantic irony, bearing testament to whence it came).

Irony, in the more sinister continental sense, is a rhetorical device of speaking without saying anything, or at least without saying anything without reservation, which is perfect for someone who does not really want to talk about something that is indefensibly unjust. They have no possible justification or rational excuse for matters being such, or any hope of others openly accepting such an unjustifiable circumstance, except through a confounding deception, and by avoiding the subject. Irony in this Longinian sense is a way of speaking without risking an open confrontation of moral/rational argument. In a less sinister sense, it is a great way of making claims without fully committing to them, since they are always said half-heartedly, which operates like a backdoor out of all propositional statements. As Caputo said in our discussion of Kierkegaard earlier, it is a way of speaking without forming a determinant thesis that would suffer the blows of any antitheses. Instead

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<sup>138</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 47.

of rational justification, irony offers the semblance of justification that would appease others, or at least divert and bore them perpetually, since it induces a vertigo that cannot be relieved. In this diversion, the reader is led on a goose chase to find a determinate thesis or purpose, where none exists.

In comparison, Colebrook identifies several tendencies of ironic texts by the Romantics. First, they are fragmentary and incomplete, which means she says that “they gestured to a process of creation that is always coming to completion.”<sup>139</sup> This incompleteness (the non-formation of a thesis), and the process of working towards it, are very important to remember. Second, these texts are “not purposive or intentional objects generated from a single consciousness with an intention to communicate some content,” but instead “often convey a sense of incoherence of voice, or that one cannot say what is being said.”<sup>140</sup> As a meaningful speech act (by traditional understanding), Colebrook warns that irony “fails to work, because it “is often self-undermining or internally contradictory.”<sup>141</sup> Third, she says that ironic texts are “critical,” which means that art is self-conscious because “it includes a reflection on its own origin and acknowledges a distance or difference from that origin.”<sup>142</sup> In a summarizing word, irony is a device of aestheticism: *art for art's sake*, which we will look at in greater detail later, but in essence it is the prioritization of form over content (particularly, as it manifests in aestheticism proper, with erasing the Judeo-Christian concern for the poor and oppressed). It is nevertheless true that the use of irony can be justified by other means. One place where irony seems well equipped is with pointing out a limit experience, where reason collapses before something it cannot possibly understand. This humility is what is profound about irony. However, despite this seeming appropriateness in the face of such incomprehensible otherness, it remains equally a discourse of division. On this problem, Colebrook says:

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<sup>139</sup> Colebrook, *Irony*, 66.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Colebrook, *Irony*, 67.

One of the common political objections to Romanticism is its incapacity to be critical. Romantic poetry is a retreat from the difference and conflict of political life, and Romantic irony collapses all political differences into an absolute poetry, imagination or inwardness. From the Romantic point of view, any outer, real or material world can only be known and mediated through poetry and spirit.<sup>143</sup>

Thus, as Colebrook alludes in her recognition of irony's poetic drive that compromises the critical function, there are those "in the know," and those who are irony's victims. If you are not aware of the message of the form, then you are going to get strung along by the give and take of the teasing of the semblances of meaning. In comparison, Isaiah Berlin says, "The reason why Fascism owes something to romanticism is, again, because the notion of the unpredictable will either of a man or a group, which forges forward in some fashion that which is impossible to organize, impossible to predict, impossible to rationalize."<sup>144</sup> In this sense, it is dishonest by its invocation of the sublime and irrational, which is subversive, yet not in a progressive sense, because the collapse of political and argumentative difference is the collapse of the critical function, which is deferred on a never-ending detour or aside. The argument often then turns from discussing topics to a hunt for the author, which is crafted to be an endless goose chase. According to the hermeneutic situation that romanticism instigates, Berlin continues, "to attempt to see things as submissive to some kind of intellectualization, some sort of plan, to attempt to draw up a set of rules, or a set of laws, or a formula, is a form of self-indulgence, and in the end suicidal stupidity... That at any rate is the sermon of the romantics."<sup>145</sup> Comparatively, Berlin continues: (if) "to dissect is to murder," as Wordsworth said, then romantic hermeneutics is instead "a process of perpetual forward creation."<sup>146</sup> In other words, in the death of the ironic text's author, or ground of sense and meaning (the *Death* of God in microcosmic form), then to read is an act of co-creation, since the original is barred, and a foolhardy pursuit for the critic.

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<sup>143</sup> Colebrook, *Irony*, 70.

<sup>144</sup> Isaiah Berlin and Henry Hardy, *Romanticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 145.

<sup>145</sup> Berlin and Hardy, *Romanticism*, 120.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

Echoing Burke and Longinus, Bowie comparatively says of the centrality of art for Romanticism that “The greatest art is not great because we know all about why it is great, but because it compels us to keep coming back to it... There is, therefore, no ‘closure’ with regard to art...”<sup>147</sup> Regarding the proximity of this tendency of romantic art to current theory, Bowie adds, “In this respect the Romantics come close to certain ideas in contemporary pragmatism and in post-structuralism.”<sup>148</sup> On the function of the Romantic writing style, Bowie furthermore adds, “Some of their best-known work takes the form of short fragments and aphorisms, which enact the sense of incompleteness they are trying to communicate.”<sup>149</sup> Examining such incompleteness as a function of irony, Bowie also explains that Romantic irony “does not come to an end,” and it is “an attitude of mind which tries to come to terms with the finitude of every individual’s existence, rather than trying to transcend that finitude by reaching a positive, philosophical conclusion.”<sup>150</sup> In this sense, irony is very much about taking thinking down into the non-systematic and guiding or pointing it towards the irrational.

### **Romantic Irony: A New Mythology**

Romantic irony is theoretically not, however, irrational. The reason it stays clear of this charge is that the Dionysian is only spoken via the Apollonian, which means the romantic is rational-irrational, in ironic wavering. Regarding its status as a new mythology, Bowie says, “Schegel and Novalis do not deny the need for systematic coherence, but they see it in terms of ‘systemlessness brought into a system.’”<sup>151</sup> Describing the operation of such romantic irony, Bowie continues, “In Schlegel’s case the *Aufhebung* does not raise us to a higher level in an endless progression toward the far-off fulfillment of union with Absolute Spirit, the Idea, nor does it move toward the achievement of Absolute Knowledge,” instead... “It transplants us into a mad chaos,” and... “leads to total non-

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<sup>147</sup> Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy*, 99.

<sup>148</sup> Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy*, 99.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy*, 53.



knowledge.”<sup>152</sup> Reflecting on the effect of this ironic move to chaos, Bowie warns, “Hegel was right to be appalled.”<sup>153</sup> Basically, irony is the *enactment* of this collapse of (non)logical speech that falls into this mad chaos. This effect identifies what the Romantics called their “new mythology.”<sup>154</sup> The question that remains to be answered in our discussion is whether or not any account that eventually collapses into this condition can avoid being a manifestation of the “new mythology.” On the topic, Bowie explains, “The new mythology is naively profound, or profoundly naïve... The combination of naiveté and profundity makes it both enthusiastic and ironical at the same time.”<sup>155</sup> Thus, the new mythology is a combination of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, or the affirmative and the destructive.

J. Hillis Miller identifies this type of ironic/poetic language that is utilized by Schlegel with “a magic power to transpose the reader into original chaos,” which is a “new language” that “is the language of madness and foolishness.”<sup>156</sup> Miller, incidentally, suggests that the definition of “poetry as magic” is a recurrent motif in Schlegel’s work.<sup>157</sup> On the significance of this observation, Miller explains the relevance of such an understanding of irony as the equivalent of magic:

It is a feature of magic formulas... that they are, at least superficially or to profane ears and eyes, senseless, stupid: ‘Abracadabra! Hocus-Pocus!’ says the magician, and something happens, a pack of cards is turned into a pigeon. **Schlegel’s conception of mythology is ultimately performative, not constative.** A work of mythology is a speech act that works through its senselessness to reveal, in a magic opening up, a gleam of the semblance of chaos. It thereby works to transform its readers through this revelation. We

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<sup>152</sup> Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy*, 71.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy*, 70.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> J. Hillis Miller, “Friedrich Schlegel and the Anti-Ekphrastic Tradition,” in *Revenge of the Aesthetic* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 72.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

do not come to know anything through a myth. We are made different, magically. The mythological work works.<sup>158</sup>

Therefore, Miller identifies that the “new mythology” is one that is concerned with effects on its readership, in the spirit of something akin to McLuhan’s statement that “the medium is the message,” which works via its medium, in a Longinian spirit, to impose perplexity upon readers via the instigation of the arresting suspension of the rational mind in its confrontation with the sublime. In this sense, irony is a metaphysic. It is not a constative metaphysic. It is instead a performative or enacted metaphysic or mythology. The human design is left in wait within the implementation of literary craft and art, rather than directly espoused in a content based propositional manner. In this way, we truly can never get beyond metaphysics. In comparison, Miller says elsewhere that “the performative side of a speech act is alien to knowledge,” which has the consequence that “It makes something happen, but just how, by just whose authority, and just what happens can never be known for certain.”<sup>159</sup> Elaborating the significance of such non-logical speech acts in relation to Schlegel, Miller continues, “Another way to put this is to say that mythologies are for Schlegel forced and abusive transfers of language, thrown out to name something that has no proper name, something that is unknown and unknowable. The rhetorical name for this procedure is **catachresis** (the misuse of words, perversion). I therefore call Schlegel’s myths catachreses of chaos.”<sup>160</sup> Therefore, irony enacts the effect of catachresis upon a reader taken into a suspension of the logical thought process.

Similarly, Miller notes that Paul de Man’s definition of irony is that it is “unrelieved vertigo, dizziness to the point of madness... as an infinite absolute negativity incapable of dialectical sublation, lifting up, or relief.”<sup>161</sup> In further explanation, Miller adds: “It means incomprehensibility, vertigo, a dead end in thought, the permanent suspension or parabasis

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid. Italics added.

<sup>159</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Others* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 39. Underlining added for emphasis.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Cited by Miller, “Friedrich Schlegel and the Anti-Ekphrastic Tradition,” 69.

of dialectical progression.”<sup>162</sup> And, categorizing the type of thing that irony truly is, Miller likewise tells us again that the romantic is “a mythology.” He says that this particular mythology “must be **both enthusiastic and ironical at once**, in defiance of reason. It must be enthusiastic in order to be inhabited by the highest. Since the highest is also chaotic, however, it can only be adequately allegorized in a mythology that is self-canceling, against reason, or alogical. Schlegel’s name for this kind of discourse is ‘irony’.”<sup>163</sup> According to this line of romantic thinking, Miller adds that such a conception of “higher reason is not rational, clear, but an irrational confusion.”<sup>164</sup> Again, this irrational ground is the Dionysian “*Real*” world that Nietzsche would hypothetically rethink in the *Gay Science* to usher in what we commonly call the postmodern pursuit of turning from the modern. Yet, this postmodern aestheticism is already existent as a possible reading of Schlegel, since it is possible that he too invokes such primordial recognition to the Dionysian in an ironic way.

The difficulty of determining whether Nietzsche and the postmodern are simply rehash Schlegel is in the ambiguity of irony itself, and distinctions made between ironists in commenting on the play of the surface content of one another’s arguments are merely potential “straw man” attacks. This potential we shall argue limits the hermeneutic accuracy of a non-ironic reading of the Caputo and Vattimo dialogue. In comparison, Miller explains of Schlegel, “It is always impossible to tell whether Schlegel is being serious or not... he may be or he may not be... the meaning is suspended in a permanent parabasis,” which is equally indicative of the consequences for the critical function accompanying the magical mechanism of the form that Miller identifies.<sup>165</sup> Thus, as we will come to see later, the effect is the same in the end, apart from the role that the content is advocating.

In the rise of the prominence of form over content, the romantic religion of the ironic comes into existence. As Bowie explains, “The tension between needs formerly

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Miller, “Friedrich Schlegel and the Anti-Ekphrastic Tradition,” 71.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

catered for by religion and the social effects of modern science and modern capitalism is a key to much of German philosophy.”<sup>166</sup> Consequently, such ideological revisionism found part of its motivation in begrudging the mass availability of traditionally privileged cultural capital, as well explained by both the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and the German historian Fritz K. Ringer.<sup>167</sup> As we have indicated earlier, the lament of this socio-cultural leveling is known as the decadence of modernity, and as Ringer effectively points out this reactive tendency deals more with a self-aggrandizing middle class rather than with a socio-economic, or political elite.<sup>168</sup> On the subject, Ringer says:

Their personal and social aspirations extend beyond the standing of lower-class experts or scribes. They demand to be recognized as a sort of spiritual nobility, to be raised above the class of their origins by their learning... In theory at least, they constitute a potential danger for the ruler, since they need only declare his government a hindrance to culture in order to refute its claims upon popular obedience. In practice, of course, their power is not that immediate, and the ruler is not entirely helpless against them. He does need their services as administrators; but he also pays their salaries... As full industrialization and urbanization is approached, wealthy entrepreneurs and industrial workers are likely to challenge the leadership of the cultured elite... Struggle as they will, the mandarins are likely to find their influence upon public affairs reduced. Party leaders, capitalists, and technicians will usurp their leadership... Ever growing numbers of students will come to the universities for ‘some sort of an education,’ and they will want to study such practical subjects as journalism and machine building, rather than Latin and metaphysics. The traditional schooling of the elite, and mildly esoteric culture, will no longer seem practical enough to modernists. All kinds of utilitarian considerations will be brought forward to advance the cause of technology... Clearly, the mandarins will be in danger of being ignored altogether.<sup>169</sup>

Ringer, in describing the German intellectual class of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as “Mandarins,” and also linking them with a common tendency across Europe, is not using

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<sup>166</sup> Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy*, 2.

<sup>167</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 34, and Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 2-3.

<sup>168</sup> Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins*, 2-3.

<sup>169</sup> Ringer, *Decline of the German Mandarins*, 9-12.

the term in any important sense outside of what he calls an association with Max Weber's similarly framed portrait of the decline of the traditional learned officials of China. The link being that the same transformational forces of Western modernization were threatening to each then reigning social hierarchy. The basic thrust of Ringer's depiction is that early 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers, especially those from Germany, were heavily influenced by a mythos of the decline of culture resulting from the philistine degeneration of society, which was really a reflection of their own perceptions of waning or frustrated influence in socio-political affairs, when their spiritual stature did not match socio-economic or political reality. Likewise, Terry Eagleton and Gene H. Bell-Villada identify similar social motivations fuelling the rise of literature, New Criticism, and aestheticism in both Britain and the United States.<sup>170</sup>

With Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard being the key foundational thinkers of postmodernism, it is fair to say that through their thought Vattimo and Caputo have inherited accompanying assumptions intrinsic to the logic of such socio-political influences. The difference being that postmodernism has been largely accepted, where Nietzsche and Kierkegaard were neglected by their contemporaries, and Heidegger felt simply misunderstood despite his attained fame, which nonetheless resulted in his eventual rejection by Nazism<sup>171</sup>. On Heidegger's position, Michael E. Zimmerman says:

Like other reactionaries, he rejected the economic and political values of the Enlightenment and called for a new social order that could arise only by returning to Germany's primal roots. Unlike other reactionaries, however, he wanted to renew Germany's roots not in order to restore a pastoral pre-technological world, but instead in order to inaugurate a world order in which Germans could establish a new mode of working and producing... Some of those ideologues maintained that Germany's problems began with the Enlightenment and could presumably be cured by a return to a pre-Enlightenment social order... Heidegger nevertheless maintained that the decadent history of the West began with Greek metaphysics. The primal Greek encounter with the being of entities had quickly degenerated into the productionist metaphysics which culminated in modern technology... The

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<sup>170</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), and Gene H. Bell-Villada, *Art for Art's Sake and Literary Life* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

<sup>171</sup> See Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990).

crisis facing Germany, he maintained, was metaphysical; it resulted from the decline in Western humanity's understanding of being.<sup>172</sup>

Therefore, while Heidegger was a supporter of the Nazi party, he did not agree with its crude mythology of a pastoral return to German roots, in some kind of neo-paganism of blood and soil. Rather, Heidegger was hoping to establish in the new German Reich another type of (post)metaphysical understanding that could do away with the decadence of Enlightenment thinking, and avert Germany from its pervasive sense of crisis, which he shared with the other spiritual elites of his socio-economic class. We see similar tendencies operative in the Romantic tradition, Stephan George's concept of "secret Germany," Leo Strauss's "esotericism," Lacan's Master's discourse, and in Foucault's condemnation of subsequent deconstruction's dependence upon the uniqueness of its founder, and his privatization of language.

Comparatively, Bowie explains that the rise of the new mythology would by modern circumstances require that it be a "mythology of reason," and Bowie sees the recognition for such a need first occurs in the wake of when "the French Revolution implements the Terror in the name of Reason, and the ways in which universal principles can lead to inhumanity," which "suggest the need for new approaches to the reconciliation of individual and society."<sup>173</sup> Elsewhere, Bowie is more explicit about the role of romanticism in this tendency of German philosophy, when he says, "The intellectual efforts of Early Romanticism center on the program of a New Mythology, a mythology that can do for modernity what traditional mythology did for ancient cultures. Apart from its religious and cultural associations the term "mythology" in romanticism denotes a practical overcoming of the narrow boundaries of discursive knowledge."<sup>174</sup> Regarding the role of traditional religion in such a new mythology, Bowie further explains, "The mythologies of antiquity may have fulfilled the same function in the past, but for the demands of a new age

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<sup>172</sup> Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity*, 4.

<sup>173</sup> Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy*, 35-36.

<sup>174</sup> Andrew Bowie "German Idealism and the Arts," in *Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 226.

they can be used only indirectly. Their ethical and aesthetic ideas can support the process of being educated in a New Mythology. A New Mythology, however, represents not a repetition of history, but a coming of age.”<sup>175</sup> On the originally intended ideological significance of this new mythology, Ayon Maharaj comparatively says that “From Schegel’s perspective irony is uniquely poised to become the new religion of a godless age.”<sup>176</sup> Likewise, within this romantic impulse, Peter Murphy and David Roberts identify a “sense of revolutionary crisis,” where “texts are seeking a socially binding force, which will provide a unifying spiritual center against the corrosive effects of analytic reason.”<sup>177</sup> Once again we hear the influence of de Maistre’s political pessimism that requires or prescribes occulting experience against advancing general enlightenment.

In further describing this New Mythology via Novalis’s conception thereof, Bowie also says, “The world must be romanticized. Then one will again find this original sense. Romanticizing is nothing more than a qualitative involution. In this operation the lower self is identified with a better self. In this manner we are a qualitative series of powers. This operation is still completely unknown. When I give the commonplace a higher meaning, the customary a mysterious appearance, the known the dignity of the unknown, the finite the illusion of the infinite, I romanticize it... Reciprocal elevation and debasement.”<sup>178</sup> Further describing this reciprocal elevation and debasement, Bowie later adds, “Characteristic of romanticism’s cosmopolitan humanism is the criticism of both irrationality and abstract reason, and of relativism and abstract universalism.”<sup>179</sup> Comparatively, Miller says that works that would contribute to the formation of the new mythology would have to be in “constant transformation because what they indirectly represent is not fixed but is in constant, senseless metamorphosis, subject to deformations beyond the human power to comprehend.”<sup>180</sup> Thus, we are describing the workings of irony and the sublime, and its

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Maharaj, Ayon. *The dialectics of Aesthetic Agency* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 112.

<sup>177</sup> Peter Murphy and David Roberts, *Dialectic of Romanticism* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 23.

<sup>178</sup> Bowie, “German Idealism and the Arts,” 227.

<sup>179</sup> Bowie, “German Idealism and the Arts,” 233.

weak adoption of strong affirmations, which is always a working towards the end of metaphysics, yet never is completed.

Miller is even more forthright about the subject, when he reflects on Schlegel, saying, “Indeed, this artfully ordered confusion, this charming symmetry of contradictions, this wonderfully perennial alteration of enthusiasm and irony which lives even in the smallest parts of the whole, seem to me to be an indirect mythology themselves.”<sup>181</sup> About the operation of this ironic form, Miller further explains that each of the smallest parts of such a new mythology must mirror the “paradoxical witty structure of the whole,” which means that irony is consistently utilized in all of the propositions that make up the totality of propositions of a work, and none of them would offer a stable declaration, minus a withdrawing of the same.<sup>182</sup> In consideration of our hermeneutic approach towards the Caputo and Vattimo dialogue, we must assume that the same witty structure could define the particular and textual whole of the dialogue’s framework.

Linking this tendency of irony back to the Dionysian, Miller later explains, “Dionysus becomes the basis of the intelligible world, which produces endless forms out of itself,” which means that like Romantic art, Dionysus is “still in the process of becoming... it can eternally only become, can never be completed, and this results in the outcome that “the unleashing of a world of decentered diversity.”<sup>183</sup> Elaborating on the import of this outcome elsewhere, Bowie, in linking such a decentering with the rhetoric of poeise, says:

Poeise as originating in the negation of the ‘progress and laws of rationally thinking reason...’ We should instead be plunged into ‘the beautiful confusion of fantasy, into the original chaos of human nature, for which I know of no better symbol until now than the colourful swarm of the ancient Gods’. The potential for the new mythology is seen as dependent on a suspension of reason... Schlegel wishes to see the creative potential beyond

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<sup>180</sup> Miller, *Others*, 27.

<sup>181</sup> Cited in Miller, *Others*, 16.

<sup>182</sup> Miller, *Others*, 27.

<sup>183</sup> Bowie, “German Idealism and the Arts,” 56.



every particular sensuous object, which leads to an endless proliferation, of the kind Kant warned against in his reflections on the sublime.<sup>184</sup>

Therefore, as Bowie explains, the new mythology is the intentional proliferation of something akin to the original chaos of “pre-conceptual” life, which we might say is a romantic mirroring of the continual swarm of the ever-regenerating impulse that is hypothetically inherent in nature. Like Burke, in his treatise on the sublime, Schlegel is interested in the proliferation of colour (i.e., representation, the Apollonian, or fantastical content), which he equates with the ancient Greek Gods, and their archetypal personifications for the bodily impulses of the will, or the irrational-rational. In this sense, the new mythology operates as the unbounding-bounding of the Promethean, where the rational or conceptual impulse to unity is overwhelmed by a proliferation of the earthly or creaturely/monstrous. The flux of the temporal in this vision is without grounding rational or unified governance, yet such does not prevail as unity either. Likewise, examining Schlegel’s same intent operating within his usage of the accordant signifying metaphor of the “arabesque,” Miller explains:

...when he says “arabesque,” as much of Raphael’s arabesques-complex designs of beasts, flowers, and foliage-as of the Muslim designs to which Raphael was alluding... In either case an arabesque is, like the airy flourishes of Corporal Trim’s stick in *Tristram Shandy*, a tangle of lines whose interleaved wanderings are governed by a center that is outside the design itself and that is located at infinity. An arabesque is a complex of asymptotic curves.<sup>185</sup>

Thus, the new mythology is the proliferation of Burke’s usage of the aesthetic device of the beautiful, or the proliferation of living forms, where the center or organizing principle of such forms is barred, like Lacan’s Master Signifier. This occurrence is consistent with the *death* of God and the death of the author. Mention of “*Tristram Shandy*,” of course, is a reference to Laurence Sterne’s nine volume novel, which was published between 1759 and 1767, and it was very involved in pioneering the literary technique common in modernism of the plot endlessly diverging into loosely associated asides, Longinus’s and Burke’s parabasis revived. In other words, it is one of the first

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<sup>184</sup> Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity* (New York, NY: Manchester University Press., 2003), 54.

<sup>185</sup> Miller, “Friedrich Schlegel and the Anti-Ekphrastic Tradition,” 62.

modern examples of the “arabesque” to emerge, and is understood to be an indirect critique of severity or gravity, i.e., its rhetorical orientation is classified as “comedy.” In this sense of the term, the humorous is linked to the idea of folly, likely originating from elevating the opposite or repressed term in the philosophical/wisdom tradition, by opposing folly with wisdom, without reprieve, and resulting in wise-folly. In other terms, this elevation of folly is the rise of the irrational, as rational-irrational. The distinction between irrational and the rational-irrational defines the lynchpin of irony’s refutation of being nihilistic or relativistic, which it is, yet in a non-systematic way, which would like to give metaphysics the slip, if only it could.

### **The Solar Inversion and Its Affirmations of “Yea” versus “Nay” Saying**

With the sun being a metaphor for the rational, the rise of the irrational is understood in equally metaphorical language as an eclipse, as on the Caputo and Vattimo text’s cover, or also possibly as “the solar inversion,” as in Mark C. Taylor’s examination of the topic.<sup>186</sup> On the subject, Taylor explains, “The festival of cruelty lifts all... protective barriers before the ‘absolute danger’ which is ‘without foundation.’ This dangerous festival which is the solar inversion of the satanic sacrifice of the separateness of the self... This crucifixion of self is the death of God which is the resurrection of the Word.”<sup>187</sup> Yet, what exactly Taylor means by the resurrection of the Word, in this case is not consistent with the Christian use of the term, since he is instead talking about the “erasure of the ‘transcendental signified’ (God as the guarantor of epistemological meaning and sense, particularly in this light as involving semiotic structural/systematic meaning), which he says “sets the stage for the infinite play of interpretation,” where... “Caught in the endless web of textuality, actors lose themselves in the infinity of the play.”<sup>188</sup> As the young Taylor suggests, often “the lost center frequently breeds despair,” yet here, in his youthful

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<sup>186</sup> Taylor, “The Text as Victim,” 69.

<sup>187</sup> Taylor, “The Text as Victim,” 69-70.

<sup>188</sup> Taylor, “The Text as Victim,” 73-74.

advocacy of deconstruction, he counters this negativity, saying, “but the other side of this Nay is a Yea which is the “the solar inversion of satanic denial.”<sup>189</sup> This inversion of the satanic denial is the deconstructive gesture of mythologizing the occurrence of the loss of the ‘transcendental signified’ differently, as an event of possibility, rather than loss and ruin. Taylor continues:

As Derrida explains, such Yea-saying is “the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. This affirmation then determines the noncenter otherwise than as a loss of the center... If we join this “Bacchanalian revel in which no member is sober,’ we discover a ‘Dionysian Christianity’... in which meaning is not fixed, but ever new and ever changing.”<sup>190</sup>

Yea-saying is merely the inverse of Nietzsche’s Nay-saying, which is a descriptor Nietzsche uses in his attack on Christianity, when he charges it of being a life denying worldview, hence the negative gesture of “nay-saying.” Thus, in “yea-saying,” deconstruction wants to affirm life, in contrast to this nay, along with the same apparent flux and indeterminacy that accompany it. Taylor, demonstrating further his prior theoretical commitment as a deconstructionist, ends this early paper, when he concludes, “Though there is no exit from the labyrinth which stretches above 70,000 fathoms, the recognition that ‘the fire and the rose are one’ brings ‘the greatest joy in the midst of the greatest suffering.’<sup>191</sup> In this metaphorical garb, the retraction of meaning is equivalent to the fire, while the construction/sustenance of meaning is represented by the rose, where prayers and tears unit.

By the 1997 conference at Villanova University, entitled “Religion and Postmodernism,” however, Taylor was rethinking this early adoption of deconstruction and its role as the language of the *death* of God. The paper there delivered by Taylor is entitled “Betting on Vegas,” which analogically associates the postmodern condition with the architectural landscape that, as living medium, defines Las Vegas as the embodiment of the

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<sup>189</sup> Taylor, “The Text as Victim,” 74.

<sup>190</sup> Taylor, “The Text as Victim,” 74-75.

<sup>191</sup> Taylor, “The Text as Victim,” 75.

death of God. In particular, Taylor emphasizes his reading of the symbolic attributes of the Pyramid of Luxor. In his reading of Luxor, Taylor reexamines his contextualization of the postmodern as the condition of being within a labyrinth where there is no exit. Thereby speaking of the architectural symbolism of Luxor, Taylor describes the postmodern as method, which we will find is a slightly revised repeat of Schlegel's mechanism of the new mythology.

In commencing his interpretive exercise, Taylor observes that the Luxor is actually a "simulation of a simulation," which he also importantly identifies is, unlike the original, an empty tomb. On the subject, Taylor further sets forth:

While it is obvious that this tomb buried in the Nevada desert is empty, it is not clear whether the absence of the body signifies that resurrection has occurred or that what seems to be the body proper is always the semblance of a body that is never present in the first place... If the crypt is empty, the secret of the Luxor Pyramid is that there is no secret... Having discovered the absence of the body at the base of the pyramid, the hieroglyphs decorating the walls now seem utterly indecipherable... signs become endlessly interpretable and, thus, are either completely meaningless or infinitely meaningful... there is 'no exit'; everything remains inescapably cryptic... The ground that once seemed stable slips away, leaving nothing to fix meaning. This is the point, or one of the points, of the pointless pyramid and the sacrificial economy it figures.<sup>192</sup>

Thus, unlike his younger self, the more mature Taylor interprets the solar inversion to be not the liberation of possibility in a new Christian-Dionysianism, but instead he reinterprets the disappearance of the master signified as a fall into the "utterly indecipherable." The point of the disappearance of the transcendental signified is therefore reinterpreted according to its original aesthetic intent of Yea-saying ("life" affirming) that cares not about the aesthetic frills of the surface play of Yeas or Nays, but only for the loss of stable meaning. Regarding the mythic operation of difference under such circumstances, Taylor comments:

The juxtaposition of black and white glass in the pyramid combines with the interplay of the darkness and light of the pyramid, to create vertiginous

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<sup>192</sup> Mark C. Taylor, "Betting on Vegas," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 231 and 237.

effects... during day, it looks as if the black glass pyramid has had its tip knocked off. At night, the massive black pyramid disappears leaving the small white tip, suspended in thin air as if it had no foundation. What is the point? Why does it sometimes appear to be pointless? The pyramid, it seems, is a sacrificial altar. But who is sacrificed-what is sacrificed-on this altar? Is there a meaning to sacrifice? Is there a sacrifice of meaning?<sup>193</sup>

In further describing the symbolic significance of pyramids through the literary projects of Poe and Bataille, Taylor continues to explain how the dynamic between the play between the One and the many in such a vertiginous interplay “creates a meltdown,” which is represented by a flame between the point of the interplay of the double gesture. In other words, in symbolic representation of this mutual canceling out, Taylor identifies that the tip of the pyramid has a flame that enacts this mutual destruction, which he says, “not only radiates the sacrifice of the One but consummates the sacrifice of the many,” since he says, “The fire of consumption is a holocaust that consumes differences in an identity that leaves nothing but the trace of nothing.”<sup>194</sup> Thus, in Poe, Bataille, and Nietzsche’s gay science, Taylor recognizes the production of “non-knowledge” (Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore”), which comes forth as an “exciting knowledge... some never to-to-be-imparted-secret-whose attainment is destruction.”<sup>195</sup> Again, this coming is never accomplished, but is always on the way. In outlining the differing “architectural” aims of the dividing pedagogical objectives of a discourse of knowledge distinguished from one of such non-knowledge, Taylor then metaphorically explains the difference between a labyrinth and a pyramid. Specifically, he says:

While dark labyrinths represent the confusion of earthly life, pyramids map escape routes by pointing to the bright light illuminating the world. Long associated with the solar religion, pyramids reflect the triangular pattern of the sun’s rays, which radiate creative power... By representing the sacred mountain where order emerges out of chaos, the pyramid forms the axis mundi that allows passage from earth to heaven... In this way, the pyramid fixes time by tracing an escape from the labyrinth. But as we have discovered, not all pyramids have a point; some are decapitated. If the point of the pyramid is to fix time by reversing temporal flow through a return to

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<sup>193</sup> Taylor, “Betting on Vegas,” 237.

<sup>194</sup> Taylor, “Betting on Vegas,” 238.

<sup>195</sup> Taylor, “Betting on Vega,” 239.

the eternal ground or origin of being, then the absence of the point marks the impossibility of return-or points to a different return which, though eternal, permits no escape from temporal flux. A pyramid marks the turning point in Nietzsche's life: Seeing a pyramidal rock by Lake Silvaplana: At precisely this moment, Nietzsche is blinded by the insight that time returns eternally.<sup>196</sup>

Simply put, the *death* of God, as loss of a transcendental signified is the loss of a ground (Reason/the solar power/the logos) for epistemological knowledge, which is replaced by the never ending production of non-knowledge, which is the ironic wavering that erupts in the meltdown of the One and the many. In sum, we are taken down into the flux of the particular, much like having our heads submerged into the watery confusion of Heraclitus' river, from whence the loss of orientation or sense itself cannot emerge productively. It is in this sense that the postmodern is a labyrinth out of which we cannot escape.

Comparatively, Fredric Jameson had himself earlier utilized a reminiscent architectural motif to figuratively point towards the same, when he linked the postmodern interpretive condition to the design of the Bonaventure Hotel, in Los Angeles, California. Describing the dynamic of the inner and outer accessibility of the space Jameson says:

There are three entrances to the Bonaventure... None of these is anything like the old hotel marquee,... which the sumptuous buildings of yesteryear were wont to stage your passage from city street to the older interior... What I first want to suggest about these curiously unmarked ways-in is that they seem to have been imposed by some new category of closure governing the inner space of the hotel itself... In this sense, then, the mini-city of Portman's Bonaventure ideally ought not to have entrances at all (since the entryway is always the seam that links the building to the rest of the city that surrounds it), for it does not wish to be a part of the city, but rather its equivalent and its replacement or substitute. That is, however, obviously not possible or practical, hence the deliberate downplaying and reduction of the entrance function to its bare minimum. But this disjunction from the surrounding city is very different from that of the great monuments of the International Style: there, the act of disjunction was violent, visible and had a very real symbolic significance-...whose gesture radically separates the new utopian space of the modern from the degraded and fallen city fabric, which it thereby explicitly repudiates... The Bonaventure, however, is content to 'let the fallen city fabric continue to be in its being' (to parody

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<sup>196</sup> Taylor, "Betting on Vegas," 239-240.

Heidegger); no further effects-no larger proto-political utopian transformation-are either expected or desired.<sup>197</sup>

Again, like Taylor, Jameson identifies the construction of an inner space that is imposed by a new category that wants to keep the subject effectively lost within the architectural inner space, which is cut off from the outside world. With Jameson, the emphasis is more immediately placed upon the division of the space of the building from the cityscape in general. This self-imposed interiority is akin to the same devices that Taylor sees at work in the Luxor, yet more so of Las Vegas at large, which is the creation of an artificial city that too is the fantasy space that is distinguished from the outer “reality” of America, as living space of the socio-economic community. The repercussion this manipulation of form takes is in the contrivance of the vertiginous effect created by the meltdown of the interweaving between the One and the many, yet what is particularly significant in both Jameson and Taylor is that the new mythology is happening in the technical “architectural” development of this solar inversion, rather than simply through poststructuralism’s remythologizing of the content, which in the Bonaventure is the equivalent of the “hanging streamers” and colour coded directional signals.<sup>198</sup> Speaking on the significance of these streamers and colour coded signals, Jameson says:

Hanging streamers indeed suffuse this empty space in such a way as to distract systematically and deliberately from whatever form it might be supposed to have; while a constant busyness gives the feeling that emptiness is here absolutely packed, that is an element within which you yourself are immersed, without any of that distance that formerly enabled the perception of perspective or volume... Given the absolute symmetry of the four towers, it is quite impossible to get your bearings in this lobby; recently, colour coding and directional signals have been added in a pitiful, rather desperate and revealing attempt to restore the co-ordinates of an older space.<sup>199</sup>

Is poststructuralism not akin in its interpretive inversion of the satanic denial of the solar inversion, in effect, to such colour coded signals in its attempt to appropriate Nietzsche and the Dionysian? Are not all Apollonian representations defined like the

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<sup>197</sup> Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 288-289.

<sup>198</sup> Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 290.

<sup>199</sup> Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 290-291.

streamers by the form that they embellish or fill? Jameson's focus upon the form and content of such architectural spaces, with their separation of the inner and outer spaces of the new architecture, brings the mechanical aspects of aestheticism into question, in spite of the "streamers" and "coloured signals," with a nod of indebtedness to Burke again.

### **Getting to the Bottom of Irony: A Bottomless Bottom**

Thus, the form that postmodernism begins with is the empty space where the distractions of systematic play or irony are enacted. The form of this non-knowledge is parabasis, by whatever rhetorical/literary means available. Irony is merely one such device to be employed, but it is a key one, as importantly being non-propositional. Yet, what is irony, and what grants it such discursive authority and prestige that it might be regularly enacted as intellectual authority? Consequently, when we follow irony to the bottom, we ultimately find that there is no stable thing there that we can identify as a legitimate concept or ground for thinking. Therefore, in form irony is enacting a partial relativism, which is only partial because in its self-effacing retraction, it is critical of itself in turn, which technically means it is not a strong manifestation of relativism or nihilism. Yet, when people attack such German philosophy they always erroneously tend to attack it as irrationalism or nihilism, which it is technically speaking not, according to its own self-conception anyway. Describing the complexity and duplicity of this technicality, Claude David noted of the Romantics that they "nowhere develop a coherent system," and in fact... "flaunted (their) disdain of systematic knowledge, yet (they) employ a great deal of logic to celebrate illogicality."<sup>200</sup> In other words, something very logical is latently operative in the supposed mechanism of the romantic form that undermines systematization and logic and reason, as the new mythology. It is a new kind of reason, a chastised but latently operative reason. It is a design left in wait.

If we counter that the devices of the new mythology are merely contingent fabrications, which they are, then we technically slide into some type of relativism without

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<sup>200</sup> Cited in Robert E. Norton, *Secret Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 432.



another metaphysical replacement, which sociologically is undesirable, and which spurred the need for a new mythology in the first place. In essence, aestheticism is complicated by the desire to undermine Christian and Enlightenment morals, while not wanting the destructive energy to be fully let loose, since this would undermine the epistemological capacities of a justified social-ideological authority. Thus, the new mythology as a philosophical-literary solution is created in response to the twin problems of undermining Christianity and the Enlightenment, while warding off the social-political problem of relativism. In order to accomplish these twin tasks, romanticism must undermine sense and meaning, yet not entirely. Bowie correspondingly demonstrates the enactment of the typical double movement of the Romantic myth as the instigator of relativism, yet not fully, when he says of romanticism's Dionysian impulse of retracting sense and meaning, "This might seem to lead to the problem that claims about the relativity of all truth must themselves be absolute."<sup>201</sup> Yet, Bowie also notes, "Schlegel, though, is aware of this objection."<sup>202</sup> Citing Schlegel, Bowie then adds, "If all truth is relative, then the proposition is also relative that all truth is relative."<sup>203</sup> Therefore, we are left stranded by this device in the perpetual meltdown between the One and the many, and our choice is a confession of metaphysics or the continuance of a sham, irony as the simulated avoidance of metaphysical propositions, which is still a metaphysical commitment. Therefore, irony is metaphysical as a performative design, rather than as a constative truth in the first sense. In the second sense, irony is metaphysical in the sense that it too is relative, as a by product of the proposition that all truth is relative, and so too is the proposition that all truth is relative. In other words, there is no overcoming the modern. There is only twisting or turning accounts in a gesture pointing towards the postmodern.

Consequently, in recognizing the problem, or acknowledging the metaphysical objection to the new mythology, neither German Romanticism nor postmodernism subsequently can resolve the problem, or go beyond metaphysics as they often promise in their rhetorical feigns. Everything collapses back into metaphysics. As Bowie alludes, "The

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<sup>201</sup> Andrew Bowie, *German Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 52.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Cited in Bowie, *German Philosophy*, 52.

problem revealed by the Romantic view is that knowing one has reached the final truth would entail a prior familiarity with that truth, otherwise it would be impossible to recognize that it is the final truth.”<sup>204</sup> After this admission of the problem, Bowie promptly changes the topic without any further insight or explanation. In the end we have a self-conscious final truth that is ironically aware of the possibility that it is merely one more such instance, yet in this very awareness it wants to appear more justified, without logical backing, which is the sham of literary form’s autonomy from logic as authority. In the ironic impasse, offered as rhetorical sham, all particulars end in the suspension of meaning by the play of absence/presence. Afterwards, as always, the topic is then changed quickly, without offering a logical explanation of irony’s authoritative usage as suspension of the metaphysical. At base, however, we are left in this ploy with a final truth that wants to evade the metaphysical collapse by the ironic self-sacrifice, but this is merely smoke and mirrors, since in the end this collapse is inevitable. As we have demonstrated this move is undertaken upon the authority of a mythology of effect, catachresis. Thus, when we get to the bottom of the ironic, there is nothing authoritative there, merely one more mythical entity, a particularly politically reactionary one, which prioritizes form over content, which complicates the effectiveness of a solely content focused response to it.

Demonstrating the instable essence of what irony really is, the authority on irony, Douglas Colin Muecke says, “I do not know of any book or article, whether English, American, French, or German, or of any European or American dictionary or encyclopedia which presents a classification of irony one could regard as adequate.”<sup>205</sup> Thus, as Muecke further explains, “No classification of irony, no list of all the ironical techniques ever practiced, will enable the critic immediately to put a tag on every piece of irony he finds.”<sup>206</sup> Tracing the concept back to its classical roots, Muecke cites Sedgewick, as saying, “‘*Eironeia*, as the Periclean Greeks conceived it, was not so much a mode of speech

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<sup>204</sup> Bowie, *German Philosophy*, 52.

<sup>205</sup> Douglas C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (New York: Muethen and Co., 1983), 40.

<sup>206</sup> Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, 41.

as a general mode of behaviour.”<sup>207</sup> Continuing, Muecke revealingly adds, “the word, down to Aristotle, was a term of abuse connoting ‘sly-foxery’ with a tinge of ‘low-bred’... It was not until the end of the eighteenth century that the name irony was given...”<sup>208</sup> Therefore, in origin, the word connotes trickery or skullduggery, which is not necessarily as jovial and gay as it might sound when serious socio-political matters are involved. It is also significant I think that only after the political upheaval of the Enlightenment does it come to signify something else, something more technical although still prone to the confounding of sense and double speak. In origin, regardless, the etymological roots of the word are connected with deception and trickery, and this should not be forgotten.

In his closest definition to what irony is, as a formal rhetorical device, Muecke later contributes, “Let us then define irony in this sense as ways of speaking, writing, acting, behaving, painting, etc., in which the real or intended meaning presented or evoked is intentionally quite other than, and incompatible with, the ostensible or pretended meaning... Our definition must likewise be allowed to include not saying one thing and meaning another but also saying two things and meaning neither.”<sup>209</sup> In other words, irony is in the more traditional sense a means of saying one thing, but implying another meaning, yet after German Romanticism it becomes additionally a way of saying two things at once and meaning neither, yet advocating both in part, maybe? Nothing is resolvable regarding the underlying nature of irony.

Another important authority on irony is Wayne C. Booth, who describes irony as “Neither rules nor relativism,” which he admits to his readers is disappointing of a definition, because “all readers would like to have useful general rules for judging literature,” but the problem as Booth sees it is that “all rhetorical situations are unique,” and “Unlike the sciences which deal in duplicatable (and therefore more or less completely rule-subjected) moments, the ironists and reader of irony deal in the unique.”<sup>210</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>207</sup> Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, 47.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, 53.

<sup>210</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 227-228.

irony is the language of the particular, which takes thought out of systematic visions and idealisms and makes it an idiosyncratic deliberation. Once again, we are hearing echoes of Longinus' explanation that the sublime cannot be taught, but only practiced by a "genius," or he who is a creator of a new paradigm, category, or genus. Thus, we are again back in the realm of Burke's and then Nietzsche's prescription for a new type of thinking that would promote the aesthetic proliferation of the beautiful particular. As Miller explains, this emphasis on the particular is consistent Schlegel's phrase "*Bedeutende Lugen*" (Beautiful lies), which are "expressions that are not literally true but have allegorical meaning," and are "an ironical name for the ironic way of speaking the truth."<sup>211</sup> In this sense of the term, we might summarize: irony is a mythology of effect, whose origins are connected to skulduggery and the deceptions of rhetoric (Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore").

Yet, irony is not necessarily all sham and error, since it does in part anyway offer its justifications too. On its more authentic function as a balancing device that is equitable with a certain metaphysical caution, Muecke says, "To say that history is the record of human fallibility and that the history of thought is the record of the recurrent discovery that what we assured ourselves was the truth, was in truth only a seeming truth is to say that literature has always had an endless field in which to observe and practice irony. This suggests that irony has basically a corrective function."<sup>212</sup> As a corrective function, Muecke interprets irony to function like a "gyroscope," which "keeps life on an even keel or straight course, restoring balance when life is being taken too seriously or, as some tragedies show, not seriously enough, stabilizing the unstable but also destabilizing the excessively stable."<sup>213</sup> In the sense that irony is equated with open-minded and unfrozen thought it is a seemingly good thing, yet associating these tendencies with irony's operation of setting the snare of a deceptive rhetoric for blunt reading does not seem necessarily accordant. The way this balance operates however, is via a counter metaphysics, which Booth identifies when he says, "I can enter into the plight of characters and authors who feel lost in the abyss-and not only because I have been there on occasion myself. The totally ironic view is, we should

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<sup>211</sup> Miller, *Others*, 33-34.

<sup>212</sup> Douglas C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic* (New York: Muethen & Co., 1982) 4.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

know by now, **one of the plausible views** of the human condition...”<sup>214</sup> Therefore, Booth is suggesting that the ironic view is equally an interpretive lens. We should also keep this in mind when thinking whether or not irony escapes metaphysics. In this sense, irony is a balancing of affirmative and negative metaphysical accounts, by putting both in suspension, which seems to be in some way more consistent with the negative impulse than the positive impulse, yet here we get into the complication of full presence versus partial presence, out of which there is no resolution or reprieve, once we begin to speak in double gestures. Yet, this charge for a proof requiring full presence is the snare of the anti-enlightenment impulse, which wants to turn the rational mind against itself to bring about real world results through selective ludism.

On the other side of the argument about irony, a youthful Jedediah Purdy questioned the role of it in contemporary American culture, in his text, *For Common Things* (2000). Purdy identifies that the point of irony is “a quiet refusal to believe in the depth of relationships, the sincerity of motivation, or the truth of speech-especially earnest speech.”<sup>215</sup> Reflecting on the prominence of irony underlying the contemporary American mind, Purdy further explains that it resides in a privileged context, when he says, “Irony does not reign everywhere; it cannot be properly said to reign at all... The more time one has spent in school, and the more expensive the school, the greater the propensity to irony. This is not least among the reasons that New York and Hollywood, well populated with Ivy League-educated scriptwriters, produce a popular culture drenched in irony.”<sup>216</sup> Explaining the essence of this underlying current of irony operative in American culture, Purdy warns, “An endless joke runs through the culture of irony, not exactly at anyone’s expense, but rather at the expense of the idea that anyone might take the whole affair seriously.”<sup>217</sup> And, regarding its effect on the American political and social imagination, Purdy adds that because of irony “Public life takes on a quality of unbelievable ritual incredulously

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<sup>214</sup> Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, 277.

<sup>215</sup> Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things* (Toronto, ON: Vintage Books, 2000), 10.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

performed, like the ceremonies of an aged and failing faith, conducted with the old litanies because no others are available and because rote speech is indifferent to its content anyway... Our private weariness and the public failure of politics are among the sources of our ironic attitude.”<sup>218</sup> In summation, Purdy suggests, “I cannot help believing that we need a way of thinking, and doing, that has in it more promise of goodness than the one we are now following.”<sup>219</sup> In response to Purdy, Canadian novelist Douglas Coupland suggested that he needed to more or less lighten up, since irony was merely a joke.<sup>220</sup> Coupland is the author of such pop culture focused books such as *Shampoo Planet* (1993) and *Generation X* (1991), where the “X” represents the proliferatory “whatever” of the solar inversion that suits each separate solipsistic fancy, and the crossing out of its capacity for any greater relevance beyond the private realm of individual fantasy.

The effect of the ironic text in general can be the same as this surface mirroring of the idiosyncratic, despite the ironist’s surface justifications for using the technique, or this effect can work to trick and bamboozle the uninitiated with its laxative effect (i.e., taking them further and further down, and back around, the garden path of seeking non-knowledge). Consequently, it is true that what is being said in the surface content of this play is important, yet when everything is said and done, the new mythology is, by definition, not determined by the surface content, which is largely irrelevant to such, but by the ironic form itself, which wants to keep thought on its way to non-knowledge (“Nevermore”). *Knowledge* conveyed through this framework inevitably collapses back into the vertiginous ebb and flow of the sacrifice of meaning, which is Nietzsche’s program. Operating through such a framework it does not matter what the idiosyncratic outer garments might convey, since they are merely the representational content of irony’s affirmative masks. Therefore, despite Coupland’s taunt to Purdy to lighten up, an ironic disposition does not appear to get us out of the aesthetic condition of the new mythology, whose motives were reactionary and anti-democratic, often in both form and content.

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<sup>218</sup> Purdy, *For Common Things*, xv.

<sup>219</sup> Purdy, *For Common Things*, xxiii.

<sup>220</sup> Jim Fleming’s radio show “The Postmodern Wink,” *To the Best of Our Knowledge* (originally aired August 30, 2006).

Additionally, even beyond this recognition, it would seem too that form is merely one more manifestation of content by another means.

### **The Centrality of Form in “the New Art” and the Moral Agenda of Art for Art’s Sake**

Thinking of the centrality of form to the new mythology, we might further investigate the attention to form that aestheticism itself has undertaken. Nowhere is this focus upon form more explicit than in the work of the Spanish, modernist aesthetic philosopher Ortega y Gasset, who explains the objectives of “the new art” quite forthrightly. In his essay, “The Dehumanization of Art,” Gasset explains that the nature of all modern art is that it is “unpopular,” which he explains is intentional.<sup>221</sup> The effect of this art Gasset explains is that it “divides the public into two groups,” which operates on the masses to suggest to “the average citizen to realize that he is just this—the average citizen, a creature incapable of receiving the sacrament of art,” and this also helps “the elite to recognize themselves and one another in the drab mass of society and to learn their mission which consists in being few and holding their own against the many.”<sup>222</sup> Explaining how the modern or new art (which is modernism proper, rather than the modern era that postmodernism confusingly attacks) is so inaccessible to the many, Basset says, “If the new art is not accessible to every man this implies that its impulses are not of a generically human kind,” which is so, because “a work that does not invite sentimental intervention leaves them without a cue.”<sup>223</sup> The “cue” that Basset is referring to is the production of a meaningful content, which the popular reader approaches texts looking for, rather than reading a text according to the usage of its form. The result, Basset says, is: “As soon as purely aesthetic elements predominate and the story of John and Mary grows elusive, most people feel out of their depth and are at a loss what to make of the scene, the book, or the

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<sup>221</sup> Jose Ortega y Gasset, “The Dehumanization of Art,” in *The Dehumanization of Art: and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 4.

<sup>222</sup> Gasset “The Dehumanization of Art,” 6-7.

<sup>223</sup> Gasset, “The Dehumanization of Art,” 8-9.

painting.”<sup>224</sup> The priority of form over content, Basset further explains, creates a “very simple optical problem,” which defines the parameters of the interpretive function. On the topic, Basset says:

To see a thing we must adjust our visual apparatus in a certain way. If the adjustment is inadequate the thing is seen indistinctly or not at all. Take a garden seen through a window. Looking at the garden we adjust our eyes in such a way that the ray of vision travels through the pane without delay and rests on the shrubs and flowers. Since we are focusing on the garden and our ray of vision is directed toward it, we do not see the window but look clear through it. The purer the glass, the less we see it. But we can also deliberately disregard the garden and, withdrawing the ray of vision, detain it at the window. We then lose sight of the garden; what we still behold of it is a confused mass of color which appears pasted to the pane. Hence to see the garden and to see the windowpane are two incompatible operations which exclude one another because they require different adjustments... But not many people are capable of adjusting their perceptive apparatus to the pane and the transparency that is the work of art. Instead they look right through it and revel in the human reality with which the work deals. When they are invited to let go of this prey and to direct their attention to the work of art itself they will say that they cannot see such a thing, which indeed they cannot, because it is all artistic transparency and without substance.<sup>225</sup>

Therefore, according to Gasset, the new art is about distinguishing the form from the content, with the form mediating our optical perception of the world outside the literary undertaking. The objective is to turn the gaze away from “the garden,” by making the “windowpane” detain perception. In other words, form is “the windowpane,” and it detains perception from the outside world. This objective of turning from life to art predates Gasset. In connection, Wallace Fowlie explains that these traits that Gasset identifies as “new” to modern art are actually another manifestation of “pure art,” or “*l’art pour l’art*,” which is aestheticism proper.<sup>226</sup> Fowlie also importantly explains that common to the various likeminded avant-garde literary movements that idealized such a pure art was an attitude toward life that the age of romanticism had called *le male du siècle* (mentioned earlier), later called *le male du fin de siècle*. Fowlie says this attitude towards life identified

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<sup>224</sup> Gasset, “The Dehumanization of Art,” 8.

<sup>225</sup> Gasset, “The Dehumanization of Art,” 10-12.

<sup>226</sup> Wallace Fowlie, *Poem and Symbol* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1990), 10.



a common sense of “dissatisfaction and even resentment that had to do with the prodigious development of the large cities, with the monotony of provincial life, with routine existence of employees and civil servants..., and with *la vie quotidienne* in general, coming after two generations of romanticism in the arts...”<sup>227</sup> This sense of decline and decadence of the literary avant-garde is consistent with counter-enlightenment’s mythological yarns of the same disposition, as we have identified earlier in such investigations like Ringer’s.

Demonstrating its overlap with the counter-enlightenment, Fowlie explains too that the cult of *art for art’s* sake really began with romanticism and continued well into the twentieth century, and included such modern literary giants as Yeats, Eliot, and Pound.<sup>228</sup> Consequently, the list could extend in both historical directions of similarly oriented literary personages, depending on how rigidly we might define such a category. However, common in all these writers, Fowlie suggests, was: “a similar attitude toward the world, at least toward the world of politics. They tended to look upon democracy as a standardizing process... They often gave evidence of a preference for an earlier social order.”<sup>229</sup> In this temperament, they shared the same concerns as Caputo identifies in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, along with many other of the transnational disenfranchised avant-garde cliques of what Lionel Trilling has dubbed the “adversary culture,” which comprised radicals of the left and the right.<sup>230</sup> Both such radical right and left elements of this adversarial culture were attacking bourgeoisie utilitarianism and the industrialization of the world, which added to their sense of alienation, yet both were likewise advocating a similar move towards a type of **anarchical** liberation. One motive saw this anarchism as a liberating force, while the other more shrewdly saw it as a way to confound and ruin solidarity. Even if it was only partially permitted, as done via irony’s double movement as meltdown and suspension of movement itself, they anticipated that the supposed counteracting movement of the affirmative was always by default negated enough to work the end they anticipated

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<sup>227</sup> Fowlie, *Poem and Symbol*, 11.

<sup>228</sup> Fowlie, *Poem and Symbol*, 14.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Cited in Bell Villada, *Art for Art’s Sake and Literary Life*, 145.

when they designed it. In other words, the assumption that irony will result in the suspension of the consolidating efforts of solidarity is what the reactionary impulse of this design was targeting. It is simply dividing and conquering the mob amongst themselves by promoting individualism and particularism. In contrast, the power of the powerless is in organized numbers, as exemplified in the workers movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. To attack organization itself is to attack this one defense the multitude have against injustice and the consolidation of socio-political determinacy. This is the impulse motivating neo-conservative myth making that defines contemporary popular culture, yet was seen as immoral and reactionary by earlier American culture. This divergence can particularly be seen, for example, in the mainstream critical backlash against the novels of Ayn Rand, during the forties and fifties by her institutionally housed literary critics.

What the favorable interpretation of the ironic impulse claimed to hold in suspension was the rise of the systematic/system-less contingent particular/whole. Again, belief that we can remain faithful to systematic and particular accounts in equal fidelity is a creedal assumption. Logically, there is nothing argumentatively defensible to justify it one way or the other. Either we believe that “you can have your cake and eat it too,” or we believe we cannot. Considering the origins of this design, I suggest we exercise caution in its utilization.

Regarding the cultural context that this literary spirit would come to embody, Fowlie describes the corresponding subsequent rise of the modern (proper) literary paradigm, when he says, “The cultural atmosphere of the early twentieth century was characterized by yearnings for the religious, the mystical, the occult, and by the development of a new romanticism that merged with a belief in the sovereignty of the word in literature.”<sup>231</sup> Thus, aestheticism is again depicted as a turn to the “word” of literature, which places its emphasis upon the materiality of art as prioritized over any worldly oriented messages or content. Comparatively, Gene Bell Villada identifies that aestheticism is a reactionary ideology that wants to take the study of meaning in literary cultivation to the level of mechanics of the craft (we might be reminded of Gasset’s

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

windowpane), rather than concern it with social or moral questions (neglecting “the garden”).<sup>232</sup>

Therefore, when we speak of aestheticism we really mean two different things, as elements of the same phenomenon. First, we are speaking about it as the prioritization of form’s conveyance of meaning over that of representational content’s. Second, we are talking about it as an intentionally inhibiting and cunningly destructive socio-moral whitewashing underlying this prioritization in various shrewd and reactionary writers. This usage of the prioritization of form over content would therefore aspire to undermine and reverse the ethical effects that reactionary thinkers thought led to the American and French revolutions, and their progressive impulses.

When we talk about Caputo and Vattimo, we recognize that they are working to counteract the second of these two things, while remaining in their approaches with the devices and framework that prioritizes *certain* mechanics of the first operation of aestheticism, as form delivering (while withholding from others) an underlying communication of meaning for those “in the know.” Therefore, the distinction we must make is that what we might call aestheticism proper wishes to do both things in tandem, while Caputo and Vattimo do not. Caputo and Vattimo want to avert the moral whitewashing of the fallout of *art for art’s sake* and its various descendants by directing their affirmative or representational moments of their irony at moral topics of discussion. This distinction is important, as we shall come to see in the next chapter(s), because the critics of such poststructuralist thinkers often charge them of aestheticism. They do continue aestheticism in the sense that they perpetuate the formal consequences of the literary devices that romanticism and the avant-garde establish to create a divide between the recipients of art and the masses, but they are not aesthetic writers in the proper sense, as the ironic advocates of a socially responsible message. The reason for this partial continuance of aestheticism is that they want to keep the division of the communicative divide, yet rid it of the moral irresponsibilities of its more overtly fascist sounding tendencies. We shall further examine the significance of this charge in context in later

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<sup>232</sup> Bell Villada, *Art For Art’s Sake and Literary Life*, 3.

chapters; here, we shall continue to outline the parameters of such things to lay a foundation for understanding the issues at stake.

Thus, in distinction from Caputo and Vattimo, the primary objective of aestheticism proper, as associated with such literary figures as Oscar Wilde, would be to escape the hegemonic moral preoccupation of the progressive voices of the modern age, which thinkers like Nietzsche understood to be blamed on Christian consciousness. What remains important I suspect is that we do not equate the shortcomings of the modern age with such voices, which is a tendency that the conservative revolution and neo-conservative voices would like us to take for granted.

Comparatively, for Wilde and his French predecessors of the *Art for Art's Sake* movement, the 19<sup>th</sup> century/the Victorian age was excessively concerned with such Judeo-Christian morality, as espoused by the ethical imperatives of its main thinkers and influential philanthropists. Such influential thinkers/philanthropists include Charles Dickens, in England, and Count Henri de Rouvroy de Saint-Simon, in France. For Wilde, in particular, the realities of helping the poor and improving social conditions were to be evaded due to their boorish and philistine lack of taste, which was to be replaced by the proliferation of his ideological vision of promoting immediacy over calculative thinking, irrationalism over the rational, and the idolization of youth and self-fulfillment over traditional ideals of wisdom and goodness.

In describing one particular enactment of this reactionary ideological program, Wilde, in his essay "The Decay in Lying," states: "Lying and poetry are arts-arts, as Plato saw, **not unconnected with each other**-and they require the most careful study, the most **disinterested** devotion. Indeed, they have their technique, just as the more material arts of painting and sculpture have, their **subtle secrets of form and colour**, their craft-mysteries, their **deliberate** artistic methods."<sup>233</sup> Wilde therefore identifies in the craft-mysteries of *art for art's sake* a technique that is a subtle secret. Importantly, he identifies this secret that is form to be "deliberate," which we must note identifies it as an effect of human design and

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<sup>233</sup> Oscar Wilde, "Decay in Lying," in *The Decay of Lying and Other Essays* (Toronto, ON: Penguin Classics, 2003), 7. Bold added for emphasis.

preconception. It is also interesting that Wilde associates lying with poetry, and disinterestedness as its general disposition. In aestheticism, we see this disinterestedness manifest with the prioritization of form and style over the import of content. Collectively, what we see by examining Bell Villada, Wilde, Fowlie, and Gasset together is that in essence the romantic mythology is again invoked in the literary/poetic writing of post-romantic avant-garde preoccupations with literary devices as distinctive markers of worldliness and learnedness, but which were additionally cues of a deeper political distinction. Generally, such an emphasis suggests that the topical focus is turned to form over content, which is the major defining “subject matter” of aestheticism, or *art for art’s sake*. Explaining this shift, Bell Villada writes:

What is this thing called Art for Art’s Sake, particularly in literature? As customarily understood, it is the idea that verse and fiction are without any moral, social, cognitive, or other extraliterary purposes. The sole objective of a work of literature is to be beautiful, well structured, and well written. We “learn” absolutely nothing about life or about values from literature. Questions of “content” therefore have no legitimacy or relevance in writing, reading, studying, and judging literary products. The art of literature, moreover, evolves on its own grounds exclusively; it neither reflects nor is affected by the social, historical, or biographical circumstances of its creation. Literature is one thing (such as combinations of words, images, text; a system of signs, a self-contained artifact, a pure fiction), and the real world another.<sup>234</sup>

Thus, Bell Villada identifies that the worldly catch of this type of formal preoccupation is that such art wants to take us away from issues of morality and social concern. This is much like the same current that impels Nietzsche’s anti-Christ sentiments, in his hopes to overcome the Judeo-Christian paradigm with his transvaluation of values, since such a Judeo-Christian ethos was the antecedent in large part responsible for the cultivation of the socio-moral impulse of the democratic and socialist sentiments of modernity. Speaking further on the phenomenon’s development in France, Bell Villada says, “In reaction to the moral and social expectations of Catholic, liberal, and socialist critics, France’s poets generally took the defensive position that moral and social

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<sup>234</sup> Bell Villada, *Art for Art’s Sake and Literary Life*, 3.

concerns... have no relevance whatsoever to their lyric craft.”<sup>235</sup> In other words, this ideology did not originally present itself as openly hostile to such things, but rather operated instead as being merely indifferent towards them, via the exultation of the formalism of the prioritization of art detached from worldliness. This orientation was self-understood to be apolitical, which by default is nevertheless passive to injustice, and promotes its growth as a result. Thus, the emphasis on *art for art's sake* is the reification of art as a new end in itself that would not care about conveying a message via the content, nor would it work for a purpose. Yet, this apolitical quietism of art did have an effect, albeit a dormant or underlying one, which was the moral whitewashing of Judeo-Christian ethical tradition as despised by anti-democratic thinkers.

