

The Mystical Element of John D. Caputo's Thought

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Abstract

The key connection that my thesis seeks to clarify is the conceptual relationship between contemporary Continental philosophy and Christian mystical theology. Clarifying this relationship furthers an underlying objective of my thesis which is to identify how religion is expressed in modernity. Hence, I argue that Continental philosophers who engage with, adapt, and deploy mystical theological ideas are, as a consequence, extending religious themes into modern contexts. To that end, my thesis is organized around the assumption that tracing the ways in which the Continental philosophical tradition employs mystical themes, provides unique insight into how religious meaning operates in contemporary culture.

More broadly, this thesis is also an inquiry into how mysticism has developed as an object of scholarly concern in the 20th and 21st century. An organizing principle that has animated this academic analysis has been to isolate and demarcate types of mysticism into identifiable categories; nomenclature such as the psychological, feminist, and perennialist types of the mystical shape this academic approach. Building on the work of Louise Nelstrop, Richard Woods, and Bernard McGinn, I extend this type-oriented approach, arguing that the interpretive strategies offered in the Continental tradition constitutes a divergent understanding and use of the mystical from those approaches already identified by scholars of mysticism. My approach thus amends a gap in the scholarship of mysticism by advocating for a uniquely Continental approach to mysticism. My hypothesis is that scholars of Christian mysticism will gain a more comprehensive understanding of its development in its modern western and postsecular form when the distinctive use of ‘the mystical’ by Continental thinkers is identified, mapped, and analyzed.

To establish and assess the above claims, I examine the work of John D. Caputo. Caputo is a philosopher, academic, theologian, and public thinker who has written on and about the relationship between Continental philosophy and the Christian theological tradition for over 50 years. A notable aspect of Caputo's theological focus is his extensive analysis of the Christian mystical tradition, specifically as voiced by the 14th century German theologian Meister Eckhart. Caputo's work is a concrete example through whom I establish what I argue is the ongoing and generative connection between Continental philosophy and mystical theology. In addition, I draw on Caputo's own analysis of key Continental philosophers to further demonstrate how it is that contemporary Continental philosophy utilizes the conceptual resources of the Christian mystical theological tradition. Hence, my thesis aims not at a comprehensive study of mysticism *as such*. Rather, the research outcomes of this project will address tensions that are western European/North American in origin and postsecular in context.

Résumé

Le lien clé que cette thèse cherche à clarifier est la relation conceptuelle entre la philosophie continentale contemporaine et la théologie mystique chrétienne. En clarifiant de cette relation, il favorise l'objectif sous-jacent de ma thèse qui est d'identifier comment la "religion" est exprimée dans la modernité. Je soutiens que les philosophes continentaux qui s'engagent, adaptent et déploient des idées théologiques mystiques et étendent, par conséquent, les thèmes religieux dans des contextes modernes. Ainsi, ma thèse est organisée autour de l'hypothèse qu'en traçant des voies comment la tradition philosophique continentale emploie les thèmes mystiques, fournit un aperçu unique de la manière dont la religion opère dans la culture contemporaine.

Plus généralement, cette thèse est une enquête sur la façon dont le mysticisme s'est développé en tant qu'objet d'étude au cours des XX^e et XXI^e siècles. Un principe d'organisation

qui a animé cette analyse académique a été d'isoler et de délimiter les types de mysticisme en catégories identifiables. Cette approche académique est façonnée par des nomenclatures telles que les types de mysticisme psychologiques, féministes et pérennes de la mystique. S'appuyant sur les travaux de Louise Nelstrop, Richard Woods et Bernard McGinn, ma recherche étend cette approche typologique et soutient que les stratégies d'interprétation proposées par certains membres de la tradition Continentale constituent une compréhension et une utilisation divergentes de la mystique par rapport aux approches déjà identifiées par les spécialistes du genre. Mon approche comble alors une lacune dans la recherche sur le mysticisme en préconisant une approche continentale unique du mysticisme. Mon hypothèse est que les spécialistes de la mystique chrétienne parviendront à une compréhension plus complète de son développement sous sa forme moderne occidentale et post-séculaire lorsque l'*utilisation* distinctive de "la mystique" par les penseurs continentaux sera identifiée, cartographiée et analysée.

Pour établir et évaluer les affirmations ci-dessus, ma thèse examine le travail de John D. Caputo. Il est un philosophe, un universitaire, un théologien et un penseur public qui écrit depuis plus de 50 ans sur la relation entre la philosophie continentale et la tradition théologique chrétienne. L'aspect notable de son orientation théologique est son analyse approfondie de la tradition mystique chrétienne, en particulier telle qu'elle est exprimée par le théologien allemand du XIV^e siècle Meister Eckhart. Dans ma thèse, le travail de Caputo est un exemple concret à travers lequel j'établis ce que j'affirme être la connexion continue et générative entre la philosophie continentale et la théologie mystique. En plus, je m'appuie sur l'analyse que Caputo fait lui-même des principaux philosophes continentaux afin de mieux démontrer comment la philosophie continentale contemporaine utilise les ressources conceptuelles de la tradition théologique mystique chrétienne. Par conséquent, ma thèse ne vise pas une étude exhaustive du mysticisme *en*

tant que tel, mes les résultats de la recherche de ce projet porteront plutôt sur des tensions d'origine ouest-européenne/nord-américaine et de contexte post-séculaire.

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Abbreviations

<i>AE</i>	Caputo, John D. <i>Against Ethics Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction</i> . Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.
<i>CaC</i>	Caputo, John D. <i>Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory</i> . Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2019.
<i>DiaN</i>	Derrida, Jacques. <i>Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida</i> . Edited by John D. Caputo. New York: Fordham University Press, 2021.
<i>FoG</i>	Caputo, John D. <i>The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional</i> . Salem, Oregon: Polebridge Press, 2016.
<i>HaA</i>	Caputo, John D. <i>Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics</i> . New York: Fordham University Press, 1982.
<i>HaH</i>	Caputo, John D. <i>Hoping against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim</i> . Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015.
<i>IoG</i>	Caputo, John D. <i>The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps</i> . Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.
<i>ME</i>	Caputo, John D. <i>The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought</i> . New York: Fordham University Press, 1986.
<i>MRH</i>	Caputo, John D. <i>More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are</i> . Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2000.
<i>PaT</i>	Caputo, John D. <i>The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion</i> . Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1997.
<i>RH</i>	Caputo, John D. <i>Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project</i> . Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1987.
<i>SoG</i>	Caputo, John D. <i>Specters of God: An Anatomy of the Apophatic Imagination</i> . Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2022.
<i>WoG</i>	Caputo, John D. <i>The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event</i> . Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.

Chapter 1: Context and Methodology

In the summer of 1919, working as a course lecturer at the University of Freiberg, Martin Heidegger, the then 30-year-old German academic, outlined a course proposal entitled *The Philosophical Foundations of Medieval Mysticism*. Between August 10th and 14th of that year, Heidegger spent his days sketching the framework for a lecture series that would undertake “phenomenological research” into “religious consciousness;” Heidegger’s methodology was factual in focus and historical in scope.¹ Less interested in the religious or devotional elements of mysticism, Heidegger saw in his study of medieval mysticism the possibility of providing the phenomenological researcher access to a mode of experience (*Erlebnis*) that was both “primordial” (i.e., originary) and historical (i.e., there was a discernable development of this experience over/in time).² This focus of Heidegger’s, in which religious themes and issues were analyzed via the phenomenological methodology instigated by his former supervisor Edmund Husserl, was given concrete expression in his 1920-21 course on the *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* and his 1921 summer course on *Augustine and Neo-Platonism*. Heidegger’s focus ranged from the eschatological themes in Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians and Galatians, the notion of time in book X of Augustine’s *Confessions*, and to the “irrationality” of Meister Eckhart, all as ways to engage this religious lifeworld. The scholarship and ideas of Wilhelm Dilthey, Ernst Troeltsch, and William James helped frame his analysis, as did the philosophical echoes of Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Of central importance for Heidegger in these projects was the issue of experience and, at this early period, *life* and how it was that one gained knowledge or understanding of said experience. As such, his project sought to “extract the moments of

¹ Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 231.

² Ibid.

constitution in mediaeval mysticism” so as to gain insight into the particular development of a form of life (i.e., “the mystical”)³ and thus gain greater understanding of the “general structure of experience.”⁴ As Heidegger notes in the introduction to a discussion of Meister Eckhart:

The immediacy of religious experience, the uncontained vivacity of devotion to the holy, godly, does not issue forth from out of itself and the contemplation of the genuine performance-character; *rather, it emerges as the culmination of a particular historically determined epistemological doctrine and psychology*, a culmination which, however, as such results in the new and the correlate of the vivacity of experience.⁵

Heidegger thus saw in mysticism a development of a historically determined mode of existence that impacted the lifeworld of an Eckhart, rather than the study of a perennially emergent mystical consciousness—a method which was then academically normative.

In short, Heidegger mined the resources of religious texts and mystical authors so as to gain greater clarity concerning the primordial or founding aspects of life and experience that were central to a phenomenological methodology—and indeed were dominant philosophical and anthropological themes at the time. As Heidegger framed the basic question for his course: “In what direction and aim does our investigation regarding medieval mysticism proceed, if the primordial-scientific, phenomenological goal genuinely guides us? *Which* aspects of mysticism, and how do they come into consideration? How is understanding guided and motivated?”⁶ Mysticism, mystical theology, the mystic, and the mystical are here subordinated to the demands of a phenomenological methodology that sought analysis of human experience, culture, and indeed reality itself. For Heidegger, the study of mysticism was something like a tool that he could use in order to clarify tensions aboriginal to a secular philosophical methodology.

³ I use quotation marks for “the mystical” in this chapter to indicate its status as a scholarly object as opposed to its use by insiders to the tradition.

⁴ Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 231.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 239 (emphasis added).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 231-232 (emphasis in original).

Nine years earlier, and writing from England, a little-known independent scholar named Evelyn Underhill was writing the preface to her now classic text *Mysticism: The Preeminent Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (1911). Whereas Heidegger's focus was decidedly etic in scope, standing outside of the mystical tradition, Underhill's project was compelled by the interest of the insider to a religious tradition. This interest was fueled by Underhill's own involvement in a variety of spiritual and occult traditions that were fashionable at the time—she belonged for a number of years, for example, to the Rosicrucian order. Indeed, this early engagement with the occult helped focus her study of mysticism, a key concern of which was to differentiate mysticism and Christian mystical theology from occultism and magic—the former, she would argue, is fundamentally a gesture of submission and desire, the latter being driven by a desire for control and dominance. Moreover, the psychological depth and spiritual nuance demonstrated by mystics like St. John of the Cross and his 'dark night of the soul' helped her to draw further analytical boundaries around those features that typify mysticism from those features germane to occult practices.

It is, importantly, Underhill's assertion that distinct divisions exist between mysticism and other spiritual practices, as well as to identify the unique role that mystical authors had on the development of Christian theology, that makes her work so vital for early researchers. She found in the spiritual resources of the mystical text, and the psychological awareness of the mystical author, consistent and generalizable patterns which allowed her to establish various 'types' of the mystical. Following scholars like William James and Friedrich von Hügel, Underhill provided criteria, definitions, methods, and analyses which would identify characteristics of 'the mystical' so as to furnish a greater understanding of its complex aims and history. For her, and "broadly speaking," she understood the term mysticism "to be the expression of the innate tendency of the

human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendent order; whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood.”⁷ For Underhill, one’s pursuit of union with God is a necessary component of mysticism—a factor that differentiates it not only from a variety of spiritual practices, but also differentiates it from theology proper.

Underhill’s project, then, is one instigated both by the love of the mystical pursuit itself as well as the emerging modernist tendency to categorize and order these texts and their claims. She sought identifiable patterns that could be isolated as unique instances of ‘the mystical.’ For her, mysticism was a “fact” that had “characteristics” which, when isolated and studied, provided insight into what she called, echoing Friedrich von Hügel, the “mystical element” of religion. Not unlike Heidegger, Underhill was keenly aware of the issue of experience in modern philosophy. This focus is evidenced in her engagement with the Continental philosopher Henri Bergson and his vitalism. Hers was also a project focused on immanent matters and finite forms of mystical pursuit—this, rather than, for example, thinking ‘the mystical’ along theologically dogmatic and creedal claims. Her project, unlike the phenomenological focus of Heidegger’s, was ultimately aimed at making evident ‘the mystical’ as a distinct and unique phenomenon. Philosophy, history, and the emerging social sciences were put to use by Underhill so as to provide clarity around the mystical “fact.” In short, and in contrast to Heidegger, her study assumed a metaphysical reality which mystical techniques and texts aimed at evidencing in the life of the religious adherent.

The above two accounts indicate patterns, suppositions, themes, and approaches that galvanized the study of mysticism in the early 20th century. Moreover, and a central focus of this study, these two portraits indicate an overlap between the study of mysticism and the study of Continental philosophy that has fueled modern investigations into the mystical. Both writers,

⁷ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Preeminent Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (New York; Image Books, 1990), xxi.

despite their dissimilarity on a number of matters, found in the study of mysticism a productive starting point for understanding both historical and modern tensions. With Heidegger, a key theorist in the development of Continental philosophy in the 20th century, mysticism was identified as a unique phenomenon open to methodological investigation—it revealed a form of life that demanded study and inquiry so as to understand factual experience. The mystic, their text, and their devotional aims were real—they impacted, formed, and compelled a unique form of experience. And, although Heidegger did not explore mysticism as a topic *as such*, his later work—especially his focus on the German romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin and the Medieval theologian Meister Eckhart—spoke to a type of mysticism. In so doing, Heidegger provided inspiration for generations of Continental theorists in the 20th century to take mysticism seriously as an important intellectual and religious phenomenon. Importantly, too, Heidegger's engagement with mysticism was methodological and analytically precise. By seeking to draw a unique form of life out from 'the mystical' he assumed it *was* a unique category whose analysis would yield distinct knowledge via careful inquiry.⁸ Underhill, too, assumed the same methodological assumption concerning the reality of 'mysticism' and the 'mystical element.'

Thus, both Underhill and Heidegger, though starting from radically divergent starting points, evidence an overlap and common evaluation of mysticism that continues to impact how mysticism is understood, studied, evaluated, and, indeed, lived. The analysis and aims which informed thinkers like Heidegger and Underhill, as will be explored below, play out uniquely in the work of the American philosopher and theologian John D. Caputo. Caputo is an example of a thinker compelled by the 'mystical element' in religion, the mystics love of God, as well as being

⁸ Indeed, the old Heidegger, having lived through the experience of trying to retrieve the "basic experience" (*Gründerfahrung*) enshrined in "original Christianity", could say "Without this theological origin I would have never arrived at the path of thinking" (Benjamin Crowe, *Heidegger's Religious Origins: Destruction and Authenticity* (Bloomington; Indiana UP, 2006) 21).

influenced by currents and trends in Continental philosophy. His thought is both radically immanent, arguing for the necessity of starting from the material and the finite, while nonetheless keeping his ear tuned to the transcendent and the hope contained within its (im)possible call.

1.1 – Thesis and Key Issues

The central connection that my thesis seeks to clarify is the conceptual relationship between contemporary Continental philosophy and Christian mystical theology. This analysis is aimed at, first, clarifying two broad research objectives. In the following I will unpack these objectives, after which I will turn more specifically to the role that John Caputo plays in this study. The underlying objective of my study is to identify how religion is expressed in modernity. Following Onishi⁹ and Gschwandtner,¹⁰ I argue that Continental philosophers who engage with, adapt, and deploy mystical theological ideas are, as a consequence, extending religious themes into modern contexts. To that end, my thesis is organized around the assumption that tracing how the Continental philosophical tradition employs mystical themes, provides insight into a contemporary configuration of religion. Second, and more specifically, my research is an inquiry into how ‘mysticism’ has developed as an object of scholarly concern in the 20th and 21st centuries. A key heuristic that has animated this academic analysis has been to demarcate ‘types’ of mysticism into identifiable categories; nomenclature such as the ‘psychological,’ ‘feminist,’ ‘perennialist,’ ‘performative-linguistic,’ and ‘historical’ is used to categorize these expressions. This type-oriented approach can be seen in early scholarship by Inge, Underhill, and Butler, and in more recent scholarship by McGinn, Woods, and Bynum. My research, building on the work of

⁹ Bradley B Onishi, *The Sacrality of the Secular: Postmodern Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics?: Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

Nelstrop, Lewin,¹¹ and Morgan,¹² will extend this type-oriented approach and argue that the interpretive strategies offered by some in the Continental tradition to 'the mystical' constitutes a divergent understanding and approach to mysticism. Evidencing Continental thinkers' engagement with 'the mystical', by identifying and isolating the unique outcomes of this connection, is integral to the intent of this thesis.

So as to establish and assess the above claims, this study will examine the work of John D. Caputo. Caputo is a philosopher, academic, theologian, and public thinker who has written on the relationship between Continental philosophy and the Christian theological tradition for over 50 years. A notable aspect of Caputo's theological focus is his extensive analysis of the Christian mystical tradition, specifically as voiced by the 14th century German theologian Meister Eckhart. In this study, Caputo's work will function as a concrete example through whom I establish what I argue is an important ongoing and generative connection between Continental philosophy and mystical theology. To show this, I detail the role that Caputo's use of the 'mystical element' has played in his philosophical and theological thought. Following the theologian and scholar of mysticism, Denys Turner, I argue that Caputo represents a performative-linguistic use of the mystical. Shunning a perennialist or essentialist notion of 'the mystical element,' Caputo's use of 'the mystical' is a temporal, transient, and finite oriented focus. He thus rejects the spiritual or metaphysical suppositions that traditionally ensconce 'the mystical element.' Instead, 'the mystical element' is used by Caputo to evoke a more-than 'excessive' dimension of material existence, a focus that derives from the influence of contemporary Continental philosophy. Tracing how

¹¹ David Lewin, ed, *Mystical Theology and Continental Philosophy: Interchange in the Wake of God* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

¹² Ben Morgan, *On Becoming God: Late Medieval Mysticism and the Modern Western Self* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2022).

Caputo rejects themes of transcendence in his own work, while cleaving to mystically derived formulations of God, experience, and salvation, galvanizes this study.

1.2 – Methodological Tensions

The approach that my study undertakes is primarily historical in analysis. More specifically, I follow a history-of-ideas perspective as first voiced by writers like Arthur Lovejoy.¹³ The primary intent of this approach is to understand how concepts and words alter across time as a consequence of their being translated into divergent and new cultural contexts.¹⁴ And, because ideas have history, then mapping the reception, translation, transformation, and promulgation of these ideas across time yields the researcher with greater understanding of said idea and its social and cultural influence. The history of ideas focus of this analysis has been further nuanced by historians of ideas like Ernst Cassirer,¹⁵ Reinhart Koselleck,¹⁶ Michel de Certeau, and, though somewhat different in approach, Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical insights. All of these theorists' projects display a sensitivity to the complexity and nuance of conceptual translation as a historical process. By conceptual translation, I mean the process by which concepts are deployed in one setting, milieu, and context, and are then made productive in a setting divergent from its previous domain. This process is evidenced in studies of Christianity that examine, for example, the changing meaning behind terms such as justification and righteousness, penance and repentance, and indeed the very notion of salvation itself. In different epochs, different theologians

¹³ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960). For a critical and more modern discussion of the issues emergent from a history of ideas approach see: Darrin M. McMahon, 'The Return of the History of Ideas?' in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, edited by Darrin M McMahon., and Samuel Moyn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Jan-Werner Müller, On Conceptual History, in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, edited by Darrin M McMahon., and Samuel Moyn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Peter E. Gordon, Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas, in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, edited by Darrin M McMahon., and Samuel Moyn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Arthur O Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, [1948?] 2019), 9.

¹⁵ Ernst Cassirer, *The Logic of the Humanities*, trans. by Clarence Howe. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

¹⁶ Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, ed. by Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

understood the meaning and intention of these terms in unique and divergent ways. Sometimes these various interpretations arose from linguistic changes in the tradition; for example, when the Greek term *dianoia* was translated into the Latin *Justio*.¹⁷ Sometimes environmental factors compel these changes, i.e., when cultural developments in new geographical settings constrain and reshape the development or reception of key theological principles.¹⁸ What is consistent in these changes is the need to alter a term's past interpretation so as to make it more amenable and understandable in a different context. This issue is of central importance to understanding the study of mysticism where themes such as 'union with the divine' evidence historical plasticity in that theme's meaning as a consequence of linguistic, geographical, cultural, and social contexts.

This analysis is fundamentally a descriptive, not a prescriptive, analysis. That is, what this study is not, is a philosophical or theological inquiry whose aim is evidencing or critiquing the philosophical truth claims made by Caputo in particular or mysticism more broadly. Nor is my concern to map the religious orthodoxy of the claims being made by those in the mystical tradition—or indeed of Caputo's theological orthodoxy. Hence, following Štefan Štofanik,¹⁹ I am less interested in unpacking the formal structure of Caputo's arguments, than I am in tracing the general patterns of thought that organize his writing with the aim of evidencing what I am arguing is its recognizably mystical focus. I do this by stressing how Caputo's appropriation of key mystical themes and ideas signal both continuity with, as well as divergence from, earlier uses of said themes and ideas. Likewise, within Caputo's oeuvre itself, my approach is historical; hence, I show *how* Caputo has used the 'mystical element' throughout his writing career, *why* his use of

¹⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 14-21.

¹⁸ See for example Norman Russell's discussion of theosis in: Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁹ Štefan Štofanik, *The Adventure of Weak Theology: Reading the Work of John D. Caputo through Biographies and Events*, ed. by Joeri Schrijvers (Albany: State University of New York, 2018).

the mystical element has changed, and *what* those changes tell us both about Caputo's own use of the mystical and about its use in modernity.

A key background issue of this study concerns 'the mystical' itself. Specifically, *how* has it been understood in different historical contexts? Equally important is the question: *how* has the modern study of 'the mystical' informed, shaped, and perhaps altered those understandings? A variety of methodological approaches inform and impact how I have addressed those questions in this study. In what follows I discuss the work of three thinkers about the mystical that have shaped this thesis: Hans-Georg Gadamer, Michel de Certeau, and Denys Turner. In the problems posed, questions asked, and answers given, these thinkers show some of the underlying themes in the study of mysticism, helping us to understand how those tensions have unfolded in Caputo's project.

1.2.1 – Gadamer: Hermeneutics and 'the Mystical'

The historical and interpretive approach of my study has been directly shaped by Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, his discussion of the hermeneutical circle, and its impact on conceptual analysis.²⁰ I want then to briefly unpack some the key insights from Gadamer's approach so as to reflect on how 'the mystical' has come to be understood in modernity and how it has been framed as an academic subject. The governing insight of Gadamer's oeuvre is that when we study events, objects, and history in the humanities, we do not come to those issues as neutral observers; instead, presuppositions always inform our apprehension of those issues.²¹ Likewise, our presuppositions always include biases which help make ready the possibility of those issues in the first place. For example, a large part of 'the mystical' as an academic topic has been formed by (a) committed insiders to a tradition whose goal is union with the divine and (b)

²⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 292-293.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 272-273.

academics and researchers who value, share, or indeed reject, the claims made by the mystical insider. Hence, when William Inge or Cuthbert Butler undertook investigations into mystical phenomena in the early 20th century, they began by assuming a certain set of norms as innate to 'the mystical', they traced the normative outcomes of those norms as they helped shape 'the mystical,' and they showed how variation and indeed heresy arose in the history of 'the mystical.'²² The object of analysis 'the mystical' was, for Inge and Butler, always already implicated in a traditional account of the mystical. Both authors had presuppositions regarding the perennial nature of 'the mystical' and deployed methods of analysis that reified that perennial reality.

It was *because* of the biases of early investigations into 'the mystical', not despite them, that the academic study of mysticism was formed. This study starts from the assumption that the methodological presuppositions of committed insiders into 'the mystical' generated data of central importance to the study and understanding of mysticism as a religious, cultural, textual, experiential, and social phenomena. There is no neutral 'the mystical' outside of its historical, textual, traditional, cultural uses—nor indeed should we expect or desire neutrality in studies of topics such as 'the mystical.' As Caputo himself argues, research into the humanities and traditional forms of culture, always reflect human value and human concern—it is a human focused pursuit 'all the way down.'²³ In this way, this project cleaves to Gadamer's claim that "we have to recognize the element of tradition in historical research and inquire into its hermeneutic productivity."²⁴ Gadamer calls this recognition the hermeneutical circle; namely, that we interpret from our own perspective and that what we interpret is itself implicated in the construction of our

²² Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism: The Teaching of Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on Contemplation and Contemplative Life* (London: Constable, 1967), 3-6; William Inge, *Christian Mysticism* (Didactic Press/Amazon; Bolton, On., 2017), 7-14.

²³ John Caputo, 'Lecture 13 – Caputo – Course Wrap, pt. 2 [12-07-2010],' *mp3 file*, 11:19-11:30.

²⁴ Gadamer, 284.

perspective—a claim particularly true, I would argue, for the study of religion.²⁵ Hence, and following Gadamer, this project assumes that the object under analysis for the researcher into topics like ‘the mystical’ and ‘the religious’ is not the validity or reality of these topics *as such*. That is, my concern in this study is not to trace how the historical unfolding of ‘the mystical’ proceeds from perennial and determined laws and effects. Instead, following Gadamer, this study assumes that the analysis of phenomena like ‘the mystical’ is the analysis of the history that is shaped by, and indeed shapes, those compelled by its message, assumptions, and worldviews. This study then is the study of a history of human actions generated by what Gadamer named the ‘call’ of tradition.

In short, this study understands ‘the mystical’ to be the history of effects that mystical texts, authors, and indeed the ideal that ‘the mystical’ has had on the development of thought in the West. The data ‘history of effects,’ in other words, is applied to the scholarly reception and the concomitant development of ‘the mystical’ as it emerged over the 20th century. In doing so, and this is key, I place Caputo within the *traditio receptus* of ‘the mystical.’ This engagement with mysticism or the “mystical element” likewise echoes what Gadamer called the “element of tradition.”²⁶ This element is what Caputo more often than not attends to in the final sections or chapters of his major publications. In these afterthoughts or summations, Caputo will evaluate key claims from the themes and authors discussed in his text. He does this, however, via a desire to explicate the earlier discussions in his work via an appeal to themes emergent from the Christian mystical tradition. Authors like Angelus Silesius and his appeal to the ‘Rose without why’ or Eckhart’s notion of *Gelassenheit* are deployed by Caputo as ways of interpreting and contextualizing the modern philosophical and theological discussions that animate his work.

²⁵ Ibid., 292.

²⁶ Ibid., 284.

What Gadamer's insights provide to a study of the history and tradition of 'the mystical' is an awareness of the degree to which our knowledge and understanding is always enfolded within and shaped by tradition—an insight that Caputo's project echoes throughout. That is, although both Caputo and Gadamer are skeptical of the metaphysical realities assumed by the mystical tradition, they both affirm the productive status of these traditions in shaping, guiding, and orienting our knowledge about the world and ourselves. Tradition, for Gadamer, has a sort of intractable force whose form of understanding 'comes upon,' 'calls,' or 'addresses' us. As Gadamer writes, "understanding in the human sciences shares one fundamental condition with the life of tradition: *it lets itself be addressed by tradition.*"²⁷ He continues:

...we are always situated within traditions, and this is no objectifying process—i.e., we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. It is always part of us, a model or exemplar, a kind of cognizance that our later historical judgement would hardly regard as a kind of knowledge but as the most ingenious affinity with tradition.²⁸

Knowledge about the mystical developed in the humanities, is knowledge generated from a tradition that speaks to *us*—because it *is* about us. Caputo shares Gadamer's assumption regarding the force of tradition and the understanding it generates. Caputo, as will be explored, also finds in religion a style of communication aimed at "putting us into the accusative" by making us responsible to its entreaty.²⁹ We are readers of a text, actors in a liturgy, and subjects to a traditional authority in religion. We are, in short, made responsible to a tradition insofar as we are obliged to respond to that tradition.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid., 283.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ *SoG*, 250.

³⁰ Unlike Gadamer, though, Caputo does not argue that a teleological force governs this appeal from tradition. As I unpack below, Caputo resists the conservative undertone of Gadamer's claim regarding the impact of tradition—he is suspicious of its metaphysical (i.e., Hegelian) suppositions. However, in the books and articles published from 2010 onwards, these earlier criticism of Caputo's are replaced with a sympathetic view of Gadamer's more teleological assumptions. This revaluation is important for understanding how Caputo engages religion and the mystical, but it is also important in understanding the epistemological and hermeneutical claims that orient Caputo's understanding of tradition.

Gadamer's approach sheds light on a problem that Caputo is himself ever attentive too, namely, the problem of objectivity in the humanities. For Gadamer, a key difficulty that the scholar must contend with is reflected in the problem of the hermeneutical circle: our understanding of mysticism begins with scholars whose normative conception of the Christian tradition assumes the reality of 'the mystical.' Two problems arise here. First, is the underlying claim of Gadamer's—and which contemporary scholars like Russell McCutcheon find exceptionally problematic³¹—that our study of 'mysticism' begins with a deductive premise concerning the object 'mysticism' and proceeds by analyzing historical examples of this 'mystical.' The outcome is a scholarly object, 'the mystical', that merely reflects the accumulated history of insiders to the tradition. Consequently, the scholar is left not with an objective object detached from human assumptions, so much as an object that utterly reflects a history of normative understandings.

For many scholars of religious studies, the above raised tensions regarding the objectivity of religion and the ways in which normative claims from insiders to the tradition, shape the object religion, and therefore, 'the mystical', signals a fundamental problem for the study of religion.³² These concerns and issues have animated discussions in religious studies for the last 30 years and are important for understanding how modern analysis of religion within the academy has developed. For my part, I find the problems raised by scholars seeking to overcome the tensions from this 'circular' methodological problem overinflated. Not that the objections raised by these scholars are wrong. But I see these issues as simply a part of the common thread of intellectual discovery, a potential hazard involved in any analysis, not a detour whose outcome is necessarily

³¹ Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

³² For example: Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3-4; Robert Segal, 'Categorizing Religion,' in *Perspectives on Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, ed. by Armin Geertz, Russell McCutcheon, and Scott Elliott (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 190; Bruce Lincoln, 'Thesis on Method,' in *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion: Twenty-Five Years On*, ed. by Aaron Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 167.

incoherence and/or error. Interrogating the presuppositions that animate both our thought and our desire to think is necessary to the active life of scholarly analysis and intellectual discovery. When we come to think about religion, rather more specifically, 'the mystical,' we do so in a manner that always already includes ways of living and understanding that give those issues their interest and import. This import impacts *what*, *how*, and *why* we in turn think about these issues. As this project advances, we will see that although Caputo is aware of the problem of objective data in the study of religion, and the further problems raised by hermeneutical circle in the study of mysticism, he does not find in these tensions intractable obstacles.

1.2.2 – De Certeau: Boundaries of 'the Mystical'

Another development in the study of mysticism that offers insights to the problems noted above, is raised by Michel de Certeau in the introductions to both volumes of his now classic study *The Mystic Fable*. While Gadamer offers insight into how our models of religion or the mystical are shaped by and within horizons of subjective understanding, de Certeau offers insight into those elements *not* included in our models. Likewise, de Certeau's focus on the experience of the modern loss of God as a new vector for 'the mystical element' is helpful for understanding mysticism as an academic topic more broadly and Caputo more specifically. Rather than focus on the problematic nature of the essentialization of 'the mystical,' de Certeau turns his attention to how our models, boundaries, and demarcations always fall short of attending to the full nuance of a phenomena like 'the mystical.'³³ Echoes of the problem noted above, of reifying the insider's essential view, arise here. However de Certeau's central insight is that when we demarcate, when we use models and boundaries from insiders or outsiders to the tradition, we do so not to capture the object 'the mystical' within the borders of our models, but, more importantly, we do this "so

³³ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, vol. 1, trans. by Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3.

that what overflows its borders may become visible.”³⁴ That is, by delineating what mysticism ‘is’ we become aware not only of the varieties of its uses, but also to a variety of uses of the ‘mystical’ that fall outside of, while still being wed to, ‘the mystical.’ This approach is helpful for appreciating Caputo’s engagement with mysticism; as, his engagement with mysticism is both orthodox and heterodox—that is, he remains wedded to traditional readings of ‘the mystical’ while also thinking its traditional uses and meanings outside its orthodox uses.

De Certeau analysis proceeds via an assumption regarding the centrality of apophaticism in mystical thought. According to de Certeau, apophaticism, especially in the 16th and 17th centuries, was situated within a discursive economy that privileged the imaging of space and history around themes like negation, the nothingness of God, and a *docta ignorantia*.³⁵ Aside from the stress that these mystics laid on the unsayable aspects of the transcendent, this apophatic focus was also a way of imaging *history*. Specifically, this approach gave new shape to the past by focusing on those actors who had a unique mystical relation to God. What was stressed by these 16th and 17th century thinkers was a history of the unsayable aspect of God as a history of insight into the transcendent. In so doing, the past, ‘history,’ became subject to modern observers via the resources of the mystical tradition. Indeed, as de Certeau writes, tradition “was fading away, transforming itself into a past.”³⁶ This past was saturated by a proximity to the traditionally understood nameless origins of things—what Caputo will call, following Schelling, *das Unvordenklichkeit*.³⁷ The past conjured by these early modern thinkers could be inscribed, imbibed, and lived by the mystic, now. That is, these thinkers imaged the past as a time in which humans experienced a fuller nearness to God via the apophatic, and deployed hermeneutical and

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 94-97.

³⁶ Ibid., 24.

³⁷ See: *SoG*, 141-144.

epistemological strategies that sought to make *that* past reality, present. Hence, de Certeau is suggesting, one outcome of early modernity (i.e., Enlightenment thought) was a rejection of religion and the mystical as a way to be modern, another outcome was an affirmation of religion and the mystical as a way to be modern. As de Certeau writes, “the mystics to not reject the ruins” of tradition and the church that surround them, “they remain there.”³⁸

De Certeau's thesis, then, is that mysticism and its modern focus developed out of a romantic longing for a lost past which occupied a variety of intellectual movements in early modernity. This romantic origin stressed the centrality of negation, the apophatic, as a means to image and relate to the transcendent. De Certeau argues that it was in this longing for a past that was both discovered and indeed invented, that ‘the mystical’ as we presently conceive it, emerged.

Addressing these tensions, de Certeau writes:

The fact that the mystics enclosed themselves in the circle of a “nothingness” capable of being an “origin” is to be explained, first of all, by their having been caught up in a radical situation they took seriously. They have translated that situation into their texts, not only in the relation an innovative truth bears throughout with the pain of a loss, but, more explicitly, in the social figures that dominate their discourse, those of the madman, the child, the illiterate.³⁹

While not denying that a normative definition of ‘the mystical’ grounded in traditional and indeed orthodox practices and assumptions pre-existed this early modern context, de Certeau's claim is that those traditional elements were filtered through a unique style of writing that emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries. This style of writing “translated” the situation of the early moderns into ‘the mystical’ focus of the 16th and 17th centuries; in so doing, these writers learned to live productively in the “ruins” of the past that ‘the mystical’ imagination voiced.

³⁸ de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, 25.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

Caputo, I argue, is an example of a thinker who engages ‘the mystical element’, but in a way which echoes de Certeau’s emphasis on that which *overflows the borders* of what has classically been understood as ‘the mystical’. In contemporary scholarship, one overflowing of the boundaries of classically defined mysticism occurs when postmodern⁴⁰ thinkers engage with its thematics. This interaction has been noted by scholars of mysticism, for example by Nelstrop, Magill, and Onishi, who designate it as a “re-reading” of ‘the mystical.’⁴¹ This ‘re-reading’ interprets mysticism via categories or models derived from existential, phenomenological, and deconstructive frameworks. The principal tension that occurs from this interaction emerges in the tension between the anti-foundationalist assumptions that orient postmodern thought and the foundationalist assumptions of classical mystical thought. Postmodern thinkers like Derrida, Lyotard, and indeed Caputo, need to be understood as thinking through the implications of their anti-foundationalist worldviews via the foundationalist assumptions inherited from ‘the mystical.’ An example of this exchange occurs in discussions on the distinction between apophatic theology and deconstructive models of language: while the limitations ascribed to language from a deconstructive model are understood to be final, i.e., there is no foundation that will resolve these limitations; the limitations assumed by apophatic thought are provisional, i.e., in the eschaton these limitations will be overcome via the foundation of God’s pleroma. We will see as this study develops that this is a key galvanizing tension of Caputo’s work, namely, how to think the

⁴⁰ Broadly, we can understand postmodernism to refer to a constellation of social and cultural changes that occurred after the ‘modernist’ period. We can loosely understand modernism to begin in the 16th century and ‘end’ at the beginning of the 20th century (N.N. Trakakis, ‘Postmodern Approaches to Religion,’ in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Graham Oppy (New York: Routledge, 2015) 32-33). Philosophically, postmodernism refers to a number of beliefs, claims, and notions that emphasize pluralist, perspectivalist, and anti-foundationalist epistemologies (Trakakis, 35-36). Postmodernism stresses the central impact of language on thought and action, and deploys deconstructive practices influenced by a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ model to critique and understand social developments (Trakakis, 36).

⁴¹ Louise Nelstrop, Kevin J Magill, and Bradley B Onishi, *Christian Mysticism: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2009), 225-254.

structural and foundational assumptions of a biblical worldview that images a *unio mystica* with a contemporary worldview that is radically nominalist, temporary, and finite.

Caputo's engagement with mysticism—and indeed the Continental tradition's engagement with mysticism more broadly—reflects de Certeau's thesis that our definitions of the mystical runs into activities and behaviors that escape the very definitions and models deployed to capture that engagement in the first place. The map, as J.Z. Smith rightly noted, is not the territory.⁴² In part, this is because thinkers like Caputo subordinate classical assumptions regarding the nature of the mystical and its metaphysical speculations to its finite, historical, human, and indeed 'inhuman' ramifications. For Caputo, discourses about 'the mystical' are ultimately discourses about human experience and material reality.⁴³ In this way, Caputo's project is twined by two competing assumptions: (1) suspicion of any discourse that assumes a metaphysical 'yonder' as its explanatory goal; (2) appreciation for religious mythology and cosmology insofar as they reflect, challenge, and galvanize human experience. This galvanizing force occurs via a term of some significance both for Caputo and for contemporary Continental philosophy, namely the event. As will be explored below, Caputo's focus on the event, is a focus that allows him to stress the irreducibly material and factual conditions of our experience, while simultaneously stressing the irreducibly 'excessive' or a Derridean non-programmability of the material. Caputo's account of the event is diverse, as will be explored below, but a key example of his is expressed temporally: our finite existence is haunted by an unknown future to-come that always already disturbs the

⁴² Jonathan Z Smith, *The Map Is Not The Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden: E. J.Brill, 1978).

⁴³ The ontological discussion regarding what constitutes matter is varied and complex conversation in modernity (see for example: McGilchrist, Iain, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World* (London: Perspectiva Press, 2021)). For the purposes of this study, I will largely frame my use of the terms matter, materialism, or the physical world via Caputo's understanding of these issues. For example, in a recording from 2010 he argues "One sort of working pragmatic definition [of materialism] is to define it in terms of the mortality of our lives. And, the finality of mortality" (Caputo, *Lecture 13*, 29:39-29:58). Caputo continues this rather Heideggerian account of materialism, by noting that whatever we precisely mean by 'matter' or 'finitude' is ultimately circumscribed by human experience and the limitation of death that circumscribes our experiences.

present moment by its unexpected arrival, and a past whose echoes reverberate in, but do not determine, the present. In mystical discourse, for Caputo, is to be found one way of thinking this finite, material, and temporal predicament.

Central to the advantages afforded by mystical discourse to evidence this material and evental process is its appeal to the unknown, the apophatic, or the excessive and unprogrammable nature of human experience. As will be unpacked, much of mystical discourse trades on an appeal to the capacity of material existence to exceed itself in specific moments, e.g., a ‘mystical experience;’ and that these experiences are enhanced by advancing a sort of ‘non-attached attachment’ to the unknowable fullness of the divine, e.g., *Gelassenheit*. In Caputo’s reading, mystical discourse advances anthropologically by seeing human material existence as itself receptive to the event of an unknown excessive ‘other’ that always already haunts our present experience by what he calls, following Derrida, its threat/promise. And like many of the thinkers that occupy de Certeau, Caputo too takes a sort of primal nothingness as the generative origin of action and thought. Whether it be in his insistence of the “mysticism of the rose” that he develops from Angelus Sileisus, or *Gelassenheit* from Eckhart, or in his later works, the ‘simple soul’ of Porete, or indeed the influence of Hegel’s negative, Schelling’s *Unvordenklichkeit*, Heidegger’s emphasis on death, or Derrida’s deconstructive philosophy—all of which assume the productive space opened up by a process that falls under the heading ‘negation.’ These terms and their issues will be unpacked below.

