



Truth

John D. Caputo

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“What is philosophy?” is a question that admits many answers. One of the simplest—and the best—was suggested by the philosopher John Campbell: “Thinking in slow motion.” But, for most people, slow motion is only appealing in small doses. A whole movie in slow-mo would be one for the art gallery, not the multiplex. This is the problem that faces those who want to write about philosophy for a broad readership: a certain amount of fast-forward is needed, but if you go too fast you’ll stop doing philosophy altogether.

John D Caputo’s entertaining investigation into the nature of truth gets the balance right. His project is to show how postmodernism can help us think through contemporary debates about religion, relativism and the legacy of the Enlightenment. Rather than dividing the world into strict categories such as the rational and irrational, Caputo’s postmodern approach tries to widen our understanding of truth. He is not a naive relativist, however. “I am not arguing against the truth of propositions,” he says. “I am arguing that truth cannot be confined to propositions.” This means taking seriously the truths one encounters in novels, say, as well as religious narratives.

As this last idea suggests, there is plenty in Truth to annoy Richard Dawkins, as well as many contemporary analytic philosophers—but the book is better off for its boldness. Rather than pre-empting every counter-attack, Caputo sets out his case confidently, enlisting Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Derrida as his allies. (His explanation of Derrida’s thought is one of the clearest that I’ve read.) This book does not claim to be the final word on truth—indeed Caputo believes the quest for an ultimate and unchanging definition of truth is doomed to failure—but it might be the starting point for a more sophisticated discussion.

Truth Details

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From Reader Review Truth for online ebook

Teerabhat Ruensiri says

Should we be despair over postmodernity? Caputo's answer is resounding no. On the contrary, we should believe in progress but take truth to be an everlasting project instead. To either believe in an all powerful pure reason or despair is to be foolish - to be unjust.

JP says

Some book storm to surprise you
This one book
was written by a scholar
A dry concept of truth was expressed in beautiful and tough language
He started with Augustine and Derrida and move slowly to other philosophers about Truth.
A walk on a hard surface without a stick little adventures...
a lovely book to read few pages a day
Superb

Joshua Leach says

A fun, comprehensive introduction to postmodern philosophy.

Joel Gn says

A readable introduction for those new to philosophy/theology. There are some quoteworthy parts, but to go further one would have to look beyond Caputo's questions and into the works of those who have influenced his thought. Caputo remains optimistic about the postmodern approach to meaning and while I do acknowledge its hermeneutical value, I am equally cautious about this approach as an end to itself.

Johannes C says

I think maybe I enjoyed this book because I am somewhat new to philosophy and theology - arriving at it from the outside - as 'laity' so to speak. This book, for me, felt like a really useful and engaging primer to the genealogy of 'postmodern' thought (which Caputo takes careful measure to distinguish strongly from 'relativism'), and produced this rare situation where I actually looked forward to looking into every end note I encountered. It felt like taking a compact course with a professor who had nothing but very interesting things (and people) to point towards. One who elegantly distilled and clarified concepts while carefully building a case for 'truth(s)' in very accessible (nearly conversational) prose.

Beginning with semantic and hermeneutic questions about the word 'truth', then moving to a striking comparison between Augustine and Derrida to establish what would become a recurring motif on the notion

of 'repetition', Caputo then presents Descartes and Kant in their era of 'Reason' (citing Plato and Aristotle, when necessary), then retells the somewhat 'prophetic' turn away from Reason (as expressed by Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche), before arriving at a philosophy of 'Event' (citing Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Kuhn). And since this book was published sometime in 2013, Caputo's final chapter on the future of truth has some very interesting and relevant things to look into re science.

Ultimately with this book, Caputo is making a case for 'faith' in the 'Event', which I think is fairly subject to critique. Chomsky made a searing critique of what he referred to as 'postmodern cults' (sometime in the mid 90's) for their (1) disengagement with the very real yet unmet needs of global populations, especially those dealing with paralyzing inequalities, as well as the issue of postmodern 'theories' being either (2) trivial or (3) obscure. Caputo deals with the obscurity (3) in this book very well, and I'm not a distinguished academic like Chomsky, so what counts as trivial for him is not very trivial for me. So I would claim Caputo also adequately deals with that issue (2). What remains unresolved for me though is the struggles of enormous populations living outside the privileges of the over-developed Occident -- which goes virtually unmentioned throughout the book, though I am certain Caputo is the type of person that does deeply care about those issues.

Something I do commend: remaining true to the 'postmodern' tradition of disintegrating borders, Caputo draws from both sides of the 'continental'/'analytic' divide. My concern is that Caputo proposes a 'faith' that the future will be better based on a hope for an unanticipated 'Event'. To clarify, Caputo presents two sources of change put forward by Derrida, invention of: (1) 'the same' which functions in the same paradigm, or; (2) 'the wholly other' or an 'Event' which destabilizes the current paradigm and requires a new one. I think, in a sense, Chomsky feels the first source of change is being neglected in favour of the second one, resulting in an over-emphasis on the 'Event' (which is defined as some future occurrence which is unknown and cannot be anticipated, and requires an opening to 'risk' to make the 'Event' possible). This seems to be diverting important intellectual resources as well as institutional power away from organizing work that makes - what Chomsky claims as - a 'real difference'. Though it can also be claimed 'Events' have brought forward changes that have made monumental changes in everyone's life, though one would need to make a case to demonstrate the importance of 'self-awareness' within discontinuities ('Events') relative to the work that can be accomplished within the existing 'paradigm'. Even still, as Caputo would probably like me to do, I remain a little skeptical of this postmodern apologia, but still find it interesting and useful personally -- as well as publicly useful to consider in moderation, or in carefully determined circumstances. What I feel the book best serves as is a great launching pad into a broad spectrum of 'theology' and its related subjects -- essentially a well written list of recommended reading with some very interesting motivation as introduction.