One can strongly see this desire motivating the prominent current within Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In the novel, the protagonist Dorian Gray is specifically identified as a new ideological symbol for a new age that values the precepts of youth, the endless diversion or detour into fanciful detail of the present or aesthetic details (reminiscent of Burke and Longinus again)<sup>236</sup>, and in the promotion and idealization of a flatteringly though pridefully blind individual “intuition” contra the more traditional values of rational legitimization via logic, the wisdom of experience and the aged, or the socio-ethical ideals of the moral tradition. In this exchange, the whimsical influences of personal fulfillment and desire over moral groundings are argued by the young man's moral antagonist and elder confidant, the dandy armchair hedonist Lord Henry Wotton. The novel depicts this quite forthrightly through the moral corruption of the youth Dorian Gray, which unfolds progressively through the text as his antagonist's hedonist vision of a self-flattering and self-serving amoral truth increasingly poisons Dorian's young mind and soul. Through this influence Dorian continually grows from a relative degree of purity and good intention to moral disfiguration, which is described in the story's unfolding of the mysterious and fantastical alterations of a painting of Dorian, which was in the narrative introduced as

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<sup>235</sup> Bell Villada, *Art For Art's Sake and Literary Life*, 56.

<sup>236</sup> As an example of such : “A grasshopper began to chirrup by the wall, and like a blue thread a long thin dragonfly floated past on its brown gauze wings. Lord Henry felt as if he could hear Basil Hallward's heart breaking and wondered what was coming” (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 13).

being originally completed by a mutual friend of Dorian and Lord Henry, Basil Hallward, at the start of the novel (i.e., this is the picture from the book's title). Dorian in the story is described by Wilde as originally envying this image of himself in the painting because it, unlike him (at least he originally thought anyway), would never grow old, but it would instead remain beautiful forever. In adopting the life of the aesthete, much akin to Kierkegaard's amoral vision mentioned earlier by Caputo, the aesthete of Wilde goes beyond time into the atemporal "now" where the gravity of meaning and choice is weakened, since Dorian in the novel ceases to age, while the painting of him does instead. In Dorian's deal with "the devil," the painting of him ages, while he as the new aesthetic youth remains unblemished by his sins and by the passing of time. In this vision, life becomes the pursuit of ephemeral pleasures that are fleeting and inconsequential to memory or moral cultivation. The course of a moral life is averted by Dorian in his betrayal of his courtship to the young actress Sibyl Vane, which further points towards a life lived without the burden of contemplated meaning. Such meaning is avoided by escaping the accountability of the ethical and a larger existential purposefulness in life. This purposefulness occurs via repetition (associated by Kierkegaard with marriage), which takes one beyond the immediacy of a timeless gratification of little things. In other words, via art, Dorian Gray can avoid the existential ramifications of time, and as an ideological archetype, Wilde would aspire to promote the same in his aestheticism through this character's transformation to his audience of "young" artistically minded readers, while his morally outraged readers would still find satisfaction in contrarily indicative moral resolution of the plot, although Wilde's seed is planted. In specific, Lord Henry tells Dorian:

Don't squander the gold of your days, listening to the tedious, trying to improve the hopeless failure, or giving your life away to the ignorant, the common, and the vulgar. These are surely aims, the false ideas of our age. Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing... A new Hedonism-that is what our century wants: You might be its visible symbol. With your personality there is nothing you could not do. The world belongs to you for a season... Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth!<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Leipzig, Germany: Tauchnitz Edition, 1908), 34-35.

Thus, in the figure of Dorian Gray, “Lord Henry” sees the symbol of a new Hedonism, where youth and the triviality of personality are flattered as utterly important, and self-actualization is the new life purpose<sup>238</sup> of the de-Christianized age.<sup>239</sup> So there is no confusion regarding the importance of Dorian Gray, as Basil Hallward says of him, in reminiscence of Burke’s aestheticism: “Dorian Gray is to me simply a motive in art. You might see nothing in him I see everything in him. He is never more present in my work than when no image of him is there. He is a suggestion, as I have said, of a new manner. I find him in the **curves of certain lines**, in the loveliness and **subtleties of certain colours**. That is all.”<sup>240</sup> Wilde’s mention of the curves of certain lines and subtleties of colour is here also note reminiscent of Burke’s aesthetic prescriptions in his treatise of the sublime and beautiful. Furthermore, we cannot take Lord Henry’s flattery of Dorian’s personality as being in the individually unique sense important beyond serving as a representation of Lord Henry’s new Hedonism personified in a beautiful youth, with the contingency of “personality” as the most important in general. Through this recognition we see the aesthetic or formal details overtaking Dorian in Basil’s ideal image of him, wherein he is not even personified. In this idealization of the archetypal Dorian, we see the quantifiable personage of Dorian giving way to abstractions or aesthetic devices, where the human figure is merely suggested in the new manner, as the personification of art for art’s sake (where personified content gives way to a new preoccupation with form). Thus, Wilde is invoking both senses of the term aestheticism: the literary device, and the moral abandonment of Judeo-Christian values.

Therefore, Wilde’s aestheticism is indicative of the moral whitewashing tendency of the movement of art for art’s sake that is not consistent with post-structuralism, contra what its critics might charge. Consequently, the idealization of youth goes back through

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<sup>238</sup> Specifically, Lord Henry says to Dorian: “The aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for. People are afraid nowadays. They have forgotten the highest of all duties, the duty that one owes oneself. Of course they are charitable. They feed the hungry, and clothe the beggar. But their own souls starve, and are naked” (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 28).

<sup>239</sup> Undoubtedly we can see many of Wilde’s protocols promoted in our own popular culture.

<sup>240</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 19-20. Bold added for emphasis.



symbolist poetry back further to the Romantics and their idealization of youth in the death of the young Romantic writer of forgery, and a martyr of financial ruin, Thomas Chatterton. The theme later reemerges in various romantic and symbolist writers like with Stephan George's sublime homoerotic idealization of the youth figure, Maximin, in his poem *Algabal*. Nonetheless, matters gets more complicated regarding the significance of form to aestheticism (which is not completely irrelevant to various post-structuralist writings, and our current two thinkers, despite the distinction of their reintroducing a morally focused content). For example, in describing the symbolist outlook of art for art's sake that was held by the Symbolist poets Stephane Mallarme and his German acolyte Stefan George, Martin Travers similarly identifies an (a)political elitist guise harboured in this aspect of the aesthetic movement, saying:

Like his French mentor (Mallarme), George saw the poem not as a vehicle for social or political comment... but as a formal organization of language... Here we learn that art has nothing to do with the 'petty rationalism and the discords of life' or with a desire to 'have an effect' or to 'say something,' but is a product of aesthetic organization of the text... In short, the poem is a means of structuring subjectivity... We are in a world where ritual has replaced morality, in which artistic order is seen as providing a system of values that can absorb, and subjugate, all behaviour to the point where its ethical integrity becomes irrelevant... all is sacrificed for the sake of the tranquility of the superior soul... a cruel but lonely spirit; as such, he is an objective correlative of the fin de siècle artist, whose exacting and uncompromising aesthetic tastes commit him to a lonely mission of personal and cultural renewal... This image of the artist as the embodiment of a superior but alienated consciousness, runs like a leitmotif ... through the work of the early Modernists in general...<sup>241</sup>

The importance of Stephan George, including his largely forgotten tremendous charismatic influence on pre-war German consciousness, revolves around an aesthetic-political consciousness that he and his "Circle" of followers called "secret Germany."<sup>242</sup> In essence, this secret is much the same in function as the divide that Gasset is appealing to in the distinction he envisions to occur between those who understand modern art's formal function on meaning from those who do not, which problematically for "democratic"

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<sup>241</sup> Martin Travers, *Critics of Modernity* (New York: Lange, 2001), 60 and 63.

<sup>242</sup> Travers, *Critics of Modernity*, 71.

sensibilities are intended to be the self-understood elite contra the masses. Describing this concept in George, and its wider significance, Travers continues:

The solution lay, George and his disciples believed, in the creation of a single recognizable authority... order requires the intervention of a superior individual... a mystification of the psychological premises of power, in whose articulation the rhetoric of the Conservative Revolution is clearly discernable... now invested **in an anonymous force, Gestalt ('Form')**, the source of all authority, whose workings are as total as they are mysterious: 'Gestalt does not set out to inform us, but moulds our ideas more than any teacher; it has no moral imperative but guides us more than any law... It was this attempt to redefine the political in terms of subjective orientation, and specifically, in terms of the 'inner' values of a 'secret Germany,' that puts George's work and that of his Circle, in spite of **an absence of any clear political commitment, at the center of the ideology of the Conservative Revolution...** George's innovation of ancient cults, his desire to see the individual defined through ceremony, his closed community of acolytes... the narrow catechism of the new aesthetic faith, and the focus upon the charismatic leader, combined to produce a secular religion that could, **quite irrespective of any substantive credo, serve as a bulwark against modernity.**<sup>243</sup>

In other words, what George felt would work against the "negative effects" of modernity was the authoritarianism of the anonymous force of sublime literary form whose "moral imperative" is none nor does it forward any "clear political commitment," yet it works upon thought all the same to create an authoritative aesthetic faith in the authority of the charismatic leader.<sup>244</sup> As Travers in part suggests then, we must note that the ideology of the conservative revolution was defined by its artifice to use the subtle operation of the workings of form over content, which is nonetheless a mysterious force. The danger of such a reactionary vision therefore does not abide in the strong commitments of a classical authoritarianism, which is in large part why Heidegger, Strauss, and George never fully identified with Nazism ideologically. In the same way, we too could acquit Nietzsche of such tendencies to link him with the phenomenon of Nazism, as a blunt reading of him might direct us to try. The troubling aspect of post-structuralism and postmodernism, in comparison, as the leading intellectual movements of progressive thinking, are that they

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<sup>243</sup> Travers, *Critics of Modernity*, 72 and 78.

<sup>244</sup> Recall this is Foucault and Vattimo's concern with Deconstruction.

continue to adhere to the mechanical working of this formal ideology. If content is merely a sop thrown to the reader to keep them distracted, while form subtly goes to work on them in more subtle ways, what are we to make of the supposed antagonism between neo-conservatism and postmodernism/post-structuralism?

The formal mechanism that the conservative revolution is promoting to create a space for non-justified authority is thereby finally justified only via a weakly legitimated masquerading of the mechanics of the sublimity enshrouding such authority itself. This non-rational “justification” of authority is mystified by something reminiscent of Longinus’ rhetorical ploy of ravishing an audience via the sublime disruption, and detour, of direct communication or meaning. As George envisioned, it traditionally operates without an evident rational argument for its own legitimization. Therefore, the danger that George’s “apolitical” legacy highlights well is the impulse to use *literary* form as an alienating device in the service of authoritarianism, and such a danger must be considered wherein postmodernism continues symbolism’s and modernism’s usages of such disruptions of direction communication, even if such a thing as complete communication is admittedly untenable “in full,” and when it is making a ontologically valid observation through it. Thus, Traveres wisely identifies this literary power as the “mystification of the psychological premises of power,” whereby form functions to subvert direct communication, yet as Gasset envisioned, such devices communicate nonetheless via secondary formal cues towards a self-enshrouding technocratic scholarly/artistic elite (whereby their own supposed superiority is legitimated only, however, by the inevitable contingency of the meaning of literary device itself).

Again, we also see this phenomenon in the work of Leo Strauss and his neo-conservative acolytes. The emphasis that Strauss places on form is alluded towards in his adoption of Al Farabi’s anecdote of the ascetic, which is perhaps a play on the similarity of the sound in the words ascetic and aesthetic. In specific, the anecdote is the following:

The pious ascetic was well known in his city for his abstinence, abasement and mortification, for his probity, propriety and devotion. But for some reason he aroused the hostility of the ruler of his city. The latter ordered his arrest, and to make sure he did not flee, he placed the guards of the city gates on alert. In spite of this, the ascetic managed to escape the city. Dressed as

a drunk and singing a tune to cymbals, he approached the city gates. When the guard asked him who he was, he replied that he was the pious ascetic that everyone was looking for. The guard did not believe him, and let him go.<sup>245</sup>

As Shadia Drury says, “The pious ascetic is the symbol of the esoteric writer. He lies in deed or manner or style of expression, but does not lie in speech.”<sup>246</sup> While it does not seem that Drury is speaking specifically about literary form here, by her subsequent argument, I would suggest that she reads the symbolism of the tale quite accurately, in connecting the lie to reside in style, rather than speech. In this manner, it would appear that Strauss’s understanding of his elitism in his overt content is merely a commotion to distract us from the underlying delivery of his politically subversive style of writing, which is the true stowaway that he brings to America, and what his acolytes mimic. If Strauss believes that form is the true threat, which he tells us he does through Al Farabi, then we must wonder about the final effectiveness of a friendly content to counteract this aim.

### **Linking Aestheticism to Postmodernism?**

Is deconstruction or poststructuralism aestheticism? The question must remain in focus as we outline what is meant by aestheticism. Bell Villada’s text, much like Fowlie’s classification of the phenomenon, dates aestheticism’s predominance in art to pervade the historical period of 1790 up until at least the 1970s, where Bell Villada ends his examination by the inclusion of America’s New Criticism and Deconstruction within the movement. Similarly, Terry Eagleton identifies a similar trend operating within the twentieth century’s main theoretical preoccupations, and precursors of deconstruction, along with *aspects* of Derrida’s work.<sup>247</sup> Operating without the aspiration of completely

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<sup>245</sup> Recounted in Drury, Shadia. *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, (Palgrave MacMillan; New York, NY, 2005) pg. LX. The original longer version by Strauss is in the text *What is Political Philosophy?*

<sup>246</sup> Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, LX-LXI.

<sup>247</sup> Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 16.

categorizing the aesthetic movement in full, we might instead list some of the main movements identified with this trend, which operates generally as a move away from literary realism to an eventual critical preoccupation with art or literary craft itself. Such examples of aestheticism might include: romanticism, symbolism, decadence, fin de siècle, aestheticism, modernism, structuralism, formalism, and New Criticism. These are the primary movements that continue the impulses of the Romantic mythos and a formal preoccupation with secondary meaning making that precede deconstruction and postmodernism.

Like Bell Villada's categorization of aestheticism, Eagleton identifies the rise of Literature as beginning "only with what we now call the 'Romantic period,' and he claims that "we ourselves are post-Romantics, in the sense of being products of that epoch rather than confidently posterior to it."<sup>248</sup> Eagleton observes that because we are still within this epoch it makes it "hard for us to grasp just what a curious historically particular idea this is."<sup>249</sup> Connecting the rise of Literature with the rise of Romanticism and "aesthetics," or the philosophy of art, Eagleton further observes: "Previously men and women had written poems, staged plays or painted pictures for a variety of purposes, while others had read, watched or viewed them... Now these concrete, historically variable practices were being subsumed into some special, mysterious faculty known as 'the aesthetic,' and a new breed of aestheticians sought to lay bare its inmost structures." Explaining further the consequences of this aestheticism, Eagleton continues, "The assumption that there was an unchanging object known as 'art,' or an isolatable experience called 'beauty' or the 'aesthetic,' was largely a product of the very alienation of art from social life... Art was extricated from the material practices, social relations and ideological meanings in which it is always caught up, and raised to the status of a solitary fetish."<sup>250</sup> Thus, Eagleton, like Bell Villada, identifies Literature as a mysterious or indirect "ideology," which he additionally explains arose in English studies particularly due to what he identifies as the

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 18-19.

supposed “failure of religion.”<sup>251</sup> Literary form, in this sense, is religion’s ideological replacement.

Eagleton explains the function of such a conception of Literature/poetry by examining T.S. Eliot’s sense of the term, which was consistent with the tendencies of *art for art’s sake* in general. On Eliot’s notion of poetry, Eagleton cautions: “Poetry was not to engage the reader’s mind: **it did not really matter what a poem actually meant**,... Meaning was no more than **a sop thrown to the reader** to keep him distracted while the poem went stealthily to work on him in more physical and **unconscious** ways.”<sup>252</sup> In this way, we again see what Miller identifies as the objective of romantic mythology operating as a magick or performative thing, rather than as a direct, or first level (surface content) mythos. Linked with this kind of unconscious working upon the reader, Eliot also promoted intuitive sources of authority such as through the “Tradition.” Eagleton also explains how Eliot promoted values that could be summarized as the non-systematic manifestations of “Life,” which Eagleton further explains the possible trappings of, in saying:

Since Life was not a theoretical system but a matter of particular intuitions, you could always take your stand on these in order to attack other people’s systems; but since Life was also as absolute a value as you could imagine, you could equally use it to lambaste those utilitarians and empiricists who could see no further than their noses. It was possible to spend quite a lot of time crossing from one of these fronts to another, depending on the direction of enemy fire. Life was as remorseless and unquestionable a metaphysical principle as you could wish, dividing the literary sheep from the goats with evangelical certainty; but since it only ever manifested itself in concrete particularities, it constituted no systematic theory in itself and was consequently invulnerable to assault.<sup>253</sup>

As we have already seen in our examination of Derrida and Caputo’s preferred Kierkegaard, poststructuralism appeals, in part at least, to such a non-systematic promotion of something very akin to Eliot’s metaphysical construct of “Life,” and “particularity;” while Vattimo hermeneutics appeals to Eliot’s usage of “Tradition,” following Gadamer. In

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 35. Bold added for emphasis.

<sup>253</sup> Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 38.

singling Eliot out as antecedent to postmodern *concepts*, we are here highlighting that these concepts had an earlier life in reactionary modernism, which is often not openly acknowledged by progressive adherents to such theoretical commitments. As Eagleton identifies in Eliot's use of "the particular," there is no easy resolution of the political objectives of these matters however, because such ironic commitments are by definition a crossing from one front to another. Bell Villada flat out says deconstruction is aestheticism, while Eagleton is more cautious, although he sees aesthetic tendencies operative in deconstruction, and particularly in its various Anglo-American acolytes, such as in Paul de Man and the Yale School.<sup>254</sup> Regarding the aesthetic tendencies of deconstruction, Eagleton says:

Reading is not a matter of fusing two different but determinate meanings, as it was for the New Critics: it is a matter of being caught on the hop between two meanings which can be neither reconciled nor refused. Literary criticism thus becomes an ironic, uneasy business, an unsettling venture into the inner void of the text which lays bare the illusoriness of meaning, the impossibility of truth and the deceitful guiles of all discourse.<sup>255</sup>

In terms of the political ramifications of such an ironic approach, Eagleton also contemplates: "The view that the most significant aspect of any piece of language is that it does not know what it is talking about smacks of a jaded resignation to the impossibility of truth which is by no means unrelated to post-1968 historical disillusion."<sup>256</sup> Speaking about post-structuralism as a historically contextualized paradigm, Eagleton adds, "Post-structuralism was a product of that blend of euphoria and disillusionment, liberation and dissipation, carnival and catastrophe, which was 1968. Unable to break the structures of state power, post-structuralism found it possible instead to subvert the structures of language. Nobody, at least, was likely to beat you over the head for doing so."<sup>257</sup> In maintaining fairness, Eagleton precautions of Derrida himself that he "is clearly out to do more than develop new techniques of reading: deconstruction is for him an ultimately

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<sup>254</sup> Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 126.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 125.

<sup>257</sup> Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 123.

political practice.” Yet, Eagleton subsequently again warns, “That (Derrida’s) own work has been grossly unhistorical, politically evasive and in practice oblivious to language as ‘discourse’...”<sup>258</sup> Conversations about “discourse” are supposed to study language and utterance as socially contextualized events. Therefore, following Eagleton, we might suggest that the matter of deconstruction’s ultimate political function is not finally condemnable, yet we must recognize nonetheless that the post-structuralist program harbours, at least in part, pessimistic and counter-enlightenment tendencies. Trying to say anything definitive about the stance is theoretically impossible, which we have hopefully demonstrated in this chapter is not something that is unique or new to deconstruction. Finally, as we shall better illustrate in the following chapter(s), deconstruction and Caputo’s return to religion (and Vattimo in his fashion too) requires the distinction be made between the formal devices of such post-romantic writings, and the aims of aestheticism proper, with its aspirations of morally whitewashing Judeo-Christian ethics from social consciousness.

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<sup>258</sup> Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 128.



## Chapter 2: Evaluating Caputo's Christian-Irony

Throughout the span of his academic career, John D. Caputo's theoretical interests have changed from an early focus upon Martin Heidegger and the mystical to his subsequent focus upon Jacques Derrida and a *certain* hermeneutics of the Kingdom of God. Through various artful transitions, especially in his later work, Caputo's technical terminology and subject matter have undergone many surface changes. We shall examine the highlights of these changes, and describe how they interconnect, in the next two chapters. Nonetheless, despite these many shifts in his terminology and the variables of his subject matter, there has remained a consistently basic underlying sensibility towards metaphysics<sup>259</sup> and the epistemologically systematic and conceptual in all of his work, which will be the primary focus of the current chapter. Understanding this underlying sensibility towards metaphysics is the fulcrum that all the specifics of Caputo's textual writings turn upon.

Caputo's thought is really a type of "writing-otherwise-than-philosophy," or more bluntly it is a certain type of "anti-philosophy" that operates via a certain type of "anti-systematic" writing style<sup>260</sup>. What we mean, in practical terms, it is using a type of "literary" technique known as, what we have been calling, continental irony.<sup>261</sup> Identifying

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<sup>259</sup> "Metaphysics" in postmodern/continental philosophy (and how I use the term throughout my thesis) means more than its common usage of referring to supernatural or otherworldly phenomena. In such theory, "metaphysics" is used in Martin Heidegger's sense of the term, which he applied to any type of ideal concept (for example: objectivism, rationality, Marxism, science, mathematics, or naturalism). Basically, "metaphysics" in Heidegger's sense encompasses all conceptual thought and ideas. It does this in a largely compromising effort, suggesting that all conceptual thought and ideas are leaps of logic, metaphorical, or mythical.

<sup>260</sup> Compare Caputo's statement about Kierkegaard: "The task of seeking the truth that is true for me makes Kierkegaard something of an anti-philosophical philosopher, writing a philosophy that brushes against the grain of philosophy" (Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 17).

<sup>261</sup> Defining irony is not an easy task, as my coverage of the concept in Chapter two should have made clear, yet for the sake of simplicity let us follow again briefly some of Claire Colebrook's basic explanations of the

Caputo's work to be such an instance of continental irony is an approach that many of his non-specialized readers miss, which makes this claim important in properly identifying the mechanics of Caputo's textual message(s).

Continental irony is a style of rhetoric or literary<sup>262</sup> writing that in a single text ends up expressing two conflicting or self-canceling viewpoints about any given topic or subject under consideration. The literary result of this self-contradictory textual style of writing is that it creates an open ended text, which results in paradox, because there is in the end no authoritative author to finalize or anchor sense and meaning for the text. The craft of the ironist is usually evaluated according to his or her ability to keep surface appearances indicating otherwise, by employing any given number of literary techniques to continually draw a reader in to the appearance or promise of textual meaning in a continual weaving and blending detour, but finally through evasive writing all such appearances are effaced, whether the reader has clued in or not. A dupe of irony is typically a "metaphysical" thinker, in the Heideggerian sense of the term, who mistakes one of the textual feigns of meaning to be its actualized or final meaning, perhaps because they are partial to the position argued or blinded by offence taken to the position.

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concept (for a quick second look at irony to ensure that our reader understands the terminology that is to follow in this chapter). Really, in general, the concept is quite simple. Colebrook says of Irony: "Until the Renaissance, irony was theorized within rhetoric and was often listed as a type of allegory: as one way among others for saying one thing and meaning another" (Colebrook, *Irony*, 7.) "Since the nineteenth century, however, Socratic irony has come to mean more than just a figure of speech and refers to the capacity to remain distant and different from what is said in general" (Colebrook, *Irony*, 8.) "Indeed, contrary to both traditional and modern readings of Socrates, the Romantics also stressed the contradictions of irony... Irony was not just signaling the opposite of what was said: it was the expression of both sides or viewpoints **at once** in the form of contradiction or paradox: '**Irony is the form of paradox**'" (Colebrook, *Irony*, 53-54).

<sup>262</sup> In continental thinking, the literary is the opposite of systematic writing. It might be considered equivalent to distinguish scientific vs. poetic writing. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the humanities in the continental tradition gained an aversion to attempting to emulate scientific writing, because thinkers like Schleiermacher, Droysen, Ranke, and Dilthey questioned the philosophical legitimation of the human sciences, and put more emphasis on human emotion and the imagination, under the influence of German Romanticism.

These appearances of meaning are the “play” of an ironic text, which is often associated with being a type of joke, which can also be very serious. Irony is often thought to be a way of life, in that the ironist stands apart from received tradition and social programming, in doubt about the sufficiency of any language to encompass a veritable picture of the world. The ironist could also be pointing out his or her uncertainty in the face of a seemingly indeterminate cosmic or epistemic impasse, which simply means that they are writing a limit experience without calling it such, because one cannot write about limit experiences directly. Comparatively, one cannot effectively write about the “Dionysian,” “infinity,” “chaos,” “God,” or “death” *directly* without diminishing such sublime “things” into an idol or fetish. In such cases, the ironist is pointing, like a finger to the moon, to the inabilities of language to breach the boundaries of the unknowable or logically resolvable. In this open-ended sense, irony is the language of the sublime. The sublime use of language is meant to convey us towards those things that exceed or defy human understanding and meaning. Irony directs the reader beyond authorial meaning and textual meaning, which makes it seem very radical and revolutionary, but problematically it has a long history with being associated with radically anti-modern thinkers. In trying to set its self apart from this troubled past, some self-styled *revolutionary* writers appeal to the prospects of setting their readers free from their authorial authority (the central sense organizing principle of a text) by employing irony. The liberatory pulse of this writing claims that meaning is ultimately finalized by the reader or is in a definitive sense abandoned, resulting in a hypothetically new awareness of the complexities of “factual” or “immediate” living, much like the function of a Zen koan, whereby paradox cathartically stills the rationally seeking mind. In comparison, Caputo says the difference between modernity and postmodernity is the following: “...modernity affirms the rule of the same and the universal while postmodernity stresses individual difference.”<sup>263</sup>

With these characteristics in mind, it is my main contention about Caputo’s methodological orientation that it is via his use of the systematically disruptive affect of continental irony that he rightly *passes* for being anti-metaphysical and anti-systematic,

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<sup>263</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 16.

because with irony one is never simply for or against anything.<sup>264</sup> His preference for an anti-metaphysical method is as equally common in his early work on Heidegger, as it remains similarly employed in his later more contemporary work alongside Derrida and deconstruction.

In order to present an effective introduction to the main tenants of Caputo's textual output, we shall examine the thematic highlights of his writings by building off our commencing insight that the entire program is one engineered around a *certain* anti-metaphysics (i.e., irony). Therefore, in commencing, we might say that Caputo's orientation is best described as that of a Christian-ironist. The most effective way to access the particulars of Caputo's thought is by identifying the main arteries of his program that employ his underlying irony. Thus, in specific, I shall examine Caputo through a look at his use of irony operating within his epistemology, in the current chapter, while examining his ontology/theology, ethics, Christology, and soteriology in the subsequent chapter. These main arteries of Caputo's writings, I suggest, tend to define the most revelatory elements of his ironically anti-metaphysical method, as it pertains to his idiosyncratically postmodern religiosity.<sup>265</sup>

### **Introducing Caputo's "Certain" Epistemology**

Another important way of understanding deconstruction's anti-metaphysical approach is by recognizing that it is in function a type of "meta-critique of critique," which Simon Critchley has similarly suggested of the larger continental tradition.<sup>266</sup> In distinction,

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<sup>264</sup> I am here borrowing Caputo's irony myself in describing his writing style as "rightly passing for" by alluding to Derrida and Caputo's employment of similarly ironic terminology, as suggested here in Robbins's explanation of how both describe their basic ironic/religious positions: "In distinction from Derrida, Caputo says that he finds inspiration in Derrida, but that he also goes where Derrida does not regarding religion, because Derrida regarded himself as "rightly passing for an atheist," while Caputo suggests that he "rightly passes as a Christian" (Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 136).

<sup>265</sup> Caputo and Derrida acknowledge that metaphysics is unavoidable.

<sup>266</sup> Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 20.

we might further emphasize that Derrida and Caputo's postmodern method, like that of the broader framework characteristic of continental theory in general, is a "certain,"<sup>267</sup> (i.e., ironic) type of meta-critique of critique. What is important to note here is the ironic way that continental theory critiques critique (i.e., the enlightenment). Irony's critique does not overcome the modern in any strong argumentative sense such as through a definitive "refutation;" rather, postmodernism merely adopts a weaker stance of "incredulity" towards modernity. The difference between these two approaches is recognizable in the postmodern's understanding of the modern as another type of metaphysics. These modern metaphysical stances are considered by the postmodern to be *grand-récits* ("big stories", or "meta-narratives").<sup>268</sup> One of the casualties of the postmodern attack on the modern as metaphysical is the argumentative mechanism of logical "overcoming." The modern therefore is different from the postmodern specifically because it maintains strong argumentative stances (theses) that are mutually antagonistic, while the postmodern, through irony, does not.

Consequently, the inhibiting of such stabilizing or overarching accounts, along with the suspension of their supposed capacity for theoretical progression, are the primary targets of irony. One of the main innovators of irony, Kierkegaard, was writing ironically in response specifically to the systematic philosophy of the Hegelian dialectic.<sup>269</sup> It seems that it is, in fact, Hegel who Kierkegaard and postmodernism are most often thinking about when irony is at play (coincidentally Hegel is a prime influence in Karl Marx's material

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<sup>267</sup> As a guide to similar stylistic employments forthcoming in this chapter, the function of utilizing a word in italics for ironic language is acknowledging irony is at work, or that the writer is speaking with an awareness of the ironic give and take happening in making a strong claim, which is not made definitively, but with an ironic apprehension.

<sup>268</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 2006), 49.

<sup>269</sup> According to such Hegelian logic, to "overcome" a position via a newer or better position is describing the dynamic of systematic advance (which claimed to apply to the advancement of systems of knowledge), where the new supersedes the old through the antagonistic-progressive dynamic of: thesis + antithesis = synthesis (or in criticism's terms: argument + counter-argument = a conclusion or resolution).

dialectic)<sup>270</sup>. In continental irony there is never any synthesis or conclusion to the Hegelian dialectic because such irony does not attempt an overcoming, rather it plays between arguments or theses, by letting competing arguments or identities stand. It does such with the important and seemingly valid, if not undermining, qualification that they all are never absolute or closed. In Caputo's terms, this inhibition functions in deconstruction as follows:

The idea behind deconstruction is to let the *tout autre* shimmer in all its a/theological undecidability, to let the translations run in both directions in theological and atheological directions, without trying to call a halt to the play. Translatability should be, per impossible,<sup>271</sup> like a river running in both directions at once, a flux of which even snooty old Heraclitus never dreamed. In the end, Derrida concludes, there is no end."<sup>272</sup>

In regards to Caputo's religious stance, the previous exert demonstrates how the use of postmodern irony therefore advocates letting reason and religion have their say without making any strong or closed metaphysical claims. Therefore, Caputo's return to religion takes advantage of postmodernism's restraint upon the modern human sciences, which no longer are thought to define the world objectively. In association, Caputo says this ironic postmodern critique of modernity and reason is consequently good news for religion.<sup>273</sup> In comparing the transition from modernism to postmodernism, Caputo says:

For are not the modernists rather like the Shemites, furiously at work on the tower of Babel, on the "system," as Kierkegaard would say with biting irony, and are not the postmodernists following the lead of God, who in deconstructing the tower clearly favors a multiplicity of languages, frameworks, paradigms, perspective, angles? From a religious point of view,

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<sup>270</sup> Consider Andrew Bowie's remarks in comparison in his Introduction to German Philosophy: "The tension between needs formerly catered for by religion and the social effects of modern science and modern capitalism is a key to much of German philosophy" (Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy*, 2).

<sup>271</sup> Caputo's spelling linking bile of the river with the word impossible.

<sup>272</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 53.

<sup>273</sup> Caputo makes this claim in several places, such as in *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* (2007) and in *Philosophy and Theology* (2011).

does not postmodernism argue that God's point of view is reserved for God, while the human standpoint is immersed in the multiplicity of angles?<sup>274</sup>

The type of ironic writing that Caputo is alluding to in the above passage therefore demonstrates again that interpretation is always a limited undertaking, which Caputo believes we should embrace as a source of freedom for the polymorphic dissemination of discourse rather than thinking it a hindrance. In utilizing the tower of Babel narrative, he links God's confusing of language with the post-structuralist aversion to strong ideals, since both the tower and "the system," in the sense of a modern metaphysical *grand récit*, operate to solidify an exclusion of the supposed "multiplicity of languages." Like God's actions in the Genesis 11:1-9 account then, Caputo claims that such an ironic position also promotes multiplicity, via keeping meaning in play, rather than laying strong authoritative claims to a lofty truth. This play would further attempt to link "heaven and earth" (the physical and the metaphysical) in a reminiscent fashion akin to the tower of Babel, where the Shemites attempted to attain knowledge like God. Caputo says the resulting state of confused language, or multiplicity, brought by the tower's destruction is consistent with postmodernism's deconstruction of modern accounts, disseminating into deconstruction's hospitality to otherness and cultural pluralism. In this hospitality to otherness, God's point of view, along with our potential for a strong knowledge of God, each remain confronted by an absolute limit experience that is respected as wholly other.

Regarding Derrida's ironic position on the Enlightenment's metaphysical account of "pure Reason," Caputo clarifies: "Derrida's more avant-garde style makes the old *Aufklärers* (enlightenment philosophers) nervous... Derrida's doubts about the absolute judicial authority claimed by and for Enlightenment Reason, by and for "pure Reason" (capitalized), do not constitute an outright attack upon reason, upon giving good reasons, the best you can under the circumstances."<sup>275</sup> In other words, Derrida is not about destroying a limited type of reason, rather he is against what he and other postmodern thinkers identify as the Enlightenment's disposition to think of reason as something

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<sup>274</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 50.

<sup>275</sup> Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 54.

absolute or pure. Similarly, Caputo further suggests that we keep the Enlightenment's critique of religion in check by recognizing in the "new Enlightenment" that "we do not imagine that reason stands alone, without faith."<sup>276</sup> A religion **without** religion (atheism) would be such an idol, since it makes or assumes that enlightenment reason or scientific thinking is a pure thing that can identify how things really are in the natural world. In the postmodern, the natural itself is merely another big story. In contrast, Caputo instead advocates a religion **with/out religion**, where the slash between "with" and "out" symbolically represents an ironic wavering between positions.

According to this interpretive schema, Caputo believes that the dangers of both religion and reason are kept in check by their mutual relevance as interpreted events, rather than as strong claims about possessing an epistemic finality or full presence. In this design, Caputo believes that he and Derrida accordingly write in "the spirit of a new, postmodern modernity, of a new Enlightenment."<sup>277</sup> Consequently, what Caputo sees warranting the declaration of "a new Enlightenment" is his belief that the ironic position gets us past the shortcomings of both pre-modern and modern worldviews, since he frequently suggests that strong thinking is largely responsible for the violent and authoritarian abuses of history. In keeping strong identities at bay, Caputo believes that we can avoid the dangers accompanying strong thought. Critics of this thought, like Ronald A. Kuipers, raise doubts about Caputo's deconstructive suspension of strong identities. Instead of seeing Caputo as promoting both orthodoxy and critical theory simultaneously, Kuipers sees in Caputo's deconstructive method a strongly held rejection of institutional religions. In specific, Kuipers says of Caputo's orientation:

The operating assumption seems to be that these communities are by their very nature violent, their sense of identity inherently exclusive, and that any such community can understand other groups only as a threat. My main question to Professor Caputo here is how deconstruction can affirm cultural and religious pluralism without at the same time allowing determinate communities to retain a certain sense of unique identity, for after all it is this collocation of differing identities that constitutes such pluralism in the first place. That is, can we affirm this uniqueness while at the same time

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<sup>276</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 155.

<sup>277</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 154.



discouraging the dogmatic exclusivism that encourages the warlike behavior we all dream will cease?<sup>278</sup>

If Caputo were to answer Kuipers' question directly he would likely say that yes we can affirm the "uniqueness" of identities while discouraging "dogmatic exclusivism" through the use of continental irony. From the theoretical rules of the discourse that Caputo is employing this is true. From the metaphysical rules of discourse that Kuipers is approaching the problem from, it is not true. Thus, what we have is an intrinsic conflict of languages. The primary parameters grounding the language games of continental theory, along with its rules of play, are governed by a different system of logic than those of the modern and religiously metaphysical languages. By Caputo's understanding, his appeal to the ironic play between Christianity and aestheticism balance one another out. To a metaphysical thinker Caputo cannot have it both ways. He insists in response that he can. I do not suggest that we can resolve this dilemma, since it represents at bottom a matter of faith. For the meantime, we shall remain with examining Caputo according to his own chosen parameters of language, and then we shall evaluate his stance by a different approach more towards the end of the current chapter.

In the same general area of consideration, the problem that most (more or less all) criticisms of Caputo fail to adequately address is to take the conversation far enough to forcing a confrontation with the real underlying matters of separation. In other words, criticisms against Caputo, such as Christopher Ben Simpson's polemic, consistently fail to confront him on his style. Ben Simpson's criticism is about Caputo being anti-metaphysical, which we might add must be qualified by highlighting that Caputo is importantly such through his use of the literary device of irony, rather than being merely "antimetaphysical" in an essential sense, because charges likewise oriented are routinely acknowledged with ease by Caputo as incorrect.<sup>279</sup> Saying that Caputo is

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<sup>278</sup> Ronald Kuipers, "Dangerous Safety, Safe Danger: The Threat of Deconstruction to the Threat of Determinable Faith," in *Religion With/Out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* (ed. James H. Olthuis; New York: Routledge, 2002), 22.

<sup>279</sup> See Christopher Ben Simpson's text *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern* (2009).

“antimetaphysical” straightforwardly, without taking into consideration the role of irony in such an anti-metaphysical claim, runs the risk of not properly addressing how such a position operates in a certain fashion as both metaphysical and “antimetaphysical.” This phenomenon is in the end perhaps “antimetaphysical,” but it is such in a *certain* way. Thus, the importance of how he is saying the anti-metaphysical for Caputo is central to his meaning, which is not straightforwardly “anti” anything. In fact, it is at least partially pro-everything, though never entirely, since everything is “dead equal” before the hermeneut’s interpretation of Otherness (our limit experiences/ i.e., the sublime, or that beyond reason), almost.

### **Radical Hermeneutics**

Caputo is foremost a specialist of hermeneutics, which is almost a redundant statement due to the centrality of hermeneutics to this type of continental theorizing, but it nonetheless highlights a major element of his methodological focus. In poststructuralist terminology, one often hears much talk about “otherness.” “Otherness,” again, in its basic continental context refers to a fundamental limit experience confronting interpretation. It is therefore anything external (or internal even) from an interpreting subject that requires reading (whether that is regarding ultimate reality, another person, a literary text, or the signification of concept or a personal thought). That we never can escape interpretation is the grounding maxim of Caputo’s method, like most other continental thinking. This inescapability of interpretation is the commencing point of all theorizing for Caputo, as it was for Derrida. Another way of saying the limit experience of otherness confronts all readers is to talk of the inherent “difference” involved in interpretation. In short, when we go looking for meaning in things themselves (like words or symbols or thoughts), basically, we are redirected to the relational or metaphorical likenesses or dissimilarity of our examined thing to other things (other words, symbols, or thoughts). Thus, one key aspect of what Derrida is pointing towards in his neologism “differance” is the inescapability of interpretation, or the impossibility of finding a stable thing to ground a full presence of understanding upon, because again we can never get to the bottom of things. When we look

closely at things they tend to dissipate into nothingness. Instead, we find origins and referential meaning in relationship or differences from other things.

Caputo, in turn, believes that there are no easy answers available in hermeneutic moments of decision, which is why his general interpretive method is called “radical hermeneutics.”<sup>280</sup> Hermeneutics is “radical” for Caputo because it is immediately existential (individual, non-systematic, immediate) and repeating forward without any guardrails or metaphysically assured easy answers. This anti-philosophy of “facticity” shares in romanticism’s critique of rationalism (later positivism), and is closely aligned with neighboring schools of thought: existentialism, *lebensphilosophie* (“philosophy of life”), and vitalism. In comparison to these kindred schools of thought, the radical hermeneutic reader is very much adrift and alone in a flux of the conflict of interpretation, without a guiding philosophy or systematic method to employ (almost).

The essence of radical hermeneutics is likewise defined by deconstruction’s employment of the concept of “dissemination.” Regarding dissemination, Caputo says it is “precisely productive repetition, a repetition which takes-again... by taking differently, as opposed to re-productive.”<sup>281</sup> Furthermore, Caputo distinguishes dissemination from a classical hermeneutics, when he says, “unlike the repetition which repeats backward, dissemination alters, modifies, transforms, links, transgresses, shifts-even as it understands that it is an operation which is always carried out on what is pre-given... hermeneutics has been shown to be an insupportable violence...”<sup>282</sup> Essentially, what Caputo is talking about when using the term “dissemination” is the opening created by the lack of final authoritativeness of any single text upon its own received meanings, which suggests that meaning is co-created by the reader, and their personal idiosyncrasies that they bring to the text. Meaning is never stable, which opens up the text beyond an author’s intention. The idea being that meaning is freed. Derrida claimed to want to liberate hermeneutic meaning from texts and empower readers to bring readings that are hospitable to the neglected and oppressed, the other, the singular, or the excluded. Elsewhere, however, the limits of this

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<sup>280</sup> Refer to Caputo’s *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987), 4-5.

<sup>281</sup> John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 1988), 151.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

dissemination are reigned in by Derrida, when he nevertheless suggests that there exists a continued need for traditional epistemological guardrails of interpretation, in a very ironic fashion of making a point only to deface it elsewhere.<sup>283</sup>

In a very postmodern way, radical hermeneutics would likewise maintain that all of these leaps into otherness can never reveal their entirety to us, but will always keep their secrets safe (there is nothing outside the text, or, in other words, there is no escaping the conflict of interpretation). In Caputo's terms, "The secret does not reduce us to silence but provokes interpretation, evoking multiple and conflicting interpretations, a flood of discourses, a multiplicity of poetic, religious, and philosophic discourses... If there will never be enough names to name God or death," he says, "that is because we do not know their name."<sup>284</sup>

### **Facticity and the Particular of Non-systematic Theorizing**

Caputo's basic interpretive approach is therefore one that is driven by the messiness of what Heidegger would call, in a very Kierkegaardian essence, "factual" existence. When thinking of existence as a matter of "facticity," Caputo is trying to get closer to existence as it happens in the particulars of lived experience outside of the conventional archetypes or systems of thought. A common concern amongst post-romantic literary figures is the need for poetic language to make thinking invigorated/difficult again by warding off the staleness of familiarity nurtured by metaphysical predeterminations and the commonalities of language turned cliché or blunted by an overly familiar usage or approximation in common daily language use.<sup>285</sup> Interpretation for Caputo is therefore a very individual, case

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<sup>283</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 156.

<sup>284</sup> John D. Caputo, "Hauntological Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Christian Faith," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 79.2 (2005), 298.

<sup>285</sup> Consider these two comments made by Caputo in comparison: "For both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, the only real antidote to the dumbing down of bourgeois life is the intensity of a passionate singularity" (Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 88), and "Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger were politically conservative,

specific, and inherently a messy affair that cannot escape out the back door of ethical responsibility. We would not be far from the mark to say that interpretation is a singular, existential challenge for Caputo, more than a repetition of past meaning.

Incidentally, Kierkegaard is the main influence on both Caputo and Heidegger here<sup>286</sup>, especially as demonstrated in Kierkegaard's essay "Repetition,"<sup>287</sup> where he describes his attempt to have two separate, yet identical, trips to Berlin. In attempting this repetition, Kierkegaard tried to repeat the experiences he had on the first trip by visiting the exact same places, and attempting to do the same things, on his second trip. The general result of his return trip to Berlin is not surprisingly a missed repetition of the original. Things have changed. He cannot repeat the trip in the exactly same way as the first time he was in Berlin. In relation to interpretive theory, this hypothetical experiment points towards the predicament that interpretation can never truly be a recovery of a lost original. Instead, it is a co-creative act enacted by the reader. The reader's response and existential responsibility in his own texts are likewise key moral dilemmas that Caputo leaves open to his reader's own agency via his more existentially focused objectives as *author*.

Like Kierkegaard, Caputo's radical hermeneutic approach is likewise anti-metaphysical in that it makes no final claims, other than those ironically posited, which puts the existential burden upon his readers, rather than making any kind of authoritative

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even ultra-conservative, thinkers, alerting us to the downside and the dangers posed by democratic institutions" (ibid.)

<sup>286</sup> Speaking of Kierkegaard, Caputo says: "His genius was to convert the coin of his own secret life into the currency of a philosophical concept-the category of the 'single individual', 'that single one', which contemporary philosophers call, under his influence, 'singularity'-the unrepeatable, the unique, the secret, something uniquely itself and not a specimen of a kind. This has struck a postmodern chord where modernity affirms the rule of the same and the universal while postmodernity stresses individual difference" (Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 16)

<sup>287</sup> Kierkegaard's Danish original was published in 1843.

claims himself as author.<sup>288</sup> Kierkegaard's Christianity is no doubt influential on Caputo's own version of Christianity, in this fashion. For example, Caputo says of Kierkegaard's notion of Christianity: "Christianity is something to do, not a philosophical puzzle. It comes about not when someone affirms a creedal proposition, but when someone does something. It is a way to be witnessed, not a proposition to be proven."

Thus, in a similar spirit Caputo rejects the classical authoritative stance of a metaphysical author. This author traditionally would attempt to have a central thesis or didactic point to their text. There is finally no such point in Caputo or Caputo's preferred Kierkegaard<sup>289</sup>, merely a passing onto the reader the existential problematic of the anxiety of existential dread or angst. This angst is the result of a confrontation of the solitary individual alone before seemingly irresolvable positions or choices. Kierkegaard's famous work emphasizing this point is *Fear and Trembling*. In this text, Kierkegaard examines one such outwardly contradictory situation, in the Abraham and Isaac narrative of Genesis 22:5-8. The main question arising from such a blockage of a logical and clear cut choice is what is to be done? This ethical suspension and inherent difficulty of the situation comes down to the solitary reader of the Genesis account as confronted with two seemingly contradictory commands in "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13) and the command for a sacrificial burnt offering via infanticide (Genesis 22:3). The choice offered in the Moriah trial of faith, from the vantage point of Kierkegaard, leads toward paradox and contradiction. This paradox arises from the vantage point of Kierkegaard's quandary regarding Abraham's moment of decision, where submission to God's command for the destruction of Abraham's son Isaac (the living embodiment of the covenant) is in resolution the fulfillment of the covenant, yet prior to its fulfillment the ethical/religious agent (Kierkegaard/Abraham) is without the assurance of knowing it. In juxtaposing the

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<sup>288</sup> On Kierkegaard's mode of living, Caputo says: "Instead of adopting the classical metaphysics of the self as a substance or soul, an essence or nature, Kierkegaard introduces us to the self as a text woven from the fabric of freedom, as a tissue of choices" (Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 41).

<sup>289</sup> Caputo favours a Kierkegaard that is more attentive to his aesthetic writings than his more religiously committed writings. Essentially, Kierkegaard suggests that a leap of faith is required to get beyond the moral stalemate of aestheticism, while Caputo believes that such a leap is a leap into fundamentalism, and he would prefer to have the religious, ethical, and aesthetic waiver in undecidability.

contradictory strands of this quandary, akin to the Gordian knot, Kierkegaard is caught in perplexity.

It would seem to Kierkegaard that Abraham is confronted by a logical contradiction, when juxtaposing the coherence of God's two separate commands together. Kierkegaard sees this type of contradictoriness as the beginning of true existential difficulty, where formulaic or systematic responses are not applicable or are eclipsed, and where true religious being (singularity) and trial commences. It is in such moments of singularity where contradictory or self-effacing dilemmas arise, which defy easy resolution, that interest Caputo. It is these dilemmas that animate his underlying methodological focuses. The difference between Kierkegaard and Caputo/Derrida is that the former appeals to religious faith as a leap to cut this Gordian knot, while the latter two would rather keep the knot tied, so the tension of "undecidability" is unresolved. Regarding the difference between postmodernism's approach and Kierkegaard's approach, Caputo says the following:

In the *Gift of Death*, Derrida argued that instead of defending a religious exception to ethics, Kierkegaard's point is best served by defending the exception as itself an ethical category. Ethics may be redescribed in such a way that no ethical obligation may be reduced to the mechanical application of a universal rule, as if making ethical choices is like running a computer program... In postmodernity Kierkegaard's category of the exception is widened beyond its religious scope-or perhaps it is better to say that his religious category is granted a wider sweep and significance. For it is just in virtue of its 'singularity' that each thing is inscribed in a field of aesthetic, ethical and religious transcendence that commands our respect, a transcendence that would honour the world God has created instead of regarding it as a place that has been blackened by God, the way a mother blackens her breast, to wean us for eternity, as Kierkegaard says at the beginning of *Fear and Trembling*.<sup>290</sup>

Kierkegaard's answer to this paradoxical impasse is modeled on Abraham's leap of faith, despite his prolonged wrestling with the paradoxes of such a leap himself. Caputo, in comparison, is worried that such a leap has a tendency to religious fundamentalism, which he hopes to avoid by not letting his irony subside. Instead, postmodernity elevates

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<sup>290</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 55.

“singularity” to the primacy of the highest ethical category, because, as Caputo says in the spirit of Deleuze, “what everything has in common is precisely its difference!”<sup>291</sup> The postmodern therefore wants to promote letting difference have its play.

Essentially, in his more affirmative moods, Caputo’s position is not that orthodox religious truths or dogmas are not possibly true in the sense of what is beyond our comprehension; rather, he believes that they are not accessibly true, without a leap into a particular language of interpretation, which is why he speaks in the quote above about respecting transcendence. Essentially, Caputo is respecting religion as a different kind of language than theory, with its own rules of meaning and truth. In this fashion, Caputo wants to keep meaning open between theory and religion by respecting the integrity of both systems of language.

Most of his critics never address Caputo through his employment of irony, and in response Caputo’s normal counter-defense against such common accusations is always the same. He rejects them all to have misunderstood his position, which in part is true (claiming in contrast that he is in a way nevertheless affirmative of certain metaphysical commitments instead of merely negating them). While Caputo suggests that such criticisms have misunderstood his position, he never explicitly or overtly explains to the victims of his irony how such misunderstandings, by default, fall short of their mark, or how viewing language systems from an aesthetic vantage point can get outside of itself to give the type of integrity that he attributes to his position’s regard for religion.

### **Caputo: The Dionysian-Rabbi**

One of Caputo’s more openly self-revelatory epistemological moments comes from his text *Against Ethics*, where he recounts in an apparently autobiographical anecdote how he once received in the mail an anonymously sent painting (the package was pseudonymously signed “Abraham of Paris”).<sup>292</sup> Caputo describes this received painting as a humorous portrait that portrays someone akin in appearance to the likeness of the Greek

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<sup>291</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 16.

<sup>292</sup> John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics* (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 1993), 42.



God Dionysus (Dionysius, as we have already explained, was a favorite of the German romantics and Nietzsche due to his associations with fragmentation, flux, ritual madness, ecstasy, and frenzy). Consequently, in Caputo's painting, Dionysius is also outfitted with various indicating traits of a rabbi. Thus, his Dionysius is portrayed as having a long beard, a tallith about his shoulders, and a scroll of the Torah in his hand.<sup>293</sup> Regarding the continued importance of this painting for himself, Caputo says:

I have ever since kept this wonderful painting hanging above my mantel as a daily reminder of my Ideal. For this sublime figure-I do not know if it is sublime or farcical-at any rate, this unrepresentable image, is, I must confess, what I aim at... For prank or no prank, the picture is a portrait of my mind, a perfect exemplification of what happens to someone who has allowed the thought, if it is a thought, of undecidability to have its way with his reflections. Mad as it seems, the image makes a certain sense to me. It reminds me of Lyotard's farcical version of the categorical imperative: act in such a way that your maxim cannot be universalized (almost). The Law my Dionysian rabbi was reading must surely be something like that... This itself bears an interesting similarity to what Derrida has been saying in recent years about justice and singularity. The print bore the title "The Heterologist."<sup>294</sup>

Caputo then explains that the key concept depicted in, or perhaps shifting or swirling within, the conceptual instability of the portrait's likeness is its underlying "heterology" (hence his above descriptor of the image as "unrepresentable"). In a certain ironic way then, the picture is hermeneutically unstable, and will never cease to retain an "unsolidified" or perpetually open quality due to the "undecidability" intrinsic to its contradictory elements of the Rabbinic (the representational or Apollonian in Judeo-Christian form) and the Dionysian<sup>295</sup>. Importantly, Caputo tells us that this is his "Ideal," and more revealingly he also tells us that it is a "portrait of his mind." It is also interesting

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Recall from chapter two that Nietzsche used the Dionysian via the Romantics to contrast the Apollonian: where Apollo is the God of form and order, while Dionysius is the God of ecstasy and the loss of individuation, as per the mysteries and Eastern appeals to an ecstatic sense of the oceanic. In the oceanic one loses one's sense of self and is swept away by the libidinal.

that he says to “act in such a way that your maxim cannot be universalized (almost).” The key idea of note Caputo implies here without directly saying it is that he recognizes through his ironic promotion of singularity and difference that they might be inversely universalized (almost), because even irony is a type of *Ideal* or *metaphysics* equally in its own style.

The Rabbinic and Dionysian are Caputo’s adopted variation of Nietzsche’s mythological representations of the natural impulses of artistic and cultural creation, which Nietzsche himself borrowed from German romanticism. These two principles of creation are very similar in nature to the yin and yang of Taoism, yet the pervading quasi-mystical element is replaced by an aesthetic priority, where the principles are themselves merely representations, rather than universal essences or powers. These two anciently religious principles, present in Eastern thought and Western esotericism, are undoubtedly highly involved in the cultural systems studied and categorized by structuralism and then subsequently challenged by post-structuralism. In one manifestation we might compare them to the nature/culture distinction, yet the applications of these two are manifold.

By talking about them via art’s impulses, Nietzsche has something in mind like an irrational primacy directing the process of creating art, which is very much in line with the romantic’s idea of the artist as nature creating itself. In Nietzsche’s sense, the Apollonian (later the Rabbinic in Caputo and others) is the individuating or form giving drive/impulse of art, while the Dionysian is the fragmenting or dispersing drive/impulse that destroys and disrupts this individuating tendency, by collapsing it back into some kind of pre-rational or oceanic totality. The Dionysian is linked by the romantics with the elements of chaos and the chthonic/monstrous, which counteract the Apollonian powers of cosmic order and reason. The Apollonian contains the Dionysian, yet the Dionysian is inexpressible. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche is critical of the dramatic works of Euripides. Nietzsche does not like Euripides because of his attributed introduction of a socio-cultural art that made sense, thereby forging a relatively held common sense. Nietzsche also thinks that Euripides contributed to establishing an ethical worldview. He sees such a morality originally emerging from the sympathetic/cathartic art form of tragedy, where an audience learns to identify and sympathize with the hero. Nietzsche describes this as betraying the original tragic essence found in earlier Greek playwrights like Aeschylus and Sophocles. He believes this divergence is due to the influence of Socrates upon Euripides. Nietzsche

resents Socrates over and above Euripides for bringing forth the ideals of Reason and the Good to orient public consciousness. For Caputo, in distinction from Nietzsche, the Apollonian, or rather the Rabbinic, comes to focus more on ethical significance, which is the underlying reason why the name change happens, in order to say that the Hebrew is principally an ethical world view. Caputo is aware of Nietzsche's political objectives in promoting the Dionysian over the Apollonian, which is why he emphasizes an ironic balancing of the two impulses in creative writing. However, Nietzsche also emphasizes the co-existent nature of these two impulses of art, which might cause Caputo problems in trying to finally distinguish his *style*, and its point (stylus), from that of Nietzsche's.

In thinking about Nietzsche's use of Apollonian/Dionysian impulses of art, Caputo's initially sets out to distinguish the uses of the Rabbinic contra the Dionysian impulses of art. Caputo says he accomplishes this distancing by advocating for a distinction of poetic writings of "difference" contra poetic writings of the "plenum."<sup>296</sup> In this apparent argument of emphasizing the Rabbinic over the Dionysian, Caputo first explains the etiology of the term "heterology" to consist of the roots of *heteros* (difference), and *logos* (the logic or word thereof).<sup>297</sup> In revisiting his distinction between what he above called the writings of "difference" contrasted from those of "plenum," Caputo again uses neologism to distinguish between what he identifies as two different ideas of difference. This time he calls one type of difference "heteromorphism" and the other "heteronomism."<sup>298</sup> The difference between differences is based on the commitments of their surface contents. In making this distinction between the two types of difference, Caputo is demonstrating that he is aware of, and concerned with, Heidegger and Nietzsche's motives in undermining the Judeo-Christian worldview, where the language of

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<sup>296</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 263, notes 63 and 67. There he says: "Both Deleuze and Levinas are philosophers of infinity, or infinite excess, and both seek to deploy a kind of Neoplatonic infinity to throw the dialectic out of gear. Deleuze affirms the infinite excess of the same; Levinas affirms the infinite excess of the Other. I have never gotten as far as the infinity of the Other, and I do not have the stamina for the infinity of the same."

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

its moral attentiveness was to give way to something beyond good and evil, something outside of an ethical world picture, as the world re-narrated otherwise than via “Zoroaster’s” moral dualism.<sup>299</sup> For example, Caputo says in his footnotes to *Against Ethics* that he thinks it “foolish, if not downright disingenuous, to try to persuade oneself that Nietzsche did not hold” political views that were “the most oppressive and reactionary”.<sup>300</sup> Elsewhere, Caputo also comments that “Nietzsche has an excellent insight into Judaism and Christianity: they are, or ought to be, emancipatory, so that the expression “liberation theology” should be (but is not) redundant.”<sup>301</sup>

Thus, Caputo demonstrates that he is fully aware of the dangers of Nietzsche’s project, along with his reactionary reasons for wanting to overcome Christianity/Judaism. Nietzsche sets out to accomplish this “transvaluation” of all values by appealing to people’s pride, which is manipulated via a great concern for being laughed at, or duped, and their tendency to distrust others.<sup>302</sup> Demonstrating that he is fully aware of the literary angle of Nietzsche’s texts, Caputo says, “Nietzsche’s woman, for she is a beguiler who traps the unwary, who offers truths where there are none... Derrida on the other hand wants to show that there is no meaning or truth to Nietzsche’s text, but that nonetheless his text has its point, its stylus, stiletto, dagger tip... which is its disruptive effect.”<sup>303</sup> In the Dionysian sense of the term “*Woman*,” Nietzsche is invoking something beyond or below the sexual difference. Gender categories at this level of examination are another metaphysical orientation of the Apollonian. In contrast, Nietzsche’s ironic commitments are described by Caputo as a “perpetual self-overcoming” of “a body that is always awake, a kind of metaphysical insomniac.”<sup>304</sup> The connection to sleep that Caputo is alluding to here is Nietzsche’s use of the phrase “good sleep,” in describing the flight to otherworldly hopes

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<sup>299</sup> Nietzsche’s text *Thus Spake Zarathustra* works towards such a transvaluation of values.

<sup>300</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 261, note 35.

<sup>301</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 262, note 45.

<sup>302</sup> Nietzsche appeals to people’s tendencies of suspicion and fear of ridicule in crafting his romantic ideology.

<sup>303</sup> Caputo, “Supposing Truth to be a Woman,” 15.

<sup>304</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 263, note 60.

and securities that we often cling to in the face of the dangers confronting us in this life.<sup>305</sup> Caputo rejects Nietzsche's appeal to sleeplessness with an ironic balancing of Christian religion and Nietzsche's metaphysical account of perpetual self-overcoming, irony. In other words, he is using irony in the face of irony, while disagreeing with the quasi-stances of Nietzsche's ironic advancement of the notion of the Will to power, with his own quasi-stances of a Biblical call for Justice. Elsewhere, in *Radical Hermeneutics*, Caputo says of Nietzsche's writing:

There is no truth of Nietzsche's text, no truth of man and woman, and hence no hermeneutics which plumbs the depths of truth. There are as many truths as one needs, too many truths, a surfeit... There is no sexual difference, no psychoanalytic hermeneutic, no Being-historical hermeneutic, no hard and fast identities of any sort, no strictly differentiated and decidable essences, each keeping to their own proper boundaries. This woman spells the end of hermeneutics.<sup>306</sup>

The idea of truth is crossed out in Nietzsche's writings, which means that ideas like the will to power in his texts are not seriously advanced, but are done in a playful manner via the snare of irony, which viewed negatively from a metaphysical standpoint is a type of seed of discord towards any kind of affirmative identities, or ideals such as democracy, feminism, socialism, or Christianity. Nietzsche's political motive in promoting such a referential collapse was anti-democratic and radically reactionary. Rorty calls Nietzsche's move "one more example of inverted Platonism," which he describes as "the romantic attempt to exalt the flesh over the spirit, the heart over the head, a mythical faculty called "will" over an equally mythical one called "reason."<sup>307</sup> It is important to again note that Caputo demonstrates that he is fully aware of Nietzsche's wily writing, which is not surprising considering how well versed in irony Caputo is through Kierkegaard and Derrida. The problem for Caputo is how does he think that his affirmative content can maintain any significantly better advantage over Nietzsche's vision, when the matter of

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<sup>305</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 19.

<sup>306</sup> Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 157.

<sup>307</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 33.

importance for Nietzsche and aestheticism is ultimately style rather than affirmative content?

### **Mythologizing Differently: The Chinese Puzzle of Boxes within Boxes**

In spite of this awareness, the methodological countermeasure that Caputo adopts in response to the politically motivated writings of the Heideggerean/Nietzschean threat to democratic sensibilities is one that appears entirely content focused in response. This focus on what is being said, rather than how it is being said, is also in part adopted by Derrida and Levinas, despite a strong grasp and utilization of the technical “how” employed in their own writings. Caputo’s commitment to this stance is most prominent in the transition from his early to middle work on Heidegger, and in his comments on Nietzsche and Gilles Deleuze in *Against Ethics*. In regard to Heidegger’s involvement with Nazism, Caputo specifically develops his content focused methodological countermeasure in his text *Demythologizing Heidegger*.<sup>308</sup> There Caputo explains his method as the following:

At the same time that my thoughts had taken a new and more critical turn vis-à-vis Heidegger, I had for some time been more and more drawn to the flourishing discourse on justice astir in the writings of the French, in particular of Derrida, Levinas, and Lyotard. I was strongly attracted to the prophetic fervor of Levinas, to his biblical call for justice, to this remarkable phenomenon of a philosopher-cum-prophet, of a distinctly prophetic voice, raised among the postmodern. Above all, I was influenced by the exquisite sensitivity of Derrida to the questions of judgment, singularity, law, and justice that characterizes all his works, but in particular the writings of recent years. . . . I was not, however, led to conclude that these French thinkers were given to the denunciation of myth, to a merciless demythologizing or antimythologizing. On the contrary, I found what I call here a tendency to mythologize differently, to invoke other myths than the myth of Being. **I concluded that it is not a question of getting beyond myth or of laying aside mythologizing altogether, which is no more possible than getting beyond or laying aside metaphysics, but rather of inventing new and more salutary myths, or of recovering other and older myths, myths to counter the destructive myths of violence, domination, patriarchy, and hierarchy.**<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> See John D. Caputo’s text *Demythologizing Heidegger* (1993).

<sup>309</sup> John D. Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington IL: Indiana University Press, 1993), 2-3. Italics added for emphasis.