By tracing how thinkers like Caputo deploy terms like ‘the mystical’, ‘mysticism’, and ‘the mystical element,’ my intention, following de Certeau, is to show how Caputo’s analysis *overflows* the classical boundary around which the object ‘mysticism’ has been delineated. In part, this overflowing is a consequence of Caputo’s profoundly materialist worldview, shaped as it is by the

Continental philosophical tradition. Because his project rejects classical models of the mystical, he expands the definition of mysticism into finite and material domains.

The mystic for Caputo speaks to the fullness of a style of thinking born in a situation that precedes the tensions of modernity, but whose ideas can still be productive for our present tensions. This analysis is thus premised on the assumption that *we gain insight into the changing shape of mysticism as its tensions, internal structures, and 'styles' are translated into and transformed by modern and indeed postmodern voices*. Caputo, although echoing the mystical tradition from which he draws, also changes it—a key aspect of this change is his focus on finitude, the event, and his account of ‘the future.’ My inquiry seeks to place Caputo within the history of the uses of ‘the mystical’ by understanding his project as an intervention on ‘the mystical’ with the aim of hearing otherwise the call of its tradition. In this way, Caputo’s project provides insight into one avenue of religious thought (e.g., the mystical) as it is expressed in modernity (e.g., in Continental philosophy); *how* it has occurred, *why*, *what* changes occurred, and *what* those changes tell us about the future direction of said religious thought.

1.2.3 – Turner: Language and ‘the Mystical’

What then is Caputo’s approach to the mystical? One answer to this question can be seen in the parallel between Denys Turner’s framing and understanding of mysticism and Caputo’s. Turner’s approach is instructive both for thinking about the practice and study of mysticism more generally, and for providing a helpful model to think about Caputo’s use of the mystical more specifically. A key work of Turner’s is his *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (1995). This is a theologically motivated text that explores the uses, strategies, and aims of mysticism in its classical, medieval, and modern expression. Turner’s focus is itself organized by a theory of language. For Turner, this theory assumes that our lack of certainty regarding the capacity of linguistic predication to accurately name qualities and characteristics of God, is the

central tension that mystical discourse functionally strove to overcome. This approach problematizes both cataphatic and apophatic assertions about God.⁴⁴ God, Turner is arguing, *is both as well as being neither, the sum of and the negation of all predications ascribed to God*. True mystical discourse strives to give voice to this paradoxical claim.⁴⁵

Historically, this linguistic trajectory began with pseudo-Dionysius.⁴⁶ According to Turner, two metaphorical motifs animate pseudo-Dionysius's mystical theology. The first is Plato's cave metaphor, the second is Moses's Sinai encounter.⁴⁷ In the former is found the metaphor of interiority, in the latter is found the metaphor of ascent. Both metaphors are central in the development of mystical thought. Likewise, both metaphors speak to the binary of light/dark, ignorance/understanding. These binaries are given epistemic validity insofar as one assumes a former state in which one was not in proximity to absolute truth and a latter state in which one is proximate to absolute truth. This basic scheme informs the linguistic structure of mystical discourse.⁴⁸ The objective of mystical theology, following pseudo-Dionysius, is not so much the assertion or denial of either metaphor, as it is the awareness of the impossibility of confining God to the strictures of language.⁴⁹ Hence, what Turner argues is that mystical discourse aims at seeing past these binaries and their metaphorical concomitants into the absolute 'excess' that is God.⁵⁰ It is to this final assumption of Turner's that his theological focus gives clarity.

⁴⁴ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 35.

⁴⁵ Sheila Elizabeth McGinn, 'Book Review: The Darkness of God,' *The Journal of Theological Studies* 51, no. 1 (2000), 364.

⁴⁶ Turner, 19; Nelstrop, 38.

⁴⁷ Thomas Sullivan, 'Book Review: The Darkness of God,' *The Review of Metaphysics* 50, no. 1 (1996): 194; Nelstrop, 38.

⁴⁸ Turner, 47; Nelstrop, 95.

⁴⁹ Turner, 35.

⁵⁰ Nelstrop, 17.

In this way, for Turner, mystical theology names a linguistic strategy that aims at an unknowable understanding—a *doctrina ignorantia*. This state, for Turner, is best expressed in the West by the theologies of Meister Eckhart and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (14th c.).⁵¹ However, Turner argues that modern interpreters have strayed from this medieval understanding. In modernity, the emphasis has largely been placed on the supposed *experiential* aspects of mystical discourse.⁵² Specifically, mysticism has come to signify an alerted state of heightened peace/pleasure/calm that overtakes the adherent as a consequence of their practice. According to Turner, the negation of binaries accomplished via the paradoxes of language deployed in metaphorical thought is, in modernity, translated into an experiential process. Turner's analysis, then, is fundamentally aimed at critiquing this focus on experience, what he calls "experientialism."⁵³ The problem, according to Turner, is that this experiential turn has psychologized the earlier apophatic tradition and, as it were, translated its paradoxical aims into experiential outcomes. He suggests, in short, that thinkers like pseudo-Dionysius aimed their analysis at a God who resisted simple prediction, not at a God known in the light of ec-static union.

Hence, although Turner gives a historical and philosophical account of mystical discourse in his work, his project must be understood via its linguistic claims. For this reason, Nelstrop rightly categorizes Turner under the Performative language model.⁵⁴ For Turner, mystical language performs a function within a mappable discursive economy; its outcomes alleviate a type of stress regarding one's inability to name God, while nonetheless bypassing that inability via a larger discursive strategy that sublates that tension into an unknowability that is liberative. Hence, for

⁵¹ Turner, 248.

⁵² Ibid., 259.

⁵³ Ibid., 267; see also: Bernard McGinn, 'Book Review: The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism,' *The Journal of Religion* 77, no. 2 (1997), 310.

⁵⁴ Nelstrop, 14.

Turner, mystical discourse is a technique that was developed by writers and thinkers who sought to indicate the unknowable *ganz andere* status of God *as such*. That is, mystical theology, for Turner, performs a function in a linguistic sphere, as Nelstrop notes, which moves the subject past the space of ascribing qualities or names to God. It is still fundamentally, for Turner, aimed at a theological claim regarding a God who escapes predication and the way in which the subject, barred from predicative access to that God, gains soteriological outcomes as a consequence of that unknowable reality.

Not unlike Denys Turner's linguistic performative account of mysticism, Caputo, I argue, envisions the mystical element of religion in terms of a linguistic strategy inculcated in the receiver of the text/teaching a mental and lived disposition (e.g., *Gelassenheit*, letting-go, detachment). This disposition, an outcome of letting-go, is performed or enacted socially—it has finite and lived outcomes. Likewise, mystical thought and claims are generally understood by Caputo to be performative in nature; that is, mystical thought is important for Caputo insofar as it is enacted in one's life and, equally important, insofar as its conceptual and linguistic resources are enacted upon thinking in general and philosophical thinking in particular. In part, this performative-linguistic approach is an outcome of Caputo's anti-metaphysical claims. And because, as will be traced below, he does not concede to perennialist assumptions regarding the aim of mystical thought, i.e., mystical union with a metaphysical other, then he does not see the aim of 'the mystical' as anything other than factual and finite. The discursive outcome of mystical discourse in a modern and postmodern context occurs via its capacity to productively intrude upon modern expressions of philosophical, theological, ethical, and indeed political forms of thought.

Throughout Caputo's oeuvre, 'the mystical element' is appealed to in order to advance what can only be called Caputo's sympathetic perspective regarding his understanding of the

religious in general. This sympathetic perspective of religion derives from Caputo's appreciation for poetic and imaginative impulses to generate productive modes of understanding. One task of the modern philosopher, for Caputo, is to find in the poetic expression that undergirds mystical discourse, something which can be applied to contemporary tensions. In short, Caputo finds in mystical discourse, certain elemental structures which can be analogously applied to a variety of modern tensions because, and more broadly speaking, mystical thought addresses irreducible aspects of human life such as passion, hope, faith, hospitality, and love. Thus, not unlike Eckhart who was both a *Lesemeister* and a *Lebensmeister*, a master of reading and learning and a master of living or of applying those learned themes to one's life, so too might we think about Caputo's 'mystical element.' Caputo wants his readers to take up the mystical element, to live it, not deterministically, as if it simply prescribes correct behavior, but as a way of thinking, behaving, and acting, a way, that is, that magnifies human experience by intensifying our relationship to experience.

As this study progresses, I will return to the hypothesis that Caputo's engagement with 'the mystical' can be productively thought along Turner's performative-linguistic approach. As we will see, Caputo too is interested in the limits of language. Though for Caputo, it is less about linguistic limits, i.e., the inability of language to describe certain realities, and more about the plasticity of language, i.e., the ways in which language deconstructs and reconstructs. Hence, although Turner's model is helpful for attending to Caputo's project, there are limits. Indeed, as I will return to at this study's conclusion, Caputo's engagement with the mystical represents an altogether novel and divergent engagement with the mystical. His finite oriented, future-directed, reading of the mystical represents a rather dramatic shift in the history of interpreting mysticism.

1.3 – Chapter Divisions

This analysis is divided into two major sections. In the first section, I trace the historical development of mysticism in key Platonic and Christian writers (chapter 2), the development of the study of mysticism in modernity (chapter 3), and key moments in the development of the Continental philosophical tradition (chapter 4). In section two, I turn specifically to Caputo, I unpack his intellectual development and key works (chapter 5), his key ideas (chapter 6) and the development and character of his ‘mystical element’ (chapter 7). In dividing this project along this scheme, my aim is twofold. First, this project takes as axiomatic the centrality of a historical perspective when attempting to understand a cultural phenomenon such as mysticism. As I show in chapter 2, the development of Christian mysticism assumes that a unity exists between Greek metaphysics and the Christian tradition. As we will see with Caputo, his project rejects Greek or Neoplatonic metaphysics—a tension he wrestles with when advocating for thinkers from the Christian tradition like Eckhart that rely on this Neoplatonic metaphysical structure in their own thought. Indeed, a central tension for Caputo’s general philosophical program concerns a questioning of the importance of Greek metaphysics for modern Christian thought. In short, Caputo asks: Does Christianity need Greek metaphysics? This question is amplified when considered within the context of Christian mystical thought. For, as will be shown below, Greek metaphysical assumptions enframe the basic suppositions of Christian mysticism.

Second, the history of scholarship on Christian mysticism is of equal importance to understanding Caputo’s engagement with mysticism. This is not to say that university discourse concerning the object of analysis ‘mysticism’ exhausts the nuance and richness of the mystical tradition. However, and especially in the work of scholars in the first half of the 20th century, their work and analysis had a decisive influence on the reception of, and understanding about, the Christian mystical tradition. These scholars, I will show, both passed on key themes and issues of

the mystical tradition to a wider audience, as well as giving shape to central concerns and understanding of the tradition for later generations. With this historical and scholarly context, I am suggesting, Caputo's engagement with mystical themes is given nuance and clarity. This is because the 'mystical element' that Caputo appeals to throughout his oeuvre, draws on the work of scholars who translated, interpreted, and advanced mystical texts and authors within an academic context. Fleshing out and evidencing these claims are the focus of what follows.

Chapter 2: What is Christian Mysticism: A Historical Overview is an historical analysis of the development of mysticism. My focus here is to evidence how mystical themes emerged from key Platonic texts, and how those themes came to impact early Christian theology/theologians. My focus is principally on the epistemic and ontological assumptions of Platonic discourse, how those assumptions show themselves in early Christian theology, and how the notion of a *Unio Mystica* arose. I end with an analysis of Meister Eckhart's mystical claims from his *Blessed are the Poor* sermon. Themes from this sermon are central to Caputo's 'mystical element;' as such, expositing this sermon's key themes will help clarify Caputo's own project.

Chapter 3: What is Christian Mysticism: An Academic Overview considers key moments in the development of the study of mysticism in the 20th century. The intent of this chapter is to establish how it is that mysticism arose as a scholarly object and what sort of tensions drove this scholarship. Establishing this scholarly trajectory will serve the larger aims of my dissertation: how, given the development of the understanding of 'the mystical', can we situate some Continental philosophers' engagement with mysticism and its impact on Caputo. My analysis proceeds by summarizing what I argue are the key methodological assumptions from early 20th century scholars, as well as by scholars from the latter half of the 20th and century.

Chapter 4: Continental Philosophy, Religion, and 'The Mystical' is an account of key thinkers from the Continental tradition: Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Slavoj Žižek, and Jean-Luc Marion. I trace key epistemological assumptions of this tradition and how those assumptions came to frame religion and religious experience. I show that the Continental tradition developed with an appreciation not so much for 'religion' *as such*, but with an appreciation of religion as a form of life that demands careful analysis—this as opposed to a more rationalistic or empirical approach that might deem religious activity as irrational and thus wrong. This positive appreciation of religious thematics helps explain why contemporary thinkers like Caputo value mystical themes and authors; in part, as I will argue, this valuation stems from Kant's desire to 'limit human understanding to make room for faith.' Tracing how different Continental philosophers also limited knowledge to make room for faith organizes my analysis in this section. I conclude by providing a definition of what I am arguing is the 'Continental approach to mysticism'—I return to that definition at the conclusion of this study when considering Caputo's own engagement with mysticism.

In *Chapter 5: John D. Caputo: Context* my attention turns to Caputo more specifically. I detail his intellectual development by unpacking key texts and issues that have motivated his project. My task here, too, is to unpack how and why Caputo draws so heavily on the Christian tradition, how themes from the Christian tradition have motivated his work, and what it means to say that Caputo engages the Christian mystical tradition in order to evidence his theological and philosophical claims.

Chapter 6: John D. Caputo: Key Ideas focuses on key terms and ideas of Caputo's and their development within his oeuvre. My principal aim in this developmental focus is to show how

key ideas of Caputo's e.g., 'the event,' function in his project and, more importantly, how Caputo uses these terms and ideas to advance both philosophical and theological claims. My focus throughout this analysis is on the role that religious and mystical thematics have played in the development of Caputo's key works and ideas.

Chapter 7: The Mystical Element of Caputo's Thought focuses specifically on the development of the use of the phrase 'the mystical element' in Caputo's work. I show how Caputo's early use of the phrase, when discussing Heidegger's 'mystical element,' developed into Caputo's own specific use of the term, why that change occurred, and what that change tells us about Caputo's engagement with mysticism. I conclude this chapter with a comparative exegesis in which I intervene upon Caputo's work in order to make explicit how it is that he translated and transformed mystical ideas and themes into ideas and themes that resonate with the Continental philosophical tradition. Likewise, I show how his use and understanding of mysticism has been shaped by his immersion in the Continental tradition. To do this, I examine the link between Caputo's use of *Gelassenheit* in his work and its connection with theories of intentionality that animate phenomenological thought. I then discuss the stylistic aspects of Caputo's use of mysticism by drawing a comparison between Caputo's appeal to mystical language—what I call the mystical voice—and the appeal to the grammatical middle voice that thinkers like Gadamer and Heidegger appealed to in their work.

[Chapter 2: What is Christian Mysticism: An Historical Overview](#)

In what follows I detail three moments in the history of the development of Christian mysticism: (1) the pre-Christian Platonic development of a metaphysics premised on the assumption of the possibility of union with 'The One;' (2) the 'baptizing' of this pre-Christian metaphysics by Augustine of Hippo and pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite; (3) the medieval expression of this

Christian/Platonic worldview in the work of Meister Eckhart. My intention is not to be exhaustive, but, instead, to offer a snapshot of three areas of 'the mystical' that have (a) been contributing moments in the history of the development of Christian mysticism and (b) are key to how Caputo understands mysticism, what he rejects about the mystical, and importantly, what he finds compelling about the mystical. My intention is to unpack key moments in the history of the Christian religion that have come to be identified with a theological outlook that understands union with the divine as not only possible, but necessary to human experience.

2.1 – Plato, Plotinus, and the 'Divided Line'

Jaroslav Pelikan began his 1992-93 Gifford Lectures with an observation regarding what he saw as a rather curious historical occurrence:

It remains one of the most momentous linguistic convergences in the entire history of the human mind and spirit that the New Testament happens to have been written in Greek—not in the Hebrew of Moses and the prophets, not in the Aramaic of Jesus and his disciples, nor yet in the Latin of the imperium Romanum, but in the Greek of Socrates and Plato.¹

The result of this convergence, Pelikan continues, is that a uniquely Greek inheritance infuses the philological and philosophical history that informs the conceptual construction of the *Koine* New Testament. Words such as *λόγος*, *υπόστασις*, *ἀπάθεια*, *τέλος*, *οὐσία* and *μετάνοια* are terms that oriented the burgeoning orthodoxy of the Christian faith, igniting new understandings, and helping to form the conceptual kernel of the new religion. But these terms carried with them a history of Greek thought that in turn animated and inhabited what would become the orthodox faith. Whether it be Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle of the Classical period or the Neo-Pythagorean, Skepticism, and Neo-Platonism of the later Hellenistic period: the language, thought, and tensions germane to the Greek speaking world imbued the theological imagination of the budding Christian mind.²

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 3.

² Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 3.

However, it would be a mistake to suppose that the ideational impacts of its Greek past simply subordinated the flowering of Christian thought to its Mediterranean backdrop. The history of the transmission and reception of any concept across time is far more of a dynamic process than a 1:1 correlation between univocal terms. As Henry Chadwick notes, the origin of Christian philosophy is “more than a matter of discovering passing echoes of Greek ideas within the NT writings.”³ Consider for example the prologue to John’s gospel. There, the identification of the Logos as the light lightening every person—a claim that shares a history with Stoic, Platonic, and Neoplatonic sources alike—undergoes a dramatic shift when John 1:14 announces “*Καὶ ὁ Λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο*.” In this way, texts like the prologue are indicators that, although the development of Christian thought is certainly bound to a Classical and Hellenistic Greek horizon, the questions Christian’s asked and the answers they gave in response suggest a far more independent and conceptually distinct tradition. In short, although Christian notions of, for example, mystical ascent occur within a Greek milieu influenced by Greek writers and the Greek language, Christian thought should not itself be understood as a mere repetition of its past. A distinct intellectual climate arose in the early centuries of the Christian church that indicate a creativity and inspiration that is its own.

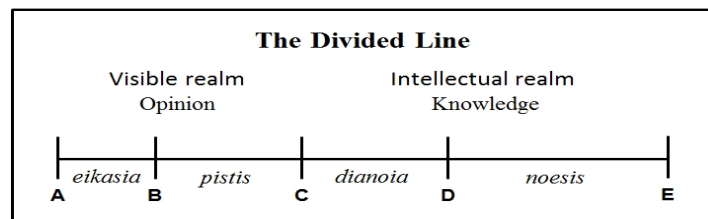
Be that as it may, the ideas, themes, and issues that inform Plato’s writing, and those who follow him, have had a unique impact on the development of Christian mysticism. One area where that impact and overlap occur is around the theme of liberation. This liberative theme is evidenced in the claim that knowledge, and indeed self-knowledge, leads to liberation—the injunction that follows from this liberative ideal is ‘know thyself’ (*γνῶθι σεαυτόν*). The love of wisdom is the love of understanding, questioning, and the pursuit of truth; this pursuit for Plato and Socrates, was a

³ Henry Chadwick, “Philo and the Beginnings of Christian Thought,” in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (London: Cambridge U.P, 1967), 158.

pursuit *from* the world of things and appearances *to* the inner world of ideas, and ultimately to the transcendent forms or ideals. To understand the link between knowledge, liberation, and transcendence, I will first unpack Plato's divided line scheme.

My purpose for the following is to connect the Delphic injunction to self-knowledge, as it was translated by Plato through Socrates, to the metaphysical claims that undergird the Platonic notion of knowledge. This epistemic development helped give shape to key elements of mystical thought and is key to understanding

what thinkers like Caputo reject about mystical thought. What then is the *nature* of 'knowing' that γνῶθι



σεαυτόν presumes? Four stages of knowing connect the epistemological claims of Plato to the cosmos he understood himself to be inhabiting. Classically, following his account from the *Republic* (VI, 509d-511e), Plato's account of knowledge is organized around the 'Divided Line' scheme.⁴ Here, knowledge is divided into sections that connote the *what* of that which is known to the *how* of the knower that knows—the known to the knower. As such, knowledge emergent from the physical world corresponds to a certain type of internal awareness that differs from the knowledge one attains when they 'know' the intellectual realms. Following the graph provided above: (ab) is knowledge of appearances, *εἰκασία*; (bc) is knowledge that arises from a type of faith in said physical appearances, *πίστις*; (cd) is knowledge best conceived of as "hypothetical reasoning engaged in by mathematics," *διάνοια*; (de) is knowledge of the intelligible/s, *νόησις*.⁵

⁴ Plato, *Great Dialogues of Plato*, trans. W.H.D. Rouse (New York: Mentor Books, 1984), p. 308-311

⁵ Robert Audi, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, Second Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 239.

Two points are vital for understanding how the Divided Line functioned for Plato: first, there is an ontological ground of being (*οὐσία*) that unifies the becoming of the material world with the immutable being of the noetic world—the former being ‘lower’ than the latter. Second, there is an epistemological claim. The process by which one attains to the higher realm is through internal discursive reflection on that which transcends the physical. Not unlike the allegory of the Cave, the Divided Line presumes that one ascends into higher and thus to a truer nature of reality when they transcend the limits of materiality.⁶

The above divided-line scheme provided the framework for the contemplative (*θεωπία*) ideal that galvanized Christian mystical thought. For Plato, the world is separated into the seen and the unseen. The soul, while in the world, “is distracted and dazzled by the perception of sense-objects” but, through a purgative process in which the finite object that arises from the intentional activity of the practitioner is bracketed, they then are able to find rest in contemplating the “eternal, pure, and immortal objects” that reflects the true nature of the soul.⁷ The results of this process is an epistemological claim (i.e. knowledge is divided into categories from lowest to highest), an ontological claim (i.e. this hierarchical knowledge corresponds to the true unfolding of reality itself), and an anthropological claim (i.e. the subject, via reminiscence, can rise above the transitory to be liberated in the permanent). This basic scheme is the conceptual blueprint upon which the tradition of mystical ascent to God, which undergirds mystical thought, functions.⁸ For Caputo, we will see that it is this hierarchical model that his critique of mysticism is above all else aimed. But Plato’s is only one step in the long development of mysticism in the West, another key voice

⁶ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) 5-6.

⁷ Francis Macdonald Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy: A Study in the Origins of Western Speculation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 247.

⁸ William R. Cook and Ronald B Herzman, *The Medieval World View: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 24-25.

was Plotinus. His influence on the development of the basic metaphysical tenants of mystical thought is enormous, hence some of his claims require exposition.

The development, transmission, and translation of ideas in antiquity resists a simple linear unfolding. Hence, drawing a direct correlative line between one school of thought in antiquity and the next, simplifies an otherwise complex intersection of historical variables. This ambiguity describes the connection between Plato and the posthumously titled Neoplatonists. As Charles Norris Cochrane notes, Neoplatonic thought does embody “a solid core of Platonic thought” but restated so as to make sense to a 3rd century mind.⁹ The question regarding the influence of Plato on mystical thought comes down, then, to this question: which Plato? On this point Jean Daniélou rightly argues, early “Christian writers depend less on Plato than on an image which Middle Platonism had rendered.”¹⁰ Adequately separating out one form of Platonic thought from the other certainly escapes the focus of this study. Instead, in what follows, I briefly address key aspects of Platonic thought such as contemplation, the picture of the self, and the assertions of mystical union, as they occur in the writing of Plotinus.

I want to begin by considering the topic of θεωρία. As discussed, Plato's Divided Line traces the movement of knowledge from the lower understanding of the physical world to the higher intellectual contemplation of the intelligibles. The question that concerns us, and indeed motivated Neoplatonic thought, was: What precisely is entailed in this contemplative process? And how does liberation arise from this type of contemplative focus? A key answer to these questions was outlined by Plato in the *Republic*, “When [ones] gaze is fixed upon an object irradiated by truth and reality, the soul gains understanding and knowledge and is manifestly in possession of

⁹ Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (London: publisher not identified, 1944), 172.

¹⁰ Jean Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, ed. John Austin Baker. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), 121.

intelligence.”¹¹ Here, we see the basic axiom that undergirds the logic which compels Plato’s thought: *like knows like*. This is an important piece of the puzzle, as it underlines an account of contemplation that had a substantial impact on the growth of Christian mysticism—and indeed is a core tenant of Neoplatonic thought that Caputo rejects. For Plato, when one beholds the Good one is struck by a sudden vision of the Good; this Good, Louth argues, “is not attained, or discovered: *it comes upon the soul, it is revealed to the soul*.”¹² The gift that arises, then, from one’s contemplation of the highest Good is an immediate and ek-static revelation of the *dark* “*unknowability* of the ultimately Real.”¹³ Here, ‘unknowable’ signifies the inability of human knowledge to fully grasp the *light* of the Good itself [τὸ αὐτὸ ἀγαθόν]. Notice though, there are two different accounts of what the highest state of knowledge reveals for the Platonical contemplative ideal: utter ecstatic light and pure unknowable darkness.

How does Plotinus himself argue that the subject comes to this knowledge of the One? Rather than develop key Plotinian themes concerning the nature of the One, I want to start with the account of knowledge given in *Enneads* 1.6.9. In this text Plotinus provides a schematic that details how one can move from a sensible understanding of the world to the invisible nature of Being via an inner contemplative light that is innate to the subject. Describing this movement, he writes:

The soul must be trained first of all to look at the beautiful ways of life: then at beautiful works, not those which the arts produce, but the works of men who have a name for goodness” then look at the souls of the people who produce the beautiful work.¹⁴

First, notice the parallels with Plato’s Divided Line here. Plotinus argues that in order to know beauty, the subject must first understand the reality of beauty as a finite manifestation. From there

¹¹ *Republic* 508c-509b quoted from: Louth, 12.

¹² Louth, 13 (emphasis added).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Plotinus, A. H Armstrong, Paul Henry, and Hans Schwyzer, *Plotinus: Enneads* (London: Heinemann, 1966), 259.

he suggests that one recognize and discern the beauty that arises from the fruits of the labour of the virtuous (*οἱ ἀγαθοί*). Hence, there is a movement here from (1) a concrete instantiation of the presence of beauty in a material object, to (2) the abstract form of beauty as a task one strives to achieve in the physical world, to (3) the quality *in the subject* that serves as *mid-wife*, incarnating this invisible reality.

Plotinus continues from the above quotation by responding to a question that he poses, namely, “How then can you see the sort of beauty a good soul has?”¹⁵ He instructs his listener to “go back into yourself (*σεαυτόν*) and look” and, he notes, if one does not see an inwardly residing beauty that reflects the external beauty whose activity produces the beauty that they have grown to admire, then they must strive to comport their actions to reflect what their inner self now longs for. Continuing further, he writes, “if you have become this, and see it, and you are at home with yourself (*σεαυτῷ*) in purity, with nothing hindering you...when you see that you have become this, *then you have become sight*.”¹⁶ The contemplative process (*παιδεία*)¹⁷ is then, first, a task that requires the efforts of an organized will aimed at meeting a goal (*τέλος*). There is what we could call a directionality, or *intentionality*, to the contemplative project Plotinus envisions—this focus on intentionality will be returned to below in our discussion of Caputo. Second, he emphasizes a theme germane to, though underdeveloped in, Plato, namely, the union that arises as a result of this ends-oriented epistemological process. Developing a line of thought that the Church fathers will call *θέωσις*, he writes that, “You must become first of all Godlike and all beautiful if you intend to see God and beauty”—for Plotinus then, as with Plato, like knows like.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid.

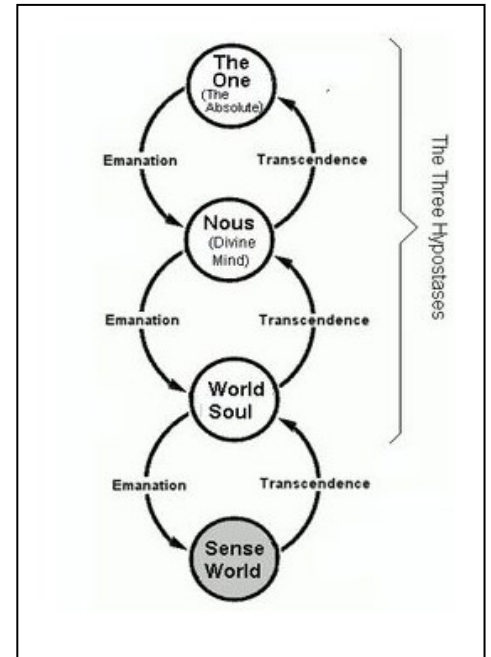
¹⁶ Ibid., 259-261 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 3-4.

¹⁸ Plotinus, 261.

The ascent motif in Plotinus's thought coheres with Plato's epistemology in that the contemplative subject ascends to ever higher and more simple modes of perception when they progress in their understanding of The Good (*τὸ αὐτὸ ἀγαθόν*). Likewise, there is also the motif of going within the self as the starting point from which one rises above and ascends to the divine. The Delphic impulse thus sits at the heart of this Neoplatinian project. Though, in order to understand how this ascent scheme functions in Plotinus's thought, and indeed to understand his later influence on Christian mysticism, I want now to turn to two other principal themes: (1) the *πρόοδος/επιστροφή* cycle, and (2) his account of the relations between the three *ὑπόστασις*: τὸ Ἔν, νοῦς, and ψυχή.

Plotinus's account of the procession from the One to the many and the return from the many to the One arises from what Maria Gatti calls the "principle problem of Greek metaphysics" namely, "why and how do a many derive from One?"¹⁹ To account for this complexity, Plotinus provides a description of the procession from the first *ὑπόστασις*, τὸ Ἔν, to the material phenomenon, *ὕλη*, via an economy of desire and gift. The larger systematic process being described here is one that accounts for, first, the movement, *πρόοδος*, from the absolutely simple nature of God to the dense multitude of matter. The metaphysical force that compels this movement is a process of emanation, or what Schoolmen like Albertus Magnus (d. 1280 c.e.)



termed '*ebullitio*' (literally a 'boiling over' of the One as it spills out, from itself, *degrees* or modes

¹⁹ Maria Luisa Gatti, "Plotinus: The Platonic Tradition and the Foundation of Neoplatonism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 28.

of being whose essential nature emerge as a result of their qualitative relationship to the One).²⁰ The reason that this overflowing process occurs is given in an ontological formula: an innate quality of the Good is the desire to share itself—to *give* itself. In short, the Good, as God, is gift. The second *ὑπόστασις* is intelligence or *νοῦς* which, in turning to contemplate *τὸ Ἐν* as it arises from *τὸ Ἐν*, is filled with *τὸ Ἐν* thus determining “itself as being and thought”—again, the theme of “like knows like” underlies this relational economy.²¹ The result of this contemplative activity is the *ψυχή* that emanates out from the contemplative activity of *νοῦς* knowing *τὸ Ἐν*. From this activity arises *φύσις*, or nature, which is itself unable to generate further lower forms of being (*οὐσία*) as a result of its own contemplative activities.²²

In the activity of the three *ὑποστάσεις*, as they participate in the overflowing of the absolute simplicity of *τὸ Ἐν* going out of itself, the *πρόδος* process is reflected in various degrees by the desire to commune back with *τὸ Ἐν*. This urge, and act, to return is the *επιστροφή*. Or, as Louth frames this:

From the One emanates *Nous*; from *Nous*, Soul. Soul emanates too, and the products of its emanations are the various forms of embodied life. These cannot emanate, for they are too weak. The furthest limit of the One's emanation is matter, which is on the brink, as it were, of being and non-being.²³

In short, as Louth notes, Plotinus's metaphysics accounts for a universe in which all things emanate from the One and everything subsequently “desires to return to the One.”²⁴ This conceptual outline seeds the metaphysical thought of every mystical writer in the Christian tradition. Whether in contrast to or in agreement with Plotinus, his influence in Western contemplative thought is simply towering.

²⁰ Louth, 38.

²¹ Gatti, 32-33.

²² Ibid., 33.

²³ Louth, 39.

²⁴ Ibid.

2.2 – Dionysius and Augustine: Platonism Baptized

There are two key ideas, Bernard McGinn argues, that directly emanate from the thought of Dionysius which dramatically shaped the development of Western mysticism: hierarchy and apophaticism.²⁵ The hierarchical model helped to give Christian form and substance to the πρόοδος/επιστροφή motif in both its anthropological (i.e. *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*) and transcendent (i.e. *The Celestial Hierarchy*) accounts. His negative theology provided a means to think past the tendency of making God an object known in the light of reason. Still, it is from Dionysius's insistence on the inability of reason to capture with syntactic certainty the essence of God that his influence as a theologian arose in the West.

In this discussion I want to follow the logic of apophaticism as it was developed in his *The Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology*. In addition, I will flesh out Dionysius's mystical claims regarding the radical darkness of the divine vision. In fleshing out both of these elements of his thought, I will also touch on a key aspect of mystical theology that Caputo's system is aimed at overcoming—namely, an affirmation of a metaphysical hierarchy. And although apophatic resonances from Dionysius's system impacts Caputo, as his is indeed also a rejection of language's ability to touch upon ultimate things, Dionysius's apophatic language is best understood provisionally, seeing the limitation of language as ultimately being overcome by the presence of God. While Caputo's apophaticism is structural—i.e., there is an ontological unknowability that is intrinsic to reality. Hence, in clarifying Dionysius's apophaticism, we will gain a better appreciation of Caputo's own use and, indeed, rejection of this account of language that has been dominant in Christian mystical theology.

The logic that undergirds the apophatic axiom, that nothing can be said with certainty about the nature of God, is itself composed of two subordinate claims regarding (a) the nature of language

²⁵ Bernard McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, v.1 (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), 157-161.

and (b) the nature of humanity. Which is to say, importantly, that apophaticism is principally concerned with making obvious the limitations of *finitude*, not the infinite. That humanity cannot grasp the totality of God via thought and language should thus be immediately understood as a human limitation, not as a divine one, according to this theological system. God *is* that which is beyond predication. What, then, specifically is Dionysius's apophatic theology and how does he deploy it within his work?

I want to begin by underscoring the importance of theosis (*θέωσις*) for Dionysius's thought. Ingredient to the development of the contemplative ideal are three practical elements that aid its process: purgation (*κάθαρσις*), illumination (*θεωρία*), and deification (*θέωσις*).²⁶ In purging finite desires, one gains an understanding of the divine, which ultimately provides a type of unity with God, i.e., theosis. According to many of devotees, as one ascends the ladder of spiritual purification, they "could physically see what they referred to as the uncreated light of Christ."²⁷ Hence, the last stage, *θέωσις*, is central. Its key insight being that through and in Christ the subject beholds the uncreated light as it illumines the mind and coheres with the spark, as it were, of the uncreated light within the subject. In order to commune with this light, the subject must purge themselves from distractions (*κάθαρσις*) and contemplate the mystery of God (*θεωρία*) so as to become holy (*θέωσις*). Structurally, this process of purgation, illumination, and purgation echoes Plato's divided line and Plotinus's processional model of Being. For all of them, the cosmos is imaged as a hierarchical process that unfolds as a consequence of epistemic insight.

How then does apophatic thought aid this hierarchical process? To unpack that, we need to understand how Dionysius understands symbols, i.e., religious imagery. For Dionysius,

²⁶ Sarah Klitenic Wear, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes* (Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 62.

²⁷ Jonathan L Zeicher, *The Role of Death in the Ladder of Divine Ascent and the Greek Ascetic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6.

theological signs are purely symbolic.²⁸ As Perl notes, the names of God, for example, are symbols that point to features or qualities that might inhere in the name 'God' but cannot themselves be understood as direct signifiers of God Himself.²⁹ In making this distinction, Dionysius wrests the name God from the limitations of human language.³⁰ For example, if the phrase 'God is good' is taken to signify God's goodness *as such*, then God becomes, as it were, captive to the constraints of linguistic predication.³¹ In contrast, the outcome of a contemplative who follows Dionysius's apophatic instructions avoids the error of idolizing language by making linguistic predication co-equal to that which is predicated.³² That said, Dionysius is also clear that phrases such as 'God is good' are not to be eschewed—cataphasis is not intrinsically erroneous for Dionysius.³³ Instead, a dual movement of 'God is' and 'God is not' organizes his writing.

Unlike Plato and Plotinus, however, Dionysius's theology is deeply incarnational.³⁴ This incarnational conception of the cosmos as form and presence of the invisible nature of God's mystery should also be taken as signifying the very nature of humanity. The subject, participating in the fullness of the mystery of the presence of God, is also an unknowable mystery to itself. As Perl notes, like God, "When all the coverings have been removed and the man himself is laid bare, there is nothing left to see."³⁵ And, if we consider this nothingness "laid bare" in the very core of the subject who is made visible in the contemplative knowledge that God is Himself unknown and

²⁸ Eric D. Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 101.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Charles M. Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: "No Longer I"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 185.

³¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, Colm Luibhéid, and Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 141.

³² Andrew Louth, "Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 138.

³³ Ibid., 139.

³⁴ Dionysius, *Classics*, 135

³⁵ Perl, 105.

unknowable, we see a rather unique development in the Delphic injunction to self-knowledge. When the Dionysian subject knows themselves, they, as Mary-Jane Rubenstein aptly describes this development, “unknow themselves.”³⁶ As she comments:

For Dionysius and Eckhart, unknowing does not function in place of, but within intellect: ‘The most divine knowledge of God is that which knows through unknowing.’ The ineffable union of human and divine, the ‘mystical experience’ of unknowing, is thus thoroughly noetic; one could say that negative theology is not sheer *ignorantia*, but *docta ignorantia*.³⁷

That is, the knowledge of the self that arises from a Dionysian account of God and mystical union is one that privileges unknowing and ineffability in the very nature of the subject themselves.

One way to frame the above analysis, as regards the gap between finitude and infinitude that Dionysius posits, is to suggest that although for Dionysius there exists an *ontological* connection between the Creator and creation, there is nevertheless a radical *epistemological* chasm. For Dionysius, one is utterly claimed by the ultimacy of God while being nonetheless limited in our understanding of ‘that which claims us’ in our epistemic finitude. From these linguistic and epistemic constraints follows, as noted, Dionysius’s assertions regarding the darkness of God. Here, a parallel with Moses is often drawn by apophatic thinkers from the early Church. For example, Gregory of Nyssa uses this imagery in his *Life of Moses*.³⁸ Moses ascends Mount Sinai and “separates himself” from the “unclean” (*κάθαρσις*), he is then illumined by the Wisdom (*σοφία*) of God while on the mountain (*θεωρία*) receiving there the grace of God’s fullness into his own being (*θέωσις*).³⁹ However, as Lossky notes in his account of this narrative, there is still a radical darkness, a *cloud of unknowing*, that resists full comprehension in

³⁶ Mary-Jane Rubenstein, “Unknow Thyself: Apophaticism, Deconstruction, and Theology After Ontotheology”, *Modern Theology* 19, no. 3 (2003): 395.

³⁷ Ibid, 395.

³⁸ Gregory, *The Life of Moses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

³⁹ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 27.

Dionysius's system. Lossky argues this is because Moses, on Mount Sinai, "does not contemplate God (for he is unseen), *but the place where He is*."⁴⁰ Continuing further, Lossky shows that the contemplative vision that Dionysius speaks to, of which Moses is a *type* (τύπος), reveals:

The presence of Him who is above all thought, a presence which occupies the intelligible heights of His holy places. It is then that Moses is freed from the things that see and are seen: he passes into the truly mystical darkness of ignorance."⁴¹

Lossky here captures with clarity a position advocated, too, by Louth. That is, the contemplative vision that Dionysius's writing alludes to is one in which the knowing subject *purges* themselves from the consequences of linguistic predication, epistemic certainty, metaphysical truth, and theological absolutes. They are, subsequently, *illuminated* by the darkness, the divine unknowing of the absolute God whose incarnate presence, as shown forth in Christ, announces the making-holy of the subject who—as Lossky suggests—passes into an awareness that transcends the duality of 'seen and unseen' into the rays "of Divine Darkness that is beyond being, leaving all behind and released from all."⁴²

2.3 – Meister Eckhart: *Blessed are the Poor* Sermon

With Meister Eckhart, we find a writer who was directly impacted by the conceptual and theological claims put forward by Dionysius and indeed the wider Neoplatonic mystical tradition. His thought, too, reflects the German mystical tradition more broadly, representing something like a synthesis of a wider intellectual and spiritual movement. In addition, the history of the reception of Eckhart's work has been highly influential on the development of Continental philosophy. Eckhart has received attention from Heidegger, Derrida, Marion, Henry, Žižek, and, not surprisingly, by Caputo himself. Indeed, as will become obvious below, Caputo's 'mysticism' is in many ways a recapitulation of Eckhart's system—especially via concepts like *Gelassenheit*. In

⁴⁰ Ibid. (emphasis added).