Alejandro Núñez baladrón says

Highly recommended argumentation for the hermeneutics model of knowledge against the dangers of dogmas and isms.

Anh says

Pretty good

I think there are a lot of reasons to read this book, most of all a refreshing take on a traditional subject. Putting an ancient and contemporary writers in conversation in a prose style dynamic as it is poetic, I will not forget the new ideas introduced to me here that have the potential to chip off the well worn approach I have

had to my own conception of religion. I also thought that Caputo was not overbearing in his portrayal of getting beyond modernity and postmodernist to a post human speculation on what is now becoming of us and our world. I recently watched a video of Caputo's speech on Youtube.com in appreciation of Paul Tillich's thought encountering Derrida's and his passion for the work shines throughout in his speaking and quips on the text he is reading. I'm looking forward to reading more of his work.

Si Lee says

Nothing particularly new, but perhaps bringing ideas together in a very accessible way that is targeted at the uninitiated. I have to say, it 'does what it says on the tin'. An appropriate book for reading on the train to work. I have quite enjoyed reading it.

Frankie Della Torre says

So fun, so playful, so spacious - a boundless view of truth. This is truth on-the-go, always learning, open to the future, unsettled, cheerful, hopeful (against hope), affirmative, always uttering "yes, yes."

Stephanie says

this was recommended to me by a friend who uses it in his intro to philosophy course at fordham. as someone with almost no natural interest in (or patience for) philosophy, this was exactly what i needed-- very accessible, to the point, and for a primer, quite able to dig in to the distinctions between premodern, modern, and postmodern thought, as well as give a passing familiarity with the key players. while he certainly has his own perspective, it's always presented as such and not to the point that one couldn't disagree, or come to different conclusions. very thought provoking read.

"we require a flexible notion of truth and reason but one that still has teeth-- we obviously need to be able to say that things are right and wrong in ethics and physics-- without driving ourselves mad with method. I am saying that the dichotomy 'it's either absolute or its relative' (rational or irrational) is a ruse, a trap. so we have to get rid of it. I am not trying to strike a middle position between the absolute and the relative. I'm not trying to split the difference; I am trying to move beyond (post) both positions, or rather to slip back behind their lines and challenge the presupposition that is common to both. that, I propose, is exactly the work that interpretation (hermeneutics) does for us. absolutism supposes the truth must be presuppositionless; relativism agrees that that indeed is what truth is, and adds 'but that's impossible' so think what you like. hermeneutics says truth is not a matter of presuppositionlessness but of having the right presuppositions and avoiding the wrong ones."

Alasdair Martin says

By the midpoint I pretty much decided this is something of a 'history of philosophy', using truth as a vehicle. To be honest, it's an approach that left me confused at first, as did much of the flowery language, in places it was somewhat verbose to say the least.

Still, the more conversational style does make it more accessible to the amateur philosopher, something I can attest to. Worth a read for those sticking their toe into the waters I think, probably not do much for those with a greater depth in the subject.

Cat says

I think this is a brilliant book. It discusses the evolution of theories of truth, leading to postmodern theories of truth and how it evolves based on context vs. relativism. It leaves me asking what control we have of these contexts, evoking the idea that: "We cannot predict the future, but we can invent it" (Nigel Calder, paraphrased from Dennis Gabor). The book concludes with questions on how the evolution of technology affects the evolution of truth.

Fil says

No philosophy here, no questions, or valid questions at any rate, a very simple theology book.

Caputo seeks the truth, in anything, and asks if it is present in religion then states that he could be looking for it in ethics or art, it really does not matter. But then he launches into a tedious analysis of truth in religion, with no other mention of ethics or art. I have a big, big problem with (dogmatic) religion and can not seem to find anything resembling truth in it, the opposite is quite provable actually but that is neither here nor there.

My problem is this: if the subject is 'truth versus reason' then the way to go about it is (I think) to discuss the merits of both and not go into an exegesis of religious texts and commentary. John D. (pun intended) seeks truth without really discussing it. He is mostly looking to validate his views by way of (not very convincing) arguments, sorry *pal*, that is not truth-seeking. He also seems to not have any original thought, philosophy means 'love of wisdom' not 'history class of past philosophers' (by the way, something many schools get wrong).

I wanted to read about well-defended views, well thought-out arguments, this was a disappointment.

Shane Suzuki says

What a debacle. He cherry picks arguments from thinkers and sympathetic thinkers to build a case for religion or "magic" as a necessary part of understanding the world. His philosophical cases basically fall onto religious arguments, and then says that because pure reason can't solve everything he must be right. A joke of a text and even someone like me who isn't trained can poke holes in his logic.

Caleb Greenwood says

Great survey across the canon of philosophy regarding truth and how it can be defined. Caputo makes the philosophy of Hegel and Heidegger digestible, which is the biggest service this book did for me. Those versed in continental philosophy and Nietzsche may find much of this book unnecessary, however Caputo is

great at representing the ties between ideas and you leave with a wealth of information in only a few hundred pages.