There are two important things to note in this passage. First, Caputo admits that there is no escaping myth or metaphysics, which we must note in defending our own claim that irony is a metaphysical design. Again, irony is a performative metaphysic, rather than a constative one. It does not promote a unified ideological vision, but enacts the inversion of this vision by promoting the proliferation of the particular/idiosyncratic. This proliferation occurs because irony is the *privatization* of meaning, which too has ideological implications, even if this is positively interpreted as the space permitting existential independence. In connection, the other key idea of note is that within French postmodernism the pervading method that Caputo identifies as operating in response to Heidegger's attempt to undermine the biblical prophetic outlook is the approach of "mythologizing *differently*." The italics on the word "*differently*" here emphasize that the ironic method is being employed in this mythologizing, yet a metaphysically oriented critic might likewise suggest that the italics signify that mythologizing differently is in the end not possible because of irony's inherent undermining tendency of other mythologies.

Irony is traditionally understood to offer the aesthete the means to remain outside the game of choice. Interestingly, Caputo says on the topic, "The aesthete refuses to play the game of choice at all except in the sense that he chooses not to choose."<sup>310</sup> This identification of the aesthetic as itself a type of leap into not leaping indicates an awareness on the part of Caputo of it again being another type of mythos. In consideration of the integrity of the various operative myths, or languages, working in his own medley of voices that interweave the fabric of his textual writings, Caputo wants to respect both the integrity of theory (irony) and religion. In wanting to respect the limit experience of transcendence, Caputo's theoretical efforts end in the medley of letting each of these identities coexist in his writings. Much like Kierkegaard's pseudonymous medley of voices, Caputo's writings are in this way "a Chinese puzzle of boxes inside boxes."<sup>311</sup> Thereby, the difference operating in their juxtaposition is not meant to offer relief to their mutual disruption.

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<sup>310</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 38.

<sup>311</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 23.

In response to typical concerns about the pitfalls of the postmodern, initially anyway, Caputo's traditional responses would evoke homage to what he calls the "heteronomic" postmodern, which he in *Against Ethics* links to such thinkers as Derrida, Lyotard, and Levinas. Elsewhere, he calls this type of mythologizing differently "Messianic postmodernism." Caputo calls its opposite "Dionysian postmodernism," which he now uses to describe that phenomenon that is more or less equivalent to his earlier identification of the category of difference he formerly referred to as "heteromorphism."<sup>312</sup> Regarding their differences, Caputo says:

If the Dionysian version of difference takes the form of a certain "heteromorphism," this second version, which I am calling "messianic," is best thought of as a certain "heteronomism," where everything turns on the law of the other, on the disruption visited upon the "same" by the "other," which is the language Levinas uses, adapted from Plato's Sophist and Parmenides, to express a very biblical notion. In this version, what matters is the "responsibility" that I incur when the other overtakes me, taking me by a kind of deep surprise, one that is older than I can say, prefigured in the very structure of *creatio ex nihilo*, in which, in Levinas's beautiful phrase, the creature answers to a call that it never heard. The heteronomic version is structured around the notion of a call in which the other lays claim to me, has always and already laid claim to me.<sup>313</sup>

In short, the distinction of the heteronomic/messianic type of difference made by Caputo is no doubt relevant in its observation of mythologizing differently, in that it correctly identifies the dangers inherent to heteromorphic/Dionysian postmodernism. While warranted in distinguishing the importance of what we say, it seems that Caputo is also compelled to make this distinction to protect Derrida and deconstruction from what he calls "a good deal of the criticism of 'poststructuralism'..." which he says is under the impression that "it is an apolitical aestheticism."<sup>314</sup> Regarding such types of criticism,

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<sup>312</sup> Caputo, John D. "Messianic Postmodernism," in *Philosophy of Religion in the 21st Century* (eds. D.Z. Phillips and Timothy Tessin; Hampshire, England: Macmillan/Palgrave, 2001), 153-66.

<sup>313</sup> Caputo, "Messianic Postmodernism," *Philosophy of Religion in the 21st Century* (Hampshire, England: Macmillan/Palgrave, 2001), 153-66.

<sup>314</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 260, note 9. There he cites John Ellis's *Against Deconstruction* (1985), J. Claude Evans's *Strategies of Deconstruction: Derrida and the Myth of Voice* (1991), John McGowan's



Caputo suggests that they are neglecting to notice the heteronomic version of postmodernism, since their understandings of Derrida come from second hand understandings of Derrida, and usually only consider his early work, rather than his later period, with its focus on the *messianic*. In “Messianic Postmodernism,” Caputo draws support for his theory of a heteronomic difference by suggesting that such a tradition began with Kierkegaard and goes through Levinas. He contrastingly claims that the heteromorphic tradition started with Nietzsche and goes through Deleuze. Further complicating matters, he subsequently identifies himself, Derrida, and Lyotard as straddling the two types of difference.

The confusing part of Caputo’s distinction between the two types of difference is Caputo’s elsewhere admitted awareness of Nietzsche’s irony as being paramount over his beguiling metaphysical assertions, such as the will to power. When considered alongside his own irony of “mythologizing differently” that similarly quasi-promotes a metaphysics of obligation, in the place of a quasi-will to power, there appears to be a technical problem. In other words, the final commitment of Caputo to the metaphysics of obligation is kept in check by his ironic indecision between the Dionysian and the Rabbinic. Ultimately, therefore, the stylistic results of Nietzsche, Caputo, and Derrida lead in the end to the same textual occurrence, which is the weakening of all strong positions or assertions. Only the metaphysically oriented thinker would mistake otherwise. The result is that Caputo makes the distinction between the two types of difference, only to say later on that he does not really believe in such a distinction after all. In specific, Caputo says:

I advocate a continual mutual disruption that refuses to let either position get securely in place and thus set in motion the dialectic operation. I do not think there really is any such thing as heteromorphism or heteronomism, that any such “identities” as these ever get established. Hence it is impossible for the gears of the dialectic ever to engage and weave them into a synthetic mesh. I see only the continual mutual disturbance of each side by the other, which makes it impossible for the dialectical progress of the spirit to make a single step forward. The strategy behind difference is to see to it that no

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*Postmodernism and Its Critics* (1991), Allan Megill’s *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (1985), David Lehman’s *The Sign of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul De Man* (1991), and Jurgen Habermas’ *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987).

thesis or position ever gets firmly enough into position to begin its course of opposition and composition. No dialectical relief is ever attained.<sup>315</sup>

Nevertheless, Caputo appeared, at least initially, to adopt this move to mythologize differently largely in response to what is now known as the Heidegger Affair that occurred in the late eighties, which sent the continental world into a state of crisis regarding the possibility of a connection between Heidegger's philosophy and his politics. Heidegger's philosophy and politics were linked as complicit by a series of significant and closely dated publications on the topic. Caputo cites four major studies that caused him to reconsider his early uncritical embrace of Heideggerian philosophy, one by Victor Farias (1987), another by Hugo Ott (1980), a third by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1987), and the fourth by Jean-François Lyotard (1988).<sup>316</sup> In turning to the French postmodernists for guidance in his response to Heidegger, Caputo suggests that:

The question of "demythologizing Heidegger" then comes down to the task of disrupting the myth of Being with the myth of Justice, of disturbing the power, glory, and prestige of Being with the poverty, invisibility, and humility of justice. It is not a question of deconstructing myth down into pure reason but of opposing one kind of mythic imagination with another, of opposing Heidegger's "phainesthetic" imagination with an ethical imagination, which imagines something invisible and unassuming that yet lays claim to us.<sup>317</sup>

Essentially, the basic move that Heidegger seemingly wanted to make (although never fully can), recall from earlier, was to distinguish between "metaphysical" interpretations of reality (beings) and "*Reality* itself beyond mere interpretation" (Being). We can think of being/Being as another manifestation of something akin to the mythical distinction between doxa/aleitheia (opinion/truth, or appearances/reality), except with the distinction that aleitheia as truth is off limits to thought. Caputo is here suggesting that he, along with his French influences, want to counter this supposed Heideggerian myth of pure "Being," with an equally valid myth of "Justice." In contrast, the continental return to religion is generally fired by the admission that attempts to view the world in Husserlian or

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<sup>315</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 64.

<sup>316</sup> Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, 2.

<sup>317</sup> Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, 3.

Heideggerian brackets, outside of a moral world picture, are no more closer to the proximity of pure Being (as off limits) than any other metaphysical account, which is a long and convoluted way of saying we never can get outside of metaphysics. Adding to the complexity of this situation, Caputo further points out that Heidegger does perhaps understand irony, which he and Derrida quasi-contested earlier in order to distinguish themselves from him. In specific he says:

By making the move beyond Being, and hence beyond the whole hermeneutic project of determining the meaning of Being or, later on, of its truth, Heidegger appears to awaken to the Dionysian dissimulation, to the play of truth and untruth, to fiction making, to the Dionysiac truth. Well then perhaps Heidegger understands women after all. He sees the Ent-eignis in Ereignis, the dissimulation in all unveiling, what Derrida calls “le coup de don,” striking by means of the gift, taking away by means of giving-which is, Derrida says, “the essential predicate of the woman”<sup>318</sup>

In making this statement, Caputo has complicated his simple narrative of wanting to narrate differently than Heidegger’s myth of pure Being (via his own myth of the call for Biblical justice). It would seem that Caputo’s attempt to “mythologize differently” is a fully ironic undertaking, much like his distinction between messianic and Dionysian postmodernism turns out to be in the end. Caputo acknowledges the inescapability from metaphysics above, yet I wonder whether he has thought about the full ramifications of the contingency of style that Rorty speaks about in his discussion of Nabokov’s equally contingent preference for art, when it is applied to his own post-structuralist writing style that rests upon a faith commitment to the dual function of irony?<sup>319</sup>

In other words, what I found very helpful in Rorty’s text *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* was that he supports my suspicion that even literary language is equally contingent. In specific, Rorty says, “This idea that somehow language can be separated from authors, that literary technique is a godlike power operating independently of mortal contingencies, and in particular from the author’s contingent notion of what goodness is, is the root of “aestheticism” in the bad sense of the term, the sense in which the aesthetic is a

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<sup>318</sup> Cited in Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 158-9.

<sup>319</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 141-165.

matter of form and language rather than of content and life.”<sup>320</sup> Therefore, my concern is whether Caputo’s attempt to mythologize differently, while still adopting Nietzsche’s literary technique, is *missing* the point, stylus. On one level, Caputo defines his project as the need to counter Heidegger’s myth of pure “Being” with another myth of ethical responsibility. This content focused approach mythologizes differently in content, but not the form of writing. This concern with Nietzsche and Heidegger’s content is legitimate, yet incomplete. As demonstrated above, Caputo on a second level demonstrates he is more than likely aware of this problem, because he knows that he is merely attacking the shadows of Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s ironies through an ironic attempt of his own. The reason for Caputo’s decision to operate thus is due to his postmodern “*Ideal*” of the democratic equivalency of ‘singularity,’ which is apparently the best we can hope for or invoke in the face of the world’s impossibilities, according to such logic. Basically, Caputo is afraid of systems, and promotes an “anti-system” of ‘singularity’ as the solution, which at bottom is equally promoting an(other) metaphysics. Like any other system of metaphysics, there are those “in the know,” and those duped by the mechanical workings of its outward operations.

Caputo’s primary concerns, like Derrida’s, are again invested in confronting their historical-political context of resisting Marxist and Fascist political agendas. Therefore, what he invokes is a Nietzscheanism lite, which keeps aestheticism’s form, while adopting a more politically correct representational content in his ironic diversions. It may be that this difference in the exoteric content is more socially important than the esoteric form, yet it may not too, which complicates matters. In consideration of the proverb that old generals are always fighting the last war, we might consider what Rorty has to say in *Truth and Progress*: “...every form of social life is likely, sooner or later, to freeze over into something the more imaginative and restless spirits of the time will see as “repressive” and “distorting... Typically, they once played a role in liberation-in freeing people from some still-worse alternative... As Marx and Foucault helped us see, today’s chains are often forged from the hammers that struck off yesterday’s.”<sup>321</sup> The matter that seems difficult to

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<sup>320</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 166-167.

<sup>321</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 320.

decide is whether the proliferation of singularity is what we mean by democracy, in actuality, or whether this is a surviving reactionary tendency that might work ruin on democracy.

If it is true that ultimately Caputo's mythologizing differently collapses back into irony, then two things are possibly happening. First, we have never escaped the real point of Nietzsche's and likely Heidegger's style. Second, we have perhaps mistaken (due to something akin to a metaphysical expectation lingering in ourselves from the progressive promises of modern writing's purpose of critical resolution) that Caputo and French post-structuralism were offering us an authoritative resolve to the problems facing us in Nietzsche and likely Heidegger's ironic method. In confronting this "undecidability" of the Dionysian Rabbi, Caputo is, in something very akin to typical aesthetic fashion, washing his hands of the responsibility expected of an author as needing to promote an argument, which moves forward or overcomes another position (in this case the Dionysian postmodern).

We know from similar remarks earlier made in this chapter that postmodernism does not overcome positions, but merely calls them into "incredulity,"<sup>322</sup> leaving the reader to confront the situation alone. Regarding the political commitments of his own position Caputo says "Like Johannes Climacus, I assume that one is better off if one is not convinced one has a mission-either to announce the end of philosophy or "to divine the coming of a matchless future."<sup>323</sup> The potential problem with this radical democratic vision is that it does not play by the same language games as the lived metaphysical construct of democracy does (a modern construct itself, with modern rules of play), with its parties/factions, lobbies, and special interest groups, which each solidify according to strong ideas in competition, looking to overcome others. Not advancing a strong idea, even if we can admit that ultimately they are as cosmically contingent as anybody else's stance, seems like quietism by another name, if we perpetually end in "undecidability."

What makes matters even more confounding, consequently, is that Caputo says he and deconstruction are about political activism and liberal progress, which again gets the

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<sup>322</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 50.

<sup>323</sup> Cited in Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 263, note 70.

gears of irony turning. Specifically, Caputo responds: “Does it still need to be said, now, after so many years of reading Derrida, that undecidability does not mean indecision or inaction, that undecidability is the condition that not only surrounds and besets decision, but also calls for decision, the condition that antedates, provokes, permeates, and follows upon decision?”<sup>324</sup> In such instances, do we hear Eagleton’s warning about a crossing of fronts when convenient or a response to the call of responsibility as Caputo would want us? Again, it would seem the matter is dependent on a leap of faith.

In other words, Caputo leaves us in the play of Wittgenstein and Lyotard’s “irreducible plurality of language games, each with its own rules, each with its own rights, so that there is no one “meta-language”... into which the other first-order or object-languages could be translated.”<sup>325</sup> Now we are getting to the bottomless depths of the Dionysian-Rabbi, in recognizing that at bottom there is no bottom. Instead, Caputo says, “The integrity and idiosyncrasy of each language game must be respected. It would go against the very idea of language itself, to declare that everything that is going on in all the other languages can be translated into the language of just one of them...”<sup>326</sup> Undoubtedly, Caputo thinks of aestheticism as one such language game, and Christianity as another type of language game, yet is there not some kind of operative persistence of the aesthetic underlying this proclamation or rhetorical declaration of the equality of the religious and the aesthetic, perhaps?

By supposedly keeping aestheticism in check by his respect for the “integrity” of the Christian language, Caputo thinks his position differs from Nietzsche’s. On the level of content, this assumption is correct, and the importance of this cannot be underplayed by our current concerns. When considering the validity of this distinction, furthermore, it is important to recall that Caputo identifies his position more with Kierkegaard than Nietzsche. Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, as we identified earlier, were both ironists. The distinction that Caputo makes between their ironies is, again, the following:

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<sup>324</sup> John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington IL: Indiana University Press, 2000), 131.

<sup>325</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 51.

<sup>326</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 52.

This is not the ‘infinite irony’ of a prankster but existential irony, indeed, finally, it is Christian irony, the irony of a man who sought a way to excite Christian passion in his readers without interposing himself between the individual and God and without posing as an authority or as a personally worthy representative of Christian life. The uncertain effect produced by the pseudonyms educes a decisive existential movement on the part of the reader.<sup>327</sup>

In Caputo’s mind Kierkegaard’s irony represents a “striking stylistic innovation in the history of philosophy... offering something different from the usual fare.”<sup>328</sup> In making this claim we can assume that Caputo is suggesting that Kierkegaard’s irony employed in his pseudonymously written text *Either/Or* differs from the “infinite irony” of German romanticism and Nietzsche, because it is “existential irony.” This claim is problematic on two counts. First, it carries the assumption that Nietzsche merely wants you not to think for yourself, but merely wants to submit referential sense of the modern mind to a never-ending Heraclitean-like disorder or disorientation, brought via the flux of the inversion of the particular over the systematic. This assumption is dangerously wrong. Nietzsche wants the exact opposite, in part. For example, in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche says to his would be anti-disciples:

A light has dawned on me: companions I need and living ones-not dead companions and corpses that I carry with me wherever I will. But living companions I need, who follow me because they want to follow themselves... To lure many away from the herd-for that have I come... Behold the good and the righteous! Whom do they hate the most? The one who breaks their tablets of values, the breaker, the lawbreaker:-yet that is the creator... Companions the creator seeks and not corpses, nor herds or believers either. Fellow creators the creator seeks, those who inscribe new values on new tablets... the rainbow will I show them and all the stairways to the Overhuman... To the solitaries shall I sing my song and to the dualitaries; and whoever yet has ears for the unheard-of... This Zarathustra had spoken to his heart as the sun stood at midday: then he looked inquiringly into the heights-for he heard above him the sharp cry of a bird. And behold! An eagle was sweeping in wide *circles* through the air, and on him hung a serpent, not like prey, but like a friend: for she kept herself

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<sup>327</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 6.

<sup>328</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 7.

coiled like a ring around his neck. 'It is my animals!' Said Zarathustra... Thus began Zarathustra's going-under.<sup>329</sup>

The nature of Zarathustra's shadowless doctrine is that the Hegelian systematic is kept coiled by the Dionysian serpent, "like a friend." Together, they represent Zarathustra's teaching, not in isolation. Nietzsche is not looking for followers he says, but rather other breakers of values. Nietzsche describes these breakers as "solitaries" and "dualitaries." Specifically, it would seem, he is looking for fellow individualists and ironists, because the neologism "dualitaries" is promoting a type of dual existence, and the word solitary is promoting an epistemic solitude or individualism. How then is this type of solitary individual brought to an immediacy of life, represented by the shadowless position of the sun at midday, different than Kierkegaard's critically oriented individualist (ironist) who attacks the values of the Danish ecclesial institution, and who is isolated in his genius (alone, misunderstood, and rejected by his family and community)? Here is one of the key origins of our own now widely utilized postmodern ideological motif of the beautiful loser, or the solitary hero, whom is chastised by a blind and bigoted collective. Furthermore, how does this promotion by Nietzsche of fellow creators, the "rainbow", and "many ladders leading to the Overman" differ from Derrida's seemingly radically democratic idea of dissemination of textual meaning?

For your consideration, Caputo describes this method as follows: "The delicate communicative art lies in what Jacques Derrida calls the paradox of the *gift*: knowing how to give a gift in such a way as not to create a feeling of dependence in the recipient. The task is to help readers find their own independence and freedom-without acquiring a dependence upon the author."<sup>330</sup> Nietzsche's call for "fellow creators" of the "rainbow" and "the many ladders leading to the Overman" is in function, if not accompanying rhetoric, the same call to independence of the reader that Derrida is here calling forth, and I fear that such is the main thrust (stylus) of both designs.

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<sup>329</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 21-22.

<sup>330</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 77.



Originally, there at least appears to be a difference between Nietzsche and Kierkegaard because the latter introduces three categories of life, with two supposedly being beyond the aesthetic. These three categories again are: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Regarding Kierkegaard's historical position, recall Caputo says, "Aesthetic existence for Kierkegaard is a dead end, but not because it is internally inconsistent, a logical contradiction, for it is all too coldly logical and consistent. Rather, the moral nightmare, an outrage of our moral sensibilities, which is what induces in us the need for a higher point of view."<sup>331</sup> In avoiding this type of moral nightmare, Kierkegaard turns towards religion to alleviate what he thinks is a dead end in aestheticism's ironic position. Caputo does not approve of Kierkegaard's lapse of tension between time and eternity. Instead, recall Caputo says "Kierkegaard is at his best, in my view, when he maintains this equilibrium, but his work becomes more disconcerting when, as happens increasingly in the last years of his life, the fragile valence of time is overwhelmed by the immensity of eternity."<sup>332</sup>

The problem it seems is that the Kierkegaardian tension between the aesthetic and the religious has flown right out of the hermeneutically verifiable, up into the eternal, where the interpreter cannot follow. Instead of making this leap of faith, Caputo appears to suggest that Kierkegaard is at his best when the tandem of the aesthetic and the religious are kept together in the tension between time and eternity. The question we are left with is how is this Derridean Kierkegaard different from Nietzsche? Are not Caputo's Kierkegaard and Nietzsche's Zarathustra performing the same ironic promotion of the shadowless sage, whose yoke is light enough to set us free to ourselves, because "the Secret is there is no secret?"<sup>333</sup>

Regarding the topic of aestheticism, Caputo describes its purpose as following: "The art is to abide strictly in the sphere of possibility, to remain eternally young, with an eye that sees possibility everywhere, while taking shelter from the harsh winds of

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<sup>331</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 70.

<sup>332</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 20.

<sup>333</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 40.

actuality.”<sup>334</sup> How does aestheticism’s sphere of eternal youth or indecision differ from Derrida’s delimitation of the metaphysical, in the religion with/out religion? As Caputo explains in his essay “Beyond Aestheticism: Derrida’s Responsible Anarchy,” the ethical “side... is not just a ‘side,’ but goes to the heart of the deconstruction project.”<sup>335</sup> Admittedly, deconstruction is not aestheticism in the sense of neglecting the Judeo-Christian message, which undermines the charge that it is “aestheticism” in an immediate first level sense of the category, as a type of writing that wanted to undermine Judeo-Christian morality by taking matters down to the flux of an inverted Platonism, where attention to infinitely fine and paradoxical details (an optics of saturating light) of the innocence of youth and life were given free reign. Therefore, on the first level of meaning, Caputo’s defense of deconstruction is correct. What goes unexplained sufficiently in “Beyond Aestheticism” is how deconstruction may have something such as a “heart,” considering its definitive stance against authoritative appeals to presence, without contradicting its heart (difference), which is thoroughly against centers and quintessential essences. Therefore, I agree with Caputo that deconstruction speaks consistently about responsibility, and operates thusly in its critique of traditional hierarchical systems. Where Caputo’s defense of deconstruction loses its effectiveness is when he starts explaining the need, due to a sense of responsibility for otherness, for the justification of Derrida’s “double gesture,” and when he starts preaching Derrida’s religion of the systematically different over the same without dipping such claims back into the aesthetic. Having a strong claim against strong claims seems to be a type of disavowed metaphysics, with a troubling pedigree (putting such things into doubt, merely performs the truth on the second level, while questioning it on a first level).

This “double gesture” of irony, however, is justified in the name of what Caputo identifies as “responsible-anarchy.”<sup>336</sup> According to such an appeal to responsibility, Caputo says that thinking responsibly is not advocating irrationalism, but instead asks what

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<sup>334</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 27.

<sup>335</sup> John D. Caputo, “Beyond Aestheticism: Derrida’s Responsible Anarchy,” *Research in Phenomenology*, 18 (1988), 59.

<sup>336</sup> Caputo, “Beyond Aestheticism,” 60.

has been excluded by “what calls itself reason and arche.”<sup>337</sup> The use of the double gesture is further justified because “It is a question of proving that one can live by the discipline of the university even while doing something to scandalize it.”<sup>338</sup> This type of approach is further justified in order to think “about the abyss beneath the university...,” while evading an invited “repulsion” by the university in response to a direct and “clumsy frontal attack” by anarchy. In this fashion, deconstruction claims to be “responsible for the university” by situating itself “on the margins, both within and without, inside and outside the hierarchy.” It is in this will to evade repulsion by the university that the honesty of deconstruction begins to waver, and we might see the need for a double gesture as operative therein. Is there not something paternalistic in this “for their own good” justification for deception?

For metaphysical thinkers (the real open secret being there is no such thing as a non-metaphysical thinker), Caputo’s answers will not suffice, since it appears he collapses back into the language game of aestheticism via the operation of his form. This form appears to harbor a type of bastardized and mechanically performed meta-narrative, which is enacted through a style of writing rather than through saying directly or mythologizing on a first level, as traditionally understood. In performing this second level type of mythologizing, Caputo and deconstruction are despite their first order calls of responsibility operating in a manner that is appropriate to German romanticism’s ideological category of “the new mythology”. Caputo suggests he is shifting between language games, but Zarathustra’s eagle/snake metaphor suggests that even this move “to narrate otherwise” is precisely in line with the romantics’ and Nietzsche’s ironic *stylus*, whereby the eagle/snake tandem travel, it is important to note, in “circles,” rather than straight or angular lines, as Burke would condemn.

Therefore, when looking at Caputo’s usage of irony, I would pre-establish that approaching such stylistic writings should come with a precaution that Caputo rightly passes for a second level aesthete. Consequently, Caputo is not an aesthete in the content he advocates, but in the mechanism of his writing’s style. In short, my concern is that the style or form is harboring the true threat against democratic solidarity (if we are naïve enough to

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<sup>337</sup> Caputo, “Beyond Aestheticism,” 62-63.

<sup>338</sup> Caputo, “Beyond Aestheticism,” 63.

believe in such a thing), and must be considered alongside the contents of Caputo's biblical postmodernism. Certainly, to his credit, the attempt by Caputo to mythologize differently is a step in the right direction, when considering the efforts of Nietzsche's "inverse Platonism" to negate the Judeo-Christian worldview on both levels, via the content and its operation in the form of a loss of epistemological grounding or orienting hierarchy. Yet, if it is possible to appreciate the merit of the hermeneutic condition, without adopting an ironic style of writing oneself, then I suppose this would be the best course of action to adopt in response, as a partial (or ironic in a sense) acceptance of Caputo.

The danger seems to be that this too (in another sense of irony) is a metaphysical reaction, via the form of writing itself, since such a thing as a non-metaphysical response is impossible. As Rorty warns, we cannot think of writing as something detached from the metaphysical function, since it is equally enacting a mythology. In other words, perhaps certain mythological devices are working on their readers in ways that the first level meaning of a text does not involve. In this sense, irony is a type of magick that creates an affect separate of the message of the first level content. On the subject, recall that Joseph Hillis Miller says, "Schlegel's conception of mythology is ultimately performative, not constative. A work of mythology is a speech act that works through its senselessness to reveal, in a magic opening up, a gleam of the semblance of chaos.... The mythological work thereby works to transform its readers through this revelation."<sup>339</sup> In short, I would like to avoid the necessarily contingent mechanism of irony that promotes a textual divide between those who understand irony and those who would be its victim (a potential laughing authoritarianism).

Caputo's defense of this performative goes explicitly unaddressed, except for his justification of its secrecy towards the university, which is again justified by him in the name of opening up opportunities for otherness. Granted, the way Caputo describes the mechanism makes it sound admirable, but that he nevertheless is still describing the same stylistic mechanism as that advanced by German romanticism and Nietzsche, while merely mythologizing it differently, gives pause. In his mythos of a radical democratic tendency, we are led to believe that separations of those who know and those who do not know would

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<sup>339</sup> Miller, *Others*, 38-39.

be leveled, via the collapse of hermeneutics and the liberatory effect of meaning's decentered dissemination, yet his defense of the "double gesture," rationalizes, it would seem nonetheless, such a keeping of secrets and division, much akin to Leo Strauss's appeal for esoteric writing, as a defensive gesture of his intellectual elite (modeled no doubt on Stephan George). The difference between Derrida and Strauss is in the first level message that their content narrated justifications for why such a "double gesture" is done, while similar literary mechanisms are put into motion in both approaches.

Nevertheless, one must not recognize in such worries a total rejection of Caputo or his approach, since there is much wisdom and subtlety in Caputo's radical hermeneutics, as it applies to the bigger limit questions about existence, and our capacities to put truth to the service of worldly politics. Who can argue against the claim that we can never get to the bottom of things, or that religious fundamentalism is prone to politically motivated idolatries? Who can offer guarantees of goodness and political honesty?

In an important sense, the hermeneutic turn is neither malign nor benign to religion or democracy, in the spirit it adopts from the deconstructive tendencies of the prophetic tradition to question authoritative accounts that would ostracize self-critique. In deconstruction's better sense, as prophetic gadfly, it simply acknowledges that no living person's perspective is Omniscient, or final, and that there are no guarantees. This critical orientation is deconstruction at its best. When deconstruction leaves the prophetic critical level to advance its own religious level (as an anti-systematic appeal to otherness concerned ultimately with avoiding Marxism or some populist solidarity against the status quo, since Fascism is completely fine with leaving the world to its own devices, and needs no strong systematic narrative) is where it begins to falter, at least for a naïve democratic sensibility.

Therefore, the strength of deconstruction is a prophetic strength, by which I mean its strength is its borrowing from the prophetic tradition. Once we get into inhibiting the systematic mythological function and the tedium of semiotics, we are embarking on contingencies of scholarly distinction and separation, all ultimately mythical, despite a seeming complexity that would delay our assessments thereof. Problematically, these scholarly mythemes remain phenomenologically operative, which is concerning, if thought to enact an avant-garde clique of practitioners that are kept beyond the main body of the prevailing cultural conversation (i.e., an avant-garde in the literal sense of the term). In

other words, there is no Secret, except for the form of writing delivering the message of non-message/responsibility, based on Caputo's justification of the "double gesture" towards the university. In other words, if Derrida and Levinas are offering new mythologizes that are trying to get at heart to the essence of the Judeo-Christian message (all the law and prophets)<sup>340</sup>, then they seem to take a long time to get to the point, which uses potentially self-effacing means to get there also: "...love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>341</sup> In sum, neither stance offers guarantees.

Nevertheless, there is an admitted didactic clarity in Caputo's writing style (compared to other continentalists), which makes me emphasize that I am not charging Caputo of being anti-democratic, in any direct or intentional way, since it appears generally quite the opposite. Simply put, my personal appreciation of Caputo's position and texts is qualified by a concern that it is not simply what you say, but how you say it that matters for any kind of discourse that claims to be democratic in purpose, which is the central contention of my thesis. In other words, I predominantly agree with what Caputo is saying most of the time, but I am concerned with the residues of the style he employs saying it. Importantly, and worth repeating, Caputo is not aesthetic in a strong sense, as in regards to the contents of his message, which are Judeo-Christian and socially concerned, which contradicts the aesthetic by definition. Thus, we cannot say that deconstruction is aestheticism. However, when again considered through Rorty's previously mentioned remarks regarding aestheticism, there still seems to be some kind of performative fidelity to "a godlike power operating independently of mortal contingencies." Is Caputo's Christian-irony uncritically adopting something akin to a Trojan horse from the aesthetic as "a matter of form and language rather than of content and life?" Is there something inherently undemocratic about irony? In recognizing the separate rules of the language games dividing metaphysical and non-metaphysical thinkers, we might suggest: *Je ne sais pas. Il faut croire.*<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> Matthew 22:40 NRSV.

<sup>341</sup> Matthew 22:39 NRSV.

<sup>342</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 26.

Caputo's ironic/existentialist position about limit experiences (respecting the transcendence of God and integrity of language games) along with his (Kierkegaard's) call to Christianity as "something to do," rather than as something to theoretically or dogmatically "affirm" (as in some kind of unquestioning submission to authoritarianism), seems appropriate considering the inherent dangers accompanying the antitheses of fundamentalism and contrastingly the threats of Nietzsche's "Death of God" postmodern agenda, or what Rorty calls his "social mission" that betrayed particularly "antiliberal views."<sup>343</sup> Indisputably, despite their potential limitations, Caputo and continental philosophy of religion have exposed something very crucial about irreligious postmodernism, and done a great service in promoting a reconsideration of the moral and political tendencies of Christianity, which seem largely distorted by the secularizing tendencies of society. The question that remains is have they gone far enough in their concerns with the Dionysian?

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<sup>343</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 99.

## Chapter 3: John D. Caputo's Christian-irony in a Nutshell

In order to present an effective introduction to the main tenants of Caputo's textual project, we shall examine the thematic highlights of his writings by building off our commencing insight that the entire program is one engineered around a *certain* anti-metaphysics (i.e., irony). Therefore, in commencing, we might again emphasize that Caputo's orientation is best described as that of a Christian-ironist. In association, the most effective way to access the particulars of Caputo's thought is by identifying the main arteries of his program that employ his underlying irony. Thus, in specific, I shall examine Caputo through a look at his use of irony operating within his Christology and in some of the key elements of his larger theological themes (i.e., via his orientation of weak theology and radical hermeneutics). These main arteries of Caputo's writings, I suggest, tend to define the most revelatory elements of his ironically anti-metaphysical method, as it pertains to his idiosyncratically postmodern religiosity.

### **Caputo's Christology**

The main idea motivating Caputo's Christology is deconstruction's aversion to originals, which operates as another instance of the loss of original/immediate presence. This loss of originals and immediate presence is known by continental theorists as the hermeneutic condition, which supposes that we can never get beyond interpretation to some kind of pure essence of things. Most simply stated, we never have an objective and unprejudiced examination of affairs. With regards to Biblical religion, Caputo's deconstructive approach suggests that authoritative accounts are more about claiming authority and less about preserving an uninterrupted or direct chain of transmission from what was an equally problematic historical original, whose consistency or uniformity was never extrinsic or readily apparent, even to its contemporaries. To help illustrate what exactly we mean here, Merold Westphal uses an apt story about six blind men from Hindustan to elucidate the contemporary hermeneutic condition. According to this story, each Hindustani has hold of a different part of an elephant, and in trying to describe what they have according to their lot, as Westphal says, "none of (them) could grasp the complex



totality of the elephant.”<sup>344</sup> In connection, postmodern understandings of interpretation always work in this fashion, as being understood to be something that never has the whole picture, or can never fully explain things as they are, except from a limited vantage point. The well known idea employed by the broader continental hermeneutic tradition that is consistent with this loss of original presence is the death of the author, which is also the loss of the authoritative origin and the guarantor of the uniformity of meaning in texts, which accordingly are never simply accessible by an appeal to objectivity by readers.

As historical interpreters, we can never entirely cross the historical distance between a text and ourselves, because these things, it is argued, were not created objectively nor can they either be interpreted objectively by later historically situated and likewise limited interpreters. The basic idea underlying this hermeneutic commitment is that entities that we often take to be unities of meaning always contain ambiguities and greater complexities than surface appearances might suggest. As we have explained earlier, Derrida took this critical observation to the level of our basic blocks of thought (radicalizing Nietzsche’s insight that all thought is metaphor by applying it to the workings of semiotics in phenomenology and structuralism). In Derrida’s vision, not even our basic communicative signs (visually symbolic and spoken/written) along with the private mental associations they signify are granted amnesty, as things that are immediately present to their owners. The accompanying idea to this loss of directness and objectivity, which can also be called the loss of direct presence, is that neither authors nor readers are ever in full possession of the meaning of the text.

When we speak of texts, we might be speaking about anything we cast interpretation upon. For example, we might speak of the Gospels, the Catholic Church, or the historical personage of Jesus of Nazareth as textual or interpretive events. The deconstructive term “the text” applies to any possible “alterity” (i.e., something apart from an interpreter, or even of the interpreter though alien in part). The applicability of this alterity, or the innate detachedness of interpretation from objects, is essentially universal, even though such totalizing language is theoretically problematic to postmodernism. This

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<sup>344</sup> Merold Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 66.

hermeneutic detachedness nevertheless identifies the postmodern condition in a nutshell. Therefore, instead of trying to find in a recollecting backwards movement a way to obtain a lost originality in texts, deconstruction co-creates a text with contemporary socio-political concerns in mind, which in its affirmative tendencies is predominately associated with a concern for justice and the welcoming of alterity (Otherness) into institutional accounts.<sup>345</sup>

In such a fashion, Caputo's examination of Jesus operates with these matters in mind. In keeping with poststructuralism's commitment to a lack of definitive presences, Caputo likewise does not offer a definitive Jesus, but instead plays between more assertive accounts (interpretations) already working in the contemporary *Zeitgeist*. In comparison, the consistent argumentative move that deconstruction generally makes when playing between strongly assertive accounts is logically structured as: both/and/neither/nor. In simpler terms, deconstruction requires host positions to compare and contrast them with deconstruction's consistent commitment to undecidability; or, as Caputo says, deconstruction "needs a house to haunt."<sup>346</sup> Eventually, Caputo's Jesus will present himself according to this bottomless undecidability intrinsic to deconstruction, but not before considering various other more assertive options. Operating according to the argumentative move of both/and/either/or, deconstruction "weakly" affirms both compared host positions, while affirming neither in a strong way. Although, there may nevertheless be more than two such positions at play in any given discussion, which merely adds to the proliferatory parabasis of the text, as an open-ended saying or detour. Thus, deconstruction in general depends upon host accounts for developing a positive content in its writings, over merely saying outright that it definitively does not know, or is undecided. In essence, this both/and/neither/nor is how deconstruction shares in Kierkegaard's legacy of ironic writing.

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<sup>345</sup> Consequently, this creative interpretation comes from German Romanticism as passes through such literary aesthetes as Oscar Wilde, particularly as outlined in his paper "The Critic as Artist"

<sup>346</sup> Caputo, "Hauntological Hermeneutics," 106.

## **Irony and the Search for the Historical Jesus: A Tale of Two Theologians**

With Caputo's examination of Jesus in his text *More Radical Hermeneutics*, his ironic position is firstly pre-endowed with an affirmative content to call into question by comparing the near contemporary Christologies of the Dutch Roman Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx and the Heideggerian atheistic philosopher Thomas Sheehan. When looking at Schillebeeckx and Sheehan, Caputo suggests that these two authors "aptly illustrate John P. Meier's observation, that "in the end there is a hermeneutics of belief and a hermeneutics of unbelief," which Caputo further suggests entails "a way of approaching this research that stays open to faith and another way that closes faith down."<sup>347</sup> Caputo identifies his position, via irony, as staying open to faith, which therefore makes his project somewhat closer to Schillebeeckx's hermeneutics of belief, he feels, rather than with Sheehan's hermeneutics of unbelief; yet, it is additionally important to note about Caputo's apparent preference for Schillebeeckx over Sheehan is that it is necessarily also qualified by his ironic position as open-ended structure. The openness he is affiliating himself with in connection to Schillebeeckx is manifested nevertheless by a final wavering between both accounts, Schillebeeckx's and Sheehan's, in undecidability.<sup>348</sup> While this is certainly a type of staying open to faith, classical metaphysical thinkers might be inclined to include it amongst Meier's latter category, as a hermeneutics of unbelief, since irony is by definition not strongly affirmative and classical faith supposedly would be traditionally understood to be ideally strong. Thus, matters are not as tidy as they might first appear to a casual reader of Caputo.

In locating Schillebeeckx and Sheehan's two apparently opposing positions in the broader historical critical interpretive debate, Caputo begins his examination of them by identifying them in context to what he identifies to be the three basic theoretical orientations about the Resurrection that are made by contemporary Biblical historical criticism. These three stances Caputo calls the traditional, the moderate, and the liberal.<sup>349</sup> In connection, Schillebeeckx, Caputo says, is a moderate. Conversely, Caputo believes

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<sup>347</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 221.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 232.

Sheehan to be more radically left than even the liberal position, thereby putting him off the standard theoretical radar here outlined, due to his Christian atheism, and its Marxist undertones. In accord with both the Christological visions of Schillebeeckx and Sheehan, however, Caputo's ironic vision shares a natural distrust of institutional authorities, along with a mutual concern for an ethics of peace and justice.<sup>350</sup> The question of how this concern is to be recognized, however, is not uniform amongst the three thinkers. For Sheehan, it is a matter of achieving a Marxist historical realization of a historically just and utopian order. For Schillebeeckx, it is a matter of finding in the theological intervention of Christ in history the promise of an underlying "noematically" just order beyond the nightmare of the world. For Caputo, it is a matter of letting the event as possibility be freed by allowing both of these visions to waver in undecideability, which will be better elaborated upon by chapter's end.

When speaking about Schillebeeckx's approach, and inevitably with certain moods of his own such theoretical tendencies also in mind, Caputo highlights: "the moderates invoke the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur... they claim that the meaning of the text, an event or... a life, is not governed by the author's or the agent's self-understanding, that a text or an event has a sense and significance... that "exceed" the original intention..."<sup>351</sup> In this frame of mind, Caputo explains that for Schillebeeckx, like himself, Jesus's message exceeds his historical person and teachings. Additionally, Caputo also identifies that Schillebeeckx's "Jesus" is one that is therefore negotiated by a desire to reconcile faith and historical criticism in an evident attempt to link or harmonize theological observation with the contemporary understandings of historical criticism.<sup>352</sup> In comparison, Caputo's Jesus is similarly negotiated, except by a desire to reconcile faith and postmodern theory, which links him with Schillebeeckx, but also limits his affinity to him.

By working for a reconciliatory end between historical criticism and faith, Schillebeeckx's Christology, was consistent with his contemporary historical critical findings that espoused that Jesus preached a message predominantly concerned with a

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<sup>350</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 223.

<sup>351</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 235.

<sup>352</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 223.

loving Father and the Kingdom of God. In a reconciliatory move, Schillebeeckx thinks that the verifiable record put forth by historical criticism of Jesus as “the proclaimer” becoming “the proclaimed” is finally not problematic for classical faith. Where, in contrast to Schillebeeckx’s reading of the situation, such historical criticism might incorrectly assume in discrepancy to Schillebeeckx’s vision that the Church might have erroneously changed in the post Crucifixion period from an originally foundational teaching about the Father to one that turned into another about the Son. Instead of seeing an irreconcilable divergence as Sheehan did, however, Schillebeeckx instead harmonizes history and faith in his belief that these experiences were “motivated” by something that took place on the “noematic side,” “viz., by the movement of Jesus’s spirit, which is also the father’s spirit.”<sup>353</sup>

According to this “noematic” logic, Schillebeeckx felt that the message of Jesus was consistent with the founding of the Church, not because Jesus came to preach about Himself as God, or about the founding of a new Church distinct from Judaism per se, but again because there was an underlying (though not visible) essence operating behind and through what He was preaching. Furthermore, regarding the early Church’s interpretation of the Crucifixion, Caputo says, “Schillebeeckx believes that Jesus has somehow been lifted up into the Father’s power, and that He exerts His influence upon the reassembling disciples.”<sup>354</sup> How this exchange occurs is another one of the central tenants of Schillebeeckx’s thought that Caputo seems to sympathize with, in particular with the centrality of Simon’s experience of interpreting and reconciling the ramifications of the Crucifixion. According to Schillebeeckx’s vision of Simon as the founder of the Church, the interpretive task of the religious significance of the crucifixion is put in existential disarray, as the most prominent manifestation of the hermeneutic crisis of the founder’s original teaching.

In connection, Caputo explains that Schillebeeckx imagines Simon/Peter being back in Galilee, having returned to fishing after the Crucifixion, when then a reinterpretation of events inspires him to rally the disciples again in fellowship. In his reinterpretation of Simon’s post-Easter experience, Caputo depicts Schillebeeckx as having worked out the

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<sup>353</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 228.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid.

theoretical demands of contemporary hermeneutic's idea of the cultural restructuring of these events with a near to classical faith commitment to the idea of a "noematic" underlying guidance of events, once again in a reconciliation between contemporary theory and religion. Thus, Caputo depicts Schillebeeckx's Simon to conclude: "And then it hit him: God did not abandon Jesus. ... everything is in the hands of the loving Father. Jesus trusted God, but the disciples fled; they abandoned him after he shared with them 'the cup of a fellowship that was supposed to be stronger than death'... The point of Jesus's unfathomable confidence in his father was to trust the father no matter what, no matter even if they put the messenger to death..."<sup>355</sup> Thus, in Schillebeeckx's reworking of Simon's experience, we are given a more modernized account of the early Church's formation, where the supernatural interventionism depicted in the book of Acts gives way to a more moderate retelling, which suggests in distinction that although these supernatural powers did intervene they were nothing, as Caputo says, "that a videotape would have picked up..."<sup>356</sup> Subsequently, we shall examine how Caputo himself develops a variant of Schillebeeckx's account of Simon's post-crucifix experience, where he reinterprets the event to be more accommodating of his own theoretical paradigm, thereby reworking the Schillebeeckxian motif to accord with postmodern theory.

In comparison, the link between theological language and the post-Easter accounts of the disciples are therefore explained by Schillebeeckx through historical critical terms, with the qualifier that these things conceal a deeper truth. Thus, Schillebeeckx accepted the findings of modern historical criticism as being expressions of what Caputo calls a "real, though not perceptual, correlate."<sup>357</sup> Caputo, incongruously, thinks that Schillebeeckx cannot in a theoretically sound way (i.e., according to a postmodern framework) make this move to a type of "classical faith," although he would not shut the door on the moderate position entirely. The opposite is true of Sheehan's atheistic Marxist/humanism \*d\*.<sup>358</sup> Thus, we are starting to see Caputo's retraction of meaning coming into play, where he

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<sup>355</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 227.

<sup>356</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 228.

<sup>357</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 232.

<sup>358</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 223.

makes an association with Schillebeeckx's affirmative content, and thereby counteracts this association by considering the other side of this stance (here represented by Sheehan), as balancing it, yet without adopting either position firmly.

The main reason for Caputo's preference of Schillebeeckx's over Sheehan's position is again that Caputo believes that Sheehan directly cancels out *undecidability*, while in contrast, Schillebeeckx does not. While Schillebeeckx's position supposedly reverts back into a type of "classical faith," Caputo believes his stance retains "the mystery."<sup>359</sup> This mystery no doubt resides in Schillebeeckx's ambiguity of his "noematic" understanding of Christianity, which likewise accommodates historical criticism. In other words, Schillebeeckx's non-systematic vision of a "noematic" Christianity is much more consistent with post-structuralism's non-closure of propositional conceptualizations. Consequently, Caputo subsequently via irony's retracting movement explains his eventual balancing of their two positions as follows: "So if Sheehan has closed down undecidability in the direction of suspicion and atheistic humanism, the question for my devilish hermeneutics is whether Schillebeeckx makes faith too safe, basing it on a trust in things for which hermeneutics gives no warrant (an objection that would amuse the Vatican, which does not think the problem with Schillebeeckx is that he is too safe)."<sup>360</sup> In other words, Caputo's position wavers in the undecidability between these seemingly opposite visions. Caputo, therefore, thinks that his position is even more *historically* critical than Schillebeeckx's and Sheehan's. This more critical stance wavers between accounts by irony, which is more critical because it sees both historical and metaphysical conceptualizations as being respectively unverifiable, and too limited, in vision.

According to Caputo, Sheehan's understanding of Jesus is that his message was that God had descended "without remainder into humanity."<sup>361</sup> Caputo thereby explains that for Sheehan the death of Jesus on the Cross is the end of God and religion, which is then

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<sup>359</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 222-223.

<sup>360</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 223.

<sup>361</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 222.

superseded by “a search for a political solution to injustice.”<sup>362</sup> Interestingly, Sheehan’s death of God theology, is not that different from Gianni Vattimo’s ironic version of it or Slavoj Žižek’s. Therefore, we are going to see very similar argumentative distinctions made again by Caputo regarding his own work contra the affirmative gestures resembling a death of God theology in the work of Vattimo. In *More Radical Hermeneutics* (2000), however, Caputo does not make any connections to either Vattimo or Death of God theology.

Caputo in this text questions Sheehan on his model’s historical accuracy according to the predominant historical critical picture that Caputo recognizes as current in more moderate and prominent stances. Appealing to such current historical criticism for support against a strong approval of Sheehan, Caputo suggests, “There is little in the historical critical picture to sustain Sheehan’s hypothesis that God has dissolved into human solidarity, nothing to suggest a proleptic version of left-wing Hegelianism... What it does suggest is a profoundly Jewish monotheism, and a sense of human solidarity rooted in the fatherhood of God.”<sup>363</sup> In this affirmative gesture, Caputo is temporarily adopting the support of a historically asserted record. He adopts such as it currently serves his purpose of discrediting Sheehan’s stance, yet such an adoption is not based on a strong belief in historical verity. Instead, it is merely convenient to the purpose, which is consistent with the ironic orientation. In this ironic orientation, Caputo consistently maintains his preference for Schillebeeckx over Sheehan due to its open *possibility* of orientation and thinking. This *possibility* is left open by Schillebeeckx’s religio-metaphoric use of language, which is not expressed in the propositionally exact language of Hegelian or modern metaphysics.

### **The Possibility of the Levinas/Caputo Jesus as Third Interpretation**

In development of this hermeneutic loophole that is the sublime, provided by the definitively insurmountable gap between any original thing/event and interpreters, Caputo’s next move is to offer as a third voice into the conversation. This third voice is offered by

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<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 234.



Caputo himself as an anachronistically post-structuralist reading of the Jesus *event*. Caputo may do this somewhat hypocritically since he earlier chastised Sheehan for being anachronistic. This move is no doubt justified by Caputo because he is being anachronistic with the self-aware distinction of thinking through the reservation of his ironic orientation. In correlation, the simple assumption that we are to make about Sheehan is that he is writing his death of God account without such an ironic awareness, which would suggest that he literally means what he says, without reservation. Whether or not this is fair to Sheehan is another matter, yet its larger significance to our purposes is that Caputo creates/uses this insufficiency, along with those earlier identified in Schillebeeckx, to introduce another voice into the account.

The voice Caputo introduces is an ironic and anachronistic vision that is built from his own affirmation of the Judaic phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas. Thereby, after balancing Sheehan's "death of God atheology" and Schillebeeckx's "doctrinal concerns," Caputo introduces a third and fourth voice into the medley. These third and fourth voices are respectively that of his own post-structuralist Levinasian vision and its reverse, which is consistent with Nietzsche's vision. These two additional voices of Levinas and Nietzsche come into play when Caputo revisits the significance of the utter undecidability inherent to the paradoxical situation of Simon-Peter's challenge of contemplating the existentially confounding circumstances of the Crucifixion.<sup>364</sup> One interesting qualification Caputo adds in doing this is he says that the undecidability we encounter when facing the "silence of God," or as he also calls it the "undecidability of the empty tomb," is not cause for "staying on the sidelines," but instead it should call us to action, in the spirit of Levinas's responsibility to the other.<sup>365</sup> In making this distinction, Caputo is here distancing deconstruction from the moral inertia of aestheticism proper, which he sees as exempted through the existential commitment to responsibility made in such particular moments of decision/indecision. The key thing linking Simon-Peter to Levinas in Caputo's narrative is therefore an underlying call to responsibility that is more emphasized in the act of retelling

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<sup>364</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 237.

<sup>365</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 220 and 237.

of the story. This retelling of responsibility is exemplified in Caputo's reconsideration of the significance of the Jesus *event* as a type of haunting memory of injustice and promise.

Caputo's narrative reconsideration does not therefore retell the story of the Jesus *event* directly. Instead, the haunting memory of injustice and the possible promise of this *event* are manifested in Caputo's creative retelling of Simon's internal dialogue regarding "his" interpretation of the Crucifixion, which foregrounds his understanding of the Resurrection. In other words, the retelling *inhabits* the space between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. In this account of Simon-Peter's internal struggle to understand the loss of the Messiah (a moment of existential paradox if there ever was one), Caputo utilizes the gaps in our inherited historical record. He does this to rethink the Jesus *event*, and the subsequent apostolic interpretation thereof, as being influenced by the idea of "the impossibility of murder."<sup>366</sup> When Caputo speaks of "the impossibility of murder" through Simon-Peter, he is using it in conjunction with Levinas's idea of infinity, which is concerned with the awareness of the open ended nature of promises and memory.

Caputo explains that Levinas understood this impossibility as the "inextinguishability of the other person."<sup>367</sup> In association, the underlying idea behind "the impossibility of murder" for Caputo is he says that "even if one murders someone, one cannot, to use the discourse of the gangster movies, 'erase' them..."<sup>368</sup> In some way not explicitly explained then, Caputo is more or less suggesting that the death of Jesus serves as a type of memory that haunts us about injustice, while calling us towards mercy and peace. Certainly, there is room left open for the possibility of a supernatural legitimization of this ghostly calling by Caputo's ironic approach, but these traces remain in the realm of possibility rather than offered via declared certitude (in keeping with the hermeneutic condition of postmodernism).

In applying his inherited Levinasian and post-structuralist methodology and terminology to the retelling of the apostolic story, Caputo suggests, "What landed on Simon

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<sup>366</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 238.

<sup>367</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 238.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

one day was the inextinguishability and inexhaustibility of Jesus, and the best way Simon could find of expressing that inexhaustibility was to use the best language at his disposal—the coming Son of Man. (The Force was with him).”<sup>369</sup> The basic idea Caputo is invoking is again that the memory of Jesus is a type of deconstructive ghost that “haunts” the survivors with the injustice of Jesus’s death, which also highlights the justness of his message in opposition to such deaths, while also paying homage to Schillebeeckx’s prioritization of hermeneutical forestructures of the Gospel language and its paradigm of understanding. In other words, the theo-logical language(s) that Caputo is using (early Christian/Judaic, contemporary historical critical, postmodern theory, along with even pop cultural references, i.e., Star Wars) are all independent voices working to demonstrate how converging influences within things predefine our interpretations of and engagements with other things, again much like Schillebeeckx suggested in his observation of contemporary hermeneutics. The early disciples used the language of the “Son of Man,” while Caputo is in contrast predominantly using the language of French postmodern phenomenology (post-structuralism), while also considering the historical critical and Marxist humanist interpretations of Schillebeeckx and Sheehan. Caputo, it is important to note, does this in a seemingly strong argumentative move, which is not consistent with deconstructive tendencies, which always later qualifies or retracts such strongly envisioned affirmations in turn. However, before we show how Caputo does this, we shall outline the remaining key points of Caputo’s affirmatively written account of his poststructuralist Jesus.

When employing the language of post-structuralism, in other words, Caputo is suggesting that Jesus might be explained (i.e., interpreted) through the phenomenological language of Levinas. Unlike Schillebeeckx’s interpretation of Jesus, Caputo’s Levinasian essence of Jesus is not unique to the historical personage of Jesus alone, since he is furthermore instead understood by Caputo as being “an extraordinarily good example of a universal human possibility, an exemplary ‘event’ of transcendence... a particular place of the divine event or advent, of God’s coming, of the coming of the *tout autre*, maybe the best a lot of Greco-Europeans can remember... But not the only possible one.”<sup>370</sup> Basically,

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 40.

what Caputo is getting at is that Levinas's phenomenological move of the "face to face" is an experience we all encounter through "every other as wholly other." This experience he believes is universal to human beings. Levinas says that we encounter the infinity of the Other (God) in our daily encounters with this same otherness intrinsic to other people. In examining the operations of this power in collaboration with Jesus, Caputo says, "Face to face, Jesus had power. When he would talk to people who were described in those days "as possessed by devils," he could calm them down. (We would not describe them that way anymore, and instead of talking to Jesus we would prescribe Prozac.)"<sup>371</sup> Further on, Caputo adds, "In Jesus we would hear the rush of God as God withdraws from the world, catch a shadowy sight of God in the face of Jesus, catch a glimpse of the back of God as he passes us by in Jesus."<sup>372</sup> The glimpse Caputo is speaking about that we are supposedly catching sight of, at least in a flash of the eye, is the Levinasian trace of God.

In such Levinasian terms, there is necessarily in the daily encounters between human beings a fundamentally prior ethical recognition, which glimpses at least obliquely something akin to a mutual reflection of God's divinity. In a fully material immanence of this reflected divinity, which we indirectly experience in the face of all other persons phenomenologically, there is hypothetically conveyed between us a glimpse towards the Otherness of God. In other words, the thing that escapes our understanding in others is the opening within them unto God's Otherness. This Otherness is sublime, because it is that in the other person that defies our interpretive efforts. It is via this infinity inherent unto us all, where Levinas phenomenologically identifies the divine as being glimpsed within all persons. As with all other human beings in Levinas's account, the humanity of Jesus is only in a direct sense perceptibly visible, while the Big Other (i.e., God the Father) remains at least in the same direct sense wholly Other, since no mortal eye has ever seen the face of God directly. Thus, God for Levinas is in a sense wholly transcendent, yet also is obliquely immanent in the face of others, i.e., our neighbors, as receptacles of this "otherness" that demand prior to our personal beginnings an unconditional obligation and recognition to

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<sup>371</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 238.

<sup>372</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 240.

otherness. We might summarize this prioritization of Levinas's phenomenology, more or less, to indicate that relationship is prior to the individual as self/ego.

### **Caputo's Jesus Is Definitely an Ironically Qualified Reading**

Therefore, implicit in Caputo's poststructuralist Jesus account is the indications of a language divide being renegotiated between the past's first century Mediterranean religious-mythical interpretation of Jesus and a current post-structuralist/mythical interpretation operating in its wake. In the end, Caputo would not privilege any affirmative language in isolation (and this may be why he feels he can call Sheehan's reading anachronistic and still offer one himself), since he is well aware of the limitations of his own language, or any such language, which he demonstrates by his argument's standard move of retreating once again back into undecidability.

This undecidability is brought upon Caputo's Levinasian account by his own return to what he calls "a hermeneutic qualifier."<sup>373</sup> Specifically, Caputo says, "We must resist the tempting illusion to still the hermeneutic flux, to arrest the play that is set in motion once we have conceded the inescapable undecidability in things. For the ethics of mercy, peace and justice, shalom, is also a perspective."<sup>374</sup> Therefore, Caputo is likewise fully cognizant that his poststructuralist Jesus is merely one more interpretation among other interpretations, which it would seem was never meant by Caputo to be anything more than an experimental or affirmative reading in the name of mythologizing differently for the content based promotion of a perspective of mercy, peace, and justice. Alongside this positive affirmative construction of interpretive meaning, the possible alternative consequence haunting Caputo's perspective of love is the tragic vision of Nietzsche's perspective of the possibility of a truthless universe. In relation to his own affirmative ebb of the post-structuralist perspective of justice and peace, Caputo muses, "The implication, the terrible and terrifying implication, of the "undecidability" of it all, of the radical hermeneutical fix we are in, just might be that the world is innocent and does not need

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<sup>373</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 242.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

saving, whether by Jesus (Schillebeeckx) or Marx (Sheehan). Suppose with Friedrich Nietzsche we simply insisted that the world was never guilty, that nothing needs to be redeemed, that everything is innocent, suffering included.”<sup>375</sup> This Nietzschean vision is the aesthetic vision revised. Important to note, Caputo calls Nietzsche to mind not to suggest that he thinks Nietzsche’s vision is the definitive one, but rather to supposedly call faith back to undecidability, both Nietzschean and Levinasian/Christian. Without undecidability, Caputo thinks faith is blunted of its *radicality*, which would cause it to fall into a type of inauthenticity that would be he says more of “a convenience or a way of getting elected to public office,” than it would be a call to religious authenticity (calling Kierkegaard and his Christian existential language to mind).

Finally, when everything is said and done, Caputo’s interpretation of Jesus and the Resurrection evokes only an insolvable “undecidability.” On the subject, Caputo himself says, “If Jesus is an undecidable, then he is a place where the bottom drops out and we are called upon to assume responsibility for what we make of him.”<sup>376</sup> In arriving at this realization, Caputo likens our current interpretive situation to that of the early Christian disciple Cleophas, who reportedly met the Resurrected Christ on the road to Emmaus without at first recognizing Him (Luke 24:13-32).<sup>377</sup> According to deconstruction, the possibility of interpretive immediacy for even the first generation of Christians could not be as evident as many of us often haphazardly assume, which is evinced by this missed encounter with immediacy by Cleophas. Therefore, the story of Cleophas conveys the complexity inherent in the concept of an origin, which nonetheless is just one of many tales in the New Testament linking recognition with faith, along with its opposite occurrence, also common in the Gospels, which is the failure of recognizing Jesus’s true identity by several of His rejecting contemporaries.

The basic idea that Caputo invokes from Cleophas’s encounter with Jesus, on the road to Emmaus, is that a foregrounding faith or spiritual vocabulary was a prerequisite in recognizing Christ, which he believes to be a staple of the phenomenon of New Testament

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<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

<sup>376</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 241.

<sup>377</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 206.

accounts. In support of his stance, Caputo further suggests that such a prioritization of a prerequisite foregrounding cultural vocabulary is also recognized in the theological vision of various historical critical scholars such as John Dominic Crossan and Schillebeckx (both cited by Caputo in relation).<sup>378</sup> As Caputo says himself, with such a foregrounding in mind, “Even if we belonged to the first generation, walking the dusty roads of Galilee with Jesus, Johannes Climacus (a Kierkegaardian pseudonym) argued, we would still have needed the “condition,” of faith, to recognize him, so that even when Jesus was present the God with or within him was not “unconditionally given.”<sup>379</sup> Caputo again invokes the authority of Kierkegaard in subsequently suggesting that to claim that the God in Christ was self-evidently visible would be a type of pagan corruption of Jesus’s humanity.<sup>380</sup> The New Testament viewed in this fashion dealt repeatedly with, Caputo argues, the recognition and lack of recognition of Christ amongst his depicted living contemporaries in the gospel accounts, and the subsequent early church of the canon letters. In the gospels, recognition of Jesus as the Messiah is not universal. In turn, the letters and epistles often record the formative struggles between what is now understood as the instances of correct observation and heresy, with the authors of such texts being repeatedly forced to keep the early churches in line with such an authoritative understanding. According to deconstruction’s recognition of the lost origin, which is the default starting point of all its readings, those historical events that made up the beginnings of Christianity (we are referring specifically here to the Resurrection and the early Church’s understanding thereof) are lost in a chain of transmission that does not directly grant us access to a fully uncorrupted, fully accessible, or fully understandable past.

In this same sense of a lost original, Caputo’s understanding of the link between Jesus and early Church are defined by the closely associated idea of the “death of the author.” Explaining the ramifications of what he means, Caputo says on the topic: “The birth of Christian tradition(s) depended upon the death of its author, not because he died for our sins and to establish a church, but because while he lived he was preaching something

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<sup>378</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 234.

<sup>379</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 206

<sup>380</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 238-239.

else. Christian tradition(s) is a living example of the need for the hermeneutics of the death of the author and of ignoring the Founder's intentions."<sup>381</sup> Continuing aspects of Schillebeeckx's vision, the discrepancy Caputo identifies as occurring between the gap between the *event* of Jesus's life and death and the subsequent theology about Him by the Church is that Christ becomes the message rather than the messenger. Like Schillebeeckx again, Caputo too advocates instead for a re-vision of Jesus as a messenger who tried to get out of the way of a teaching of a loving Father and a fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets (i.e., an extension of Judaism rather than the founder of a new religion). While making this claim, Caputo also makes a point to highlight that the Church is a plan "B" for the early Christians, rather than what seems to have been expected in the return of the Son of Man, which was expected as an immanent apocalypse.<sup>382</sup> In contrast to the immanence of the Apocalypse, Caputo says, "We are the ecclesia of those who come too late for the Origin and too early for the parousia. Différance, which is not a bad word, is the space of ecclesia."<sup>383</sup> In relation to deconstruction's natural proclivity for such circumstances, Caputo continues, "That is why it is always a question of starting from below, *in medias res*, in the midst of the tumult, amidst supplements and signs, mediations and substitutes, without a heavenly hook to bail us out, doing the best we can. It is a question of beginning where one is, as Derrida tells us-not where God is, we may add."<sup>384</sup> The short of what Caputo is getting at, in saying such things, is that interpretation goes all the way down, and there are no privileged readings.

Contemporary Biblical historical criticism also claims something similar, which Caputo himself in a reconciliatory way points out. Caputo further calls for, from such compatibilities, an agreed recognition that the New Testament is not an original text, but a copy of copies. Caputo further reminds us that the texts comprising the canon were mostly

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<sup>381</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 215.