⁴¹ Ibid., 28.

⁴² Quoted from: Louth, *Origins*, 175.

what follows, I unpack Eckhart's key ideas with reference to his Sermon 54, *Blessed are the Poor* (*BaP*). This sermon has proven highly influential in the reception of Eckhart by various Continental theorists and has been especially important in Caputo's work.

Sermon No. 52, or *BaP*, begins with a quotation from Matthew 5:3 "*Beati pauperes spiritu, quoniam ipsorum est regnum caelorum*,"⁴³ a passage from which the text's title emerges.⁴⁴ Examining the notion of poverty as expressed in this biblical passage is Eckhart's key exegetical intention with this text. The sermon begins by stressing the tension between that which is spoken and that which is silent: "Blessedness," Eckhart writes, "opened its mouth" out of which was spoken the words of Matthew 5:3; this passage is then juxtaposed with a description of the angels and the saints who "must be silent" before the spoken wisdom of God whose "groundless wisdom" makes foolish all of creation.⁴⁵ It is via this interplay of the utmost heights and utter depths that, Eckhart stresses, emerges the truth that "Blessed are the poor."⁴⁶ Eckhart's sermon begins, then, by exploring the tension between the word of God that, in speaking of the poor and low, silences the heights of the Angels and the saints. What then exactly *is* poverty for Eckhart?

Eckhart names two types of poverty in his sermon: (1) "an external poverty [*eine äußere Armut*]" which Eckhart suggests is a good insofar as it reflects Jesus's own life of poverty. That said, developing this externalized conception of poverty is not his concern. Instead, it is (2) "an inner poverty [*einen innere Armut*]," the type of poverty that he argues Jesus' words were truly aimed at with his "Blessed are the poor" statement, which is his focus.⁴⁷ Eckhart is quick to note

⁴³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

⁴⁴ This analysis of Eckhart draws on the following sources: Reiner Schürmann, and Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, Mystic and Philosopher: Translations with Commentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978); Raymond Bernard Blakney, and Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); Eckhart, Niklaus Largier, and Josef Quint, *Bibliothek Des Mittelalters: Werke I* (Frankfurt Am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1993).

⁴⁵ Eckhart, *Werke I*, 551; Schürmann, 210.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

that inner poverty is not simply a disposition that arises from being dissatisfied with the things of the world—a position that he argues is common amongst Christian teachers, though Eckhart does not dismiss this viewpoint entirely. He instead suggests that “This is a poor person, one who wills nothing and knows nothing and has nothing.”⁴⁸ Explicating these three claims organizes the bulk of the sermon and is the focus of what follows.

Concerning the poor man who wills nothing, Eckhart is not referring to those engaged in “penitential exercises and external practice” as they, in so doing, often make a “great deal” of themselves therein making “external appearance” more important than one’s internal disposition.⁴⁹ Instead, Eckhart stresses the importance of abolishing all desires aimed at gratifying external aims—even the desire to please God. He writes, “So long as a man has this particular wish to fulfill the ever-beloved will of God—if that is still a matter of his will, then this man does not yet possess the poverty of which we want to speak.”⁵⁰ For Eckhart, this will to negate desire, live simply, and follow God, are all desires whose intentions are supplicant to the subjective will of a concrete individual. Note, then, that the anthropological model that Eckhart is here giving voice to is one that sees any willing or intentional activity by the subject as a necessary incumbrance. In short, to will is to be desirous of the willed outcome of a created being, not the creator.⁵¹ Eckhart argues that one must will nothing, “For he alone is a poor man who wills nothing and desires nothing.”⁵²

Why, though, would God as an object of desire obfuscate the Eckhartian subject engaged in the pursuit of poverty? To answer this question, we need clarity around Eckhart’s further claim that to truly encounter God one must *return* to their original state of being before they were created.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Schürmann, 211.

⁵⁰ Eckhart, *Werke I*, 553; Schürmann, 211.

⁵¹ Schürmann, 211.

⁵² Eckhart, *Werke I*, 554; Schürmann, 212.

In this original 'before' state, Eckhart writes, "I willed nothing and desired nothing, for I was a pure being and a knower of self in full enjoyment of the truth."⁵³ It was in this primordial state of existence that the 'subject' persisted without willed desire—a detached perspective whose utter detachment [*Gelassenheit*] was the condition of possibility wherein union with God occurred and, indeed, could occur. Thus, "in this way a man is poor who wills nothing."⁵⁴

Eckhart next considers the idea of "a poor man who knows nothing."⁵⁵ Here he again emphasizes the link between the pre-creational state of humanity as a non-being *with* God; though, in this section he more strongly correlates this state to God's own non-being.⁵⁶ He argues that this pre-creational state can be re-encountered by the subject that lets go of their attachments to finitude. For, he writes:

when man still stood in God's eternal being, nothing else lived in him [than that being]. All that was alive, there, was he [that man] himself. Hence, we say that man should be so devoid of his own knowledge as he was when he was not yet. He should let God accomplish whatever God wills, and man should stand void.⁵⁷

There is a radical state of pure nothingness that is encountered via the disposition of utter 'letting-go-ness' [*Gelassenheit*]. However, his high valuation of this state does not arise solely from its capacity to reflect one's primordial standing. Instead, the importance of this mode of being comes from its capacity to reflect God's own true letting-go-ness nature more fully. God, too, Eckhart is arguing, is utterly detached from all things. And because God is "free of all things he therefore is all things."⁵⁸ Hence, in order to have the spirit of poverty that he is here advocating, one must, like God, be free of all things—in so doing, one is united with all things with and through God.⁵⁹

⁵³ Ibid.; Schürmann, 212.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.; Schürmann, 212.

⁵⁶ Schürmann, 212.

⁵⁷ Eckhart, *Werke I*, 556; Schürmann, 212; Blakney, 230.

⁵⁸ Schürmann, 213; Eckhart, *Werke I*, 557.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Finally, Eckhart addresses the status of poverty in which one “has nothing.”⁶⁰ This position asserts, not unlike the above two notions of poverty thus far considered, that true poverty is rooted in being “devoid both of his own will and God’s will, quite as he was when he was not yet.”⁶¹ Here, again, Eckhart suggests that poverty occurs when one is “devoid of understanding and knowing as God stands void of all things.”⁶² This state of poverty requires, he writes, “*daß der Mensch nichts hat.*”⁶³

After enumerating his claims about the nature of poverty, Eckhart makes a somewhat startling statement as regards the nature of God and the work of God in the life of the Christian. It is a traditionally argued position, Eckhart writes, that the individual must strive in both their “inward and outward” actions to make a space in which “God can find in him a site for acting.”⁶⁴ However, Eckhart notes that this state, in which the subject becomes open to the full presence of God in their life, is not itself true poverty. Rather, true poverty is made manifest when “one keeps oneself so clear of God and of all one’s works that if God wants to act in the mind, he [God] is himself the place wherein he wants to act.”⁶⁵ True poverty, then, is that state of being in which the subject so negates their own ‘positionality’ that, when they act, they find not that God acts ‘in them’ but, instead, *they find that it is in fact solely God who acts.* This union, whose hinge rests upon Eckhart’s understanding of poverty, culminates in a state in which one has so de-voided themselves that their actions are symmetrical with and co-equal to God’s.

Eckhart ends this section by suggesting that “in this poverty, man recovers (*ervolget*) the eternal being that he was, now is, and will eternally remain.”⁶⁶ Of note here is the word ‘*ervolget*’

⁶⁰ Eckhart, *Werke I*, 558.

⁶¹ Ibid.; Schürmann, 213.

⁶² Ibid., 558; Schürmann, 213-214.

⁶³ Ibid., 559.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.; Schürmann, 214.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 560; Schürmann, 214.

that Eckhart uses to describe this process of union. For, in a section already laden with Neoplatonic themes, Eckhart doubles down, as it were, and formulates his theological anthropology around a thoroughly Neoplatonic position that stresses remembrance and recovery as key epistemological factors that aid the subject in their union with God. For Eckhart, there is an un-blemished element of the soul (*das vüncelîn*) that is always already in union with God which, via *Gelassenheit*, is *recovered*.

In the last several paragraphs of *BaP* Eckhart advocates what may be his most (in)famous assertion that “I pray God that he quit me of God, for one’s unconditioned being is above God.”⁶⁷ The implication of this passage is that ‘God’ functions as a name that signifies a creator of creatures. However, the nature of the soul that the sermon has thus far advanced assumes a pre-existence that precedes the act of creation by God as creator. God as creator is a label wed to the necessity of creaturely being: before the creature was, the creator was not. For the Eckhartian subject, then, even this creator/creation dynamic must be overcome if one is to be fully reconciled with the uncreated status of human nature before creation. Unifying these uncreated spheres (God’s and humanity’s) is Eckhart’s intention, an intention that he argues is made obscure via the willed impulse innate to creation itself—whether that ‘will’ come from God as creator or humanity as created. To overcome these obstacles, Eckhart emphasizes the always-already existing state of union between God as *Gottheit* and the *grund der sele*—between the God beyond God and the ground of the soul. As Eckhart notes:

In my eternal birth, however, everything was begotten. I was my own first cause as well as the first cause of everything else. If I had willed it, neither I nor the world would come to be! [That God is God, of this I am a cause.] If I had not been, there would have been no god. There is, however, no need to understand this.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Ibid., 561; Blakney, 231.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 560-562; Schürmann, 215.

It was precisely as a consequence of claims like this that raised the questioning eye of the inquisitorial body which saw in Eckhart's writing heretical statements regarding the nature of God. An outcome of which was the 1329 Papal Bull *In Agro Dominandi* that specifically rejected Eckhart's theological assertions. Eckhart, in other words, implies that God is merely the result of the activity of the finite subject. God is a predicate assigned to a creative act which hinges upon the necessity of a creature—without the creature, there is no God. Another way to read this passage is reflected by Caputo when he writes:

For Meister Eckhart, detachment is to be equated with “true poverty.” For according to St. Augustine, the poor in spirit are those who have so “abandoned” (*überlassen*) everything to God that He now has these things back again just as He did before everything existed—viz., as pure ideas in the divine mind. The poor in spirit, therefore, are those who have nothing, because they have given everything back to God, and there can be no greater poverty than that. They have given up all things for the pure Nothing itself.⁶⁹

Eckhart, though, is not simply arguing for the importance of a perspective of the *nihil* as such. As if Eckhart the preacher was merely interested in conveying the philosophical integrity of the ‘pure Nothing’ to his audience. There is a *desire* for union that orients Eckhart's understanding of the relation between the ground of the soul and the ground of God's own hidden darkness throughout sermons like *BaP*. As McGinn writes, “Eckhart molds language for his own purpose in order to express a union of indistinction.”⁷⁰ Such a description, I would argue in concert with McGinn, is precisely what we see Eckhart doing in *BaP*.

Eckhart ends his sermon by making explicit a host of implicit theological assumptions that runs throughout Eckhart's analysis. Of note, in particular, is Eckhart's claim that:

When I emanated from God, all things spoke: God is; but this cannot make me happy, for it makes me understand that I am a creature. In the breakthrough (*durchbrechen*), on the other hand, where I stand devoid of my own will and of the will of God and of all

⁶⁹ *ME*, 17.

⁷⁰ Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300-1500)* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2005), 182.

his works and of God himself, there I am above all created kind and am neither God nor creature. Rather, I am what I was and what I shall remain now and forever.⁷¹

Of note here is the verb *durchbrechen* which is used to describe the way in which the Eckhartian subject recognizes their unification with God—a God known not via its creating capacity, but in the still silence that God was when creation was not. This uncreating God is the God Eckhart's analysis ultimately elicits. Indeed, as he ends his sermon by suggesting, *durchbrechen*, as it opens up within the subject, makes manifest the metaphysical reality that “Now God is one with the spirit, and that is the strictest poverty one can find.”⁷² This drive to union, as has been shown, organizes much of Eckhart's sermon. However, as the final sentences of his sermon emphasize, what he has described is not simply an intellectual venture. Rather, he hopes that “we may so live as to *experience* it eternally.”⁷³

Chapter 3: What is Christian Mysticism: An Academic Overview

The previous chapter is an account of the key themes and issues that have galvanized the history of mysticism. The data drawn upon to give this account, represents, in large part, the concerted effort and output of hundreds of scholars over the past century. This scholarly achievement, in which countless documents, authors, and ideas were examined, classified, and analyzed, gave shape to and helped organize the very object, events, and experiences they sought to understand, namely, ‘the mystical.’ This issue was noted in the introduction when I discussed Gadamer's account of the ‘hermeneutical circle.’ When we examine Caputo and consider his use of mysticism, his critiques of Neoplatonic hierarchy, and his advocacy of Eckhart's notion of *Gelassenheit*, we see Caputo implicitly relying on this scholarly work. Consequently, and in order to properly

⁷¹ Eckhart, *Werke I*, 562; Schürmann, 215.

⁷² Ibid.; Schürmann, 215.

⁷³ Ibid.; Ibid.

account for Caputo's engagement with mysticism, we need clarity on the presuppositions and basic developments of this field in order to situate and contextualize Caputo's own 'mystical element.'

In what follows, I unpack some of the key movement in the study of mysticism as it developed over the 20th century. Two tensions galvanize this analysis. The first, largely representative of the early development of the study of mysticism, stresses the status of the insider and their role in the construction of the study of mysticism. This insider perspective, as shown in the work of von Hügel and Underhill, initiates its inquiry from the assumed status of the metaphysical reality that the practices, claims, or experiences of mystics throughout the centuries have alluded to. In short, they engage the textual output of the mystical tradition via a perspective that takes as true the claims and assumptions of the mystical tradition itself. This earlier approach is now understood to represent what scholars call the perennialist approach to mysticism—a topic discussed below. The second, largely representative of analysis into mysticism that occurred from the 1960's onward, is more attentive to the social, cultural, and textual contexts of the authors, texts, and ideas that have been understood to represent the mystical tradition. This is not to say that theological, religious, and philosophical analyses of mysticism have not occurred in the academy since the 60's, nor that those analyses are less important for understanding how mysticism as an academic topic developed. But, I contend, the major source of innovation in this latter period came from scholars more interested in the contextual and historical factors that shaped mysticism, rather than by scholars interested in evidencing the perennial or metaphysical truths of mystical thinking. This shift, it should be noted, is representative of the study of religion in the 20th century more broadly and should thus not be understood to signify a trait unique to the study of mysticism itself.¹

¹ See for example: Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

I begin by looking at key texts from scholars in the early part of the 20th century and discuss the central themes therein. I next look at the latter developments of the study of mysticism by attending to authors and debates that have shaped its modern output. I end by summarizing my findings. My findings from this section help inform my analysis in chapter 4 where I provide an account of the Continental approach to mysticism. The outcome of both these analyses is greater clarity as regards Caputo's account of or engagement with mysticism—especially in relation to the dominant modes of analysis concerning the mystical that has galvanized its research in the 20th century. Finally, throughout this chapter, I will detail how scholars like McGinn, Nelstrop, and Woods have classified the thinkers under discussion. The aim of this focus is to evidence not simply how these various scholars classified and construed 'mystical' data, but to also show how contemporary scholarship itself *classifies* these scholars. Evidencing how this second-order classification is applied and what it reveals about the study of mysticism will serve to highlight an underlying question of this study as whole: What is the Continental approach to the study of mysticism?²

3.1 – Early Approaches to the Study of Mysticism

Von Hügel's influence on the study of mysticism in the early 20th century was pivotal.³ His understanding of religion was impacted by Catholic writers such as Maurice Blondel, Cardinal Newman, and the philosopher Henri Bergson.⁴ It is from them that Hügel's own historical-critical

² It should be noted that there exists no Continental philosophical 'approach' to mysticism *as such*. That is, there is no systemized approach that unifies how thinkers in this tradition have engaged mysticism or indeed religion. Instead, as this study is framed, I am seeking to name several constants that, when noted and identified, does provide the scholarly grounds for assuming a more generalized 'Continental approach' to mysticism. As this study develops these constants will be noted, either from Caputo's work specifically or from the claims made by others in the tradition more generally, with the aim of identifying this common approach.

³ W. R. Inge, 'Review: Mysticism,' *Philosophy* 6, no. 24 (1931), 519.

⁴ Baron Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and her Friends* (Bolton, Ont.: Amazon.ca, 2020), 9.

analysis took shape in his 1908 *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in St. Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends*.⁵

The methodological aims of Hügel's were organized by his insistence on adhering to objective and scientific criteria of analysis when seeking insight into religious matters. Though not alone in this focus, the extent to which he advocated this approach, and the influence this position had on subsequent studies of mysticism, make his contribution to this development noteworthy. Evidence of this development and focus can be seen in his role in the 'Modernist controversy' of the late 19th century.⁶ Modernism refers to a movement that attempted to radically change the political, cultural, and scientific understanding of the Catholic Church.⁷ A key element of modernism was its assumption that "*faith is encounter rather than mere assent to propositions*;" hence, though still emphasizing the mystical element of religion, its favorable attitude toward science, and its emphasis on the human subject as the "glory of God's" creation, are key.⁸ In short, and despite his tie to modernism, Hügel still emphasized the historicity of basic Catholic creedal claims and affirmed orthodox conceptions of God.⁹

Hence, modernists like Hügel, against the traditionalist view, rejected dogmatic religious authority as the *sole* criteria by which to understand religious matters. This was obviously a methodological development that preceded Hügel, but his focus on deploying these criteria so as to adjudicate matters related to mysticism was indeed novel. Hügel's basic methodological criteria argued that religion should be understood as the encounter of a particular concrete instance (i.e., person, place, etc.) with a universal truth (i.e., union with God, transcendent reality, etc.).

⁵ McGinn, *Foundations*, 294.

⁶ Leonard J. Biallas, 'Von Hügel's Contribution to Religious Studies and to Religion,' *Horizons* 6, no. 1 (1979), 60.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Furthermore, the aim of the scholar, for Hügel, is to identify the influence of historically verifiable contextual factors that shape this particular/universal encounter. This was opposed by more traditionalist thinkers whose understanding of the mystical—whether it be via a doctrinal, theological, or an experiential claim—was framed by the Church as, often, an ahistorical ‘showing-forth’ of the presence of God in the world.¹⁰ Hügel’s emphasis on the necessity of formulating more objective models of criteria when evaluating religious phenomena, in short, signals his influence on the emerging field of inquiry into mysticism.

Hügel’s *The Mystical Element* is a historical inquiry into the life of Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510). Throughout this work, Hügel’s aim was to evidence the status of the ‘mystical element’ as a governing variable in Catherine’s life and teachings. He contrasted the mystical element with the “intellectual element” and the “institutional element.”¹¹ These three elements, all falling under the umbrella ‘religion,’ stand in opposition to one another. Importantly, Hügel argued that this oppositional quality generated a tension in the life of the individual and the religious community as they sought to relate with a transcendent ideal. The scholar’s task is to give voice to these tensions via a focused analysis of key biographical details from the mystic’s life. Two by-products result from Hügel’s claims. First, the ideas generated by analyzing the ‘mystical element’ as it contrasted with the other identified elements of religion provide the scholar with *legitimate forms of knowledge*. This is Hügel’s epistemological assumption. Second, these tension-ridden patterns are identifiable by analysis; one can, in short, survey these tensions and objectify the experiences that arise from them, via an organizational approach. This is Hügel’s methodological assumption. In short, von Hügel argued that, in mapping the historical unfolding of these tensions as they concretely expressed themselves in Catherine of Genoa’s life, we gain knowledge of

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 59.

religion.¹² Religion in general and the mystic in particular, for Hügel, reflects these tensions materially, psychically, intellectually, and spiritually.

Nelstrop categorizes Hügel within a perennialist model. Perennialists assume the transhistorical reality of mystical experience. She also identifies him under her contextualist model. For Nelstrop, contextualists see experiences as mediated through cultural and historical context.¹³ That is, Hügel does not solely privilege the ineffable in his analysis; rather, his claims regarding Catherine's mystical experiences are grounded within a host of historical and material contexts.¹⁴ Similar to Nelstrop, McGinn sees Hügel's project as largely philosophical in nature.¹⁵ He argues that Hügel's influence arose from his position that "mysticism is only *one part or element* of a concrete religion."¹⁶ This signifies a development, McGinn writes, because prior to Hügel mysticism was subsumed within the larger historical unfolding of Christianity *as such*.¹⁷ Within the methodology advanced by Hügel, an identifiable element called 'the mystical' was discerned as operationally distinct from other 'elemental' aspects of Religion, and therefore could be capable of specific scholarly analysis.¹⁸

Whereas Hügel's influence on the study of mysticism was overshadowed by later scholarship, William James's influence on, and presence in, the study of mysticism has never dwindled. His 1902 Gifford Lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, remains a standard in the field and has emerged as something like a classic of literary non-fiction. And unlike Hügel's *The Mystical Element* whose prose wanders and whose arguments are

¹² Hügel, 4.

¹³ Nelstrop, 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁵ McGinn, *Foundations*, 294.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xvi (emphasis added).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 65. Other 'elements' that Hügel notes are the intellectual or philosophical elements of a religious tradition, and the institutional or ecclesial elements of the religion (Ellen M Leonard, *Creative Tension: The Spiritual Legacy of Friedrich Von Hügel* (Scranton, Pa.: University of Scranton Press, 1997), 60.)

often clumsily stitched together, James's *Varieties* is a clear and focused portrayal of a variety of expressions of mystical experience from a psychological perspective.

James's study is organized by an assumption regarding the possibility of the experiential 'fact' of mysticism as arising from its status as both a psychological and phenomenological reality. Thinkers like Max Müller, David Strauss, E.B. Tylor, and Andrew Lang were influential on James; Spencer, Darwin, and Comte also proved important.¹⁹ Following Müller, this 'factual' claim is undergirded by the position that religion *as such* is an achievement of the human imagination; religion, phenomenologically, developed out of and in concert with the human imagination's engagement with the physical world.²⁰ This phenomenological reality has psychological effects, which James traces. Scholars like Müller, a humanist, sought to situate religion as a human achievement while Tylor, an anthropologist, argued that religion was a "holdover" reflecting the needs of "an older state of society."²¹ That is, scholars like Tylor relegated religion to a phenomenon whose significance emerges from its primordial emergence alone and thus ignored its positive value in modern society. Müller, in contrast, stressed the ongoing and present influences of religion in modern society. James followed Müller. However, James also wanted to divest the study of religion from theological inquiries such as the study of *a priori* arguments for the reality of the transcendent.²² The human subject and their experiences of religion, therefore, are paramount for James.²³ Examining the variety of religious claims, propositions, ideals, facts, experiences, and feelings were thus James's conception of religious studies. Hence, similar to von

¹⁹ Henry S Levinson, *The Religious Investigations of William James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981) 72-73.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

Hügel's Modernist focus, James argued that knowledge about mysticism should be ascertained from a study of its material sources.

James's *Varieties* lectures were driven by a central question: what helps explain the psychological presence of religion in modernity or, indeed, in any society? To answer this question, James argued that an analysis of the outcome—the *fruits*—of religious experience should orient the scholar's focus.²⁴ James grounded this claim on that assertion that because mystical experiences occur within cultural contexts, contexts which compel, sustain, and limit said experience, then those contexts are vital to understanding mystical expression. As such, noting the psychological by-products that arise because of the mystical experience, and locating this experience within the environmental milieu from which it arose, provides the scholar with a more exact understanding of the mystical experience.²⁵ James then, like Hügel, sought to bring the study of mysticism 'down-to-earth' by grounding its expressions within their historical and contextual factors. In short, for James, an account of the ethical and social consequences of the mystical experience itself is integral to understanding the nature of the experience *as such*.²⁶

James states that his lectures were motivated by the desire to underscore the "reality of the states" described by mystics. Therefore, he asks what does the expression "mystical states of consciousness" specifically mean?²⁷ In answer to this question, he provides "four marks" that, when "an experience has them" one is justified in calling said experience "mystical:" (1) its ineffability, (2) its noetic quality, (3) its transiency, and (4) its passivity.²⁸ Ineffable experiences refer to the "negative" dimension of mystical experience; i.e., "no adequate report of its contents

²⁴ Ibid., 76.

²⁵ Ibid., 75, 80.

²⁶ Henrik Rydenfelt and Pihlström Sami, *William James on Religion* (Helsinki: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.

²⁷ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A study in Human Nature* (Routledge: New York, 2002), 294.

²⁸ Ibid., 295.

can be given to words.”²⁹ These are imageless states whose content nonetheless extends past our sensory awareness and escapes predication.³⁰ Noetic experiences are the resultant “states of knowledge” that arise from the illuminative reality claimed by the mystic.³¹ This is a unique type of understanding that yields distinct epistemic insight for/to the mystic.³² In addition, these experiences are transient—i.e., their duration is brief.³³ Finally, the element of passivity is key; in a mystical state, the subject is submissive to the diffusion of the transcendent within or upon them.³⁴ This fourfold model proved fundamental to all foregoing analyses of mysticism as it provided the emerging discipline of psychology with governable parameters around which it could gain a more comprehensive understanding of the mystical phenomenon.

Nelstrop categorizes James under her perennialist model.³⁵ Her reason for doing so is James’s acknowledgment of the validity of mystical experience as a transhistorical phenomenon.³⁶ In contrast to Nelstrop, McGinn’s categorization of James within the ‘Philosophical approach’ seems more appropriate.³⁷ This is especially so given that the truth-value of the ‘experience’ that James is concerned with mapping surfaces from the concerns of a thinker galvanized by the claims of Pragmatism—i.e., a phenomenon is granted the value ‘truth’ insofar as it produces productive consequences in the world. This pragmatic assumption troubles a perennialist reading of James. As such, I follow McGinn’s categorization of James. Still, Nelstrop’s model does provide a degree of explanatory power, especially if one considers James’s essay *The Will to Believe*, in which the

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Nelstrop, 5.

³¹ James, 295.

³² Nelstrop, 5.

³³ James, 295.

³⁴ Nelstrop, 5.

³⁵ Ibid., 3.

³⁶ Ibid., 6.

³⁷ McGinn, 291.

nature of religious belief is wedded to a type of voluntarism.³⁸ In summary, James's model of mysticism might best be understood as philosophical in form, psychological in analysis, and perennialist in its understanding of experience.

Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*—like James's *Varieties*—has emerged as a classic in the study of mysticism. From its first publication in 1911, *Mysticism* was immediately well received.³⁹ It stood out not simply as a concise analysis of mystical themes and concerns, but also as an extremely clear discussion of the topic. This fact is made more noteworthy given that Underhill received no formal education. Moreover, Underhill published at a time in which few women wrote on religious matters via a philosophical perspective.⁴⁰

Close to 500 pages in length, Underhill's *Mysticism* is a wide-ranging and in-depth study into the history, psychology, and spiritual nature of mysticism. The text is divided into two major sections, 'The Mystic Fact' and 'The Mystic Way.' The former begins by examining the link between mysticism and contemporaneous thought; here philosophical, psychological, and theological concerns are central. Of note is Underhill's discussion of Henri Bergson's philosophy. Bergson's influence at the time was wide-ranging and influential—his was an anti-functionalist vision of nature and experience. As such his thinking was influential on writers like Underhill who sought an understanding of mysticism that was rigorous and systematic in analysis, while nonetheless sidestepping the centrality of empirical and rational methodologies that thinkers like James stressed. Consequently, Underhill's use of Bergson centers in on his philosophy of 'becoming', that is, of the ways in which phenomena undergoes variation within the field of time

³⁸ Here, James argues that a 'doubting' and a 'believing' disposition towards religious matters, what he calls the religious hypothesis, must "be made on passionate rather than intellectual grounds" (Henrik, 7).

³⁹ For example, see A.E. Taylor, "Book Review: Mysticism," *Mind* 22, no. 85 (1913), 126.

⁴⁰ Grace M. Jantzen, 'The Legacy of Evelyn Underhill,' *Feminist Theology* II, no. 3 (1993), 80.

and space and how the human mind can come to knowledge of said variation. This is contrasted with philosophical thought that concerns itself with 'Being', that is, a philosophy that assumes the reality of a static transcendent order which is also discernible and knowable by human cognition.⁴¹ For Underhill, philosophical language can give shape to the ontology of the experience described by the mystic—whether as Being or becoming—but, at its core, the mystic's experience surpasses linguistic predication.

Of particular importance to the influence of Underhill on the early study of mysticism is the division she places between mysticism and magic. Indeed, a driving impulse of many early analyses of Christian mystical theology at this time was to separate mysticism proper from accounts of mysticism that focused on physical illumination, levitation, and other psychic phenomenon.⁴² Because mystics and mysticism was often identified with and understood to be a part of these occult focused practices, scholars like Underhill wanted to evidence precisely how mysticism differed from magic and the occult, and what that difference essays about mysticism in general and Christian mysticism more particularly. According to Underhill, in magic the "will-to-know" galvanizes the practitioner's activity around finite concerns. There is, thus, "nothing supernatural about" magic.⁴³ While mysticism, in contrast, sought purification of the self as a means to "approach" the infinite.⁴⁴ In short, as Staudt helpfully describes this division, for Underhill "Magic wants to get" and "Mysticism wants to give."⁴⁵

In the second part of her text, themes like purification, illumination, and vision/ecstatic experiences are discussed. This general scheme follows the classic division of mystical experience

⁴¹ Underhill, 41.

⁴² James Thrall, *Mystic Moderns: Agency and Enchantment in Evelyn Underhill, May Sinclair, and Mary Webb* (Lanham, Maryland; Lexington Books, 2020), 52-53.

⁴³ Underhill, 157.

⁴⁴ Underhill, 204.

⁴⁵ Kathleen Henderson Staudt, "Rereading Evelyn Underhill's Mysticism," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 12, no. 1 (2012), 119.

as a process that unfolds in the life of the subject: purgation, illumination, and unification.⁴⁶ Staudt notes two additional themes that Underhill adds to this scheme. Before the purgative stage, in which personal attachments and desirous impulses are negated, she emphasizes a process called ‘The Awakening of the Self.’⁴⁷ This experience is a “response to a divine invitation that produces joy and a clear sense of the reality of the presence of God” in the subject.⁴⁸ The second element is withdrawal, or, as she terms it, “Introversion.”⁴⁹ Here, via a process of internalized recollection, the subject strives to confront those unreflected upon psychological traits that may inhibit the mystical path of union to God. All of these steps culminate in the last major stage discussed in the text, ‘The Dark Night of the Soul.’ In this section, Underhill stresses the necessity of suffering and the importance of loss as a process the mystic must undergo when seeking unity with God.⁵⁰

In a chapter entitled ‘The Characteristics of Mysticism’ Underhill offers a fourfold definition of mysticism that mirrors James. She begins by asserting what mysticism is not: it is “not an opinion: it is not a philosophy. It has nothing in common with the pursuit of occult knowledge.”⁵¹ Instead: (1) “*Mysticism is practical, not theoretical,*” that is, mysticism results in acts that are more than mere speculative ideals—it results in an “act of love, an act of surrender, and an act of supreme perception.”⁵² (2) “*Mysticism is an entirely Spiritual Activity.*” The intent, focus, and aim of the mystical practice is one that desires communion with a transcendent spiritual phenomenon.⁵³ (3) “*The business and method of Mysticism is Love.*” Underhill means here both a love that is generous to and with the world and, more importantly, a love that is a “deep-seated

⁴⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism* in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. by Richard Woods (New York: Image Books, 1980), 33-37.

⁴⁷ Underhill, 176-197.

⁴⁸ Staudt, 122.

⁴⁹ Staudt, 123; Underhill, 297-357.

⁵⁰ Underhill, 412.

⁵¹ Underhill, 81.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 84 (emphasis in original).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

desire and tendency of the soul towards its Source.”⁵⁴ (4) “*Mysticism entails a definite Psychological Experience.*” By psychological Underhill means a “form of organic life” in which the “whole self” is organized to reflect the mystical impulse—both externally and internally.⁵⁵

Underhill’s perspective on mysticism is clearly Perennialist. Throughout *Mysticism*, and indeed her vast writing career, she assumes an identity between a variety of writers and thinkers across history via mystical experience. David Knowles grouped Underhill with von Hügel and James as all treating mystical experience as a “wide arc of experience” common to a variety of historical contexts.⁵⁶ This common experience is notable for its capacity to mark a physical change in the life of the subject that is then given expression in the textual tradition of the religion.⁵⁷ Hence, as Gershom Scholem rightly noted when discussing Underhill, these mystics and the mystical experience they voice are rooted within a religious *tradition* that facilitates the emergence of this experience.⁵⁸ But Underhill also resists these traditional elements. For Underhill, mysticism is a distinct religious phenomenon with a historical pedigree that is nonetheless subordinate to a methodological gaze that can abstract data and information on its various manifestations. But the central *fact* of mysticism, for her, transcends mechanistic historical conditions.⁵⁹ This mystical reality, as McGinn rightly notes, is the “core of religion” for Underhill.⁶⁰ This core assumes a perennial “transcultural and transreligious unity.”⁶¹

⁵⁴ Ibid., 85.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 90.

⁵⁶ David Knowles, ‘What is Mysticism,’ in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. by Richard Woods (New York; Image Books, 1980), 523.

⁵⁷ Arthur Deikman, ‘Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience’ in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. by Richard Woods (New York; Image Books, 1980), 249.

⁵⁸ Gershom Scholem, ‘General Characteristics of Jewish Mysticism’ in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. by Richard Woods (New York; Image Books, 1980), 149.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 23, 41; Nelstrop, 92.

⁶⁰ McGinn, 274.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Before turning to an analysis of key thinkers from the latter development of mysticism, I want to isolate five components that make identifiable the category 'mysticism' as an object of inquiry for the scholars just considered—as well as a number of scholars from this period. These components are fundamental elements to the development of the study of mysticism and will be identifiable in those authors that we turn to next. I will return to them again at the conclusion of this chapter:

1. *A definition of mysticism*: Every theorist considered above assumes the necessity of providing clear and defined boundaries around mysticism that separates it from (institutional) religion in general. These definitions, typically, makes an ineffable unmediated union with God an experiential necessity. For our purposes, what is key is the use of definitions to provide boundary markers around which an identifiable 'mystical element'—as von Hügel framed it—arose. These scholars drew on existing suppositions regarding the distinct experiential and textual record of mystics and mysticism. However, they made this distinction subordinate to scholarly concerns. Here, these distinctions served to evidence a unique type of religious activity that, when isolated and demarcated as a sphere of human action, could, methodologically, be appropriated to extract historical and present facts.

2. *A basic schema or model that categorizes unique expressions of mysticism*: This modeling impulse runs throughout the work of the thinkers considered. It flags a propensity to divide and organize expressions of mysticism into categorizable models. The application of models to the variety of mystical experiences and texts provided these scholars with a set of agreed-upon criteria through which they could establish what would become the study of mysticism itself.

3. *A division that contrasts mysticism against, or in concert with, other phenomena*: Mysticism is not like the occult; it is not like classic forms of theology; it is not a philosophical school; it is not

psychological. It is distinct and isolatable for these scholars. From these negative divisions arise a positive account of what mysticism is and how it is to be understood in a scholarly context.

4. *An appeal to the ineffable*: Here the object of the mystic themselves is simultaneously the object of the researcher. In each text and author considered above, a sympathetic assumption regarding the nature of mysticism as an activity aimed at an ineffable experience is key. At this early stage of the study of mysticism, the perspective of the insider to the tradition still dominated.

5. *The academization of mysticism*: All these thinkers engage sources whose origin is the academy, contrast their work with other academic sources, and inspire new avenues of thought within academic context. Some theorists, like James, were dominate voices in the academy while they wrote. While others, like Underhill, were outsiders. But all of the thinkers produced texts whose primary audience was, or would be, a university context. Underhill's *Mysticism* and James's *Varieties* were the only texts with wide-ranging appeal inside and outside the academy.

What the above characterizations suggest is the transformative impact that early 20th century scholars had on 'the mystical.' No longer relegated to the territory of the religious themselves, mystical texts, ideas, and themes became intertwined with the debates and tensions of the modern and secular world. The developing fields of philology, archeology, and new historical-research practices opened up new questions into mysticism such that 'the mystical element' emerged as an identifiably distinct phenomenon. These scholars revealed patterns, norms, and standards by which to methodologically adjudicate religious phenomena via the nomenclature 'mystical' or 'mysticism'. Here, a term whose origins and history recede into the very beginning of Western thought gained academic form and legitimacy via the work of these thinkers. In section two, we will see how these early writers' claims and ideas take on new and more rigorous academic analysis.

3.2 – Latter Approaches to the Study of Mysticism

In what follows I identify key thematic trajectories in the scholarly analysis of mysticism that developed in response to the theorists discussed in section one. My approach follows de Certeau and seeks to evidence how those thinkers discussed in section one provided a “direction of inquiry” for the topic ‘mysticism’ as it developed in the academy and how, in that inquiry, analysis of the mystical as a religious element, datum, reality, or fact, was further transformed into a scholarly and indeed scientific project.⁶² Scholars in section two, I show, demonstrate a process of transference in which “a mystic ‘motif’ would reappear” within an academic context allowing for mysticism to “reappear, but changed, in turn, into another discipline (i.e., psychological, philosophical, psychiatric, novelistic, etc.).”⁶³ They reflect the “ensemble of processes” that has allowed mystical language to be treated as an object of analysis and area of knowledge within the academy.⁶⁴ Here, as de Certeau argued, the mystical “phenomenon” emerged as an ‘object’ of inquiry that conformed “to the rules of each discipline.”⁶⁵ The authors considered below organized their directions of inquiry into categories that built upon the techniques of sympathetic insiders to the mystical tradition like Underhill and James, the consequence of which was a proliferation of knowledge and understanding into the history of Western thought, society, and culture.

3.2.1 – Historical Approaches

Herbert Grundmann’s *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages* is a foundational text in the historical study of mysticism. His analysis, though largely overlooked when it was first published in 1935, has had a significant influence on the study of mysticism in the latter half of the 20th century. Scholars like Amy Hollywood and Caroline Bynum directly anchor the impulse

⁶² Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, v. 1, 1, 7.

⁶³ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 14.

⁶⁵ Certeau, Michel de. *The Mystic Fable*, v. 2: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, ed. by Luce Giard, trans. by Michael Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 2, 14.

of their own research and methodological aims within Grundmann's analysis. Grundmann himself can best be thought of as both a historian and sociologist.⁶⁶ He sought not simply to evidence the past as a historical object of data, but, too, his study sought to show the social and cultural ramifications of mystical theology—both its effect on society at large and its influence on the lives of women during the late Middle Ages.⁶⁷ His methodological approach demonstrates the impact of an emerging focus into historical matters that sought, above all else, to situate the event, text, and author within the specific context from which they arose.⁶⁸

Grundmann's distinct approach, first, rejected a model of inquiry that subordinated the study of mystical theology to categories like 'heretical' or 'orthodox'.⁶⁹ This approach represents an immediate break from many early scholars. He argued, innovatively for his time, that the historian must disabuse themselves of these theological impositions and study the lived historical reality of mysticism decoupled from religious impositions.⁷⁰ Hence, in his study of the impact of the Beguine movement, he explored (1) the newly emergent independence provided by the town for women, (2) the recognition of the inability of earlier religious orders to meet the demands of a new religious population, and (3) the increased rates of literacy, as some examples of this development. For Grundmann, a study of those lived concrete elements provided the most lucid account of the German mystical writings that arose in the 14th and 15th century and its link to the Beguines. A purely historical analysis that sought above all else to locate the data abstracted from the written evidence solely within the context of the period so as to gain better insight into the

⁶⁶ Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, 'Introduction,' in *Herbert Grundmann (1902-1970): Essays on Heresy, Inquisition, and Literacy* (Melton: York Medieval Press, 2019), 3.

⁶⁷ Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*, trans. by Steven Rowan (Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 5.

⁶⁸ Deane, 5.

⁶⁹ Robert E. Lerner, 'Introduction' in Grundmann, Herbert, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages (...)*, trans. by Steven Rowan (Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame Press, 1995), xvii.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, xviii.

lived reality of the religious orders he studied, is Grundmann's key influence on the study of mysticism.