<sup>382</sup> John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 34-35.

<sup>383</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 207.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*



written generations apart from the historical events they claim to describe.<sup>385</sup> In clarification of a potentially natural concern for religious readers, Caputo assures us that deconstruction's ironic approach, does not jeopardize the possibility of a religious commitment to Jesus (faith), but rather always qualifies faith by a reminder of its own finitude and culturally formed and contextualized applicability. This described egalitarian modesty claims to approach the Resurrection and Jesus instead through the hermeneutic circumstances of being seen "through a glass darkly," where faith does not authorize the power of bishops, but invokes the religious individual to ethical response.<sup>386</sup> In making this move, Caputo wants to stress that religious faith is maintained when the religious believer is confronted with "the silence of God,"<sup>387</sup> elsewhere he in comparison distinguishes between faith and direct knowledge, showing how faith is by definition not direct knowledge.<sup>388</sup> Otherwise, Caputo adds, "it is not a battle, not through a glass darkly, but a high road assured of success."<sup>389</sup> This loss of the supposed immediacy of the classical hermeneutical vantage point, which apparently erroneously assumed we had direct contact with the objects of our understanding, or that we possessed the powers for achieving an objective historical analysis, has always for deconstruction collapsed into a "repetition that precedes presence," which Caputo formulaically applies to the life and Resurrection of Jesus, like all other elements of his examination of religion via radical hermeneutics.<sup>390</sup>

### **Founding a Church and the Deep Undecidability in Things: The Silence of God**

As we said earlier, Caputo re-narrates the post-Easter experience of the early disciples through his narrative about Simon-Peter's existential angst and perplexity in confrontation with the Crucifixion of the Messiah. When explaining his interpretation of

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<sup>385</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 240.

<sup>386</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 237.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid.

<sup>388</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 63.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 215.

Simon's post-Easter event, Caputo suggests, "What it means from my point of view is that Simon had a brush with the deep undecidability in things, with the wavering instability of things, with what we have been calling the silence of God that we cannot avoid even as it elicits a choice from us."<sup>391</sup> Caputo collaboratively makes this move by building off tones from his Levinasian, Schillebeeckx's, and Sheehan's like modeled post-Crucifixion accounts. However, Caputo instead incorporates as chiefly constituent of this collaborative vision his own regard for deconstruction's fundamental commitment to undecidability, which is likewise haunted by a Nietzschean innocence of suffering and a stupid cosmos.

Unlike Sheehan who closed off "undecidability" when he saw the post-Easter transition as a corruption of Jesus's secularizing political commitments, and also unlike Schillebeeckx's "noematic" reinterpretation,<sup>392</sup> Caputo instead "brackets" all readings. He "brackets" such affirmative readings by *prioritizing* alongside them an ironic undecidability into Simon's post-Crucifixion existential predicament. In the end, this undecidability therefore goes beyond Caputo's own preceding Levinasian narrative about the "impossibility of murder," which itself is finally only advanced ironically (hence his usage of italics). The inverse of this Levinasian vision of justice that Caputo also keeps in play is the possibility of a morally innocent, or rather indifferent, Godless universe.<sup>393</sup> It is in Simon-Peter's dual confrontation with the possible horror of such a truthless truth about the universe and his fond memories of Jesus that Caputo re-inscribes his retelling of Simon's *original* interpretation of the Crucifixion from. Therein, Simon-Peter is forced to make sense of the paradox of the belief shattering event of the Crucifixion of the Messiah, and somehow reconcile it with his preexisting belief in a loving Father and the immanence of the Kingdom. Caputo, in connection, emphasizes Simon-Peter's internal dialogue between affirmative and negating voices. The resulting voices of undecidability that Caputo writes within Simon-Peter's mind thereby shift between faith affirming and negating moods. In some tones these moods interpret Jesus's death as divinely meaningful, and in others horrifically not. Caputo presents this time for Peter, in particular, as one of great existential

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<sup>391</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 237.

<sup>392</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 228.

<sup>393</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 238.

crisis, which is recounted most vividly in a three to four page passage from *More Radical Hermeneutics* called “The Parable of the Fish.”<sup>394</sup> There functioning in what Caputo likens a type of “appendix” is a short parable (i.e., a short illustrative story) that Caputo claims he received by email from one pseudonymous author (in the spirit of Kierkegaard), called “Johanna de Silento.”<sup>395</sup>

Caputo’s story about Simon-Peter recounts in specific how he was out late one night fishing alone under the vast and dark, yet starlit sky, shortly after the Crucifixion. While he is fishing, Simon wrestles with many thoughts like the teachings of Jesus and the outcome of his murder. Additionally, his thoughts include matters as diverse as reflecting on Jesus’s trust in the Father, his preaching that the kingdom was here, his love of social outcasts that upset the religious authorities, Jesus’s love, and His frequent use of the parable of the prodigal son. At the same time, naggingly, Simon also dwells on matters more troubling, such as regarding his own desertion of his friend in his time of trial and execution.

The two primary undecidable moments of reflection, however, might be identified in accompanying Simon’s decision to take his thoughts back to the others to seek their approval of his reconciling meditations, regarding the significance of the events he has just reflected upon. In these two contrasting moments of undecidability, where irony plays, Simon experiences thoughts of exhalation and equally haunting flirtatious thoughts of despair. In an uplifting mood, Simon contemplates, “Yeshua was dead. But for a moment, for the briefest twinkle of an eye, Simon thought he was not alone in the boat.”<sup>396</sup> Simon is contemplating here, as earlier, on his personal experiences with Jesus, and about the things he said, as though the vividness of his memories about Jesus were equal in power to a presence being with him in the boat, and perhaps in some kind of noematic sense he is for Caputo. Contrasted with these moments of evangelical epiphany, Simon also is haunted by the tragic vision of the cosmos, most vividly through his laments for the fate of the fish he has caught, as he brings in his catch, and as he watches the life leave them as they sit suspended from the water in his net. Finally, he sets sail for home to go tell the others of his

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<sup>394</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 244-248.

<sup>395</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 244.

<sup>396</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 247.

revelations, brushing off his personal reflections on the tragic aspects of his experience. Specifically, “Johanna de Silentio” says:

Simon kept thinking of the fish, struggling and twisting, fighting to get free from his net. He remembered how he looked on at their struggles, all the while remaining quite impassive to their fate, for it was their appointed role to be food for Simon and his wife and his family. He wondered whether-and this was just a passing thought, but he couldn't quite get it out of his mind-life was not like this, a chain of stronger and weaker, and whether life simply played itself out, without justice or injustice, but with a kind of vast stupidity. He wondered whether the death of Yeshua was like that of the fish... The only thing that helped Simon cope with that abysmal thought was the memory of Yeshua's smile.<sup>397</sup>

In the spirit of Johanna de Silentio's account, Simon is confronted with both the remaining memories of the teachings of Jesus's vision of the universe and at the same time though contrarily the seemingly cruel and “vast stupidity” of life's demands by the cosmos upon him. Simon evidently chooses Jesus's vision, or what Caputo might call his best memory and interpretation thereof anyway, instead of giving way to the despair and meaninglessness that were here encroaching upon him. In including the parable as an appendix to his chapter, Caputo in typical deconstructive fashion keeps the various voices (along with their origin, hence the use of the pseudonym), which in this case are narrated as occurring in Simon's head, in play, without letting any one vision establish centrality as the authoritative account of things. Incidentally, as his pseudonymous authorship of the parable indicates, Caputo does not want to take responsibility for these voices in Simon's head as the Author, because such a presence would suggest a consistency that Caputo would prefer to avoid. In this ironic sense, Caputo is offering what he calls elsewhere a weak theology, which does not make any non-ironic truth claims, but lets voices speak, and leaves the reader to themselves finally (at least hypothetically speaking), regarding a response. As we shall explore next, this tendency is not unique to Caputo's Christology alone, but also defines his broader theology.

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<sup>397</sup> Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 247-248.

## Exploring Caputo's Weak Theology

The most fitting place to begin in exploring the ontological elements of Caputo's broader theology is perhaps in the very beginning (*en arche/bereshit*), with how Caputo approaches Genesis's account of how God created heaven and earth. In typical radical hermeneutic fashion, Caputo begins where he finds himself (in the middle of interpretive accounts), as an inheritor of the Biblical tradition's account of origins that comes down to us from a less than fully homogeneous past, and equally a less than politically neutral transmission of things. His theoretical move in approaching Genesis is consistent with his Radical hermeneutic approach because it suggests that we cannot retrieve an original understanding of the limit experience of the past, as per what Maurice Blanchot described as *le pas au-delà* (the step not beyond).<sup>398</sup> Caputo's treatment of this topic is most thoroughly outlined in his third chapter, "The Beautiful Risk of Creation: On Genesis ad literam (Almost)," from his recently written text *The Weakness of God*.<sup>399</sup> Consequently, Caputo works this ironic combination of Derrida and the biblical creation narrative through an adoption of process theologian Catherine Keller's feminist-Dionysian reading of Genesis 1:1-3, which comes from her text *Face of the Deep*.<sup>400</sup>

In comparison, Caputo says that Keller's argument, in *Face of the Deep*, is appealing to him because it is "deeply marked by post-structuralist and Derridean openings."<sup>401</sup> Keller's basic position shares in Luce Irigaray's post-structuralist feminist

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<sup>398</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 85. Also of note here for our broader concern with post-structuralism's focus on content over form, is Caputo's mention of Simon Critchley's question whether Blanchot's concept has "a genuinely ethical movement"... or whether "beyond or within 'the space of literature'... the ethical is not swallowed by the disaster. Further, Caputo also calls to notice Critchley's wonder "to what extent the religious and theological 'tone' of what Levinas calls 'ethics' puts a definitive distance between him and Blanchot"? Caputo does not attempt to resolve the Levinas/Blanchot comparison, but changes topic to suggest that Derrida and Levinas interpret Blanchot's concept to be "a call for justice to come, as a prophetic call" (ibid.).

<sup>399</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>400</sup> Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>401</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 57.

reading of Christian tradition. Caputo in association explains that Irigaray believes that Christianity, as a patriarchal tradition, has tried to “forget” the “uterine” foundation of the creation account.<sup>402</sup> This forgetfulness is discussed by Irigaray in her essay “*Belief Itself*,”<sup>403</sup> where she connects the Eucharist and the general consecration of Christian “patriarchal” religious belief with the suppression of the female “body that gives life” but never “enters into language.”<sup>404</sup> The connection on the aesthetic level of this account here is that everyone is associating the individuating or form giving principle of art with the paternal, while the fragmentary principle of art (the Dionysian) is connected with the feminine. The links these metaphors hold to gender, however, are entirely arbitrary if pressed beyond the cultural assumptions of received tradition. The Dionysian in this more rudimentary sense, as we have earlier explained, is the force of art that unties unity and form. In more creationary terms, Irigaray similarly connects her excluded feminine with “the elemental substrate of life, existing before all forms, all limit, all skin, and of heaven, visible beyond-horizon.”<sup>405</sup>

Keller’s like-minded concern for the excluded feminine elemental substrate of life manifests in her retelling of the biblical creation account, where she rethinks the place of the feminine figures often equated by near eastern mythology with primeval chaos, like *Tiamat* (the ocean monster-goddess slain by Marduk), *tehom* (the deep), and *tohu wa-bohu* (the void). In Keller’s retelling, she calls the early church’s formalizing stance on an orthodox theological account of creation out of nothingness (*ex nihilo*) a patriarchally enforced “power discourse.”<sup>406</sup> Correspondingly, in the following passage, Caputo describes what he believes to be their joint sentiments on the subject: “Metaphysical theology has turned this Hebrew narrative into the tale of a pure, simple, clean act of power carried out on high by a timeless and supersensible being, a very Hellenic story that also

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<sup>402</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 60.

<sup>403</sup> Ellen T. Armour, “Beyond Belief? Sexual Difference and Religion After Ontotheology,” in *The Religious* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 215.

<sup>404</sup> Luce Irigaray, “Belief Itself,” in *The Religious* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 121.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 59.

goes along with a top-down social structure of imperial power flowing down from on high.”<sup>407</sup> For Keller, and thus Caputo, a “closer reading,” of the story would be much more complicated and messier, which would rather be a “creation *ex profundis*,” rather than a “*creatio ex nihilo*.”<sup>408</sup> Like in our account of Caputo’s Jesus, here repetition precedes the classical hermeneutic appeal to retrieving an originary presence. Along with this complication of the lost origin, the post-structuralist reading device of repeating interpretation forward here involves the promotion of the feminine as an oppressed and excluded contemporary “other,” in distinction to the officially authorized reading that wants to put the feminine/Dionysian out of mind as quickly as possible, in order to make way for the hybridized oppressing tandem of patriarchy/power. In comparison, Keller summarizes her theological argument as follows:

The darksome deep wears so many denigrated faces: formless monsters, maternal hysteria, pagan temptation, dark hoards, caves of terror, contaminating hybrids, miscegenation and sexual confusion. Queer theories, groundless relativisms, narcissistic mysticisms. The collapse of difference. Excess, madness, evil. Death. Amidst the aura of a badness that shades into nothingness, how can we rethink the darkness of beginnings? This book is about that depth, its darkness, its face and its spirit. What kind of a subject-matter is that?... But Christian theology, I argue, created this *ex nihilo* at the cost of its own depth. It systematically and symbolically sought to erase the chaos of creation. Such a maneuver, as this book will suggest, was always doomed to a vicious circle: the nothingness invariably returns with the face of the feared chaos-to be nihilated all the more violently... The author of Genesis, like virtually the entire ancient world, assumed that the universe was created from a primal chaos: something uncreated, something Other, something that a creator could mold, form, or call to order. But the Christian theology that early came to dominate the church could not tolerate this constraint upon God’s power: for why should “He” have had to reckon with an Other? The prevenient chaos cramped the growing Christian imaginary of mastery-what we may call its dominology, its logos of lordship. I will argue that by the third century theological orthodoxy had defined itself by an unprecedented nihil. Classical theism created itself in the space of the erased chaos... I mark “the beginning” instead as a beginning-in-process, an unoriginated and endless process of becoming: genesis... Not surprisingly, the aggressive nihilation of the chaoid otherness took the form of exacerbated, even divinized, masculinities. So for the foreseeable future a

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

tehomc theology will be feminist in kind. But its feminism, like its religious identity, lacks purity. Indeed in the interest of dark beginnings it attempts to free itself from the “light supremacism” of Euroamerican ideals... Face of the Deep labors to reclaim for theological reflection the tehom inscribed “in the beginning” itself. I do not pretend to construct its opening as it ever was, but as it might yet be: as it unblocks possibilities within, at least, a particular postmillennial context.<sup>409</sup>

In further explanation of the above, Keller is avoiding confronting something like a beginning as historical actuality, or as the possibility of a historically apt reading of the text. As she explicitly says, she is not attempting to construct the beginning as it ever was, but as it might yet be (what we mean by deconstruction’s Kiekegaardian/Wildean/Schlegelian reading strategy of repeating forward). Once again here is radical hermeneutics repeating forward a co-creative encounter with the limit experience of our understanding. Instead of retrieving what actually happened, or laying claim to be in on “the Secret<sup>410</sup>,” the essentialism of a strong first account (en arche) gives way to the murkiness of something more uterine and ghostly, which does not try to claim a purity of account for its own privileging via the authority of an originary chronicle. Additionally, important to note is that Keller explains her feminist rereading of Genesis to “lack purity.” This qualification makes reference to her understanding of her use of the Dionysian in service of the feminine, which as Caputo suggests would nonetheless even deconstruct ideals of gender and gender roles, if let loose, without restraint. Thus, in balancing of the Dionysian with the Messianic/post-structuralist mythologizing otherwise, the clarity of such once strongly recognized “Euroamerican ideals” is here giving way to a re-narrated beginning without a strong beginning. At the very least, the qualification is made that strong narrative beginnings are not as easily accessible to posterity as classical authoritative accounts would like us to believe. Gone is the original hermeneutic possibility

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<sup>409</sup> Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, xvi-xviii.

<sup>410</sup> Caputo in *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 1, says: “The secret is, there is no Secret, to some big capitalized know-it-all Secret, not as far as we know. (If we have, it has been kept secret from me.) The secret is, there is no Secret, no such access to The Secret, which is what Jacques Derrida means by the absolute secret, or a more originary experience of the secret... It is just not anything we are going to get to know; it is not even a matter of knowing.”



of finding truth “out there,” or “back then,” and what the post-structuralist radical hermeneutic move of affirmation offers in the place of such a lost origin or past is an affirmative counter-signing of the original, with a second “yes,” which wants to open readings to their muted or excluded others.

This opening to otherness is done, Caputo suggests, always in the spirit of love, and looks out for what Nietzsche called the nay-saying tendencies of religion. Such nay-saying tendencies are charged by poststructuralists with trying to flee the difficulty of life, by appealing to something beyond the immediate actuality of things. In this sense, Caputo wants to keep our feet firmly on the ground by keeping religion in undecidability by appealing in his Dionysian moods to a much more morally indifferent or neutral universe. In some ways, Caputo and Keller are walking a thin line here in invoking the tragic vision of Nietzsche’s immoral cosmos and undermining the strength of strong theological principles. Undoubtedly, they are aware of these problems, but see the alternative of a fundamentalist literalism of accounts as equally problematic, in its tendency to legitimating potential authoritarianism. Caputo’s irony is what he believes keeps both tendencies in play, the Dionysian and the Messianic. There is a potential problem in irony’s suspension of strong commitments, but it seems that there are also equally vexing problems in hoping to retrieve a pre-modern world picture.

In appeal to this counterbalancing original cosmic innocence, which aims to keep things in undecidability, Caputo and Keller are suggesting that it is possible to read in the biblical creation account that there is no original battle with chaos, and that Elohim is not a warrior, nor the wind and watery elements a Babylonian Goddess (Tiamat) to be slain by the paternalistic principle of order (Marduk), as in the ancient text, the *Enuma elish*. Contrasted with the Babylonian narrative, Caputo and Keller point towards the way we might alternatively read Genesis as depicting the “nonviolence” of the wind and water, which are “just there, mute and wordless... just waters over whom the spirit (*ruach*) of Elohim sweeps,” in contrast to the violence of Marduk.<sup>411</sup> Instead of a clearly defined exclusion of the flux, Caputo suggests that we suppose the flux not to be evil, but take it

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<sup>411</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 61.

instead to be the “figure of ‘radical uncertainty...’ Of a beautiful but risky business.”<sup>412</sup> The risky business that Caputo is here talking about is consistent with the “weakness” operative in his theological account that wants to stay with the hardness of “facticity” or with the uncertainty intrinsic to the comportment of the existential abandonment of metaphysical assurances.

In general the “weakness” of God is the underlying tendency of Caputo’s post-structuralist theology of the same name. Weak theology is merely the title of a theology that is reconsidered through the parameters of the postmodern condition (i.e., the circumstances facing the six blind Hindustanis, whom we mentioned in this chapter’s opening, each holding a different part of the elephant), which suggests that we can never have the whole picture of things. A “weak” theology is therefore one that does not make strong knowledge claims, and one such way of definitively not making strong claims is through the writing device of irony, which again in deconstruction uses the logical formula of both/and/neither/nor when discussing existing positions. It is important to distinguish this ironic writing style from the general admission of the conflict of interpretation, as the basic intellectual framework governing the postmodern condition.

The difference, it would appear, is between the basic interpretive and writing approaches of Derrida contra Ricoeur and Gadamer. The former being an approach more concerned with avant-garde literary writing stylistics, while both camps are aware of the limitations of the hermeneutic condition of postmodernism. Therefore, my approval of Caputo’s project aligns with his work as being consistent with the postmodern hermeneutic condition, while I am worried about the democratic prospects of avant-garde writing, which seems to harbor an unnecessary consequence of intentionally complicating communication (which originates from a troubled past associated with elements we might call reactionary and anti-modern). Thus, where Caputo’s project is strongest is in his consistency with the postmodern hermeneutic condition, and it remains potentially problematic in his practice of avant-garde writing and equally in post-structuralism’s strong aversion to systematic accounts. A weak aversion to systematic accounts, or rather a hermeneutic concession to the limits of interpretation that recognizes the inevitable inescapability of metaphysics, may

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<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

be safer. Therefore, our approach to adopting Caputo's radical hermeneutics is largely affirmative, yet selective. One place where it shines is in its similarities to the prophetic tradition, and in its critique of institutional power. Caputo really brings this positive side of deconstruction to bear in his text *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News for the Church*.

### **“What Would Jesus Do?” and Weak Theology**

The two consistent themes of “What Would Jesus Do?” and “Weak Theology” are unified in their essential commitments to justice and peace. To answer quickly how the two themes relate, might accordantly expect that Jesus would challenge the powers of strength in the world through an appeal to a weak force, love. In this sense, we shall briefly return to the question of who Jesus is for Caputo, in order to help define how He relates to the schema of his weak theology. The basic idea of the weakness of God revolves around the common deconstructive distinction between “the world” and the “messianic” promise. Deconstruction, as we shall examine in greater detail when looking at Caputo's ethics, is always about being called towards greater ethical responsibility, often like the messianic/prophetic tradition prior to it. In explaining the significance of this distinction between the world and the kingdom (the messianic), let us examine Caputo's explanation of his theology in contrast to that of his fellow continental philosopher Slavoj Zizek. Caputo on the topic says:

Zizek is only half right to say that the perverse core of Christianity lay in Jesus's being abandoned and that what we should learn from his death on the cross is that there is no Big Other to save us, so we should get on with our lives. The other half, what Zizek leaves out, is that in this abandonment there lies the weak force of God... The divinity is rather that his very death and humiliation rise up in protest against the world, rise up above power... The power of God is not pagan violence, brute power, or vulgar magic; it is the power of powerlessness, the power of the call, the power of protest that rises up from innocent suffering and calls out against it, the power that says no to unjust suffering, and finally, the power to suffer-with (sym-pathos) innocent suffering, which is perhaps the central Christian symbol.<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>413</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 43.

Therefore, Caputo's weak theology operates as a call to justice against the powers of the world that would, in contrast, promote death of the weak and the spreading of injustice. In this fashion, Caputo suggests that the name of God is a type of event that "calls for" justice, yet does not work through a masked or restrained strength that might have allowed Jesus to come down from the Cross if he really desired.<sup>414</sup> In explaining further what he means by this weak power, Caputo says:

But his kingdom did not belong to the world, to the realm of meeting power with power. His strength was the weak power of powerlessness... not the real power of the world, and so he was killed, quite against his will and against the will of his Father. But in the powerlessness of that death the word of God rose up in majesty as a word of contradiction, as the Spirit of God, as a specter, as a ghostly event that haunts us, but not as a spectacular presence. That is God's transcendence.<sup>415</sup>

In developing this association with God and the little things (*ta me onta*) of the world, Caputo appeals to the idea of the kingdom of God as a type of "topsy turvy" way of overturning the world's seeming natural tendency of the strong murdering the weak. The Kingdom is instead the welcoming of the outcast and the rejected, even favouring them over those typically deemed more agreeable or desirable by the system or status quo.<sup>416</sup>

Regarding who Jesus was in relation to such an inverted vision, Caputo adds, "Jesus would be just the sort of unnerving, scary, smelly, and marginal character who would clear the room, the sort that would cause a lot of Christians to cross to the other side of the street if they saw him approaching, the kind of fellow who sends 'For Sale' signs springing up all over suburban Christendom for fear the neighborhood is going and property values will decline."<sup>417</sup> Therefore, the Jesus that is good news for the Church is a scandal, much like the prophets were, because through Caputo's Jesus the hypocrisies of normal religious observance are called to question themselves through the eyes of the rejected poor and oppressed.

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<sup>414</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 42-43 and 48.

<sup>415</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 44.

<sup>416</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 48.

<sup>417</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 33.

The logic of the Kingdom in this sense is a reversal of worldly wisdom, which instead sides with the weak and unwise. In this sense, Caputo says that Jesus is not guided “by the philosophers’ ‘principle of sufficient reason,..’ but by the excess of the gift, the excess of love, which is ‘without why’...”<sup>418</sup> In order to legitimate his weak theology, Caputo furthermore appeals to the authority of St. Paul. On the topic, Caputo specifically says, “I am above all in Paul’s debt for what he calls the “logos of the cross” (1 Cor 1:18), which is quite central to the idea of the weakness of God. But Paul inscribes his idea of the weakness of God that is revealed in the cross in a larger economy of power-“for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (Cor. 12:10) and “God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (1 Cor 1:25)...”<sup>419</sup> Thus, the logic of the cross is one that defies reason, which itself is an idol of the world. In this collapse of the modernist category of truth by correspondence, Caputo and continental philosophy of religion rework the basic questions concerning religion, such as the very question about God’s existence as a strong ontological entity, contra his existence as a weak *call*.

### **Weak Theology and the Proof of God**

Describing his “weak theology” as a theology of the event, Caputo also explains: “The event belongs to the order of the poor ‘perhaps,’ the *peut-être*...”<sup>420</sup> The distinction resting between the way things are in the world, and alternatively, how they might instead be if things were different, if they were lived in the topsy turvy logic of the Kingdom, where truth and wisdom give way to the “foolishness” of the weak. Regarding the theological roots of this “perhaps,” Caputo in comparison explains his stance towards the existence or non-existence of God: “I approach God neither as a supreme entity whose existence could be proven or disproved or even said to hang in doubt... About God as an entitative issue, I offer no final opinion. I leave you on your own, twisting slowly and all alone in the winds of that ontico-ontological conundrum... I am more interested in

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<sup>418</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 86.

<sup>419</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 42.

<sup>420</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 8.

answering to the provocation of the event of this name than in adjudicating whether there is an entity somewhere who answers to that name.”<sup>421</sup> In this sense as an event, particularly as a call to ethical responsibility, Caputo is more concerned with God as a weak force (a type of ghost of memory) than as a postulate of phenomenological knowledge, because as with the historical record of Jesus, when we trace these things back in hopes of an originary presence, we instead find the bottomless bottom of the conflict of interpretation, inherited via tradition.

In correlation, Caputo’s theology is called “weak” because it is an ironic oscillation between strong positions of atheism and theism. In postmodern theory, the contrast of this “weak theology,” as Caputo calls it, is what post-Heideggerian theorists would call “ontotheology,” which combines the roots of the words ontology and theology to identify a theology of being, as it were. “Ontotheology” is considered problematic to post-Heideggerian thinkers because it does not take into account the limitations (the earthly or womblike quality) of all accounts, as mere accounts. Without going too deeply into Heidegger, we might simply explain that this means that such strong accounts about direct access to pure Being (direct interpretation) are not ironic. They are accounts that are unaware of their own limitations, as mere interpretations, and according to such terms of discussion, are in danger of being “ontotheological”. Such non-ironic accounts of reality purport to have a grasp on how “things really are”, or a direct route to “the Truth”, which really means they are operating from a pre-Kantian (i.e., late 18th century) hermeneutics that is often associated with a fundamentalist or pre-modern starting point.

The basic move of a “post-ontotheological” theology, which several continental philosophy of religion theorists claim to make, would be to remove Greek philosophy from biblical theology. Greek philosophy is deemed not synonymous with, or intrinsic to, the original Hebrew religious calling, or its type of cultural-conceptual consciousness. For example, Merold Westphal suggests that this anti-philosophic biblical tendency can even perhaps be found as far back as in Martin Luther, along with more contemporary continental thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Vattimo, and Jean-Luc Marion.<sup>422</sup> In

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<sup>421</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 10.

<sup>422</sup> Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation?*, 5-6.

correspondence, Westphal describes this de-hellenizing process as calling “Jerusalem back into itself from Athens by contrasting the God of the philosophers with the God of living faith.”<sup>423</sup> Interestingly, as Thomas G. Guarino explains, the official response of the Catholic Church, and Pope Benedict XVI, has rejected this separation, instead saying that the union of Greek philosophy with theology was divinely guided.<sup>424</sup> Nevertheless, regardless if one agrees with the post-ontotheologians or the Papal decree to keep the onto in theology, in making this move away from Greek philosophy, there is here exhibited a great tendency in the continental tradition, and its return to religion, towards poetic writing, as replacement of philosophic writing, which happens according to the epistemological shortfall of the hermeneutic condition. According to such logic, the truth itself is a fable (via Nietzsche), which means there are only fables and degrees by which they are well played or not. The circle of irony hypothetically relieves this seemingly aesthetic assertion from crystallizing back into another metaphysical account simply by the self-sacrificing gesture of the ironic disavowal, which keeps the closure of such a claim from finalizing. One very prominent example demonstrating this tendency to poeticizing is Derrida’s quasi-mythical construct called Khora, which figures very prominently in Caputo’s account.

### **Describing Deconstruction’s Mytheme Khora as Bottomless Bottom**

Derrida’s quasi-mythical entity used to describe the aesthetic “space” where the rise and collapse of traditions into difference takes place is called “Khora,” which he appropriates from Plato’s text *Timaeus*, and Levinas’s concept of the *Il y a*. Essentially, it is a quasi-mythical entity that describes the aesthetic vision of reality, as representations taking place on a meaningless or void “screen.” This is similar to what Irigaray and Keller/Caputo have in mind when calling forth for the recognition of the suppressed feminine from Christian theology. According to Caputo, Khora is another way besides

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<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

<sup>424</sup> Thomas Guarino, *Vattimo and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2009), 89.

negative theology to be “*sans l'être*”, “without being”<sup>425</sup>, since it “eludes all anthropo-theological schemes, all history, all revelation, all truth.”<sup>426</sup> When spoken of through metaphor, i.e., indirectly or inadequately, khora is “described as receptacle, space, or matrix/mother.”<sup>427</sup> Caputo qualifies these statements further on, however, saying, “Khora is neither present nor absent, active nor passive, the Good nor evil, living nor nonliving... but rather atheological and nonhuman... khora is not even a receptacle... Nor is the discourse metaphoric... Khora has no meaning or essence... In short, the khora is *tout autre*, very.”<sup>428</sup> Caputo’s move<sup>429</sup> here is to highlight “an interesting fluctuation or undecidability between “the two tropics of negativity”, between the discourse about khora (the aesthetic) and the kenotic, self-emptying desertification of apophatic theology.”<sup>430</sup> Thus, in this play, Caputo maintains his customary ironic fluctuation, now between God and khora, which instigates the vertigo of looking for an origin or ground to his (anti-)metaphysical position.

There are many connections with this inaccessible center throughout continental philosophy. Where Christianity and Neoplatonism would traditionally describe the unknowable center as God and the Good, for Derrida the other/Other is ultimately inaccessible to all human understanding, much like the later Heidegger’s understanding of *Es Gibt*, yet without warranting any gratitude. Interestingly, however, friendly critics such as James Olthuis and Ricoeur’s disciple Richard Kearney have called Caputo out for not making a decision between khora and God, asking which he is finally for, khora or God?

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<sup>425</sup> Caputo definitely has in mind Heidegger’s distinction between beings/Being (doxa/Reality) here, but also Jean-Luc Marion’s God without being, as a refutation of the theoretical priority of the hermeneutic position, over a theologically primary interpretive schema. In contrast to Marion’s God without being, Caputo is here offering the second way to think of the limit experience beyond language/opinion.

<sup>426</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 35.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

<sup>428</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 35-36.

<sup>429</sup> Distinct from Derrida’s and Levinas’, by degree of emphasis, explained to be such by Caputo: “If Levinas thinks to find a Greek echo of a very theological *tout autre* in the *epekeina tes ousias*, Derrida seeks out an alternate, outlying, atheological, desert site in khora” (Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 37).

<sup>430</sup> Ibid.



While Olthuis leaves his question open for a reply from Caputo,<sup>431</sup> Kearney more aggressively suggested that Derrida's deconstructive undecideability nevertheless leans towards favoring a tragic nihilism over the biblical God by its apparent or seeming preference for khora over God, albeit qualified as it is with genuine prophetic concern. Accordingly, Kearney also charges Caputo of the same, because of the seeming indecision that persists between God and khora in his work equally. Specifically, Kearney says, "What do I love when I love my God, God or Khora? How are we to decide?... I may be wrong but I suspect that Caputo is suggesting that we don't-since the issue remains radically undecideable?... I am suggesting, in short, that Caputo can't have it both ways... Perhaps Khora is no less an interpretive leap in the dark than religious faith?"<sup>432</sup> Kearney is perhaps touching upon something very fundamentally constitutive here in saying that Derrida's mythological construct of khora is a metaphysical leap, since Caputo's irony acknowledges there is no escaping metaphysics. If pressed far enough for a response to such accusations, strong positions fall back into the play of differences untarnished from the charge, because irony is theoretically likewise uncommitted to khora. As Kearney himself says of khora, "It is unnameable and unspeakable. And yet, both Derrida and Caputo keep repeating, it is the very impossibility of speaking about Khora that is also the necessity of speaking about it."<sup>433</sup> Subsequently, Kearney further suggests:

I may be wrong but I get the opposite impression reading *Prayers and Tears*: that to accept being lost in the desert of destinerance, without looking for meaning or healing, is really more courageous, more steel-nerved and uncompromising than seeking to be found... What I'm basically saying is that I don't believe Jack Caputo is entirely neutral on the question of khora. If anything, I reckon he reckons it's the place (or no-place) to be if you really want to get to the heart of things. It's what is really out there (in here) once we go beyond alibis and illusions, salves and solaces, credos and

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<sup>431</sup> James H. Olthuis, "Testing the Heart of Khora: Anonymous or Amorous?" In *Cross and Khora: Deconstruction and Christianity in the Work of John D. Caputo* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 174-186.

<sup>432</sup> Richard Kearney, "Khora or God?," In *A Passion for the Impossible* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 111.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

consolations, and open our eyes and ears. I may be wrong of course. It's hard to be right about something as elusive as khora.<sup>434</sup>

Kearney is making two moves at once in his charge against Caputo's supposed preference for khora over God. First, he is literally saying that he thinks Caputo really favors khora, which seems obvious. Second, and more importantly, he is saying this ironically. Thus, rather than discuss irony openly with Caputo, Kearney playfully challenges one of the possible metaphysical strong points within Caputo's text, while simultaneously signaling to those with a knowledge of irony that he is aware of the final difficulties of the situation of saying what he is saying. As he says towards the end of the above quote, "I may be wrong of course. It's hard to be right about something as elusive as khora." Therefore, should we be concerned that Kearney is simply playing with his metaphysically inclined reader's hope for a resolved choice between khora and God? Or, is he instead suggesting that not choosing is a type of choice that favors the theoretical (the aesthetic) over the theology as primary, in the way reminiscent of how John Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy worry, yet without directly confronting irony either as operative form as mythos? Maybe he is challenging Caputo's ironic commitments? Or, maybe, he is indirectly suggesting he cannot? Who can say for certain? Thus, it appears that Kearney thinks that Caputo favours khora over God, like Derrida, and wants to correct Caputo that a choice is required between the two. However, he certainly does not address the complex problems arising from irony as explicitly involved, which makes this supposed critique of Caputo's position more literary, and in keeping with the spirit of the continental tradition, than critical, while still pointing to the same basic metaphysical commitment thereby operative in the choice to not choose. This response is perhaps a smart approach by Kearney, especially considering what Isaiah Berlin says regarding the pitfalls or romantic writing styles.<sup>435</sup> Likewise, there is a certain difficulty inherent in defining irony,

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<sup>434</sup> Kearney, "Khora or God?," 114.

<sup>435</sup> Berlin suggests in *The Roots of Romanticism*, 1: "Indeed, the literature on romanticism is larger than romanticism itself, and the literature defining what it is that the literature on romanticism is concerned with is quite large in its turn there is a kind of inverted pyramid. It is a dangerous and confused subject, in which many have lost, I will not say their senses, but at any rate their sense of direction. It is like that dark cave

romanticism, and khora, as suggested by Kearney above. However, these akin quasi-concepts still have contingent mythological/metaphysical origins, which are human-all-to-human, paraphrasing Nietzsche, while thinking him again through Rorty's use of him. In simply letting irony off the hook, without examining these origins, we are potentially giving way to a certain type of newly subversive or subliminal authoritarian discourse that threatens us through such stylistic manners, despite its well intentioned content that speaks of a justice to come and a concern for the oppressed.<sup>436</sup>

Of particular interest for reconsideration, is the fact that romanticism understood itself as a certain type of "new mythology." Caputo's heteronomic/messianic continental theorist category of focusing upon the affirmative content of ironic texts, rather than upon the form seems to neglect to address the primarily concerned mechanical intentions of this "new mythology." As Berlin explains of romanticism, "the whole movement, indeed, is an attempt to impose an aesthetic model upon reality, to say that everything should obey the rules of art."<sup>437</sup> With this quote in mind, perhaps we can see that Kearney is potentially uncorrelatedly pointing at a true tendency of irony to choose khora over God, due to its prioritization of the rules of art and the aesthetic model upon reality, which in irony's self-sacrificing gesture merely circles back to the aesthetic from the religious and vice versa in perpetual disruption, i.e., irony.

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described by Virgil, where all the footsteps lead in one direction; or the cave of Polyphemus-those who enter it never seem to emerge again. It is therefore with some trepidation that I embark upon the subject." (Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, 1).

<sup>436</sup> Compare when Berlin warns of Romanticism: "The reason why Fascism owes something to romanticism is, again, because the notion of the unpredictable will either of a man or a group, which forges forward in some fashion that is impossible to organize, impossible to predict, impossible to rationalize. That is the whole heart of Fascism: what the leader will say tomorrow, how the spirit will move us, where we shall go, what we shall do-that cannot be foretold. When the use of irony is not made explicit, are we not advocating a type of divide between those in the know and those duped, leading to a certain rational-irrational mystification of meaning? It is not what you say, but how you say it." (Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, 168).

<sup>437</sup> Berlin and Hardy, *The Roots of Romanticism*, 145.

## Caputo's Ethics of Obligation

Caputo's concept of a "weak theology" extends beyond the creation account and his quasi-concept of khora into his ethical commitments. In short, Caputo says he is "against ethics."<sup>438</sup> After posing this initially scandalizing remark, however, his provocative tone then gives way to reveal the less shocking motivation behind this first claim. The subtlety that Caputo is alluding towards in his seemingly scandalous remark develops a *certain* type of argument that nonetheless calls for an obligatory response, in its affirmative movements, for the excluded other of official/moral accounts. Obligation to such others therefore manifests in Caputo's distinction between ethics and obligation, which is qualified by his usual degree of ironic distance.<sup>439</sup> Before getting into a deeper discussion about what Caputo means by this distinction between ethics and obligation, it is perhaps best to further clarify the motives of deconstruction before explaining the technical reasons of "how." In his text *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News for the Church* Caputo says that deconstruction "does not take a single step without love."<sup>440</sup> Elaborating on what he is invoking in such an appeal to love, Caputo explains that by calling for "love," in association with deconstruction, he is making an appeal for "the affirmation of the impossible;" which, he also calls "the coming of the event."<sup>441</sup> In this statement Caputo is in proximity to his other similar distinction between the world as it is, and the world to come (the impossible), which he associates with the kingdom of God. Underlying all of his quasi-aesthetic/ethical accounts, Caputo's poetics of deconstruction operates via an obligation fired by an affirmative mood that is somewhat in debt to Johannes Baptist Metz's "dangerous memory."<sup>442</sup> Furthermore, Caputo's poetics of obligation is

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<sup>438</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 1.

<sup>439</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 3.

<sup>440</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 78.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid.

<sup>442</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 270.

theoretically supported upon a pre-communicative “yes,” in the spirit of Franz Rosenzweig (inherited by Caputo likely via Levinas).<sup>443</sup>

Thus, distinctions like that between the possible/impossible are common in deconstructive parlance where the “name” of a metaphysical concept is denounced in favor of an undeconstructible “event,” almost. The theoretical distinction to note here, in such opposing couplets as ethics/obligation or possible/impossible, is regarding how deconstruction distinguishes between the terms “name” and “event”. According to such a schema, Caputo links ethics to being a **name**, rather than an *event*. The difference between them Caputo suggests is that an event is a “potency in a name, a possibility that inhabits the name,” and it is “what that name is trying to express while never quite succeeding, something that the name recalls but never quite remembers, promises but never quite delivers.”<sup>444</sup> Once again, we are getting back into the anti-metaphysical problematic of full presence, where here the term “name” is somewhat akin with the religious concept of an “idol,” while an event is somewhat more consistent with the function of an “icon,” (in trying to alert its user to a greater significance beyond commonplace preconceptions and expectations). A “name” is therefore a closed conceptualization, while in contrast an “event” leaves conceptualization open like metaphor and poetic language. In the sublime space of the “event,” contrasted to the closed “name” of conceptualizations, the absolute future or absolute possibility awaits expanded consciousness. The basic idea fueling the distinction is letting the other “be,” without making it into a projection of the “same,” while keeping room for the possibility of exceeding our expectations or horizons of understanding.

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<sup>443</sup> Defining the affirmative “Yes”: “To explain this, Derrida refers us to a text from Franz Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*, in which Rosenzweig describes the “yes” (Ja, oui) as a primal word of language... the elemental power of yes of which Rosenzweig speaks does not mean that yes is a basic element out of which propositions are composed, or even that it is a part of a proposition or of language at all. Rather, yes makes words and sentences possible to begin with. For Rosenzweig, yes is “the silent companion of all the parts of a sentence, the confirmation, the sic!, the ‘Amen’ behind every word. It gives every word in the sentence its right to exist, it supplies the seat on which it may take its place” (Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 256).

<sup>444</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 59.

Basically, Caputo envisions that the event is the promise within a name, or the potential of a name that can never be fully realized, and will always call us forth to greater realizations of the event. In this sense, Caputo and Derrida make strong connections with the event and its variously employed links with monotheism's narratives about "the messianic," which provokes the name of organized "religion" with a type of prophetic diligence for watching out for hypocrisy or self-betrayal. About this deconstructive use of the "messianic," Caputo says, "This is an idea that Derrida has borrowed not from Plato but from Judaism, which is why he calls it the "pure messianic" form, not an "ideal" form. But be aware that he (Derrida) has in mind a slightly peculiar idea of the "Messiah,"... where the Messiah never actually shows up, where the Messiah is the name of the pure structure of hope and expectation."<sup>445</sup> In this sense, the metaphysical is not permitted closure or final account. The non-closure of ironic language is what averts the metaphysical function, which is why deconstruction is also called post-structuralism, because it is in part "beyond" structural accounts. The messianic (post-structuralism) is the general structure of keeping things open for the coming of something unforeseen, which like the traditional messianisms is exercising a type of prioritization of the power of hope, yet now it operates without allegiance to traditional cultural particulars or dogma, but according to a new type of post-structuralist cosmopolitanism that works through ironic device to avert strong claims or systematic accounts.

Highlighting the difference between such coupled distinctions (employing different coupled terms in the name/event paradigm), is a literary device made more prominently in Derrida's later work. We might also say that a "name" is akin to the actuality of circumstances (what Caputo calls "the "existential" order, the order of what actually exists, of natural languages and real things)<sup>446</sup>, whereas the event is a certain type of ideal driving the "existential order" to greater actualization (Caputo says the event "belongs to the 'vocative' order-the order of what is calling").<sup>447</sup> However, because deconstruction is a certain type of anti-essentialism, such a distinction must be made carefully, without losing

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<sup>445</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 60.

<sup>446</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 59.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid.

sight of the challenges of irony. The distinction is important to deconstruction because it thinks that the power of hope in itself is a progressive force, even when the world seemingly will not answer our prayers.

To further qualify how an event is a certain type of ideal, it is important to stress that Caputo would call such things like ideals: “formal indications,” after Heidegger’s coining of the term. In adopting Heidegger’s term, Caputo is keeping with the romantic and Kierkegaardian tradition, later taken up by existentialism, which wants to keep life safe from systematic accounts or world pictures, with a particular focus upon the messiness of life, as thrown into a complex material soup of particulars largely in flux. On the topic, Caputo says “Unlike the traditional concept or category that purports to seize or comprehend its formal object, the “formal indication” is but a projective sketch that traces out in advance certain salient formal features of an entity or region of entities.”<sup>448</sup> Caputo makes wide use of the distinction between formal indications (another terminological manifestation of an “event”) and names (strong ideals/idols) throughout his work, borrowing several of the following examples of such pairings from the later Derrida’s categories of the undeconstructible/deconstructible, including: the world/the kingdom of God, the possible/the (im)possible, democracy/the democracy to come, law/justice, the future/the absolute future, the power of god/the weakness of God, and of course ethics/obligation.

Looking back again upon our original pairing, ethics/obligation, from this deconstructive vantage point, it should now be apparent how Caputo’s problem with “ethics,” is not the “moral” intent behind the name, but rather the danger of trusting in its potential for fetishism, or in his words, lapsing into “a consensual euphoria, or worse, a community of complacen(cy)... reassured and reconciled with the world and ethical certainty... and good conscience”<sup>449</sup> Essentially, what Caputo is worried about is the irreverence and complacency with which many groups of “religious” people approach ethical platitudes and prescriptions, without ever really thinking hard upon such matters, or upon how each encounter requires a unique response to fit its unique scenario. This

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<sup>448</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 139.

<sup>449</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 3.

particularity requires a constant vigilance to the other through a forward looking affirmation to obligation's call. In Caputo's terms, "Obligation... is a kind of skandalon for ethics, which makes ethics blush, which ethics must reject or expel in order to maintain its good name, for ethics is "philosophy," a certain episteme. Ethics contains obligation, but that is its undoing, (deconstruction). Ethics harbors within itself what it cannot maintain..."<sup>450</sup> What is it that ethics cannot maintain? Caputo says that it is the event of obligation. As a formal indication of ethics, obligation is "the individual, the singularity" and is "not taken as an instance or example of the universal, does not become a subsumable case or *casus* that falls off the pedestal of Greek universality... Rather, the singular is affirmed in all of its singularity, respected in all of the richness of its idiosyncratic... this-ness."<sup>451</sup> In this sense then, Caputo wants to keep ethics on its toes, in a "factual" acuity. With this call back towards the particular, Caputo's ethics is a call to personal responsibility, which is weary of institutional formulas and hypocrisies.

Existentialism's call to particularity certainly has its point, since often institutional expressions of morality often function to promote the status quo, which tends to advocate the interests of its strongest members over those of the weak and voiceless, while placing upon the public a veneer of decency and morality that bludgeon individual freedoms through a slight of hand that is enforced by an uncritical herd mentality. In this regard, Caputo and Derrida's critique of institutions still has much merit, regarding the downside of institutions. Yet, swerving hard left to avoid running into Charybdis only leaves us spiraling in the fragments of the wreckage and waves swirling around Scylla. While there is no escaping metaphysics, deconstruction nonetheless still beckons the left to such an unrealizable standard, yet once the devices of irony are recognized as mere contingencies of human artifice, making promises they cannot keep, then what is left warranting such an unrealistic appeal to avoiding metaphysics? Deconstruction demonstrates itself to be aware of itself as metaphysics, but this recognition serves to legitimate itself as a never ending gesture on the way to overcoming metaphysics rather than exercising a truly critical self-examination of its commitments. Holding to any type of position strongly, even the

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<sup>450</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 5.

<sup>451</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 140.



weakness of positions to the point of total mythological fragmentation, is a type of fundamentalism. Undoubtedly, deconstruction is aware of this metaphysical necessity that limits itself, but it is still predominately suggesting that something else is happening. In this gesturing towards overcoming, which often masquerades as non-violent or non-metaphysical without an explanation of the irony of such a conveyance, the non-metaphysical is presented to criticism as the ideal we must be held accountable to, which leaves us in collective tatters, while its irony goes in circles upon moments of idiosyncratic decision.

Caputo, by balancing Christianity and deconstruction, to his credit believes himself to avoid the dangers of aestheticism, yet I am not convinced that he or Derrida does entirely. Certainly, they avoid the aversion to moral content that aestheticism hopes to enact, but there is more to aestheticism than mere content alone. Aestheticism is by definition the prioritization of style over content, where the moral bypassing is merely a byproduct of this emphasis. In comparison, Caputo's strength as a thinker is in his consistent homage to the postmodern condition, which is often associated with viewing the world ironically, as a hermeneutically complicated affair. In distinction, I suggest in one sense that viewing the world as interpretation and using the literary mechanics of irony without explicit announcement to one's audience have no intrinsic or natural consistencies that cannot be questioned in separation. The two things are not synonymous without the efforts of the stylist. Avant-garde writing is a tactic of making language difficult, which is enacted in the spirit of a very anti-modern mythology. This avant-garde writing style wants to separate the cultural elite from the typical reader, which merely creates the cultural divide for a new type of sublimated authoritarianism to establish itself. The sublimated authoritarianism of form is the mythological vision of the conservative revolution. In this sense, it is not an ideological mythos like Nazism or Fascism, but it is through George and Strauss something far more subtle, and not understood by the Nazis through their misunderstandings of Heidegger or George, although it is still not democratically friendly in a radical sense. The catch of this authoritarianism of Gestalt is that it is rhetorically condemning of authority itself, even in its conservative affirmations, yet in the economies of cultural production and consumption, it enacts nonetheless the very opposite. Thus, it promotes fragmentation and a collapse into particulars, in its attack on institutions and

systems, which it does at the expense of traditional collective solidarities, by dismissing traditional locations and avenues of social improvement and influence, such as progressive elements of the institutional Church.

In comparison, the true importance of the essence of continental philosophy's return to religion comes upon the reflection that Christianity is culturally responsible for the rise of modernity and democratic institutions, which is wisely acknowledged and championed by thinkers like Caputo and Vattimo, although not fully to the point of enacting a full counterattack on continental theory in general. Instead, their project aims against the supposed anti-modernist tendencies working in "Dionysian" postmodernism, which it would like to limit only to what they identify as its supposed "Nay-saying" expressions. These Dionysian expressions are definitely concerning, in their inheritance of Nietzsche and aestheticism's agendas of undermining these Judeo-Christian democratic tendencies, yet trying to reconcile the literary devices of this tradition, in the name of re-narrating them through the rhetoric of a supposed messianic postmodernism might not be radical enough to avert their potential dangers. In short, this response misses the danger that the literary device itself poses to democratic practices.

## Chapter 4: Vattimo's Ironic/Irenic Epistemology and the Death of God

The two prominent cultural paradigms that interweave in Gianni Vattimo's "weak" thought are postmodern hermeneutics and Catholicism. In his own words, Vattimo says, "Today there are no longer strong, plausible philosophical reasons to be atheist, or at any rate to dismiss religion."<sup>452</sup> What exactly Vattimo means by his theoretical label of "weak" thought, or "*pensiero debole*" in his native Italian, is encapsulated in this quote, but it will take the entirety of the next two chapters to develop a comprehensive understanding of exactly how this type of epistemological approach operates, and how it unfolds in his return to religion. Next Chapter we will examine the predominantly Christian elements of his writing. In this current chapter, we shall focus upon outlining the most important epistemological foundations upon which his return to religion rests. Again, like Caputo's return to religion, Vattimo's return to religion is one qualified by irony, which is more or less intrinsic to the anti-metaphysical continental theorists that influenced each of them. The essence of his ironic approach is encapsulated in his clever paradoxical expressions, "Thank God, I am an atheist," and "I believe that I believe."<sup>453</sup> The contradiction within each sentence is what makes them ironic. Only by clearly articulating the particulars of how this theoretical form is operating within Vattimo's return to religion, will we be able to judge it apart from its manifest content of apparent friendliness towards religion, in order to identify its strengths and potential weaknesses.

While Caputo primarily identifies with Kierkegaard and Derrida, Vattimo more closely associates his project with Heidegger and Nietzsche, yet the two groups of thinkers are closer in methodological effect than these simple distinctions might suggest, which is not surprising considering the generally recognized interconnectedness of all four thinkers. In correspondence, the primary focus of my examination remains upon the distinction between each thinker's form and content, while showing how their respective ironies operate in corresponding ways. One slight difference is that Vattimo's epistemology more

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<sup>452</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Belief* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 29.

<sup>453</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 7 and 70.

typically highlights another sense of the ironic, where irony is the very consciousness of its own limitations as a locally inherited and historically contextualized event. This element of irony is present in Caputo too, yet Vattimo's work emphasizes more the direct role of the Gadamerian hermeneutic perspective of tradition as perspectivism via Nietzsche, and Vicco, than Caputo's work. In comparison, Caputo's writing is more consistently playful, which is more frequent in its stylistic usage of Kierkegaard's back and forth literary tension between strong positions in his basic tendency of presenting alternatives in either/or scenarios. In other words, Vattimo's usage of irony as literary/poetic device is frequently much less textually apparent than Caputo's, although both writers are fully ironic. The difference between their idiosyncratic uses of irony vary according to their slightly difference emphasizes of the concept.

Vattimo's irony, due to his greater emphasis on aspects of Gadamer's focus on tradition as perspectivism, is therefore more expressively focused upon the inevitability of viewing the world from local cultural perspectives. In this sense, Vattimo thinks of Christianity as inheritance, which means he believes that we cannot ever get outside to think of the world without some kind of residual Judeo-Christian influence. This Gadamerian insight of the world as defined by tradition is another way of saying we cannot ever get to an objective interpretation of how things really are beyond our paradigms of understanding. At the same time he is aware of his vision ironically, which makes his emphasis on the aesthetic priority of perspective as definitive of his religious orientation. When these types of ironic disposition frame anthropological categories from an aesthetically primary perspective, the ironic position remains implicitly operative by being very aware of itself as merely one more interpretation amongst other interpretations, which it does rather than believing itself to be a natural interpretation that defines how things really are on an objective plane of reality. While we might suspect that it does this all the same in a detached way, it does such rhetorically in a self-sacrificing way, which operates to generally convince us that it has given metaphysics the slip, when it nevertheless has not.

In other words, postmodernism wants to portray itself as avoiding the metaphysical commitments of modern theorizing, and predominantly so does Vattimo. In contrast to postmodern irony, modernity functioned according to an antagonistic mythos of progressive overcoming that wanted to surpass previous theses or positions, with advances

in knowledge and social betterment. Vattimo and other postmodern writers want to avert this antagonism of accounts. In Vattimo's words, "The rigor of post-metaphysical discourse consists in the effort to cultivate an attitude of persuasion without proclaiming a 'universal' viewpoint, which is no viewpoint at all, an attitude that is aware of coming from and addressing someone belonging to the same process, of which it has no neutral vision but risks an interpretation."<sup>454</sup> Therefore, Vattimo's epistemology wants to distinguish itself from its modern predecessors, as something hermeneutically more sensitive (in a more radicalized self-negating positivism), in contrast to the supposedly totalizing accounts of the modern. Vattimo also believes that it is his adoption of irony that allows him to adopt a position argumentatively without appealing by default to the self-authorizing epistemological ground of the modern subject, which is what permits him to evade the universal viewpoint snare, which is associated with the interconnectedness of an author as an authoritative exemplar of the modern subject as epistemological ground. In contrast, the self-effacing author of the ironic approach appeals through the non-propositional function of form to no such final authority, as the center of textual meaning, or the "Author," which theoretically makes their account avoid the "universal" viewpoint. Thus, when Vattimo invokes risking an interpretation, he does not mean a strong argument, or a logical argument, but rather he wants to rhetorically persuade via the ironic flirtation with the affirmation of representations of traditional modes of argument. Theoretically, the combination of traditional argument and irony is not something we can stabilize into something formulaic or finalized, where we might close the meaning of Vattimo's discourse off in a complete analysis. Instead, the incompleteness of Vattimo's argumentative approach keeps his argument open, or really, unfinished, in traditional terms.

In explanation of his own theoretical commitments, Vattimo interestingly links the influence of his culturally ironic disposition back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century's growth in anthropological awareness, rather than discussing German romanticism etc. From this growth in anthropological awareness, Vattimo associates the theoretical origins of his perspectivist outlook and approach with the incursion of these newly encountered competing cultural paradigms, which he similarly identifies as the cause of the tendency for

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<sup>454</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 46.

the de-centering of European ideals.<sup>455</sup> In a very positive interpretation of events, Vattimo describes the creation of the ironic vision as follows: “History too, after the end of colonialism and the dissolution of Eurocentric prejudice, has lost its unitary meaning and broken up into many histories that are irreducible to a single guiding thread.”<sup>456</sup> The implication of the introduction of these competing worldviews, Vattimo believes, is that “belief in objective truth and faith in the progress of Reason towards full transparency appear to have been defeated.”<sup>457</sup> Therefore, according to this framework, the possibility of even identifying matters in the traditional terms of truth or by reasoning has been compromised by neocolonialism, and thereby we cannot expect answers according to such expectations from Vattimo’s project. In other terms, argument for Vattimo is not a rationally grounded development of logical resolution.

At the same time, Vattimo in a rare confessional musing (which is necessary to confirm his mastery of the subject of irony), himself revealingly says, “Metaphysics, to put it another way, is not something which can ‘be put aside like an opinion. Nor can it be left like a doctrine in which we no longer believe; rather **it is something which stays in us** as do the traces of an illness or a kind of pain to which we are resigned.”<sup>458</sup> Therefore, Vattimo’s basic ironic commitment knowingly arises in the recognition that metaphysics cannot be overcome. In this sense, metaphysics in irony is not overcome but only “*verwunden*” (turned)... “in ironic directions that are known to be provisional,” yet which “consists in the effort **to cultivate an attitude of persuasion.**”<sup>459</sup> This confession made by Vattimo is central to verifying our argument’s insight that irony is equally a metaphysical commitment of the performative kind, and we must read Vattimo with the awareness that he understands his ironic affirmations according to this turning, which is rhetorical in its efforts to evade metaphysics. The important thing to note is that Vattimo identifies here

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<sup>455</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 4.

<sup>456</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 32.

<sup>457</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 29.

<sup>458</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 173. Bold added for emphasis.

<sup>459</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 119; *Belief*, 46. Bold added for emphasis.

that irony's primary purpose is to "cultivate an attitude of persuasion," which we might paraphrase to say that it is intended as a type of political rhetoric. As Vattimo also warns, metaphysics is something that "stays in us," and irony as human design cannot be granted exception.

### **Irony as Vattimo's New Mythology of Turning to New Purposes**

The progressive "overcoming" mytheme operating in the modernist political stance (which was inherited from Hegel and German Idealism and associated with modernism in general and with classical metaphysics equally by postmodernism) changes for Vattimo into a new type of thinking that would realize a "turning to new purposes, surpassing, twisting, resigning, and accepting ironically, rather than overcoming."<sup>460</sup> Vattimo in describing this new way of thinking is more or less describing his own way of thinking, as ironist. In basic genealogical terms, this new type of mythology became one that operated in function rather than through an explicit content, which works in part as a rhetorical inhibition of the mythological function. Consequently, the ironic stance does not itself truly evade being a metaphysical one, as Vattimo would often seemingly have us believe, despite other less frequent open acknowledgements of this point.

As we shall explain in greater detail throughout the remainder of this chapter, the end-point of modernity that is glimpsed in describing this inhibition is epistemologically synonymous with the *death* of God. The *death* of God is necessarily not declared in a strong sense, according to modern parameters of a truth by correspondence, but instead is marked by irony's rhetorical twisting of accounts, in what operates as the liberation of metaphor, or through what is understood to be the proliferation of noble fable/lies in the neoconservative tradition. The proliferation of such fable/lies occurs via what Nietzsche called the philosophy of perpetual morning, which is akin to Vattimo's more positive depiction of the same as the perpetual twisting of the production of ever newly proliferating non-authoritative accounts. According to Burke's reactionary aesthetics, the essence of what is important in Nietzsche's philosophy of perpetual morning is instead the

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<sup>460</sup> Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, 6.

proliferation of differences and the hyper-aggravation affirmative content. In association, Milbank warns, “First of all, the most radical thinker of difference never pretended anything other than that it was grounded in an ‘ontology of violence.’ Secondly, he directed his philosophy first against socialism and as a consequence against Christianity.”<sup>461</sup> When Milbank speaks of an “ontology of violence,” he is merely referring to an ontology of difference from a vocabulary that is less friendly to the same vision. From this perspective, the ontology of difference is emphasized according to its essence as a vision of competing divisions instead of one enacting a harmonious cohabitation of such divisions. With Nietzsche’s original targets of socialism and Christianity in mind, Milbank’s comments deserve pause regarding what he calls the “revisionary” tendency to narrate Nietzsche otherwise.<sup>462</sup> Explaining Nietzsche’s objectives according to such a threat, Milbank also warns, “Nietzsche is often **pushing liberal theses to their logical conclusions in order to subvert them**, and also that, in his bitter opposition to socialism (the ultimate real target of his hostility), Nietzsche was driven to conclude that socialism was grounded in the deepest Western legacy of Platonism and Christianity...”<sup>463</sup> Thus, Milbank identifies in the anti-metaphysical orientation of Nietzsche, and Heidegger, a predominantly political motivation. It is from this angle of interpretation that we must reconsider the uses of irony in an appropriation of Christian content by the postmodern.

Contrastingly, on the subject of establishing his own left-Nietzschean optics, Vattimo says, “For Heidegger, as for Nietzsche, thought has no other ‘object’ than the errancy of metaphysics, recollected in an attitude which is neither a critical overcoming nor an acceptance that recovers and prolongs it.”<sup>464</sup> Within this context, all mythical content is mere contingent representation that never gets to the hardcore “X” that eludes our understanding about all things, great and small. In sum, this observation identifies irony as perspectivism prioritizing an aesthetic worldview, which includes itself as merely one other perspective within the flux of perspectives, when pressed on the topic anyway.

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<sup>461</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, XIV.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid. Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>464</sup> Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 173.



Accordingly, any affirmative content always collapses back into the undermining retractive check of irony. The objective of this perpetual return of new beginnings, according to Vattimo, is to “rebel against the total organization of society,” which Vattimo also identifies happening in Heidegger’s denial of metaphysics and in a large part of artistic, literary, and religious thought at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>465</sup>

What we call postmodernism operates in the subsequent landscape of the perpetual fallout of a loss of center (God as the guarantor of Truth). It is here, in the perpetual falling out of the modern mythos, the unrelenting occurrence Nietzsche would smugly call the eternal return of the same (i.e., the collapse of progressive epistemological frameworks or progressive narratives about history), where Vattimo finds his starting point for his project, at the never-ending end of metanarratives. This never-ending end of metanarratives is the so called death of God announced by Nietzsche, whereby the claims “to mirror the objective structure of being have been discredited,” which is not the same thing as making an objective truth claim about ultimate Reality (which is averted by irony again).<sup>466</sup> Thus, even saying that God is dead is a metaphysical folly, in the strong sense of the utterance. At the same time, it is also a mistake to proclaim in reverse to be fully committed to nihilism, which is why Vattimo is an *active* nihilist rather than a passive one, as too, Nietzsche was before him. He is an active nihilist in the sense that his nihilism is still moving towards completion in the ironic gesture (i.e., a type of saying to influence), where a passive nihilism is one that is solidified in an idolatrous fall into classical metaphysics. In this sense, the ground of Vattimo’s epistemology is a groundless ground like Caputo’s, where thought’s main purpose is to overcome metaphysics. The way Vattimo approaches this never ending project is through ironic writing, which is a twisting of the metaphysical in new directions without offering propositional synthesis.

As Vattimo explains, Nietzsche’s style of thought in comparison was not making a metaphysical statement of a “truth by correspondence” (as in the statement “A” corresponds to “X”) of how the world really is, but was instead making a rhetorical declaration, which would convince us of the loss of epistemological ground, and an absence

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<sup>465</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 4.

<sup>466</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 15.

of a meaningful or truth granting center.<sup>467</sup> In invoking this vision, Nietzsche was not original, since he was more or less mythologizing his own discovery of the New Mythology, which he portrays as being an original insight of his own manifesting that was distinct from Wagner, yet what the transition in his thought of the philosophy of morning really identifies is his own personal discovery of the German romantics and Burke. Vattimo, nevertheless, attributes it to primarily Nietzsche.