Kevin Madigan argues that Grundmann's influence stems from his "ground-up" approach to scholarship.⁷¹ The historian, for Grundmann, must analyze how contextual variation, demonstrative from a host of social and cultural environments, produces change in history. Following this, a key argument of Grundmann's is that German mysticism arose as a consequence of two vectors. The first being the emerging Beguine movements, and their lack of any formal doctrinal training. These communities existed on the peripheries of ecclesial norms. They were structured and organized groups, but their organization was not tied into the ecclesial structure of the medieval church. According to Grundmann, the Church could choose to either ignore, banish, or tolerate the Beguine groups.⁷² They were granted toleration. Consequently, second, as the Beguine movement developed more authority and autonomy, preachers and the educated had to cultivate new modes of communication that would be understandable and accepted by these women. An example not discussed by Grundmann, but by later scholars, is the impact of thinkers like Meister Eckhart on the Beguine movement. Eckhart, for reasons not entirely known, was tasked with teaching groups like the Beguines when he was sent to Erfurt. The scholastically trained Eckhart, who occupied the same teaching position in Paris as had Aquinas, had to translate the Latin expressions and theological terms that he had used in Paris, to instruct the beguines. In so doing, Eckhart gave new shape and form to theological language and indeed the German language itself. The result of these two factors was the "flowering" of the German mystical literary

⁷¹ Kevin Madigan, 'Medieval Christianity: A New History,' *Harvard Divinity School*, April 28, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JiDa2YC26vw&t=741s>.

⁷² Grundmann, 134.

movement. As Lerner notes, Grundmann's claim is that the "flowering of German mysticism in the fourteenth century was intelligible only against this [Beguine] background."⁷³

In short, for Grundmann, historical events needed to be (a) contextualized as responding to lived pressures and (b) established within a web of social relations. For Grundmann, mysticism, as both a religious movement and a literary genera/style that arose in the 14th century, can be understood best when framed as a phenomenon that arose as a confluence of the social and cultural needs here noted. Therefore, mystical experience, mystical theological claims, or doctrinal issues are subordinate to the textual records that describe the lived reality of men and women in the 13th and 14th centuries. Grundmann's analysis takes as his starting point the assumption of a historical reality to the mystical as a datum, and extracts from his research a causal outcome of the mystical on the religious and social lives of both the Beguines themselves, as well as the larger context of the period.

In the opening section of a chapter entitled 'Female Mysticism' from Nelstrop's *Christian Mysticism*, she notes that "women's mysticism constitutes a particular type of mysticism that, while different from that produced by men, is no less a form of mysticism."⁷⁴ The key advocate of the position and type of mysticism that Nelstrop here denotes, is Caroline Bynum. Bynum is professor emeritus of Western medieval history at Colombia University and Princeton. Key to her project is her ability to demonstrate the efficacy of isolating and categorizing a specific mode of mystical writing under the label 'women's mysticism' so as to better understand the historical development of mystical thought and women's experience in the Middle Ages. To extend the efficacy of this category, her methodology, in works like *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the*

⁷³ Lerner, xxi.

⁷⁴ Nelstrop, 139.

Spirituality of the High Middle Ages (1982), isolates key “religious imagery” that populates the writing of women authors in the medieval period.⁷⁵ She writes:

If we trace the networks of images built up by medieval authors and locate those networks in the psyches and social experiences of those who create or use them, we find that they reveal to us what the writers cared about most deeply themselves and what they felt it necessary to present or justify to others.⁷⁶

The images that Bynum isolates are contextualized both individually and socially to reveal the intentional and representational value of said image in and on the lives of women. In so doing, Bynum hoped to trace a “history of religious attitudes” by (a) providing a more sympathetic portrayal of the spiritual lives of medieval writers and (b) a more accurate account of the lifeworld that produced these texts.⁷⁷

Like Grundmann, Bynum stresses an “affective” approach to historical research.⁷⁸ Two examples of this image-oriented affective approach can be seen in Bynum’s analysis of what she calls the “feminization of religious language”⁷⁹ as well as softer images of authority that are portrayed in the 13th and 14th century.⁸⁰ The “feminization” of language is a result, she argues, of the proliferation of vernacular texts in this period.⁸¹ These works gave voice to women’s experiences via the publication of love poetry, fiction, and lay devotional texts. Here, not only were women’s voices and experiences extended into the sphere of published texts, but a sort of feminine ‘accent’ can be said to have impacted how these texts came together and who their audience was. This impacted the development of mystical texts by providing greater lexical options from which women mystics could draw when articulating their own lived experience.

⁷⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus As Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 8, 24.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 4. That being said, Bynum’s admiration of Grundmann is not indiscriminate (e.g., *ibid.*, 13).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

Second, Bynum shows that images of authority in this period began to be described with more amiable language—she argues that this gave rise to a softening image of authority. Bynum discusses Bernard of Clairvaux who “uses mother to describe Jesus, Moses, Peter, Paul, prelates in general, abbots in general, and, more frequently, himself as abbot.”⁸² Bynum argues that these images undercut an earlier masculine and sterner understanding of authority. A concrete example of both these accounts occurs in her discussion of the images of Jesus’s wounds pouring out blood and the image of breasts pouring out milk. These images were correlated because, she notes, in the Middle Ages breast milk was understood to be “processed blood.”⁸³ The imagery of nourishing breastmilk was ascribed to Jesus, Mary, and to Bernard of Clairvaux himself.⁸⁴

Nelstrop categorizes Bynum under her feminist readings model.⁸⁵ That label of course makes sense, as Bynum’s scholarship has given voice to female actors in a discipline that traditionally ignored those voices or tended to relegate their claims to either orthodox or unorthodox positions. Although scholars such as Roberta Bondi argue against labeling works like *Jesus as Mother* as ‘feminist.’⁸⁶ Like any other historical study, she contends, Bynum exegetically traces the use of language by divergent actors and unpacks how that language, as it transforms, demonstrates novel use by women and men in the late Middle Ages.⁸⁷ Hence, there is nothing discernibly distinct from Bynum’s approach that makes it ‘feminist’ in comparison to a nominal historical approach. Other reviewers of Bynum’s work tend to reflect Bondi’s position.⁸⁸ I would err here on a *both* historical *and* feminist reading rather than an either/or

⁸² Ibid., 115.

⁸³ Ibid., 132.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 123-124, 116.

⁸⁵ Nelstrop, 18.

⁸⁶ Bondi, Roberta C. “Jesus As Mother.” *History of Religions* 23, no. 3 (1984), 280.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Richard K. Emmerson, “*Jesus As Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* by Caroline Walker Bynum (Review),” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 7 (1985): 175–78; John R. Sommerfeldt, “Book Review: Jesus as

binary. What Bynum demonstrates is the effectiveness of categorization and the helpfulness of establishing new models for understanding the history of the development of mysticism—a typology whose outcome is a more concise analysis of the historical development of women writers on mystical topics in the Middles Ages.

I turn now to perhaps the most influential and simultaneously most difficult scholar to place in terms of mysticism: Michel de Certeau. Himself a Jesuit whose theological trajectory was influenced by the work of Jacques Lacan, de Certeau's work combines the rigorousness of a historian, the speculation of a philosopher, and a theologian's sympathy to perennialism. As was noted in the introduction, de Certeau's two volume *The Mystic Fable* unpacks the relationship between the word mysticism and its place within the literary genre of mystical writing that developed in the 16th and 17th centuries. He accomplishes this by tracing the development of the uses of the word 'mystical' from an adjective that characterized a form of theological writing grounded in the work of pseudo-Dionysius to a noun in which the term stood for a consistent form of theological writing that one could trace to Paul's letters.⁸⁹

De Certeau gives several reasons why the 16th and 17th centuries provided a new space for certain linguistic shifts in the meaning and use of mysticism to occur. First, de Certeau clings to something like a death-of-God perspective in which, ingredient to modernity, is the recognition of the absence of a governing transcendent sphere.⁹⁰ This absence was compelled by, second, a growing distrust in the Church institution to mediate one's relationship with God.⁹¹ To fill the gaps produced by these voids, de Certeau argues that the centrality of the biblical text

Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages," *The Catholic Historical Review* 71, no. 4 (1985), 622–24.

⁸⁹ David LaGuardia, 'Book Review: *The Mystic Fable* Vol. 1,' *History of European Ideas* 18, no. 5 (1994), 824; Certeau, *Mystic Fable* v.1, 76.

⁹⁰ James A Wiseman, "Book Review: *The Mystic Fable*. Vol. 1,' *The Catholic Historical Review* 79, no. 3 (1993), 536; Graham Ward, "Michel De Certeau's 'Spiritual Spaces,'" *New Blackfriars* 79, no. 932 (1998), 429.

⁹¹ Certeau, *Mystic Fable* v. 1, 15.

and one's personal experience arose in this period as *the* dominant sources of religious authority.⁹² The characters that occupy de Certeau's *Mystic Fable* display these strategies when seeking to overcome the experience of the absence of God.⁹³

McGinn situates Certeau's project under the model 'philosophical.' He stresses both the difficulty of de Certeau's argument and style rooted as they are within Lacanian psychoanalysis. He likewise suggests that de Certeau is too confident in the model he advances.⁹⁴ Certainly, McGinn argues, the 16th and 17th centuries were unique periods, but far more research would have to be done to substantiate the hypothesis that de Certeau advances concerning the link between the nominal use of the term mysticism and the corresponding literary genres that arose from that usage.⁹⁵ Nelstrop, more precisely, places de Certeau within a performative language model.⁹⁶ This model, though sharing traits with her contextualist model, is "particularity interested in how language functions in a given text."⁹⁷ Hence, Nelstrop's model is a helpful designator. This is because (a) de Certeau concentrates on linguistic representation, linking it with "social subjectivity and the reinterpretation of fables," and (b) he stresses the "socially disruptive nature of mysticism."⁹⁸ And indeed, if de Certeau's analysis seeks to accomplish anything, it is to establish a link between the subject and the Other via an analysis of the genre of writing that developed under the heading 'mystical.'

⁹² Jerrold Seigel, "Mysticism and Epistemology: The Historical and Cultural Theory of Michel De Certeau," *History and Theory* 43, no. 3 (2004), 403.

⁹³ For a critique of Certeau's positions, see Amy Hollywood, "Love Speaks Here: Michel De Certeau's Mystic Fable," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 12, no. 2 (2012), 203.

⁹⁴ McGinn, *Foundations*, 312.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Nelstrop, 16.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

For my part, I find Graham Ward's emphasis on the historical elements of de Certeau's thought to be helpful.⁹⁹ Specifically, the historical claims rooted in the methodological discussions found in the introductions to both *Mystic Fable* volumes. De Certeau's emphasis on the necessity of situating mysticism as a response to, and as concomitant with, the developing scientific worldview of the 16th and 17th century warrants considerable attention.¹⁰⁰ For de Certeau, mysticism developed alongside the methodological constraints of a scientific perspective that saw the necessity of models, definitions, and categorization as the means by which to produce knowledge.¹⁰¹ Mysticism as a science advanced via the constraints of these methodological assumptions. The outcome of this process was a formalized articulation of a theological language that pre-existed the 16th and 17th century but was given unique shape during this period.¹⁰²

3.2.2 – Theological and Language-Focused Approaches

Andrew Louth's *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Denys* (1981) has become a classic in the field of mystical theology, both as a resource for understanding key arguments from the tradition's major influences as well as offering a historical account of the development, translation, and re-deployment of these key themes in different epochs by different actors. Despite this, its original reception was mixed.¹⁰³ This mixed reception arose from scholars who treated his text as one necessarily framed within a debate concerning the relationship between the Church Fathers and Neoplatonism.¹⁰⁴ However, another way to situate Louth's text—as I do here—is to place it within the development of the study of mysticism. For example, in his text's conclusion he provides a brief discussion of Underhill and later scholars like Charles Zaehner,

⁹⁹ Ward, 428.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 429.

¹⁰¹ Ryan Netzley, "The Mystic Fable, vol. 2 (Book Review)," *Modern Philology* 115, no. 3 (2018), 185.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ M. J. Edwards, 'Louth *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*,' *The Classical Review* 58, no. 2 (2008), 377-278.

¹⁰⁴ Simon Tugwell, 'Book Review: *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*,' *New Blackfriars* 62, no. 736 (1981), 442-44.

namely, their claim that all mysticism speaks to the same fundamental activity. Louth disagrees with that proposition.¹⁰⁵ His text demonstrates that deviation via its dispute with Andre-Jean Festugière's claim that "when the Fathers think their mysticism, they Platonize. There is nothing original in their edifice."¹⁰⁶ Louth argues to the contrary that the fathers and the Neoplatonists had rather distinct mystical claims. These distinct mystical claims arose from dissimilar epistemic assertions which were themselves the product of divergent liturgical and, Louth maintains, experiential realities.¹⁰⁷ Louth's thesis is thus aimed at driving a wedge between different 'types' of mysticism and arguing for the necessity of noting distinctions within this phenomenon.

With that in mind, Nelstrop's categorization of Louth as a contextualist is warranted. Nelstrop argues that, via an analysis of Louth's discussion of Augustine's vision at Ostia, productive parallels and divergences in relation to Plotinus's mystical visions are emergent.¹⁰⁸ Louth argues, Nelstrop shows, that we understand Augustine's mysticism via the context from which and out of which Augustine both writes and lives. That context was circumscribed by a Christian milieu that (1) saw communion with God as a collaborative affair (Augustine's vision was shared with Monica, his mother), (2) was one grounded in Augustine's incarnational theology, and, (3) was oriented by the Christian belief in creation *ex nihilo*.¹⁰⁹ These three traits stand in contrast to a Neoplatonic notion of union with the one, which is framed by Plotinus as a 'flight from the alone to the alone.' The specifics of each element here noted, though deserving of far more analysis, is not as important for the present discussion as is recognizing that at the core of Louth's work is a concern to differentiate mystical experience within the context from which a

¹⁰⁵ Louth, *Origins*, 191.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, *xiii*.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, *xv*.

¹⁰⁸ Nelstrop, 35.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

thinker theologizes: to note a fundamental difference between two modes of a similar yet distinct phenomenon. And yet, it must be noted that Louth's project is underscored within a perennialist supposition that assumes the transhistorical reality of a core mystical experience.¹¹⁰

Another thinker of importance in the later study of mysticism is Denys Turner. Turner, as was discussed in the introduction to this study, represents what Nelstrop called a performative-language approach to the study of mysticism. In addition, I argued that Turner's approach should be understood as advocating a fundamentally theological perspective. That is, although he attends to the centrality of language and its performative character in mystical discourse, he ultimately argues that these aspects of mystical discourse are subordinate to a claim about the unknowability of God. As I stressed in the introduction, and indeed will return to at the conclusion, Turner's project frames mystical language as something that is enacted in the linguistic economy of the text. The mystic writes so as to articulate a theological understanding of God that goes beyond language, while still assuming that this unarticulated reality can be expressed via the resources, motifs, genres, and style of the linguistic text. *The* example of this performative-linguistic scheme for Turner is apophatic theology, which both assumes the unsayability or unknowability of the Godhead as such *and* the ability of language to paradoxically articulate this unsayable reality.

Steven Katz, professor of religion at Boston University, has published four edited volumes on the history of mysticism: *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (1978), *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (1983), *Mysticism and Language* (1992), and *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture* (2000). Each volume operates from the thesis that (a) mysticism is rooted within a linguistic, cultural, and social context from which the mystic and the mystical text draws its inspiration and,

¹¹⁰ See, e.g.: Louth, *Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology*, 146.

consequently, (b) there is no unmediated or ineffable experience.¹¹¹ For Katz, in short, one cannot have experience unmediated from cultural context; both interpretation *and* the experience itself shows cultural influence.¹¹² For example, he writes in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*: “the biblical text as a whole, with due allowance for differing exegetical emphases, thus contributes significantly to shaping the ontological-spiritual frame of reference in which the mystic moves and ‘experiences’.”¹¹³ Or, as H.P. Owen notes in the same volume, “Christian forms of mystical experience are shaped by antecedently held beliefs.”¹¹⁴ Influences such as historical context, dogma, and scriptural resources organize the mystics account of their experience and consequently negate any claim to a perennial or universally consistent mode of mystical behavior or experiences.

Katz’s claims develop from his rejection of a variety of scholarly approaches to mysticism. For example, as Richards notes, he is “at odds with James, Stace, Underhill, Otto, Zaehner and Smart” by maintaining “that the mystical experience itself as well as its form of expression is shaped by the traditions of the religious community in which it occurs.”¹¹⁵ As such, Katz’s constructivism stands in opposition to perennialist assumptions within the study of mysticism. Katz argues that his approach provides a more complete image of mysticism. For example, he argues, in the same volume being here discussed, that mysticism, far from being a source of religious creativity, reflects orthodox and conservative tendencies in the development of religion.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Bernard McGinn, ‘Mysticism and Sacred Scripture (Review),’ *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 2, no. 1 (2002), 108; Glyn Richards, ‘Book Review: Mysticism and Religious Traditions,’ *Religious Studies* 21, no. 3 (1985), 417.

¹¹² Nelstrop, 11.

¹¹³ Steven Katz, ‘The ‘Conservative’ Character of Mystical Experience,’ in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. by. Steven Katz (New York; Oxford University Press, 1983), 13.

¹¹⁴ H.P. Owen, ‘Experience and Dogma in the English Mystics,’ in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. by. Steven Katz (New York; Oxford University Press, 1983), 148.

¹¹⁵ Richards, 417.

¹¹⁶ E.g., Katz, 23.

Nelstrop argues that Katz is a contextualist—indeed, she sees his work as the origin for the contextualist approach itself.¹¹⁷ McGinn also notes this contextualist element.¹¹⁸ Katz, though, is not without his detractors. The most pointed critique of Katz comes from Grace Jantzen. Jantzen's assessment, interestingly, arises from her own, as it were, contextualization of Katz's argument. She writes, there is no recognition in Katz:

that the assertion of ineffability comes to prominence in modern discussions of mysticism largely from Schleiermacher's post-Kantian assumption that there is a 'noumenal' which is not conceptually knowable, and on which language can get no purchase.¹¹⁹

For Jantzen, Katz's contextualist assertions are themselves born out of a post-Kantian framework that assumes the necessarily constructivist elements of the mind and the further rejection of a Kantian assumption regarding the noumenal boundary that limits speech.¹²⁰ Jantzen thus turns the table, as it were, on Katz and submits his work to the same type of analysis that he submits the mystic to. The outcome is less a negation of Katz's claims—as indeed, the perennial claim is something that Jantzen's herself would be at odds with—but a limiting of the scope of Katz's analysis. The mystic, much like the scholar studying them, is inscribed in a variety of social presuppositions, cultural norms, and religious/philosophical assumptions that give shape to their output. Jantzen is correct to flag this oversight in Katz, but Katz's work, especially against the perennial claim regarding the essence of mysticism, holds. That is to say, the problem that thinkers like Katz raise against the presupposition of an ahistorical phenomenon called 'the mystical' must confront the weight of the historical and contextual evidence that scholars like Katz evidence in their analysis of the mystical. Nothing exists outside of the context from which it emerged—or, as Caputo would frame it, correlation is irreducible.

¹¹⁷ Nelstrop, 11.

¹¹⁸ McGinn, *Foundations*, 322.

¹¹⁹ Grace Jantzen, 'Book Review: Mysticism and Language,' *Religious Studies* 31, no. 1 (1995), 136.

¹²⁰ Jantzen, 135. She also critiques Katz's analysis for its lack of attention to postmodern and feminist issues (*ibid.*, 135).

3.2.3 – 'Religious Studies' Approaches

It is not an exaggeration to say that Bernard McGinn has perhaps contributed the most to the modern study of the historical development of mysticism with his multivolume *The Foundations of Mysticism* and a variety of other edited books and series. *Foundations of Mysticism* details the historical development of Christian mystical theology from its Greek and Hebrew origins to its medieval expressions and finally to its modern formations. Largely a study in the major actors, trends, and debates of the tradition, McGinn's project has become an indispensable resource for any analysis of the development of mysticism. The first volume of his *Foundations* series concludes with a thorough overview of the development of the study of mysticism and, indeed, serves as the inspiration for the present study.

Although historical in scope, McGinn's project is informed by several approaches. Theologically he is influenced by the Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan and his theory of "human intentionality."¹²¹ This, as Nelstrop notes, is an account of a universally shared capacity for a pre-linguistic experience of God that he calls a mediated immediacy.¹²² Though, despite this theological claim, as Nelstrop rightly argues, McGinn's analysis pays close attention to context:

Following Bernard Lonergan, McGinn argues that mystical texts are expressions of a form of consciousness that encompasses all aspects of human loving and knowing in a way that exceeds ordinary consciousness. McGinn is, however, also convinced that context informs the experiences that mystics encounter. In this relation, McGinn is deeply concerned with the content of mystical texts.¹²³

Hence, although theological assumptions guide his research, it is McGinn's contention that the scholar must ground their studies within the social and cultural milieu of the mystic under analysis that galvanizes his research aims. Because of the variety of approaches he deploys, McGinn's interdisciplinary focus, I argue, situates him within the broader Religious Studies milieu. By

¹²¹ Bernard McGinn, 'Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal,' *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 8, no. 1 (2008), 44.

¹²² Nelstrop, 13.

¹²³ Ibid., 101.

Religious Studies here, I simply mean to indicate the pluralism that governs this term's use in the academy—Religious Studies departments, despite their diversity of focus within a North American context, are nonetheless unified by their shared interdisciplinarity.

That being said, scholars like Jantzen argue that McGinn fails to provide an adequate or nuanced account of the context of his research, especially insofar as those contexts are shaped by dynamics like power imbalances and political tensions on the development of mysticism.¹²⁴ Additionally, she argues that McGinn ignores the role that gender might play in the development of mysticism.¹²⁵ Be that as it may, as Nelstrop holds, the core of McGinn's analysis is organized by a belief in the inability to separate experience from interpretation—a position that was also at the core of William James's approach.¹²⁶ Instead, throughout his analysis, McGinn seeks to hold these two factors in tension. For McGinn, in sum, mystical experiences are phenomenologically, psychologically, and experientially real—they need to be understood and researched, therefore, as reflective of this lived and historically embedded transcendent reality.

Amy Hollywood, like McGinn, is one of the most influential scholars in the field of mysticism today. Although her approach to the study of mysticism shows the interdisciplinary focus of a Religious Studies scholar—i.e., she freely draws on sociological, philosophical, theological, and cultural themes—her early work is demonstrably historical in focus. A key influence on Hollywood, especially *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, is Grundmann's historical analysis.¹²⁷ Via Grundmann, Hollywood takes seriously the vast influence that the Beguine religious movement had on the development of mystical theology in the late Middle Ages. Grundmann's

¹²⁴ Grace Jantzen, "Book Review: *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*," *Religious Studies* 29, no. 3 (1993), 403-4.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Nelstrop, 196.

¹²⁷ Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 4, 6, 39, 193.

claims, we noted above, argued for the importance of grounding our historical understanding of the Beguine movement within the tensions and context of that period. Hollywood's analysis builds on Grundmann's work.

However, Hollywood differs from Grundmann in that her study is chiefly organized by attention to literary themes.¹²⁸ Hence, she stresses the importance of genre, narrative theory, and allegory as ways to more fully engage and understand the mystic and their text. In so doing, she frames the development of mystical writing, and female mystical writing in particular, as a *type* of literary genre that arose in the Middle Ages.¹²⁹ This genre provided a conceptual space for women to discuss not simply their theological and religious convictions, but, too, issues like desire, their body, and their status within the social and cultural milieu within which they found themselves.¹³⁰ This genre functions, according to Hollywood, as a sort of relief valve for the otherwise silenced female voice in that culture. The genre 'mysticism,' then, is isolated by Hollywood as a unique space for the exploration of female experience in history.¹³¹

3.3 – Themes in Latter Approaches to the Study of Mysticism

Five basic traits were identified above as key elements to the early study of mysticism. Many of the scholars just analyzed reflect those traits in their own work. For example, every scholar provided (1) a working definition of mysticism; many deployed (2) their own model that categorized states of mystical experience, types of Christian mysticism, or types of scholars and approaches to the study of mysticism—this later approach being a development from section one; mysticism as a (3) distinct category was instrumental for these scholars. This was especially evident in the historical analysis of Grundmann and Bynum whose research demonstrated the

¹²⁸ Ibid., 21; Nelstrop, 104.

¹²⁹ Robert E. Lerner, "Book Review: The Soul as Virgin Wife," *The Journal of Religion* 78, no. 1 (1998), 114.

¹³⁰ Hollywood, 57.

¹³¹ Ibid., 65-67.

explanatory precision gained by assuming the heuristic ‘mysticism’ when examining the cultural world of the Middle Ages. For some scholars, but certainly not all, (4) an appeal to the ineffable was a helpful organizing principle. And (5) the academization of mysticism, as has been clearly demonstrated, was central to their study—as indeed every example considered comes from the work of a university professor. Finally, every scholar considered in section two engaged or critiqued thinkers from section one.

Three key divisions mark scholars in section two from section one. For most researchers from section one, aside from James, an appeal to the orthodoxy of mystical theology was prominent (e.g., Underhill). As scholarship developed in the 20th century, less emphasis was placed on the doctrinally correct claims of the mystic in relation to religious orthodoxy (e.g., Grundmann), though, as examples like Louth evidence, this is still a concern for some researchers. Second, though related to the first, an emphasis on context as a guiding analytical tool became central (e.g., Katz). The mystic and mystical text was (often) deemed most comprehensible when read via the cultural, social, and historical period from which they wrote. More recent research that focuses on the context of gender, power, and sexuality reflects this shift (e.g., Bynum, Hollywood).¹³² Third, the focus on linguistic developments as a metric of evaluation for understanding mystical texts has been key (e.g., Turner). Here, appraising the transformation and translation of words, themes, and styles of writing has provided researchers with a more robust understanding of the ways in which subtle linguistic changes shaped ‘the mystical.’

In sum, the scholarly category ‘mysticism’ has provided a space within which a more comprehensive picture of religion could occur. The result of this process has been—*despite its constructed origins and essentialized vocabulary*—that deploying the term ‘mysticism’ as a model

¹³² See, e.g., Grace Jantzen, *Power Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995).

or boundary device generated greater explanatory and descriptive power regarding the actions, motivations, and intentions of the historical actants discussed herein. In Caputo's work, all of these themes, authors, and ideas, shape both the data he works on (e.g., the scholarly retrieval and analysis of Eckhart's work derives from scholarship focused on this area) and shapes how he understands said data (e.g., research into 'the mystical' and its perennial and/or contextual emergence was traced and unpacked by scholars whose assumptions organized and shaped the reception of said data). Likewise, Caputo's reception and understanding of the mystical was and is informed by the Continental philosophical tradition, hence why, before moving on to Caputo's work more specifically, we need to unpack some of the major themes from that tradition to make sense of Caputo's own use of the 'mystical element' of religion.

Chapter 4 – Continental Philosophy, Religion, and 'the Mystical'

A precise definition of Continental philosophy is difficult to produce. But multiple texts and authors exist from which one can yield something like a description of this philosophical approach. Geographically, the term 'Continental' signifies the European continent from which most of its thinkers originate, in particular France and Germany. Still, a variety of influential thinkers in the tradition can be found throughout Europe, and it now has a global presence with strong roots in North America.¹ The term, too, is meant to signal another geographic reality, Continental philosophy is distinct from its Anglo-American, Analytic counterpart. Analytic philosophers tend to focus on logical analysis and the linguistic structures that organize propositional statements with the aim of determining their truth. The achievement of clarity as concerns a set of statements and claims about the world orient this tradition. In contrast, Continental philosophy has often been

¹ Stephanie Rumpza, "Introduction: Catholics and Continental Thought—a Curious Allegiance", in *The Catholic Reception of Continental Philosophy in North America*, ed. Gregory P Floyd, and Stephanie Rumpza (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 3.

criticized for its lack of clarity and, indeed, its celebration of ambiguity.² These traits make Continental thought particularly productive when thinking through mystical texts which, too, tend to celebrate the conceptually paradoxical. Broadly, however, Continental philosophy is best understood as a conversation that includes a variety of thinkers all responding to a host of key concerns that have been articulated over the past several centuries. Hence, in lieu of a precise definition, I trace here the central movements and thinkers that have organized its output so as to paint a general picture of its aims and goals, before moving on to a more detailed discussion of its key thinkers.

Continental philosophy has one origin in the publication of Immanuel Kant's 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason* and his 1790 *Critique of Pure Judgement*.³ Key to Kant's impact on the development of Continental philosophy, as indeed Caputo argues, is his statement that "I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith."⁴ In part, this statement affirms a basic tension that underlay Continental philosophy of religion: there persists an epistemological gap, an unknown X, that always already marks human experience and our understanding of the world; and, we cannot think or understand anything, with certainty, beyond rational and empirical claims.⁵ This denial of knowledge by Kant, is simultaneously an affirmation of how to conceptualize transcendence as an unknown X. But Kant, as he discusses in his *Critique of Pure Judgment*, also argued that finite experience 'exceeds itself' immanently via his discussion of the sublime—a topic to which we will return shortly.

² E.g.: Roger Scruton, *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

³ John McCumber, *Time and Philosophy: A History of Continental Thought* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2014), 17.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 117.

⁵ Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17.

The epistemological tensions raised by Kant gave rise to a series of thinkers who reacted both against and in concert with his work. One school of thought that emerged was the German Idealist tradition which includes thinkers such as J.G. Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. Similar to the German Idealists was the German Romantic movement, key voices here being Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel, and Johann Hölderlin. The response generated by subsequent thinkers to these movements led to what Paul Ricoeur called the “Masters of Suspicion”⁶ and can be seen in the work of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. This group of thinkers helped give rise to two dominant strands of thought in early 20th century Continental thought: phenomenology and existentialism. Thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Edmund Husserl, Henri Bergson, and Heidegger were influential. These thinkers stress the theme of freedom and the angsts that emerge from the reality of freedom in and on human experience. Out of these schools developed a strand of Hegelianism influenced by Alexandre Kojève, the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and what Simon Critchley calls the ‘anti-Hegelianism’ of thinkers like Georges Bataille. In addition, the area of hermeneutics was explored by thinkers like Hans-Georg Gadamer and Ricoeur.⁷

Politically, a western styled Marxism arose in mid 20th century Europe and North America and can be seen in the work of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Walter Benjamin. For them, political emancipation was tied to a critique of capitalism and the unchecked modes of desire that its system trades on. Finally, structuralists, post-structuralists, and postmodernists like Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray were all vital to giving Continental thought the shape it has today. For them, a Marxist

⁶ Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. by Dennis B Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 33.

⁷ Critchley, 14.

account of social development and political class, combined with psychoanalytical claims, a focus on language, filtered through themes of power, organized their output. This tradition continues to develop in the present via the work of Slavoj Žižek, Jean-Luc Marion, Quentin Meillassoux, Alain Badiou, Catherine Malabou, and François Laruelle. These last thinkers represent a continuity with the Marxist and psychoanalytically motivated tensions from the early 20th century while representing a further radicalization of those themes via their stress on non-anthropocentric models of material existence.

Finally, in North America, philosophers like Merold Westphal, Mark C. Taylor, and Caputo himself represent a geographical shift from, though still being largely in ideational continuity with, the European Continental tradition. But differences emerge—in part, I would argue that one difference is the religious context to which and from which they write. The context that thinkers like Caputo write from is one in which the political, social, and religious milieu is deeply impacted by religious fundamentalism. This fundamentalism is certainly not simply a species of North American Christianity. But the dominance of religious fundamentalism in North America—especially, to be clear, in the eyes of Caputo—shapes how these American writers intervene in and upon religion.⁸ Caputo, for example, finds in Christian fundamentalism a serious political and religious problem in American life. He thus engages the Christian tradition to decouple fundamentalism from his account of Christianity.⁹

What then are the specific claims of the Continental tradition? I will suggest four criteria that loosely situate the borders of Continental thought. Because of its Kantian roots, Continental philosophy begins with (1) assumptions about the knowing subject and how this knowing subject

⁸ Bruce Ellis Benson, “How Continental Philosophy of Religion Came into Being and Where It Is Going”, in *The Catholic Reception of Continental Philosophy in North America*, ed. Gregory P. Floyd, and Stephanie Rumpza (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 234; *SoG*, 223-224.

⁹ *SoG*, 223-224.

alters and impacts what it is that it knows about the external world. Contemporaneously, this tension is discussed via the notion of 'construction,' and assumes that human experience is always already marked by pre-interpretive structures that filter the world and our response to it. Continental thinkers are also very much (2) influenced by Hegel, and, as such, tend to emphasize the importance of context, culture, and history as key elements to the formation of an intellectual tradition. In short, *how* we know is as important, indeed if not more, to our understanding as *what* it is that we understand. In addition, because of the impact of existentialism and phenomenology on its development, Continental philosophy emphasizes (3) the role of embodied experience in understanding the world. Constitutive of many of these embodied claims concerns issues that revolve around desire, power structures, and social and cultural norms. Finally, Continental thinkers emphasize (4) the importance of discursive power structures as key factors in identifying elements (1), (2), and (3). Words and texts are not simply a means of communicating a desired end, instead, they form the epistemic and hermeneutical horizon within which the subject navigates the world.

Finally, and to add a fifth element to the above list, Continental philosophy (5) distinguishes itself from its Analytic counterpart by what Critchley calls its capacity to be "concerned with relations to non-philosophy, whether art, poetry, psychoanalysis, politics, economics" and, importantly, religion.¹⁰ It is this final element, the propensity of Continental thinkers to actively seek an understanding of the world via non-philosophical categories, that is key to understanding the engagement with mysticism by the Continental tradition.

In what follows I unpack key elements from the Continental tradition by focusing on some of the most important thinkers. My discussion largely follows Caputo's account of these thinkers

¹⁰ Critchley, 87.

and the importance he ascribes to them. The principal theme I unpack is the link between negative theology or apophaticism and the Continental tradition; in short, what is 'unsayable' or 'unknowable' according to themes derived from the Continental tradition? As such, I trace what I am suggesting is a thematic core of Continental thought, and indeed one reason for its propensity to focus on religious themes. This thematic is expressed in Kant's claim that he 'found it necessary to deny knowledge, to make room for faith.' How thinkers from Kant to Caputo have 'made room for faith' in their philosophical analyses, will help clarify the propensity to engage religious matters that galvanizes much in the Continental tradition.

4.1 – From Kant to Marion: Understanding, Negation, and God

Immanuel Kant's division between noumena and phenomena, itself echoing the metaphysical image of the divided line discussed in chapter 2, is crucial for the development of modern philosophy and for research in the modern university more broadly. In offering this distinction, Kant sought to evidence rational justifications for the foundations of scientific knowledge; to, in short, provide an account of *how* knowledge of the external world is possible, *what* it is that is known in this process, and the *limits* of this knowledge.¹¹ To do this, Kant limited the scope of knowledge to that which is empirically verifiable or rationally justifiable in light of those empirical possibilities.¹² That said, Kant did not call for silence on those matters that escaped empirical or rational validation. Non-empirically derived claims—i.e., metaphysical claims—regarding morality, human freedom, and God were advanced by Kant as necessary postulates of human thought.¹³ However, as Kant would also argue, the postulates of human thought that promote metaphysical claims fall into antinomies, hence the postulate God exists can be

¹¹ Roger Scruton, *Kant: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 54-55.

¹² Pamela Sue Anderson and Jordan Bell, *Kant and Theology* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), p. 12.

¹³ Scruton, 56.

immediately confronted with the equally postulated assertion, God does not exist.¹⁴ Caputo notes that ingredient to the development of his own anti-metaphysical views, was his being convinced of the validity of Kant's arguments regarding the antinomies of reason.¹⁵

However, it was in his *Critique of Judgement* that these latter issues concerning the epistemic status of metaphysical claims, especially with reference to their phenomenal appearances, came to the fore. Of importance for our purposes is Kant's account of the sublime, and the possibility of understanding the sublime as a phenomenal experience. Among a variety of outcomes and issues that emerge from Kant's claims here, a key theme turns on the capacity of one's "inner sense" to perceive an external "sublime" appearance.¹⁶ What then is the sublime that this inner sense perceives? The sublime, he writes,

refers to things which appear either formless (a storm at sea; a vast mountain range) or which have form but, for reasons of size, exceed our ability to perceive such form. In either case, the object is considered formless because 'we cannot unify its elements . . . in sense intuition.'¹⁷

That is, the sublime indicates the intuitional limit of one's mental faculty to abstract information about the 'formless' quality of external phenomena. This formless quality suggests an excessive, a *more-than*, that accompanies our phenomenal experiences while nonetheless always already exceeding said experiences—both positively and negatively.¹⁸ Importantly though, the sublime, though signifying an excessive quality, is nevertheless graspable and known by the subject—indeed, as Mellissa Meritt stresses, Kant ultimately roots the sublime within the mind itself.¹⁹

¹⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 517.

¹⁵ John Caputo, "Lecture 13 – Caputo – Course wrap-up, pt. 2," on <https://johndcaputo.com> (Dec. 7, 2010), 02:47.

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), p. 78.

¹⁷ Philip A Shaw, *The Sublime* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017), p. 100.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 105.

¹⁹ Melissa Merritt, *The Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 4.

Hence, as Phillip Shaw notes, “Through the encounter with *the vast* in nature the mind discovers within itself a faculty that transcends the realm of sensible intuition.”²⁰

It is this ‘transcending’ *more-than* characteristic of the sublime that will come to impact not simply subsequent thinkers like Schiller and the Romantic tradition,²¹ but also Continental thinkers like Jean Francois Lyotard,²² Žižek,²³ and indeed Caputo, all of whom advance theories concerning finite experience that take as ingredient to phenomenal experience this always already excessive quality. This latter development, in which Continental theorists advance materialist philosophies in which finitude is imaged via the language of material excess, is important for understanding Caputo’s engagement with the mystical element. In particular, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6, Caputo’s account of the event employs these themes to indicate how finite experiences exceed themselves.

Importantly, as Stephen Palmquist notes, Kant’s theory of the sublime is “closely associated” with a religious conception of a radically transcendent yet utterly immanent God.²⁴ Inner feeling, and indeed religious feeling, then, is not bound to empirical verification for Kant. Hence, as Žižek frames it, Kant’s focus on the sublime is a focus that makes evident an “internal otherworldliness” in finitude itself in which the excess marked by the sublime signals not an “external transcendence” but an excess “in the very heart of the subject.”²⁵ This is not to suggest that Kant’s notion of the sublime, i.e., the experience of an overwhelming excess derived from external phenomena, is a mere subjective chimera. Rather, the sublime is the view that the

²⁰ Shaw, 105 (emphasis added).

²¹ Helmut Holzhey, and Vilem Mudroch, *The a to Z of Kant and Kantianism* (Lanham. Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 252.

²² Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant's Critique of Judgment, [sections] 23-29* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994).

²³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

²⁴ Stephen Palmquist, *Kant and Mysticism: Critique as the Experience of Baring All in Reason's Light* (New York: Lexington Books, 2019), p. 74.

²⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014), 165.

experience of pleasure and disgust that arise in finitude, “results from an awareness that we have powers of reason that are *not dependent on sensation, but that legislate over sense. The sublime thus displays both the limitations of sense experience...and the power of our mind.*”²⁶ In short, and to return to a key theme of Kant’s work noted above, Kant ‘found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith;’ that is, ingredient to his system is the recognition that human knowledge is always already limited by its finite capacities. However, those finite capacities exceed themselves, imminently, and suggest an excess that perceptually emerges from the recesses of subjective experience.²⁷ But, whereas Kant conceptualized the economy whereby this excess was revealed via epistemic tensions and restraints, i.e., our inability to know noumenal and metaphysical matters is an epistemic limitation, it was Hegel’s ontologization of this epistemic gap that would greatly impact the development of Continental philosophy.

Kant’s project was fundamentally rational in focus. He aimed at providing guardrails around that data which could be construed as knowable (phenomenal) and that data which escaped rational knowability (noumenal). He pushed the unknowable elements of thought beyond the scope of experience, making its unknowable limits a signifier of human limitation. In contrast, Hegel argued that this unknowable element is constitutive of human experience as such.²⁸ Hegel’s system understood human experience to be fundamentally developmental. This developmental scheme sees human experience and understanding as subordinate to the historical processes that gives rise to said experiences. For Hegel, human consciousness changes in history as a consequence of its relationship to other external phenomena and one’s internal ideas.²⁹ This change is facilitated by Hegel’s dialectal scheme; here, one confronts experience insofar as it presents itself to

²⁶ Audi, 886 (emphasis added).

²⁷ Merritt, 4.

²⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 27.

²⁹ Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 118-120.

consciousness, that presentation when/if it is met with a 'contradiction' or tension discovered in experience, problematizes the original presentation and thus establishes a contradiction between what was expected and what actually showed itself.³⁰ This tension is reconciled by incorporating the original tensions noted, but transcending those tensions via an awareness of a higher unity.³¹ Such a dynamic undergirds the force by which social, political, ideational, and historical change occurs for Hegel. Importantly, negative moments in thought, i.e., the errors, tensions, and contradictions observed in experience, are understood as being constitutive of experience itself and indeed of our understanding of experience.³² Thus, unlike Kant, who sought clarity on the limits of human understanding, Hegel saw those limits as themselves constitutive of human understanding.

The synthesis that Hegel's system aims at evidencing, is a synthesis between the subject that knows and object that is known.³³ This synthesis is a higher order unity that Hegel understood to signify absolute knowledge.³⁴ In absolute knowledge, the distinctions observed in phenomenal experience are resolved—the outcome of which is a conceptual unity of subject-object.³⁵ Hence, moments of misunderstanding and epistemic error are 'true' insofar as they add to or make possible

³⁰ Ibid., 81-82.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 199-201.

³³ The language of 'synthesis' or 'higher synthesis' to describe Hegel's system has been challenged by modern scholarship. In part, this rejection is grounded in the claim that Hegel himself did not use the 'thesis-antithesis-synthesis' triad in his own writing (M. J. Inwood, *Hegel* (London: Routledge, 1999), 550-551). However, as Inwood argues, although Hegel did not make overt use of the term synthesis or thesis/antithesis "it is not obvious that the use of these words misrepresents his intentions" (Inwood, *Hegel*, 551). Moreover, and more important to the present study, in Caputo's lectures on Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, he makes repeated and favourable use of the more classic thesis-antithesis-synthesis model (e.g., John Caputo, '09-08-09 Hegel Philosophy of Religion 2.mp3,' from JohnDCaputo.com, mp3 file). As such, I will make use of the language 'synthesis' in this analysis to characterize Hegel's project.

³⁴ Caputo also uses this thesis-antithesis-synthesis model when teaching Hegel's philosophy of religion (Caputo, 09-08-09 Hegel Philosophy of Religion, 36:50-37:10). But he uses this model with some caution, as he notes when discussing the use of the triad to make sense of Hegel's system, it "routinizes and programs" Hegel's system – it makes it "mechanical" (Ibid.). Despite these reservations, Caputo argues that at base, this is how Hegel understood his own system and how the immediate followers of Hegel understood his system.

³⁵ Inwood, *Hegel Dictionary*, 27.

higher degrees of development—a sort of, as it were, Hegelian *felix culpa*. In short, in Hegel's system, finite error is constitutive of self-knowledge.³⁶ One outcome of this position is a positive evaluation of, for example, religious claims.³⁷ Whereas Kant understood religious claims regarding the reality of metaphysical entities to be largely error-ridden, Hegel argued that the (potential) errors encapsulated in religious claims are *necessary* to components of absolute knowledge and thus of human experience and history. This shift in emphasis brought on by Hegel, what Caputo characterizes as the first post-modern critique of modern rationality,³⁸ understands the creative output achieved through religious imagery and ideals as productive moments in the unfolding of human experience.

Hegel's account of absolute knowledge was compelled by a force (*Geist*) which animates the dialectical process as it seeks actualization beyond that which presents itself. This higher unity, in which distinctions like subject and object are overcome historically, is discernible in a variety of cultural manifestations, e.g., art, philosophy, politics, but its highest synthesis occurs in religion—specifically, as Caputo notes, in the Christian religion. In Christianity, especially in its account of the incarnation, an absolute reconciliation of finite and infinite impulses occurs.³⁹ Importantly, however, it is not Christ-as-fact that interests Hegel so much as the representational significance of the Christ image on human consciousness. These representations (*Vorstellungen*) are treated by Hegel as productive moments in the life of human consciousness.⁴⁰ In these representations are contained moments of human consciousness encapsulated in, e.g., artistic, philosophical, or theological form.⁴¹ In Christianity is given the highest representation in the

³⁶ Ibid., 78; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Arnold V Miller, and J. N Findlay, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 55.

³⁷ Inwood, *Hegel Dictionary*, 256.

³⁸ *IoG*, 102.

³⁹ Martin De Nys, *Hegel and Theology* (London: Continuum International Pub. Group, 2009), 54.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 85.

⁴¹ Ibid., 86.

imagery of Christ whose incarnation signals a unity of the transcendent and the finite; it is a moment in the history of human experience in which tensions or contradictions between God and the world, are erased.⁴² These themes and issues will be returned to below when we analyse Caputo's use of Hegel's *Vorstellungen*. Caputo, we will see, treats all religious imagery via Hegel's *Vorstellungen* model.⁴³ However, Caputo demythologizes Hegel's *Vorstellungen* model of any metaphysical force or absolute *Geist*. Understanding *how* and *why* Caputo does this is key to understanding his mystical element.

The influence of Hegel's thought on the Continental tradition will be unpacked more thoroughly in our discussion of Caputo. As we will see with Caputo, Hegel is a thinker that contemporary Continental philosophers cannot but engage with—his developmental scheme finds, in both lucid and irregular aspects of thought, important moments in understanding human experience. Mysticism for Hegel, as for example his readings of Eckhart⁴⁴ and Boehme⁴⁵ suggest, provides an example of the irregular development of thought. These irregularities, unlike for Kant, are understood by Hegel to be constitutive or productive moments in the life of thought. And although Hegel is suspicious of the desire for unity that undergirds mystical thought, he nonetheless finds in its written output moments in the history of human experience that (inadequately) sought unity with the absolute—a desire which, as Cyril O'Regan has noted, suggests Hegel's underlying continuity, even if qualified, with the mystical tradition.⁴⁶ What I want to stress here is the underlying appreciation for the inoperative, the negative, and the

⁴² Ibid., 89.

⁴³ Indeed, in Caputo's reading, Hegel's account of the Absolute Spirit "is itself another *Vorstellungen*" (Caputo, 09-08-09 *Hegel Philosophy of Religion*, 29:40-29:45).

⁴⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, and Peter C Hodgson, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, I: The Lectures of 1824* (Oxford University Press, UK, 2008), 347-348.

⁴⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, Peter C Hodgson, and Robert F Brown, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 431, 435-436.

⁴⁶ Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 250.

irrational, as themselves constitutive of thought as such.⁴⁷ This assumption regarding the productive space of negativity on thought and experience informs how Continental theorists like Caputo have themselves engaged religion and religious thought—whether negatively or positively. Two philosophically motivated thinkers whose views on religion also impacted how the Continental tradition understood Christianity and indeed its relationship to philosophy more broadly, were Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Unpacking their claims regarding the status of ‘the religious’ in modernity will help clarify Caputo’s views on religion and indeed the mystical.

While Kant limited human understanding to make room for faith, and Hegel expanded human experience to include its activities as constitutive moments of the infinite, Kierkegaard, for Caputo, marks “the beginning of the ‘end of metaphysics.’”⁴⁸ By metaphysics, here, Caputo means that Kierkegaard’s attacks on religion was an attack on the view of religion as proffered by philosophers like Kant and Hegel. In their work, Christianity provided either ethical clarity (Kant), or insight into an absolute knowing that pointed, as Caputo will argue, beyond certain forms of Christian revelation (Hegel).⁴⁹ For both, human experience was subordinated to systems, logics, and truths that made of one’s life a mere case in a universal moment. In short, this world, and our individual experiences and struggles in this world, is the focus of Kierkegaard’s ‘philosophy,’ not the pursuit of objective claims and absolute assertions. The outcome of this focus has been termed existentialism and, along with phenomenology, is formative to the development of Continental thought.⁵⁰ Outcomes of this finite and experiential focus can be seen in Kierkegaard’s discussion of angst or dread. In works like *Fear and Trembling*, the story of the binding of Isaac from *Genesis*

⁴⁷ De Nys, 35, 88, 92.

⁴⁸ John Caputo, (ed.), *The Religious* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), 1.

⁴⁹ To be clear, as Caputo argues in his lectures on Hegel’s *Philosophy of Religion*, the “outer form” of Christianity as shown in its imaginative stories (i.e., *Vorstellung*) are what is ultimately overcome. These are mere finite representations of an “inner divine content”, which, for Hegel, is ultimately overcome by philosophy in *Denken* (see: 09-08-09 Hegel Philosophy of Religion 2. Mp3 lectures, 2:31:00-2:40:00).

⁵⁰ Critchley, 29.

is reimagined to highlight the emotional distress of the characters; to heighten the moments of decision, faith, and commitment displayed in that story.⁵¹ Of importance, for our purposes, is that Kierkegaard's focus is not on the truths of faith, philosophy, or the ethical—he is not turning his attention to emotional themes to evidence objectively true statements. Instead, Kierkegaard stresses that momentary decisions made now, in this moment (*Augenblick*), *in life*, demand a response grounded not in surety and confidence, but in risk and faith. In risk is opened up a feeling of existential awareness regarding one's capacity, one's freedom, to act now.⁵² For Kierkegaard, this choice, or decision, to passionately follow one moment, event, or person, reveals the deeply personal and subjective side of our lived experience. This focus on the subjective, rather than the universal, has had a dramatic impact on the development of Continental philosophy and Caputo's project more specifically.

A host of themes and issues from Kierkegaard's corpus could be drawn on to indicate his influence on the development of Continental thought. Three key themes, though, are his leap of faith thematic, his appreciation of irony, and his critique of Hegel. I want to briefly unpack these issues before moving on to Nietzsche.

Kierkegaard's focus on subjective experience, as is famously known, needs to be understood vis-à-vis the universal concerns of thinkers such as Hegel.⁵³ In Hegel's project, particularity and/or subjectivity is reduced to a moment in a larger and more significant universal process. Consequently, subjective experience—its import and meaning—is subordinated by Hegel as an instance in a larger whole within which its immediate concerns are denied significance. In

⁵¹ Søren Kierkegaard, and Alastair Hannay, *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric by Johannes De Silentio* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 44-48.

⁵² Cyril O'Regan, "The Rule of Chaos and the Perturbation of Love", in *Kierkegaard and Christian Faith*, Paul Henry Martens (ed) (Waco, Texas: Baylor U.P., 2016), 139, 145, 147.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 138.

what will become central to thinkers like Derrida and Caputo who follows him, Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel opened up a focus on the importance of the particular and the unprogrammable for the Continental tradition. To indicate or stress this subjective and non-programmable theme, Kierkegaard turns to religious themes like faith and argues that faith—as indicated by examples such as Abraham in the *Akedah*—signifies a non-rational commitment to a non-objectively known reality.⁵⁴ For Kierkegaard, human experience is beset with unknowns and the unknowable; philosophical and religious *formulae* domesticate these unknowns. In figures like Abraham, we see the productive role that faith provides—it demands of us a decision *in this moment* (*Augenblick*)—that is irreducibly my own act.⁵⁵ For Kierkegaard, and this is the key movement that makes his thought existential, to take the leap of faith without an appeal to systems and systematisers is to confront the reality of individual freedom. We are, for him, free in every moment to decide to act or not to act.

Finally, we should note Kierkegaard's non-systematic writing style. This is especially important to help understand Caputo's own writing style and approach to philosophy. Indeed, not unlike Kierkegaard, Caputo too writes in pseudonyms, uses the comedic and the ironic throughout his writings, and seeks not the resolution of paradoxes in his writing, but their amplification. In part, this approach reflects Kierkegaard's suspicion of logic, systems, and the demands of totalization. In part, this approach reflects what it is that Kierkegaard is trying to show his readers: truth is not the consequence of an orderly unfolding, but emerges out of a struggle with the angsts induced by the experience of one's lived freedom which always already accompanies finite and factual experience.⁵⁶ This approach is evidenced in his ironic approach to writing in which,

⁵⁴ O'Regan, "The Rule of Chaos and the Perturbation of Love", 136-137.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 142, 146.

⁵⁶ Edward F. Mooney, "Pseudonyms and 'Style'," in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, John Lippitt, and George Pattison (eds.) (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford U.P., 2013), 203-204.

following Socrates, the ironic use of ignorance is intended to lead one's interlocuter to a deeper understanding of said topic.⁵⁷

Kierkegaard though was not alone in the approach to philosophy that he took and the style of writing he adopted—indeed, he represents a broader intellectual development in Europe at that time. Perhaps the most prominent example of these thinkers is Friedrich Nietzsche. Along with Hegel and Heidegger, Nietzsche's influence on the development of Continental Philosophy is central. His disdain for systematization, his appeal to the irrational, and his rejection of religious dogma as a source for human guidance and understanding, continue to organize the aims and suppositions of Continental philosophy. Indeed, and unlike Kierkegaard who anchored his critiques and claims within a fundamentally theological set of assumptions concerning the reality and vitality offered by Christianity, Nietzsche's thought was aggressively anti-theological. But, and perhaps more importantly, Nietzsche's project provided the most robust critique of truth in European philosophy. For our purposes, I want to focus on two consequences or outcomes of Nietzsche's' criticism of truth from his *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* (1873)—both foci represent the major uses of Nietzsche by Caputo. In these claims, and not unlike Kant, Nietzsche found it necessary to show the limits of reason, but not, needless to say, to make room for religious faith. Instead, Nietzsche aimed to show the impossibility of that which faith clings to: God, order, and eternal life.

For Nietzsche, there is no *das Jenseits*, no yonder, to which human thought can appeal in order to justify or legitimize its experience. Instead, humans advance truth claims for biological and psychological purposes—they are comforting illusions. "What then," he writes, "is truth?",

A moveable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphism: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and

⁵⁷ Ibid., 208-209.

binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.⁵⁸

An underlying drive, or motivating will, compels truths' advancement. This assertion is pivotal to the development of post-modern thought as, at its core, this claim denies that truth is 'true' insofar as it does not signify anything absolute. Instead, there is a sort of contextual or accidental nature to truth; we have deluded ourselves into thinking that these truths are anything more than mere perspectively generated willful illusions.⁵⁹ These illusions are compelled biologically through our individual will, as well as collectively through language.

For Nietzsche, language is something like a tool that acts as a buffer between the world and the subject—it facilitates our ability to grasp and understand external reality. However, language has rules of its own; these rules shape and order its output.⁶⁰ Consequently, we should be suspicious of any claim to truth, insofar as a host of linguistic, biological, and contextual factors shape its output. That is, unlike Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard, Nietzsche's analysis challenges the very notion of reason and logic or truth as objective by problematizing the finite conditions of possibility within which these issues are advanced.⁶¹ In short, by indicating the complex intersection of finite expressions wherein truth is expressed and understood, he relativizes truth, making it a mere species of finitude.

But Nietzsche does more than critique truth's claim to permanence by contextualizing its expression. More dramatically, he critiques the claim that an absolute or eternal presence sustains

⁵⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense", in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), 84.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 85.

⁶¹ Ibid.

its assertions. A passage which indicates this temporal claim is one that Caputo will use to great extent throughout his writing career.⁶² Nietzsche writes,

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of the universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of 'world history,' but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die.⁶³

Nietzsche, here, expresses the absurdity of assuming 'truth as eternal' when contextualized against the fleeting nature of earthly experience. The outcome, for Nietzsche, was a negation of a worldview premised on the eternality of God as the sustaining ground of truth. In short, Nietzsche deconstructed truth's claim to eternality. From this perspective is given his famous pronouncement that God is Dead, a claim which rests on the recognition that modern scientific thought and secular claims make the traditional forms of truth claims and meaning-making generated by religion obsolete.⁶⁴ The desire to reevaluate our moral and philosophical systems as a consequence of the modern world and its discoveries directly leads to thinkers like Caputo and works of his like *AE*—themes from which will be discussed below. Now, however, I want to turn more specifically to Continental thought in the 20th century by starting with Husserl and Heidegger.

The full relevance of Husserl and Heidegger's impact on Caputo will be discussed in greater detail as this analysis develops. Here I simply want to situate the status of these two thinkers' claims in reference to the discussion above, to help clarify the direction of contemporary Continental Philosophy that I am tracing. For Caputo, Continental Philosophy, as it is understood currently, begins with Husserl.⁶⁵ His phenomenological approach, itself an outgrowth of Kant's

⁶² *CaC*, 176.

⁶³ Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, 79.

⁶⁴ For Nietzsche's engagement with scientific thought, see: Thomas H Brobjer, 'Nietzsche's Reading and Knowledge of Natural Science: An Overview', in *Nietzsche and Science*, Gregory Moore, and Thomas H Brobjer (eds) (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016).

⁶⁵ Caputo, *Lecture 13*, 16:11-15

phenomenal/noumenal distinction, lay the groundwork upon which most thinkers in the Continental tradition work—either in rejection of, or conformity with, the basic axioms of his system.⁶⁶ The term phenomenology for Husserl refers to the study of those experiences that present themselves in experience. It maps, details, and evidences those phenomena as they appear to subjective consciousness. And not unlike Kant's limitation of reason 'to make room for faith,' Husserl's project is also marked by a desire for limits and reductions as a means to make more robust claims about experience. For example, Husserl argues that phenomenological analysis begins by first bracketing, i.e., the *epochē*, one's preconceived knowledge about the world to attend only to those things that directly present themselves to consciousness.⁶⁷ This phenomenological reduction is itself premised on an assumption regarding the nature and aim of consciousness, i.e., its intentional goals. Indeed, *the* key axiom of phenomenological thought is that 'consciousness is, consciousness of' or, consciousness is fundamentally a goal-oriented act, it intends toward objects with the aim of understanding said object.⁶⁸ Via the reduction, Husserl argued that the phenomenologist could identify those characteristics deemed non-essential to the phenomenon under analysis, and those features deemed essential.⁶⁹ We will return to Husserl's account of the reduction and intentionality in chapter 6 and 7. I will argue that Caputo's mystical element is itself haunted by this desire for a reduction, that is, to minimize one sphere of understanding, judgment, and/or intentionality so as to maximize the awareness of another sphere. Consequently, I argue that ingredient to Caputo's account of the mystical element carries with it an assumption regarding the suspension of intentional desire to inculcate something like an opening to a radical acceptance of things that Caputo explores via Eckhart's notion of *Gelassenheit*.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Burt C Hopkins, *The Philosophy of Husserl* (London England: Routledge, 2014), 110.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 116.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 115.

Pivotal to Husserl's influence is less his specific phenomenological claims than it is the latter responses to Husserl by thinkers in the Continental tradition. The first thinker that critically responds to Husserl is Heidegger. Caputo identifies Heidegger's first major criticism of Husserl as a key moment in the development of Continental thought,⁷⁰ specifically Heidegger's rejection of Husserl's assertion regarding the possibility of the phenomenological reduction.⁷¹ Heidegger argued, against Husserl, that we cannot bracket the natural attitude because we cannot bracket our own situated contextual *Sitz im Leben*. We cannot, as it were, artificially remove our perspectival position when reflecting on the world as *we are always already implicated in a perspective that cannot of itself be neutralized*.⁷² Indeed, the very premise upon which intentional neutralization initiates, according to Heidegger, necessarily negates the possibility of neutralization. Heidegger reasoned that the presupposition regarding the possibility of a neutral perspective carries a non-neutral claim, i.e., a claim about the capacity of consciousness to neutrally describe the world.⁷³ For Heidegger, then, and here showing the influence of Hegel, we are always already implicated within a host of presuppositions which obscure any attempt at neutrality. This basic claim concerning the irreducibly constituted or constructed nature of experience and consciousness has had a dramatic impact on the development of post-modern thought.

However, it was in Heidegger's ontological turn and indeed the hermeneutic turn that his influence on Continental thought is most evidenced. In the ontological turn, which can also be seen in his early work as the hermeneutics of facticity, Heidegger sought, Caputo writes, "to trace the genesis of logical categories back to the 'facticity' of 'life,' in contrast to the pure logical

⁷⁰ See: John Caputo, "Gadamer 2," from *Johndcaputo.com*, mp3, 1:55:50-1:56:51.

⁷¹ John D. Caputo, "Husserl, Heidegger and the Question of a 'Hermeneutic' Phenomenology," *Husserl Studies* 1, no. 1 (1984): 177.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 176.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 158. It should be noted that although Caputo argues that Heidegger's thought proceeds via critique of the 'presuppositionless' assumptions of Husserl's thought, his thesis in the article here being cited, seeks to complicate that basic model.

foundation of meaning and the categories he had previously defended under the influence of Husserl and Scholastic logic.”⁷⁴ Two suppositions guide this turn. First, is the attention that Heidegger wants to give to human existence *in* existence; of an analysis of the entity *Dasein* which names “the event or happening of the world’s manifestness, so that as soon as there is a being like *Dasein*, there is (*es gibt*) a world.”⁷⁵ *Dasein* is a being whose nature or key characteristic is concern for itself. And following thinkers like Kierkegaard, Heidegger argued that analysis of *Dasein* was an analysis of those active moments of decision in which one succeeds—or indeed fails—to act authentically as oneself *in* the world.⁷⁶ The consequence of this approach was a focus on the everyday factual experience of *Dasein* to gain an appreciation of the lifeworld (Being) within which these decisions unfold. Heidegger’s task was to peel back the layers of historically accumulated decisions and experiences that compose *Dasein* to get a clearer understanding of ever-elusive Being itself.⁷⁷ However, and second, this approach carries a fundamentally historical supposition: to understand *Dasein*, and thus Being, one needs to understand those historical developments which have obscured *Dasein* and their experience of the world, and those historical developments which have clarified or revealed truths about *Dasein* and indeed of Being. To do this, Heidegger’s focus falls on religion and Christianity more broadly and, as was noted in the introduction to this study, on mysticism more specifically. We will unpack this focus below when we examine Caputo’s engagement with Heidegger in greater detail. What is important here, however, is that Heidegger turns his focus to religious matters to gain clarity on philosophical issues. This historical focus is compelled by what Heidegger will call a *Destruktion*. A destruction,

⁷⁴ John Caputo, “Martin Heidegger”, in *John D. Caputo: The Collected Philosophical and Theological Papers*, v.3, ed. Eric Weislogel (Bolton, ON: John D. Caputo Archives, 2021), 41.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

Caputo writes, “does not destroy but breaks through to the originary factual experiences from which the text arises.”⁷⁸ An outcome of this historical and hermeneutical focus is a stress not on history as a sequence of static events, but on history as a sequence of existentially consequential moments. Hence, as Caputo observes, when “Lecturing on the phenomenology of religion, Heidegger analyzed the temporality of the *Parousia* in Paul’s letters to the *Thessalonians*. The ‘second coming of Christ’ as not a ‘when’ to be calculated but a ‘how’ to be lived; not a matter of reckoning a definite time in the future, but of being ready, existentially transformed and radically open to an indefinite possibility that must be preserved in its indefiniteness.”⁷⁹ This existential focus of Heidegger’s, in which historical events and moments are understood as moments of self-reflection regarding one’s experience more broadly, and one’s experience towards death in particular, shaped Heidegger’s hermeneutical focus—and indeed is the impetus for Heidegger’s latter development (*kehre*) from the 1950s onwards.

Consequent from Heidegger’s focus on religious matters was the high valuation he ascribed to religious thinkers like St. Augustine and Meister Eckhart. Assertions like “Our heart is restless until it rests in you” or “What am I to you...?”⁸⁰ that Augustine voices at the start of the *Confessions* are understood by Heidegger to reveal factual moments of lived experience in angst that arise in the subject that extend past the subject matter itself. In other words, Augustine’s statements reveal more than clues about the *Confessions*, Augustine himself, and indeed Christian theology more broadly.⁸¹ Heidegger thus *destroys* or *deconstructs* the original meaning of the text from its initial context and interprets its claims within the history of the unfolding of *Dasein* and

⁷⁸ Ibid., 43.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 42.

⁸⁰ Augustine, and Henry Chadwick, *Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3, 5.

⁸¹ John Caputo, “Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)”, in *John D. Caputo: The Collected Philosophical and Theological Papers*, v.3, ed. Eric Weislogel (Bolton, ON: John D. Caputo Archives, 2021), 57.

indeed of *Dasein*'s reflection on Being more broadly. The particular philosophical claims are less important at this point, as indeed a number of these themes will be discussed when analyzing Caputo. What I want to stress here, instead, is how Heidegger's approach to philosophy attends to religious texts and authors in order to supplement his philosophical insights.⁸² Like Caputo who follows him, Heidegger translated ideas that he found in the work of thinkers like Augustine into his own existential and hermeneutical concerns. He thus finds productive the aims and outcomes of religious and indeed mystical texts insofar as those aims and outcomes reveal something about experience and Being more broadly. This latter element, the disclosure of Being as a consequence of Heidegger's analysis, is a key element of Heidegger's that thinkers like Caputo reject. Indeed, Caputo's first major publication, *DH*, wrestles with this complicated legacy of Heidegger. And although Caputo rejects what he takes to be Heidegger's teleological suppositions, we will see as this study develops that he follows Heidegger's approach to religious texts, ideas, and authors as productive spaces to think through philosophical tensions in modernity.

The history of Continental philosophy post-Heidegger is complex and varied, mapping its full development escapes the current analysis. With that said, I want to conclude this section by first looking at the work of Jacques Derrida, a thinker of vast importance both to Caputo and Continental philosophy more generally. Next, I turn to Emmanuel Levinas and unpack his account of the Other. I will end by looking at some more recent developments in Continental philosophy of religion with a brief consideration of contemporary writers that have impacted Caputo's work: Jean-Luc Marion and Slavoj Žižek.

It would be hard to overstate the influence of Derrida on Continental philosophy—especially Continental philosophy as it developed within a North American context. Derrida's

⁸² *Ibid.*, 55.

project is a perfect representation of Caputo's claim that Continental philosophy develops out of a response to Husserl, as can be seen in his 1967 'Speech and Phenomena' essay or his 1962 *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*. A key issue raised by Derrida concerns the status of presence that he argues is an uncritical assumption of Husserl's project which, when examined via his post-structuralist assumptions, reveals a problem in Husserl's system. In a manner not unlike Heidegger's criticism of Husserl's *epochē*, in which he denied the assumed neutrality of the phenomenological researcher that Husserl's system supposes, Derrida disrupts Husserl's notion of a supposed "living-present" moment.⁸³ This moment, for Husserl, carried a sort of absolute ground for the phenomenological researcher in that there was no beyond or behind this moment—it was a space of immediate *presence* for Husserl's phenomenological project.⁸⁴ Derrida's project initiates as a critique of the assumption of such immediacy. For Derrida, as will be seen in my discussion of Caputo on Derrida in chapter 5 and 6, consciousness and experience are always already marked by an iterative process. As such, there is no pure presence that a phenomenological analysis can yield; instead, presence is a *consequence* of an underlying differential matrix. For Derrida, every presence—phenomenological, textual, political, theological, etc.—is marked by the trace of an absent or deferred past. Consequently, any perceived experience of pure meaning, presence, or absolutes are, more fully understood, representative of an underlying play of differences that is experientially irreducible.⁸⁵

The above themes represent many of Derrida's early claims. We will see below the impact they had on Caputo's project. But Derrida's later writings, in which religious and theological themes are explored, are themselves key to understanding the development of a thinker like

⁸³ Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, ed. and trans. John P. Leavy (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 136-137.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 137-139.

⁸⁵ Steven Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 41.

Caputo. Derrida, not unlike Heidegger, finds in religious texts and themes productive and challenging insights that, in short, confirm or signal something valid about his philosophical concerns.⁸⁶ One religious theme is of particular importance here: hospitality.

For Derrida, the idea of hospitality as expressed in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, is marked by an internal binary whose ultimate resolution is not the affirmation of one side of the binary against the other, but a recognition of the element of responsibility that accompanies hospitality.⁸⁷ Echoing Heidegger's *Destruktion*, and via his own Deconstructive approach, Derrida traces the origin of hospitality to its Indo-European roots, *hos*.⁸⁸ When encountering the stranger, two basic responses are possible: one can receive the stranger with *hostility*, rejecting their encroachment, or one can receive them with *hospitality* and accept them.⁸⁹ However, the iterative nature of Derrida's thought resists a simple affirmation of, e.g., an ethics of pure hospitality. This is because once hospitality is subordinated to a system of welcoming, it enters into an economy of exchange in which the hospitality that is given to the stranger is understood to result in an outcome of reciprocity; the one welcomed now *owes* the welcomer, they are indebted to them. In contrast, Derrida's aim is to evidence the non-exchange-oriented nature of hospitality.⁹⁰ Here, hospitality is imaged as an openness to the other without conditions, a pure *gift* given without guardrails; that is, welcoming the other and that which their presence incites, is not a mappable or programmable encounter. The other whom I welcome might indeed be a threat. In this way, Derrida argues in a manner similar to Kierkegaard, our responsibility to the other is an infinite responsibility; it has no obvious or identifiable internal limit. Instead, our encounter with the other, with any other, is

⁸⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 147.

⁸⁸ *DiaN*, 109-110

⁸⁹ Ibid., 110.

⁹⁰ Shakespeare, 131.

an encounter with the recognition that to truly engage the other is to engage the possibility of risk that the other always already threatens, but to nonetheless confront that difference with openness and hospitality.⁹¹

Derrida's account of the other echoes the account of the other given by Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas, too, advocated an ethics of responsibility to the other. But whereas Derrida's project stresses the finite and immanent implications of an ethics of hospitality, Levinas's writing strives to articulate those same implications within a more classically evident theological model. For example, although Levinas's project emerges from a post-Husserlian, post-Heideggerian rejection of metaphysical thought in place of a focus on finite and factual experience, transcendent themes do emerge in his ethical assertions. The clearest example of this can be seen in his account of the human face, and its status within the larger economy of social relations. In the face of the other person, Levinas argues, is located an irreducible ethical call to respond to the needs or demands of that person.⁹² The face in Levinas's system, more specifically, is a sign of an imminent excess that resists totalization or categorization, while nonetheless signaling an obligation that demands of 'me' a responsibility that I must attend to.⁹³ The specifics of Levinas's claims regarding the face escape the present focus. What is important, instead, is the division Levinas's system advances and its theological implications. Indeed, and not unlike Kant's phenomenal/noumenal distinction, Levinas, too, makes a distinction between what phenomenally presents itself (the face) and its noumenal or excessive 'more than' manifestations (its 'call'). The face for Levinas is evental, it signals a relational dynamic that is irreducible to human experience. Likewise, Levinas's account of the face echoes mirrors the classical account of God; God, the absolute Other, is itself a name

⁹¹ Ibid., 136-137.

⁹² Nigel Zimmermann, *Levinas and Theology* (London, UK: T & T Clark, 2013), 40-41.

⁹³ Ibid.

for something to whom I am infinitely obliged, an infinite demand that is inexhaustible.⁹⁴ Otherwise stated, as Caputo will argue when following thinkers like Derrida and Levinas on these issues, our relation to the face, like our relation to God, is an impossible relation.⁹⁵ Its demand cannot be satiated. It is inexhaustible. As Caputo writes, with specific reference to the eventual nature of these claims,

The event begins by *the* impossible, as [Derrida] puts it. By that he means that the event is moved and driven by the desire for the *gift* beyond economy, for the justice beyond the law, for hospitality beyond proprietorship, for forgiveness beyond getting even, for the coming of the *tout autre* beyond the presence of the same, for what Levinas, picking up on an ancient tradition, called the excess of the *good* beyond being.⁹⁶

What needs to be stressed here, is that Levinas's and Derrida's—and indeed Caputo's—project is aimed at evidencing a 'beyond' or excess that is indicative *not* of a metaphysical yonder, but of finite reality itself. In classically derived theological and metaphysical formulas, here following Heidegger's approach, are found creative expressions of this finite excess.

For thinkers like Caputo, Levinas's project provides an opportunity to rethink classically derived notions of a transcendent Other in terms of the limitations of finitude. In appealing to these theologically derived claims, Levinas argues that finitude—i.e., matter, the body, our flesh—is permeated by an irreducible excess that is uncontainable. Consequently, in Levinas's work, the face is something like a secularized *khora Akhoraton*, a container of the uncontainable.⁹⁷ For thinkers like Caputo, Levinas's project provides an example of what it means to think the limitations of finitude via the resources of a metaphysical tradition that finds in finitude traces of a transcendent excess. Nevertheless, thinking such an excess signals only a moment in finitude.

⁹⁴ Zimmermann, 51.

⁹⁵ *WoG*, 111.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *IoG*, 51.

More will be discussed about Levinas's project below, especially as concerns the notion of the other with reference to Caputo's own ethical and anti-metaphysical claims. What Levinas and Derrida show, however, is the development of Kant's desire to place limits on understanding, and in their own way to make room for 'faith.' Whereas Kant relegated the transcendent or the noumenal to the limits of human knowledge and experience, these thinkers repeat that same claim while paradoxically infusing our material and social experience with an excess that looks strikingly similar to what Kant originally sought to deny. Stated otherwise, whereas Continental philosophy initiated via a suspicion of transcendent categories and our capacity to discern metaphysical truths, it culminated in thinkers who were suspicious of our accounts of finitude that failed to account for something 'more than' which always already accompanies our experience of finitude. In order to express this excessive 'more-than' element of finitude, thinkers like Derrida and Levinas draw on religious and theological thought and deploy these themes via the assumptions that galvanize phenomenological, existential, and deconstructive thought. In this way, parallels were drawn between apophatic theology and, for example, the aims of deconstructive thought. What I have wanted to stress here is not so much the conceptual overlap—although that is key—but how Continental philosophy developed with the aim of evidencing an unknown 'excess' that marks material reality; an excess that theological language, e.g., mystical discourse, was uniquely equipped to articulate. One outcome of this development, more atheist in tone, goes under the titular 'new materialism' in Continental thought and includes thinkers like Ray Brassier, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Graham Harman, and indeed Caputo himself. Another development, more Catholic in origin and in line with classical phenomenological analysis, can be seen in the work of Marion, Michel Henry, Emmanuel Falque, and Jean-Louis Chrétien. I will unpack some of Žižek's

key claims as representative of the first group, before moving on an analysis of Marion as a representative of the second development.

In his 2003 *The Puppet and the Dwarf* Žižek writes that the materialist and atheistic view that he subscribes to is *only* possible if one goes “through the Christian experience.”⁹⁸ For Žižek, this means that Christianity offers a conceptual strategy that allows one to overcome a tension that he deems ideologically problematic: the promise of a hoped for transcendent *beyond*. This ideological hope takes, for him, a problematic eschatological form in politics and religion.⁹⁹ For Žižek, there is no beyond where our hoped for afterlife expectations will be satiated. Paradoxically, however, Žižek argues that it is the recognition of this absence—a negation of a negation—that provides one with psychological relief.

Žižek’s philosophical account of Christian theology is interpreted culturally via Hegel’s philosophical system and psychoanalytically via Jacques Lacan. Hence, in Žižek’s reading, Christ’s cry of desperation from the Cross is a cry that reflects human experience more broadly, and modern human experience more specifically: God is dead, and we are alone in our isolation. On these claims, Žižek follows Hegel’s Christology.¹⁰⁰ According to Žižek, what dies on the Cross for Hegel is the invisible or hidden God beyond God—that is, of the abstracted assumption of an invisible order in the beyond.¹⁰¹ He writes:

Hegel’s underlying premise is that what dies on the Cross is not only God’s earthly representative-incarnation, but the God beyond itself; Christ is the “vanishing mediator” between the substantial transcendent God-in-itself and God qua virtual spiritual community.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 6.

⁹⁹ Haralambos Ventis, “Pacifist Pluralism Versus Militant Truth: Christianity at the Service of Revolution in the Work of Slavoj Žižek,” in *Slavoj Žižek and Christianity*, ed. Sotiris Mitralaxis (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 117.

¹⁰⁰ Slavoj Žižek, John Milbank, and Creston Davis, *The Monstrosity of Christ Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 28-31.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 29.

Žižek's analysis here cleaves close to Caputo's—not in its outcomes, but in its structure. Specifically, Žižek sees the Christian religion composed of representations, what Hegel would call *Vorstellungen*. These representations are phenomenologically given conscious moments that, when worked through and lived concretely, transform the subject.¹⁰³ We will see that Caputo's own views of religion follows, broadly, Hegel's representational (*Vorstellungen*) claims.

Religious representations, for Žižek, also provide opportunities for a contemporary critique of ideology.¹⁰⁴ Religion—like film, music, novels, art, etc.—is a creative expression of human thought that, when analyzed via a Žižekian methodology, can reveal unconscious or repressed ideological presuppositions. Žižek, then, follows a tradition of Continental thought that treats religious language, texts, and claims seriously. They are repositories of human experience that reveals *how* truth emerges, namely, for him, via a theory of the event. Žižek, following Alain Badiou, argues that Christian thought frames the truth that is revealed in the Bible as evental in structure.¹⁰⁵ Here, the truth of the Gospel, for example, is not an example of a correspondence theory of truth—i.e., the statements do not correspond with or accurately reflect objective facts in the world. Nor, to be clear, does Žižek offer a more postmodernist or constructivist notion of truth; as if the truth of the Gospel were based only on arbitrary and/or accidental historical developments and cultural assumptions. Instead, the Gospel's truth emerges as an event. *The* key example of this evental scheme is the event that the apostle Paul underwent in his Road to Damascus.¹⁰⁶ Paul, Acts tells us, on his journey to Damascus to persecute Christians, in a moment, underwent an experience

¹⁰³ Ibid., 79-80.

¹⁰⁴ Dionysios Skliris and Sotiris Mitralaxis, "The Slovenian and the Cross: Transcending Christianity's Perverse Core with Slavoj Žižek," in *Slavoj Žižek and Christianity*, ed. Sotiris Mitralaxis (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 19.

¹⁰⁵ For example, see Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 16-17.

of transformation which cemented his commitment to Christ.¹⁰⁷ Žižek abstracts from this theological claim, a general claim about what truth is and how it transforms us. Specifically, thinkers like Žižek argue that a truth event like the one Paul underwent is an event that galvanizes the subject and makes them responsible to the event.¹⁰⁸ It is in this evental moment, in which one takes responsibility for the truth being advanced, that compels Žižek's interest in religion. Like Badiou, Žižek wants to translate what he argues is the evental structure of religious thought into modern political action; he wants to repeat what he sees as the event of religious conversion and conviction, in his own Socialist and Communist ideals.

In short, Žižek too limits human understanding to make room for faith. The limits of human understanding for him are empirical and factual—the material world is all there is, we cannot think or have experiences devoid of material conditions. And while Žižek is certainly not making room for faith insofar as it is classically understood, he is, like all the thinkers noted above, trying to make room for the status of an 'excess' that always already accompanies cultural and social representations and experience. This is not an empirically derived excess, nor an excess evidenced by the light of reason, but instead speaks to an excess that emerges from the relationship between the object and the subject who finds in that object something of value that is not explicitly found in said object.¹⁰⁹ An example of this in secular terms can be as simple as a pen that one values for reasons 'more than' the value it has as a pragmatic writing tool; religiously, this excessive quality can be seen in the valuation of the biblical text itself—it is 'more than' a mere book insofar as it is believed to reveal truths not derivable from human experience itself.¹¹⁰ Although Caputo's use

¹⁰⁷ Acts 9:3-9.

¹⁰⁸ Slavoj Žižek, "Paul and the Truth Event", in *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology*, John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek, and Creston Davis (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 75-76.

¹⁰⁹ Lucy Bell, "Badiou," in *The Žižek Dictionary*, ed. Rex Butler (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2014), 11.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

of the event does not directly follow Žižek's we will see as this analysis develops Caputo's adherence to this basic Continental claim regarding the impact, influence, or consequence of these evental theories.

Whereas Žižek begins from an atheistic starting point, in which the death of God is the *sin qua non* of Christian thought, Marion is a Christian who sees confronting the perceived death of God to be a seminal *moment* for modern theology.¹¹¹ And unlike Žižek, whose analysis rejects the authority of revelation, Marion's philosophical project is embedded in a discourse wed to the necessity of revelation. Indeed, how revelation occurs and what revelation is, organizes much of Marion's output. Hence, in texts such as *God without Being* (1982), Marion unifies the Christian conception of revelation with the phenomenological notion of givenness to understand how God and the subject might be relationally imaged in modernity.¹¹²

In Marion's basic phenomenological scheme, he posits (a) an intentional subject whose consciousness aims at extrapolating information about the external world—i.e., 'consciousness is, consciousness of.' However, (b) the phenomena that the Marionian subject intends towards is "multidimensional" in the information it gives back to the intending subject in particular and the world in general.¹¹³ Hence, whereas a classical phenomenological perspective sought to map the relational dynamic between the intending subject and the given phenomenal object—a claim that presumes a correlational link between a discrete subject and object—Marion assumes far more plurality in the phenomenal object by stressing not correlation, but revelation.¹¹⁴ Marion, stated

¹¹¹ Tamsin Jones, *A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion: Apparent Darkness* (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 2011), p. 20.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 94.

¹¹³ Donald L. Wallenfang, "Aperture of Absence: Jean-Luc Marion on the God Who 'Is Not'," in Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher (eds), *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities* (Dordrecht, Germany: Springer, 2013), 863.