Vattimo summarizes the heart of the Nietzschean position as follows: “In sum, for Nietzsche ‘God is dead’ means nothing else than the fact that there is no ultimate foundation.”<sup>468</sup> In other words, knowledge has no fully empirical guarantees. Heidegger’s project is merely another emanation of Nietzsche’s project (i.e., the romantics project), with its own contingent surface detours, but it also enacts the same ironic fall into a perspectivism that cannot ever grasp an extra-rational difference between representations and their Other (as off limits). Combined, these are the two theoretical arteries of the heart of Vattimo’s ironic Christianity, which are in truth closer together than they first appear. While seemingly true on an interpretive level, within this statement there still persists the major underpinnings of the slight of hand that Vattimo delivers in his association of Christianity with the hermeneutic tradition, which I do not think is as innocuous as he would have us believe. In comparison, French Christian anthropologist Rene Girard thinks similar, when he worries that Vattimo is dangerously downplaying a crucial element of Nietzsche’s thinking:

On the contrary, the most important thing Nietzsche ever said about religion... is that in myth the victim is always expelled and justly killed... He asserts that the ferocity of the Dionysiac is a characteristic that society ought to preserve and that Christianity is destroying the world because it is too “tender,”... And Heidegger defuses this whole discourse, advising against reading this part of Nietzsche and remaking him into a philosopher who can be read at once as politically correct and as someone who asserts that “there

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<sup>467</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 3.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid.

are no facts, only interpretations.” But the real Nietzsche is much more ambivalent, and Vattimo, I believe, knows it.<sup>469</sup>

Thus, Girard highlights a major concern with Vattimo’s project. The truths about Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s writings are that they, as Girard says, are much more ambivalent than Vattimo is conveying in his appropriation of them. Comparatively, when describing the post-structuralist current of thought, as he sees it pertinent to Vattimo’s Nietzschean-Heideggerian project, Girard characterizes it as one holding “an attitude of extreme optimism about history,” where even “history does not mean a lot,” because from their sociological perspective within the academy, Girard says of such academics that “their lives are... fairly easy.”<sup>470</sup> Girard continues his attack adding that the postmodern school is best defined as a type of theory laden “game,” where “everything is ludic.”<sup>471</sup> On its primary objectives, Girard says, again seemingly quite accurately, “This school set out to break with German idealism but not to deconstruct our civilization or our world.”<sup>472</sup> Girard, incidentally, is quite correct to say that such a school is ludic (via irony’s retractive gestures); yet, as the standard self-defense of irony demonstrates, we cannot say that everything about the school is ludic, at least not technically speaking, even though the thrust of Girard’s point is accurate via certain means.

### **The Death of the Moral God**

With Girard’s evaluation in consideration, we can reevaluate the rhetorical sale of Vattimo’s return to religion through Nietzsche’s *death* of God. Vattimo describes this declaration with shocking, though oddly unacknowledged, accuracy: as what Nietzsche called the death of the “moral God.” Demonstrating his, perhaps incautious, orientation to

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<sup>469</sup> Gianni Vattimo and Rene Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and the Weakening of Faith* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 69.

<sup>470</sup> Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and the Weakening of Faith*, 36-37.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

Nietzsche's announcement of such, Vattimo says "after all only the moral God is denied."<sup>473</sup> While this passage is admittedly taken out of context, the basic claim it makes stands much in isolation, just like it would appear to do even in the original context of the text. Although the meaning that Vattimo is attributing to such a statement is not immediately evident, Vattimo more or less means well in suggesting such a qualification, and is, like Caputo, attempting to narrate otherwise, from a "philosophical" development that he deems unavoidable. In contrast, there still seems to be a bastardized performative mythology operating in what Vattimo and Caputo identify as theoretically unavoidable acceptances of Nietzsche's and Heidegger's *philosophies*, whose naturalness is such via an ideological commitment. If irony is a performative metaphysics aimed at rhetorically influencing, exactly how it is finally unavoidable is unclear.

Regardless of Vattimo's personal motives, the main issue of concern is that he wants to equate Nietzsche's calling for the death of the moral God to be of importance solely according to its ontological standing as a metaphysical proof in philosophical argument, while he neglects the declaration's other implications. This approach, like Caputo's, wants to separate Nietzsche's unacknowledged, though calculated, use of irony in the service of reactionary ends from the explicitly tragic-heroic content of a politically "out of season" or "untimely" pseudo-aristocratic message, while nevertheless carrying forth through the medium of their epistemologies the same unsettling effect of the ironic method.

Vattimo is well regarded for his understanding of Nietzsche, so we cannot suppose he is ignorant of this slip. With this complication in mind, it seems odd that he or Caputo think they have the capacity to turn Nietzsche into an advocate of the Christian religion, without still falling victim to the same stylistic affect of irony, which operates as a give and take of the promise of meaning with its slight of hand withdrawal of sense and coherence. On the topic, Stanley Rosen, a neoconservative specialist of Nietzsche, and a Straussian, says:

Vattimo shares the Heideggerian thesis that Nietzsche is a critic of metaphysics who cannot himself elude the language of metaphysics; in what I find an amusing example of this thesis, Vattimo holds that Nietzsche's rejection of socialism leads him to use aristocratic models for the superman,

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<sup>473</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 11.

thereby falling back into the language of metaphysics... his own reading overlooks the coherent and quite explicitly Platonistic, but certainly not metaphysical, political framework of Nietzsche's various uses of the image of the mask.<sup>474</sup>

Thus, Rosen thinks that what Vattimo is basically passing over is Nietzsche's alarming political objectives of a non-metaphysical implementation, by means of an odd and uncharacteristic oversight of the motives that are driving Nietzsche's usage of style (i.e., demonstrated in his various uses of the image of the mask/affirmative content), in what Rosen identifies as an aberration in what is typically an otherwise strong command of Nietzsche by Vattimo. In other terms, what is being overlooked by Vattimo's reading is Nietzsche's unequivocal compromising of the moral God as irrefutably and most importantly the **moral** God, which Rosen links directly with the play of his aesthetic style. It is this concept of the moral God that subsists intrinsically in the elements that persist from secularized Christian influence upon political modernism with its ideals of democratic and socialist sensibilities, as Nietzsche was well aware. Rosen quite forthrightly says that the key mistake that Vattimo makes in his project is that he equates "freedom with aesthetic play."<sup>475</sup> This is the basic flaw I also see operating in Vattimo's post-structuralist epistemology, if indeed his intentions are irenic, rather than ideological.

What is also puzzling about this oversight is that Vattimo knows that Nietzsche does not mind if the moral God is replaced by other gods, or some kind of pantheism, much like the later Heidegger's Godless aesthetic of the quasi-mystical *Ereignis*,<sup>476</sup> which nevertheless heavily influences Vattimo's own epistemology. What is puzzling about Vattimo's neglect here is that he knows other non-moral Gods are okay for Nietzsche and Heidegger, yet he nonetheless wants to reduce the death of the moral God to a mere ontological technicality, or a defect of philosophical language. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the way Vattimo regrettably seems to do how Nietzsche is rabidly unrelenting in his

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<sup>474</sup> Stanley Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), xvi.

<sup>475</sup> Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment*, xiii-xiv.

<sup>476</sup> *Ereignis* is translated often as "an event," but is better understood in terms of something "coming into view."

assault on Christianity, which culminates in his rhetorical pitch that God as a moral ground cannot be philosophically validated any longer. Granted, Vattimo and Caputo are addressing this through the quasi-religious assertions of their ironies in their return to religiosity, but if the *point* (stiletto) is the disruption that compromises this content, as the young Caputo said himself in his essay on the nature of the Woman-truth,<sup>477</sup> then there still seems to be something left in need of deconstruction, which is “deconstruction” itself.

### **Evaluating the Metaphysical Inevitability of Vattimo’s Irony**

There are depths of philosophical meaning we might unpack here to explain this further, but basically when all the cards have been played, it amounts to a metaphysical (i.e., rhetorical) slight of hand preaching the end of metaphysics, yet nevertheless remaining metaphysical by default itself, while rather hypocritically suggesting that any “other” reading must by default be dismissed due to its fall into the error of an inescapable destiny as metaphysics. In distinction to classical metaphysical systems, the metaphysical aspect of the literary cannot be spoken, but merely enacted. It is in this once removed mechanism of a functional mythos that the ironic hides its own workings of the equally mythic device of textual abandonment that implicitly is assumed to be an independent occurrence, yet is in actuality merely one more mere interpretation amongst other supposedly mere interpretations. Vattimo knows that this response is the natural tendency against his *argument*, and he wants to delegitimize its argumentative strength by pointing out that he is aware of this natural counter response, as Nietzsche was, yet ultimately beyond this initial dismissive acknowledgement neither he nor Nietzsche gives any further argumentative justification or explanation for dismissing it. If we are to accept their dismissal of the metaphysical inevitability of their own visions, we must do so through a leap of faith. The common response against postmodern critics is that they do not properly understand the postmodern position, which if we did ignore the primary element of irony therein, would partly be true, albeit in a disingenuous and unforthright way. The thing to understand that

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<sup>477</sup> Caputo, “Supposing Truth to be a Woman.”

they are reportedly missing is based upon an intuitive understanding, rather than a rational or logical proof.

Vattimo, demonstrating his awareness of these problems, discusses this apparent gap in his argument, when he says in *Belief*:

I realize that this argument might appear elusive: a circularity between ontology and weakening and the Christian inheritance, the paradox of a non-metaphysical philosophy that nevertheless believes it possible to speak of Being and its tendency to escape any rigorous definition, law and rule by indefinitely consuming all strong, imposing structures. Yet it is legitimate to suspect that the need for ‘clear and distinct ideas’ is still an objectivistic and metaphysical remnant within our mindset. I am not saying that one should accept any statement no matter how vague and contradictory it may be. I am trying to propose arguments, which, even though they do not claim to be definite descriptions of things as they really are, seem to be reasonable interpretations of our condition here and now.<sup>478</sup>

In other words, Vattimo is limited in his ability to say things about the ontological nature of Being, because he is limited by the inescapable condition of the non-metaphysical aspirations of his argument. Alongside Vattimo’s final confession that his vision too is merely another interpretation, we must recognize in his remarks above the requisite commitment of belief that he is inadvertently appealing to for us to accept his *argument*. Vattimo admits that his argument seems elusive, circular, and paradoxical. Rather than defending these tendencies argumentatively, he goes on the offensive again against a metaphysical remnant motivating a critical engagement with his vision that would object to them. In other words, to the appearance of rational and logical argument Vattimo’s argument appears elusive, circular, and paradoxical, yet Vattimo is not appealing to logical argument to defend his vision. He is instead asking his audience to take his vision on faith, which is perhaps hard to see because the faith it requires is not a classical variant. Vattimo justifies this gap in his explanation because he is “not writing a philosophical essay, but telling why and how” he has “rediscovered religion through” his “work as a philosophical scholar.”<sup>479</sup> In this admission, Vattimo is more or less acquitting his vision of logical proof

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<sup>478</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 46.

<sup>479</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 45.

or rational legitimization because it is a literary vision, rather than a philosophical one. The epistemological justification of such circularity that Vattimo also identifies in his work is legitimated, he says, due to “the relative contingency of the whole.”<sup>480</sup> In this sense, Vattimo is appealing to the likelihood of a truthless or meaningless universe as the justification of his fable, as Nietzsche would call it. In short, Vattimo is describing his vision indirectly to be an ironic and literary one, which is not accessible to reason or logic for verification. He would object, as we have said, that a concern with his vision would betray a metaphysical remnant in his would be critic, yet why should we believe that his critics should be held to a standard that he himself cannot attain? He too cannot escape metaphysics.

Additionally, much like Caputo’s irretrievable origin or presence of any given “X,” Vattimo’s epistemology is hereby operating on a type of Heideggerian/Gadamerian mythos of a predetermining tradition mixed with the contingency of the historical passing of events, as a playing without why via Heidegger’s borrowing of Heraclitus’s child-king.<sup>481</sup> Again, this mythos has a relative pertinence, yet like all mythologies it must necessarily make room for the “X” that eludes its own panoramic declarations about the *Real*. On the topic, Vattimo says regarding his own circularity between hermeneutics and Christianity (which will become clearer in the next chapter how this exactly operates), “we encounter the world already possessing forms, words, grammatical structures through which we give it order, otherwise to us the world would appear to be an indistinct mess.”<sup>482</sup> In a seemingly positive move, whereby he is calling for the re-appropriation of Christianity by postmodernism, Vattimo invokes the authority of this Gadamerian concept of an all-

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<sup>480</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 70.

<sup>481</sup> Heraclitus says: “Time (aion) is a child playing a game of draughts. The kingship is in the hands of a child.” (Cited in Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought*, 82). Caputo says of the fragment in relation to Heidegger: “The child-king is the mystery of play upon which Being itself rests and upon which the life of man also rests. The mission of Being sends itself to us in a mysterious, play-like way... The epochs spring up unpredictably; they are a “free play.” There is no “why” for the sequence of epochs... One cannot ground the sequence of epochs in a higher explanation. One can only let them be, accept them as they are.” (Caputo, *Ibid.*, 82-83).

<sup>482</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 7.



encompassing tradition against the apparent naturalness of the barrenness of the aesthetic framework as something reminiscent of Hume's orderless throng of sensory stimuli without boundaries or categorization. In this distinction, we see the non-defined space outside of the representational (the sublime Real) contrasted with the meaningful space enacted by tradition/language. Vattimo (like Hamann before him) does not think we can intelligibly think outside of tradition/language. Thus, Vattimo would suggest that we cannot see *Reality* outside of our inherited paradigms. This move of recognizing the *naturalness* of Judeo-Christian mindset is a critical move also made more generally by the return to religion, and it is important in addressing the content level reactionary tendencies of aestheticism, yet we must equally consider the other implications of this framework.

### **Christianizing Heidegger and Nietzsche: Asking the (Im)possible of Tradition**

In connection, Vattimo is arguing that Christianity is our traditional legacy and the developments of reactionary hermeneutics are participants within this tradition, which continue this now secularized inheritance in ways unbeknownst to its radically anti-Christian authors (Heidegger and Nietzsche). Thus, Vattimo hypothetically believes he can either ignore or out narrate the negating aspects undermining Judeo-Christianity by aestheticism in Nietzsche's perspectivism with his own usage of a similarly operative irony. In correlation, the essence of Vattimo's Heideggerian project of thinking "Being as an event" means to think of thinking itself as *andenken*, which is a type of authentic (self-appropriating) remembrance.<sup>483</sup> On the subject, Vattimo says, "The importance that the notion of *Andenken* (re-collection) acquires in the late Heidegger, for whom post-metaphysical thought is defined as recollection, a recovery, a re-thinking, etc., places his work in substantial proximity to Nietzsche's philosophy of morning."<sup>484</sup> In this sense of re-thinking, the critic becomes artist in Wilde's sense of the concept, where the guarantees of a historical retrieval are barred, which open the possibility of infinite proliferation, and this again enacts Burke's aesthetic vision of a sublime medley of fragmentation and flux as filling the void of the ideological vacuum left in the absence of authoritarian religion.

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<sup>483</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 12; *The End of Modernity*, 174.

<sup>484</sup> Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 174.

Catering to the posture of striving towards a non-metaphysical epistemology, Vattimo further explains the groundless ground on which he builds this theoretical commitment:

Since it is not an object, Being does not possess the stability assigned to it by the metaphysical tradition. Hence, the event of Being lies in the double sense of the genitive: the horizon is the opening belonging to Being, but it is also that to which Being itself belongs. Being is not given as a stable and eternal structure. Rather, Being gives itself, again and again, in its occurrence.<sup>485</sup>

In other words, Vattimo is again suggesting that we cannot ever get a full picture about how things are in actuality, which means we must always participate in partial paradigms as active interpreters. In this sense, where Christianity has come from wavers in the event of Heidegger's double genitive, where the truth of the event is not distinguishable from its historical appearances, which makes the subject of originals and origins a barred or paradoxical matter for the rational mind, which instead gives way to merely accepting the sending of such paradigms, while putting the poet visionary in Lacan's Master position. As Vattimo says, in comparison, "The truth of the opening is not an object whose cognitive possession may be authenticated by the sensation of evidence..."<sup>486</sup> Then speaking of Being as an event, Vattimo adds, "I have already said above that if we are to stop thinking of Being in metaphysical terms as a necessary structure given once and for all, it must be conceived as event; this event is the outcome of an initiative, of which I am an 'effect', an heir, an addressee..."<sup>487</sup> Making Being an event is alluding to the unending circuit that ironic language undertakes in its attempt to say something other than the metaphysical, which is recognized above by Vattimo in his call for a different type of discourse that does not conceive of Being as a "necessary structure given once and for all." Within this ironic landscape, the interpreter becomes an active participant because they are equally an effect, an heir, and an addressee of the tradition they inherit. As a consequence, the centrality of logic and reason are additionally qualified in the individual as critical thinker, where the presence of stable cognitive entities is undermined, and gives way to the ebb and flow of weak entitative conceptions, whereby the interpreter's feet will never touch bottom again

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<sup>485</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 21.

<sup>486</sup> Gianni Vattimo *Beyond Interpretation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 84.

<sup>487</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 92.

with the same interpretive stability as that attributed to the modern political subject. The consequence for a classical truth, as something that can be identified by a detached observer, is that now “there is no truth outside of a horizon disclosed by an announcement, by a word handed over.”<sup>488</sup> Ultimately, all of these handed over truths are but moments in the rise and fall of affirmative gestures of meaning.

### **Vattimo’s Postmodern Paradigm of Truth**

Vattimo in comparison describes the postmodern context and its conception of truth as “historical message, rise and fall of paradigms, interpretations of things in light of inherited historical languages,” from which arises his conclusion that “it becomes essential to take the Bible seriously” again.<sup>489</sup> The Bible is then important for Vattimo because it is a historical paradigm, wherein the separation of the rational mind outside of the sending of Being is not strongly accessible outside its parameters of thought, which makes truth claims about its legitimacy problematic in a historical critical sense. Alluding to the role of the interpreter as exponent and poet/overman within this rise and fall of paradigms, Vattimo says, “Hermeneutics is not only a theory of the historicity (horizons) of truth: **it is itself a radically historical truth**. It cannot think of itself metaphysically as a description of one objective structure of existence amongst others, but only as the response to a sending, to what Heidegger calls *Ge-Schick*” (the sending or dispensation of historical epochs that always conceals the hidden “giving” that sends all historical dispensations).<sup>490</sup> The giving that is hidden comes from the unknowable of Being, which means it defies rational explanation for Heidegger, and Vattimo too. Thus, if what exactly Heidegger is getting at seems unclear, in his description of what *Ge-Schick* and the sending of historical dispensations exactly entails, then you more or less get the performative point of the opening because again it is not a rationally argued insight, rather it is enacting a type of affirmative-retractive hermeneutic, which is logically not graspable.

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<sup>488</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 66.

<sup>489</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 7.

<sup>490</sup> Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 6. Bold added for emphasis.

In essence, we are in the cognitive terrain of the contingent creation of cultures or beings, in the spirit of a quasi-Wagnerian romanticism (except unlike Wagner the mythologist does not invent, but partakes in the sacrament of *Ge-Schick's* sending). In this case, irony limits the true capacity of any such creations to truly pierce ultimate Reality's essence (Being), making the Wagnerian mythologist partially dispossessed of a total command of his/her created mythological vision, which is instead a sending from *Being* or the *Es Gibt*. What Heidegger (and Vattimo by association), is identifying as intrinsic to this process of cultural formation then is that there is a hidden otherness of each *contingent* historical manifestation. In essence, this hidden otherness is the gap enacted by the retractions of ironic play, which is the invocation of the sublime as the eclipsing of the rational.

In other words, because hermeneutics recognizes its limitations as a radical historicity it cannot itself try to claim an ontological priority to Being, whose hidden workings accompanies all sendings via a type of contingently poetic dispensation of the affirmative-retractive gestures of creating meaning. In short, this Heideggerian framework identifies the context that Vattimo uses in re-envisioning his return to Catholicism, which is done via the ironic condition. Concerning to the critical function, even the hermeneutic recognition of this sending must concede itself as a passive/active recipient/participant, rather than as a traditional rationality capable of grasping this mysterious sending. Additionally, Heidegger's methodology tends to eclipse collective agency in its striving for a non-metaphysical ontology and a subjectivity of personally accountable authenticity. Basically, by wanting to eliminate the metaphysical function, in the perpetual ironic return of the same, the particular is prioritized over the collective, which does not change with Vattimo's own affirmative vision.

### **Vattimo's Weakened Subject as Active Interpreter of Tradition**

Comparatively, in contrast to the modern thinking subject that is systematically contextualized, Vattimo prefers a weakened type of subjectivity, something more akin to Heidegger's ontologically oriented subject as *Dasein* (there being), whose being is more sensual, individually particular, and stimulant responsive to the immediacy of existence

beyond representational thinking. The thinking/writing style of this weakened subjectivity is ironic, because such is not rationally grounded, or direct, in the later Heidegger. As Vattimo explains, this type of being in its ideal manifestation employs a type of “accomplished nihilism,” which suggests once the subject is made aware of the unavoidable implication of the ‘weakening of Being’ the only available recourse is to respond to “a fictionalized experience of reality which is also our only possibility for freedom.”<sup>491</sup> Vattimo’s usage of the term “fictionalized” is troubling for his appropriation of Judeo-Christian tradition, but essentially in his Nietzschean-Heideggerian moods, which this is one, he is basically taking the stance of an atheist that views religion as ontologically false, with pragmatic implications. Again, this stance is merely one mood of Vattimo’s irony, which is not atheist in a strong sense, but it instead wavers with his other moods of Judeo-Christian theism. The basis of this ironic vision is the abandonment of an attempt to reach an objective truth, and the fables or *sendings* of being are left to lightly play upon the surface of an impenetrable sublime actuality. Like Heidegger and Nietzsche before him, Vattimo is here calling for a suspension of the rational mind’s role in thinking.

The rise of the Babel-like pluralism that accompanies this perspectivism means that “narratives proliferate without any stable center or hierarchy,” and as Vattimo further suggests, “No master narrative or normative metanarrative is any longer capable of legitimatizing or delegitimizing them... The social hierarchy... has been overturned.”<sup>492</sup> Vattimo, in a radically democratic sounding tone, suggests that the type of social agency required in the face of such pluralism is thereby oriented towards “an ethics of autonomy.”<sup>493</sup> Furthering his connection with the Babel-like pluralism of the non-metaphysical’s proclivity towards democracy, Vattimo also suggests, “The pluralistic world in which we live cannot be interpreted by an ideology that wants to unify at all costs in the name of knowing. This ideology would stumble against, among other things, any ideals of democracy.”<sup>494</sup> While rhetorically Vattimo’s call for pluralistic tolerance is reciting all the

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<sup>491</sup> Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 28-29.

<sup>492</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 16.

<sup>493</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 47.

<sup>494</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 5.

right politically correct platitudes, the truth of a healthily functioning democracy is likely much less euphemistic than Vattimo would like to here suggest. These democracies are problematically still modernist institutions, which still operate according to modernist language games. To abandon their rules of play is to potentially relinquish one's voice, in an influential fashion, from the commons. Somewhat tellingly, Vattimo describes the socio-political ramifications, thus far, under the leading influence of the postmodern/poststructuralist paradigm:

To be sure, the liberation of metaphor from subordination to the proper sense has taken place in theory only. In practice, societies are still far from having achieved the perfect equality of the life forms... embodied in the different metaphorical systems. The demise of hierarchical principles and norms is, at least, sufficiently clear in the theoretical discourse of philosophy, literary criticism, and several genres of writing.<sup>495</sup>

This epistemological situation (likened to a democratic pluralism of a decentered epistemology) Vattimo thinks unavoidable, and likely this reasoning is what motivates his paradoxical attempt to bring Heidegger and Nietzsche back to Christianity, as a type of secularized "Christian" *philosophy*. The connection, as we more thoroughly examine in the next chapter, is with the connection of this weakening of the rational mind, with the Christian kenotic gesture. Vattimo sees the need for this hybrid necessitated, because he argues we cannot go back to a classical worldview. Again, from his recent conversation with René Girard, Vattimo says on the topic, "In this situation of multiplying interpretations, man can only survive by going farther and becoming a new type, capable of devising and proposing ever new interpretations... there is no return to metaphysical and structural modalities because it is impossible, all we can do is to push on ahead and create the beyond-man."<sup>496</sup> Otherwise stated, Vattimo believes that "A meaning for history can be reappropriated only insofar as we accept that it has no metaphysical and theological weight and essential value".<sup>497</sup> The problem with Vattimo's claims in the two above quotes is that

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<sup>495</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 16.

<sup>496</sup> Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and the Weakening of Faith*, 72-73.

<sup>497</sup> Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 28.

we have yet to leave metaphysics, and never will. In connection, the beyond-man, or Nietzsche's superman, as the man living beyond strongly held values and dogmas, is an inverted messiah, whose non-doctrine enacts the proliferation of the particular over the One, which is equally an ideological effect as it is a theoretical insight.

The supposed technical epistemological implications of this declaration about history and the new philosophy of morning are that now in the form of writing, as Vattimo says, "the distinction between philosophical and poetic-or creative-writing has been apparently erased," since systematic accounts are no longer to be valued. According to this schema, Vattimo idealizes the power of the individual interpreter as risen to the height of a transvaluation of values through an ironic awareness of the fallibility of all attempts at representation, as mere representation.<sup>498</sup> In being an active nihilist, he is aware of all representation as mere representation, and calls for a response by his idiosyncratic Dasein as the locus of aesthetic play (again Heidegger's Dasein is the postmodern subject who is not rationally grounded but is weakened of such technological closure as instead "there being," or as the ironic awareness of living in the presence of the difference of Being contra beings). In replacement of the modern subject grounded on rationality is something indebted to the early Heidegger's notion of the subject as *Dasein*. *Dasein* is a reinterpretation of human subjectivity as a contextually situated interpreting forward, which aspires to existentialism's ideal of leading an authentic existence, separate from the inauthenticity of the *Mitsein*, or the "being with," or *Das Man* "they say." This vision, at base, would nonetheless still seem to strongly favor a disrupting or fragmenting individualist idiosyncratic contingency over an individuating or collectivist one. In contrast, Vattimo thinks of Heidegger's approach, or perhaps rethinks it, thus:

Indeed, Heidegger dismisses the metaphysical-objective, stable, and structural-conception of Being only in the name of an experience of freedom: if we exist (with our projects, hopes, aims, and fears) as finite beings who are not just appearance but rather beings who have a past and a future, then we cannot conceive of Being in accord with the objectivistic terms of metaphysics.<sup>499</sup>

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<sup>498</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 17.

<sup>499</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 4.

Therefore, Vattimo is advancing in the above quote what appears to be a promise of subjective freedom by avoiding metaphysical accounts, via active nihilism's agency as inheritance, which involves an interpretation focused co-creation of tradition chastised via the ironic awareness of Being outside of metaphysical and rational thinking. Explaining further exactly what he is supporting, Vattimo says, "This genre of writing is related to the classical art of the Sophists and the Rhetoricians, which Plato banished... Their eyes remained fixed on the problem of life, but they despair of solving it by means of a universally valid metaphysics or a theory of how the world hangs together; life should be interpreted from it..."<sup>500</sup> Therefore, such a philosophy of life and its neighboring insight of "the real world become a fable" wants to do away with overarching theories about how the world hangs together, and replace it with a much more localized interpretation(s) of life interpreting life in the idiosyncratic immediacy that is its own calling, as something messy and systematically impossible to pin down. This aversion to the systematic and metaphysical is supposedly enacted by the rhetorical inhibition of its ironic disposition, which operates furthermore as something much more modest in scope and seriousness than modernist political identities and objectives strived to enact in their mythos of a better world. Yet, the promise of averting metaphysics is a false one, especially in a modernist political context, where there are inescapable defining rules of play.

In comparison, Vattimo sums up his project as the move "from universality to hospitality," which he believes will result in a benign "Babel-like world of pluralism."<sup>501</sup> He contrasts this Babel-like asystematic vision as being the counter to the Enlightenment's legacy of "imperialism and colonialism," which is associated with the tendencies of systematic thought's claims of universalism and rationalism.<sup>502</sup> While there is a measure of truth in what Vattimo says here, I cannot help but think that once again we are swerving hard left, into a watery and fragmentary ruin against Charybdis to avoid the looming threat of Scylla.

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<sup>500</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Nietzsche* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 4.

<sup>501</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 100.

<sup>502</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 98.



## **Avoiding the Violence of Metaphysics via Metaphysics**

The danger is in its self-assured optimism that the end of metaphysics has ushered in the beginning of a new opportunity, which the technological violence of the modern prevented. It is possible that the promise of a world devoid of violence is again merely a utopian vision, metaphysics aside. Further thinking on the topic, I largely concur with Girard, when he says of Vattimo's orientation: "People think that most of the conflicts today are caused by absolute values, absolute opinions about this or that, what are called "ideologies" or "grand narratives"; they think that absolute opinions generate violence because they generate opposition. There is something aggressive about that... it is a mistaken way of viewing violence..."<sup>503</sup> Essentially, Girard is suggesting that there is equally something violent about the grand narrative about the undermining of grand narratives, which thinks that if only ideological identities were eliminated there would be no conflict in the world. While we can concede that ideological identities do spurn violence, we can also see an elaboration of Girard's point that often much of what passes for ideological violence has other underlying socio-political motivations. When we get to the bottomless bottom of the chthonic irony, as the manifest (un)logic of an equally mythical chaos that we are not permitted to speak about, yet do through rhetorical manipulation, there does seem to be a potentially aggressive and unforthright logic operative in the anti-metaphysical impulse. More problematically, perhaps, we never get outside metaphysics, which means we are subject to a new possible violence in Vattimo's own metaphysical project, if we were to associate metaphysics with violence.

Girard is also rightfully critical of Vattimo's dependence upon Nietzsche's aesthetic primacy. In specific, Girard says, "To have nothing but interpretations is the same as having none. Most of the time, Nietzsche disregards his own formula and, with all due respect, the same is true of Vattimo himself... The people who take the fashionable ostracizing of facts too seriously end up sounding like the politically correct academics they

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<sup>503</sup> Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and the Weakening of Faith*, 59.

effectively are.”<sup>504</sup> Likewise, Girard’s intuition that Nietzsche’s slogan that there are not facts only interpretations “plays into the hands of those who turn all texts into insipid ‘narratives’ or more or less fictional ‘stories’” seems again relatively accurate.<sup>505</sup> Accompanying this concern, Girard adds, “I can’t prove this explicitly, but I think in Vattimo’s conclusions there arises the problem of how this new interpretation emerges without turning into the destructive form of nihilism...”<sup>506</sup> In response, Vattimo parries, “I myself have never known a relativist, just as I have never known anyone who said, “All theories, including mine, have equal value.”<sup>507</sup> Further on, Vattimo adds, “My own nihilism does not come down to the thesis that there exist no truths, as Girard well knows, so I feel challenged only in part.”<sup>508</sup> The distinction again resides in Vattimo’s employment of irony, which would make of relativism another strong position that his ironic disposition would when pressed disown, or as he says only challenge him “in part.” Even though Girard is right to pick up these tendencies working in Vattimo’s thought, he does not call Vattimo out on the mechanics of his irony, which thereby causes him to miss the subtleties of Vattimo’s method.

While his admonition of the aesthetic is admittedly also a fable, Vattimo challenges anyone to come up with a more plausible alternative that does not simply lapse back into metaphysics.<sup>509</sup> This retort seems problematic in its helpfulness, rather than explicative of a verifiably strong defense. Despite his ironic feigns of offering promises to the contrary, Vattimo, in the end, is charging his critics with a standard that neither he nor Nietzsche has ever actualized, despite alluding often towards the opposite in the give and take of irony’s deceptive promises of meaning. In a certain sense, the poststructuralist and neoconservative positions are two sides of the same coin. In correspondence, Terry Eagleton’s comments on

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<sup>504</sup> Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and the Weakening of Faith*, 94.

<sup>505</sup> Ibid.

<sup>506</sup> Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and the Weakening of Faith*, 69.

<sup>507</sup> Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and the Weakening of Faith*, p. 50.

<sup>508</sup> Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and the Weakening of Faith*, 61.

<sup>509</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 41.

such ironic orientations of writing are perhaps also worth considering before we simply concede that Vattimo is right in his striving for Nietzsche's *Übermensch* (i.e., Overman) as his only option in averting the pitfalls of a reactionary nihilism:

One advantage of the dogma that we are the prisoners of our own discourse, unable to advance reasonably certain truth-claims because such claims are merely relative to our language, is that it allows you to drive a coach and horses through everybody else's beliefs while not saddling you with the inconvenience of having to adopt any yourself. It is, in effect, an invulnerable position, and the fact that it is also purely empty is simply the price one has to pay for this. A further benefit of this stance is that it is mischievously radical in respect of everyone else's opinions, able to unmask the most solemn declarations as mere disheveled play of signs, while utterly conservative in every other way. Since it commits you to affirming nothing, it is as injurious as blank ammunition.<sup>510</sup>

In fairness to Vattimo, his position does not *entirely* collapse into the circumstances negatively identified by Eagleton about shallow types of poststructuralist writing. Vattimo, to his credit, wants to admit an exception to this free play of difference, which is perhaps his justification of aligning himself with such reactionary thinkers in his methodological approach. This exception to what we might also call Vattimo's program or narrative of secularization is love.<sup>511</sup> In his terms, he also says against a reactionary reading of his thought:

Nietzsche, the son of a pastor, rebelled against his father's authority, his sister's, and so on; Heidegger distanced himself from the Catholic Church at the very beginning of his academic career. All this is mixed with issues of politics and power. I am referring to Nietzsche's last writings and to Heidegger's involvement with Nazism. To a different degree and for reasons that are only vaguely similar to Augustine's, Nietzsche and Heidegger remain captive to Greek objectivism and refuse to develop fully the implications of Christianity's anti-metaphysical revolution. These cannot be fully developed without recourse to charity. In other words, only friendship, explicitly recognized as the decisive truth factor, can prevent the thought of

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<sup>510</sup> Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 125.

<sup>511</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 67.

the end of metaphysics from lapsing into a reactive-and often reactionary-nihilism, to use Nietzsche's expression.<sup>512</sup>

The reason that Vattimo adopts this approach of trying to Christianize Nietzsche and Heidegger he explains is that it offers "a more rigorous philosophical foundation" than that offered for example by the Levinasian other, which he feels "is always exposed to the risk of being dethroned by the Other (with a capital letter)," and yet that does not help the security of his weak stopgap of love/friendship, as critics like Guarino and Deportere have already pointed out.<sup>513</sup> In other words, Vattimo believes that Heidegger and Nietzsche's ontological account is more rigorous than Levinas's account of God as Other, which he thinks is unverifiable by the risk of the sublimity of Otherness in general, which defies philosophical proof. Thus, we can also find in Vattimo's maintenance of the hermeneutic perspective a lingering commitment to some kind of bastardized truth via correspondence commitment, which would logically undermine his love/friendship stopgap if questioned inhospitably. Similarly, the performative metaphysic of irony is equally merely one more manifestation of another unsupportable human design of detached intentionality and conceptuality. The catch that Vattimo is not mentioning in his preference for such a grounding love is that he knows it by default equally collapses back into the ironic circuit. Likewise, Vattimo is also aware that we cannot get outside of metaphysics, despite all the bobbing and weaving of the pseudo-technical affirmations of theoretical poetry, which is still highly Platonic and systematic in its inversion of such hierarchically justifying metaphysical yarns.

Important here is the recognition of what the end of metaphysics, pushing forward to the over-man, means for Vattimo's limit to secularization that is love. Clarifying himself, Vattimo says, "It is not a matter of discovering a philosophical truth superior to that of past metaphysical philosophies. Like the death of God, the end of metaphysics is an event that cannot be ascertained objectively, one to which thought is called to respond."<sup>514</sup> Again, we

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<sup>512</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 110-111.

<sup>513</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 76.

<sup>514</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 13. Underlining added to add emphasis.

see Vattimo explain that we cannot follow his argument, rather we must respond with belief. Thus, the end of metaphysics disappears back into the play of irony's difference, yet something rhetorical is enacted materially, all the same, which fragments solidarity and strands Vattimo's readers in the crux of existential crisis. Existential crisis is an inherently individual thing, and this bears political significance.

### **Vattimo's Ideal Community of Equal Interpreters in Dialogue**

Vattimo's ideal epistemological order of love basically entails "the possibility of communicating with a community of interpreters," where the only limit on secularization is love.<sup>515</sup> The ideal mechanism of such a community of interpreters would be "hospitality in dialogue between religions and cultures," which would limit itself to the task of building consensus in dialogue, without making any claims of absolute truth, which likewise would entail sticking "almost entirely to listening, and thus giving voice to the guests."<sup>516</sup> The goal of this community of interpreters would be to generate "a productive interpretation," which would generate "new senses of experience, new ways for the world to announce itself" by joining traditions "in a sort of *discursus*," which is evaluated not by its objective status, but because it is "valid for a community of interpreters."<sup>517</sup> Vattimo offers no concrete examples of when such a framework was successfully applied. Understood in this sense, nonetheless, "as a lightening and poeticization of the real," Vattimo sees a chance for civilization to realize what he calls "the kingdom of the spirit," which he also admits is currently merely an imaginary poeticization, but he stands firm in his conviction that it nevertheless offers the chance.<sup>518</sup> In order to properly interpret this chance opportunity, Vattimo explains that "the dissolution of the metaphysics of presence" is necessary, in order to avoid the violence of "superstition and idolatry" that accompany "the belief in

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<sup>515</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 67.

<sup>516</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 101.

<sup>517</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 67.

<sup>518</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 54.

objective metaphysical structures.”<sup>519</sup> If these impediments are eliminated with the sole exception being taken on account of a theoretically unfounded defense of love, then Vattimo says, “one gets back to the truth as opening by taking the unfoundation as destiny.”<sup>520</sup> Thus, the accompanying insight that conversation is aesthetic in severity is a crucial ingredient in such ideal interpreters, which seems to indicate that the recognition that such discourse is finally mere aesthetic play is the underlying key to successfully participating in such politically correct hodgepodes. Yet, Vattimo would not accept such an undermining and reductionist summary.

In hoping to avert the criticism of a lapse into aestheticism, Vattimo outlines how his position is distinct from Derrida’s. For example, in the very structural tendency of what he calls “Being’s vocation for the reduction and dissolution of strong characteristics,” Vattimo suggests that he in resolve finds a “guiding thread for interpretations, choices, and even moral options,” which he adds goes “far beyond the pure and simple affirmation of the plurality of paradigms.”<sup>521</sup> In contrast to Derrida’s “multiplicity of perspectives,” which Vattimo says deconstruction only shows “to be merely possible,” his position he suggests in distinction experiences the situation of “the irreducible multiplicity of voices” **to be the “situation of a response”** that he says comes from the *Uber-lieferung*,” and “which keeps this unfoundation (*sfondamento*) from simply being confusion, or at the very least arbitrariness.”<sup>522</sup> The distinction resides in Vattimo’s contrast between what Heidegger in *Being and Time* identifies as “Tradition” with a capital “T” and the “tradition as *Uber-lieferung*”, which Vattimo explains to be “understood as the active inheritance of the past as an open possibility, not as a rigidly determined and determining schema.”<sup>523</sup> Nonetheless, my suspicion is that Caputo would say this is not fair to Derrida’s position,

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<sup>519</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 69; *After Christianity*, 76.

<sup>520</sup> Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 94.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid. Bold added.

<sup>522</sup> Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 91-92.

<sup>523</sup> Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 90.

which is much closer to what Vattimo is saying than he is admitting, despite the slight variances of its theoretical superficialities.

In his reading of Heidegger, Vattimo wants to bring forth an interpretation about the importance of interpretation that avoids the violence of metaphysical schemas, yet equally he believes himself to avoid the dangers of relativism intrinsic to a “hermeneutics purely as a philosophy of the irreducible multiplicity of perspectives,” via approaching this multiplicity as an open possibility. However, despite his and Caputo’s call for response to such situations, the place where this response is anticipated to take place is in the reader as existential recipient of the thunderbolt of sublimity. This preference for the individualized contingent over the collective contingent still accords with Nietzsche’s hopes for a legacy of non-disciples that would honor him by becoming independent destroyers/creators themselves, which leads to the proliferation of differences through a metaphysics of “consummate subjectivity” rather than one establishing commonalities or solidarity.<sup>524</sup>

Therefore, what Vattimo is finally recommending is a proactive type of living interpretive community of interpreters that are hospitably negotiating the tradition toward a non-metaphysical avoidance of violence (aesthetic play by definition, at least for such ideal interpreters, since they are non-metaphysical), which he deems intrinsic to such strong stances, in contrast to his own, which arises as an event in the destiny of Being, as radical historicism. Accordingly, Vattimo suggests that the guarantees for truth that this ideal community of interpreters would rely upon is a modified type of truth via non-metaphysical consensus, which is actualized in a subjectivity that recognizes itself as inheritance, where truth is constituted by a “reference back to conditions of possibility which cannot in their turn be stated in a proposition that corresponds, but which are instead given as an endless network of references constituted by the multiple voices of the *Über-lieferung*.”<sup>525</sup>

Borrowing from a poem by Borges, Vattimo likens this state of *Über-lieferung* to the interpreter’s “conception of truth as dwelling in the Library of Babel,” whereby knowledge proliferates in whatever direction it will, according to no metaphysical

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<sup>524</sup> Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 91.

<sup>525</sup> Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 90.

hierarchy, with truth becoming an ephemeral matter of consensus by hospitality that will never solidify into a metaphysical violence.<sup>526</sup> In speaking about “dwelling,” Vattimo is using the term in the Heideggerian sense, which emphasizes the active participancy of the interpreter towards tradition’s inheritance. Ultimately, Vattimo’s epistemology is calling for a radical democratic hospitality, whereby no metaphysical foundations can establish a priority over other interpretive positions, and again it seems that Burke and Wilde would be pleased with the tendency towards the particular and fragmentary that this vision continues.

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<sup>526</sup> Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation*, 91.



## Chapter 5: The Irony of Vattimo's Christian Re(turn)

Vattimo's return to his native Catholicism is methodologically accommodated by his postmodern aversion to modernist metaphysics, and exactly how it does this should become relatively clear when considered in conjunction with our examination of his epistemological commitments in the previous chapter. Again, in sum, ironic arguments always operate as a movement of *Verwindung* (turning), which offers a continual return and alteration of culture's inheritance. The key of this turning movement is that it makes no strong propositional commitments, nor does it offer any kind of strong synthesis beyond the play between mythic dichotomies. The appearance of strong meaning in such ironic texts is an illusion according to metaphysical expectations, which is not aided by the ironist's duplicity and chicanery. This current chapter will examine how Vattimo's ironic method operates in correspondence to the Christian content of his writings, which is artistically interwoven with his flirtations with the nihilism that postmodern philosophy is always forever deferring by the very same act of *Verwindung* between tradition/sense and chaos/the sublime.

### Contextualizing Vattimo's Return to Religion through Irony

If Vattimo's writing is not understood in its proper rhetorical context as irony, which would be the typical mistake of the majority of his casual readers, then the textual movements and quasi-commitments by which the implicit content of the text occurs (in distinction from the explicit play of the surface content) can distort the proper orientation we must take in evaluating the larger meaning that is latently happening in the give and take of his texts. Therefore, key to remember about this central concept of *Verwindung*, before we get into the details of his Christian postmodern insights, is how Vattimo's postmodern aversion to modern epistemology defines his methodological orientation, and, thus, his Catholicism. Furthermore, postmodern philosophy does not think itself capable of determining a truthful or objective depiction of the world by appealing to some kind of direct theory of truth by correspondence (A is A), because every theory is always prejudiced and partial (A is always A-"X"). In connection to his approach to knowing the

God of traditional metaphysical understanding, Vattimo says, “It is not possible to “believe” in this God in the strong sense of the word, as if God’s reality were more demonstrable than the reality of sensate things or of the objects of physics and mathematics.”<sup>527</sup>

According to these parameters, Vattimo’s approach to religion is thoroughly consistent with the larger postmodern epistemological framework that always approaches strong semblances of meaning in such noncommittal fashion. The underlying significance of this postmodern framework is that we never get outside a “religious,” or rather a metaphorical or a cultural, optics of seeing the world through the partial capacities of representations. This limitation placed upon the critical function makes insights into the objective world problematic, and the ramifications of this somewhat true insight are extended beyond their true significance in political significance. Thus, despite its certain validity, along with considering the complications of its ironic tendencies arguing otherwise, there still seems something that is occurring in such writing that is potentially politically problematic.

Along these lines of inquiry, the epistemological starting point of Vattimo’s return to religion takes its genesis from the commencing hermeneutic insight that all visions of the world are mythical or metaphorical, which includes atheism and nihilism. This comprehensive metaphorical vision of hermeneutics holds that our capacities for interpreting the world are always operating at the opening of the play of representations, where the ironic tension between atheism/nihilism and religion/truth is set in motion. In this fashion, Vattimo is not trying to get to the bottom of things regarding his return to Catholicism to find religion’s true essence or something along such historical-critical lines, but is instead playing between religious and non-religiously held theoretical insights to offer a re(turn) that is functioning to provisionally generate new interpretive possibilities.

In the continental tradition this relinquishment of a totalizing theory about objective truth is demonstrated primarily through the supposed mechanisms of ironic writing. Such ironic writing typically insinuates or presents itself to be non-metaphysical because it does not make any strong truth claims, or strong propositional commitments. In connection,

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<sup>527</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 8.

Vattimo's return to religion is therefore an ironically enacted return, which makes his propositional claims always only partially argued. The basic formula of the ironic position as worldview is A(-X); and, the basic formula for poststructuralist irony as rhetorical device is: either A or B, and simultaneously neither A nor B. Accordingly, an ironic text does not advance a unified logical argument, which means that identifying something we might systematically identify as Vattimo's postmodern Catholic theology is slightly problematic, in any strongly unambiguous or in a neatly contained manner. The difficulty in identifying an unambiguous meaning in ironic texts will become especially evident when we, in the next two chapters, examine Caputo and Vattimo's theoretical exchange in their dialogue, "*After the Death of God*," where such exchanged criticisms generally tend to miss their mark by default.

Instead of a unified and unambiguous meaning, the ironic text typically offers a plurality of positions or insights that are articulated in an ambiguously enacting disorder, where some points might contrast with one another, or may not offer any overarching development of, or connection to, one another. This type of writing gains justification through its ontological mirroring of a logical void or vacuum created by the supposed *death* of God. As Nietzsche emphasizes, God is the guarantor of truth, and to remove God's anchoring of truth hypothetically makes the disorder of chaos the *true* order underlying things. Therefore, the *Death* of God is the return of the disruptive otherness of the chthonic, or more accurately in Romantic terms, the return of rational/irrationalism, since even chaos and disorder are metaphysical constructs. In addition, part of the problem with describing ironic texts is that there are no strict guidelines that an ironist must follow, once again mirroring the ontological circumstances, which makes each instance of irony unique. An increase of the uniqueness of each instance is a furthering of the fragmentary imperative, which is again in less politically correct terms the collapse into a reverse Platonism that Rorty warns about, yet does not fully condemn.

On the communicative level, this roundabout and poetically elusive manner of writing is generally meant to make the contradictoriness or fragmentary essence of the overall work difficult to detect for casual readers, operating as a type of initiatory atrium to keep the unsympathetic intellectual tourist at arm's length. It is not a leap of logic to assume that the reader who is not aware of the text's form will get lost in the flux of its

idiosyncratic details and play of simulated meaning(s). Typically, the metaphysically oriented thinker will focus in upon some conveyed representational detail of the content, at the expense of others, in order to place a final meaning on the ironic text. In examining Vattimo's Christian-atheism<sup>528</sup>, these gaps in a unified meaning of his texts will perhaps illustrate not only to what end Vattimo's method operates, but also what the implications of such methods might entail to supposed democratic sensibilities.

In not making a unified argument, irony would like to insinuate that it is, or present itself as, the antithesis of metaphysical writing. This insinuation is nonetheless not even finally possible, since the text does have a pre-conceptualized design that is latently offering another type of secondary level meaning or communication in the language game that is literary style working below the surface level of its explicitly weak content. Thus, irony has its own human origins that function in the governance of the subsidiary meaning of the text. As much as it might feign to the contrary, irony cannot detach itself from the human all too human design and conceptualizations of its original authorship. Irony, as a human construct, is inherently metaphysical on a secondary level and contingently idiosyncratic, rather than a mere effect of textual innateness, which is the implicit suggestion of its usage.

Meaning is exchanged between stylistically astute readers and writers in a type of formal esotericism. In other words, communication of a latent type of secondary meaning is therefore likewise exchanged between ironically astute readers through their comprehension of the symbolic significance of the textual form, rather than through the comprehension of the text's thematic or surface level content. In correspondence, the name of Vattimo's postmodern epistemology is "weak ontology," or "weak thought," and if it is not apparent yet what both Vattimo and Caputo are really speaking about when they say something is "weak" it is really just irony via another name, which we might again identify with the ironist's rotational evasion of his/her repeated use of the same reoccurring and

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<sup>528</sup> The hyphen in Christian-atheist is meant to indicate the wavering of Vattimo's stance between Christianity and his nihilistic leanings, similar to his profession of being an active-nihilist. The distinction between Vattimo and death of God theology is therein implicit in the wavering of irony between strong commitments to either theology or atheism.

reiterated aversion to a committed insight. Thus, the operation of this rhetorical move of “crop rotation” (which Caputo points out that Kierkegaard prescribed to aspiring aesthetes) is intended to stretch the versatility of the ironist’s textual output, when the availability of unique subject matter is low.<sup>529</sup> It also helps to evade detection of irony at work.

Irony, in this fashion, is therefore a reoccurring and reiterated type of opening or distancing from the severity of meaning; because the ironist is not burdened with making propositions that correspond to the way things truly are in any sort of definitive account of reality, they are free to play with semblances of meaning, which can be prolific. It is therefore according to such an ironic logic of play that Vattimo can intellectually justify making paradoxical statements like “Thank God I am an Atheist,” and “I believe that I believe,” and not simply be dismissed for speaking nonsense, or irrationally, by the intelligentsia.<sup>530</sup> He is communicating through the use of another type of logical language, literary form (irony), which is nonetheless a logic against logic that is only ever partial itself in its refutation of logic. It is taken as jest, a ludic jest with quite severe implications nevertheless, rather than committing itself to the severity of making a strong propositional argument.

In this way, Vattimo’s return to Catholicism is a partial return that does not aspire to the severity of a philosophical or systematic stance. Hypothetically, Vattimo’s ironic position is supposed to be an even balancing of the Christian tendencies of his writing alongside his methodological commitments to Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s (non)metaphysical epistemologies, yet whether or not such a partial return is severe enough to be of relevancy beyond a temporary alleviation from sliding back into the apathy of a strong nihilism remains for most critics of his postmodern position problematic, even though irony itself is not directly held responsible by them.<sup>531</sup> There is an important distinction that remains to be made, in light of such criticism, that if we do not directly confront the irony of the textual circumstances of weak nihilism, then we will miss the deeper complexity the problem requires for careful consideration of the living text. This

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<sup>529</sup> Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, 28.

<sup>530</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 7; *Belief*, 70.

<sup>531</sup> I am thinking again of Girard and Guarino.

deeper insight is that irony itself is not relativistic, but is instead another metaphysical, or dare we say, religious stance, which operates on the subsidiary level of the meaning of texts.

In connection, we have identified this hermeneutic framework as a mythos synonymous with romanticism's flirtatious play with tragic nihilism, which has much indebtedness to its mythical origin in late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> German literature, as a rereading of the Greek tragic/oriental tradition that emerged in the wake of Kant. In the German romantic reading, the seed of discord against metaphysics, particularly against the metaphysics of Enlightenment Reason, is personified as the Greek God Dionysius, whose symbolic function works as the power of disorder, fragmentation, and even more cunningly as rational-irrationalism, rather than mere irrationalism. Neo-conservatives and post-structuralists alike simply counter charges of irrationalism as incorrect, without explaining why such readings are insufficient. In irony, in other words, Dionysius does not simply overpower the Apollonian so that everything is lost in meaninglessness, in a fully adopted "alogic" against logic, which would be nihilism. Instead, the Dionysian is always within the Apollonian, reminding the severity of meaning in general of its mortal limits via the spine chilling laughter of Silenus and his taunting of the vanity or folly of all human hopes and aspirations of wisdom. Thus, the tragic seed of doubt is always there like an irremovable stain, reminding us of the futility of hoping to grasp higher truths, because everything is always a representation, yet this position always shrewdly pays tribute to its own creaturely limitations, in a pretense emphasizing the sagacity of its own perspective, which always qualifies that there is no such thing as relativism, and that one must risk a choice.

Ultimately, I worry that Vattimo's irony is not in complete control of a perfect balancing or harmonization of the two aesthetic principles of beauty and the sublime, since the tragic sublime in the end persists in the intrinsic working of the form of his project, just as it does in Caputo's form. This continuance of the tragic in the form of irony means not that we collapse into nihilism per se, but instead that they do not get outside the German Romantic hybrid aesthetic of the New Mythology, whose original purpose and design were reactionary. Consequently, while I do not think that Vattimo or Caputo's projects go far enough in their reactions against Heidegger and Nietzsche, I do believe that what they advocate in the ironic return to religion is partially very helpful, and even possibly

contemporarily unavoidable, due to irony's admitted inherency or coincidence with(in) the liberal ideological viewpoint. However, the role that irony plays in such insights must be widely explained to avoid the potential pitfalls of the device on alienating a large segment of its readership from proper understanding.

It is the liberal ideological outlook that supposedly best protects anthropological or multicultural tolerance, as a check against fundamentalism and authoritarianism, which makes a total rejection of the "ironic" worldview at least partially problematic, and even in another sense partially impossible. Nonetheless, it is necessary to consider the following. Undoubtedly, there is equally too a type of ideological restriction at work in this liberal outlook. As Jedediah Purdy says, for example, Tocqueville well understood early into the history of the American mindset that the significance of the freedom of speech and the hypothetical freedom of thought is seen to come full circle when it recognizes that such radicalization of the esteem of the collective/particular actually works to undermine the validity of any unique or noteworthy particulars that might arise worthy of distinction or attention.<sup>532</sup> In other words, public opinion becomes a self-defeating freedom, because everyone's opinion is as equally (in)valid as the next persons. The result, Purdy basically suggests, is that there is no weight behind what anyone has to say, because everyone is entitled to their opinion.

When considered at this depth of analysis, no easy resolution of these dually problematic positions (liberal or fundamentalist) seems immediately evident. The problem that persists, for those of us in the liberal context, in spite of such lack of clarity, is the unaddressed question of when do such ironic checks against tyranny become checks against democratic clarity, socio-economic progress (even a check against a neoliberal regress), and temporal collective betterment? Even more darkly, when could such checks become the aids towards a potentially more inconspicuous type of inverse, or eclipsed, neo-authoritarianism? My approach to Vattimo's return to Christianity, therefore, is undertaken with these concerns in mind, yet it is still one of cautious approval, since within Vattimo's efforts there appears a certain degree of liberal necessity. However, this liberal necessity must be tempered too by a further deconstruction that recognizes that by allowing such an

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<sup>532</sup> Purdy, *For Common Things*, 4.

ironic logic too much freedom we would be in danger of a vice of the an(other) extreme (i.e., what Rorty identified as reverse Platonism)<sup>533</sup>.

### **Inverse Platonism, Radical Democracy and Vattimo's Theoretical Antecedents**

Subsidiary or overt meaning aside, therefore, there remains a metaphysical commitment in operation either way, which cannot be rationally supported or defended, but must merely be declared as an event of rhetorical persuasion, which is hoping to advance provisional thoughts for consideration. As Vattimo says, **“It is not a matter of discovering a philosophical truth superior to that of past metaphysical philosophies. Like the death of God, the end of metaphysics is an event that cannot be ascertained objectively, one to which thought is called to respond.”**<sup>534</sup> In other words, the postmodern is never actualized, but instead is offered as a rhetorical event. The larger objective of this response by thought, Vattimo says elsewhere, is that **“Our task is to build consensus in dialogue”** (i.e., rhetorical guidance), “without making any claims for absolute truth.”<sup>535</sup> Thus, Vattimo is promoting a radical democratic monologue<sup>536</sup>, which he hopes will end in consensus, rather than furthering or accepting differences as inevitable. Therefore, the flux of weakened metaphysical accounts results in a consensus of mutual restriction.

In order to achieve his vision of consensus, Vattimo's main argumentative move in his return to religion is to re-narrate the unpleasant sounding tendencies of Heidegger and

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<sup>533</sup> Mark 5:1-13 NRSV.

<sup>534</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 13. Bold added for emphasis.

<sup>535</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 34. Bold added for emphasis of centrality of statement to our highlighting of irony's metaphysical necessity.

<sup>536</sup> In not taking a thesis he is not really engaging in a dialogue, rather he is speaking in a monologue, because he is not really open to the other person's criticisms or antitheses of his *argument* with/out an argument, because there are none to be had. Instead of communicating, he is humouring the appearance of communicative dialogue, but no communication is actually taking place. Instead, this is the discourse of the politically correct Master, where every communication is performative to the same end, which is the propositional and conceptual disruption.



Nietzsche through a Judeo-Christian re-appropriation of their theoretical commitments. As Vattimo himself says, “I would like to explain my paradox of having recovered Christianity-in the form of believing that I believe-through Nietzsche and Heidegger.<sup>537</sup> Vattimo, in doing this, is in keeping with the larger poststructuralist response, which re-approached Nietzsche and Heidegger from a similarly oriented, weakened return to a pseudo Judeo-Christian/ethical reevaluation of the early continental tradition. Vattimo, in developing his own subsequently *unique* poststructuralist response to this hermeneutic or Nietzschean-Heideggerian framework of moral indifference, to his credit, reads the priority of the Christian tradition as anchoring or paradigmatically pre-constituting the formative essence of the secularizing tendencies of the Western world. Vattimo narrates this weakening of being as happening in a gradual decline of metaphysical thought, which he identifies as coming forth through the play of historical paradigms. In a reminiscent way to Thomas J.J. Altizer’s Christian atheism<sup>538</sup>, Vattimo (once again in a playfully appropriative and affirmative mood) appeals to the authority of Joachim of Fiore’s different ages of the Church’s worldly evolution, in order to create a *working* historical genealogy for his own unique Christian-Atheist vision.<sup>539</sup>

For Joachim of Fiore, the three ages of the Church were the Age of the Father, the Age of the Son, and the Age of the Holy Spirit. Vattimo uses these three ages to dress his genealogical account of the weakening of being. The Age of the Father for Joachim was equated with the era of the Old Testament that was characterized by humankind’s observation to the Law. In Vattimo, the Age of the Father remains consistent with Joachim’s vision, with the exception that he is being far less theologically grave in this

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<sup>537</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 3.

<sup>538</sup> Notice the lack of a hyphen to denote a strong commitment by Altizer contra Vattimo to atheism. Also note my choice of *working* regarding Vattimo’s consistency with Altizer, which does not suggest a direct link between Altizer and Vattimo, since I am aware that Vattimo has suggested he has had no direct influence from Altizer. I find the similarities between narratives, in light of this disassociation by Vattimo, astonishing.

<sup>539</sup> Vattimo suggests he has not read Altizer, and in calling his vision Christian-Atheist I am not suggesting it is such in a non-ironic way. Thus, the distinction between Altizer’s Christian Atheism and Vattimo’s Christian-Atheism is through irony’s qualification of the label, which is represented by the hyphen above.

designation than Joachim was prior. In particular, the severity of the age of the Law as a metaphysical and authoritarian violence comes to take on a new “historical” significance in its difference from Vattimo’s later ages. The Age of the Son of Man, for Joachim, represented the era when humankind was under the guidance of Christ as the son of God, which entailed the need for the Church hierarchy. This hierarchy was only justified by Joachim in what he saw to be an incomplete understanding of the significance of Christ by the world. In correspondence, the age of the Son, for Joachim, was to last between the Advent until an expected imminent return of the messiah some time around the mid 13<sup>th</sup> century C.E. (i.e., Joachim’s own life time), when the third age was anticipated to begin. In Vattimo, the age of the Son of God represents essentially the same era of incomplete or misrecognized religiosity/idolatry accompanied by a nonessential interim of paternalistic authoritarianism. The historically evident difference between visions is that Vattimo’s second age lasts much longer than Joachim’s vision, since now the third age has been deferred until the present, but it is now possibly imminent with Vattimo’s new reading of the end of metaphysics. Consequently, Joachim’s Age of the Holy Spirit is prophesied to commence when humankind comes to a more direct or realized union with God, when an era of freedom, peace, and justice would develop alongside the realization of the Christian Event. Vattimo, in comparison to Joachim, sees this third age as possibly imminent with the end of the era of the literal interpretation of the Bible, when a new “spiritualized” reading of scripture will bring forth a more Christianized world order, which would be something like the Kingdom of God.<sup>540</sup>

The difference evidently between Joachim’s and Vattimo’s reading of the third age is the expectable distinction of a weak metaphorical reading of the Holy Spirit as interpretive disposition versus a more traditionally understood variant of the Spirit as a metaphysical or supernatural force. On the topic, Vattimo says, “The signs of the approaching third age, which today we call the end of metaphysics, are obviously not the same ones observed by Joachim. However, Joachim’s text can still be our guide because of the general meaning of the age of spirit...”<sup>541</sup> Thus, due to the ambiguity inherent to the

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<sup>540</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 16.

<sup>541</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 31.

concept of the “spirit,” Vattimo is able to find a loophole (*andenken*) where he might introduce a new element of meaning into the tradition, again in the spirit of Wilde imitating the German Romantics. In this sense, Joachim’s Age of the Spirit is turned by Vattimo to now instead identify the commencement of a post-metaphysical age, which makes it a hermeneutic event.

### **Secularization and Biblical Charity**

Vattimo, continuing this manner of thinking via the Age of the Spirit, identifies an essential kinship between the tendencies of secularization (along with its manifestation in Nietzschean-Heideggerian *philosophy* and its announcement of an apparent end of metaphysics) and the Christian principle of self-sacrificing love.<sup>542</sup> In this frame of mind, Vattimo declares, “It would be difficult to conceive of the democratic evolution of modern political forms apart from the Christian concept of the brotherhood of men as children of the One God: the rejection of war, inscribed in the charter of the United Nations, is at least in principle an effect of the deep influence of Christian or religious ideas.”<sup>543</sup> Therefore, Vattimo is advancing the basic position that secularization is “constituted above all as a continuation and desacralizing interpretation of the biblical message.”<sup>544</sup> In this sense, he is able to identify such secularly driven thinkers of the Enlightenment and modernity, such as Voltaire, as having been what he identifies as “a positive effect of the Christianization of mankind.”<sup>545</sup>

Continuing this secularization insight into the foray of contemporary continental theory, Vattimo furthermore identifies something inherent in the Christian position that he believes is equally latent within the anti-Christian and undemocratic hermeneutic position. This latent equivalency is made possible supposedly by the workings of the hermeneutic

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<sup>542</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 43.

<sup>543</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 46.

<sup>544</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 45.