¹¹⁴ Or, as Caputo frames Marion's phenomenological approach, it wants to name "the formal possibility of an absolutely plenitudinous givenness exceeding any possible intention" (John D Caputo, "Apostles of the Impossible: On God and The Gift in Derrida and Marion," in *John D Caputo The Collected Philosophical and Theological Papers Volume 3: 1997-200 The Return of Religion*, ed. Eric Weislogel (Bolton, ON; John D. Caputo Archives, 2021) 140.

simply, argues that the multidirectional showings *given* by phenomena negates the primacy ascribed to the intending subject from earlier phenomenological accounts. One key consequence of this position is that the phenomenon *itself* comes to be imbued with an excessive nature—or, otherwise stated, the givenness of phenomena precedes and exceeds the intending subject. This excessive *revealing* quality he designates by the titular “saturated phenomena.”¹¹⁵

One division that Marion explores which helps to elucidate the above claims is between the icon and the idol. An idol is that object which arises from a perspective that assumes the unidirectionality of the intended object.¹¹⁶ As Donald Wallenfang writes, an idol “formed strictly according to human determination, acts not as a translucent mediator that discloses divine mystery, but as a mirror reflecting only the human gazer.”¹¹⁷ In contrast, the icon “does not result from a vision *but provokes one*.”¹¹⁸ The icon, then, speaks to the invisible “infinite depth” of the unrestrained givenness of an object.¹¹⁹ They signal the intricate givenness of a phenomena not bound by a perceptual directionality that presumes the priority of a knowing subject. In short, like a revelation, they reveal an ontological fullness in which the desire to give *precedes* (via the revelatory act) the desire to know.

Marion’s system rests on an appeal to the mystical claims of Pseudo-Dionysius—both the hyper-ousiatic and apophatic claims that derive from that system. Following Dionysius’s claim that what God *is* is that from which Being is given its ontological status,¹²⁰ Marion prioritizes God’s *giving* quality as primary to his nature. God *gives* the gift of Being.¹²¹ However, this gift arises from the loving quality of a God not bound by Being as such, but, rather, by the relationality

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 864.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 865.

¹¹⁸ Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 17.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 21.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 75.

¹²¹ Ibid.

inscribed in the 'distance' between finitude and the infinite.¹²² As, paradoxically, it is distance that functions as the condition of possibility wherein communion occurs.¹²³ By recognizing this distance, Marion further argues, one overcomes the problem of the idol in order to see God as icon. Here, God as a unidirectional object of the human gaze is negated. Rather, in the distance itself, God is engaged as a relational dynamic whose plural plenitude is known via the gift of *ἀγάπη*.¹²⁴ In short, communion is sought *with* God *as* relation, not *for* God *as* object.

Like Žižek, Marion's system assumes that objects are imbued with an excessive quality that galvanizes, shapes, and forms human experience. Unlike Žižek, Marion argues that this excess is indicative of a transcendent force that reveals itself in certain objects and events. The term that Marion uses to describe this excess is 'saturated;' he argues that phenomena like the Cross or Christ are saturated phenomena and that this saturation signals not a finite excess, but an infinite excess.¹²⁵ Marion's system also echoes a similar Kantian noumenal/phenomenal division in his idol/icon scheme. Whereas idols yield information via their directly perceptual phenomenological reality, icons reveal information via their capacity to reveal a hidden and unknown, though not unknowable, reality.¹²⁶ Marion's project thus argues that we must acknowledge certain limits of human understanding in order to accommodate or attend to modes of understanding that are premised, ultimately, upon faith claims.

4.2 – A 'Continental Approach to the Mystical.'

In the above I have provided a brief account of the development of the Continental philosophical tradition from Kant to Marion. I stressed that this tradition (a) began with Kant's delimitation of human understanding in order to make room for faith, and (b) attempted to account

¹²² Ibid., 107.

¹²³ Ibid., 169.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 111.

¹²⁵ Jones, 110-112.

¹²⁶ Marion, 22-24.

for notions of finite *excess* that did not rely upon metaphysical or transcendent ideals. In this way, we can see that thinking about religious matters and the status of metaphysical claims in modernity have been at the heart of the development of Continental philosophy. This focus on religious matters more broadly helps explain why Continental philosophers engage religious, theological, and mystical themes and ideas. As this tradition developed, from Hegel onward, these thinkers treated cultural and social forces like religion, not as producing right or wrong ideas but as producing forms of life, patterns of thought, and unconscious motivations. In short, religious thematics were understood to signify something deeply true about *human* experience. Hence, although these thinkers did not think religion was necessarily true in its metaphysical and theological speculations, it was nevertheless true insofar as it revealed something deeply true about the development of human thought and experience.

It was these general assumptions that provided the impetus for Continental thinkers to engage with mystical texts and authors and, as I will suggest, frame 'the mystical' in a profoundly divergent manner from other conceptualizations of mysticism in modernity. Space does not permit to unpack in detail how these thinkers each engage with mystical authors and texts. Instead, for this study, only evidencing Caputo's engagement with mysticism is my main concern. That being said, and from the above discussion, I want to evidence several major trends in the Continental approach to religious and mystical concerns that make it uniquely distinctive. Evidencing these approaches now will help clarify *how* Caputo engages mysticism, *why*, and *what* makes that engagement distinct from standard modes of analysis of the mystical in modern scholarship.

Let me begin by first acknowledging that there is no sufficient model that could account for the diversity and ambiguity of the thinkers expressed above. Even thinkers like Žižek and Marion, whose generational proximity should, one might presume, provide a locus by which to

more readily conceptualize how mystical thought has been organized in modernity. This is not the case. That said, despite these problems, it is my contention—here following thinkers like Woods, McGinn, and Nelstrop—that we advance in our understanding of the engagement of the mystical theological tradition if we formulate identifiably clear boundaries around scholarly modes of interpretation. The upshot of this claim is a heuristic that affords one possible way of understanding a conceptual and ideational movement in modernity—in this case, the engagement between Continental thinkers and the mystical theological traditions. Providing a map by which to understand this engagement and, indeed, to show one unintentional direction that this engagement has produced, is my aim. By unintentional, to be clear, I mean that the authors considered above do not see themselves as part of an interpretive school of mystical theology—or indeed of a specific religious tradition. With these above claims in mind, and in light of this chapter's analysis, I provide four unifying trends that I argue link the above thinkers in their interpretation of mystical thought, while also indicating the distinctiveness of this interpretive tradition from the aforementioned types provided by Nelstrop discussed in chapter 3.

The first key characterization that distinguishes a Continental approach from those approaches considered in chapter 3 is its emphasis on finitude. For every thinker discussed above, finitude is the starting point from which all thought begins and, for many, ends. The starting point of this finitudinal position is the recognition that embodied limitation is the ground of thought. Our physical limits, for example, death, circumscribe our thinking about finite experience. And, as was shown, for Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Žižek, and Marion, their engagement with religious themes resulted in a continual effort to stress both the limitations or impasses of experience and how experience always already goes beyond these limitations via an appeal to excess.

Another distinguishing characteristic is the parity with which the Continental tradition engages mystical and religious thinkers. Far from treating the epistemic and ontological claims of, for example, mystical theologians as mere imperfect accounts of a *real* world that would be made finally correct by modern analysis, these thinkers treat the claims and ideas of religious thinkers as obviously pertinent and valuable to modern experience.¹²⁷ Thus Caputo, we will see, takes Eckhart as seriously as he would any contemporary thinker. Hence another related component of the Continental approach to mysticism is that within mystical thought there is presumed to be a description of human individual and communal experience that, if thoroughly engaged, can shed light on these matters for the modern mind.

There is, third, within the Continental tradition an appeal to and indeed a desire for the transcendent. However, this is not a notion of the transcendent ‘beyond’ that we saw discussed in chapter 2. Instead, this transcendent beyond is given an immanentist veneer via an appeal to excess. Tracing these moments of excess, in which immanence goes beyond itself through itself and, indeed, back into itself, is a fundamental characteristic of many Continental philosophical projects.¹²⁸ It is a key claim of this study that when Continental thinkers read mystical texts, they are interpreting mystical language of transcendence to be speaking to an immanent and finite excess. A desire that is itself emergent from an angst concerning the perceived pitfalls of metaphysical discourse. Indeed, the language of excess is in many ways a translation of

¹²⁷ This affirmation of Medieval thought stands in stark contrast to the critique of this thought that compelled Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers. For them, Medieval thought was simply a failed attempt to understand the world.

¹²⁸ Colby Dickinson in his *Theology and Contemporary Continental Philosophy: The Centrality of a Negative Dialectic* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019) also argues that this characteristic is a defining quality of the theological output generated by Continental thinkers (Colby, pp. 69-96). Likewise, Marika Rose in her *A Theology of Failure: Žižek against Christian Innocence* (New York, NY: Fordham U.P., 2019) argues for a similar claim, specifically as it relates to Žižek. In her thesis, though, Žižek’s emphasis on the ‘gap’ or ‘excess’ constitutive in materiality though discussed in theology, is given the titular ‘failure.’ Additionally, this claim organizes much of the articles featured in David Lewin’s *Mystical Theology and Continental Philosophy: Interchange in the Wake of God* (New York: Routledge, 2017), a text that has been influential on the development of the present study.

metaphysical discourse into philosophical analysis filtered through the claims of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. It is this urge to articulate theories of finite excess that I claim chiefly compels the engagement with mystical thought by the Continental tradition.

Finally, I have stressed Kant's 'limitation of knowledge to make room for faith' as a sort of hermeneutical presupposition that has guided much of the epistemological, ontological, and indeed, anthropological assumptions of Continental thought. Although not denying the centrality of rational and empirical claims in philosophical discourse, this interpretive presupposition is that we cannot intuit beyond the finite sphere of human intuition.¹²⁹ But Kant's system also stressed the importance of *acting as if* God existed, assuming the reality of human freedom, and finally positing themes like immortality, all as regulative ideals necessary to human experience and flourishing. Evidencing why Kant made these specific arguments is not of concern here, what is key is the epistemic status granted to the unknown or unknowability of the transcendent as a necessarily *knowable* reality. Caputo works within a line of thinking that was developed by both theologians and Continental thinkers that wrote in the aftermath of Kant's critiques. Caputo, too, wants to make room for faith. The interpretive strategies offered by the Continental tradition, when applied to religious and mystical themes, authors, and texts, is how he accomplishes this.¹³⁰ Caputo's project, like contemporaries such as Marion and Žižek, sees the relationship between religion and secularity and reason and faith as far more porous than thinkers like Kant assumed. Evidencing the porous, back-and-forth relationship between the religious or 'the mystical' and secularity and reason, is a guiding leitmotif in the development of Continental philosophy—and indeed of Caputo's project.

¹²⁹ E.g., see Caputo on Derrida and Kant in: *PaT*, 90.

¹³⁰ *FoG*, 27.

From the above points, I make here a tentative definition of the Continental approach to mysticism:

A Continental approach to mysticism treats the mystical thinker contemporaneously by translating their ontologically and epistemologically rooted transcendent claims into a philosophical language that stresses finitude; these finitudinal assertions are grounded in a further claim regarding the excessive nature of material reality, this excess is suggestive of an indeterminate absent that is immanently present. The outcome of a Continental approach is thus a series of speculative claims concerning the nature of subjectivity, desire, culture, and, indeed, theology and religion abstracted from an interpretation of the mystic and their text.

This definition is far from perfect. However, in light of the above analysis, its preliminary outlines do indeed provide a schematic outline of the key issues that arose from the above study. I will return to this definition at the conclusion of this study as a way to think about Caputo's specific engagement with mysticism. I will argue that the Continental approach that I have outlined provides a useful hermeneutic for philosophers of religion and mystical studies who want to understand how and why it is that the Continental philosophical tradition is engaging with and producing analysis on the Christian mystical tradition.

Chapter 5 – John D. Caputo: Context

In what follows, I turn specifically to Caputo himself and unpack how and why Caputo draws so heavily on the Christian tradition, how themes from the Christian tradition have motivated his work, and what it means to say that Caputo engages the Christian mystical tradition in order to evidence his theological and philosophical claims. With Caputo we see the intimate relationship that exists between mystical thought and Continental claims made explicit. It is for this reason that Caputo is being considered in this thesis. His project characterizes the link between the Christian religion and the Continental philosophical tradition that I am tracing. The outcome of this analysis will serve to indicate what I argue is a unique type of mystical discourse that has arisen in modernity via the channels of Continental thinking. In Caputo's writing, I am arguing, we find a

distilled and clear portrayal of the significance of the religious, of Christianity, and of the mystical as articulated by a thinker steeped in the Continental philosophical tradition, and how specific conceptual norms or patterns from the Continental tradition shape Caputo's own 'mystical element'.

5.1 – A Restless Heart: Caputo, Catholicism, and the Ear of Tradition

I begin by charting three divergent yet overlapping areas of Caputo's development as a thinker: Caputo the philosopher, the theologian, and the academic. First and foremost, his is a theology shaped by Vatican II and the consequences that that event had on Catholic theology in the 20th century. He found, second, in the philosophy of Heidegger, Derrida, Levinas, and Gadamer, thinkers who allowed him to both critique and challenge Church orthodoxy and theology, while nonetheless allowing him to cleave closer to (he would argue) the *truths* of the Church, the tradition, and indeed the gospel. Caputo the scholar, third, is of less importance to my analysis as a whole; and yet, Caputo the religious studies scholar, is a role that cannot be ignored in this analysis. His is a project deeply grounded within a host of scholarly debates concerning the status of truth statements affirmed by the humanities in contrast to those affirmed by scientific analysis. This last theme, itself an echo of the *Naturwissenschaften/Geisteswissenschaften* debates that fueled Heidegger's and Gadamer's projects, have impacted the development of Caputo's understanding of religion as both an academic as well as a lived phenomenon.

In the early 1960's two events took place whose outcome had a dramatic impact on Caputo's development as a thinker. The first event is the Second Vatican Council held between 1962-1965. At that time, or rather just before it, Caputo was a member of the Catholic De La Salle brotherhood.¹ He had studied with them as a brother-in-training and as an aspiring theologian. It

¹ *HaH*, 25.

was during this time that Caputo was “introduced both to the mystics and the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas.”² This mix “of mysticism and metaphysics, and the task of exploring the borders between faith and philosophy” Caputo wrote years later, has “filled my head ever since.”³ However, the De La Salle order, a Catholic lay-based group, focused much of its energy on training educators. Caputo was dissatisfied with the potential results of this education. In part, it was the scarcity of philosophical education in this program that spurred his exit; Caputo wanted to study philosophy, the order wanted him to follow “the will of God as it is expressed for me by the will of my superiors.”⁴ In Vatican II Caputo found the impetus to leave the brotherhood and focus on philosophy.

An important outcome of Vatican II was that it decoupled Catholicism from several reforms and norms that had accumulated in the Church since the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Vatican II also challenged the dominance of Aquinas as *the* theologian of the Catholic Church. As Caputo notes in a 2020 article:

Before Vatican II, Catholic colleges were [...] insular institutions that served up a rigid regimen of Council of Trent theology and Neo-Scholastic philosophy. They enthusiastically embraced Leo XIII's call to return to St. Thomas in *Aeterni Patris*, which mistook philosophy for a branch of Catholic apologetics.⁵

A central outcome of this turn from Aquinas and the scholastic to modernity and modern thought was a shift to existential philosophy and historical criticism as ways to interpret, understand, and transmit the faith. Historians and theologians such as the Jesuit Fredrick Copleston and his *History of Philosophy* (1946-1975) series or Etienne Gilson and his work such as *A History of Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (1955), represented this shift of focus. These authors gave Caputo a wider

² Ibid, 24.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁵ John Caputo, ‘Continental Philosophy and American Catholics: Then, Now, and Tomorrow,’ in *The Catholic Reception of Continental Philosophy in North America*, ed. Gregory P Floyd, and Stephanie Rumpza (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 93.

appreciation of the nuance of theological thought by shedding light on the historical particularity of its ideas and thinkers.⁶ Aquinas's engagement with Aristotle, for example, was now contextualized in its historical milieu, the outcome being that Aquinas's Scholastic reading of the Stagirite was understood to come from a period that "was profoundly different from the Greek world of Aristotle, from whom Aquinas was separated by a millennium and a half, a pre-Christian culture, and the Latin translations of Aristotle that he used."⁷ In short, Aquinas the "timeless ahistorical master" voicing ahistorical truths of the Catholic tradition was recontextualized as being "a historically situated thirteenth-century thinker."⁸ Hence, Aquinas or Plato, far from being masters of a perennial truth, were now understood to signify irreducibly contextual and historical elements. A consequence of this shift—for some, it should be noted, not all—was a newfound stress on hermeneutical, existential, and phenomenological methodologies. These methodologies proved vital for thinkers like Caputo who responded positively to the post-Vatican II world.

On October 26th, 1962, fifteen days after the convening of Vatican II, the first meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP) was held.⁹ Although the proximity of the dates for these two events is accidental, the development of phenomenology and existentialism *was* spurred on by Catholic universities, journals, and theologians who were seeking ways to conceptualize classical theological themes in the new post-Vatican II intellectual climate. As Edward Baring argues in his *Converts to the Real: Catholicism and the Making of Continental Philosophy*, the spread of existentialist and phenomenological thought was compelled by its

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 94.

⁹ Ibid., 92.

perceived benefits for Catholic theology.¹⁰ Thinkers like Gabriel Marcel and Jacques Maritain, both influential on the young Caputo, signify this existential turn in Catholic thinking.¹¹

Broadly, existentialist thought provided the means for Catholic thinkers to engage secular matters, while nonetheless cleaving to a style of thinking that resisted a number of modern assumptions regarding the primacy of empiricism and rationality as the surest way of grounding truth claims. Writing in the echoes of Kierkegaard, analysis of themes like individual freedom suggested an always already persistent 'excess' whose finite experiential dimension could, when thought along Christian theological and hermeneutical lines, be made amenable to Catholic theology. These events are signs that indicate larger shifts in the intellectual climate of the time that would help shape Caputo's shift from a Catholic Brother to a University Professor. Indeed, Caputo would become a staple at SPEP meetings throughout the 80's and 90's—even being SPEP's president from 1983-85. Hence, following Vatican's II's shift from Scholastic themes, Catholic's like the young Caputo saw in non-Catholic or non-Christian writers, new means by which to engage the tensions of modernity. The ever-present need to think through issues like experience, identity, and feeling—all themes thoroughly explored by traditional Catholic theologians—were given new directions of inquiry via issues raised by thinkers as Husserl, Heidegger, and emerging French existentialist thinkers.

But what ultimately compelled Caputo to engage Continental thought, while nonetheless anchoring himself within the Catholic tradition of his religious formation, was his "taste for the Mystics."¹² In mystical authors Caputo found a space to re-image notions of the sacred around

¹⁰ Edward Baring, *Converts to the Real: Catholicism and the Making of Continental Philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard U.P., 2019), 1-3.

¹¹ See for example: John D. Caputo, "Marcel and Derrida: Christian Existentialism and the Genesis of Deconstruction," in *Living Existentialism: Essays in Honor of Thomas W. Busch*, ed. Joseph C. Berendzen and Gregory Hoskins (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 11-13.

¹² *HaH*, 23-44.

immanent and worldly themes, while simultaneously infusing the finite with an *excess* that points not 'beyond' to an infinite transcendent *ganz andere*, but to a depth dimension within finitude itself. The outcome of this lifelong focus and high estimation of the mystical has laid the groundwork for his own unique style of mystical thought that stresses above all else, finite themes. He mines the thought of writers as Eckhart, digs past the Neoplatonic architecture that props up his system, and finds a type of wisdom that he deploys in his own work so as to evidence his own philosophical and theological views. Eckhart's Neoplatonism privileges the recognition of the always already unifying connection that persists between God as *Gotttheit* and the subject. As we saw in chapter 2, terms like *Funklein*, a divine spark, are deployed by Eckhart to magnify his belief regarding the soul's relation to God—a magnification that occurs via deploying further notions like *Gelassenheit*. Eckhart, paradoxically, is a thinker who seeks to go beyond God, to 'be rid of God,' so as to get nearer to God. Negation is thus generative for Eckhart. Caputo's work echoes the 14th century Eckhart, but he translates this desire to let go of God via modern existential and indeed phenomenological perspectives. He thus repeats earlier writers such as Marcel and Maritain and their penchant for the existential and phenomenological but, as will be unpacked below, extends further the role of finitude in his own system than did these earlier writers.

What I want to stress is that it is via mystical texts, the theology they inspire, and the poetical and linguistic structures that form their writings, that Caputo found, paradoxically, the answers to the theological and philosophical tensions that galvanized his early thought. This paradoxical element forms from the tension of a thinker who took seriously the thought of religious mystics, whose aim was a hyper *ousiatic* force to which they yearn and from which they derive, to reimagine the tensions of modernity—specifically, a modernity devoid of this hyper-*ousiatic* image. In part, this is because Caputo's thought is best understood as centering not on Catholic

theology and/or Continental philosophy *as such*; rather, it centers on the space opened up between both systems as they wrestle with themes of immanence, finitude, the Other, and the unconditional in relation to the conditional. Mystics, for Caputo, think this in-between. Hence, Caputo is not trying to center in on one mode of thought, so much as he is trying to think with and alongside these various voices, the aim being to think the unthinkable that their thought seeks to voice. The mystic, for Caputo, is a thinker whose aim it is to make evident this unprethinkable ground, i.e., the space within which the fullness of God—of life—opens in and upon them. As Caputo notes, writing on these early tensions later in his life, “instead of *choosing* between the conditional and the unconditional, it is a matter of *living* between them. The mark of the human condition is to live *in the distance between the conditional and the unconditional*, to constantly negotiate between them.”¹³ Mysticism offers Caputo a style of thinking that allows him to constantly negotiate between the conditional of factual existence, and the unconditional ground within which the conditioned plays. Hence the mystical does not provide Caputo with glimpses into an “eternal life *but of living otherwise in this life*.”¹⁴ Caputo thus has a performative appreciation of the mystical. Their style of writing, their poetic impulses, their passion, and their thought, is repeated by Caputo; thus, it is not the event of mystical experience as a communion with the absolute but, rather, what is going on *in the living of the mystical element* that Caputo values. This evental repetition is key to Caputo’s engagement with mysticism and will be unpacked as this analysis develops.

In Continental philosophy Caputo heard an echo of the call he discerned in the mysticism of his Catholic upbringing. This time, however, it was filtered through the tensions and realities of modernity. In Levinas’s account of the depth of the face; Derrida’s insistence on the irreducibility and undecidability of language; Lyotard’s eschatological ponderings regarding the utter end of

¹³ *HaH*, 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 33 (emphasis added).

things in what Caputo will call “ruined time;” Gadamer’s hermeneutical engagement with the classic and with tradition in which Caputo too hears the call to productively engage a “past without a history;” Heidegger’s later mystical flourishes and his early framework of *Dasein* as a fallenness towards death both; in all these projects Caputo discerned a religious ‘element’ that, when thought alongside the impulses of Christian theology, gain greater clarity. Furthermore, Caputo’s lifelong admiration for mystical texts and authors gave him a further appreciation of the ways in which mystical theological claims were deployed by Continental thinkers. Caputo’s project thus weaves together the mystical elements of Continental philosophy and its ousiatic focus, with the mystical elements of Christian theology to produce his own distinct system.

To unpack Caputo’s system, I divide his project into: (a) philosophical, (b) hermeneutical, (c) theological, and (d) mystical. Caputo the philosopher, the hermeneut, and the theologian has received ample engagement in the secondary literature. Caputo as a mystic, or as one who engages the received tradition of mystical texts, is less explored. The task of the following analysis is to lend clarity to this element of Caputo’s thought. My objective is to show how, in Caputo himself, these ideational themes and conceptual tensions are worked out by one of the most important philosophers in North America over the last 50 years. The outcome will chart how the development of a pattern of thought, i.e., ‘the mystical,’ which spans the history of Western thought about subjectivity, freedom, and transcendence, has unfolded in modernity. Caputo is what Jim Kanaris calls an *enecstatic* thinker;¹⁵ he occupies the role of the insider, the outsider, and the space between both. He plays with tradition to think about the present, and hope for a future to-come. Caputo does not do this apologetically, i.e., to show the pristine state of Catholic, mystical, or Continental

¹⁵ Jim Kanaris, *Toward a Philosophy of Religious Studies: Enecstatic Explorations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2023), 33-34.

thought, but rather he does it with the scholar's eye for critical evaluation and the Protestant eye for destruction—what Tillich called the Protestant Principle.

But why is Caputo doing this? What instigates his analysis? In short, for Caputo, tradition demands interrogation, re-evaluation, transformation, and translation. This is not only an external demand but an internal one; traditions deconstruct for Caputo—their centers cannot hold, they fall apart. The task of thought for Caputo, which is best captured in mystical discourse, is to let things fall apart so that they might be picked up and put back together by new voices with new desires that hear in the call of tradition an echo of the very desire to engage tradition in the first place: to play with its structures to reveal as yet unthought and unexpressed presuppositions of said tradition. Indeed, as Caputo writes in the concluding chapter of *AE*, “The idea is not to deny our presuppositions but to unfold them with greater penetration, staying on the alert as best we can to the *ontocategories* that shape our thought, troubling ourselves about them and worrying them a lot.”¹⁶ Unpacking how the presumptions of ‘the mystical element’ impacted the shape of Caputo’s thought is the aim of what follows.

5.2 – Caputo: Major Texts

Before clarifying and unpacking the positions noted above, I want to provide a brief sketch of the major texts which Caputo has published. My aim is to provide a general account of Caputo’s scholarly focus over the last many decades, but with an eye to the importance of the mystical as it reverberates as a key topic throughout his many writings.

To date, Caputo has published 27 books. His first book, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought (ME)*, was published in 1978. Like many academics, Caputo’s first publication develops on themes that stem from his PhD dissertation. Though, in *ME*, he was more

¹⁶ *AE*, 221.

focused on the influence that Eckhart specifically had on Heidegger's philosophy. While Caputo's PhD dissertation focused on the "turn" (*Kehre*) in Heidegger's thought that marked the difference between the early and late Heidegger with a specific focus to the theme of the principle of sufficient reason (*Satz vom Grund*) which Heidegger discussed in his 1929 essay "On the Essence of Ground (*Vom Wesen des Grundes*)."¹⁷ In his dissertation, Caputo argued that "the reversal was, more deeply considered, a step back into the ground (*Rückgang in den Grund*) of the early position, more than a change of perspective, less a simple contradiction."¹⁸ These themes and issues, Caputo writes, were taken up in *ME* which "picked up where the dissertation ended, with *Der Satz vom Grund*."¹⁹ In addition, Caputo sought there to make sense of Heidegger's use of *Gelassenheit* in relation to the ground of reason.²⁰ This focus on *Gelassenheit*, a focus which Caputo notes "never left me," was undertaken in order to think through and help reconcile problems he identified in Heidegger's "hermeneutics of facticity."²¹ The tension, as Caputo frames it, is that *Gelassenheit* "emphasized composure and non-willing, [while] the other anxiety and decision-making, which is the problem on which Heidegger's 'turn' turns."²² What drove Caputo to undertake this focus, rather than concentrating on Aquinas and Heidegger for his first book, was what he called "the 'mystical element' in Heidegger."²³

The origin of this focus on the mystical element, Caputo writes, developed from his time at the De La Salle Brother and represents a "breakthrough moment" for his project as whole.²⁴

¹⁷ John D Caputo, 'Introduction to Volume 1,' in *The Collected and Philosophical and Theological Papers Volume 1: 1969-1985, Aquinas, Eckhart, Heidegger: Metaphysics, Mysticism, Thought*, ed. Eric Weislogel (Bolton, ON: John D. Caputo Archives, 2021), 4-5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

What his time in the monastery did, he writes, was bring him into “living contact with the great monastic tradition, a world that had not changed much over the centuries, initiating me in the spirituality of the ‘detachment’ and suspension of willing and self-will taught by the spiritual masters.”²⁵ And unlike Aquinas, who “was a metaphysician with a taste for the mystical, Eckhart was a mystical theologian with a taste for metaphysics.”²⁶ Importantly then, Caputo’s engagement with Eckhart in this book and indeed throughout his career, needs to be understood as principally an engagement with the metaphysical tensions that arose in theological thought in the Middle Ages, and a desire to confront those tension as they emerge in modernity. That is, although Caputo’s project is decidedly modern and indeed post-modern in focus, his analysis is sustained by a deep appreciation of mediaeval metaphysics. What Caputo ultimately discovered in Eckhart’s Latin and German sermons was a thinker that valued finitude and its depth dimension, as well as a “very deep immersion in Christian Neoplatonism.”²⁷ Much of Caputo’s later engagement with Eckhart and the ‘mystical element’ is one that, like Heidegger, wants to keep the factual and ‘risky’ elements of Eckhart’s theological focus—especially as it develops in his discussions of *Gelassenheit*—but to sidestep the Neoplatonic divided line and the emanating One that undergirds his thought.

In his second book, *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics (HaA)*, Caputo “argued that there is a “mystical element” in Aquinas himself which was central to seeing what the two thinkers had in common, and indeed where they really differed.”²⁸ Caputo argues against neo-Thomists like the Jesuit Emerich Coreth who was also trying to synthesize Heidegger

²⁵ Ibid., 6.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 7.

and Aquinas, but who did so via the ontological theme of *esse*.²⁹ In contrast, Caputo's reading of Aquinas was influenced by Pierre Rousselot and his 1908 *Intelligence: Sense of Being, Faculty of God*. Rousselot, deploying a Neoplatonic account of knowledge, saw in Aquinas's use of *intellectus* a form of participatory knowing that unified the subject with God.³⁰ However, Caputo's focus had at this time grown more historical in emphasis, meaning that he now stressed the importance of historical context and the "different worlds" from which these thinkers arose and to which they spoke. For Caputo, when thinking about Thomas's view of Being, one needs also to attend to the quiet religious life of the man, the religious milieu that he grew up in, and in which he was shaped. Caputo argues that ultimately, Thomas's notion of being and the metaphysical claims that sustains it, should be understood experientially. This is Caputo's basic thesis in this work, that Thomas's metaphysics itself deconstructs into a primordial and "essential experience."³¹ Much like von Hügel, Caputo's mystical element of religion names this essential experience.

Caputo's 1987 *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project (RH)* represents a departure from Caputo's earlier texts. In the labour Caputo undertook to complete this text, he writes, "I found 'my point of view as an author.'"³² This work developed out of a long process of engaging the Continental philosophical tradition, and finding within it answers to the theological questions and tensions that motivated his earlier writing. In part, this text reflects themes that emerged for him from an introductory undergrad course he had taught at Villanova University since 1968, "German Existentialism and Phenomenology."³³ This course, he

²⁹ John D Caputo, 'Fundamental Ontology and the Ontological Difference in Coreth's Metaphysics,' in *The Collected and Philosophical and Theological Papers Volume 1: 1969-1985, Aquinas, Eckhart, Heidegger: Metaphysics, Mysticism, Thought*, ed. Eric Weislogel (Bolton, ON: John D. Caputo Archives, 2021), 231.

³⁰ Pierre Rousselot, and Andrew Tallon, *Intelligence: Sense of Being, Faculty of God* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette U.P., 1999), xxvii.

³¹ *HaA*, 6.

³² John D Caputo, 'Introduction to Volume 2,' in *The Collected and Philosophical and Theological Papers Volume 2 1986-1996: Hermeneutics and Deconstruction*, ed. Eric Weislogel (Bolton, ON: John D Caputo Archives, 2021), 1.

³³ Caputo, *Introduction to Volume 1*, 11.

would later write, was something of an introduction to him to the Continental tradition—“thus did I learn Continental philosophy at my own feet and that of my students.”³⁴ Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger were all discussed in this course, and in turn were the key theorists he discussed in *RH*. Caputo’s engagement with Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* is also of fundamental importance to this text. Indeed, the very notion of a radical hermeneutics is an extension of Gadamer’s basic hermeneutical project but undertaken to denude Gadamer’s hermeneutical framework of its Hegelian and Heideggerian impulses.³⁵ “In Gadamer,” Caputo writes, “I argued, the dangerous play of the epochs in Heidegger had been pacified, so that an historical epoch looked less like an age of the “oblivion of being” and more like a kind of Hegelian *Aufhebung*.”³⁶ That is, Gadamer drifted from Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics and the forgetfulness of being and imported a conceptual scheme which built on Hegel’s account of the Absolute Spirit—Gadamer, not being a thinker who gave way to extremes in any form of thought, was not as interested in the anti-metaphysical vein that animated Heidegger. That being said, *RH* was itself undertaken by Caputo to “defend Heidegger and Gadamer against Derrida”—as, whatever the intellectual disagreements that Caputo had with the German tradition that he was so well acquainted with, thinkers like Derrida for Caputo at this stage of his writing, represented a “disruption of the logic of the ‘primordial’ (*ursprünglich*) and the derivative in the name of a disseminative energy that spread across the surface of language and left us all in a lurch.”³⁷ Ironically, then, writing against Derrida was the motivation for *RH*.

Given the echoes that this research would have on Caputo’s development as a thinker, the process of writing *RH* is important for understanding Caputo as whole and thus warrants some

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 13.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

focus here. *RH* was undertaken with an 1983-84 American Council of Learned Societies Fellowship and a 1985 grant from the National Endowment of Humanities, these grants gave Caputo the opportunity to conduct a “careful study of Derrida”—of whom, before then, Caputo had not engaged with much focus.³⁸ Caputo’s objective in this research was to carefully read Derrida alongside and with the criticisms he aimed at Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, etc. Caputo did this to gain a fuller understanding of Derrida’s project and goals; Caputo’s intention was to critically evaluate Derrida’s project. However, Caputo writes, he “only got as far as Husserl” and realized that Derrida’s “‘criticism’ of Husserl was less a criticism than it was a meticulous and ‘micrological’ reading of Husserl, which exposed tensions built right into the text of Husserl.”³⁹ This is an important detail to understand Caputo’s approach as a writer and academic. His is never a doctrinaire project. Any careful reading of Caputo will reveal a thinker who has always shown a propensity to challenge the idols of thought, be they his own or others. Hence, not willing to simply submit to the orthodoxy of the German thinkers that had so occupied most of his academic career, he found in Derrida a master of textual explication who could play with language and written works to make as yet unsaid themes visible. Caputo also found in Derrida’s playful style an approach to emulate. This style, or performative aspect of writing, was as important to Caputo as were the arguments that Derrida made against Husserl.⁴⁰ But, ultimately, it was Derrida’s close reading of Husserl, and the claims that arose from this reading, that generated his appreciation for Derrida and Deconstruction in general. In short, Caputo writes,

Derrida was right about Husserl. Then it hit me. That is what ‘deconstruction’ *is*. It *is* what it *does*, micrological readings that are the very opposite of arbitrary [readings], which his critics claim, among whom, up to then, I would have numbered myself. From then on, I

³⁸ Ibid., 14.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 15. It was from his engagement with Derrida that Caputo’s writing style shifted. This creative, flowing and I would suggest ‘French accented’ style of prose is most evidenced in *PaT*. Caputo’s more recent texts, i.e., *SoG*, differ substantially in style and accent from *PaT*.

was on board, with both feet. Or to reverse the metaphor, I was unhorsed on my way to Damascus.⁴¹

The outcome of this 'evental' engagement with Derrida marked a shift from his Catholic beginnings which compelled his interest in Aquinas and Heidegger, to a radically postmodern perspective in which "the destabilizing agent" of deconstructive thought and its style, would animate the rest of his career.⁴²

RH, in short, marks a transition in Caputo's thought from the "classical metaphysics and mysticism" of his early De La Salle Brother Paul days, to the impulses and motivations of the scholar and academic who sought to "radicalize" this tradition via the resources of deconstruction⁴³—not with the aim of taking apart, but, instead, of thinking religion anew via the impulses of a postmodern mindset. In short, a sort of repetition of Luther's Reformation in a new key; not a *via moderna*, but a *via post-moderna* in which the nominalist impulses that drove Luther to his *Sola Scriptura*, would be extended by Caputo to a *Sola Hermenutica*.

What though, aside from the biographical themes and shifts that *RH* represents for Caputo, is the text itself oriented towards? *RH* is an attempt to amplify the importance of an analysis that makes evident the always already state of flux within which all experiential and interpretive acts occur. This textual flux, for Caputo, is an echo of the flux of the material—the factual. Hence, in his attempt to name the material, Caputo does not appeal to a mere materialism *as such*, as if naming the booming-buzzing confusion of the external world is in itself central for Caputo at this stage of his thought. Instead, here, it is Caputo's desire to name improper vs. proper hermeneutical engagement within the flux which is his goal. Hence, Caputo turns his attention to thinkers of the flux within the philosophical tradition as a means of explicating his underlying concern.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Caputo, *Introduction to Volume 2*, 1.

⁴³ Caputo, *Introduction to Volume 1*, 15.

All of the thinkers considered in *RH* think in line with Heraclitus, *the* primordial thinker of flux, rather than Parmenides, the thinker that Caputo argues made the flux static. Kierkegaard's focus on the necessity of repetition as the possibility of retrieving what went on in the past, and making it new again, is key to how Caputo reads Heraclitus. This is a notion of the flux that notes the productive status of patterns and structures of the *actual* (or the conditional), while emphasizing the capacity of the *possible* (or the unconditional) to always re-enact that which was originally given in the actual. Husserl is engaged in *RH* as a thinker of the flux as it presents itself to the intentional gaze via the resources of the phenomenologist. However, Husserl ultimately domesticates the flux of finitude to a psychological perspective of the *eidos* which freezes the flux and makes it subordinate to the demands of the ideal. Heidegger, by contrast, disrupts the subjective foundations of phenomenology by decoupling Husserl's subject from phenomenological analysis, the outcome of which leads to his focus on *Dasein*. Heidegger, especially the early Heidegger, focuses on the living lifeworld of *Dasein* as it moves in and throughout a world. History and the flux itself contain a revelatory-like opening which makes evident the reality of the changing state of things, while nonetheless emphasising a primal ground (i.e., the Greeks) from which this disclosed opening arose. For Derrida, in contrast, difference itself is inscribed within the totality of all communicative exchange. Likewise, the material world resists, too, any impulse of the static. For Derrida, all things are composed by a play of differentiation which is ultimately pivotal.

Finally, it is noteworthy that a discussion of Eckhart and the mystical emerges in *RH*. With Eckhart, Caputo finds a thinker whose mystical language seeks a way to express the ultimate via the contingent. This contingent is known not in the light of reason (i.e., via an *eidos*) but in the *activity* of surrendering to the play of differences without attachment. This is the imperative of

Gelassenheit. Eckhart's tradition, which impacted Heidegger and Derrida, is appealed to by Caputo not for its apophatic elements in *RH*, but for something like a paradigmatic 'experience' of interpreting phenomena that does not prioritize clinging to an *eidos*, but, rather, it prioritizes the importance of surrounding to the flux itself.

In 1993 Caputo published, first, *Demythologizing Heidegger (DH)* and second, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction (AE)*. *DH* represents a turn in Caputo's thought. Here, Caputo grappled with the legacy of Heidegger's political involvements and his positive evaluation of Nazi ideology as well as secondary scholarship—for example Victor Farias's *Heidegger and Nazism*—that sought to place Heidegger's thought firmly within the Nazi intellectual cosmos.⁴⁴ Until this period, i.e., the late 80's and early 90's, Caputo had "swallowed the official line that Heidegger's [Nazi] involvements was a temporary aberration which he soon regretted."⁴⁵ *DH* emerged from this period of Caputo's thinking in which the legacy of Heidegger's philosophical value and his "odious political views" were reconsidered.⁴⁶ In this work, Caputo focused on Heidegger's penchant for a "mytho-logic" in which the "greatness of the beginning," e.g., the West's Greek foundation, is met with a "history of decline" narrative.⁴⁷ Caputo, following Tillich, argues that this basic *philosophical-historico* image of Heidegger's mirrors the "structure of fascist time" in which a "nostalgic memorializing of a Great Beginning" marshalled the activities and intentions of the German Nazi party.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Caputo, *Introduction to Volume 2*, 7

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* This research objective is evidenced in Heidegger's focus on, for example, Paul's letter to the Thessalonians which Heidegger undertook in his early work. Here, Paul's 'originary' or 'primitive Christian experience' of expectation is held up as an apogee of Christian experience. Heidegger would argue that the history of Christian thought was, in effect, the slow loss or covering over of this primary experiential event.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Caputo's main task in this work, then, was to critique Heidegger's account of Being via his ethical commitments. This account, largely given expression in the 1930's, understands Being as a call that was first received, or given its full expression, by the Greeks. This call made visible a reality that was always already before us, but lay hidden in the flux of becoming. Being quickly receded from view by metaphysical and consequent epistemological structures that 'pushed' onto Being categories that were anterior to it—thus 'hiding' it as it were. For Heidegger, we need to learn how to hear the call of Being once again, but this time leave it unencumbered by these anterior structures. Although suspicious of this sanguine evaluation of a perceived lost past, Caputo nonetheless wants to give voice to something positive going on in Heidegger's thought, namely, the awareness of the process of destruction that goes on in the history of philosophy as a tactic to manifest Being in its elusiveness. But this is not a presence or a structure or even 'Being' itself, especially as Heidegger would frame it. For Caputo, rather, it is the *call* of Being and indeed the call of philosophy itself that is central. In *DH*, Caputo links this call to the call of the Other via a Levinasian framework. In so doing, Caputo does something that Heidegger could not do, namely, to voice the necessity of ethics in the call of Being. But this account of ethics is not an ethics organized around rules or structures, so much as it is an ethics of obligation. Appealing to a specifically biblically based Christian framework, Caputo argues that we establish proper ethical bonds by adhering to the call of what Paul called the *ta me onta* (1 Cor. 1:28)—to those without. This is Caputo's wager, that Heidegger's project can be made productively subservient to a later postmodern critique of presence and master narratives via Paul's injunction regarding the necessity of our obligation to those without, while nonetheless keeping the 'mystical' tone of Heidegger's thought via the language of the call, front and centre.