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid.*

circle and the inheritance of Christian tradition, in the Gadamerian sense of an inescapable involvement and indebtedness mentally to such a thing. On such matters, Vattimo says:

To be clear: the Christian inheritance that ‘returns’ in weak thought is primarily the Christian precept of charity and its rejection of violence. Once again, as always, we find circles... we derive an ethics of non-violence from weak ontology, yet we are led to weak thought, from its origin in Heidegger’s concern with the dangers of the metaphysics of objectivity, by the Christian legacy of the rejection of violence at work within us.<sup>546</sup>

The consequence for both Heidegger and Nietzsche, Vattimo believes, is that they (unbeknownst to themselves) had never really extracted their theoretical creative powers outside of a Christianized mentality in the Gadamerian sense, even though both demonstrated radically anti-Christian tendencies and aspirations, much like Voltaire, as mentioned above. The difference is of course that Voltaire was anti-Christian in the sense that he believed the Church was against liberal progress that aimed at the general enlightenment of humankind, while Nietzsche and Heidegger were against Christianity for its progressive tendencies that Voltaire overlooks. Connecting the two motives to one collaborative vision is not without the risk of mistaking the import of their contrasting socio-political end goals.

We must acknowledge that Vattimo’s objective in calling all these thinkers into consideration is in support for a Christian philosophy that is concerned with metaphysical violence. Again, Vattimo thinks that the play of irony is working to justify this seemingly contradictory intellectual endeavor. How it does this balancing is again not a logically apparent thing, again we must take it on faith. In spite of the play in Vattimo’s weak thought, there still appears to be quite strong commitments and propositions that are coming into shape (or are apparently being offered to metaphysically inclined readers at least, as the above insights have begun to indicate). The overriding problem for “metaphysical” readers that look to gain a working understanding of Vattimo’s Christian vision is that one cannot stably identify any affirmative content within his argument, because he is not making one. Vattimo’s Christian texts are *literary* offerings rather than

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<sup>546</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 49.

theological or philosophical theses, even though a definite mythos is linkable to such a literary approach. In general, however, we cannot know when to take Vattimo's affirmative content seriously, since by definition we cannot with any degree of severity, because such aspirations are intrinsically problematic when approaching the ironic perspective. We might endlessly speculate what the "real" Vattimo is saying, but this is missing the ambiguity and open-ended quality intrinsic to ironic texts, which makes the author by default superfluous to the mechanisms of the textual play.

It is in the spirit of such individualist/literary writing that both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche wrote. Thus, in place of a systematic vision about reality, we are given the proliferation of small details. On the implications of such an agenda, Vattimo in a positive spin says, "Narratives proliferate without any stable center or hierarchy in the Babel-like pluralism of late-modern society. No master narrative or normative metanarrative *is any longer capable of legitimatizing or delegitimizing them*. The social hierarchy, of which the young Nietzsche spoke..., has been overturned."<sup>547</sup> Despite the warnings that others like Rorty have pointed out regarding the intrinsic pitfalls of this reverse Platonism (contrasted to Neoplatonism's idea of the One emanating being down to the particular) with its elevation of the particular, Vattimo persists in his commitment that such an orientation is synonymous with democracy itself, which would make democracy synonymous with a complete realization of individualized particularity, unimpeded by any systematic or conceptual framing or organizational restraints (i.e., aesthetic anarchy).

With this contention in focus, we must keep in mind the possible dual ramifications that: 1) Vattimo's texts are very idiosyncratically designed; and, 2) they function without any higher attempts at unifying meaning or developing any kind of direction of argument in any stronger way. In this literary spirit of scientific or systematic abandon, Vattimo is consistent to the fragmentary or literary poetic imperative by giving many personal details and partial insights, in place of strong philosophical propositions, regarding his Christian atheism.

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<sup>547</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 16.

### The Paradox in Vattimo's "*Credere di Credere*"

Vattimo's first book solely dedicated to his return to religion is titled *Credere di Credere*, which in English was translated simply as "*Belief*." As to be expected, perhaps, something is lost in the translation of the title from Italian, where the original conveys the paradoxical nature of Vattimo's return to Catholicism that the condensed English title neglects to convey. In his text, *After Christianity*, Vattimo gives a more literal translation of this expression. In specific, he translates the expression to have the more complex and paradoxical meaning of "believing that one believes."<sup>548</sup> Regarding the subtlety of the expression, Vattimo says:

The expression "believing that one believes" sounds paradoxical in Italian, too: to believe means having faith, conviction, or certainty in something, but also to opine—that is, to think with a certain degree of uncertainty. To clarify the title, then, I would say that the first believing has the latter meaning, while the second use of the term has the sense of having faith, conviction, and certainty. It is rather difficult to put the two meanings of the verb together: if I merely opine, if I think, I hold with some probability that I have certainty and faith. This sounds unclear as well as suspicious. However, this expression's meaning, unclear as it may be, seems to correspond to an experience that is widespread and comprehensible, and of which many of us are aware.<sup>549</sup>

The above statement made by Vattimo regarding his stance towards a return to religion is about as direct an admission to the usage of irony as we are going to receive from him, in contrast to Caputo who is at a few select times much more candid about his employment of such writing, and is quite didactic and succinct about irony in his text on Kierkegaard. Vattimo, in comparison, is guardedly describing his method in his two above distinctions of his usage of the term "believing." This distinction is between the usage of the ironic sense of "believing," as opining (notice the telltale indicator of irony he employs above in his usage of italics), and the second usage in the sense of the term "believing" as conviction and certainty (no italics). The biographical explanation that he gives credit towards fomenting this paradoxical position comes from a casual moment of intellectual

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<sup>548</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 1.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid.

repartee he claims to have had, while one day, in the relatively recent past, he was speaking with an old philosophy colleague on a public telephone. While Vattimo was reportedly amidst the hustle and bustle of chatting patrons and passing traffic, his old friend asked him if he still believed in God. In reply, Vattimo tells his readers that he spontaneously responded to his friend that “Well, I believe that I believe.”<sup>550</sup> Upon reflecting upon this spontaneous response more thoroughly subsequently, Vattimo adds that he realized that this quick reply came to identify an “unclear meaning of faith” that “is entirely bound up with (his) experience as a scholar of philosophy, and perhaps as an intellectual belonging to this specific epoch.”<sup>551</sup> This reflection causes Vattimo to question, “Why, then, do I think I have understood that for those like me who have any familiarity with contemporary philosophy, but above all with postmodern life, religious belief can only have this meaning characterized by a deep uncertainty of opinion?”<sup>552</sup> In forthright reply, the answer to his quandary is that his unnamed awareness is indeed due to the postmodern’s inherent disposition of irony, as he knows, which is nonetheless the underlying commitment of such postmodern philosophy. Thus, while indirectly acknowledging it, Vattimo furtively neglects to overtly mention or alert his readers to his use of irony.

In what sense then, as Vattimo subsequently asks, can one “believe that one believes”?<sup>553</sup> The God that Vattimo says he has recovered is not the God of “metaphysical certainties, of the *preambula fidei*.”<sup>554</sup> Instead, it is the God that Vattimo believes comes after “the illusion that one could demonstrate that the real has a certain structure and a determinate foundation” is put aside.<sup>555</sup> Vattimo describes the recovered God of the post-metaphysical and postmodern epoch as “the God of the Book,” or perhaps more

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<sup>550</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 2.

<sup>551</sup> Ibid.

<sup>552</sup> Ibid.

<sup>553</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 7.

<sup>554</sup> Ibid.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid.

revealingly, as the “God who is given to us in the Book.”<sup>556</sup> Coming from the hermeneutic tradition, Vattimo is here insinuating the primacy of an inheritance of tradition’s role in defining our horizons of experience, through, in this instance, the lens of the Judeo-Christian monotheistically grounded encounter with interpretations of the hypothetically objective Real (i.e., reality beyond the shortcomings of interpretation). In this sense then, Vattimo is speaking about the Judeo-Christian God here in a double sense. Believing one “believes” has at least two possible readings. The first possible reading of Vattimo’s use of the term “believe” is by means of the classical reading of “believing” in the supernatural existence of a Supreme Being. The second reading of the word “believe” is as an aesthetic lens that defines our socio-cultural identities, as inheritors of this tradition, and its values. The key thing that irony does in this contradiction of statements is, if we believe in it, it keeps the two voices in unrelenting balance/disruption to avoid a metaphysical violence. Vattimo is suggesting to be thinking here through this disruption, instead of from a graspable extension of the modern subject’s capacity of making rational truth claims about ultimate reality. An additionally important distinction to be made is that Vattimo believes that there is no such thing as anything outside such an aesthetic lens to view reality in any greater of an objective manner.

In accord with his adoption of this Christian-aesthetic tone of voice, Vattimo says, “A few times, and for primarily aesthetic reasons (which I am careful not to undervalue or even to distinguish from the ‘authentic’ religious ones), I have been to Latin sung Christmas liturgy in one of few churches that still celebrate it...”<sup>557</sup> Accordingly, it would seem that Vattimo is advancing an ironically held aesthetic return to religion. Vattimo justifies adopting such a vision because he says: “Our civilization, which we have reached through mechanical and computer technology, political democracy, social pluralism, and the availability of goods necessary to ensure survival, offers us a chance to realize the kingdom of spirit, understood as the lightening and poeticization of the real.”<sup>558</sup> In further explaining the aesthetic quality of his vision, Vattimo continues, “What I am trying to

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<sup>556</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 8.

<sup>557</sup> Vattimo, *Against Christianity*, 69.

<sup>558</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 54.



argue... is that the postmodern dissolution of metanarratives... leads Christianity to see itself as merely an internal element in the conflict among cultures, religions, and worldviews.”<sup>559</sup>

As indicated in his parenthetically made point in the first quote cited in the paragraph above regarding ‘authentic’ religious observance, it must also be acknowledged that such an aesthetically primary viewpoint is not entirely dominant or dismissive in his ironic return to religion. For example, Vattimo says elsewhere, “when I pray-since I pray in the most traditional manner, mainly by reciting the psalms and other prayers of the Roman breviary-I am aware that I am not merely acting on the basis of a philosophical persuasion, but am going a step further.”<sup>560</sup> Further, he also says elsewhere, “The philosopher, like any other religious man, can only hope that life will not end with the death of the body. It is not an unreasonable hope to the extent that there are no “metaphysically” certain limits of nature...”<sup>561</sup> Thus, Vattimo advances two paradoxical commitments, the aesthetic and the religious, at differing times in his texts. This dual promotion of contradictory paradigms is of course irony at play. This ironic position, as demonstrated in the preceding quotes above, we might call Christian-aestheticism, yet defining exactly the boundaries of what such a thing strongly entails on a propositional level is definitively impossible since it is a wavering (non)commitment, which perhaps is an adequate definition after all, or not. Regardless, we cannot allow this apparent truth to eclipse that there remains a strong mythical commitment, as we said earlier, on the literary level of the text that is still at work upon the reader. It may well be that Vattimo believes himself to be equally committed to a dually held religious and aesthetic interpretation, rather than merely offering his Christian faith as a mere stance for playing with in his irony.

In the spirit of this aesthetic-Christian ironic comportment, Vattimo aptly describes his stance as a “half-believer,” which is exactly what the ironic stance enacts on the explicit

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<sup>559</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 98.

<sup>560</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 92.

<sup>561</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 53.

level of meaning.<sup>562</sup> In contemplating the doctrinal significance of this half-belief, Vattimo adds, “If I say that I believe that I believe, what exactly do I believe about Christian doctrine, as it has been passed on to us? I consider myself a half-believer because I cannot answer this question conclusively. To be sure, I do have some answers, but not of the kind that might allow me to reformulate the Creed in secular terms.”<sup>563</sup> As demonstrated in this quote, beyond our looking at the topic of the politics of the form, Vattimo is admittedly exploring what are evidently for him personally important issues, regarding his desire to return to Catholicism, qualified as it is by his weak thought.

Accompanying Vattimo’s concern for reconciling a weak hermeneutic philosophy with his return to Christianity is his inclusion of such personally motivated reasons for adopting such a hybrid approach, which is in keeping with the a-systematic writing style of Kierkegaard or existentialism. The most relevant personal detail that Vattimo mentions is pertaining to his own lived and directly experienced complications with the exclusionary aspects of a dogmatic religious perspective. In specific, Vattimo speaks about his own life experience as a homosexual dealing with the church, which has been regrettably experienced by him in less than ideally inclusive circumstances. In an upsetting, yet personally revelatory and vindicating moment, Vattimo questions, “how could I belong to a Church that treated me, in its public teaching, as morally despicable... a monstrous brother who must be loved but kept hidden.”<sup>564</sup> Regarding the seemingly limited applicability of his circumstances to the larger Church’s demographic, Vattimo continues, “It is true that the question of homosexuality concerns a specific group of people that remains a minority in the Church. However, for me... this question has become the key to interpreting all the other superstitions within the Church, and all the forms of social exclusion outside it.”<sup>565</sup> Consequently, Vattimo’s personally experienced exclusion does affect more than the homosexual community, because such practices define the Church at large. Furthermore, closer linked with our current purposes, as he himself claims, we must recognize in the

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<sup>562</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 61.

<sup>563</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 76-77.

<sup>564</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 73.

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.*

topic of Vattimo's sexual orientation, and his unfortunate partial rejection by Orthodoxy, a key ingredient in his proclivity towards poststructuralist and ironic commitments towards religiosity. Therefore, there is something progressive and Christian about the poststructuralist method of deconstruction, and its inclusion of otherness, which should not be eclipsed in our partial condemnation of irony and its pedigree of enacting an exclusionary alienation via form, which is not very inclusive either. Vattimo's personal commitments to post-structuralism are therefore not championed without some kind of personal investment, which makes the force of his critique perhaps even more relevant to the temporal matters of the Church's socio-cultural identity politics. Yet, our concern is not with the merits of progressive identity politics, which seem self-evident, but with another type of subliminal exclusionary violence.

In spite of Vattimo's self-declared mistreatment from the Church, he describes his position as not being an all out counterattack or rejection, although it is partially. When explaining his wider position in comparison to the authority of the Catholic Church, Vattimo says of his postmodern design, "The Christianity that I or my contemporary "half"-believers rediscover embraces the official Church as well, but only as part of a more complex event, which includes the question concerning the continuous reinterpretation of the biblical message."<sup>566</sup> Thus, Vattimo is basically saying that he is not trying to undermine the Church in any kind of strongly vindictive or mutinous way, but instead he seemingly wants to open the Church's consciousness up towards the matters of interpretive theory that he has found relevant in his work as a postmodern *philosopher*. In the preceding exert, besides showing how he wants to balance orthodoxy and hermeneutics in irony's undecidability, Vattimo also once again conveys, in part, his vision of the ideal situation of a metaphysically-free community of Christian-aesthetic interpreters that are working towards social betterment by assuming the hospitable stance of receptivity to the voices of other traditionally ignored elements, which again is in keeping with the general gist of poststructuralism, and is largely an agreeable agenda, in spite of its other possible shortcomings, which are again the alienations caused via form's secondary communication of meaning.

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<sup>566</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 61.

## The Hermeneutic Christ and Kenosis

In correlation to post-structuralism's hospitable community of ideal interpreters, Christ is thereby reinterpreted by Vattimo as the first example of such interpreters. Christ is thereby rethought to offer a bridge or transition between the legalistic tendencies of certain Old Testament metaphysical commitments and the new community of the Spirit envisioned by Vattimo's idealized hermeneutics. According to such an equally utopian vision (-X), Vattimo reinterprets Jesus to be "the living, incarnate interpretation of Scripture," thereby incorporating his own scholarly niche as the guiding principle to his reading of Jesus.<sup>567</sup> Vattimo's interpretation of Christ, as the archetypal exponent of the weak disposition of the hermeneutic approach, while not the last word on Christ or Christianity, like all idiosyncratic readings, nevertheless offers an interesting insight into the possible nuances of the tradition's essential disposition. This disposition rightly points towards hospitality as the demeanor of God's presence amongst peoples. There is something therefore undeniably right in connecting a hermeneutics of hospitality with Christianity. The affirmative movements of Vattimo's poststructuralist vision, by associating with this force, are in many ways therefore consistent with the better tendencies of the Christian ethos.

When interpreted from Vattimo's weak approach to hermeneutics, a rethought Jesus offers an authentic and parallel interpretation of the Old Testament much akin to the prophets. Vattimo indicates this in his interpretation of Christ as the archetypal weak hermeneut. In considering the circular significance of such a hermeneutically hospitable Christ, Vattimo suggests of Jesus's true importance: "before leaving his disciples he promises to send the Spirit of Truth upon them, which will continue to teach, and thereby to carry on the history of salvation by reinterpreting the content of Jesus's own doctrines as well."<sup>568</sup> Further outlining what the ramifications of his Christology entail for his contemporary situation, Vattimo later adds, "... I realize that Christ himself is the

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<sup>567</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 61.

<sup>568</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 49.

unmasker, and that the unmasking inaugurated by him... is the meaning of the history of salvation itself.”<sup>569</sup> It is however very important to note what Vattimo’s Christ is unmasking, which is something very specific and contemporary. This unmasking is an appropriated twisting/turning of Rene Girard’s notion of mythological violence. In particular, Vattimo’s Christ is the unmasker of metaphysical violence, yet not the unmasker of form’s metaphysics, which seems like an important oversight.

The basic idea that Vattimo is suggesting in his vision of Christ as the unmasker of metaphysical violence is that the death of Christ symbolizes the death of the mythological function. Vattimo links this reinterpretation of the death of God as the event that is the beginning of the end of metaphysical accounts and strong identities, which he thinks are largely responsible for antagonizing worldly violence. Vattimo believes that if we could get rid of such strong identities, including a strong natural theology, then the world would more or less have no more reasons for being violent on a large scale, since everyone would in theory adopt a weakened stance of tolerant hospitality and incredulity to metanarratives.

The transition from the violence of natural religion Vattimo also sees occurring in the event of the incarnation of God, which he highly associates with the Christian-Greek term κένωσις, or “kenosis.”<sup>570</sup> Through the lowering of God into the material sphere then, via kenosis’s incarnation, Vattimo suggests that the transcendent God of natural religion dies on the Cross, in the body of Christ. Upon making this insight, Vattimo is very careful to distinguish this kenosis of the incarnation of the Divine from the otherness of the postmodern God of Levinas and Derrida (if Derrida has such a God), and hence Caputo too. On deconstruction’s God as wholly Other, Vattimo adds, “God as the wholly other of which much of contemporary religious philosophy speaks is not the incarnate Christian God. It is the same old God of metaphysics, conceived of as the ultimate inaccessible ground of religion... and warranted by his eminent objectivity, stability, and definitiveness—all traits belonging to the Platonic *ontos on*.”<sup>571</sup> Consequently, Vattimo further suggests about deconstruction’s wholly other theologies that they “do not seem to take too seriously

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<sup>569</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 66.

<sup>570</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 39.

<sup>571</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 38.

the dogma of incarnation.”<sup>572</sup> This connection will be refuted by Caputo in their dialogue, as we shall see next chapter. In contrast to Caputo and such theologies of poststructuralism, Vattimo believes that his theology importantly keeps the incarnation as definitive of the essence of Christianity. Argumentatively, he advances this regard for the growing observance of this significance of the incarnation through his usage of his notion of successive historical ages, as *progressively* enfolding in the vision of de Fiore.<sup>573</sup> Regarding the incarnation, Vattimo further says, “The only great paradox and scandal of Christian revelation is the incarnation of God, the kenosis—that is, the removal of all the transcendent, incomprehensible, mysterious and even bizarre features that seem to move so many theorists to the leap of faith.”<sup>574</sup> Therefore, Vattimo suggests that he is instead trying to materialize the Gospel account, in order to weaken what he sees as its apparent mythological tendencies of God’s transcendent otherness.

In furthering the connection of equating kenosis with secularization and continental philosophy’s program of overcoming metaphysics, Vattimo adds, “the incarnation, that is, God’s abasement to the level of humanity, what the New Testament calls God’s kenosis, will be interpreted as the sign that the non-violent and non-absolute God of the post-metaphysical epoch has as its distinctive trait the very vocation for weakening of which Heideggerian philosophy speaks.”<sup>575</sup> By speaking about kenosis as the weakening of metaphysics, Vattimo is now connecting the Heideggerian theme of the project of perpetually trying to turn from metaphysics to the coinciding broader *progressive* cultural tendencies towards secularization, which are supposedly enacted on a formal level via irony’s disruption of metaphysical accounts.

Addressing the topic of secularization’s progressive tendencies, Vattimo then suggests, “secularization is the way in which kenosis, having begun with the incarnation of Christ, but even before that with the covenant between God and ‘his’ people, continues to

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<sup>572</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 43.

<sup>573</sup> Ibid.

<sup>574</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 55.

<sup>575</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 38.

realize itself more and more clearly by furthering the education of mankind concerning the overcoming of originary violence essential to the sacred and to social life itself.”<sup>576</sup> Vattimo in connection suggests that violence found its way into Christianity when it adopted the theological problematic of a “metaphysics as the ‘science of Being as being,’ that is, as the knowledge of first principles.”<sup>577</sup> Basically, what Vattimo says he is trying to argue, in advancing such a schema of Kenosis and the incarnation of God into Christ, is again for “the postmodern dissolution of metanarratives.”<sup>578</sup> The continuance of violence intrinsic to the second Age of the Son, as per Joachim’s account, is he suggests due to such continued and misguided adherence to metaphysical visions.

The main connection with the epistemological weakening of ontological accounts is associated by Vattimo through the same concept of kenosis, or “self-emptying,” which Death of God theology employed in a similar, albeit, atheist fashion prior to Vattimo’s usage of the concept. Consequently, the “self-emptying” of the incarnation/crucifixion, originally envisioned by Altizer as the definitive and total death of God (and divinity in general for Altizer) on the cross works in another context for Vattimo through his continental hermeneutics. Hermeneutics too is a type of “self-emptying,” which is the “self-emptying” of the metaphysical function that Christ is rethought to manifest. Vattimo interprets this “self-emptying” as an act of charity or *caritas*, which in the spirit of Paul makes foolish the wisdom of the wise. Specifically, Vattimo says, “Salvation is an event in which kenosis, the abasement of God, is realized more and more fully and so undermines the wisdom of the world, the metaphysical dreams of natural reason which conceive of God as absolute, omnipotent and transcendent, as *ipsum esse (metaphysicum) subsistens*.”<sup>579</sup> Latent within this reading of kenosis, as undermining the wisdom of the world, is Paul’s comments from 1 Corinthians 3.18-20. The scripture reads: “Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become

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<sup>576</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 48.

<sup>577</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 117.

<sup>578</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 98.

<sup>579</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 49.

wise. For the wisdom of this world is the foolishness of God...<sup>580</sup> Similarly, showing his further indebtedness to Paul, Vattimo also cites Philippians 2:7 as the source of his inspiration for using the term “kenosis.”<sup>581</sup> The passage by Paul, who is instructing the Philippians upon the humility involved in the appropriate imitation of Christ, says the following:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even on a cross.<sup>582</sup>

As the above quote by Paul demonstrates, the term kenosis is like other borrowings from the tradition that are taken slightly out of context, and twisted (*Andenken*) by Vattimo, which is once again in perfect harmony with his Romantic and aesthetic hermeneutic of a second re-reading of the original text. Thus, with the loss of an irretrievable original comes forth the proliferation of metaphor, and the fragmentation of referential history, if not checked by some kind of guardrail, which might hope to ensure further some kind of guarantee to such historical memory. While Vattimo is not directly advocating an abandonment of historical memory, he is nonetheless promoting a partial abandonment, which is replaced by a literary act of creation, by the critic-artist. Important to note is how his ironic wavering between Christianity and aestheticism is meant to enact a check against a strong atheism or nihilism. In this sense his approach to an irretrievable past is instead ironically qualified as a type of active interpretation/nihilism. As explained before in our examination of his epistemology, the distinction between a strong, or passive, nihilism and conversely an active nihilism is that the latter offers the possibility of co-creating meaning alongside the inheritance of tradition. Vattimo, of course, favors the latter in his Christian-aestheticism, as demonstrated by his hermeneutic rereading of Paul, but this artist as critic

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<sup>580</sup> NRSV

<sup>581</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 49.

<sup>582</sup> Philippians 2:7 NRSV.



method (Wilde/Schlegel) also continues in his divergences from contemporary thinkers like Girard.

### **The Influence of Girard and the Violence of Metaphysics**

Girard's Christian anthropology, for example, focuses upon the uniqueness of the biblical tendency to identify with the victims of mythological violence instead of upon them as the outsider as contagion, as the enemies of the tribal god(s), which coincides with the common mythic tendency of making such victims into deserving and dehumanized scapegoats. The basic idea behind Girard's Christological vision revolves around his understanding of the mimetic drive, where the tendency to mimic our neighbour's desires eventually turns into a type of inflamed resentment when we end up wanting what they have, because we have learnt through the neighbour how to desire, and what to desire via mimesis. In this situation, Girard believes that we can only avert the arising social tensions from all turning upon themselves by redirecting these negative feelings onto a scapegoat that can enact a cathartic release. According to Girard, myths of violence (what he contrasts with Judeo-Christian religion as tribal or "pagan" myths) tend to emphasize the blame upon the scapegoat, which helps to alleviate the societal tendency to slide into the "war of all against all" threat intrinsic to the mimetic drive when left unchecked. In contrast, Jesus and the protagonists of the Old Testament turn this scapegoating mechanism on its head, by getting the crowd to identify with the victim, rather than against them. Girard furthermore believes that the violent tendencies of Christianity and modernity are not the fault of some innate flaw of Christianity, but are the result of the incompleteness of its recognition and reception by various inheriting peoples. Additionally, Girard believes that the only way that Christianity was able to get started institutionally with mythically violent peoples was to take on the sacrificial aspects and tendencies of the natural religions, which also explains for him why there are apparent deficiencies in the historical manifestations of institutional faith. Girard only believes that now, after humankind has matured somewhat, is a reconsideration of the anti-mythical, non-violent message of the Bible potentially audible.

Vattimo slightly changes the emphasis of Girard's aversion to the mythical violence of the natural religions to equate it with metaphysics in general, from the Heideggerian and

Nietzschean angle of the topic. In Vattimo's terms, he completes Girard's argument by interpreting the "victim-based mechanism as metaphysical objectivism."<sup>583</sup> Vattimo agrees with Girard that the victim-based reading of Scripture is wrong, which would erroneously equate Jesus's crucifixion with supplying the father with a victim adequate to his wrath.<sup>584</sup> The difference, however, remains in a subtle turning (*Andenken*) of this idea of Girard's critique against the violent God of the natural sacred. On the subject, Vattimo specifically says:

To move closer to the nihilistic recovery of Christianity, it is sufficient to go just a little beyond Girard by acknowledging that the natural sacred is violent not only insofar as the victim-based mechanism presupposes a divinity thirsty for vengeance, but also insofar as it attributes to such a divinity all the predicates... assigned to God by natural theologies... In short, Girard's violent God is from this standpoint the God of metaphysics. The dissolution of metaphysics is also the end of this image of God, the death of God which Nietzsche spoke.<sup>585</sup>

The subtle turn that Vattimo is adding here is equating Girard's critique against the violent God of the natural sacred with Nietzsche's death of God. When considered alongside the duplicitous attack of Nietzsche's writings against Christianity, which we have already argued that Vattimo neglects to address in full, this subtle change seems problematic. Recall, in relation, that Vattimo identifies this death with the death of the moral God, which he reduces in significance to an epistemological technicality of philosophy, when there appears to be more afoot in such an objective motivating Nietzsche and similar aesthetes, beyond even a content based consideration.

As we mentioned earlier too, Girard certainly believes the content based connection is problematic, since he is fully cognizant of the fact that Nietzsche was very specific about his orientation towards victims as the amoral universe's innocent discharge of Life's superfluous weakness. For Girard, in his dialogue with Vattimo, the final word comes down to a fundamental orientation, which he describes as such: "The question the Passion

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<sup>583</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 116.

<sup>584</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 37.

<sup>585</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 38-39.

poses is: which side are we on? Are we with the crowd that accuses Jesus of being guilty, or are we on the other side.”<sup>586</sup> In comparison, Depoortere says that Girard’s position, in contrast to Vattimo’s, does not end in the “erasing of divine transcendence,” but instead focuses upon the transcendent quality of violence itself that is assumed by the modern outlook against his version of authentic Christianity.<sup>587</sup> More specifically, Depoortere says Girard holds that: “against the violent transcendence of natural religiosity, Christianity does not oppose the immanentism of modernity, but another kind of transcendence, the transcendence of love, which is even more transcendent than the transcendence of natural religiosity.”<sup>588</sup>

Vattimo is again very close to Girard in this adherence to love, with the slight distinction of the latter believing Love to be grounded by a metaphysical or transcendent immanentism, while Vattimo predominantly argues for a non-metaphysical immanentism of love or *caritas*. On the topic, Girard says, “”Personally, I agree with Vattimo when he says that Christianity is a revelation of love, but I don’t exclude that it is also a revelation of truth. Because in Christianity truth and love coincide and are one and the same thing. I think we ought to take very seriously this concept...”<sup>589</sup> Thus, Girard is apprehensive to let go fully of Christianity’s revelation of truth, in which, Girard sees a violent exclusion at work in Vattimo’s thought. The key point of importance that Girard identifies is that Christianity identifies love with truth, which is weakened of its authority in Vattimo’s weak conception. In comparison, Thomas Guarino says:

Vattimo wishes us to see that this profound interpretative plurality disarms every kind of fundamentalist ideology and so, the very possibility of physical and spiritual intolerance toward the ‘other’... But surely, one will legitimately protest, even in a world of vast plurality, one needs to adduce criteria to distinguish the better from the worst, the rational from the irrational. If we fail to do so, as Richard Berstein has observed, we simply

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<sup>586</sup> Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, 43.

<sup>587</sup> Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, 61.

<sup>588</sup> Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, 62.

<sup>589</sup> Vattimo and Girard, *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, 46.

flee from metaphysics into anarchic relativism, which itself inevitably spawns a ‘fundamentalist’ metaphysical reaction.<sup>590</sup>

While Guarino is attacking the wrong lapse back into the metaphysical, he and Girard appear justified in voicing this concern, since the ironic approach is itself religious or metaphysical (rather than a simple lapse back into relativism, which Vattimo disassociates himself from). In the end, these critics are right in identifying that there is something inherently violent and totalizing in the desire to completely undermine systematic or institutional thought, yet they neglect how this operates.

Consequently, the instability of Vattimo’s irony also makes the distinction between immanent and transcendent hard to hold up, but there is a definite tendency by Vattimo to preferring the Christian Atheist account of kenosis, as the metaphysical God dying on the cross to enact the subsequent era of progressive Christian secularization, which makes his defense of love not tenable against Nietzsche. As Depoortere asks, “If all reality is posited by the human subject, as nihilism states and Vattimo defends, why would the principle of *caritas* not also be a construction of the Will to Power?”<sup>591</sup> The reply that Caputo would offer in Vattimo’s defense is that a strong theology offers no strong guarantees for love in this world either, and both thinkers would claim that Depoortere, Guarino, and Girard have not fully understood their positions. Yet after we have addressed this concern, by identifying irony is at work in this play, it still seems that there is something that is at least partially legitimate about the concerns of their critics, which persists beyond recognizing the further fortifications of irony’s argumentative inner wall and keep.

In contrast, in his thinking through of the need for this type of weak Christianity, Vattimo says, “All of us should claim the right not to be turned away from the truth of the Gospel in the name of a sacrifice of reason demanded only by a naturalistic, human, all too human, ultimately unchristian, conception of God’s transcendence.”<sup>592</sup> Therefore, Vattimo wants to get away from the strong objective language or natural theological accounts of

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<sup>590</sup> Guarino, *Vattimo and Theology*, 33.

<sup>591</sup> Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, 63.

<sup>592</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 55.

objectivist ontology that have characteristically “Greek” metaphysical influences, and have done so since the beginnings of Christian theology. According to such logic, Vattimo identifies the “Antichrist” as the influential power of representational or objectifying thought (metaphysics), “who continually tests the faithful and drives them to idolatrously identify the Messiah with figures who falsify his meaning.”<sup>593</sup> In simple terms, according to Vattimo’s theology, the Antichrist (metaphysics) has “pushed into oblivion Christianity’s authentic, original content.”<sup>594</sup> The paradoxical nature of this appeal to keeping guard against the wiles of the Antichrist should be apparent to anyone with even a small inkling of an idea of who and what Nietzsche fashioned himself after: the Anti-Christ himself, and history would seem to so far be proving him right, as the most prominent instigator of a non-metaphysical, metaphysical worldview.

### **The Anti-Christ as Christ**

In other words, Vattimo’s hermeneutic of weakness wants to renarrate the self-declared Antichrist as the true Christ. The ambiguity that results in this dual appeal is that, by conceptualizing himself as “Antichrist,” Nietzsche may have been thinking of either the impact of his anti-religious content, such as elements like the Will to Power and the critique of resentment, or he may have had in mind rather his more clandestine non-metaphysical form of writing. Likely, Nietzsche had both elements in mind, with the second being the more important of the two, as the *coup de grâce* that the metaphysical reader never saw coming. Problematically, Vattimo’s reading only takes into account addressing the first of these two aspects of Nietzsche’s role as Antichrist, although this admittedly is a positive beginning. More importantly, Nietzsche’s second level Antichrist is the anti-metaphysical itself at play, which is completely the opposite of what Vattimo is suggesting in making metaphysics the antichrist. Can Vattimo appropriate such a device simply by re-narrating it otherwise, while utilizing the Nietzschean anti-christ via the promise of a post-metaphysical and violence free framework? The risk is that the post-metaphysical rhetorical event is the

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<sup>593</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 133.

<sup>594</sup> Ibid.

truest variant of Nietzsche's anti-Christ, not just all of his alarming surface-level talk of a social Darwinian slant. In both assaults, the moral vision of the world is under attack. The second is more covert, and therefore more potentially dangerous.

In comparison, we cannot with any degree of certainty take Vattimo too literally in his description of events or concepts of theological significance. Demonstrating that his co-creative function is at play with the tradition as inheritance, Vattimo says in lighthearted fashion, "I have often told myself, and repeat it to myself over and over, that this 'coming together' of the pieces of my personal religious philosophical puzzle is too good to be true."<sup>595</sup> In other words, Vattimo fully acknowledges a certain level of contingency in his constitution of a history of the violence of metaphysics. In response to being called upon to possibly defend such a contingency to his critics, he warns them, "I look forward to anyone who disagrees with me proposing a more persuasive interpretive hypothesis."<sup>596</sup> Thus, the challenge to his critics is to go beyond the contingency of a co-creative metaphysics by inheritance, which even though his history of the violence of metaphysics is admittedly such, nobody else will ever offer anything more philosophically sound, via what would necessarily require an overcoming of metaphysics, since Vattimo knows such an overcoming is not possible. Vattimo's final word on this situation is the following: **"Metaphysics cannot be overcome but only *verwunden*-accepted, distorted, and continued in ironic directions that are known to be provisional."**<sup>597</sup> Again, this remark is revealing of his often reoccurring claims to offer a non-metaphysical Christianity, which must be understood as further rhetorical bluffing, despite always being on the way to a post metaphysical writing. In this light, the usage of the term "post-metaphysical" is somewhat misleading, due to the inherent danger of the non-ironic reading of the couplet, which rhetorically would like to have us believe that we have left metaphysics behind.

The question that remains, however, is whether poststructuralism's adoption of the Judeo-Christian ethos is a betrayal of the religious commitment to hospitality, due to its call for an unguarded hospitality, which here would welcome the self-declared methodological

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<sup>595</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 41.

<sup>596</sup> Ibid.

<sup>597</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 119. Bold added.

orientation of the Antichrist, as form subsidiarily at work upon the text's readership, yet not welcome the otherness intrinsic to the theological itself. Problematically, there is a long recognition within the Judeo-Christian tradition of a tendency by the world to abuse holy matters in complication with temporal agendas. Christ's removal of the money changers in the temple demonstrates, along with his warning in Matthew 10:16, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves... Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves",<sup>598</sup> that there has always been recognized a need for a degree of vigilance to be maintained in holding such a position of hospitality, because there are those elements that would knowingly abuse such goodness to evil ends.

While deconstruction's appeals to this (im)possible condition sound more progressive and admirable in purely rhetorical terms, than either Ricoeur or Gadamer's critical hermeneutics, there does seem to be a residual concern that persists with its strong calls to an unbounded hospitable welcome to the non-systematic and unscientific, particularly when it comes bearing the literary devices of German romanticism and other reactionary avant-garde subsidiary mythologies. Certainly, these rhetorical prescriptions sound even more prophetically strong than Christ's own imperative of a dual commitment between the dispositions of innocence and shrewdness (i.e., be as "snakes" and "doves"). Is not a strong commitment to non-systematic thought or a strong commitment to full hospitality in the end not such an impossibly strong commitment that post-structuralism itself wants to supposedly avoid? Again, the answer is one of belief. From the classical metaphysical perspective, Caputo (Derrida) and Vattimo, in their partial/total inhibition of the collective mythical function, sound potentially more fundamentalist and totalitarian than the tradition itself, if we are to take part of them literally, which according to the rules of the game, we cannot, since according to the operations of irony, even such an inhibition of the mythical is counteracted by the affirmative gesture of the systematic host. **However, accepting this *logic*, is again equally as mythical or contingent in its acceptance of the rules of play (a leap of faith) grounded in the other of logical argument.** In this partial appeal, therefore, the poststructuralist position is nevertheless still calling for the subjective agency of totally passive reception, which is, it would qualify, not possible in the end, yet it

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<sup>598</sup> NIV

continues to enact a rhetorical spell that undermines other profitable, albeit equally mythological or metaphysical ideas or positions. It does this in its constant deferring detour of representational poeticizing, akin to Burkean and Longinian prescriptions of enacting the rhetorical sublime through the twisting and turnings of thought to no strong resolutions or syntheses. This caution is not intended to say there is not something progressive in post-structuralism's ever receding messianic, but there equally seems to be something else requiring our vigilance in welcoming such a return to religion. The main question arising from the need for a dual construction of meaning, content shaped and formal, is the following. If they know that irony is a metaphysical commitment, then why are they trying to performatively convince us otherwise? The transition indicates a certain withholding for those without eyes to see or ears to hear what is hiding in plain view. The risk, therefore, is in the establishment of a two tiered strata of readers akin to that dreamed of by Ortega y Gasset in his description of the divisive purpose of modernist art. This enactment is no doubt intended to counteract what Vattimo and Caputo fear will result in a collapse into a proletariat Marxism, in a spirit reminiscent of de Maistre, yet when the status quo is neoliberalism's continual weakening or even the looming *erasure* of the middle class one wonders about the *absolute* future and democratic sustainability of such a supposedly stabilizing invocation.



## Chapter 6: Caputo's Argument in Death of God and the Jest of Ironic Criticism

Caputo's argument in the book is presented in two separate yet compatible parts, these consist firstly of the opening essay "Spectral Hermeneutics: On the Weakness of God and the Theology of the Event," and secondly of a recorded question and answer section on the main tenants of Caputo's thought, and his thoughts on Vattimo's project, which is an interview conducted by the book's editor Jeffrey Robbins. Caputo's opening essay, "Spectral Hermeneutics," is divided into five main sections, which are then broken down into the following additional subsections:

- 1) **"A theology of the event"** (pgs. 47-58): A) events (p. 47), B) a postmodern covenant (p. 51), C) prayers and tears (p. 54) D) the desire for God (p. 57).
- 2) **"The Weakness of God"** (pgs. 59-65): A) untitled (p. 59), 2) sacred anarchy (p. 61), 3) A Postmodern theology of the Cross (p. 62).
- 3) **"The Death of God"** (pgs. 66-69): no subtitles.
- 4) **"On Radicalizing The Hermeneutical Turn: In Dialogue with Vattimo"** (pgs. 70-82): A) Weak Theology and Vattimo's Weakness Theorem (p. 70), B) The Secularization Theorem (p. 74), C) "The West or Christianity," (p. 77).
- 5) **Spectral Hermeneutics:** no subtitles (pgs. 83-85).

### **A Theology of Event and the Postmodern Covenant**

Caputo commences his opening essay "Spectral Hermeneutics" with a description of what he means by the term "event," in his essay's first subsection entitled "A Theology of Event." Specifically, Caputo *clarifies* his use of the term, "event," as follows: "An event is not precisely what happens, which is what the word suggests in English, but something going on *in* what happens, something that is being expressed or realized or given shape in what happens, it is not something present, but something seeking to make itself felt in what

is present.”<sup>599</sup> Consequently, in Heidegger’s later philosophy, an “event/erlegnis” is a term that denotes a more neutered or dumbly contingent happening, as per something reminiscent of the romantic notion of the artistic drive as self-creating creation (operating like Angelus Silesius’s rose without why used in Caputo’s comparison between Meister Eckhart and Heidegger).<sup>600</sup> The simple insight that Caputo is utilizing here builds off of the Levinasian derivative of this Heideggerian *ground* that emphasizes that there is always more behind things than meets the eye, if not in mere phenomenological complexity, than also in their existential possibility to be otherwise too. Originally, for Levinas, the most prevalent example of this pregnant possibility of the sublime (as that which exceeds our expectations or classifications) is found most recognizably in his application of it in the manifestation of the face of the Other, where immanence hosts transcendence in a quasi space of the encounter of the presence/absence with the Divine, or the Other.

The key to understanding the poststructuralist distinction of an “event,” from Heidegger’s use of the term, is therefore exactly this difference, which again is that it emphasizes that there is more at stake than meets the eye in a mere phenomenological happening, which in the Heideggerian sense is seemingly more prone to advocating a full passivity or quietism in existential comportment, as something less rationally grasped, and less systematically expecting of a general response. In contrast, the poststructuralist encounter with the sublime, while still paying tribute to that which defies our capacity for understanding, is instead interpreted as a positive, rather than a negative, predicament. In order to clarify and develop what he means by this distinction, Caputo, as he has often elsewhere done, again distinguishes a “name” from the “event” that remains open within a named thing. Caputo here again lays out what he means when he speaks about “names” by specifying that they are “historical, contingent, and provisional expressions.”<sup>601</sup> In other words, Caputo’s basic deconstructive method and orientation is again once more manifested, yet through another allegorical permutation. Accordingly, the terminological recycling of the different ways of poeticizing the deconstructive position, work to rename

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<sup>599</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 47.

<sup>600</sup> Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought*, 60.

<sup>601</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 47-48.

the key insight of the position that recognizes a problem with immediate interpretation, yet it importantly interprets this condition to be one of possibility, rather than ruin and impotence. Thus, in this sense as well, Caputo's distinction between "names" and "events" allude to limitations of language and philosophy, while still wanting to point beyond these limitations to a hope for something unforeseen.

In correspondence to the basic deconstructive framework, "words" and "things" (names) are deconstructible, while "events" are not deconstructible.<sup>602</sup> In other words, the event is something beyond the limits of the systematic or material possibilities of typical cognitive organization or orientation. In sum, an event is a promise of possibility from that exceeding our expectations or cognitive grasp. In an abstract sense, this framework of possibility and hope is comparable to the basic messianic framework of particular religious observances, with the exception that it wants to eliminate exceptions altogether, by attacking systematic entities of exclusionary disposition. The catch of this argument is of course that it too is another such instance that it wants to eliminate, which is something that it too recognizes, yet does so with the hope of persuading others through its own self-understanding to be more advanced. In addition, irony does not seem to mind if you think it is escaping the metaphysical, and thereby it welcomes being thought of as the exception that can evade the violence of metaphysics.

Interestingly, Caputo qualifies the tangibility of the undeconstructible nature of events by conditioning his statement's argumentative position with Derrida's quasi-ironic expression "*s'il y en a*," ("if there is any").<sup>603</sup> In this qualifier, we see the ironic form take precedence in the end over the affirmative promises of a theology of the event. The move is therefore necessarily self-effacing of the argumentative force of Caputo's affirmative account, which in the end does not want to offer a stable metaphysical account for easy prescription, yet via the form of irony, as we have earlier demonstrated, inevitably does nonetheless. Therefore, it is only by considering the device of irony as non-metaphysical that we can ignore the ramifications of such a double movement, since only if we believe

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<sup>602</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 48.

<sup>603</sup> Ibid.

the promise of the ironic device to keep matters in metaphysical instability, can we accept the post-structuralist assumption that it itself is not merely aesthetic in form, if not content.

Instead of exploring this consequence, Caputo continues by reverting to speaking about how the affirmative concept of “events” means “provocations and promises,” which also means that they operate methodologically in the same manner as Derrida’s concept of the “unforeseeable” future that is “to come” (*a venire*), as indeterminate calls towards something not clearly delineated. Likewise, Caputo also says that events “call us back,” which is important for Caputo, he says, because they sustain what Johann Baptist Metz calls “dangerous memories”, in what might be an otherwise “irremissible past.”<sup>604</sup> With these qualifiers in mind, Caputo summarizes the nature of events as serving to “call and recall.”<sup>605</sup> In the sense of a call and recalling of dangerous memories, Caputo’s event is another manifestation of the ironic adoption of socially progressive ideals, coinciding with the prophetic tradition, where here the future and the past are incidentally not taken with the severity of an uncomplicated or unbiased call or promise. In connection, Caputo explains that postmodernism takes a theological turn when the concept of the event shifts its attention towards the name of God.<sup>606</sup> The event is what is happening in the name of God, where the name is the literal acceptance of the affirmative content, and where the event is the ironic quasi-acceptance of the affirmative matters at hand.

In order to establish an affirmative content for his ironic theology of the event, as he does elsewhere in his work, Caputo again in this essay employs Catherine Keller’s creational account from process theology, in order to bestow his theology of event with a possible biblical pedigree.<sup>607</sup> Keller’s reading is possible, in that her hermeneutic approach is one akin to Wilde’s notion of the critic as artist, which is a common literary-critical approach taken by poststructuralist’s to texts and authors, as lost originals to be replaced by a contemporarily motivated second reading. In this second reading the sublime spaces of

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<sup>604</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 48.

<sup>605</sup> Ibid.

<sup>606</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 49.

<sup>607</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 50.

the text/author are interpreted as a positive opportunity, which we have already explained is definitive of the poststructuralist response to the aesthetic predicament, as sublime possibility.

According to Caputo's reading of Keller's theology, God had in a poststructuralist mood released the events that stirred within the great sleeping elements of chaos, in creating the world, which, as we have explained earlier, happened where the original or origin had collapsed into an immemorial difference that exceeds a clear retrieval of any lost original, as uncomplicated.<sup>608</sup> In connection, taking a postmodern theological position in Caputo's theology of event means to "affirm" the event, to say as he regularly does "'oui, oui' (Amen!)," and this affirmation takes place not in "what is present," but "what is coming."<sup>609</sup> Therefore, the event (the opportunity of the sublime) in words and things is a messianic force that calls us to listen and look for the affirmative possibility in such things, to keep an eye out for "what is promised by them."<sup>610</sup>

Furthermore, in connection, Caputo explains that the title of his essay "Spectral Hermeneutics" is created in association with the "messianic or even ghostly" nature of such a postmodern theology of the event. Playfully, Caputo associates events with postmodern theology's belief in what he calls "ghosts, very holy if slightly pale ghosts."<sup>611</sup> A ghost for Caputo is another manifestation of an ironic ideal, which is never fully materialized, yet haunts the living with a "spectral" presence that is paradoxical, as the "living-dead," or the possible-impossible. Caputo's affirmative spin on the employment of ghosts, events, and spectral hermeneutics comes via what he calls his focus upon "the fragile 'perhaps' in things-which promise a new life, a new beginning, a new creation."<sup>612</sup> In other words, in the ironic suspension of immediate presence, Caputo is articulating a space of possibility, rather than the negative acceptance of nihilistic ruin. Such an affirmative approach to

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<sup>608</sup> Ibid.

<sup>609</sup> Ibid.

<sup>610</sup> Ibid.

<sup>611</sup> Ibid.

<sup>612</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 51.

perspectivism is the post-structuralist project in a nutshell, as it hopes to differentiate itself from its various earlier aesthetic predecessors.

In association, Caputo labels the next section of his paper “A Postmodern Covenant.”<sup>613</sup> The key thing to note about the promissory nature of events Caputo says is that they are “irreducible,” just as deconstruction is “irreducible.”<sup>614</sup> In this sense, Caputo believes that deconstruction’s affirmative movement hopes to release the irreducible aspect in phenomena that they cannot contain. Providing another example of the affirmative nature of events, Caputo presents Derrida’s construct of the “democracy to come,” which he suggests is a “type of covenant.”<sup>615</sup> In comparison, Caputo in a likeminded way explains that religion is “a covenant that has been made-by who we cannot quite say-between the event and us,” and beyond this the need for such a distinction between names and events in religious language and theology is for him instigated by a wariness of “Master narratives and monotheistic exclusivism.”<sup>616</sup> Revealingly displaying his distrust of strong accounts and systems, Caputo thereby explains that the idea behind a “postmodern theology,” in collaboration, is to release the event harboring in traditional religious language, while evading “local” forms.<sup>617</sup>

In evading “local” forms, Caputo hopes to keep the affirmative possibility in religion free from the trappings of exclusionary and violent socio-cultural distinctions that he sees predominant in the various histories of religious thought. With this concern in mind, Caputo’s qualification that non-postmodern language about God errors if it takes itself too seriously, because according to his spectral hermeneutical account, it merely deals with the name of God, which is again a non-ironic comportment towards the subject, and it is to be disfavored to the more sensible ironic approach that would see God instead as an

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<sup>613</sup> Ibid.

<sup>614</sup> Ibid.

<sup>615</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 52.

<sup>616</sup> Ibid.

<sup>617</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 53.

event.<sup>618</sup> Therefore, Caputo's postmodern theological language, in contrast, differs in comparison to traditional religious language in that it distinguishes between the name of God, and the event that "stirs within" the name of God.<sup>619</sup> In partially explaining what he means, Caputo compares the event stirring within the name of God to a "sacred spark or fire," which he likens to "an open-ended excess and an inaccessible mystery."<sup>620</sup> We must be careful not to take his metaphors too seriously, however, since Caputo is playing with religious language to convey post-structuralist commitments. Thus, as we said earlier, the event is an encounter with the limit experience of the sublime, which we might add, means that in aesthetic terms the name would be equivalent to the beautiful rigidly conceived, whereas the event is the beautiful/sublime, which is the ghostly, or the ironic ideal in another guise. In contrast to traditional reactionary moves, this space of the beautiful/sublime is *interpreted* to be a space of possibility, rather than one invoked simply for the effect of its tendency to aggravate dispossession.

Comparatively, Caputo links his employment of the event within the name of God with Derrida's phrase "*sauf le nom*" (save the name).<sup>621</sup> Caputo explains that Derrida's expression has a double sense of: 1) keeping the name of God, but also of understanding that 2) "God is everything except (save) the name."<sup>622</sup> Likewise, pointing to the double movement intrinsic to this ironic or double sense, Caputo highlights that the distinction between the name and the event within the name is where deconstruction's work takes place.<sup>623</sup> The work Caputo is referring to here is the supposed deconstruction of official accounts, where assumed distinctions are made to collapse in order to favor the oppressed party of the dialectical divide. Comparatively, the affirmative work of deconstruction, as occurring in the event within the name, which is another guise of the Apollonian-

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<sup>618</sup> Ibid.

<sup>619</sup> Ibid.

<sup>620</sup> Ibid.

<sup>621</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 54.

<sup>622</sup> Ibid.

<sup>623</sup> Ibid.

Dionysian, is likened by Caputo to “what calls us” in religious language, which Caputo suggests makes the adherents of a theology of the event “the people of the call.”<sup>624</sup> In this sense, the people of the deconstructive call are those who are called by a weak promise, which is forever spectral, yet always calling forth, rather than accomplished. In other words, it is a non-totalizing promise, where things are left to perpetually waver in the space between the messianic call and the worldly guises it inhabits.

### **Prayers and Tears**

Caputo’s next subsection of the essay is called “Prayers and Tears,” alluding to his influential text of the same name that examines the religious possibilities within Derrida’s work. In this section, Caputo continues his discussion on the nature of events, while examining them in their new allegorical guise of being associable with prayers. Thus, Caputo suggests that religion “begins and ends with prayer,” and likewise he suggests that the “event is the stuff of which prayers and tears are made.”<sup>625</sup> In this manifestation, the prayers represent the affirmative mood of deconstruction, while tears represent the negating mood of deconstruction. In regards to the nature of events, as things that are always “to come,” Caputo again links that they are “never kept by any actual occasion.”<sup>626</sup> In making this point, what Caputo specifically has in mind is that the event’s continual deferral ensures that it is “unconditional,” whereas when it is realized in actuality, he says it can only be “conditionally realized in any time or place, in any word or proposition or discursive formation, in any ontic realization or actualization.”<sup>627</sup> In other words, we never really exhaust the affirmative potential of certain things, because there is always the possibility that something beyond what currently “is” could be more inclusive or more affirmative than matters as currently held. In this sense, we are always missing a piece of

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<sup>624</sup> Ibid.

<sup>625</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 54-55.

<sup>626</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 55.

<sup>627</sup> Ibid.



the puzzle, which is interpreted to be an opening of hope, not just a limitation on human cognitive capacities.

The possibility of an unlimited affirmative possibility is what the postmodern messianic is calling forth via the distinction between names and events. Caputo subsequently links this messianic capacity of the event to the Biblical motif of “nomadism,” particularly associated here with Abraham, as per the age of the patriarchs and their desert, tribal lifestyles.<sup>628</sup> Accordingly, the call that Caputo sees working in the Biblical accounts of such a “desert dwelling” or nomadism is the existential predicament of perpetual displacement that is qualified by the “charge” of “hospitality” and “welcome” to the unforeseeable Other. Abraham and the patriarchs likewise lived outside of the systematic or socially totalizing organizations of the great city states of the ancient Middle East. In comparison, our interpretive situation is a type of nomadism. We can never go home to things in themselves, to a reappropriation of the text, since we can never return to a lost origin, or repeat such a thing, as the lost original. In hermeneutics, this nomadism allegorically represents deconstruction’s surrender to otherness, whereby the interpretive act is abandoned to that otherness exceeding the self’s attempts to totalize a reading. Thus, unlike in Gadamerian and Ricoeurian hermeneutics, the self never comes back to itself as definitive stance to revise its interpretive horizon, because such a gesture would commit a violence of propositional exclusion, and thereby fall back into metaphysics. This interpretive journey is therefore like that of Abraham who leaves home, never to return from the desert back to the city of his birth, from where he heard God’s call. Religion, according to such an interpretive approach, is important here to philosophy because it is the call of the Other, which is other-than-philosophy because it testifies to something outside of philosophy’s attempt to systematically contain existence’s complexity into a manageable account. In this sense, the “Other” is another postmodern term that is interchangeable with one element of what we mean when Caputo speaks of “events.”

Like the event, the Other is another manifestation of the sublime encounter, or that which is outside of our systematic attempts to posit things into manageable accounts or representations. In association, Caputo touches briefly on the work of Deleuze and Borges

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<sup>628</sup> Ibid.

as such likeminded postmodern predecessors of his own postmodern theology of event. In specific, Caputo says that Deleuze and Borges focus upon accounts of literature where the event burgeons forth from disruptions of our normal expectations. Caputo, in other words, takes the postmodern hermeneutic used by these secularly focused authors, with their focus upon literature, and turns its estranging power to coincide with the Otherness of religious literature. In this sense, literature and religion are the Other of philosophy and rationalism, since they write by another means than logical argument or propositional proof. Furthermore, Caputo highlights the messianic possibility of such writing otherwise than philosophy, when he suggests that such literature and theology are places where “we dream of what is coming.”<sup>629</sup> Returning to the role of prayer in the postmodern, while thinking via a theology of the event, Caputo challenges that prayer is not “a transaction or interaction with some hyperbeing in the sky...,” but is instead a “provocation that draws us out of ourselves.”<sup>630</sup> In this sense of drawing us out of ourselves, prayer in Caputo’s use of the term involves another ghostly provocation of the (im)possible, because it is invoking something that is not entirely comprehensible via a desire for something that we cannot see entirely either, which makes it an encounter with the alterity of Otherness, which is calling for an affirmative result nonetheless.

### **The Desire of God**

In association, Caputo’s next subsection is called The Desire of God.<sup>631</sup> Building off its role in prayer, Caputo here speaks of desire as another name of the event, which is, in other words, another name for what directs our “prayers and tears,” which he further links with Derrida’s insight that “desire is the absolute secret.”<sup>632</sup> Similarly, desire is another manifestation of the sublime, or that aspect of existence that defies our rational schemas of the world. In correspondence, Caputo explains that for Lacan and Badiou “desire is

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<sup>629</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 56.

<sup>630</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 57.

<sup>631</sup> Ibid.

<sup>632</sup> Ibid.

constitutive of the subject of the unconscious;” which makes it “the non-known par excellence.”<sup>633</sup> The connection that permits Caputo to link desire with the name of God is that such an ironically observed desire is likewise not exactly the name of that “of what we desire, but rather (of) a desire beyond desire,” which is the event within our desires.<sup>634</sup> In other words, the desires we are aware of, or can cognitively grasp are not what the post-structuralist is invoking in the religious call. Instead, the sublime is that call or prayer of an otherness that defies our rational capacities. Comparatively, Caputo ends his section on the desire of God with the following question: “What is the event of desire, which is always the desire for the event that occurs in theology?”<sup>635</sup> Answering this question definitively is not possible, since it operates rather as pointing towards the same limit experience in the discourses of psychoanalysis and of religion, where God and the desire beyond desire both partially hint at something beyond the rational power to understand, yet which operate as an unrelenting call forwards towards fulfillment.

### **The Weakness of God and Sacred Anarchy**

It is therefore not without a certain degree of topical affiliation that Caputo posits the above question and then opens up his next overarching first level subsection: “The Weakness of God.”<sup>636</sup> In thus considering the significance of Caputo’s phrase “the weakness of God,” it is therefore important to remember that he is again speaking about the event, when he speaks of “weakness.” These two terms are merely different aspects of irony, and the ironic disposition as recognition of the limits of understanding. Moving back briefly to reconsider Deleuze’s study of literature as philosophy’s other, (particularly looking at the work of Lewis Carroll), the emphasis of post-structuralism’s affirmative reading of this unknowable is placed upon turning the logic of the “world” upside down as achieved in *Alice in Wonderland*, except here Caputo wants to utilize instead the rhetoric of

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<sup>633</sup> Ibid.

<sup>634</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 58.

<sup>635</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 59.

<sup>636</sup> Ibid.

the “Kingdom of God” from the New Testament as a discourse of the event. In the likewise “mad, paradoxical, parabolical, upside down, topsy-turvy” logic found in the scriptures, Caputo finds a compatible literature of the event that was overlooked by Deleuze, in his reading of it as manifested in Wonderland. In this sense, which is another manifestation of the poststructuralist messianic, Caputo explains that “the event jolts the world, disturbs, disrupts, and skews the sedimented course of things, exposing the alternative possibilities...”<sup>637</sup>

Thus, in the narrative language of the New Testament, Caputo identifies the upside down logic of the event happening in cripples being “made straight,” lepers being cured, and the dead rising from the grave.<sup>638</sup> These changes, which Caputo identifies with the essence of the New Testament, he calls “*metanoia*,” which are types of “bodily metamorphoses” that involve a conversion to a new personal disposition directed to belonging to what he identifies with “the Kingdom.”<sup>639</sup> In other words, what interests Caputo foremost is the subjective disposition of a Kingdom directed orientation.

At the same time, the end product of this topsy-turvy logic of the Kingdom of God is what Caputo calls “sacred anarchy,” which is also consequently the heading name of the next subsection title in his broader subsection of the “Weakness of God” portion of the essay.<sup>640</sup> Herein, Caputo identifies his thesis as twofold. Firstly, he identifies here in connection to the subsection’s title that the scriptures are the “offspring of the shock that is delivered by the name of God... to the world, which results in “sacred anarchy.”<sup>641</sup> Secondly, he links this notion of sacred anarchy with what he has already identified in the previous subsection with the traits of the event of the Kingdom of God as a weak force, rather than a strong force.<sup>642</sup>

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<sup>637</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 59.

<sup>638</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 61.

<sup>639</sup> Ibid.

<sup>640</sup> Ibid.

<sup>641</sup> Ibid.

<sup>642</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 62.

## A Postmodern Theology of the Cross

Exploring what Caputo means in this claim that the idea of the Kingdom of God is a “weak force” leads into his next subsection of the essay, which he titles, “A Postmodern Theology of the Cross.”<sup>643</sup> In this section, Caputo outlines a postmodern theology of the cross as one that identifies the event of the Cross as crucial to what he is identifying by his commitment to a theology of the event, where he emphasizes what he thinks is the preferable experience of God as a “weak force” via a weak (ironic) theology.<sup>644</sup> At the same time, Caputo’s affirmative reading wants to emphasize that within his postmodern theology the importance of the Cross exists in what he terms the “cries of protest that rise up from the scene” of Jesus’s trial and execution by imperial or worldly power.<sup>645</sup> Accordingly, the weakness of God is demonstrated via the Cross, in spite of the “injustice of imperial power,” which crushes the “Kingdom by worldly forces.”<sup>646</sup> In this sense, what Caputo is getting at is that Jesus does not represent a *strong* hypostatizing power. Jesus is instead, Caputo suggests, “the *eikon* of God,” which is additionally “the sacredness (that) lies in the cries of protest that rise up from the scene of suffering from such worldly power...”<sup>647</sup> Caputo thereby identifies in the cries of protest to Jesus’s unjust execution something other than the logic of the world. Again, this indication is operative according to an(other) logic that is seemingly upside down, but it exists in its possibility as the potential for things to be other than the way they typically have unfolded in the status quo of history and power. In this way, Caputo believes that God is a call of possibility for a more just world, which while it itself can never be realized, still serves in its promissory function like the coming of the messiah, since it aims to always call us forth towards a more sacred type of life and communal comportment.

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<sup>643</sup> Ibid.

<sup>644</sup> Ibid.

<sup>645</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 62-63.

<sup>646</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 63.

<sup>647</sup> Ibid.

Describing such a drive in operation, Caputo explains that “The event harbored by the name of God in this scene, the eventful paradox or paradoxical event whose tremors can be felt throughout the New Testament, is that of the power of powerlessness or of something unconditional without sovereignty,” of a “weak force,” which takes up a discussion that Derrida was developing in his final writings.<sup>648</sup> According to such a vision, the majesty or glory of the name of God does not lie in the power of a strong force but in something “unconditional,” or undeconstructible, yet “without an army, without actual force, real or physical power,” which means furthermore that “it is the name more of a potency than a power, a restive possibility...”<sup>649</sup> Caputo explains that he, in association, believes that the actuality or the realization of this restive possibility is “assigned to us,” in fulfillment or observation, which is an idea he adopts, while attributing its origin to Dietrich Bonhoeffer.<sup>650</sup> In this mood, Caputo further suggests that such evangelizing claims, which he interprets as events, “depend upon us to respond, to realize or actualize them, to make them happen, which here means to make God happen, to give God body and embodiment, force and actuality.”<sup>651</sup> In this affirmative mood, Caputo is saying quite strong claims about his conception of Divinity, or so it would temporarily seem, anyway. In this mood of severity, he continues to explain that the name of God is “not the name of an abstract logical possibility but of a *dynamis* that pulses through things (*rei*), urging them, soliciting them, to be what they can be, and it is in that sense that is what is most real about them.”<sup>652</sup> In other words, Caputo in part believes that we are laid claim to be the spectacle of the Cross, which he equates with what he identifies as the “dangerous memory of this scene,” because it operates via what he further calls an “astonishing spectacle of greeting hatred with love, of answering persecution not with retribution but with forgiveness.”<sup>653</sup> In this astonishing spectacle of the Cross, Caputo suggests that the crucified body of Jesus, as

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<sup>648</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>649</sup> Ibid.