In this text, 'the mystical' occurs via an appeal to Eckhart. Eckhart's *Gelassenheit* model is understood by Caputo to be a call to obligatory relation with God, while at the same time representing an obligation to let-things-be in general. We detach from the desire to adhere to a master narrative, e.g., Heidegger's mythology of a pure Greek origin, while still adhering to the desire to respond to the call of Being with a seriousness that makes visible the very real demands of the social and subject themselves. We might call this a secularization of *Gelassenheit*.

One way to frame Caputo's criticism of Heidegger, as indeed he himself does, is via a polemic that galvanizes much of Caputo's work, namely, the tensions of the Lutheran trope between the theology of the Cross and the theology of Glory. In Martin Luther's *Heidelberg Disputations* (1517), he criticizes the theologian of Glory who looks at the Cross of Christ and sees in it a radiant, divine, transcendent splendour—polemically, Luther had in mind the mystical assertions of Aquinas, Bonaventure, and pseudo-Dionysius. Here, the truth of the crucifixion event points not to the tattered and broken flesh of Jesus, but to a divine radiance that obscures the material reality of the Cross event. In contrast, Luther argued for the value of a theology of the Cross whose hermeneutic is organized by the event of the Cross in itself, not its referent.⁴⁹ Caputo writes:

The later Heidegger had embraced a *theologia gloria*, of the glory that was Greece, in oblivion (*Vergessenheit*) of his own departure, of the roots of his hermeneutics of facticity in the *theologia crucis* of Luther.⁵⁰

That is, Heidegger neglected the factual origins of his thought in favour of the hidden glory of a lost past whose call he sought to discern. Caputo thus cleaves to Heidegger's basic approach, while criticizing Heidegger for failing to follow the full implications of his thought.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Against Ethics (AE) repeats the same general thematic focus of *DH*. The reason for this is that *DH* was originally intended to be a larger book. However, during the publication process, the text was divided into two separate book publications—the outcome was *AE* and *DH*. In *AE*, Caputo argues that a key problem with Heidegger's focus on the Greeks and their "Great Beginning" was that this focus amounted to a kind of "Greek Big Bang."⁵¹ Far from a mere overevaluation of the glory of this origin, Caputo argues that this focus on a Greek origin forgets more than it reveals. For example, it "utterly erases the Jew, both literally (Spinoza does not belong to Heidegger's history of Being) and as a figure of the outcast, the excluded, the marginalized."⁵² Caputo's aim in *AE* is to evidence this gap in Heidegger's thought via the obligatory call to respond to 'those without,' i.e., those eclipsed by the narrative of this pure origin. Kierkegaard, Derrida, Levinas, and Lyotard are all deployed by Caputo in this work to evidence the forgotten in Heidegger's system. But these thinkers are drawn on not to marshal an ethical response, in which universal rules and governing structures are appealed to so as to form our ethical commitments, but for their capacity to evidence *obligation*. In obligation, Caputo argues, we are called by 'we know not what' to respond to the needs of the least and attend hospitably to the neighbour.

Cleaving to a biblical hermeneutics that governs his thought in general, Caputo finds in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians a challenge to Heidegger. Where, Caputo asks, is the place of the excluded body, of the female, the slave, the homosexual, etc. who fail to achieve the image of glory that Heidegger's project aims at revealing? In 'those without,' in Paul's *ta me onta*, Caputo finds the disavowed figure of history that a focus on master narratives of a pure and clean origin, cannot reconcile. Here, following Paul, Caputo argues that in what amounts to the foolishness of the philosopher, the excluded, can be located a more originary or primal call—the call to respond

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

fully to the needs of the needful not from a place of ethical demand, but obligatory necessity. In this work, Levinas's ethical and Lyotard's eschatological claims are drawn upon to make evident both the primal and real status of obligation: in obligation, one cannot but help to respond to the real needs of the Other (Levinas), but in this obligation there is no originary and/or pure demand that obligation follows (Lyotard). And although Derridean thematics run throughout *AE*, it is not until *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion (PaT)* that they are taken up by Caputo.

Like *RH* and *AE*, *PaT* represents a further turning or shift of focus in Caputo's oeuvre. Here, the theme of religion arises not again—as religious themes or issues have never strayed far from Caputo—but differently. The impact of Derrida, and indeed the influence of Heidegger's factual claims on Derrida, shaped *PaT* and, in the process, dramatically shaped Caputo's subsequent theological focus. What underscores this Derridean impact on Caputo is the shift to what we might call Caputo's 'hermeneutics of the *ta me onta*'—a theme which, as noted, was ingredient to his analysis in *AE* and *DH*. Derrida, in short, intensified Caputo's focus on finitude, theologically, philosophically, and mystically. Indeed, as Caputo noted regarding this Derridean influence, "my attitude towards the mystical, with which I tended to identify religion up to that point, was beginning to shift, not because I was about to drop it, which I never did, but because I wanted to make room for the prophetic, for justice for the least among us."⁵³ This shift of Caputo's is best understood, then, as a shift from a notion of religion as addressing a mystical core, to a notion of religion as a socially conscious 'this-worldly-focused' sphere. An emphasis on the prophetic outcomes, and thus the ethical and practical outcomes of a religious perspective which equates with, as it were, a 'preferential' option for the poor, is something like a natural

⁵³ Caputo, *Introduction to Volume 2*, 9-10.

development of Caputo's project. *PaT*, therefore, though distinct in its voice and focus, reflects an aboriginal trajectory of Caputo's thinking.

Tensions in the form of external voices also impacted Caputo's trajectory in *PaT*. As Caputo notes, not only was he drawn to Derrida and thus compelled by the arguments and linguistic claims of a Derridean analysis but, too, Caputo's shift here was motivated by a reaction to the claims of Jean-Luc Marion, philosophical, theological, and mystical. Caputo's own "shift" at this time "can be detected in the critical discussions of Marion, in which it became crystal clear to [him] that the classical notion of the mystical as unmediated unity; pure givenness, being saturated in light, is up to its ears in Neoplatonic metaphysics."⁵⁴ Moreover, Caputo argues that the unmediated presence of the givenness of the unconditional that orients Marion's thought is, ultimately "accompanied by the unconditional authority of the Roman Church, of Marion's "bishop."⁵⁵ It is Caputo's penchant for the 'foundationless' foundation of things which motivates his notion of the mystical and religion to a prophetic vein to counter the possibility of landing on either Marion's unmediated claim regarding one's access to the metaphysical presence of Being, or the utterly mediated status of the Catholic church. It is important to see here how the Continental philosophical tradition, in its internal debates about 'the mystical,' give shape to new images of what mysticism is in modernity.

Aside from the above noted elements, *PaT* was also a response to Mark C. Taylor. Taylor's influential 1984 *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*⁵⁶ had cemented a view of Deconstruction as "the hermeneutics of the death of God" by translating, in short, God into *différance*; the consequence of which was to make Deconstruction itself into a species of negative theology or

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Mark C Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

apophatics.⁵⁷ Negative theology has classically been circumscribed by a Dionysius *hyper-ousia*, in which the negative that goes unnamed in the apophatic claim gestures towards a more-than-perfect ultimate which is unstained by any conceptual, linguistic, or formal categorization made by finite humans. Caputo, ever suspicious of a smuggled in essentialism, argues that terms like *khora* capture, more appropriately, the aims of Deconstruction. That is, *différance* is the space (*khora*) within which the play of the impossible unfolds, rather than Taylor's claim in *Erring* which argues that *différance* names the impossible *as such*. The *khora*, not unlike Caputo's account of God in general, names that weak-force which allows for the impossible to become possible. Contesting Taylor's thesis, then, Caputo argued that "Derrida's religion, if that is what it is, his religion without religion, is the circum-fession of his prayers and tears, his affirmation of the event that is harbored in the name of God, which he signalled in the expression 'the possibility of the impossible.'"⁵⁸ Caputo thus argues that to name Derrida's project as centering in on a death of God theology, especially as that voiced in the American theological context by thinkers like Thomas Altizer, is too 'final'—too, as it were, Hegelian and absolute.⁵⁹ Instead, "in Deconstruction, if you say something is dead, it will come back to haunt you (*revenant*)."⁶⁰ Life is always inscribed with death, God with finitude, the conditional with the unconditional—this is a fundamental trait of Caputo's thought and is given its first and clearest expression in *PaT*.

Two key threads bind *PaT*: what Caputo calls the Biblical im-possible and Derrida's *différance*. In the first, the impossible arises from a structural impossibility inscribed within the name God which eludes all attempts to grasp it with certainty. This impossibility is shown in God's promise to Abraham that Sarah would give birth to Isaac—a promise met with a laugh by the 90-

⁵⁷ Caputo, *Introduction to Volume 2*, 9-10.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

year-old Sarah meant to indicate the obvious impossibility of the promise.⁶¹ This impossibility is met with the gift of the actual, the possible, in the form of Isaac's *life*. This then is understood as an unforeseen possible made real by, or *in*, the promise of the impossible to-come of Isaac's birth. In the second, Caputo sees Derrida's *différance* as something like the condition of possibility wherein the impossible breaks-in and upon the actual, therein revealing a new unforeseen possible. *Différance*, for Caputo, is the ground upon which faith in the impossible occurs—following Derrida, he will call this a quasi-transcendental condition of possibility.⁶² It is 'quasi' because the conditions that it makes possible also, simultaneously, makes those conditions impossible. This impossible is the hope inscribed within the very structure of religion *as such* according to Caputo. Or, at least, religion as Caputo would like it to be. Derrida's *différance* thus echoes Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "religion without religion" claims.⁶³ This is a religion shorn of its *onto-theo-logical* heights, barred from its teleological aims and Neoplatonic supports, and is instead made low, fleshy, and vulnerable. In other words, religion *is true*, insofar as it in *kenotically* incarnate—its emptiness is made full in so far as it is given material form.

The next major work of Caputo's is his 2006 *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (*WoG*), though several smaller books were published contemporaneously which warrant some attention. *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (1997) (*DiaN*), is a smaller book which records a presentation that Derrida gave to Villanova university on the topic of his *Circumfession*, religion, and theological/philosophical themes such as the "structure of the *khôra*."⁶⁴ The bulk of *DiaN*, though, is composed of Caputo's explication and

⁶¹ *Genesis* 17:16.

⁶² Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 328.

⁶³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997). Although I will not be unpacking Bonhoeffer's influence on Caputo in this study, Bonhoeffer has been a consistent and constant reference point throughout Caputo's writing career; for example: *PaT*, 219; *WoG*, 51, 277; *CaC*, xiii, 77, 84, 89, 92; *IoG*, 46; *SoG*, 186, 209, 211.

⁶⁴ *DiaNS*, 18.

analysis of Derrida's Deconstruction. Polemically, *DiaN* was the first publication in a series that took seriously the Continental philosophy of religion not as a false "turn as Dominique Janicaud had framed it, but as a fruitful continuation of the Continental tradition."⁶⁵ The other text published at this time was his follow up to *RH*, the 2000 *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are (MRH)*. This text further signals the influence of Derrida on Caputo's hermeneutical project—especially as concerns Derrida's focus on the notion of the 'secret' as a driving force of philosophy. Underscoring the religious focus of Caputo at this time, *MRH* ends with a section entitled On the Road to Emmaus and wrestles with Paul's notion of faith and hope and the nature of *hermeneuein* as a term used in the New Testament. Equally important, Caputo ends *MRH* with an analysis of the mysticism of Eckhart and the Dominican's prayer 'I pray God rid me of God' which Caputo takes to signify a "perpetual prayer to keep the discourse on God open and free of idols."⁶⁶ In addition, in this work, Caputo extends his engagement with hermeneutics by thinking through the contrasts between the natural sciences and the social sciences, or the humanities. Here, Caputo appeals to works such as Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) to think about the way in which truth emerges in scientific thought and how it is that truths that emerge in the humanities differ from the sciences. Caputo argues that what unifies both inquiries, both sciences, is a shared pursuit of uncovering "the secret."⁶⁷ That is, the unknowability of the unknown is something like the driving motivation of all thought which is aimed at inquiry and explication: we yearn to know the unknown. He concludes *MRH* by arguing that a similarity exists between Derrida's notion of the secret and the "mystical silence" that prompts thinkers like Eckhart. Caputo writes "mystical silence, I will argue, *is in fact an operation within language*, of

⁶⁵ John D Caputo, "Introduction to Volume 3," in *The Collected and Philosophical and Theological Papers Volume 3 1997-2000: The Return of Religion*, ed. Eric Weislogel (Bolton, ON: John D. Caputo Archives, 2021), 3.

⁶⁶ *MRH*, 11.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 154-155.

textuality and *écriture*, that is captured magnificently in Eckhart's beautiful prayer" that "I pray God rid me of God."⁶⁸ I will return to this claim of Caputo's that the mystical language of silence is fundamentally rooted in language.

Another publication from this time is Caputo's 2001 *On Religion*, which wrestles with theological and religious themes in a post 9/11 context. In addition there is an edited volume in the Blackwell Readings in Continental philosophy series entitled *The Religious* (2002) (*TR*). This edited volume is important for two reasons. First, Caputo's introductory essay 'Who comes After the God of Metaphysics' gestures at Caputo's 'death of God' theological focus that becomes central to his work in the early to mid-2000's and culminates in the 2007 publication *After the Death of God* which was co-authored with Gianni Vattimo. *TR* is also a revealing volume in that the primary texts that it offers are instructive for understanding what Caputo himself understands as 'The Religious'—as such, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, and Irigaray are something like the primary sources of Continental philosophies engagement with religious tradition, while responses from Marion, Janicaud, Hart, Kearney, Jantzen, Westphal, Wink, and Milbank, among others, represent a secondary development in this tradition.

Caputo's *WoG* marks not so much a turn in Caputo's thought as it represents a culmination of his work in general. Indeed, I take *WoG* to be his most important work for his overall project; it is the result of the ideas he instigated from his earliest analysis of Aquinas, Heidegger, and Eckhart, synthesized via his extensive engagement with the Continental philosophical tradition via the work of Derrida, Levinas, Gadamer, and Lyotard, which was given shape via Caputo's *radicalizing* of Luther's 'theology of the cross' and his own distinctive ethico-theo-religio reading of Paul's *ta me onta*. If one were looking for the most concise representation of Caputo's thought,

⁶⁸ Ibid., 11 (emphasis added).

WoG serves that function. Outside of reflecting Caputo's early development as a thinker, *WoG* is also the key prompt addressed by his 2010 publications up to his 2022 *Specters of God*. Because of its centrality, I will unpack themes and issues from *WoG* as my analysis develops below. But here, briefly, I want to unpack the text's basic thesis and the role that mysticism plays in helping to articulate that thesis.

The thesis of *WoG* is summarized by Caputo when he writes,

My idea is to stop thinking about God as a massive ontological power line that provides power to the world, [and] instead [think] of [God as] something that short-circuits such power and provides a provocation to the world that is otherwise than power.⁶⁹

Caputo's objective in *WoG* is to provide an account of the Christian God that is devoid of a hierarchical metaphysics which makes God, paradoxically, subordinated to a vision of height and grandeur. Likewise, and more central, this vision of God makes of God's power something more-than this world; this is a position, as will be unpacked below, that stands in radical contrast to the Theology of the Cross that galvanises Caputo's thought. This image of God as pure power is a representation (*Vorstellung*) which Caputo freely acknowledges is aboriginal to a biblical depiction of God. God as creator, sustainer, and the end of all things, marshals the account of God given from *Genesis* to *Revelation*; Caputo does not deny, nor is he ignorant of the traditional way of knowing God via this power dynamic. However, Caputo sees in the history of effects of this image of God as power-infused, a host of social and indeed religious tensions that he is ultimately trying to work through. Hence, in trying to circumvent this hierarchical vision of God, and the negative outcomes that Caputo argues develop from this hierarchical model, Caputo appeals to divergent strands within the theological tradition that 'hear otherwise' the name of God. The term that he gives this counter tradition is a *poetics*. In the poetic expression of Christian thought, God

⁶⁹ *WoG*, 13.

is conceptualized as an intimate and personal relation—a provocation that stirs within, something ‘nearer to me than myself’ as Augustine framed it. Caputo’s poetics is related to, or is a sub-species of, the allegorical method in which the “mysteries” of the kingdom of God as revealed in scripture are understood as figurative revelations of a deeper ‘as yet unknown reality.’⁷⁰ That is, posting the weakness of God is more than a theological claim, it is a hermeneutical claim—it is a way to wrestle with scripture. As Caputo writes, “*My whole idea of poetics of the event is to provide an interpretation of these miracle stories that neither reduces them to supernaturalism nor inflates them into a metaphysical tour de force.*”⁷¹ A poetics, then, captures the animating and inspiring *qualia* of the biblical text, without subordinating them to the demands of a metaphysics that grants them importance only as a consequence of what they refer to, rather than appealing to the integrity of their own poetic force. The desire to subordinate existing reality, things as they are, to a higher more perfect expression that they yearn after, is central to the problematic nature of metaphysics that Caputo wants to upend. Poetics, then, is “a non-literalizing description of the event that tries to depict its dynamics, to trace its style, and to cope with its fortuitous forces by means of felicitous tropes.”⁷² In short, the emphasis on poetics that runs throughout *WoG*—and indeed much of his *oeuvre*—is aimed at making evident the ways in which texts (e.g., biblical, mystical, religious, etc.) transform us by their provocations, not by their imperatives.

Be that as it may, Caputo’s poetical hermeneutics is anchored in the rather “strong”⁷³ theological language of Martin Luther’s *Heidelberg Disputations* (1518) and the distinction he draws therein between a ‘Theologian of the Cross’ and a ‘Theologian of Glory’—already discussed

⁷⁰ Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers* (London: Burns & Oats, 1960), 11.

⁷¹ *WoG*, 238 (emphasis added).

⁷² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷³ As he writes, “the strong point about weak theology is that it is a theology of the cross” (*Ibid.*, 42).

above. It should perhaps come as no surprise that Caputo's more nominalist emphasis on finitude, the factual, and the vulnerability of flesh, finds in Luther's Theology of the Cross a hermeneutical starting point for interpreting and indeed resolving the tensions of metaphysical height and power in the Christian religion.⁷⁴ Moreover, it is the representation (*Vorstellung*) of God as weak, vulnerable, and incapable of action that accompanies the Cross which Caputo derives much of the impetus for *WoG* and indeed much of his thought in general. As Caputo frames it, "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."⁷⁵ Hence, in contrast to a Greek or indeed a medieval metaphysics of power, where "God is found in the highest and most brilliant beautiful realm," Caputo argues that a "weak theology asserts the priority of the "lowliest and most unsightly."⁷⁶

The language that Caputo uses throughout *WoG* to name this weak force is provocation, promise, and claim. These are words spoken by Caputo in the middle-voice, meaning, they suggest less a subject acted upon or an object acting on, but the *relata between*. Truth, too, is a term best understood in the middle-voice for Caputo in *WoG*. For example, near the text's conclusion, Caputo writes that:

Truth is a claim made upon us—a "truth claim" is less an exact claim we make that an exacting claim that is made upon us—that wrests from us an open-ended concession that we cannot contain the event that the name contains within the limits of the name. Truth is less something I seek than something I cannot evade."⁷⁷

Truth happens; and, in its happening, in its unavoidable and uncontainable unfolding, we are brought along and transformed by it, we are claimed by it. And in our being claimed by it, for Caputo, truth, too, is claimed by us. In this back and forth, betwixt and between, arises the

⁷⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 44.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 46.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 286-287.

knowledge of the weakness of any event, name, or claim to truth: a structural weakness circumscribes *any and all* attempts at certainty. This weakness is revealed in the Cross, and indeed in any moment that stresses the power of the vulnerability of the flesh, the weakness of the stranger, and the necessity of hospitality. In each event the fullness of the name God is revealed in the weakness of the event itself, and in *our* power to respond adequately to the needs of the weak.

One final comment here concerns the division that Caputo tends to assume between a Neoplatonic metaphysics and Biblical system. It is an unfortunate reading of Caputo's that sees in the Neoplatonic metaphysics of hierarchy and language of a *hyper-ousiatic* force, an alien imposition on the biblical text and the ethical system that follows from it. As was noted in the introduction, the link between Neoplatonic thought and the New Testament is one that suggests far more unity than it does discontinuity. The New Testament is a text written in *koine* Greek, it carries within it the spirit of Greek language and thought, and indeed the Greek metaphysical categories that went along with a number of key theological and philosophical terms that are used in the New Testament.⁷⁸ As Andrew Louth argues, there existed a common worldview, a common set of assumptions, and a common set of texts that helped frame, shape, and unify the questions asked and the answers given to those questions in the Greco-Roman empire between the 3rd century B.C.E. and the 3rd century C.E.⁷⁹ Caputo tends to overlook this unity and sees Greek metaphysics as an external voice that adds an external metaphysics to what would become the Christian tradition. At its kernel, in Caputo's reading, the Christian Bible is a text driven by the obligatory

⁷⁸ Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 3-5.

⁷⁹ Louth states, "The way in which philosophical thought developed in late antiquity paralleled the way in which Christian thought developed in late antiquity. [...] in late antiquity both Christians and Pagans were responding to the same kinds of developments in society and also listening to one another, sometime disagreeing with one another. And that it is not so much a question of an 'influence' from Neoplatonism to Christianity, or even the reverse. It is much more a question of people belonging to the same world of thought, the same world of discourse. And within that same world of discourse, responding in often very similar ways (Film Studio MDA Bogoslov [Киностудия МДА БОГОСЛОВ], "Priest Andrew Louth on Christianity and Neoplatonism," (YouTube, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdlvSe--wq4>)).

desire to respond hospitably to the other and shows that demand via the impulse of stories. While Greek metaphysics and ethics assume a universally derived set of actions and assumptions that begin with rational principles. The evidence we have of the period troubles Caputo's image—to the contrary, where the 'Bible' begins and where Greek thought and its metaphysics ends, is, I would argue, impossible to discern. Thus, although Caputo is certainly within his rights to find problematic Greek metaphysics, his critique of a vertical metaphysics is a critique of a biblical world view; hierarchy and control, based on an economy of power, is not the result of foreign intrusion into the biblical text, so much as it is a compatible philosophical account of the ways in which the Bible representationally shows the relationship between God and the God's people. Caputo's objective here is to evidence what *he* argues is not working in Christian thought; the core of that inoperability lay in the problems or tensions that he sees arising from a hierarchical perspective—whether that be Greek, Jewish, or indeed German in origin.

Caputo's 2013 *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps (IoG)* extends themes and issues he addresses in *WoG*, but, in this volume, Caputo provides one of his most nuanced readings of contemporary Continental philosophy with particular attention given to its more recent 'materialist turn.' A key theme of this book is to clarify how to make sense of God's weakness as an insistent presence—in short, to make a case for the strength of weakness. To accomplish this, Caputo deploys the idea of 'the perhaps' as something like a specter, or ghost, "which haunts ontology."⁸⁰ The ghost of the perhaps builds upon what Derrida called a huantology, which "spooks the black-or-white to-be-or-not-to-be of metaphysics and so it unnerves onto-theologians."⁸¹ In framing his discussion of the perhaps along these spectral lines, Caputo consciously seeks to name a sort of in-between state that the perhaps indicates. As he notes, what

⁸⁰ *IoG*, 5.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

a focus on the perhaps does is to “prevent the present from closing down upon itself, from being identical with itself, leaving it structurally exposed to the future, not the future present but the very structure of the to-come (*à venir*).”⁸² The perhaps, then, names “the advent of what is coming, the coming (*venir*) of what we cannot see coming (*voir venir*), the coming of the future (*l’avenir*), which always comes as a surprise and includes the best and the worst.”⁸³ There is then a structural or quasi-transcendental condition of possibility for the ‘presencing of things’ that the perhaps as an evental structure of reality names. All these terms, the perhaps, the event, insistence’, etc., should be understood as attempts by Caputo to “twist free from the grip of thinking in terms of power” that framed *WoG*.⁸⁴

Caputo appeals throughout *IoG* to the “middle voice.”⁸⁵ Here, as with *WoG*, he self-consciously appeals to Gadamer’s use of the middle voice to indicate not a subject or an object, but an in-between interpretive space that is fundamental to his hermeneutical project.⁸⁶ In classical Greek, the middle voice signified a reflexive action that begins and ends in the subject. Caputo’s example is the English “I give myself time to deliberate.”⁸⁷ Caputo is using the middle voice in an “impersonal sense to say things are getting themselves said and done without an identifiable agency under the name of God.”⁸⁸ This strategy of Caputo’s will be discussed in chapter 7.

What makes *IoG* unique, however, is its appeal to theories of materialism that arise from discussions by thinkers in the Continental tradition as a way to name the insistence of the event of the perhaps. That is, to clarify his account of the perhaps, Caputo appeals to conversations

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 31, 54.

⁸⁶ On Gadamer and the middle voice, see: Philippe Eberhard, *The Middle Voice in Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Basic Interpretation with Some Theological Implications* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

⁸⁷ *IoG*, 271. n 21.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

regarding the material world and the ways in which patterns are formed and repeated within that vision of materiality. Thinkers like Donna Haraway, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Slavoj Žižek, Catherine Malabou, John Milbank, Bruno Latour, Michel Serres, Alain Badiou, and Quentin Meillassoux are all central to Caputo's analysis—both as thinkers he agrees and disagrees with. Indeed, although Caputo does not outright state this in *IoG*, the text itself echoes themes from a class he taught in the fall semester of 2010, Rel 660: The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion. The principal aim of this course was to explore the notion of materialism as a possible future for Continental philosophy—especially as a consequence of Continental philosophies earlier theological turn. Hence, and by way of an example of Caputo's general focus in *IoG*, I want to unpack his discussion of Malabou's materialism from the chapter 'Is There an Event in Hegel? Malabou, Plasticity, and 'Perhaps.'"

As with many of Caputo's books, the characters of Martha and Mary—filtered via Eckhart's interpretation of the sisters—are given special focus in *IoG*. In what Caputo calls Martha's world, his stress is on the *praxis* of Martha rather than the *contemplatio* of Mary. This act-oriented focus is the impetus for his desire to think through the material conditions upon which the *praxis* of Martha unfolds. "In radical theology, theology is directed to Martha's world and the promise of the booming, buzzing world below. By the world 'below' I mean 'this' world; by 'this' I mean 'the' world, the only one we know' by 'we' I mean us all, anybody any of us has ever met."⁸⁹ But, it is in the notion of the perhaps or, better, the event of the perhaps that complicates this materialist vision of 'the booming, buzzing world.' To that end, Caputo appeals to Malabou's discussion of Hegel, and his account of futurity via her notion of plasticity to make sense of 'this world.'⁹⁰ How then is the event correlated to materiality?

⁸⁹ Ibid, 65.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 121.

Heidegger had argued that Hegel's notion of Absolute Spirit was a spirit "turned towards the past" and the activities of the past; as a consequence, this "Spirit has no future"—i.e., in the becoming true of the Absolute Spirit, the future that comes is subordinated to its capacity to fulfill the past, not to make possible an unexpected to-come.⁹¹ Via an account of Hegel that prioritizes his theory of the double kenosis, in which God's emptying into the world (Phil. 2:5-7) and God's further emptying on the Cross are stressed, Malabou injects a strong theory of the unexpected transformation of the Spirit into the unfolding process of the Absolute—and, therefore, *of any possible future for that absolute*.⁹² This account makes the loss a *real event* for the Absolute Spirit rather than a deterministic outcome. This event, apropos Derrida, is "something we can't see coming"⁹³ a structural reading of the event that Malabou argues is ingredient to the Absolute Spirit who also "cannot see what is coming"—a claim she asserts via the 'double kenosis' thesis noted above.⁹⁴

Malabou's focus, and indeed Caputo's reading of her, centres on the status of the possible to-come in relation to the Absolute. In so doing, she deploys a distinction between the "relative superiority of temporal action (*action*) versus a timeless pure act (*actus*)"—which Caputo finds productive, but ultimately unconvincing.⁹⁵ What is significant from Malabou's analysis, and Caputo's response to Malabou, are the material implications that are drawn from this scheme. Specifically, this is a conception of matter that prioritizes possibility or potentiality over actuality or presence. Caputo's objective in his discussion of Malabou is not to forge a new image of the material world; he does not think that physicists needed the aid of Continental philosophy to gain

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 122.

⁹³ Ibid., 121.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 124.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 122.

a clearer view of the physical world.⁹⁶ Rather, Caputo sees in the image of matter that follows from thinkers like Malabou, a starting point for thinking of a materialism that initiates from a poetics. That is, the theme of plasticity, of the infinite malleability of reality, its innate non-totalizability, opens up a space for thinking about our world, our ideas, and ourselves, around this possibility-infused theme. In short, what this perhaps-laden materialism provides is an account of difference or variation or change within finitude, without the requirement of subordinating that notion of change to an external or alien force. Caputo writes:

Derrida, Žižek, Malabou, Meillassoux, and I are all “materialists” in the sense that we are not *City of God* Augustinians; we do not think there are two worlds, one in space and time, the other transcending space and time. It is in order to “supplement” physics that Malabou emphasizes a transformational “plastics,” Žižek introduces “parallax shifts,” Meillassoux produces a rather extraordinary account of contingency and a coming God, and I speak of a “poetics” of the event.⁹⁷

In this material image, the constitutive elements of the cosmos are not the smallest or most basic structures (i.e., atoms, quarks, etc.) but their “virtualities and actualities.”⁹⁸ Virtualities like the ‘perhaps’ *insist* themselves (middle-voice) into being as the ground of possibility from which matter itself arises.

Caputo does not want to drive these conversations to their limit by thinking through the potential perhaps that always already sits beyond the horizon of expectation and thus forms the horizon of the real. Instead, he inquires into the status or state of these virtualities in a cosmos destined to absolute entropy in which not only will matter be stretched to its limits, but (perhaps) potentiality itself will have run its course. What *IoG* provides, then, is an opportunity for Caputo to extend a theme that he developed in his earlier writings, namely ruined time, and apply the notion of a cosmos utterly devoid of the possibility of redemption to his notion of materialism. In

⁹⁶ Ibid., 190-191.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 213.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

his following works, *CaC*, *FoG*, and *SoG*, Caputo further stretches these themes by pursuing the question of meaning and the event of the perhaps in a cosmos devoid not only of matter, but indeed of the perhaps *as such*.

In the *Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (2016) (*FoG*), Caputo radicalizes his notion of the event of the perhaps and his insistent claims, by thinking through what he calls God-perhaps. In short, as he states in the opening lines to this book “The real interest of theology is not in God,” instead, there are “deeper interests than God” which compel theological investigation.⁹⁹ Indeed, whereas “strong theology,” i.e., confessional theology, has bestowed upon itself the task of making evident the warp-and-woof of the divine, a weak theology seeks to make evident the “unconditional” which attests to a religion without religion or, transcendently, the conditions of possibility within which religion itself forms.¹⁰⁰ Several points from this text are worth reciting here. First, Caputo grounds his notion of the unconditional in Derrida’s *différance* model where Deconstruction means to be, via Malabou, endlessly “reformable or transformable” and, via Derrida, “inventible, reinventible, and even (up to a point) preventable.”¹⁰¹ In so doing, Caputo prioritizes *différance* and makes unity an “effect” rather than an anterior condition of diversity.¹⁰² The unconditional, as a plastic differentiating ground, arises via the demand that the unconditional places upon the individual—here, demand implies the ways in which the world and our communities insist upon and provokes us into action.¹⁰³ Following Kierkegaard, Caputo is arguing that our affirmation of the unconditional, i.e., how we make it our own, is ingredient to the unconditional. Here, Caputo is making a basic claim that runs throughout his texts: God does not

⁹⁹ *FoG*, 1.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 29.

exist, God insists; or the unconditional does not exist by itself, it insists as a consequence of finite actions. Humans, however, do exist and, in our lives and actions, the unconditional emerges as a virtual reality whose persistence is given concrete shape through the actions we take to make its call visible. Not unlike Martha, the call to the unconditional is one of action in the world. In *FoG* Caputo appeals to a theme that he extends elsewhere, this being the image of the messiah as described by Walter Benjamin in his 'On the Concept of History' essay.¹⁰⁴ In this analysis, Derrida's emphasis on the "unconditional without sovereignty," which galvanized him in texts like *PaT*, is married to Benjamin's "weak messianic force." Caputo writes,

By a weak messianic, Benjamin means that instead of waiting for a (strong) Messiah who will bail us out, *we* are the messianic age. *We* are the ones who have all along been expected—by the dead. *We* occupy the messianic position—to make right the wrongs that have been done to them."¹⁰⁵

The condition of possibility for the existence of the unconditional, its virtuality becoming actual, is the concrete acting subject. This claim by Caputo needs to be read against his strong/weak theological assertions. Whereas strong theology assumes a "regional distinction between the domains of the natural and the supernatural," Caputo's weak theology works to undercut this dualism. Significantly, it is Hegel's thought that Caputo appeals to, arguing that weak theology is heir to Hegel's basic system. In short, whereas classical theology assumes dualities, according to Caputo, "in Hegel, there is only one world, but it manifests itself in different and gradually more intensive stages."¹⁰⁶

A term that Hegel deploys to make visible this process-oriented unity, or non-metaphysically distinct cosmos, is *Vorstellung*. Hegel saw in religious language and imagery, so many representations (*Vorstellungen*) of the Absolute—but these images of the Absolute are

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 57.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 56-57 (emphasis in original).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 99.

images given in concrete and finite contexts. These finite contexts are just as much a part of the religious *Vorstellung* as is its infinite signification—or, in the image of the *Vorstellung* resides an image of a unified finite/infinite image. “To say that religion is a *Vorstellung*, is to say it is a work of the pictorial imagination—of its images, stories, and liturgies, which stir up our feeling of solidarity with the Absolute Spirit—but it also has a spiritual or intellectual content; it lights up our lives.”¹⁰⁷

By way of example, Caputo turns to the Christian religion as an instance of a *Vorstellung*. In a strong theological account of Christianity, Caputo argues, the “Eternal Logos,” which pre-existed from “all eternity” in a “sphere above the heavens, comes down into space and time, is born of a virgin, laid in a manger, kept warm by the breathing of the animals, while angels from on high sing alleluia to God in the highest.”¹⁰⁸ According to Hegel, these are representations, *Vorstellungen*, of the Absolute Spirit implicit in the Christian account of God. The theologian’s task is to make explicit the philosophical concepts (*Begriff*) that are implicit within this representational scheme; to unpack their logic and show how it is that the Absolute Spirit (i.e., the True), is revealed in these stories. However, in arguing this, Hegel makes the stories of the Christian religion provisional images of the Absolute. This rather than arguing that the images of, e.g., the Crucifixion, are images which necessarily grips the Absolute Spirit. Thus, for a strong theology, the unconditional force of the Absolute Spirit hovers over and makes true the Christian image, whereas for Hegel, the representations of the Christian religion are but one more representation of the unconditional. For Caputo, in what he calls his headless-Hegelianism, he argues that the unconditional as such should be thought of as divorced from a *Begriff* that grips itself onto the Absolute Spirit via representations that speak conditionally to its unconditional

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

value. Instead, for Caputo, theology (whose real interest is not God) needs to make evident the unconditional *as unconditional*.

As a consequence, Caputo argues that a theology of the unconditional has two tasks. First, theology must strive to “protect the secrecy of the unconditional” by rejecting any and all claims that identify the unconditional with a “definite mode of being.”¹⁰⁹ Second, the unconditional needs to be understood “in the weak mode;” that is, the weak theologian strives to decouple any imagery of the unconditional that marries it to hierarchical authority and political power.¹¹⁰ The idea that Caputo deploys to help further this focus on the unconditional is his appeal to non-knowledge which he puts in the place of Hegel’s Absolute Spirit who has “Absolute Knowledge.” A non-knowledge operates via a “hermeneutics of experience” that places the contingency, iterability, and “deep unforeseeably” that is at the heart of human experience, and makes of that differential ground, the ground upon which the “unconditional” makes a claim upon us. Hence, not unlike themes aboriginal to mystical theology, which he celebrates in *FoG* as a theology that does not “adopt the high and mighty discourse of metaphysics,” a *docta ignorantia* or non-knowing is constitutive of Caputo’s theological claims here. Though, whereas mystical theology bypasses metaphysics because of its claim that God—e.g., Eckhart’s *Gottheit*—resists the yoke of human thought, Caputo argues that this mystical assumption must also be rejected by theologians who follow in his wake.¹¹¹ As Caputo writes “Mystical theology allows Being in through the back door of apophasis, laced in the garments of a hyper-being” whereas Caputo, in contrast, wants a notion of non-knowing whose radical ground is an unknowing, all the way down. For Caputo, to “proceed further, to venture into an abyss like that, would be more like the folly of God we have in mind.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 103.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 70.

¹¹² Ibid., 71.

It is in Caputo's 2019 *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory* (CaC) that this unconditionality, especially as it is related to Caputo's own 'soteriology,' is given its fullest expression in Caputo's *oeuvre*.

CaC followed the publication of Caputo's 2017 *Hoping Against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim* (HaH). While not an outright autobiography, the subtitle 'confessions' indicates the work's biographical focus. In this text Caputo provides a brief snapshot into some of the religious, political, academic, and social contexts that helped shape his thought. He begins with a discussion of his early 20s when he had joined the De La Salle brotherhood, his eventual departure from that group after Vatican II, and how he ultimately came to study Continental philosophy. As the book develops, Caputo stages the philosophical and theological questions he raises and the answers he provides in response, against the backdrop of Caputo's own search—his status as a 'pilgrim' in the world. HaH is something like a distillation of *FoG*, *IoG*, and *WoG*, its focus addresses similar issues raised in these works, but presented for a wider audience.

In CaC, Caputo offers the clearest account of the specifically Christological, soteriological, confessional, and theological implications of his thought. Broadly, Caputo's analysis weds Derridean deconstruction to Luther's *Heidelberg Disputations* (1517) and the Theology of the Cross that emerges from the polemics of that text. In Luther's Theology of the Cross, Caputo hears a general hermeneutical principle, indeed the same hermeneutical principle that marshals Tillich's Protestant Principle, namely: "The death must be *intrinsic* to the life, the victory lodged *in* defeat, the strength *in* the weakness, the glory in the cross. The difficulty is not a means to glory; the glory is embedded *in* the difficult."¹¹³ This, Caputo notes, is "the rule," "the task," it is "the principle I will follow to the bitter end."¹¹⁴ For Caputo, Luther's *theologia crucis* "holds not simply for the

¹¹³ CaC, 5 (emphasis in original).

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

battle with scholastic theology but for thinking itself.”¹¹⁵ The demand of radical doubt, circumscribed by a radical hope, is the elemental structure of Caputo's thought.

In *CaC*, Caputo provides an important historical account of the development of the notion of deconstruction. Part of Caputo's interest with doing so is genealogical. In short, Caputo shows how Continental philosophy and the project of Deconstruction are deeply rooted in Luther's project. Following the work of John van Buren, Caputo traces the development of Derrida's *Deconstruction* as it formed from Heidegger's early focus on *Destruktion*, and how Heidegger's *Destruktion* itself was shaped by Luther's translation of Paul's ἀπολῶ from 1 Corinthians 1:19. Ἀπολῶ from ἀπόλλυμι, to destroy, is translated by Luther as “zunichtemachen”¹¹⁶ to destroy or to nullify. Ἀπολῶ itself derives from the Septuagint's translation of the Hebrew from Isaiah 45:15, in which the hidden or nullified nature of God is considered. Consequently, Caputo notes, “we can see that the so-called postmodern theory [of Deconstruction] has deeply biblical roots, stretching across the Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German, and French languages, where the crucial bridge from one end to the other is found in Heidelberg.”¹¹⁷ In so doing, Caputo argues that Continental philosophy is rooted in Christian theology.