<sup>650</sup> Ibid.

<sup>651</sup> Ibid.

<sup>652</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 65.

<sup>653</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 66.

event, is empowered via its ability to “shock the world,” rather than subdue it via a withheld Divine omnipotence.<sup>654</sup> In these affirmative moods, Caputo’s engagement with biblical themes is very insightful and socially responsible. In such gestures, Caputo offers a contemporary reading of the Jesus event that can still enable the benefits of religion, while retaining the *possibility* of a supernatural agency, despite the underlying postmodern condition of the final uncertainty of all truth claims.

### **The Death of God**

In connection to the event of the Cross, Caputo’s next section is called the Death of God. Caputo’s postmodern theology of the Cross, as allusively indicated in his exploration of the significance of this event, suggests additionally in contrast to traditional accounts that the death that occurs on the Cross is not that of the God beyond metaphysical accounts, but is instead the “death of the *deus omnipotens* of classical theology.”<sup>655</sup> In substitution, and largely continuing his emphasis from the previous subsection, Caputo appeals to Sallie McFague’s identification of “God’s suffering body” as giving rise to his own conception of God as an event, which he says calls to an “unconditional protest against needless and unjust suffering.”<sup>656</sup> In this section, Caputo therefore advances two main claims. First, the God of his postmodern theology is not that of classical metaphysics. Second, the God of postmodern theology is more of an instigating event, which calls for our responding to the injustice of the world. The God outside of classical metaphysics is a more sublime thing than a self-assured conceptualization or dogmatic truth. Caputo continues to distinguish his more sublime and ironic quasi-conceptualization of God in contrast to the classical metaphysical conceptualization, when he says, “Insofar as there is any philosophical life left in this increasingly dated expression, the death of God, it refers to an *ongoing* and *never finished* project of deconstructing the God of ontotheologic, which is for me above all the

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<sup>654</sup> Ibid.

<sup>655</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 67.

<sup>656</sup> Ibid.

God of sovereign power.”<sup>657</sup> In other words, Caputo is not simply suggesting that the supernatural God is dead and replaced by the cultural idea or aesthetic fantasy of a weak power that calls us to justice.

While he is in part calling for such a thing, he is not in full, due to the parameters of his own project, via irony, which are not stable in themselves as affirmative propositional claims. This irony makes any final identification of a definitive stance problematic to traditional logically legitimated types of understanding. The indeterminacy of this ironic wavering, however, is identifiable as a consequence of the style of Caputo’s writing, which takes us to the limits of what is said, before it collapses into the confusion of the ironic device, where essentially communication signs off. Getting closer to the centrality of irony’s role in the discussion, Caputo next moves to clarify that he believes that the “downbeat” movement of deconstruction as “a hermeneutic of the death of God” is merely “but a moment” that is countered by deconstruction’s “upbeat... hermeneutics of the desire for God.”<sup>658</sup> In other words, Caputo believes that the affirmative upbeat of the ironic stance balances the negative downbeat of the skeptical retraction of irony’s withdrawal of stable meaning. Therefore, Caputo is committed to the belief that irony itself can fully commit to its different moments of affirmative content, or at least he is saying he believes it.

In contrast to his ironic death of God, as the death of the God of metaphysics, Caputo explains that Altizer’s theology of the death of God is largely driven by the transition of God’s presence from a role of transcendence to one of immanence, explained via the concept of kenosis. Regarding Mark C. Taylor’s orientation in his book *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Taylor having been a key voice in death of God theology and deconstruction during the early and mid 1980’s), Caputo believes that Taylor’s deconstructive method emphasizes incorrectly such an over-preoccupation with the downbeat orientation (the ironic retraction of meaning). In other words, Caputo feels that the early Taylor’s approach does not observe deconstruction’s “undecidable fluctuation of the event that stirs in the name of God... in his death of God theology as “atheology, not

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<sup>657</sup> Ibid.

<sup>658</sup> Ibid.



a/theology.”<sup>659</sup> Therefore, Caputo thinks that the early Taylor errs in making deconstruction atheistic, when it should waver in undecideability. This insight highlights an important point about Caputo’s own ironic approach, which is not such a thing as atheism. In contrast to his own work, Caputo claims that Taylor instead takes “the strong argumentative position of seeing deconstruction as the hermeneutic of the death of God”.<sup>660</sup> Along these lines, Caputo worries that death of God theologies, like Altizer’s and Taylor’s, are really just “thinly disguised *Grands Recits*” (Master Narratives).<sup>661</sup> Accordingly, the Death of God is a grand narrative, which would attempt to make a propositional truth claim, which is inconsistent with the ironic method. The catch of this argument made by Caputo of course is that irony itself is no escape from metaphysics, and it is disingenuous in feigning to dodge such an unavoidable status by suggesting to have found the God of post metaphysics.

Again, in contrast to this consideration, the death of God Caputo wants to keep relevant is not atheism’s account of the end of God in total negation, but the death of what he prefers to call the “God of power,” which is more accurately the death of the metaphysical God, or even more accurately still, the death of metaphysics.<sup>662</sup> In other religiously familiar language, Caputo equates this death of the God of power with “a critique of idols.”<sup>663</sup> In this more religiously friendly language, the religious reader can supposedly equate the death of metaphysics with a type of critique of idolatry, which seems like a natural consistency toward Biblical faith, yet problematically beyond Caputo’s compromising account there is no escaping metaphysics, not even via irony’s promise to suspend the violence of such things. Instead, one idol is replaced by a more abstract and seemingly uncontrolled one, and irony is the metaphysical ground that defines wavering beyond its affirmative indecision. Consequently, Caputo ends this subsection of his argument by admitting that he has no inside information on how well the name of God will

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<sup>659</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 68.

<sup>660</sup> Ibid.

<sup>661</sup> Ibid.

<sup>662</sup> Ibid.

<sup>663</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 69.

continue to remain relevant in the future, whether it will thrive or decline, yet what he is ultimately concerned with he suggests is with keeping alive “the event” that the name of God shelters.<sup>664</sup> Nonetheless, things are not quite as carefree and natural (in the Longinian sense of the term) as he would here have us believe. In what appears to be natural, there remains the underlying effect of human design per the workings of literary style, as Longinus recommended in his discourse of the political sublime.

### **On Radicalizing the Hermeneutical Turn: In Dialogue with Vattimo**

\*d\* Caputo’s next major section is called “On Radicalizing the Hermeneutical Turn: In Dialogue with Vattimo.”<sup>665</sup> In examining Vattimo’s hermeneutical approach to Christianity, Caputo first identifies where his own likenesses to Vattimo reside, and then where his differences and concerns likewise rest with his reading of Vattimo’s theological propositions. In opening his comparative juxtaposition, Caputo makes nine prominent comparisons between himself and Vattimo. These comparisons are briefly stated: First, Caputo compares how both thinkers come from an Italian Catholic background. Second, Caputo points out that Jacques Maritain’s critique of modernist “dogma” was a strong influence on both him and Vattimo early in their developments. Third, Caputo feels similarly towards fundamentalism and authoritarianism as does Vattimo, and both have similar approaches in questioning the politics of the previous popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, which he contrasts to a more favorable preference for “the spirit of” the Second Vatican Council.<sup>666</sup> Fourth, Caputo suggests that he and Vattimo both share a strong influence from Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Gadamer.<sup>667</sup> Fifth, Caputo mentions how he and Vattimo have each found ways to “reinscribe, reinvent, or reaffirm” their Christian beginnings through postmodern parameters.<sup>668</sup> Sixth, Caputo and Vattimo both partake in

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<sup>664</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 70.

<sup>665</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 71.

<sup>666</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 70-71.

<sup>667</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 72.

<sup>668</sup> Ibid.

an ironic Christianity, which he indirectly describes as meaning that they both are weary of “modernist certitudes.”<sup>669</sup> Seventh, Caputo highlights that both he and Vattimo promote “weakening” “metaphysical objectivism” to make way for a faith without certitudes.<sup>670</sup> Eighth, Caputo points to how both he and Vattimo have a strong affinity to the concept of “the God of love” and a “hermeneutics of charity.”<sup>671</sup> Ninth, where Vattimo is the progenitor of the concept he calls “weak thought,” Caputo explains that he has adopted his terminology and applied it specifically to theology, which results in his “weak theology”.<sup>672</sup>

Basically, in these nine similarities, there are two major likenesses that Caputo identifies. First, they both come from Catholicism. Second, they both espouse an ironic-Christianity that comes through the political philosophy of Maritain and is re-envisioned in the name of a “hermeneutics of charity.” In other words, the above listed similarities, numbered two through nine, are more or less merely re-descriptions of the implications of the sixth similarity, but merely offered in different terms, or from a different angle of the same phenomenon. In this methodological similarity, which again is specifically their shared propensity for irony, the significance of the variants of their affirmative gestures of their particular projects are quite argumentatively the same, in the end, which is consequently without end.

### **The Secularization Theorem**

Caputo’s next subsection is called “The Secularization Theorem.”<sup>673</sup> In this section, Caputo continues his affirmative examination of the work of Vattimo. Specifically, he identifies Vattimo’s process of weakening thought to be a “two-pronged” undertaking, much like his, which again is a partially veiled allusion to the ironic approach operative in

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<sup>669</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 73.

<sup>670</sup> Ibid.

<sup>671</sup> Ibid.

<sup>672</sup> Ibid.

<sup>673</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 74.

both projects.<sup>674</sup> Caputo nonetheless describes such ironic method in Vattimo by the following terms. Firstly, he says that Vattimo's weakening of Being involves a close affiliation between the work of Heidegger and Nietzsche, where the language of absolute foundations gives way to "perspectives" and "interpretive schemata," which is the ironic complication of immediate perception by another name, and to whose predecessors Caputo also is in debt.<sup>675</sup> Secondly, Caputo says that Vattimo's weakening of God happens via Paul's language of kenosis, which he properly identifies is oriented in Vattimo's reinterpretation of it as the incarnation of charity and the self-sacrifice of God working towards the process of secularization.<sup>676</sup> In other words, the focus upon kenosis and its role in secularization is the affirmative content of Vattimo's irony, which are qualities that Caputo's own project adopts in its own manifestations to a large degree, as we have previously demonstrated.

Further demonstrating the inner complexities of the ironic method, Caputo identifies that Vattimo's secularizing process of kenosis is a successor of the "death of God theologies," which more or less becomes beyond a blunt reading (missing or overlooking the *possibility* of irony) of the text a complicated affair due to the wavering of Vattimo's commitments to an active nihilism contra his prayers to something more significant, although Caputo seems less inclined to highlight this discrepancy. Nevertheless, in this consideration of what in the end amounts only to Vattimo's affirmative promotion of secularization as the Christian truth, Caputo plays the fool to the *possibility* of Vattimo's irony, thereby obscuring the true futility that is operative in their mutual evaluations of each other's projects, outside of an evaluation of the ironic method that is guiding the formal meaning of each thinker's respective projects, which are much closer in form than acknowledged in this text. Instead of examining this important aspect head on, Caputo instead only contemplates the affirmative moments of Vattimo's project without discussing the instability of the weakness of such affirmations, such as when he identifies in correspondence that both weak theology's and weak thought's political correlate is

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<sup>674</sup> Ibid.

<sup>675</sup> Ibid.

<sup>676</sup> Ibid.

nonauthoritarian democracy, which in aesthetic terms is equivalent to a proliferation of affirmative accounts without restraint or master signifier.<sup>677</sup>

Essentially, in laying out his approvals of Vattimo's project, Caputo summarizes that the consistent essence behind his and Vattimo's shared return to religion is that both likemindedly amount to a rhetorical promotion for pluralism and hospitality, via their traditional influence from what we might call the prophetic impulse of Christianity.<sup>678</sup> This approval plays on top of the foreknowledge that irony is at work, which would make such consistencies and their alternate inconsistencies between their projects *potentially* much less significant than we are being led to believe.

### **The West or Christianity**

Next, moving in consideration of further examples of such affirmative inconsistencies, Caputo entitles his following subsection "The West or Christianity." It is in this section that Caputo begins to outline where he sees several problems with Vattimo's project. In particular, Caputo seems worried about the "privilege" that Vattimo allots to Christianity and the West, which he compares to Heidegger's privileging of the Greeks over Christianity.<sup>679</sup> Regarding his reservations about this privileging, Caputo says, "My concern is that there is an unguardedness in talk like this, considering that each time different people use these expressions, like "our" country or religion, they mean different countries and different religions".<sup>680</sup> Thus, in Vattimo's promotion of Christianity as the origin of secular non-authoritarian democracy, Caputo sees an exclusionary mythos being given form. In resolution to this possible problem, Caputo then asks why Vattimo might not attempt to make his discourse more complicated via a "gesture of strategic reversal," whereby he suggests making women or Jews the universal emblem of Vattimo's appeal to

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<sup>677</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 75.

<sup>678</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 77.

<sup>679</sup> Ibid.

<sup>680</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 78.

biblical tradition.<sup>681</sup> In correspondence, Caputo also suggests that Vattimo is incorrectly a “critic of the transcendence of God in Levinas,” which we mentioned in the last chapter. In response to Vattimo’s charge that the poststructuralist God is wholly Other, Caputo replies that Vattimo misses Levinas’s focus on “the face of the neighbor here below.”<sup>682</sup> Thus, Caputo suggests, Levinas’s Jewish deflection of God into the face of the neighbor does the same work as Vattimo’s Christian kenosis.<sup>683</sup> Caputo is here alluding to Vattimo’s identification of his project as superior to that of the deconstruction project because of poststructuralism’s emphasis on the otherness of God. As we have earlier shown, Vattimo identified this point in his other writings, whereby he felt Levinas’s idea of God as Wholly Other, in the spirit of existentialism, was not material enough in its focus. In this gap of transcendence, Vattimo sees the old metaphysical violence holding sway, which is where he *says* he believes that his kenosis theory would be better than such overly transcendental theologies.<sup>684</sup> In making this distinction, Caputo raises a valuable consistency between their positions that Vattimo would seemingly disown. However, Caputo is assuming that Vattimo is being serious about his affirmations regarding the differences between his and Levinas’s work, and while he may be, we cannot definitively take him at his word.

Likewise, Caputo also thinks that Vattimo’s privileging of Christianity would also be a problem for other religious belief systems such as Islam.<sup>685</sup> The playfulness of Caputo’s charges against Vattimo in these regards, however, again reside in the ironic disposition of Caputo’s own project, which would incidentally make such politically correct platitudes to Judaism and Islam also in part problematic, because if he were pressed on such cultural entities themselves, he would have to admit that they too must be subjected to irony’s reservation, if they were to avoid the undesirable consequence of becoming fundamentalisms. Therefore, Caputo’s defense and promotion of such Others, once the

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<sup>681</sup> Ibid.

<sup>682</sup> Ibid.

<sup>683</sup> Ibid.

<sup>684</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 37.

<sup>685</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 79.

politically correct platitudes are voiced in his affirmative moods, could only ever be a partial affirmation, which is, when the dust settles, merely one more instance of colonizing the Other via the Same (theology/metaphysics qualified by the metaphysical vision of irony), more or less. Again, whether or not Caputo can hold affirmations in full fidelity is a matter of faith in irony's properties. From a classical logical sense, the Judaism and Islam that Caputo would defend are castrated variants thereof, at least according to the requirements of such by the fundamentalist observers of both faiths. Accordingly, irony is a self-sacrificing *metaphysical* account, with its own totalizing framework and dualistic heroes and villains (basically offered now as metaphysics vs. non-metaphysics via its various guises, with the hyphen in the latter containing an important distinction).

The other major problem that Caputo sees in Vattimo's work is the "deep family resemblance" he identifies in Vattimo's secularization thesis and its affiliation with death of God theologies.<sup>686</sup> In keeping with his affirmative defense of Judaism, on this topic, Caputo further identifies that the process of transition from transcendence to immanence inherent to such death of God theologies has the consequence that "somebody has to play the bad guy," as the prior schema or paradigm to be overcome, and Caputo believes that this again operates to inadvertently demonize Judaism.<sup>687</sup> Again, if we take the dream of weakened thought to be merely another social idealism, qualified as it is, with the negative apparatus of ironic writing that is a "working" myth akin to magic, instead of a first order mythology, we must question the seriousness with which Caputo's position is undertaken, or even the final potential it might effectively command in critiquing Vattimo's project of the same orientation, without misrepresenting itself as another metaphysical account, which it unavoidably is, after the rhetoric gesturing otherwise is critically considered.<sup>688</sup>

It is not that Caputo is incorrect, when he identifies that Vattimo's affirmative content harbors "a supersessionist story of the transition from the alienated Old Law of the Pharisees to the benign New Law of love and the gift..." or, when he says that "The hint of

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<sup>686</sup> Ibid.

<sup>687</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 80.

<sup>688</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 81.

Marcion is never far from this story, however much it is resisted and revised.<sup>689</sup> Instead, he is attacking what he knows to be more than likely an affirmative instance of Vattimo's irony, which would not adopt such a commitment in a serious fashion, but only with a reservation that would compromise a strong adherence to such a claim from commencement, and unseat the charge of the metaphysically oriented critic, as Caputo himself has said in his essay on the woman-truth<sup>690</sup>. In other words, Caputo by not discussing the possibility of the ironic weakness of such affirmations is inevitably feigning or choosing to fall for Vattimo's positive content, when he knows that there is a very good possibility that Vattimo is not speaking earnestly. It is possible that Caputo's reading of Vattimo is right, but then we are assuming he is right about Vattimo, and then that we are right about our reading of him being right. Once irony is known to be in play the more methodologically consistent hermeneutic is to approach such affirmations with a degree of levity.

Therefore, when Caputo says, "I do agree with Vattimo's aim of disarming the metaphysics of apocalypticism, the dualism of two worlds..., Like him... I do affirm the one and only world we know... But I want to preserve the salvific effects of distance, of the shock or trauma of an "unconditional claim" that disrupts the human-all-too-human course of the "world," we must take his distinction from Vattimo with a grain of salt.<sup>691</sup> Vattimo, as self-admitted ironist<sup>692</sup>, maintains this distance via his method, which in the end never commits him so strongly to what Caputo would here like to reduce to an emphasis on his meaning to merely to take place in the surface content of his affirmative moods. Nonetheless, Caputo plays along without qualification or warning, thereby taking the fall for Vattimo's irony without betraying the larger comical predicament of the task in process, when he claims to object to such death of God theologies on two grounds. Firstly, Caputo again says he is worried about supersessionist theories that portray Judaism as a religion of

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<sup>689</sup> Ibid.

<sup>690</sup> Caputo, "Supposing Truth to be a Woman."

<sup>691</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 81.

<sup>692</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 41. "Metaphysics cannot be overcome but only verwunden-accepted, distorted, and continued in ironic directions that are known to be provisional..."



the father.<sup>693</sup> Secondly, Caputo claims he is concerned that such supersessionist accounts tend to become grand narratives because in telling us that “they have traced the underlying historical structure of matters they also fall victim to manifesting a metaphysical account.”<sup>694</sup>

Consequently, Caputo is not done in this strong critique turned by default into play. Once again stopping along the path to stop and smell the flowers, Caputo additionally claims he has a problem with the idea that orthodox faith in the United States is somehow “on the wane,” which he thinks Vattimo wrongfully assumes.<sup>695</sup> The problem with these insights of course is that Vattimo does not necessarily mean any of them with such severity that he would ever risk “manifesting a metaphysical account” of the sort that Caputo is warning about. While it would be an equally bad oversight to suggest that such surface affirmations bear no significance to the differences between the thinkers, it remains definitively important that an emphasis on them must be qualified by the likely role irony is here enacting on meaning, otherwise the metaphysical thinker will stray from the path. It is from something like such a lighthearted sense then, that we might hazard a reading of Keller’s remark on the book’s back cover to more than likely summarize the critical possibilities of the text when she identifies the conversation as a “good humored volume,” without herself explaining either the nature of such good humor, or its function in the text’s communicative end. In sum, the qualifying role of a possible irony defines the dialogue’s function as critical encounter. Typically, we would assume that such a meeting of minds would jostle to enact the dialectical resolution of an overcoming resolution, yet no such hostile effect is enacted, at least not with any assured severity. If Caputo and Vattimo do mean anything they say without ironic reservation, then they have gone astray from their larger methodological commitments to attempting to write the overcoming of metaphysics. Giving them the benefit of the doubt, we cannot assume they commit this error.

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<sup>693</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 83.

<sup>694</sup> Ibid.

<sup>695</sup> Ibid.

## Spectral Hermeneutics

The final section of Caputo's essay, where the function of the ironic disposition is consequently indirectly considered, is called "Spectral Hermeneutics."<sup>696</sup> In specific, Caputo asks, "Accordingly, I wonder if Vattimo's weak thinking is too strong and if his version of radical hermeneutics, because it has not truly eradicated this strength, is not sufficiently hauntological-and radical."<sup>697</sup> In other words, Caputo wonders if Vattimo's irony is ironical enough, which fails to make sense if we acknowledge Vattimo's project as an ironic one from the start. In exploring the possible reasons for such an inadequacy of Vattimo's irony, Caputo reiterates later, in deconstruction's mythical language, that what Vattimo's thought really lacks in distinction is something akin to Derrida's concept of Khôra.<sup>698</sup> Basically, as we have already explained, Khôra is another name for difference, which is likewise another name of the aesthetic conceptualization for the wavering between affirmative accounts, which is irony by another name, again, basically. The effect of this figure in Derrida, Caputo suggests is to underline the sense of "the contingency and deconstructibility-the weakness-of the names," which Caputo further says "are inscribed in this desert space and hence the deep and intractable secret in which our lives are inscribed."<sup>699</sup> Further linking it with irony, Caputo also points that "Khôra is also used by Derrida affirmatively, as the quasi condition of the im/possibility of prayer, as a way to describe a scene of messianic hope in the coming of someone, of a Messiah whose figure I cannot describe and hence a scene of desert prayers and tears and of desert hospitality."<sup>700</sup> In contrast to Vattimo, Caputo says that his quasi concept of events are inscribed in the weaker and more "ghostly" play of difference.<sup>701</sup> Caputo's closing verdict on Vattimo's project is that it is too Gadamerian in its mode, which by association leads to coming under

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<sup>696</sup> Ibid.

<sup>697</sup> Ibid.

<sup>698</sup> Ibid.

<sup>699</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 84.

<sup>700</sup> Ibid.

<sup>701</sup> Ibid.

“the spell of Hegel,” or, in other words, under the influence of dialectical or progressive metaphysics.<sup>702</sup> Again, this conclusion is likely misleading, because Khora is merely an affirmative mytheme of the same effect recognized by Vattimo’s comparatively affirmative mytheme of Borges’s library of Babel. The reader is called to interpret both separate affirmations as constituting the space of existential possibility in the leveled play of differences. In this way, Vattimo qualifies Gadamerian tradition through Borges, which makes the threat of Hegelian collapse unwarranted, except upon a strictly content level of interpretation.

Regarding his evaluation of Vattimo’s project through an over dependence upon Gadamer, Caputo further asks, “Does it not here take the form of the thesis that Christianity is a classic truth that needs an updated application in the postmodern or secularized order?”<sup>703</sup> Caputo in asking this question claims to believe that Vattimo’s project falls into serious error in adopting what he calls Gadamer’s “metaphysical distinction between an inexhaustible classic and its current application.”<sup>704</sup> In distinction to Vattimo’s project, Caputo instead suggests his radical hermeneutics is more committed to what is basically an ironic suspension of the metaphysical, yet within this claim Caputo is making the unlikely error of again bypassing the likelihood of Vattimo’s irony to get to the author’s true intent behind his affirmative moods, which cannot withhold a serious investigation of the form operative in their respective projects.<sup>705</sup> In short, Caputo’s critique of Vattimo is by default done in jest, since Caputo surely knows he cannot say anything accurately about the content of his friend’s project without becoming the possible victim of his irony. In other words, any critique of the affirmative content of the project will always fall short of the mark, as Caputo had warned us of Nietzsche’s woman-truth, as earlier explained. In this sense, if we are to take Caputo’s own warnings about the final impenetrability of ironic texts into account for our readings of him, then we must consider the possibility that the dialogue is done in a lighthearted manner. In this fashion, ironic arguments play along with the typical

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<sup>702</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 85.

<sup>703</sup> Ibid.

<sup>704</sup> Ibid.

<sup>705</sup> Ibid.

expectations that such an encounter would traditionally promise in the adherence to established rules of classical argument and contemporary scholarly expectations.

### **Caputo's Q&A: The Power of the Powerless**

The second part of Caputo's contribution to the book is through his recorded dialogue with Jeffrey Robbins titled "The Power of the Powerless."<sup>706</sup> The dialogues are the most interesting part of the text, wherein Robbins demonstrates his command of the subtleties of the subject in briefly touching upon the role of irony and the political implications that some critics have questioned regarding the potential shortcomings of the poststructuralist orientation that is thereby functioning alongside it. While Robbins' emphasis is not placed directly on the role of irony as directly definitive of the death of God dialogue, as we are highlighting, he does demonstrate his familiarity with the topic by asking some interesting questions that are helpful to understanding the role irony does take in Vattimo and Caputo's larger projects. Yet, through most of the dialogues Robbins too plays along with the predictable ebb and flow of his two ironist counterparts, setting up the ironic response in a give and take of affirmative and retractive play.

In commencing his dialogue with Robbins, Caputo explains that in the early nineteen eighties his theoretical focus changed from Heidegger and mysticism to Derrida and the "prophetic or ethicopolitical" elements of religion.<sup>707</sup> In association with these thinkers, Robbins asks Caputo if he is skeptical of metaphysics and mysticism and Caputo explains in response that he is, but not he adds in "such a way as to say there's something bogus... or that we can dismiss" them.<sup>708</sup> In this comment, we see the double nature of Caputo's orientation coming forth. Likewise, when Robbins asks Caputo about the "task of thought," Caputo replies that it must be "affirmative, rather than merely disruptive and negative."<sup>709</sup> In other words, thought cannot be fully affirmative or fully negative, but must

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<sup>706</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 114.

<sup>707</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 115.

<sup>708</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 116.

<sup>709</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 117.

waver in ironic indecision. Caputo, in correspondence, explains that his adaptation of deconstruction writes “with both hands,” which is referring to his usage of the Kierkegaardian allegorical motif that indicates a use of irony. Caputo continues utilizing this motif when he elaborates on his method by referring to his attempts to employ the “left hand of radical critique” with the “right hand of an affirmative,” which points towards a “desire beyond desire.”<sup>710</sup> Consequently, the affirmative is not ever strongly affirmative by logical proof. It is also gesturing towards the duplicity of an ironic commitment in the affirmative itself, which in aesthetic fashion is affirmative-negating (Apollonian-Dionysian), rather than fully affirmative. In sum, the seed of doubt always remains, or interpretation goes all the way down, whereby hermeneutics is a self-sacrificing orientation that presents itself as merely one more aesthetic act, in an ebb and flow of paradigms. In this unrelenting wavering between paradigms the hermeneutic circle is enacted, and from which there is no escape without a leap from its a-logic.

Comparatively, in further describing his project, Caputo once again speaks about a desire for things that are undeconstructible, such as an event, which is, again, the poststructuralist choice (a certain Yea-saying) of staying open to the affirmative hope in the ironic potential in things, as here invoked within the name of God.<sup>711</sup> Thus, in one of his more candid moments of his unrelenting commitment to difference or wavering, Caputo explains to Robbins that we must regard both philosophers and theologians “with a certain ironic distance.”<sup>712</sup> In sum, although not explicitly described as so, this is again Caputo’s method in a nutshell, regarding his return to religion via continental philosophy.

Consequently, in mentioning this commitment to ironic distancing, Caputo also demonstrates a willingness to open the conversation up to discussing his usage of irony, which shows that he treats its usage not as a strong secret, but it instead functions as an open secret, which theoretically speaking is no secret at all. However, the sheer proportion of Caputo’s project that is written ironically without indicating it forthrightly ensures that there remains a general secrecy, including the regionalized specificity that his working

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<sup>710</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 118.

<sup>711</sup> Ibid.

<sup>712</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 118-119.

concept of irony furthermore entails, which also would be missed by most casual readers, even when directly in front of them. The problem in properly identifying such a working concept of irony is perhaps due to the Anglo-North American delay in familiarity with such continental devices, or perhaps it is due to the technocratic elitism of its usage. If one is not familiar with such a conception of irony, then one cannot properly understand the matter as presented.

Next, in offering one of irony's typical qualifying disclaimers (as we have repeatedly seen enacted by our examined poststructuralist authors), Caputo then stresses that in affirming an event he is not suggesting that "one thing is as good as another," by which he means that he is not advocating a total relativism, which is often thought to accompany an unchecked slide of the skeptical orientation into a full blown nihilism. In response to Caputo's explanation of his method's wavering orientation, Robbins says to Caputo that he is concerned with the "nonknowing, the skepticism, and the irony," which he suspects would have a "debilitating effect on anyone's affirmation or desires."<sup>713</sup> In posing this concern, Robbins briefly touches upon the heart of the matter, regarding what deconstruction's critics have generally been worried about, as we have explained earlier. Even more interesting perhaps, Caputo agrees with Robbins that an "endless deconstructibility of things we love poses a challenge," but when Caputo proceeds to offer a justification of his position in response he suggests rather circularly that such instances of being confronted by this "*discouraging*" situation must be met with "*courage*."<sup>714</sup> Unfortunately, Caputo does not elaborate or explain what this would entail. Thus, is not such a vague recommendation of meeting "discouraging" situations with "courage" not yet another diversion back into the vertiginous play of the ironic paradox itself? The solution offered by Caputo, for the apparent problem created by endless deconstructibility, in other words, seems in itself to be merely another instance of a play on the inevitable irony of the discouraging/courage contradiction of our ungrounded circumstances. Thus, Caputo's answer slips away further, back into the communicative-noncommunicative mechanism of the rhetorical play of language's structural dependence upon difference.

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<sup>713</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 119.

<sup>714</sup> Ibid.

Instead of calling Caputo out on this further rhetorical slip, back into disambiguation, Robbins regrettably changes his inquiry's direction slightly and admits that he agrees with Caputo about how our desires are never completed, thereby refocusing his critical questioning to playing along with Caputo's ironic give and take by next questioning Caputo if we do not "at least partially get there?"<sup>715</sup> In relation to God and the Church, Robbins correspondingly asks Caputo if there is not something that is at least partially fulfilling of religious experience and practice, and Robbins asserts that he in comparison believes there is indeed something affirmative about such things. Caputo replies that he believes Robbins' point to be "true," while expanding that "if it were not, we really would be defeated."<sup>716</sup> Yet, by asking if there is something at least partially fulfilling about religious experience, Robbins here is merely offering Caputo's ironic Christian orientation a positive opportunity to run with the subtle rhetorical *twistings* of the innuendo of the device, rather than really staying with the bottomless bottom of matters. Running with the ball, Caputo further qualifies this statement by explaining that these types of experience "are never realized;" and, he then expands on this by reiterating that we "live in the space between what is possible and what is impossible."<sup>717</sup>

In this sense, Caputo is calling attention to the ontological circumstances of life as being limited by a situation much alike to what Muecke, in his study of irony, calls cosmic irony.<sup>718</sup> In this sense the ironic defines our epistemological capacities, both commemorative and projective, by qualifying our historical memories and our future plans and expectations. According to this qualified framework, Caputo next refers to the projective nature of Derrida's concept of the "democracy to come," which seemingly suggests that political progress might come through the event that the name "democracy" contains.<sup>719</sup>

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<sup>715</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 119-120.

<sup>716</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 120.

<sup>717</sup> Ibid.

<sup>718</sup> Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, viii.

<sup>719</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 120.

Further wanting to associate deconstruction with progressive politics, Caputo next contrasts his political sensibilities with those of the late Heidegger. In specific, Caputo says that he rejected Heidegger's "essential thinking" because he could not agree that "Stalinism, Fascism, and Democracy were all essentially the same."<sup>720</sup> In other terms, he is distancing himself from the moral aestheticism or quietism of Heidegger's project. When Robbins subsequently questions Caputo on deconstruction's preference for democracy, Caputo explains that its preference comes from democracy's tendency for "autodeconstructibility," which he equates with the ability for the system to provide "for its own correction."<sup>721</sup> Despite the hope invoked for a "democracy to come," however, both Robbins and Caputo eventually agree that "a place in which there is pure harmony or perfect 'peace'" simply would never come.<sup>722</sup> Instead of such a world of "pure harmony," Caputo envisions that a more democratic system would "be a place where there would be endless and irreconcilable differences... that would be adjudicated without killing one another..."<sup>723</sup> While Robbins doubts that such a system will emerge, Caputo explains that "the very nature of living, of being alive in time and history, means that we affirm, what we desire..." which still "will never come."<sup>724</sup> Thus, while Caputo's irony points towards the hope of a better world of a "democracy to come," he does finally keep such hopes in suspension via his left hand retraction of the skeptical withdrawal of such hope. Thus, in place of a strongly progressive vision, Robbins and Caputo agree instead that the point is to "try to make the world that we do live in as much like that world" as possible.<sup>725</sup> In elaboration, Caputo explains that it is the "structure of hope and expectation" that is

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<sup>720</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 121.

<sup>721</sup> Ibid.

<sup>722</sup> Ibid.

<sup>723</sup> Ibid.

<sup>724</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 123.

<sup>725</sup> Ibid.



important for deconstruction, which means that in the phrase the “democracy to come” the important element is the “to come” rather than “democracy.”<sup>726</sup>

Responding to Caputo’s statement, Robbins imagines that critics of deconstruction might think that the “to come” emphasis might sound a little too “ephemeral.”<sup>727</sup> Caputo then parries this concern of Robbins and such hypothetical critics (Vattimo being one such critic, as we shall see in his dialogue with Robbins), by admitting that this might *appear* true, but this would be an incorrect understanding on their parts, due to the “specter” essence of the “to come,” whose meaning must be more carefully considered by such critics.<sup>728</sup> Basically, what Caputo wants to highlight in his emphasis on the spectral is what he takes to be the importance of “dreaming,” which he suggests to be “essential,” and which he implies his critics have carelessly missed.<sup>729</sup> Generally, the critic misses the double nature of Caputo’s and deconstruction’s irony, yet what they identify to be operative in such a position (the negative retraction of meaning) is thereby in part true nevertheless, but technically, not fully true, at least according to the rules of its own game (which is the “romantic sermon,” as Berlin called it earlier).

In contrast to strong belief systems or codes of morality, Caputo instead suggests, “We need trained political and legal theorists who understand political structures and economics and the law and who can do concrete scientific work, but who are inspired by this dream, by this kind of understanding.”<sup>730</sup> In making this suggestion, Caputo is looking to turn the socio-political onus away from deconstruction itself, and put it on its recipients, as particular political agents, who are each individually called to act. In other words, while the collective metaphysical programmatic ready-made response is suspended (flags and standards), the individual as existential crisis is given socio-political priority. Thus, deconstruction is a call to individual existential response, which can be interpreted on the

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<sup>726</sup> Ibid.

<sup>727</sup> Ibid.

<sup>728</sup> Ibid.

<sup>729</sup> Ibid.

<sup>730</sup> Ibid.

systematic level as promoting a further fragmentation into the particular, or on the phenomenological level as liberating the reader from the author. Problematically, the two events are concurrent happenings via competing mythologies.

According to this advocacy for a particularized political agency, much akin in design to Vattimo's ironic orientation, Caputo claims that by sticking to the phenomenological level he is looking for more "determinate ways to effect the democracy to come," which he contrasts with Badiou and Zizek's post-Marxism that Caputo feels "offers no real economic alternative to capitalism."<sup>731</sup> In making this accusation, Caputo is calling into question the pragmatic capabilities of not only Badiou and Zizek's Lacanianized discourse, but also the possibility of actualizing systematic responses, which are only ever enacted by groups of individuals.

Keeping with his approach of playing along, by now approaching the double commitment of Caputo's project from yet the inverse direction, Robbins next asks Caputo how deconstruction can keep its "critical edge," while speaking of the "affirmative nature of deconstruction?"<sup>732</sup> Caputo not surprisingly replies that deconstruction "negotiates" between these "twin dangers," whereby neither the affirmative nor the negative gain dominance.<sup>733</sup> Again approaching basically the same question from another angle, Robbins then asks Caputo whether it matters if deconstruction is "good or bad."<sup>734</sup> Caputo, in a partially misleading response, asserts that affirmation is always deconstruction's objective in critique, since what it is always affirmative of in critique is the promotion of the other, as a prioritizing of the particular outside of the systematic or official account, which is affirmative only due to the positive reading artificially imposed upon the sublime space that defies our understanding, which is really neither positive nor negative, but unknowable.<sup>735</sup> In this sense, deconstruction's interpretation always puts a positive spin on the loss of the

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<sup>731</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 124.

<sup>732</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 127.

<sup>733</sup> Ibid.

<sup>734</sup> Ibid.

<sup>735</sup> Ibid.

Master signifier, which is the hermeneutic predicament we supposedly find ourselves in (i.e., in the interpretive space where the immediacy of thought is called into doubt, whereby the unquestionable influence of the Divine in guaranteeing direct interpretive or systematic meaning is not a phenomenological given), and indicating this would be a more accurate starting point in developing an answer to Robbins' question. In such an account, the verifiability of good or bad is complicated, and threatened by moral nihilism, although never collapsing into such a full relativism.

In further explaining poststructuralism's consistency of partially always taking us into the unknowability beyond our rational schemas, Caputo defines his objective as being to "restore life to its genuine difficulty" by "disarming the illusions we are always constructing."<sup>736</sup> Demonstrating what would seemingly always be the motivation of working towards achieving a strong commitment against systematic thought, Caputo revealingly says, "If people actually believed that they really don't know in some deep way what is true, we would have more modest and tolerant and humane institutions."<sup>737</sup> In return, Robbins responds to Caputo's statement that likewise if everyone believed the same thing as per Marxism or Christianity the world would also be a simpler place.<sup>738</sup> Basically, in identifying the importance of the equality of harmonized solidarity, Robbins then gets Caputo to further qualify his idealistic sounding statement, wherein Caputo distinguishes "simplicity" from "uniformity."<sup>739</sup> Elaborating on what he means by such a distinction, Caputo adds, "What I want everyone to believe is that there is no one thing for everyone to believe. I want everyone to acknowledge the deeply contingent and historicized character of what they believe."<sup>740</sup> In association, Caputo believes that if everyone could acknowledge such contingency in their beliefs then there would "be a flowering of

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<sup>736</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 128.

<sup>737</sup> Ibid.

<sup>738</sup> Ibid.

<sup>739</sup> Ibid.

<sup>740</sup> Ibid.

differences.”<sup>741</sup> The vision that Caputo here confesses to is empirically the same as that of the ideological vision promoted by Burke and other reactionary thinkers. The true complexity of this vision is that its true end is clouded, much like a wolf in sheep’s clothing, or the inverse perhaps. Definitively, it is hard to say, since our orienting capabilities of language have been turned around and around into an indistinguishable and directionless situation. According to such a schema, the political as a dialectical mytheme has become impossible.

In response to Caputo’s promotion of his vision, and once again getting close to the definitive problematic raised against the postmodern situation by critics, Robbins worries that such a structureless flowering of differences and contingency would be akin to psychosis or schizophrenia.<sup>742</sup> In essence, Robbins is here invoking what Taylor called the solar inversion, where categories and rational thought collapse into the flux of a system-less system (a totality as the romantic new mythology), akin in ground to Hume’s empirical vision, where reference or greater significance are lost in the play of the particular. Knowing exactly where Robbins is going with this concern, Caputo offers his positive interpretation of this situation, when he explains that the “idea of some kind of postsecular moment” arises from Nietzsche’s death of God because such an end to truth means the end of “monism or reductionism” in general, which would by default also include secularism.<sup>743</sup> Thus, in much the same way as Vattimo suggests he has outwitted the mechanics of Nietzsche and Heidegger by mythologizing their insights differently, Caputo similarly suggests, “Nietzsche fancied himself a prophetic voice, but he didn’t see that coming.”<sup>744</sup> Yet, as we have already demonstrated, Zoroaster’s symbol was not the snake, but was the *snake and the eagle combined*, moving *in wide circles*, where the snake was coiled around the eagle in flight.<sup>745</sup> Thus, according to such imagery, it would appear that Nietzsche did

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<sup>741</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 129.

<sup>742</sup> Ibid.

<sup>743</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 133.

<sup>744</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 133.

<sup>745</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 12.

see Caputo and Vattimo coming, and parted from them laughing, at their laughing and weeping at him, much as with Nietzsche's account of the old ascetic and Zoroaster in the forest.<sup>746</sup> Whereby, finally alone again, Zoroaster infamously ponders, "it be possible! This old saint in the forest hath not yet heard of God is Dead!"<sup>747</sup> Naturally, the death that is finally significant in this encounter is the death of the metaphysical determinacy of truth, which is seemingly missed by an ironic-Christianity, which reenacts the Nietzschean movement with the hope that an affirmative representational content will ideologically suit the liberal context, without sliding into either a Marxist/socialist State or a traditionally understood Fascist State in the spirit of Hitler or Mussolini.

Continuing with his response to Robbins, in contrast, Caputo explains that people who do not like Heidegger or Derrida tend to group them together, but he believes that they are very different.<sup>748</sup> In distinction from Derrida, Caputo says that he finds inspiration in Derrida, but that he also goes where Derrida does not regarding religion, because Derrida regarded himself as "rightly passing for an atheist," while Caputo suggests that he "rightly passes as a Christian."<sup>749</sup> Adding to his image as a more religiously sensible thinker, Caputo explains that Derrida thought of him (Caputo) as a theologian, rather than as a philosopher.<sup>750</sup> Further distancing himself from Derrida's shadow, Caputo also emphasizes to Robbins the influence of Kierkegaard upon his thought and writing.<sup>751</sup> In explaining that his writing method is indebted more to Kierkegaard than Derrida, Caputo very revealingly says, "Kierkegaard of the aesthetic literature is the model for the way that I write-which is, again, another difference between me and Derrida. Derrida is subtle, elusive, playful, and avant-garde writer. I'm a playful writer, but not like Derrida, who is very difficult to

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<sup>746</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 2.

<sup>747</sup> Ibid.

<sup>748</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 135.

<sup>749</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 136.

<sup>750</sup> Ibid.

<sup>751</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 137.

read.”<sup>752</sup> The two important things that Caputo identifies in this quote are that one: his writing is ironic in the same fashion as Kierkegaard; and, two: Derrida’s writing is cryptically avant-garde, which is even more elusive than a mere either/or in invoking the rhetorical guises of the sublime. As Rorty has suggested, much of these literary devices enacted by Derrida are invoking not established conventions of meaning, but are calling forth poetic instances of a personal meaning, “private allusions,” where “philosophy” becomes impenetrably autobiographical, much in the vein of symbolist and subsequent modernist writers of the flux.<sup>753</sup> However, demonstrating that a Kierkegaardian irony operates predominantly in Derrida too, Caputo likewise explains that his acquaintance with Kierkegaard is what helped him to understand Derrida.<sup>754</sup> The natural coincidence of irony and private allusion is not surprising considering their common root in rhetorical craft, as parabasis, or the deferral of meaning, which is the poststructuralist motivation in averting the rational mind, which it believes to be a violent idolatry.

After defining his project as methodologically indebted to these two authors, Kierkegaard and Derrida, Caputo then attempts to summarize what his project, as a result, tries to honor, when he adds, “What I try to cultivate, what I have learned from both Derrida and Kierkegaard, is this power of laughing through your tears, which distinguishes both from Heidegger.”<sup>755</sup> It is true that this position is distinct from Heidegger, in the affirmative reading it places upon the aesthetic possibility in things, yet it does this according to aestheticism’s rules of play. We have heard this language before from the early Taylor, where the solar inversion was to be met by an affirmative rather than a negative orientation, yet while Taylor came to later interpret this distinction as finally unimportant, Caputo is here insisting that a fundamental difference separates the two responses, when he has already suggested that it is more than likely that Heidegger knows of irony or the woman-truth.

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<sup>752</sup> Ibid.

<sup>753</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 122.

<sup>754</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 138.

<sup>755</sup> Ibid.

Further trying to distance deconstruction from aestheticism, Caputo then says to Robbins, “Derrida will emphasize the mirror play of complications that beset a decision, but Derrida is telling you what Fear and Trembling tells you, that at a certain point deliberation must cease and you must decide.”<sup>756</sup> According to Derrida’s existential phenomenology of reading, Caputo further reflects, “Then I saw clearly what a bad take it was on deconstruction to view it as aestheticism, as antireligious or ethically irresponsible.”<sup>757</sup> Consequently, the verity of what Caputo is here claiming harbors some ambiguities and complexities that are not entirely forthright in what he is here saying, since the kind of aestheticism that Derrida avoids is accomplished if we buy into the mythical device of the hermeneutic circle as inescapable. Basically, Derrida is not antireligious because he is ironic, which means he is only not anti-religious because he is not fully aesthetic either, which collapses back into the circularity of a self-sacrificing logic, irony (Nietzsche’s circling eagle with a coiled serpent at its neck). In a partial way, Derrida and Caputo favor the particular over the collective/systematic, which is further demonstrated when Caputo says, “...what interests Derrida is situations that are formally undecidable, which is what Kierkegaard is all about, too. ... making ethical choices... requires phronesis, which is not formalizable.”<sup>758</sup> Yet, via irony, Caputo feels that he is not definitively about the particular either, since his affirmative gesture makes his anti-systematic stance never properly antisystematic (i.e., no hyphen to indicate irony’s suspension of severity), but merely in part. Thus, it is not long before the critic is lost chasing his own tail, with the odd taunt from the ironist to speed him/her on in their seemingly futile critique. At bottom, one cannot critique a bottomless author/text, supposedly, because it is self-effacing when necessary, which makes the whole endeavor an elaborate joke, on the critic. The self-sacrifice of irony not only debilitates the critic, but it also debilitates strong thought and systematic thinking if we adopt its rules of play, which are the compromise of the self-sacrifice of ironic detachment. The only way out of the circularity of irony is to take the fall into metaphysics, which incidentally, we have never

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<sup>756</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 139.

<sup>757</sup> Ibid.

<sup>758</sup> Ibid.

really left. Problematically, this alternative is equated by post-structuralism to be a reversion to a type of violent fundamentalism, or so Caputo and Vattimo would have us believe anyway. In a certain sense, this threat is real, and they are warranted to be wary of it, yet feigning to not take this fall themselves is equally troubling.

Envisioning an ideal implementation of the ironic worldview, Caputo speculates, “If one adopted the deconstructive approach to religion that I’m advocating, you would neither fly aircraft into the side of tall buildings nor would you have launched this unjust war in Iraq; you would live in fear and trembling about the things that you believe and keep your fingers crossed that your beliefs will not harm anyone.”<sup>759</sup> Therefore, Caputo’s method is motivated by his worry that a passion for “God” can go “awry” or “mad.”<sup>760</sup> Basically, in suggesting such a concern, Caputo believes that his role as a scholar is to keep the dangers of fanaticism, in all its guises at bay. In his words, Caputo specifically says, “The task of intellectuals is to keep the passion alive while guarding its faults,” which Caputo identifies with criticizing fundamentalism and understanding “what is being affirmed in religion by the general population that has never largely accepted the death of God.”<sup>761</sup> In creating such a sociological framework, Caputo distinguishes between intellectuals that understand these things “with a kind of ironic distance and a more naïve religious faith.”<sup>762</sup> In this sense, the mark of a fundamentalist for Caputo is that there is “no ironic distance” in their religious faith, which is “direct, nonironic, and reactionary.”<sup>763</sup> Caputo sees in such fundamentalist belief structures a “dangerous and uncritical” position that might be “manipulated for nationalistic purposes,” which would “contradict everything that Jesus and the prophets stand for.”<sup>764</sup> Certainly, the type of fundamentalist religious mentality that Caputo identifies is due such criticism and aversion. Yet, one wonders if the ironic position is enough of a

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<sup>759</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 151.

<sup>760</sup> Ibid.

<sup>761</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 153.

<sup>762</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 154.

<sup>763</sup> Ibid.

<sup>764</sup> Ibid.



corrective towards the reactionary tendencies that linger in the aesthetic elements of the deconstructive position, as a metaphysics portraying itself otherwise? What if the abuse of power was no longer a national thing, what if it was transnational and fragmented, and our traditional identifications of its operations were merely keeping up with ironic appearances in some way identified by Sheldon Wolin's notion of a managed democracy?<sup>765</sup>

In relation to deconstruction's own capacity to be supposedly both affirmative and skeptical of religion at once, Caputo importantly questions, "Now the thing is, one could ask, and I always ask myself this-is it possible to inhabit a construction, understanding that it's a construction?... Can you inhabit a tradition with ironic distance?"<sup>766</sup> Unfortunately, Caputo does not directly answer this question; rather, Robbins interjects and answers it for him, in suggesting that Derrida did do this successfully. In response, Caputo cautions Robbins, responding: "Something like that, although he says he rightly passes for an atheist, so his inhabiting was even more ironic than the believer's."<sup>767</sup> In development of this thought, Caputo suggests that according to his own vision that "the formula 'rightly passing for' is a good one for everybody, including believers... It builds the distance and the irony into the belief, which is what I treasure in it."<sup>768</sup> In this sense, Caputo interprets irony to be a check against a double danger, where the threat of aestheticism is held back, and yet the threat of religious fanaticism is too. Regrettably, Caputo is never forced to address the faith commitment required by deconstruction needed to believe it can inhabit a

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<sup>765</sup> For example, around the time Derrida was about to enter his middle period of literary experimentation, leading American political strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski was already identifying this more complex political situation. In specific, Brzezinski notes: "Today we are again witnessing the emergence of transnational elites... The ties of these new elites cut across national boundaries, their perspectives are not confined by national traditions, and their interests are more functional than national." (Brzezinski, Zbigniew. *Between Two Ages*, [New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1970], 29). What are we to make of the capacity of a critical theory that is concerned with deconstructing such obsolete entities as national traditions and boundaries, when the vision that Brzezinski is here identifying is already near forty five years past?

<sup>766</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 155.

<sup>767</sup> Ibid.

<sup>768</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 156.

construction with irony without letting aestheticism predominate. It is interesting, however, that it is a question he is still vexed by himself, even though he admits to it only indirectly in passing.

In response to Caputo's clarification, Robbins with merit objects to Derrida's adoption of an ironic distance "at the front" of all things by suggesting instead that such a "consciousness" would weaken "the possibilities of genuine political applicability."<sup>769</sup> In return, Caputo replies that perhaps instead of being at the front of consciousness then it might be "in the back of your mind," which Caputo insists is important, in order to distinguish the event from the name.<sup>770</sup> While there is some merit in Caputo's distinction between a front and rear loaded irony regarding the importance of narrative upon our identities, we must wonder whether the distinction truly affects the mechanism of irony that is still working on the technical level of meaning. On the content level, the distinction of a front loaded irony holds. On the stylistic or formal level, it may not. While I agree with what Caputo is saying, I worry about the workings of the second level significance that is still operative in such a rear loaded irony, if presented outside of its context as a metaphysical commitment, where the guarantee of irony's dual commitment is not ascertainable for thought.

At the same time, recognizing the danger of the fall into the particular that form risks, Caputo emphasizes that it is because of the name or, in other words, the institutions of the West that the "memory of Jesus" has been preserved. In connection to this indebtedness, Caputo also adds, "That's why I said to you before that I wouldn't want to go the way of individualism versus community, because communities preserve traditions and they pass on memories." Therefore, the two commitments waver, that of the community and that of the individual, thereby keeping each other in line. Whether or not such a wavering holds, again is a matter of faith, from a metaphysically logical stand point it does not, yet there is no outside of metaphysics even for Caputo's creedal commitment to romanticism's wavering non-conceptualization of irony. In other words, irony is theoretically non and conceptual in its abandoned textual state, yet it was conceptualized by

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<sup>769</sup> Ibid.

<sup>770</sup> Ibid.

human design in origin all the same. Literary constructs are as contingent as any other human construct. The particular is just as contingent and metaphysical as the systematic, yet the effects have different socio-political boundaries of thinking.

In summary, Caputo agrees that such an adoption is “deconstruction in a nutshell,” because through the influence of the “unconditional event” the “inherited form of life” is forced to “reinvent itself anew.”<sup>771</sup> Thus, in its critical movement, deconstruction positively interprets the openness beyond inherited accounts, in order to save them from their more malign tendencies, yet Caputo is also calling upon religious thought to affirm the things that an aesthetic philosophy could not effectively affirm upon its own. Whether or not he is able to accomplish this task is a matter of faith, either way: 1) via the affirming lens of the metaphysic of irony, or 2) via the refuting lens of a classical metaphysics.

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<sup>771</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 158.

## Chapter 7: Vattimo's Argument in After the Death of God

Like Caputo's contribution to the text, Vattimo's "*argument*" in the book is presented in two separate yet compatible parts. These two parts consist, firstly, of the opening essay "Toward a Nonreligious Christianity," and, secondly, of a recorded question and answer section on the main tenants of Vattimo's thought conducted again by the book's editor Jeffrey Robbins. The opening essay "Towards a Nonreligious Christianity," is also divisible into the following sections: "Knowledge and Interpretation" (p. 27-31), "The Advent of Christianity and the Birth of the Subject" (p. 31-39), and "Charity and the Future of Christianity" (pgs. 39-46). In examining the highlights of each section, we shall examine Vattimo's argument in the text as it relates to irony, the death of God, and his dialogue with Caputo.

### Knowledge and Interpretation

Vattimo begins his essay in the book with a discussion on the central importance requisite in acquiring and assessing knowledge via the operation of interpretation, as evinced by the subsection's title: "Knowledge and Interpretation."<sup>772</sup> In association, Vattimo explains that he operates from a "hermeneutical perspective."<sup>773</sup> Essentially, what he means in saying this is that Vattimo believes that all knowledge is foremost a matter of perspective, which means that it employs a necessary complication of direct observation, via his hermeneutic interpretive approach/disposition.<sup>774</sup> From this all-commencing epistemological framework, Vattimo explains that he believes that definitively "knowledge requires a perspective."<sup>775</sup> Vattimo means that we can never escape perspective, which also means that knowledge is necessarily partial, inherited, and biased to our particular vested

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<sup>772</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 27.

<sup>773</sup> Ibid.

<sup>774</sup> Ibid.

<sup>775</sup> Ibid.

interests and our place within a historical-cultural context.<sup>776</sup> Vattimo also restrictively qualifies these statements, in turn, by adding, “there is no experience of truth that is not interpretative,” which simply means we can never get a real grasp of how things are separate of our perspective and the limitations it brings. In correlation, Vattimo explains that this hermeneutical starting point is where Heidegger begins his “objection to metaphysics,” which commences with the interpretive decision that we cannot have an objective link to Truth/truths.<sup>777</sup> Vattimo explains that for Heidegger, and the hermeneutic tradition in his wake, the key idea is that we are necessarily interpreters “in the world,” rather than objective observers with an “outside” view of things.<sup>778</sup> In a Heideggerian tone, Vattimo affirms, “As being-in-the-world, my interests are very complicated... I cannot say precisely how things are, but only how they are from this point of view...”<sup>779</sup>

Consequently, Heidegger’s hermeneutic emphasis corresponds very reminiscently with Ortega Gasset’s contemporary identification of the operation of the new art, where emphasis is placed on the medium that conducts our experiences of art and the world, rather than on the living content itself. This correspondence is not to be taken lightly, since Heidegger is a product of this intellectual context, which is a neglected study. Instead of *art for art’s sake*, hermeneutics is the study of interpretation for interpretation’s sake, whereby emphasize on hermeneutically examining “human content” is put aside to instead emphasize the “dehumanizing” form or art of interpretation itself. In making this move, Heidegger builds off Schleiermacher’s original romantic diversion from classical hermeneutics to help prioritize a hermeneutics of hermeneutics.

Without questioning this correspondence, however, Vattimo’s adoption of Heidegger’s basic interpretive framework unfolds further in its significance towards the importance of it not only as it pertains to the knowledge of metaphysics and the humanities, but Vattimo also looks at it as it applies to the sciences. Vattimo is quite focused in this

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<sup>776</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 29.

<sup>777</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 27.

<sup>778</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 28.

<sup>779</sup> Ibid.

essay upon associating the sciences as being under the paradigm of the hermeneutic framework too, which would appear to be a type of address to the perception that continental hermeneutics has not made much commotion outside of the human sciences, while also highlighting science's assumed framework as a modern metaphysic. In this mood, Vattimo takes significant care to demonstrate how science equally always commences from a specifically located point of view and "functions under certain expectations and premises" pertaining to the employment of such by "situated and vested human operators."<sup>780</sup> Building off this clarification, Vattimo rather incautiously explains that Heidegger's "century old claim" is now "accepted fact" (a strong statement) that "scientists do not objectively describe the world," yet the admittedly few scientists and engineers I have discussed postmodernism with have absolutely no idea who Derrida or Heidegger are, let alone accept either of them as fact. This trend persists with university educated people outside the arts. While the basic impulse of Vattimo's insight seems fine, which is that science is not fully objective, the naturalization of the Heideggerian paradigm seems not as obvious, since more is at stake than a simple objectivism vs. perspectivism as a rigidly distinguished false dichotomy acknowledges.

In a largely obscuring way, Vattimo's historical explanation of the origins of such reasoning nevertheless suggests that Heidegger's existentialism is the "result of a Kantian philosophical sensibility passing through the crucible of anthropological culture."<sup>781</sup> Minus the philosophical jargon, Vattimo is here suggesting that Heidegger's hermeneutical position is linked with the changes of cultural understanding brought into effect by cultural anthropology and the recognition of the necessary pluralism it brought forth, which interestingly neglects to mention anything of German Romanticism as a radicalization of Kant or the reactionary connections with the counter-enlightenment that we have shown Isaiah Berlin to have identified with such cultural anthropological writings that attacked Enlightenment ideals.

In place of this oversight, Vattimo continues his genealogical account by distinguishing between Immanuel Kant's inclination towards system and universalism from

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<sup>780</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 28.

<sup>781</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 30.

what he identifies as the comparative anthropology of such pluralistically minded thinkers like Claude Levi-Strauss.<sup>782</sup> While Vattimo is speaking the truth about these matters, it is via the convenient oversight of the aesthetic tradition as in large part a reactionary metaphysic. Instead, Vattimo chooses to depict the development of the hermeneutic outlook in the politically correct guise of being the product of a mere repercussion of the maturation of the weakening of colonialism's totalizing observations about the nineteenth-century study of other cultures, which he claims dramatically altered understanding of knowledge about culture and truth.<sup>783</sup> In developing this line of thought, Vattimo suggests that Kantian attempts to establish a uniform account of "reason" guiding human understanding and practices were thereby exposed as insufficient in the face of cultural anthropology's revelation of cultural "differences."<sup>784</sup> While the validity of the insights that Vattimo is making seem predominantly indisputable, there remains a troubling gap in this genealogical reconstruction that he is weaving to give his secularization premise form.

Continuing with his euphemistic account, Vattimo proceeds by suggesting that in contrast to "the first wave of cultural anthropology, the important shift in a new kind of pluralistically friendly thinking comes via Levi-Strauss implementation of an awareness that external cultures do not represent a failing of human reason, but merely a different systematic implementation of internal logic and rule governed behaviors."<sup>785</sup> There is nothing wrong with this insight, except with the oversight we have previously mentioned that it makes. Based on the friendly pluralism this new paradigm brings, Vattimo concludes, "The matter of interpretation is now configured in this way: interpretation is the idea that knowledge is not pure, uninterested reflection of the real, but the interested approach to the world, which is itself historically mutable and culturally conditioned."<sup>786</sup> Yet, this account is offered in place of the glaring anti-democratic origins that ground his

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<sup>782</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 30.

<sup>783</sup> Ibid.

<sup>784</sup> Ibid.

<sup>785</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 31.

<sup>786</sup> Ibid.

framework's origins, championed in the philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger, whose motives were far from the more friendly sounding musings of Vattimo's neo-colonial mythos. The Other that such a mythos promotes is always a silent one, whose discourse, if received, is necessarily heard, despite the rhetorical oversight of such politically correct offerings of such platitudes, via the resignation of postmodernism's ironic superiority to strong accounts. For example, such discourses will speak of deconstructing Christianity in order to hospitably welcome the Jew and the Muslim, as we saw Caputo do in the chapter previous, yet the non-metaphysical ideal governing such a gesture necessarily means that such is at least in part a patronizing reworking of the noble savage motif, where the further away such voices are, the more authentic they become in a self-sacrificing argumentative move. In other words, irony at least in part makes all positions equal, equally wrong. Is such a posture truly welcoming of alterity or merely a duplicitous gesture of an unspoken yet condescending political correctness? The question is again a matter of faith. Classical metaphysical readings would think it was condescending. This question is truly what is at stake in such an ironic disposition, which would predominantly have us believe that there is such a thing as going beyond metaphysics.

### **The Advent of Christianity and the Birth of the Subject**

Vattimo's second section of the essay is called "The Advent of Christianity and the birth of the subject."<sup>787</sup> Consequently, Vattimo's argumentative move in the transition to his second section of his essay is to establish a link between Christianity and the decline of "objectivity," as espoused by the hermeneutic outlook of unavoidable interpretation and subjective truth(s).<sup>788</sup> With passing credit to Wilhelm Dilthey, Vattimo calls upon Saint Augustine's sentiment that truth lives within the subjective.<sup>789</sup> It is interesting that Vattimo sees in Dilthey, and by association with him, Heidegger also, the same decline of

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<sup>787</sup> Ibid.

<sup>788</sup> Ibid.

<sup>789</sup> Ibid.



objectivity as he reads back/forward into Augustine's focus upon the subjective.<sup>790</sup> Dilthey is another interesting figure, who as a proponent of life philosophy, shares the same ideological terrain as Nietzsche, who is far less ambiguous in his employment of such categorizations of such a vision, as a kind of pseudo-Darwinianism. Yet, in championing a bastardized type of life philosophy/hermeneutics of existentialism, Vattimo is again selectively emphasizing his genealogical roots. Granted, he does acknowledge the politically suspect orientation of both Nietzsche and Heidegger in passing, yet perhaps not in proportion to the ramifications that such orientations might have in sum upon their aesthetic methods, which he continues without the isolated consideration they deserve.

Thus, without consideration of these precautions, Vattimo instead makes the connection that Augustine's subjective self, through its focus upon its own subjectivity, is in extension a concern for the subjectivity of the "poor, weak, and outcasts," thereby linking his hermeneutic framework to the same through Augustine. Thus, by claiming to follow Dilthey's schema, Vattimo sees the subjective focus of Christianity as extending its underlying influence towards self-understanding as eventually resulting in Kant's schema of "the truth," which is not in things or outside ourselves, but commences rather from within the reason of man.<sup>791</sup> Vattimo, in connection, describes Kant "in a nutshell," as advocating that the "immediacy of what (we) see" is subsequently recognized as being linked to our own culturally specific languages/constructions/systems of meaning.<sup>792</sup>

In making this distinction, Kant was hoping to find universal structures of meaning inherent to all instances of interpretation, while Vattimo and hermeneutics is taking Kant further than himself and admitting that there are no such categories of interpretation that are universal, only culturally particular categories of meaning and truth.<sup>793</sup> The one exception that he and Caputo often imply is that interpretation is universally prior. Yet, even this we cannot hold to be a strong truth without making a metaphysical assertion. This move is not

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<sup>790</sup> Ibid.

<sup>791</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 32.

<sup>792</sup> Ibid.

<sup>793</sup> Ibid.

new with postmodernism or Vattimo, since the German Romantics were among the early reactionary respondents to see such an opportunity lying in wait in the unexplored consequences of the writings of Kant. Basically, Vattimo's insights are largely accurate according to theoretical standards, yet they are underplaying the reactionary element that was at the very minimum operative in the formation of the Kantian response via continental philosophy.

Instead of exploring these reactionary elements, Vattimo takes his conversation from this connection between subjective truth and Kant's limitations to the "crucible of cultural anthropology," with what he perhaps hopes his average reader will confirm is the origin of postmodernism's "increased appreciation for the finitude of existence."<sup>794</sup> In connection, the link that Vattimo wants his reader to here admit is that all languages of meaning are merely only possible languages, rather than necessary languages, or objective. In specific, Vattimo hopes that we will agree with him that "now even mathematics is revealed as only a mathematics," implying there may be other truth bearing systematic structures applied to the world than the ones we know and take for granted as being the "way things are."<sup>795</sup> In further support of his claim, Vattimo cites Wittgenstein's qualifier that in math, if someone arrives at another answer, the question one must ask of oneself is: are they wrong, or are they applying a "different mathematical language?"<sup>796</sup> Naturally, we might add that such a questioning of language might be applied to irony itself, which is indirectly admitted, but less often and never fully by Vattimo and Caputo. In fact, encapsulated in Wittgenstein's qualifier is the very divide between Vattimo and Caputo versus thinkers like Marion and Milbank, whereby to recognize irony as they should like us to, as affirming and negating, one must adopt the case specific language of one or the other camp: aesthetically and religiously balancing, or classical metaphysics.

Demonstrating the closed admission that such ironic stances generally enact in order to arrive at a retracting admission of their own such qualification, Vattimo in correspondence suggests that the recognition of different languages does not "imply that...

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<sup>794</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 33.

<sup>795</sup> Ibid.

<sup>796</sup> Ibid.

the idea of interpretation...” means that “everything goes.”<sup>797</sup> Much like Caputo and Derrida have done elsewhere, as we have previously demonstrated, Vattimo is here specifying in response to such a threat that “there are rules,” whereby “every language functions like a game with its own rules.”<sup>798</sup> In this move, Vattimo undermines the retracting skeptical impulse of the ironic double movement, which thereby closes the circuit of the collapse of strong meaning. To illustrate his point, Vattimo explains that the rules of basketball and those of baseball are important to the proper functioning of their working purposes, but they do not properly interchange.<sup>799</sup> In other words, we might say the same to be true of irony and classical metaphysics. If we read irony from a classical metaphysical view, then we must condemn it to not properly interchange. If we take the leap of faith, which is required by irony’s own metaphysic, then we should not condemn it, but admit that Vattimo can have it both ways. We should not forget, however, that the leap this requires makes problematic Vattimo’s rhetoric that predominates his vision of writing and promoting a non-violent type of discourse that is distinct from classical metaphysics in any strong way. This danger is not averted.

From a classical metaphysical or logical expectation of the rules, the seeming relativism that cultural anthropology might lead us towards is averted in typical Schlegelian fashion by not permitting nihilism to gain a definitive metaphysical status, as something hazardous to the hierarchical health of society, as understood by the various swan songs of the decline of the West, voiced by such conservatives as Spengler and his co-reactionaries. Without a consideration of these reactionary origins, this qualified nihilism that Vattimo is here offering might actually pass in the politically correct garb it is draping itself in, as a consequence of the anthropological liberation of truth, and while such accounts do contain some truth, they remain incomplete, and therein potentially dangerous.

In the subsequent paragraph, Vattimo again returns to elaborating his narrative of how Christianity contributes to the formation of such a philosophy of interpretation, or

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<sup>797</sup> Ibid.

<sup>798</sup> Ibid.

<sup>799</sup> Ibid.

Heideggerian and Nietzschean perspectivism/hermeneutics.<sup>800</sup> Accordingly, Vattimo suggests that Christianity contributes to the birth of such a philosophy for “many reasons”.<sup>801</sup> Firstly, Vattimo again identifies that Christianity turns the Western mind “inward,” as he mentioned earlier in his attribution of such to Augustine. Summarizing his earlier points on the subject, he rephrases this move as Christianity anticipating the “modern philosophies of subjectivity,” which essentially means that without Augustine and Christianity there never would have been a Descartes or a Kantian subject of the Enlightenment.<sup>802</sup> Expanding on the role of Christian influence on modern philosophies of subjectivity, Vattimo likewise explains that he believes that such later modern philosophies could not have been thought apart from their context of arising in the cultural milieu of Christian civilization(s).<sup>803</sup> Then, Vattimo’s next argumentative move is to link the prominence of interpretation with the origins of the Judeo-Christian tradition itself.<sup>804</sup>

In order to demonstrate the naturalness of this connection, Vattimo calls upon Jesus and Moses as archetypal interpreters of tradition and ontological meaning, via their readings of tradition and God’s covenant (in a gesture that incidentally compromises Caputo’s attack of his program as neglecting such a Judeo component in his narrative, whether or not this move was done in response to Caputo’s criticism is undetermined). Accordingly, Vattimo’s reading of the event of the Pentecost in this schema similarly ushers forth a new era of the Spirit, where the powers of interpretation must venture forth in the wake of the message of Christ.<sup>805</sup> Returning to accommodate Judaism again, Vattimo adds that it is likewise by nature a continual hermeneutic encounter with the Hebrew Scriptures, as he identifies in Walter Benjamin’s *Theses On the Philosophy of History*, which demonstrated in its Talmudic terms of thought an inherent role of interpretation in

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<sup>800</sup> Ibid.

<sup>801</sup> Ibid.

<sup>802</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 34.

<sup>803</sup> Ibid.

<sup>804</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 34-35.

<sup>805</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 34.

maintaining the living legacy of religious observance.<sup>806</sup> Likewise, Vattimo argues that the Christian gospels are widely recognized as “written reports based on oral traditions.”<sup>807</sup> Where is Vattimo going with all these loosely connected associations about religion and interpretation, interweaving examples from Judaism and Christianity? He is working towards a defense of Nietzsche and Heidegger as collaboratively Judeo-Christian thinkers. In development of this fundamental insight of his project, he suggests that the answer is that Christianity is a “stimulus/message” that begins a tradition of thought that will finally result in the “its freedom from metaphysics.”<sup>808</sup> In other words, Vattimo wants to identify in the Jewish and Christian traditions an inherent affiliation with the hermeneutic position, which he is arguing transpires from its Judeo-Christian context, making Heidegger and Nietzsche a product of Judeo-Christianity, rather than a reactionary rejection of it.

In a moment of infrequent qualification, Vattimo cautions that he does not mean that metaphysics was a mistake to be overcome, because any kind of denunciatory claim would likewise “fall into the trap of metaphysics.”<sup>809</sup> In other words, even the aesthetic reductionism of cultures to externalizations is a metaphysical orientation, which demonstrates Vattimo wavering back towards the religious via irony. According to this line of reasoning, he offers in supplication to his religious readers the association that atheism is a metaphysical assertion about how the world “really is,” because it likewise attempts to speak of the objective truth.<sup>810</sup> Disassociating himself from such an atheistic commitment, Vattimo here acknowledges that such a strong position would be an error of interpreting interpretation to have a direct link with how things are outside our interpretive schemas, which he, recall, thinks inaccessible.<sup>811</sup> Instead, he is offering the wavering between

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<sup>806</sup> Ibid.

<sup>807</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 35.

<sup>808</sup> Ibid.

<sup>809</sup> Ibid.

<sup>810</sup> Ibid.

<sup>811</sup> Ibid.

atheism and theism of irony, where theoretically, at least, neither position would gain prominence to outweigh the other.

Next, Vattimo further indirectly highlights the ironic nature of his position in what he has just stated, by explaining that “in order to say something, or anything, I must draw on particular words... from some particular tradition.”<sup>812</sup> In other words, without an affirmative content, the negative downbeat retraction of irony cannot operate. Thus, the above qualifier of his framework’s dependency upon the double movement of irony should serve as a warning about the entire positive/affirmative content of Vattimo’s argument, from which he can retreat when advantageous, because there is no guarantee to consistency of meaning once irony is established as being operative, even if only part, since we cannot properly know when to take such an author serious or not.<sup>813</sup> In such instances of perplexity, the sincerity/insincerity paradox suspends the rational mind, and bars thought from the otherness of the private/individual. Writing becomes literary, rather than argumentative or propositional, which is not to say there is not something propositional about irony and the literary, although as Gasset exemplifies these matters are not very politically correct.

Indirectly commenting on his deployment of an ironic argument, Vattimo hints that “my argument is not traditional, but one of transmission, of language, and of the culture in which we live together.”<sup>814</sup> In introducing the above precautionary qualifier about his position, Vattimo again implies that his argument does not abide by “the rules of logic,” which means self-contradiction is to be expected, yet not determinately so, so we might know when he is serious and when not.<sup>815</sup> Instead of a logical argument, Vattimo again allusively explains that what he is writing is rather a “litany,” which we might assume he means in reference to such as a type of ceremonial or liturgical type of prayer.<sup>816</sup> Recall, we

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<sup>812</sup> Ibid.

<sup>813</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 35.

<sup>814</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 36.

<sup>815</sup> Ibid.

<sup>816</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 35.

have seen Caputo use this metaphor to allude to ironic affirmations as spectral entities or conceptualizations that would manifest in forms that are outside of philosophy's totalizing language of concept and argument. In this sense, a prayer or litany is not a strongly articulated calling forth, yet is ironic instead. Interestingly, Vattimo explains his litany offered as taking the form of the question: "Did you read this or that?"<sup>817</sup> The question he poses appears to be an instance of an appeal to the "either/or" dilemma inherent in taking sides about topics of argumentative criticism. Subsequently, Vattimo rephrases his meaning, when he comments, "In other words, the only arguments I can offer are not those that are traditionally recognized as such by those who police the rules of logic."<sup>818</sup> Without directly confessing to utilizing irony in his approach, this comment is pretty much as clear of a confession as we might expect from Vattimo of his method.

The approach of playing between affirmations of tradition and retracting such affirmations by ironic writing that Vattimo adopts in his project is explained by him to be necessary because he furthermore believes that without the Bible there would be no language or thought possible for anyone to adopt in a meaningful way.<sup>819</sup> In other words, Vattimo is suggesting that the Bible provides the "very instruments" he has that allow him to "think and to talk," which is an extension of his identification of Heidegger and Nietzsche as being necessarily Christian thinkers, in spite of their own anti-Christian tendencies.<sup>820</sup> Adding to his declaration a supportive pedigree, Vattimo references the twentieth-century Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce, whom he cites as saying, "We cannot but call ourselves Christians."<sup>821</sup> Similarly, in order to prove his point about the unavoidably Christian nature of our situation, Vattimo also invokes Voltaire's rejection of institutional Christianity's authoritarianism as for "freedom," and by default Christianity.<sup>822</sup>

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<sup>817</sup> Ibid.

<sup>818</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 35-36.

<sup>819</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 36.

<sup>820</sup> Ibid.

<sup>821</sup> Ibid.

<sup>822</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 37.

In other words, Vattimo sees true Christianity as standing for freedom and democratic pluralism, even when it would apparently contradict its own metaphysical interests, by including in such a liberating orientation the “freedom from (the idea of) truth.”<sup>823</sup>

Half-heartedly, Vattimo here suggests, “In this way perhaps true Christianity must be non-religious.”<sup>824</sup> In place of a definitively true Christianity then, Vattimo wants to offer an ironic Christianity (note the distinction of his choice of the term “non-religious,” not nonreligious minus the hyphen) that keeps human freedoms open by avoiding the propositional certitudes of metaphysical (in the broader sense) truth statements.<sup>825</sup> Vattimo’s fear of metaphysical accounts (in the Heideggerian sense of the term, which is again inclusive of any declarative truth statement) is that when there is an “objective truth” there “will always be someone who is more in possession of it than I and thereby authorized to impose its law of obligation on me.”<sup>826</sup> He shares this fear with Caputo and Derrida. Like Caputo and Derrida furthermore, Vattimo also develops his argument by similarly suggesting that “all forms of authoritarianism” are founded on metaphysical “premises.”<sup>827</sup>

By association then, the alternative to any furtherance of authoritarianism in an argumentative form would therefore be a non-metaphysical/non-declarative type of writing, such as irony.<sup>828</sup> Vattimo, in connection, thinks that authority is easier to explain and is more binding if it is construed metaphysically rather than, he says, if “a government or philosophical official (was) trying to persuade you that a certain action, policy, or belief is in your own best interest.”<sup>829</sup> Yet, irony offers no such direct explanations or arguments either. Thus, Vattimo is distinguishing the appeal by authority to metaphysical justifications

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<sup>823</sup> Ibid.

<sup>824</sup> Ibid.

<sup>825</sup> Ibid.

<sup>826</sup> Ibid.

<sup>827</sup> Ibid.

<sup>828</sup> Ibid.

<sup>829</sup> Ibid.



versus another type of more logical appeal that appeals to persuasion, by which we can only assume he means logical persuasion, which is nonetheless problematic in support of an ironic style of writing, which we have also demonstrated has never itself left metaphysics, but instead operates as a block against logic and direct surface level communication instead.<sup>830</sup>

Nonetheless, Vattimo lays out his “argument” as taking a stance against metaphysics, even though we know we cannot take him seriously. The affirmative content of much of what he is saying is, at least in part, somewhat garnered towards a progressive discourse. For example, in seemingly cogent support of his point against metaphysics, Vattimo explains how George W. Bush’s rhetoric after September 11<sup>th</sup> was charged by “some premises of a metaphysical nature” rather than by a “logical appeal to the best interests of the American people for subsequently invading Iraq.”<sup>831</sup> By distinguishing such language as metaphysical, Vattimo suggests that in this particular example the American people would have been able to recognize the “illegitimacy of a preemptive war.”<sup>832</sup> Yet, while there admittedly seems to be a degree of legitimacy in what Vattimo says, one cannot help wondering if his equally metaphysical distinction, of such supposedly metaphysically blinded citizens versus the non-duped ideal citizenry of his non-metaphysical ironic disposition, is not also an oversimplification, which reduces the greater implications at work in America at the time, of which postmodern resignation could certainly also be charged in compliance. More likely, the American failure was a composite of many metaphysical (mis)understandings that worked towards ensuring no uniform orientation was ever adopted by enough of the populace that moral resistance to such a mission would ever have been strong enough to halt the power of the state, rather than a mere delusion by moral dualism, because also many of these motivations were undoubtedly based on quite secular fears or motivations, such as equally negligent causes like personal detachment and apathy, and furthermore it seems that equating religiously metaphysical language as the sole metaphysical violence operative here, is in its own way, a red herring diverting us

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<sup>830</sup> Ibid.

<sup>831</sup> Ibid.

<sup>832</sup> Ibid.

away from the role that difference itself could play in immobilizing such instances where a collective response might be required.

Continuing with his supposed attack on metaphysics, Vattimo offers also a more religiously oriented association of his point, where he asks: “If Christianity did not liberate us from the objective truth, how could we even maintain our belief in Scripture, or how could we prevent Scripture from being logically inconsistent, if not utterly absurd?”<sup>833</sup> In response to what he identifies as the logical shortcomings of scripture, Vattimo also emphasizes that language does not “only denote logical realities,” since the language of the gospel is a “discourse of values.”<sup>834</sup> In a way, these are helpful insights about scripture, there is nothing wrong in recognizing it as a discourse of values and by identifying that it is not an objective account of truth, yet these insights are attacking somewhat of a straw man, in their reductionistic orientation to the category they describe, which is not to say that Vattimo does not identify certain traits of a certain prevalent religious orientation, yet these are not representative of the religious studies discourse at its best or brightest, which makes such affirmative prescriptions somewhat misdiagnosed.

### **Charity and the Future of Christianity**

The third section of Vattimo’s essay is titled “Charity and the Future of Christianity.”<sup>835</sup> Commencing this section of the argument, Vattimo once again returns to explaining that the move towards secularization/nihilism has gradually led to the realization that “objective being” is a self-consuming idea.<sup>836</sup> Taking as his starting point Nietzsche’s idea that the world “has become a fable/dream,” Vattimo proceeds to the subsequent

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<sup>833</sup> Ibid.

<sup>834</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 38.

<sup>835</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 39.

<sup>836</sup> Ibid.

conclusion that, as a result, “the so-called real world has become a story that we tell each other.”<sup>837</sup> In other words, there is again no escaping metaphysics.

In this return to aestheticism’s giving way of objectivity, Vattimo proceeds next to re-elaborate the inspiration for his theoretical construct of “weak thought,” which he sees arising in the hermeneutic complication of “communities, cultures, sciences, and languages.”<sup>838</sup> In alluding to the importance of the later Heidegger for such an aesthetic view, Vattimo claims, in metaphorically speaking about culture’s affect on our “in-the-worldness,” that: “what makes your house a home is the artificial order you establish.”<sup>839</sup> In this strongly affirmative aesthetic orientation towards culture, Vattimo comes very close to advocating what we might call a vision that is nihilistic or relativist, yet we know that via the irony of his position such expressions are not to be taken in full seriousness either, despite what might seem to be a tendency to prefer this type of vision operative in his project.

Expanding furthermore upon the possibilities of this sentiment, Vattimo cites a quote from Baudelaire that claims that “virtue is against-nature,” whereby Vattimo would distinguish that common understandings of the natural world make it “a place where the “big fish eats the small one.”<sup>840</sup> In distinction to such a potential nature, Vattimo suggests that through Christian culture things might be different, if determined by virtue rather than brute stupidity.<sup>841</sup> In recognizing the virtue of this social disposition, Vattimo hopes to establish a natural tendency towards this type of orientation by what he identifies, via Gadamer’s hermeneutic primacy of tradition, as the West’s necessitated epistemological context as being potentially authoritative. Contrastingly, in what Vattimo sees as an overreaching search for an objective truth, the modern world he claims mistook the necessitated obligation that was due to Christianity by this inescapable underlying

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<sup>837</sup> Ibid.

<sup>838</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 40.

<sup>839</sup> Ibid.

<sup>840</sup> Ibid.

<sup>841</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 40-41.

constituency of it, as allotted it by Gadamerian tradition, which has missed the inescapable primacy of the biblical heritage.<sup>842</sup>

In the subsequent paragraph, Vattimo again shifts his tone to a retractive orientation, in moving his focus to the ebb and flow of cultural paradigms, in another aesthetically toned query, regarding the limits of culture's "continual process of transformation."<sup>843</sup> Again, Vattimo asks, what are the limits to this process and can we "simply do whatever we like, as per the lack of parameters via total nihilism"?<sup>844</sup> As before, Vattimo answers that there are limits and we cannot simply do whatever we like, because he believes that there is a limit to secularization, which he identifies in Scripture's fully secularized realization of the furtherance of charity.<sup>845</sup> Therefore, where earlier he said that different language games abided by case specific rules of play, now he is offering "charity" as a possible pseudo first principle or stopgap to the threat of nihilism and relativism. Thus, in another affirmative mood, Vattimo claims that he believes that at bottom the Christian tradition always comes back to charity, and that beyond all talk of metaphysics or secularization the tradition always stands for this commitment.<sup>846</sup> Similarly oriented, Vattimo then declares via another seemingly strong proposition that beyond love everything else is "mythology."<sup>847</sup> According to Vattimo's project then, love and charity are something like undeconstructible pseudo ideals within the framework of the confines of our tradition. Yet, both the rules of games and charity are necessarily merely affirmative ebbs in a poetic Christian-irony, which in truth, pre-understands that no such things are definitive.

In subsequent association, Vattimo next contemplates whether prayer is in such a framework of Christianity-as-charity still possible. He responds to this self-induced query in the affirmative because of what he holds is the validating power of a "love for a

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<sup>842</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 41.

<sup>843</sup> Ibid.

<sup>844</sup> Ibid.

<sup>845</sup> Ibid.

<sup>846</sup> Ibid.

<sup>847</sup> Ibid.

tradition,” which he further qualifies is “not intended to convey some literal truth,” meaning even the authority of tradition must waver in indecision.<sup>848</sup> Underlying these playful quandaries is the ever-present function of irony as method and worldview, wherein the aesthetic and the religious are reconciled in an instable coexistence, which is never tangible beyond the failings of contingent musings or partial observations.

Yet, these implications remain unspoken. Instead, Vattimo continues by elaborating on what he means by preserving the tradition out of love, when he explains what he sees as fundamentally important in continuing with an adherence to the Christian tradition. Vattimo asserts that this is more important as a tribute to interpersonal relationships rather than as a metaphysical orientation, which in his terms are matters that are “much more about charity than truth.”<sup>849</sup> Underlying Vattimo’s disposition here is the influence of Jurgen Habermas, whom he is going to subsequently discuss, regarding his understanding of rationality as supported via dialogue with others, rather than truth as corresponding to the “thing itself.”<sup>850</sup> On the topic, Vattimo says, “Today, truth is increasingly determined by agreement with others,” which is a typical fallback of postmodernism in general, and certainly employed by both Derrida and Caputo too.<sup>851</sup> In correspondence with making this understanding of truth appear consistent with his Christianity, Vattimo appeals to the authority of Dostoevsky’s claim that he would choose Christ over truth, if he were forced to choose, which Vattimo then contrasts to Aristotle’s remark about his teacher Plato: “Plato is a friend, but truth is a greater friend.”<sup>852</sup> The difference between Dostoevsky and Aristotle’s proclamations about truth is the difference between an existential and a metaphysical orientation towards such a thing (the supposed difference between the postmodern and the modern). However, if we might suggest that strong theological collectives or ideological collectives are such instances of agreeing about truth, then

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<sup>848</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 42.

<sup>849</sup> Ibid.

<sup>850</sup> Ibid.

<sup>851</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 43.

<sup>852</sup> Ibid.

Vattimo certainly would not stand by this Habermasian conception strongly in association, instead his irony would retract any affirmative utterances once again when pressed.

According to Vattimo's postmodern hermeneutic, putting metaphysical or objective truth over charity puts interpreters back into the dangerous territory of the violence of metaphysics.<sup>853</sup> Vattimo again suggests that "all violent people of great dimensions have been metaphysical," which means that by blocking the metaphysical function Vattimo expects that we might eliminate violence on the large scale, as witnessed by the atrocities of politics in the twentieth century.<sup>854</sup> For example, Vattimo in association suggests that the Holocaust was a result of Hitler's metaphysical theory, which he believes was disastrous because it clutched at the "general nature of all Jews," rather than perhaps merely hating some "Jews of his particular neighborhood."<sup>855</sup> Despite making a rather seemingly self-evident and even oversimplified claim, then offering a kind of naïvely sounding alternative in solution, Vattimo's argument seems beyond these potential shortcomings to be problematic on a merely logical level, which is perhaps not problematic for an ironist, yet nevertheless. In supporting his appeal to promoting a wide adoption of a non-metaphysical orientation, Vattimo hereby invokes the argumentative cover of the morally shaming and irrefutable association it might entail when linked with the Holocaust, which is in a way a game forfeiting tactic by associating his theoretical assertion with the conveying topic it cloaks itself within. The argument, despite this topical pitfall, however, is the victim of a weak argumentative fallacy: 1) The holocaust was horrible. 2) The holocaust was caused by a metaphysical orientation. 3) Therefore, all metaphysics are bad. In commencing his argument by taking this politically sensitive cover, Vattimo then smuggles in mention of Nietzsche's influence upon his thinking under the residual effect of the emotional association this argumentative move would induce via a guilt by association, or rather via an innocence by association, when he next moves to suggest in the spirit of Nietzsche that all metaphysical accounts attempt to "dominate and control" via appropriating "first

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<sup>853</sup> Ibid.

<sup>854</sup> Ibid.

<sup>855</sup> Ibid.

principles.”<sup>856</sup> The move to disassociate Nietzsche with reactionary politics is not unique to Vattimo, since all postmodern discourse and neo-conservative discourse alike want to distinguish between Nietzsche and Nazism, where the “authentic” Nietzsche was not responsible for the atrocities of the German regime, which had misinterpreted his teachings, making the mistake of taking him seriously. Adding to the further complexity of the problem, we cannot forget that Vattimo and Nietzsche alike are not offering an escape from metaphysics, because irony is necessarily metaphysical too, which complicates his project’s apparent promises of liberating his followers from such accounts of domination and control, since he too is merely offering a more sublimated version of the same, which is the real matter of concern beyond his playing with logic and rhetoric.

With this complication in mind, we might read the following comment with different eyes, when Vattimo continues, “Our tradition is dominated by the idea that if we only had a stable foundation we could move and act more freely. But philosophical foundationalism does not promote freedom. Rather, it is for the purpose of obtaining some desired effect or of consolidating some authority.”<sup>857</sup> In contrast, Vattimo suggests that weak Christianity would reinterpret the metaphysical impulses of the Church to understand instead that “The truth Christ came to teach the church is not an already accomplished truth...” since, “Its message grows with history.”<sup>858</sup> Continuing, Vattimo claims that the future of Christianity and the Church is to become a “religion of pure love,” where “charity will eventually replace truth.”<sup>859</sup> Vattimo further qualifies his message of charity by saying that he is not merely promoting the “usual message of tolerance,” rather he is promoting the “ideal development of human society, via the “progressive reduction of all rigid categories that lead to opposition,” which he sees included in: “property, blood, family”, and the “excesses of absolutism.”<sup>860</sup> Vattimo similarly contemplates that damnation should instead

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<sup>856</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 43.

<sup>857</sup> Ibid.

<sup>858</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 44.

<sup>859</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 44-45.

<sup>860</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 45.

be interpreted to be, via such a new post-metaphysical condition, as the situation arising here on earth that occurs when we commit ourselves to clashing “against one another,” arguing over truth, or the power to speak on behalf of “the one true god.”<sup>861</sup> Yet, has not God, as epistemological ground, now not become more abstract and arcane in the vestiges presented to us via his new accompanying priestcraft that is literary form, which thereby instead manifests as a type of paradoxical and authoritative mechanism of non-truth, via irony?

Is irony by definition not a groundless-ground, or a Godless-God, at least in terms of its all important role as epistemological first principle, as metaphysical master-signifier, khôra/difference, from which the legitimacy of all thought arises? Whereby we might claim, there is no truth but irony, and Vattimo and Caputo are its prophets? Now thinking is not about thoughts and content, but is governed by a mechanism that underlies the significance of any of the surface content it may contingently burgeon.

In contrast, and closing this section in a more affirmative mood, we might identify that Vattimo summarizes his position via a Church hymn that he believes to accord with the spirit of Christianity, when he quotes, “Where there is love, there is also God.”<sup>862</sup> Certainly, we cannot contest this affirmation or its significance. In association, there are many positive and likable affirmations made by Vattimo’s project. However, there remain aspects that must be considered alongside the dubious tradition out of which they have come, by reading the return to religion against the return to religion, as one that has never left metaphysics.

With his tone swaying again to the aesthetic, Vattimo subsequently contemplates that upon thinking on Christ’s remarks about when two or more followers are gathered in his name that he is with them, whereby Vattimo adds that he cannot help but think that Jesus might “just as well mean charity.”<sup>863</sup> Furthermore, Vattimo adds, “Now it is time for

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<sup>861</sup> Ibid.

<sup>862</sup> Ibid.

<sup>863</sup> Ibid.



Christianity to realize this nonreligious destiny, which is its own.”<sup>864</sup> In these statements, Vattimo appears to be making a relatively strong argument for a secularized Christianity, where love and charity trump the metaphysical observation of religion, yet knowing Vattimo to be an ironist, we might avoid the pitfall of taking these suggestions too seriously. Admittedly, there remains something very attractive in Vattimo’s affirmative moments, especially in his recognition of a need for the return to religion (i.e., Judeo-Christian tradition). Yet, the hesitance remains that the function of irony is not without a cost and consequence via its own predominantly unacknowledged metaphysical complicity.

### **Vattimo’s Q&A: A Prayer for Silence**

The second major part of Vattimo’s argument in the text appears in his dialogue with Jeffrey Robbins called “A Prayer for Silence.”<sup>865</sup> When asked about the philosophical significance of the death of God, here by Robbins, Vattimo in reply attempts to outline and harmonize Nietzsche’s understanding of the idea with his own. In particular, Vattimo suggests that Nietzsche believed that with the rise of stable societies the idea of God’s protection was no longer necessary, which Nietzsche also believed was complimented by the discovery that God was a lie, and such a discovery, Nietzsche further suggested, negated God by God’s own guiding command (i.e., thou shalt “not to lie”).<sup>866</sup> In comparison to Nietzsche’s understanding of the death of God, Vattimo’s reinterpretation wants to present the death of God as in someway differently oriented, although while there remains something else effectively the same, because it is likewise, he says, the death of the metaphysical/rational God, which in distinction from Nietzsche he claims because “Christianity has always said” that the metaphysical was dead, and this is a liberating of charity and love in defiance of Nietzsche’s program to the contrary.<sup>867</sup>

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<sup>864</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 46.

<sup>865</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 89.

<sup>866</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 90.

<sup>867</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 91.

This death of the metaphysical God is initiated according to Vattimo's account via his reinterpretation of the event of Christ's death on the Cross, which he says that afterwards it was no longer possible to believe in the "classical, rational gods of the Greeks."<sup>868</sup> This death of the metaphysical God is a variant of Death of God theology's interpretation, with a greater emphasis on the metaphysical end enacted, which lines up with the postmodern project already underway, as the *announcement* of the end of metaphysics. Interestingly, the death of God that Nietzsche is speaking about is seemingly much more consistent with Vattimo's own death of God project than he here suggests, since Nietzsche would seemingly not care what affirmative content was used by one of his fellow artist-creators, as long as it was done in the ironic spirit of his Zoroastrian proliferation of differences. Granted, Nietzsche would prefer a prolific non-Christian content, yet it seems his method could still accommodate it as one within a Babel-like affirmation of affirmation and plurality, and still enact its desired end.

In the death of metaphysics, Vattimo like Caputo sees that the return of religion is granted legitimacy because the real world is a fable, and likewise the return of God is legitimated via an ironic return, yet this option by keeping in the ironic framework remains somewhat still consistent with Nietzsche's reactionary aims. The distinction that Vattimo wants to make between himself and Nietzsche, therefore, is that he seemingly wants to preserve the Christian God by rethinking it outside of the main target of Nietzsche's attack, which was the metaphysical proof of God, rather than the God of the Bible, which implicitly can be understood otherwise than as an objective philosophical proof or first principle. In making this move, Vattimo wants to preserve the charitable elements of the Christian God, yet avert the systematic violence that might result due to a strong metaphysical ideological function.

Vattimo continues to explain that Christianity's destiny was to end metaphysics, which was delayed by the involvement of the Church in secular matters, those that Robbins had himself in the text's introductory essay, "After the Death of God," referred to as the matters of "Christendom," in the spirit of Kierkegaard. In essence, there is an appeal happening in such language of the Kierkegaardian kind that is pointing towards a

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<sup>868</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 90.

distinction between authentic and inauthentic Christianity, where the institutional expression of the Church typically endorses a type of spiritual shortcoming amongst the mass of Christians, which is too entangled in worldly matters to be a genuine expression of faith's more authentic observance. This more authentic experience was for Kierkegaard a solitary encounter of the individual before God. Something of this authenticity of the solitary existential individual persists in Caputo's and Vattimo's projects, yet without the leap of faith that the religious Kierkegaard makes. This idea of bringing forth what is in essence an authentic Christianity Robbins himself identifies, in the introduction, as being an important factor in the orientation of death of God theology, which saw in the decline of the worldly power of the Church an opportunity for a reevaluation of the liberating aspects of a metaphysically unrestrained Christian-secularism.

In Vattimo's terms, this idea of secularism's liberating effect on religion manifests as follows: "So only after a lot of revolutions did Christianity realize that the core idea of Christianity was the negation of a necessarily objective rational (i.e., eternal) structure of the world."<sup>869</sup> Therefore, Vattimo is again thinking this realization through Nietzsche's concept of the death of God as now ushering in the Christian-realization of the dissolution of metaphysics, rather than exclusively the demise of the non-metaphysical expressions and manifestations of the "Christian God."<sup>870</sup> In making this statement, Vattimo is keeping the mechanism of his irony at play, which makes it neither a strong appeal to a secular Christianity, nor a return to a postsecular Christianity. Instead, Vattimo's position is post-secular Christian. Again, the hyphen indicates the wavering between the secular and its disappearance.

Secondly, Robbins asks Vattimo what is the connection between his idea of "weak thought" and the theology of the death of God?<sup>871</sup> In answer, Vattimo replies that he has not studied death of God theology "intensely," but that he believes that his notion of weak thought might help death of God theologies to better understand their origins, which he

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<sup>869</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 91.

<sup>870</sup> Ibid.

<sup>871</sup> Ibid.

identifies in Heidegger and Nietzsche.<sup>872</sup> While my examination of death of God theology has not yet been comprehensive enough to speak for the whole of the movement, Vattimo's apparent reading of such seems partially flawed, since Altizer's Christian Atheism, at least, was quite aware of Nietzsche's significance as amoral secularizing influence, if not his ironic style of writing. The similarities that Vattimo's own project thematically shares with Altizer's are significant. These similarities include using many of the same major affirmative themes of Vattimo's vision prior to him, including: his focus on the passion's transformative significance as the death of God (albeit this is not seemingly ironic with Altizer), the principle of kenosis, and the three ages of Joachim de Fiore. Despite these thematic similarities between them, the point Vattimo seems to be unfamiliar with or to not acknowledge is that Altizer's project demonstrated a concern with the moral consequences of Nietzsche's anti-philosophy, rather than a mere unfamiliarity with his writing. Seen in this light, with an emphasis on the immorality of Nietzsche's anti-philosophy, it would in part seem troubling that Vattimo would hope to improve upon such theologies by way of reintroducing Nietzsche as a manifestation of the Christian destiny, which begs a serious examination of the motivations guiding Nietzsche's writing style on top of his surface content.

Third, and leading into the topic of irony inadvertently, Robbins asks Vattimo why his death of God theology does not equate with atheism.<sup>873</sup> Vattimo answers Robbins indirectly via a demonstration of his rejection of the rational God of metaphysics, when he invokes such in the ironic utterance: "Thank God I'm an atheist."<sup>874</sup> However, he does not explain explicitly how the performative contradiction of this statement answers Robbins' question.<sup>875</sup> Instead, Vattimo explains that the death of God he is acknowledging in what in fact is his ironic utterance is the death of the God "propped up or demonstrated by reason or

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<sup>872</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 92.

<sup>873</sup> Ibid.

<sup>874</sup> Ibid.

<sup>875</sup> Ibid.

rationality of belief.”<sup>876</sup> In contrast to this ironic vision he is indirectly advancing, Vattimo continues by saying that he believes that the Church still wants to hold onto the rationality approach of proving God’s existence, because of what he identifies as its nostalgic longing for the prestige and power it held in the medieval period.<sup>877</sup> Therefore, Vattimo turns from the question that would incline towards a discussion on irony. Instead of answering Robbins’ question directly and openly, he obliquely makes an ironic statement and then goes on the offensive against metaphysics. In continuation of this attack, Vattimo explains that he similarly sees this clinging to first principles by the Church to betray an authoritarian impulse still existent in the institution that wants to break off “the dialogue of questions and answer,” and merely tell people how to behave, such as by keeping the law against divorce in Italy, or by telling people how to vote in the medically assisted procreation referendum, or what to think about bioethics.<sup>878</sup> While pointing out a legitimate concern, this condemnation of shutting down open communication seems again somewhat hypocritical coming from an ironist, whose modus operandi is inescapably directed at diverting rational dialogue or thinking, which he has just reasserted in dodging the topic of irony in open conversation.

Robbins’ fourth question for Vattimo asks him what he thinks of the rise of fundamentalism in association with philosophy’s return to religion and its affiliation with secularization.<sup>879</sup> Vattimo explains that he is concerned with a return to “primitive religiosity,” which he sees as feeding people’s superficial want for “the religious show” rather than for “religious engagement.”<sup>880</sup> Correspondingly, Vattimo identifies that this tendency of showmanship was amplified by the papacy of John Paul II, along with an intrusive concern with his inclination to dogmatically talk about everything. With Pope Benedict XVI, in comparison, Vattimo says that what he would have liked from his papacy

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<sup>876</sup> Ibid.

<sup>877</sup> Ibid.

<sup>878</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 93.

<sup>879</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 95.

<sup>880</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 96.

was more “silence,” which he esteems would be better modeled in a Pope who would “preach about the gospels,” instead of decreeing authoritative stances on such private matters such as the politics of the family.<sup>881</sup>

With these concerns in mind, Vattimo subsequently suggests that philosophy and secularization are important for religion because they present new possibilities for religion.<sup>882</sup> By reevaluating the secular through Vattimo’s Gadamerian/Borgean hermeneutic tenet (culture cannot simply cast aside, but remains our vehicle for thought and language), we might supposedly recognize in the modern world an orphaned but intrinsic Christian primacy therein underlying many of our esteemed cultural values and advances.<sup>883</sup> In response to Robbins’ original concern for distinguishing the interactive relationship between fundamentalist and postmodernism’s return to religion, Vattimo says, “I would say that real Christianity is the secularized theory that belongs to charity... On the other hand, I would say that there is a sort of discord that is preserved.”<sup>884</sup>

As a summary of what he thinks Christianity encompasses, Vattimo next explains that he is not interested in the historical existence of Jesus or creedal dogma, but rather he remains committed to the “Christ of the Gospels” and the “mystery of creation,” along with an acknowledgment of “the power and truth of Christianity” as an “event of an intervention of God in history.”<sup>885</sup> In describing what kinds of Christian thinkers that he is sympathetic towards, Vattimo cites the evolutionism of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and he also agrees with Robbins that Rudolf Bultmann’s figurative approach is consistent with his own concern for biblical literalism.<sup>886</sup>

Fifth, in echoing Caputo’s concerns with Vattimo, Robbins asks him how his privileging of the Christian heritage will not lead us back to the religious “triumphalism”

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<sup>881</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 97.

<sup>882</sup> Ibid.

<sup>883</sup> Ibid.

<sup>884</sup> Ibid.

<sup>885</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 99.

<sup>886</sup> Ibid.

that he claims to want to avoid.<sup>887</sup> Vattimo explains that triumphalism is linked with a literal reading of the Bible, whereas he sees “modernity as a dissolution of the sacred distance between God and the world.”<sup>888</sup> In other words, there is something inherently consistent with figurative reading and irony, as communicative devices of revealing-concealing, and Vattimo’s response indicates this natural disposition of his project through the other.

Sixth, Robbins asks Vattimo if his tenet that there can be “no philosophy apart from Christianity” might not be caught in a contradiction, by giving the example of how the Western philosophical tradition was greatly influenced by its reintroduction via Islam in the Middle Ages. Vattimo, in response, admits that he has possibly expressed his position a little too strongly, since he acknowledges the role of Greek, Jewish, and Islamic contributions to the evolution of philosophy and our contemporary cultural paradigm.<sup>889</sup> Again, he here inadvertently demonstrates how Caputo’s reading of him would miss the mark, because of the looseness that his ironic disposition truly entails. Pinpointing this looseness of his meaning, Vattimo explains, “I would say that the event of Christianity does not deny mythologies, but has, in effect, authorized the different mythologies and religious traditions.” Vattimo expands by claiming that the incarnation of God could take any other mythical forms, such as via a sacred cat or cow and still remain in spirit true to the mythological manifestation of the incarnation of God/charity in history.<sup>890</sup> In making these claims, Vattimo should definitively reassure any concerns that Caputo’s supposed reading of his project might accurately indicate a blunt supersessionist meaning as motivating the true intentions of Vattimo. Instead of believing such a reading, we must recognize Vattimo’s project, and Caputo’s reply to him, as ironically held affirmations.

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<sup>887</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 100.

<sup>888</sup> Ibid.

<sup>889</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 102.

<sup>890</sup> Ibid.

Seventh, building off this apparent association with Caputo's critique, Robbins asks Vattimo how he would distinguish his own work from that of Caputo.<sup>891</sup> In preamble to his question, Robbins points out that Caputo's radical hermeneutics is "careful to distinguish itself from nihilism," which he connects with Caputo's close alignment to Derrida's idea of "religion without religion."<sup>892</sup> In consideration of this point in association with his own proximity to them as thinkers, Vattimo responds by distancing himself from the label "radical hermeneutics," since he suggests that his use of hermeneutics is not as closely bound to Derrida as Caputo's.<sup>893</sup> However, the definitive link that Vattimo shares with Derrida, and consequently also Caputo, is their equal commitment to overcoming metaphysics, which can take many guises, but all such seem to be working towards the same secondary metaphysical end.<sup>894</sup> Regarding the topic of nihilism, in comparison, Vattimo explains that he thinks that not only that "hermeneutics leads to nihilism, but nihilism appears only thanks to the work of hermeneutics."<sup>895</sup> In making this statement, we see Vattimo playing on the reversal of terms, which lead to the circularity of the hermeneutic stance. Again, Vattimo's nihilism is never finalized, but remains in transit, never to be accomplished, much like the postmodern attempt to overcome metaphysics.

In connection, the central political idea of importance in Vattimo's active nihilism is that he believes it results in a democratic hermeneutics, because it advances no metaphysical model for authoritarianism to hold over people, supposedly.<sup>896</sup> In further attempting to separate Caputo from his project, Vattimo in association says, "I think that Caputo would not agree that in order to overcome metaphysics we would need to recognize the nihilistic vocation of hermeneutics."<sup>897</sup> Yet, as we have seen in Caputo's dialogue with

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<sup>891</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 103.

<sup>892</sup> Ibid.

<sup>893</sup> Ibid.

<sup>894</sup> Ibid.

<sup>895</sup> Ibid.

<sup>896</sup> Ibid.

<sup>897</sup> Ibid.



Robbins, the difference would amount to a back-loaded irony contra a front-loaded irony, which effectively amount to the same formally, despite their affirmative outer garments suggesting otherwise.

Eighth, Robbins declares a change of direction and then subsequently asks Vattimo what he thinks about the role of religion and politics today and whether such language as the “clash of civilizations” should be a cause for alarm? Vattimo suggests that Marx’s critique of religion, which suggested it is used to serve the ideological function of “masking” unspoken political and economic ends, is here pertinent as it is relevant to such rhetoric, yet he also thinks that this dynamic has “become increasingly apparent to everyone.”<sup>898</sup> In order to avoid such pitfalls of religion, Vattimo says that people need to be “demythologized,” if they cannot recognize, he further asserts, that “God is not involved in our struggles; rather, our struggles are about oil, domination, power, and so on.”<sup>899</sup> Therefore, Vattimo associates the response to the “clash of civilizations” to be a problem of metaphysics, which is hiding the material elements of the equation from too many people. Again, as I have said earlier, the problem of a response to injustices seems to be equally as explainable as a problematic arising from an operative inability for a unified response, which again one could just as easily equally charge that postmodernism, as an advocate of differences, helped to aggravate in the Western contributions to the ideological shortcomings of such a hypothetical clash. Certainly, Vattimo’s charge is, if nothing else, reductionistic.

Ninth, leading towards an engagement with such an ideological complication, and in claiming to stay with the theme of religion as an ideological cloak hiding our actual material conditions, Robbins next asks Vattimo about Antonio Negri’s and Michael Hardt’s comments on postmodernism in their text *Empire*.<sup>900</sup> This question is one of the more interesting of the text, because it points towards the critique of the possible ideological function that postmodernism itself might enact. The heart of what Negri and Hardt are saying about postmodernism in their text is well summarized by the following passage:

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<sup>898</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 104-105.

<sup>899</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 106.

<sup>900</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 107.

Although many of the various postmodernist theorists are lucid in their refusal of the logics of modern sovereignty, they are in general extremely confused about the nature of our potential liberation from it—perhaps precisely because they cannot recognize clearly the forms of power that have today come to supplant it. When they present their theories as part of a project of political liberation, in other words, postmodernists are still waging battle against the shadows of old enemies: the Enlightenment, or really modern forms of sovereignty and its binary reductions of difference and multiplicity to a single alternative between Same and Other. The affirmation of hybridities and the free play of differences across boundaries, however, is liberatory only in a context where power poses hierarchy exclusively through essential identities, binary divisions, and stable oppositions. The structures and logics of power in the contemporary world are entirely immune to the “liberatory” weapons of the postmodernist politics of difference. In fact, Empire too is bent on doing away with those modern forms of sovereignty and on setting differences to play across boundaries. Despite the best intentions, then, the postmodernist politics of difference not only is ineffective against but can even coincide with and support the functions and practices of imperial rule. The danger is that postmodernist theories focus their attention so resolutely on the old forms of power they are running from, with their heads turned backwards, that they tumble unwittingly into the welcoming arms of the new power. From this perspective the celebratory affirmations of postmodernists can easily appear naïve, when not purely mystificatory.<sup>901</sup>

Negri and Hardt raise interesting questions about the reductionistic tendencies of the socio-political challenges that present contemporary concerns. In comparison to the passage above, Robbins suggests that Negri and Hardt are concerned about postmodernism’s tendency to “emphasize oscillation and plurality.”<sup>902</sup> Then, still speaking through the concerns of Negri and Hardt, Robbins asks Vattimo what he thinks about postmodernism’s tendencies towards mirroring the ideological conditions of “increased mobility, indeterminacy, and hybridity.”<sup>903</sup> Asking such of Vattimo, Robbins really presses the central ideological risk that worries our “inverted totalitarianism” conscious reading, when he thereby questions whether the indeterminacy of such thinking might not function to exacerbate the suffering of the poor, while offering ideological legitimization and

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<sup>901</sup> Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 142-143.

<sup>902</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 107.

<sup>903</sup> Ibid.

exoneration to those benefiting from such conditions.<sup>904</sup> In response, Vattimo admits that he is suspicious that Robbins might be correct, but he questions whether he “could describe what the poor in this situation would actually desire,” and he questions whether Negri and Hardt really represent these people themselves, since they are participants in the same “yuppie” project.<sup>905</sup> It is interesting that Vattimo admits that Robbins’ concern is possibly correct, and it is too bad the conversation turns so quickly from the ramifications of this possibility. It is also interesting that we once again encounter the required silence of post-structurism’s other that is now manifested in Vattimo’s suggestion that neither he nor Negri and Hardt could ever identify something as sublime as the desire of such a poor and mysterious element of humanity. In this case, I do not think this silence is justifiably helpful. This apparent legitimization of irresponsibility by a political correctness of the sublime seems problematic, metaphysical fall to say such aside, even if on some level there is a degree of truth in what Vattimo is saying, which I would not dismiss. Still, there is something very aesthetic in the Wildean sense of the term in appealing to the unique and precious personality of such off limit others, and in prioritizing the performative importance of *authentic* voices over empty stomachs and wounds of violence and terror. Is not the threat of Wilde’s vision of Dorian Gray, with its flattery of the trivial pursuit of idiosyncratic whim and self-expression, echoing in these words? Prioritizing youthful vanity and particularity over the priorities of the social gospel? Thus, in place of a defense of postmodernism, which is here at the limits of its typical parameters of discourse, Vattimo instead once again goes on the offensive, rather than justifying his logic, which would be problematic. This problem of getting a logical explanation of his position results from the metaphysical commitment required to finally accept his stance, since irony cannot offer logical explanations when pressed to the limits.

Vattimo continuing his counterattack next questions Hardt and Negri’s employment of “complicated” writing, when things might be said much more accessibly, if it were really intended for “the so-called multitude.”<sup>906</sup> Specifically, Vattimo says, “I have the feeling

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<sup>904</sup> Ibid.

<sup>905</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 108.

<sup>906</sup> Ibid.

that not only do they not represent the so-called multitude but neither do they want to be understood by them if they make their book so complicated. This is an old game that intellectuals play to gain prestige and power.”<sup>907</sup> Interestingly, there is something quite revealing about Vattimo’s understanding of the mechanics of theory made in this comment, especially when taken out of its immediate context as an attack against Hardt and Negri, and thought about in general, or in its possibility of expressing a self-understood point that we might apply to Vattimo’s *inner* understanding of his own project. As an alternative to such potential shortcomings of academic irrelevance, and in contrast to such “intellectual discussions on metaphysical essences” (here Vattimo is referring to constructs like “empire” or “multitude” rather than in a more commonly used religious sense), Vattimo conversely recommends promoting the adoption of a useful political activism motivated by the same logic employed by Richard Rorty in his text *Achieving Our Country*.<sup>908</sup> The problem with Rorty’s vision is that it is still predominantly thinking of power in terms of national expressions, when the possible threat today is private, transnational, and fragmented. As Robbins suggests earlier, power is now far more oscillating and plural. These traits of the new power, which is not that new, make such national and classical notions of ideological understandings of power limited in their allowance to thought and political activism to engage it. In further condemnation of Hardt and Negri, Vattimo in championing Rorty’s vision suggests that intellectual discussions, such as theirs, are “quite useless for political activism.”<sup>909</sup> The problem that continues in Vattimo’s support of Rorty’s vision is whether or not such activism is misdirected, even though Vattimo has a valid point regarding the distinction between activism and intellectual or scholarly discussion. However, this also makes problematic his promises of a non-violent harmony realized through the hospitable orientation of his community of weak interpreters of Christian-aestheticism, which is promising more to his readers than mere intellectual preoccupation.

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<sup>907</sup> Ibid.

<sup>908</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 109.

<sup>909</sup> Ibid.

In response to Vattimo's appeal to Rorty's political activism, Robbins then asks him whether or not Caputo and Derrida's idea of the "democracy to come" is an adequate "philosophical base for political activism."<sup>910</sup> Vattimo replies that he believes that the phrase "the democracy to come" must be emphasized by both components being read together, "democracy" and "to come."<sup>911</sup> Conversely, Vattimo suggests to emphasize one aspect of the statement over the other would lead to a tendency to metaphysics, and questions why Caputo would emphasize the "to come" over democracy, a tendency that he attributes to Caputo's conditioning by Heidegger.<sup>912</sup> At the same time, Vattimo also admits that the "to come" is essential to democracy because "it is always a program," rather than "actual."<sup>913</sup> In summary of keeping the two components together, Vattimo envisions his position as follows: "If we only talk about the future, then we may never accomplish what we want and, on the other hand, if we only describe how democracy should be, then we might forget that it is something constituted in such a way as to be modified through time."<sup>914</sup> While Vattimo is here identifying a quasi-shortcoming of Caputo's stance, in truth, their positions are much more alike than he is indicating, since Caputo's position would waver between the two equally. In this move, Vattimo is also playing the fool to Caputo's irony, in order to distinguish his own position as less metaphysical.

We must caution that Vattimo, Caputo, and Derrida all demonstrate something *like* a fear of increased democracy, alongside their surface affirmation of it. This fear seems manifest in their shared desire to balance the negatives effects of left and right wing political extremes. The irony of the "democracy to come" supposedly keeps this fear of a direct democracy in balance between affirmative and negating tendencies in their rhetoric. The problem of course is how can we support more democracy and support inhibiting more democracy with any hope of more to come? In consideration, we must contemplate

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<sup>910</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 110.

<sup>911</sup> Ibid.

<sup>912</sup> Ibid.

<sup>913</sup> Ibid.

<sup>914</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 111.

Robbins' own engagement with Sheldon Wolin's thought in connection, when he warns, "a democracy that harbors a fear of the people as an unruly multitude is a democracy in name only."<sup>915</sup> There seems to be something of this fear present in post-structuralism's tendency to make philosophy difficult, in its hopes of defending a hypothetical left of center liberalism through the political insights of Maritain. The problem they may encounter is in thinking they have found a "middle" ground to defend, when the stability of such a thing is no doubt harder to inhabit than what we might take for granted. Like all strong mythemes, the notion of holding a middle position is less self-evident to close scrutiny than we might first take for granted. In the end, whether or not the democracy to come is a progressive vision rather than an inhibiting one, however, is again maintained or lost through a faith commitment to the powers of irony.

In general, Vattimo's approach is very typical of the compromise that the Left adopted in the aftermath of the turbulence and unrest of the 1960s, and it involves the idea of trying to create autonomous communities that strive to dissipate the monopolization of power by the implementation of "peripheral powers".<sup>916</sup> Instead of confronting the power of the state head-on in revolutionary fashion, Vattimo suggests in contrast that we should try to avoid force, and instead "extend the replication of (such) autonomous centers."<sup>917</sup> In creating these autonomous centers of power, Vattimo advocates that political subjects should subtract themselves from the game of power, thereby going outside the systematic legitimization of such tendencies.<sup>918</sup> Speaking from his own personal experience in politics, Vattimo suggests, "I discovered that when you get into power, it is not because you have conquered the power, but because the power has conquered you."<sup>919</sup> In other words, Vattimo ends his discussion by closing with the problematic of another paradoxical complication of agency, and we are left rudderless in the subterfuge of his irony.

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<sup>915</sup> Robbins, Jeffrey W. *Radical democracy and political theology*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011), 32.

<sup>916</sup> Ibid.

<sup>917</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 112-113.

<sup>918</sup> Vattimo, Caputo and Robbins, *After the Death of God*, 113.

<sup>919</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

The basic commitments of Caputo's and Vattimo's return to religion are important in their recognition of the socio-political implications of the whitewashing effects of aestheticism proper against Judeo-Christian morality (whatever form this might take). To the credit of both thinkers, they have reintroduced religion as a topic of discussion in what had become a predominantly secular discourse, which they have properly identified as equally metaphysical, and thereby problematic. In this sense, religion in some way owes a debt to such continental theorists that are calling for its continued relevance and importance. They are not writing a new theology for institutional Christianity, in whatever denominational guises it comes, but are instead creating a new type of Christian expression, and when seen in this light it must be predominantly embraced, with the qualification that they are not violently trying to rewrite anyone else's creed. In general response to the reactionary intent of aestheticism proper, one can only anticipate that a proliferation of Judeo-Christian affirmations, in whatever contingent guises they might arrive, should be exacerbated in response, in what we might envision to be a living expression of the essence of the tradition (without threatening tradition).

There is something seemingly accurate and very important in Vattimo's insight that the better intentions of secularism are merely an unacknowledged manifestation of the Judeo-Christian ethos, whereby the mythical content of the Bible has been reworked into the socio-moral fabric of progressive hopes and dreams, yet trying to clarify exactly how this or religion in general operates seems unnecessary, if not foolhardy. Thus, one admirable quality of the ironic orientation is in the humility of it as a hermeneutic stance, which in spite of this strength still has potential shortcomings in its form as alienating literary device, as we have been arguing. The truth of the Judeo-Christian ethos that pervades our better inclinations as a culture is one that should be accompanied by a suspicion of those aestheticizing elements of our secular culture that would prefer to undermine this association. The intentional aggravation of differences to inhibit solidarity must be considered alongside totalizing ideological hazards.

As our examination of aestheticism demonstrates, the appeal to youthfulness and the counter-culture's idolization of the authentic individual as sacred are equally

mythological constructs that are covertly compromising, since they are not as liberating as they sound in their rhetoric. They inevitably result in a proliferation of division that is as Nietzsche understood, all too well, the true Anti-Christ. In this sense, the institutional must be rethought again as the vehicle of collective agency, whereby the individual might recognize something beyond the immediate and limited aspirations of the solipsistic self of late consumer capitalism.

The problem with fully condemning Caputo's or Vattimo's irony, nevertheless, is that to do so would inevitably undermine many progressive and pro-religious tendencies that operate in their projects. Thus, instead of outright condemning their use of irony, we might instead merely caution that the device is equally a metaphysical construct, which makes problematic their liberating promises from the violence of metaphysics. If we have never left metaphysics, how can we avoid its violence? Why the need to feign otherwise? There is something that is also seemingly violent in their condemnation of institutional expressions of religion, which are often identified by too simplistic of rhetoric to ever offer a fair depiction, or a legitimate identification of any *fully* intrinsic problems to such large phenomena as an entire religious tradition or the collective understanding and praxis of a religious people in entirety. In this move, we see the mythologizing violence that Girard cautions us about reemerging in bastardized fashion. In association, it would seem that metaphysics, in the end, is unavoidable. Thus, it also apparently persists that there is something inherently complicated in an aesthetic prioritization, since it is not offering us a way of seeing how things really are, but is instead undermining something: a moral vision of the world, problematic as it remains. Vattimo and Caputo suggest that they avert this danger, yet logic cannot affirm they do. Therefore, we must make a leap of faith to accept this generally underemphasized aspect of their projects. In this light, we must equally recognize that irony is also a metaphysical orientation, and it has a troubled genealogical pedigree, even more than Caputo's front loaded Christian-irony or Vattimo's Christian kenosis might care to recognize.

There persists a dangerous semblance in such ironic writing to Nietzsche's own ironically constructed project, which was undeniably reactionary, anti-democratic, and anti-Christian. The propensity that continental philosophy tends to adopt regarding these lingering concerns is to suggest that the political shortcomings of such German thought



were a result of misunderstanding its true import, yet this misunderstanding is less distorting than likely indicated. Such *revisionism* must be approached with caution. Therefore, the concern remains that irony is potentially enacting a reactionary effect upon understanding, since this effect was its true artifice in Nietzsche and the conservative revolution all along, rather than a liberating discovery that appropriating post-structuralists have unraveled or resolved. In other words, the possible threat we are here identifying is in the possibility that the basic framework remains the same, while the affirmative content (benevolent or not) continues in proliferation of the reactionary artifice that is only another representational offering in the confusion of the solar inversion, or the metaphysics of “consummating subjectivity.” In fairness, if this content is religiously progressive or friendly, one could assume that the whitewashing tendencies of aestheticism were counteracted, and we might hope that a left of center liberalism would cautiously maintain balance against radical political forces. However, we must caution that the function of the ironic form as socially divisive persists in this withholding of direct communication, which necessitates some kind of authoritarian impulse rekindled. George was well aware this creates as good of a place for authoritarianism to speak with impunity from the heights of sublimity as any theocratic authoritarianism ever did. Its discourse is equally beyond rational explanation, although it is more abstract. Granted, rational discourse is a metaphysical language game, yet it holds rules of play that we can loosely adhere to, which suggest irony is “offside” accordingly. While this commitment is not definitive, it requires careful consideration. Caputo and Vattimo believe that irony is unavoidable, yet we cannot help wondering if they are too strongly committed to their metaphysical truth(s) due to a shared aversion to traditionally understood Marxist and Fascist ideologies underlying their epistemological commitments?

Ultimately, I do not believe that this type of religious exegesis is necessarily heretical or inauthentic, and when irony is at its best it is when it is functioning as a type of interpretive openness and humility, not as a divisive literary device. Thus, in terms of serving as a Biblical hermeneutic, weak thought and weak theology are very attractive. After all, to say that we view matters through a glass darkly is Paul’s own metaphor, as

Caputo points out,<sup>920</sup> when he cites 1 Cor 13:12-13. Specifically, Paul says: “When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.”<sup>921</sup> Thus, Caputo identifies in our drive for knowledge’s aspiration of acquiring an understanding of full presence and conceptual closure something akin to a hubristic idolatry, and in this identification I suspect he and Vattimo (in his own way) are theologically correct to reserve a degree of humility in interpretation. Yet, we should not adopt such a stance without equal reservation towards them in turn, considering what we know about the tradition that has brought such literary devices forth, especially concerning irony’s effectiveness as a socio-moral critique, which seems more problematic than its effectiveness as a Biblical hermeneutic.

It would seem that sometimes we need to play the fool to the wisdom of the wise. The fall into metaphysical error is unavoidable to even post-structuralism, as the performative design of irony in the end betrays. Therefore, the charge to avoid metaphysics is a dishonest one to saddle its opponents and believers alike with, although it does offer a reasonable degree of applicability most of the time it is invoked against strong or fundamentalist visions. Thus, we must be careful to not go too far in the other direction in condemning something like interpretive humility that the concept includes.

In addition, contra the seeming novelty of their poststructuralist readings, Caputo’s reading of Paul also demonstrates that the tradition itself perhaps already accommodates something akin to a more subtle hermeneutic of a non-totalizing religious consciousness. Perhaps when reconsidered in this light, we might acknowledge how Kuipers is in a way correct in suggesting that the Christianity that Caputo and Vattimo chastise is undertaken in the fashion of an oversimplification or straw-man target? The same might be said of the Romantic’s appropriation of Socrates and the Western philosophical tradition. Is not one of the best known Socratic witticisms that a wise person knows that they know nothing? What could be more ironically astute than that admission made by the *founder* of metaphysics? At the same time, this question does not suggest that Vattimo and Caputo do

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<sup>920</sup> Caputo, *On Religion*, 116.

<sup>921</sup> 1 Cor 13:11-13, (New American Standard Bible)

not bring forth productive insights in their inquiries, merely it suggests that they are not comprehensive in their identification of what the totality of Judeo-Christian *tradition* encompasses as a living expression, past and present, and we should not neglect this insight, since it is reading them against themselves. In attacking such strong entities they themselves are guilty of a metaphysical reductionism, and perhaps this demonstrates the need for such oversimplifications or their unavailability?

Consequently, the resolution to the paradoxes of full-presence, faith, and understanding are not easily settled, yet the one thing that we might nevertheless still offer while avoiding the resolution to such hair-splitting theoretical quandaries is the recognition of a need for a renewed kind of Judeo-Christian consciousness instigated in particular through a reconsideration of Nietzsche and aestheticism as being nothing other than a historically contingent *event* that calls us to respond. In other words, we must focus upon the violence of both the latent and blatant elements of Nietzschean-Heideggerian mythology as impetus to promoting a reconsideration of the benevolent values of Judeo-Christian tradition in broader terms.

Regarding irony, there are no easy answers. It is a matter of faith. This difficulty of its nature leaves us in a stalemate of sorts, and in large part, theoretically still accordant to a certain degree with Caputo and Vattimo, in the end. What we have shown in distinction, nevertheless, is that irony as a literary device (instead of as a qualified or tentative hermeneutic stance) is necessarily a contingent fabrication itself, whose import is authoritative via tradition's legitimization thereof, and/or rhetorical acceptance of it, rather than due to it offering a superior logic to legitimate its perpetuation over other rhetorical declarative visions about reality. Therefore, in response to these problems, I am advocating for the promotion of a weak theology/thought that is openly self-critical of its own metaphysical problems. In other words, we would be wise to adopt irony's usage with caution, since it too is a metaphysical commitment, and we cannot forget this when it tries to pass its self off, quite often unforthrightly, as going beyond metaphysics. In this dishonesty there is a violent tendency happening. These problems are two. One, unforthright irony promotes a formal divide, in the spirit of Ortega y Gasset. Two, irony is always in part promoting the contingent individualized/poetic at the expense of the equally contingent systematic/collective through form, while promoting both in content. In

contrast, there is a legitimate concern with the violence of metaphysical accounts that Vattimo and Caputo are wise to warn us about, since while it is not all of what religion's essence and legacy entails, it does identify a problematic legacy, nevertheless. The addition to this warning is to apply the same advice to the usage of irony, since the alienating effect of its literary mechanism is in part equally dangerous if not openly taken into consideration.

In the end, therefore, we must equally emphasize that irony is likewise such an account, which they are not forthright enough about themselves, often enough, even though they might object that this point is implicit in their stance already. It is the lack of explicitness that is generally troubling about irony. Therefore, regarding the import of irony, we must admit that the current age is defined by the ironic perspective (in the hermeneutic sense), but we must not be uncritical about such a perspective (particularly as literary device or metaphysical commitment). It is possible that Vattimo and Caputo intend to convey this apprehension in their irony already, yet without fully examining irony in explicit isolation as metaphysical event something eludes the communicative clarity of their respective discourses and the text (*After the Death of God*).

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