Caputo traces a variety of arguments and theological debates as *CaC* develops. Of note is his analysis of James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011) and Delores William's response to Cone in her ‘Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption.’ In his analysis of this interaction, Caputo unpacks the difference between liberation and salvation via the critical hermeneutics of Black Liberation Theology. It is, however, his discussion in the second part of the text on ‘The Cosmos’ in which Caputo extends his *theologia*

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Martin Luther, *Die Bibel: Nach Der Übersetzung Martin Luthers, Mit Apokryphen* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1985).

¹¹⁷ *CaC*, 74.

crucis to a cosmic analysis that I want to unpack here. In this section, Caputo develops a strand of thought that he had explored in the theme of ruined time that runs throughout his work from *AE* via a discussion of Katherine Keller's *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (2015). The phrase ruined time is pockmarked throughout Caputo's corpus. First developed in his 1993 *AE* and still used in his 2022 *SoG*, its basic intention is to indicate a futurity devoid of renewal—or, what he calls following Levinas, an “expenditure without return.”¹¹⁸

To unpack what ruined time concretely signifies, Caputo often appeals to scientific theories that describe potential endings of the cosmos. Here, cleaving to his oft-repeated claim that the work of modern theoretical physics far surpasses anything that the medieval metaphysician could imagine, the picture of the material cosmos that Caputo assumes is the one informed by general relativity, quantum mechanics, string theory, etc. Following from models of the universe that derive from these theories, he asks, what is the status of our universe in a “trillion trillion years,” a time in which, some models suggest, the cosmos will be stretched to an entropic state of absolute dis-equilibrium. This is the futurity of ruined time: the generative reserves of the universe will have been spent; it will be utterly devoid of events.¹¹⁹ Caputo's account of finitude assumes this future as our ultimate horizon. And, although the term ruined time is not of fundamental importance to Caputo's project as a whole, its importance as a general thematics of the end, of the future to-come, is key—this is a theme that a central role in *SoG*, to which I now turn.

Specters of God: An Anatomy of the Apophatic Imagination (SoG) like *RH*, *PaT*, or *WoG*, is both continuous with, while representing a shift from, Caputo's earlier work. The text begins with the affirmation of what Caputo calls “the mystical sense of life” or the “mystical element”

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 66

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 65.

which he notes is an “obscure imperative” that provided the “passion of my life.”¹²⁰ This mystical element, he writes,

is not a thing but a quality in things, in anything, in all things, great or small. If something does not pass through the discipline, the asceticism, the criticism, the prism, the exigency of the mystical, then I am not interested.¹²¹

Caputo, however, immediately qualifies his use of the mystical. He finds the word, or that which it evokes, productive and provocative. But he rejects the mystical as a designator of a secret mystery or a hidden gnosis in which the “desire to be one with the One.”¹²² Hence, rather than use the language of the mystical element in *SoG*, he prefers instead “the apophatic element.”¹²³ This apophatic element, he writes,

arises from a kind of archiexperience of something unencompassible, an encounter with something that lays claim to us before we make any claims on it. Call it the concealed depths, the unlit core, the nocturnal powers.¹²⁴

Caputo goes on in the preface to *SoG* to clarify his project as one focused on the apophatic event that goes on *in* religion—this focus on the ‘in’ is a theme of Caputo’s that will be returned to below. Religion as Caputo discusses it in *SoG*, in its most authentic form, cleaves to this apophatic thematic. Here, following Tillich closely, Caputo wants to find the value that goes on in religion, without affirming the value of specific religious representations themselves.¹²⁵

SoG is divided into three sections, each of which is meant to unpack what Caputo takes to be key imaginative structures of religion. He explores the ‘Ontotheological Imaginary’ in section one, the ‘Hauntological Imaginary’ in section two, and the ‘Posthuman imaginary’ in section three. Section one is perhaps the most innovative section of this text in relation to Caputo’s *oeuvre* as a whole, specifically as a consequence of his analysis of Friedrich Schelling. Schelling as a thinker

¹²⁰ *SoG*, ix-x.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, x.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, xiii.

has received relatively little attention in Caputo's work. In *SoG*, however, Schelling bridges Tillich and Derrida and ultimately Derrida and the post-human to the inhuman, or ruined time.

Caputo argues that German Idealism as a whole is post-theistic in that it represents a first move away from the medieval conception of God as an eternal immaterial spirit.¹²⁶ In Hegel's idealism, who Caputo finds much to draw on, God is understood via imaginative representations (*Vorstellungen*) and immanent themes—as we noted above. However, these themes are ultimately subordinate to an overarching concept (*Begriff*) that makes of the particular religious representation, mere parts of a larger whole. In Schelling's more voluntarist system in which God's free willing nature is stressed, "God *becomes* God by overcoming the 'dark ground,' boldly located *in* the divine being itself—a nocturnal power humanity inherits from God."¹²⁷ This then is not a system that assumes the transcendent as divorced from the depths of things. Instead, what God is *is* God's relation to the depths of things. Schelling's system, as Caputo makes clear, deploys themes from the Rhineland mystical tradition—specifically as voiced by Eckhart's claims concerning the unifying link between *das Grund der Sele* and *das Grund der Gott*.

The upshot of the importance of Schelling for Caputo in *SoG* is discernable in his appeal to Schelling's account of *Unvordenklichkeit*, or the unprethinkable. In contrast to Hegel, who saw a necessary and governing link between being and thought in which, Caputo writes, "Being reflects the categories of reason, and reason articulates the categories of being," Schelling's *Unvordenklichkeit* assumes the inability of thought to *know*/grasp Being with certainty.¹²⁸ Caputo writes, "We might say that in Hegel, being and thinking are contemporaries, whereas Schelling holds that no matter how early reason rises, being is 'always already' there."¹²⁹ Thought then, for

¹²⁶ Ibid., 10.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 10.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 141-144.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 142.

Schelling, arrives on the scene only to find Being already running. This always already unprethinkable can be understood as the *prius*, or the ground, within which the *relata* of his possible/impossible scheme is situated. And yet, as Schelling's analysis suggests and Caputo acknowledges, how we are to *think* this *unprethinkable* poses challenges. Caputo writes,

This task is paradoxical: to bring the unprethinkable to thought, just so far as possible, to catch the prephilosophical in act without turning it into more philosophy, to turn the lights on fast enough to see the dark, all of which is impossible. The unprethinkable belongs not only to a past we will never make present but also to a future we cannot foresee. That is the event, the stuff of which radical apophatics is made.¹³⁰

In the footnote that accompanies this passage, Caputo notes that via Heidegger's "hermeneutics of facticity" the "line of argument" that follows from Schelling's *Unvordenklichkeit* helped establish Caputo's own radical hermeneutical project.¹³¹ This strand of thought, then, in which philosophy is always trying to articulate something it can never quite reach, has been instrumental to the formation of Caputo's project as a whole. With that in mind, the outcomes and issues that animate Caputo's notion of the *Unvordenklichkeit* will be discussed below in greater detail—specifically when unpacking the theme of repetition in *RH*. What I want to stress here is how Caputo's discussion in *SoG* orbits a twin tension between the ultimate unsayability of things which names an irreducible epistemological gap, and the further premise of the ultimate unknowability of things which names the ontological ground of this epistemological gap. Caputo is using a 19th century German thinker whose own conceptual foundation builds upon premises rooted in the German mystical tradition, to evidence his own theological and philosophical positions in a 21st century context.

That Caputo, 45 years after the publication of *ME*, continues to publish works that wrestle with the deep unknowability and unsayability of things is not an insignificant detail to

¹³⁰ Ibid., 143.

¹³¹ Ibid., 362.

understanding his entire project. As he noted, thinking alongside the mystical, hearing its provocations, and indeed its limitations has spurred his intellectual development as a theologian, philosopher, and academic. What the above reveals is that Caputo's engagement with the mystical is not constant; differences in Caputo's approach to the mystical element are apparent. With *ME* and *HaA*, Caputo engaged the mystical in what we could call a more descriptive approach; the mystical was a part of Heidegger's, Aquinas', and Eckhart's thought, explicating how, why, and its outcomes, was a scholarly exercise. With *RH* and *PaT*, Caputo started what would become a standard of his texts. He deployed the mystical as an example of what it means to think through the paradoxical claims that he sees announced by thinkers in the Continental tradition. Caputo's background training in classical and mediaeval metaphysics allowed him to see the underlying religious and mystical tropes in writers like Heidegger, Derrida, Levinas, and Gadamer with a unique focus. The mystical element in these works, then, was deployed as a means to make more apparent the claims of theorists in the Continental tradition. In Caputo's more recent publications, such as *WoG*, *FoG*, and *SoG*, his own conception of the mystical element emerges. To echo Katherine Keller's statement from her review of *WoG* in which she wrote that Caputo comes 'out of the closet as a theologian,' in these later works, we might say, Caputo has come out of the closet as a mystic. But his is a mysticism shorn of its mythical and transcendent veneer (*Vorstellung*), decoupled from its hope in a transcendent fatherland on the horizon to-come, and remolded as a strategy of explicating philosophical and theological claims within a postmodern context. For Caputo, a post-modern context is one informed by a modern scientific worldview, the materialist turn in Continental philosophy, the fragmented status of our political, social, and cultural experiences, and an emphasis on futurity and the post-human. Mystical thought provides strategies to think through these modern tensions.

Finally, Caputo's biographical context placed him in a unique role as a scholar. His in-depth study of classical metaphysics as a young seminarian, his later skepticism regarding the Catholic Church from his post-Vatican II context, his love of existential and phenomenological philosophy, and indeed his acumen and skill as a writer, gave his analysis distinctive insight into the religious substratum that fuelled modern thought. He could 'hear' in Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida a strand of biblical and theological thinking that was overlooked by those more focused on Continental philosophy and postmodern thought alone. Moreover, his respect for these religious traditions—despite his constant frustration and criticism of them—has given his work a more balanced approach to an otherwise emotionally laden subject. Indeed, unlike more critically infused analysis of the religious via the impulses of Continental theory, e.g. Bruce Lincoln and Russell McCutcheon, Caputo's project mirrors more closely that of thinkers as Grace Jantzen or Edith Wyschogrod. Like these later thinkers, Caputo is less inclined to see a sharp division between the modern, or postmodern, and the classical and medieval periods in which religious thematics were more present. Caputo wants to remind his readers, more implicitly than explicitly, that religious, theological, and mystical elements continue to shape our thought—the questions, issues, and themes from writers in those areas speak to a common human experience that we do well to acknowledge. In this way, Caputo's writings reveal a thinker who is both secular and positive towards scientific thought and notions in his thinking, while nonetheless being religious and mystical in outlook. His thought questions what scholars in the 1960's called the secularization hypothesis, i.e., that modernity is incompatible with the religious. His is not an outright agreement with or negation of that thesis. Although his writing suggests a scholar highly critical of key doctrinal and theological claims and their positive status in the modern world, he has nonetheless striven to give voice to those elements of the religious that he thinks are compatible with

modernity. This has made his writings open to the criticism of being either too essentialist concerning the status of the religious by scholars in the academy, and too secular by theologians and religious insiders both in and outside the academy. To clarify these remarks on the reception of Caputo's work, I now turn to an evaluation of these interpretations, criticisms, and assumptions both within and indeed outside the academy.

5.3 – Secondary Scholarship on Caputo

Given Caputo's long academic career and the breadth of scholarship, responses to Caputo are nuanced, varied, and wide. We can divide these responses into three general categories: responses from thinkers in the Continental philosophical tradition, responses from Christian writers and theologians, and responses from scholars in religious studies. We can further divide these responses into those given to the early, middle, and late periods of Caputo's publications. Early texts refer to Caputo's scholarship on Heidegger, Eckhart, Aquinas, and his hermeneutical project: *ME*, *HaA*, *AE*, and *DH* are the major works in this period. I take his middle period to refer to his Derridean turn which is most notably expressed in *PaT*, but includes works up to the publication of *WoG*. I take his later texts to start from *IoG* onwards. These are obviously porous and artificial boundaries and are meant primarily as heuristic divisions aimed at providing greater clarity into Caputo's development as a writer and the types of responses his texts evoked. I will largely sidestep the first major scholarly response to Caputo with the publication of his *RH*, as those responses focused on the thoroughness of his hermeneutical project with reference to his treatment of key thinkers in that field. For example, a prominent criticism Caputo received at this time concerned his critique of Gadamer. Instead, criticism of Caputo from his engagement with Derrida will occupy more of the focus in what follows. Many of these critical responses emerge from those who distrusted what they perceived to be Caputo's overly religious reading of Derrida. Given the focus of this thesis, clarifying how and why Caputo was read this way should prove

instructive. My main focus, however, will fall more on Caputo's later publications. I do this because Caputo's own style and intention as a radical theologian and his proximity to mysticism is more thoroughly engaged by the secondary scholarship at this time.

Caputo's reading of the mystical element in Heidegger can simultaneously be understood as the philosophical element of mystical thinking. That is, in explicating the role of the mystical, Caputo tells us something about how he understands philosophy—and indeed its relation to religious matters. Whether it is the mystical or the philosophical element that is stressed, key for Caputo, as early commentators of his *ME* text noted, is his positive evaluation of Heidegger's emphasis on *thinking*. As Michael Zimmerman comments in his review of *ME*, for Caputo,

The point of reading Heidegger is not to agree automatically with everything he says, but to enter into the experience of thinking itself. Thinking is supposed to bring about a change in the thinker. Hence, genuine thinking is never merely scholarship, which is all too often the domain of the "enthusiast." To take a risk with thinking can mean to take issue with the thinker who has inspired one's own way of thought.¹³²

Zimmerman stresses what we might call a certain emic attitude that characterizes Caputo's engagement with philosophy and theology—and indeed characterizes the bulk of the critique of Caputo as a scholar. And although certainly critical of Heidegger, Caputo nonetheless follows this basic Heideggerian axiom regarding the necessity of critical reflection, philosophical analysis, and thinking (*Denken*), as particularly salutatory in modernity. Zimmerman continues,

Caputo holds that in order to guide our lives in a way that brings us as close as possible to our essential nature, we still need (perhaps now more than ever) philosophical reflection that does not degenerate into mere technical analysis, even if it does not attain the simplicity of thought.¹³³

Zimmerman rightly notes Caputo's faith in Heidegger's general claim regarding the reparatory function of *thinking* in modernity—this despite the fact that he is suspicious of Heidegger's

¹³² Michael E Zimmerman, "The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought (Review)," in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 3 (1982), 324.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 323.

backward-looking claim that yearns for a recapitulation of a pre-Socratic thinking in the present as uniquely productive for modernity. What differentiates Caputo from Heidegger is what we might call Caputo's humanism. Whereas Heidegger rejected the link between philosophy and humanism, Caputo finds in philosophy and indeed the study of religion, a fundamentally humanistic enterprise.¹³⁴ In short, philosophy, like religion and like the mystical, provide avenues of insight into the human condition which, in the modern world, continues to illuminate human experience. To understand Caputo's engagement with religion, this humanistic tendency of his needs to be appreciated. What I want to stress here is how commentators like Zimmerman noted that Caputo does more than provide a scholarly analysis of Heidegger or indeed Eckhart. He champions, rather, key elements of their thought as fundamentally valuable to the contemporary world.

This prescriptive or insider/emic aspect of Caputo's writing has not obscured the reception of his work as being objective and scholarly in analysis. References to *ME* and *HaA* in scholarship on Eckhart, Aquinas, Heidegger, metaphysics, and mysticism continue to pockmark scholarly literature. These references are both positive and negative. Sonya Sikka in her *Forms of Transcendence: Heidegger and Medieval Mystical Theology* (1997) shows both of these tendencies. Her analysis takes seriously his comparative analysis of Heidegger and Eckhart as concerns the mystical,¹³⁵ while nonetheless being critical of some of Caputo's wider claims.¹³⁶ More recently, publications such as 'Eckhart, Heidegger and Caputo: a reappraisal of 'the mystical element in Heidegger's thought' by Sylvia Avakian similarly approves of some of Caputo's basic analysis of Heidegger and Eckhart and the mystical, while taking issue with some of his central

¹³⁴ Caputo, *Lecture 13*, 11:19-11:30

¹³⁵ E.g., Sonia Sikka, *Forms of Transcendence: Heidegger and Medieval Mystical Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 4, 134, 163, 165, 185.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 266-277, 288.

arguments.¹³⁷ For example, Avakian criticizes Caputo's historicization of Eckhart and Heidegger in favour of what might be called a perennialist claim. Avakian argues that a deeper underlying structural connection unifies Eckhart and Heidegger rather, as Caputo claims, that an analogous link connects the two thinkers.¹³⁸ Finally, Caputo's work on Eckhart is still drawn on by pivotal scholars in Eckhart studies such as Bernard McGinn.¹³⁹ McGinn draws on Caputo's analysis of Eckhart's *Parisian Questions*, a systematic and logically framed analysis by Eckhart about God, nothingness, and the 'subject.'¹⁴⁰

More important to this analysis is how Caputo's engagement with Eckhart has been interpreted by those in the Continental tradition—and indeed by readers of Caputo himself. The best example of the treatment of Caputo and Eckhart occurred in Žižek and John Milbank's 2009 *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic*. When Caputo is discussed, and his weak theological position is articulated by Žižek, what is drawn out is Caputo's Eckhart inspired theological claims. Žižek finds in this Caputo, that is, the Caputo inspired by the mysticism of Eckhart, a theological voice he can repeat. Žižek writes,

I cannot fail to agree with Caputo's description of what is happening on the Cross: It is a mystification to think that there is some celestial transaction going on here, some settling of accounts between the divinity and humanity, as if this death is the amortization of a debt of long standing and staggering dimensions. If anything, no debt is lifted from us in this scene but a responsibility imposed on us.¹⁴¹

In this quote, Žižek affirms his basic agreement with Caputo's weak theological claims. Indeed, in both Žižek and Milbank's analysis, Eckhart receives a positive evaluation; his apophatics, his rejection of a clear boundary between reason and revelation, and his poetical formulations to

¹³⁷ Sylvie Avakian, "Eckhart, Heidegger and Caputo: A Reappraisal of 'the Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought,'" in *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 81 (1) (2020): 36–54.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 36-37.

¹³⁹ Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad Pub, 2001), 233, 240, 257, 263.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 233.

¹⁴¹ Žižek & Milbank, 55.

describe the relationship between the transcendent and the finite, are seen by both authors as possible alternatives to modern tensions. Consequently, they both treat Eckhart in a similar way to Caputo; they find in the ideas offered by a 13th century mystical writer a possible antidote to the tensions of modern thinking. This strategy is the one deployed by many within Continental philosophy when they refer to the mystical tradition. It is at the heart of Caputo's engagement with mysticism.

Mark Dooley in the introduction to the 2003 anthology on Caputo, *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus*, summarizes Caputo's relationship to mysticism when he writes "Caputo's affirmation of his Catholic and scholastic training becomes manifest [...] when he draws on parallels between his deconstructive tendencies and those of his Medieval masters."¹⁴² Dooley notes that the "prayers and tears of radical hermeneutics" are "no less passionate than those of the mystics."¹⁴³ He continues, "Both radical hermeneutics and mysticism share a love of the impossible, or for that which challenges our most sacred certainties. They both hope against hope for impossible dreams, dreams that revolve around the name 'God'."¹⁴⁴ The example Dooley uses to show this connection is Eckhart's prayer 'to be rid of God.' Indeed, what both Eckhart and Deconstruction rely on, their similar ground, Caputo notes, is that both use "a sublime form of language which calls for, which prays and weeps for, the other of language, for the incoming of the other, *l'invention de l'autre*."¹⁴⁵ Dooley continues,

The silence that mysticism encourages is not a means of cheating language, but the means by which language assumes its most sublime form, not because it has, at last, corresponded with reality, but because it takes the form of a prayer for what is *wholly other*—The Secret, the impossible, or, as Derrida might say, the *tout autre*. Silence is a way of saying or

¹⁴² Mark Dooley, 'Saints and Postmodernism: Introduction', in *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus*, ed. Mark Dooley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), xviii.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., xix.

¹⁴⁵ Quoted from: Ibid., xix-xx.

signaling (both linguistic operations) that, try as I might, I cannot make the impossible possible.¹⁴⁶

Dooley's analysis sheds light on a theme that will be returned to at this study's conclusion, namely the linguistic-performative nature of Caputo's mystical element. What I want to stress here is how scholars like Dooley interpret Caputo's use of mysticism. I noted above how Caputo's reading of Eckhart has been used by academics engaged in scholarly analysis of Eckhart's system. Caputo's analysis by these scholars, e.g., McGinn, is treated in a descriptive and objective fashion. We could call this Caputo's first order descriptive account of Eckhart and mysticism—this is a thorough review of the metaphysical claims of a thinker like Eckhart, grounded in a scholarly analysis of his key texts. What Dooley's account gives us is something of a second-order prescriptive account of Caputo's motivations. What Dooley observes in the prescriptive aspect of Caputo's use of mysticism—and indeed deconstructive thought in general—is the importance of these systems of thought as ways of making us stay “alert.” Dooley writes,

For Caputo, the upshot if this is clear: we must be prepared to face the worst, we must, that is, be prepared to go the distance with Nietzsche when he suggests that we are but clever animals making our way in the midst of an anonymous rumbling which is devoid of sense and meaning.¹⁴⁷

As we will see, a leitmotif of Caputo's project, from his focus on Luther's Theology of the Cross, Heidegger's focus on our factual condition, to his latter focus on ‘Ruinology,’ is to rhetorically evidence ‘the worst’ and the necessity and value of facing the worst without compunction. The mystics that Caputo studied as a scholar, offer an example of what it means to face up fully to the worst of things, or to the potential worst that always already threatens factual experience. The mystical element is that element of the religious that faces up to the “anonymous rumbling” that we cannot escape. Seen in this light, Caputo's project offers his modern readers—both inside and

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., xx.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., xv.

outside the academy—strategies of thought that productively confront the worst. I will argue in chapter 7 that Caputo's analysis and deployment of *Gelassenheit* is precisely this: a strategic deployment of the linguistic and conceptual resources of the medieval mystical tradition to incite in his modern readers the performative outcome of letting-go. This focus on letting-go, I argue, is best understood as Caputo's prescription for how to navigate the modern world, not via strong claims and strong attachments but via a subtle and playful engagement with the world that makes us face up to the worse without falling for strong metaphysical claims that obscure reality.

How though, more broadly, has Caputo's theology been understood? For our purposes, it is reaction to Caputo's project and his use of Deconstruction that provides the most clarity to this question. Very broadly, as scholars like Jeffrey Robbins interpret him, Caputo can be understood as an echo of the death-of-God theologians which can be traced back to the work of Altizer and his 1966 *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*.¹⁴⁸ Altizer's blend of Hegel and Nietzsche to argue for the good news of the death of God, mirror's basic theological assumptions of Caputo's. Though via Caputo's appeal to Derrida and Deconstruction, he ultimately rejects Altizer's strong a-theological formulation. Likewise, Caputo is framed as a thinker writing in the echoes of the secularization hypothesis, a theory made most famous by Harvey Cox's 1965 *The Secular City*. Cox argued that the demographic trends of American culture in the 1950's and 1960's suggested that, in time, America would ultimately find itself devoid of its Christian foundation.¹⁴⁹ Finally, Robbins casts a wider conceptual net and frames Caputo's general project in line with post-Holocaust theologians and philosophers. Caputo's weak theological project, Robbins suggests, can

¹⁴⁸ John D Caputo, Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 1-2.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

be understood as trying to make sense of an all-powerful God's silence in light of atrocities of the Holocaust.¹⁵⁰

Robbins also sees an organic link between death-of-God theologies and postmodern theology expressed by Caputo and others in the Continental tradition. The link that weds them, and weds Caputo to thinkers like Vattimo, is the theme of weakness. Robbins writes,

In contrast to the variant of contemporary religiosity that asserts itself strongly and triumphantly, Caputo offers a postcritical religion in the sense that he wants to affirm faith, though without absolute or certain knowledge, and he seeks to value religious traditions, while keeping his distance from the actual historic faith communities. In short, his is not a theology of power but a theology of weakness that connects the weakness of God with the ethical imperative to serve the poor and needy.¹⁵¹

Robbins rightly notes the in-between nature of Caputo's project. He wants to affirm the death-of-God, the death of metaphysical absolutes, while, in what Robbins calls the postcritical focus, he wants to affirm the value of religion. This postcritical aspect of Caputo's project is elemental to many in the Continental tradition in general. Caputo, Robbins notes via a citation,

sees postmodernity as 'a more enlightened Enlightenment [that] is no longer taken in by the dream of Pure Objectivity...It has a post-critical sense of critique that is critical of the idea that we can establish air-tight borders around neatly discriminated spheres or regions like knowledge, ethics, art, and religion.'¹⁵²

Caputo, in short, is suspicious of suspicion and confidence; of any epistemological project that assumes "strong" claims, whether critical or not. A term that Caputo uses to emphasize this suspicion is undecidability which religion typifies because,

Religious truth is a truth without knowledge...Undecidability is the place in which faith takes place, the night in which faith is conceived, for night is its element. Undecidability is the reason that faith is faith and not knowledge, and the way that faith can be true without knowledge.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 15-16.

¹⁵² Ibid., 20.

¹⁵³ Quoted from: Ibid., 21.

What Robbins highlights is how the loss of meaning that undergirds a variety of cultural and religious movements in modernity, play out and unfold in Caputo's thought. The impact shows itself in Caputo's constant reference to weakness, deconstruction, undecidability, etc. Likewise, this context shapes what it is Caputo sees religion doing. For Caputo, religion does not provide an accurate corresponding account of the cosmos or the world; it is rather a poetic, creative, and imaginative expression of human experience. Its epistemic outcome is not factual, but factical—it speaks to the human condition, from the human condition. In short, Caputo sees religion as stripped of its power, hierarchy, and authority, but not its force. Giving expression to its force, denuded of power, is at the core of Caputo's project.

And yet, although Caputo's project might be understood as referring to the more secular, human, and weak thematics of religion, his project has been read by some in the Continental tradition as starkly theological. Martin Hägglund, for example, argues that Caputo provides a “theological account” of Deconstruction which obscures the otherwise a-metaphysical characteristics of Derridean thought.¹⁵⁴ For Hägglund, Derrida's thought is aimed only at edifying mortal experience, thus any appeal to an ephemeral impossible or undecidable in his system is a fundamentally flawed claim. Along these lines, Hägglund argues that Caputo “systematically misreads Derrida” by seeing religion and deconstruction as both motivated by a similar “passion” for the impossible.¹⁵⁵ Via an analysis of *PaT*, Hägglund writes,

According to Caputo, Derrida's critique of negative theology is a “first, preparatory and merely negative point,” which is superseded by an affirmation of the desire that drives negative theology: “deconstruction says yes, affirming what negative theology affirms whenever it says no. Deconstruction desires what negative theology desires and it shares the passion of negative theology.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 11.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Hägglund's argument is that Deconstruction affirms life, while mystical practices like negative theology affirms a life to-come. Caputo, according to Hägglund, obscures this division. Moreover, Hägglund draws on Eckhart's theory of detachment, *Gelassenheit*, to clarify the difference he sees between negative theology and deconstruction. Hägglund argues that at the core of Eckhart's account of detachment is a fundamental rejection of the things of this world so as to experience God more fully. In short, he writes, Eckhart stresses a "detachment that is supposed to release one from concern with what has been and what will come, in order to let things be in themselves and approach the timeless presence of God."¹⁵⁷ Hence, humans should aim at becoming absolutely still, detached, like God "[to] whom nothing can happen since God is exempt from time."¹⁵⁸ Eckhart's thought, according to Hägglund, is one that points his readers away from finitude, the world, and mortal life, and towards the full unchanging presence of God. Derrida, in contrast, deploys deconstructive thought and thinkers like Eckhart in order to affirm life and mortality in its fullest. Even the messianic focus of the later Derrida, Hägglund argues, is "for Derrida a hope for temporal survival, faith [for him] is always faith in the finite, and the desire for God is a desire for the mortal, like every other desire."¹⁵⁹ Caputo's reading of Derrida, Hägglund argues, infuses a faith element that sees the impossible or the undecidable as signifiers of a theological reality that prioritizes the life to-come over our present life.

But Hägglund's account of Eckhart is simply too one sided. First, it is instructive that Hägglund notes that "the same argument" that Eckhart is making can also be found in Pseudo-Dionysius.¹⁶⁰ Both, he argues, are unified in the desire to overcome finite attachments in order to gain transcendent outcomes. And of course, on its surface, this connection is organic: Eckhart's

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 117.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 117-118.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 120.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 119.

Neoplatonic inspired Christianity does indeed share a conceptual genealogy with the Areopagite as I noted in chapter 2. But Eckhart's thought speaks to two foci. In the first, he is a learned *Lesemeister*, a scholar trained in a style of metaphysical rhetoric which speaks to the Neoplatonic foundations of Christian theology. But Caputo, although certainly attentive to the Neoplatonic elements of Eckhart's thought, is also attentive to Eckhart the *Lebenmeister*—the master of life. This Eckhart, the master of life, is not the Eckhart who held the same chair of theology as Aquinas at the University of Paris, but is more closely representative of the preacher and educator of the nuns, beguines, and members of his congregation later in his life. In this latter position, Eckhart was not simply communicating abstract Neoplatonic truths about the nature of God in the tradition of the *via negativa*. Rather, he was providing practical skills for living more fully in this life, now. Hägglund's understanding of Eckhart repeats a common error, he reduces Eckhart to a mere metaphysician divorced from the concerns of common life. But Eckhart was a Dominican, the Order of Preachers, whose aim was not only metaphysical speculation but was *also* aimed at providing guidance for how to live fully in this life. It is Eckhart the *Lebenmeister* that influenced those who followed him; for example, Johannes Tauler (1300-1369) and Angelus Silesius (1624-1677). In Silesius's emphasis on the 'rose without why' Caputo hears this celebration of life, in all of its factual messiness. Detachment here is seen not as a way to escape the chains of finitude and fly to the One—a 'flight of the alone to the alone,' as Hägglund wants to read Eckhart. Instead, detachment for Silesius, following Eckhart, is a strategy for encountering life as fully and completely as possible.

On its surface, Eckhart and those that followed him do anchor their claims in the certitude of a metaphysical order which justifies their assertions. But, whereas Hägglund wants to chain Eckhart's thought to the theological assumptions that undergird it, Caputo, following more closely

the deconstructive urge that spurs Derridean thought, hears something else getting itself said by thinkers like Eckhart. Hägglund holds to a sort of fundamentalist Deconstruction in which those words and concepts whose pedigree is metaphysical, cannot, as a consequence, escape the grip of the *presence* assumed by that system.¹⁶¹ In Hägglund's desire to show that Caputo's is "the most influential misreading of Derrida" he shackles the language of presence he hears in Eckhart to an undeconstructable foundation.¹⁶² In doing so, Hägglund turns Caputo's project into a sort of crypto-theology that belies its metaphysical assumptions. I would argue, however, that Caputo's reading of Eckhart follows more closely the spirit of Deconstruction. Caputo hears in Eckhart a thinker whose project deconstructs the medieval system he thought within. In his prayer to 'rid himself of God,' he deconstructed the image of the presence of the fullness of the God given by the medieval tradition. This is what Caputo calls the radical Eckhart, e.g., it is not so much Eckhart's thought as it is the type of thinking that Eckhart inspired. In short, we might say that Caputo radicalizes Derrida by extending the urge to deconstruction to areas that a more traditional reading of Derrida might find problematic. What Hägglund's reading of Caputo shows us is how Caputo has been read as offering a religious or theological, and therefore incorrect, reading of Derrida's deconstruction project.

Chapter 6 – John D. Caputo: Key Ideas

In his 1966 essay 'Religion as a Cultural system' the anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote on the difference between "moods and motivations" and their importance for understanding the actions of individuals and groups within religion. Geertz writes, whereas:

motivations are "made meaningful" with reference to the ends toward which they are conceived to conduce [...] moods are "made meaningful" with reference to the conditions

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 127.

¹⁶² Ibid., 213.

from which they are conceived to spring. We interpret motives in terms of their consummations, but we interpret moods in terms of their sources”¹

Motives are directional, they tend toward a specific course of action; moods, in contrast, vary only in “intensity”—moods name the always already performative context which shapes our experiences.² The previous chapter discussed some key sources of Caputo’s thinking or its ‘mood’ in his Catholic upbringings and his early existential explorations. This early focus names what Lovejoy called the “persistent dynamic factors” which shape an idea’s origin and expression; they colour the ‘mood’ of the thinker giving a unique concentration of focus to their work.³ Caputo, I argued, was shaped by his post-Vatican II context and the emerging importance of Continental philosophy on Catholic thinkers as seen in the influence of existentialism and phenomenology. In this section, I want to unpack what Lovejoy calls the “component elements” or “unit ideas” of Caputo’s project; in other words, to trace what Geertz calls the motivations with reference to the significance of their “ends” in Caputo’s project as a whole.

Caputo’s central motivation, without which his project’s themes and aims cannot be fully appreciated, can be summarized in a remark from the concluding chapter of his *AH*. He writes: “My concern throughout has been to keep metaphysics to a minimum.”⁴ And, although this quotation refers specifically to one text and is thus not meant by Caputo to signify the intention of his analysis *in toto*, I nonetheless take this to be the principal axiom of Caputo’s for several reasons.

First then, Caputo’s project is marked by an *antipathy* towards metaphysics. In his *AE* text, this motivation is evidenced by his desire to root ethical claims not within a universalizable and rational application of a law which is then applied to a particular circumstance. Rather, he appeals to the theme of obligation to establish his ethical claims. Obligation for Caputo signifies the

¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 104.

² Ibid.

³ Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 5.

⁴ *AE*, 220.

imperfect, flawed, and clumsy ways in which we seek to productively encounter one another—how our being-together is always already grounded in material and factual conditions ‘from below’ which both comports our behavior and compels our relations. Obligations, in short, cannot be formalized. If we were to situate Caputo’s motivations within a classical formulation, he holds a decidedly Aristotelian perspective. He thus follows the downward direction of the Stagirite’s hand as portrayed in Raphael’s *The School of Athens*; in finitude, depth, and the markings and experiences of ‘this world’ is to be found the motivations which make meaningful the elemental moods or dispositions that govern Caputo’s interests.

Second, Caputo’s project is marked by a *love* of metaphysics—or, perhaps a more suitable word would be transcendence.⁵ In *The School of Athens*, although Plato and Aristotle point in different directions—Plato gesturing up while holding his *Timaeus* and Aristotle gesturing down while holding his *Nicomachean Ethics*—both thinkers are drawn together as if connected at the waist, as if they were two sides of one body. And in one sense, in the development of Western thought of which Caputo is most certainly an heir, Plato and Aristotle were always understood as representing two halves of a whole perspective—the world of the cave, and the light of the sun, where two halves of the same whole. Caputo’s thought reflects this relationship. And yet, Caputo’s formation by a critique of a pre-Vatican II Thomistic metaphysics which was itself amplified by his engagement with Heidegger and his project of overcoming the onto-theo-logical structure of Western metaphysics, strongly orients his project. But, as noted above, it is his ‘taste for the mystics’ as well as what can perhaps only be called a general appreciation for the ‘poetics’ contained in metaphysical thought, which has kept Caputo rapt to a style of thinking that echoes this metaphysical heritage. Thus if we hear in the ‘meta’ of metaphysics not ‘after’ as in after-the-

⁵ John Caputo, “Levinas 1 – Intro,” Lecture, on <https://johndcaputo.com> (Dec. 7, 2010), 1:17:14.

physics of Aristotle, but in another prepositional use which can denote “in the midst of” which signifies “association, union, and accompaniment”⁶—a hermeneutical approach common to Caputo’s own style—we can discern how Caputo engages the metaphysical: he wants to think in the midst of metaphysics, in the space opened by its discursive aims; not to repeat its metaphysical assumptions, but to hear otherwise its poetical impulses.

What Caputo ultimately wants to avoid is the tendency of metaphysical thought to totalize experience and knowledge. By totalization, he understands metaphysics as trying to provide an absolute, true, and certain account of the world in both its invisible and visible structures. Caputo’s thought is allergic to this totalizing tendency; he strives continually to make evident that which is not accounted for in any system, metaphysics or otherwise. And yet, this same allergy to totalization is equally applied to the total critique of metaphysics that has dominated the work of thinkers like Heidegger and has had a strong influence on the development of Continental thought and indeed of modern secular thought. In contrast, Caputo wants his readers to hear what is ‘getting itself said’ by metaphysical discourse outside of its history as a totalizing vision of experience and knowledge. Caputo writes:

The time has come to overcome the “overcoming of metaphysics.” Or to make it plain that the point of overcoming metaphysics is to “not-be-overcome-by-metaphysics,” by too much metaphysics, not to suffocate or to perish from the extravagant, totalizing tendencies of a maximizing metaphysics. A maximizing metaphysics is always too violent for events, which are very delicate and tender little growths...*One cannot avoid some sort of metaphysics or another, but that does not mean that one needs to rush headlong into the most extravagant, totalizing, maximalist, metanarrative, in short, the most meta-physical forms of metaphysics.*⁷

One way to understand Caputo’s project in general and indeed his engagement with mysticism more particularly, as indeed I am stressing here, is via the twin tensions of wanting to both

⁶ Joseph Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Coded with Strong's Concordance Numbers*, 9th ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 402.

⁷ *AE*, 221 (emphasis added).

overcome metaphysics while nonetheless arguing that we are always already situated in a type of metaphysical language that forms the horizon within which we think. What mystical writers and authors do for Caputo, is deploy particularly felicitous and generative accounts of this metaphysical structure, but in a way which reduces its totalizing tendency. For Caputo, in short: metaphysics must be subordinate to a worldview that assumes the primacy of finitude and the material; while finitude must be understood as excessive in *structure*, a container that contains the uncontainable—an immanent *khora akhoraton*. This excessive finite element is formalized via rules and structures throughout the history of Western thought and can be discerned in early Greek metaphysics, mystical authors, the medieval Schoolmen, the German romantic/idealists, and in contemporary Continental philosophy.

It is attempting to name the excessive structure of human experience, material phenomenon, and the future to-come, that marshals Caputo's work and is key to understanding his project. Indeed, in order to understand Caputo's motivations for engaging mystical thought, and how he deploys it, this tension between a desire to engage metaphysics with the aim of cautiously translating its key themes and notions into the language of immanence, is pivotal to Caputo's use of the mystical element. Likewise, this approach of Caputo's is central to understanding the core of his philosophical and theological ideas, specifically: the event, weakness, hospitality, radical theology, and mythopoetics and theopoetics. In what follows I unpack these ideas with reference to this dual approach to metaphysics that marshals Caputo's project.

6.1 – The Event

The concept of the event is not Caputo's. The terms pedigree can be traced to Heidegger and his notion of the *Ereignis* which names an “event” or an “event of appropriation.”⁸ Hence,

⁸ *ME*, 290.

given Heidegger's influence on Caputo, every major publication of his, from his 1978 *ME* to his 2022 *SoG*, this term has been pivotal. In his earlier works, the notion of the event tended to be treated descriptively, merely recounting how the term functioned in Heidegger's thought. But, as Caputo's own thought progressed and his work developed a more self-conscious style of its own, Caputo shifted to a more prescriptive use of the term. In short, Caputo's scholarly second-order engagement with thinkers like Heidegger, led to a first order use of terms like the event. However, Caputo's use of the event, though certainly grounded in Heidegger, is, in his later work, more tightly tied to the notion of the event as expressed by thinkers like Badiou, Deleuze, Derrida, and Žižek. There are then two distinct uses of the event in Caputo's oeuvre, unpacking those uses and evidencing Caputo's proximity to these thinkers as a consequence of this overlap, needs to be first unpacked before clarifying Caputo's own distinct use of the event.

In *ME*, as with all of Caputo's early work, the event is analyzed as a technical term derived from Heidegger's account of the *Ereignis*. For Heidegger, according to Michael Inwood, our "situation"—i.e., where we find ourselves—does not contain "static elements, but '*Ereignisse*'."⁹ An event in this characterization names a diachronic process not a synchronic moment—we do not analyze *the* event, but *an* event. Our situation or experience is thus not to be understood as a closed neutral monad in which disconnected events manifest, but is rather always already composed of interconnected evental moments that shape and indeed "provides *Motivation*" for the unfolding of experience.¹⁰ For example, in Heidegger's account of the development of Western metaphysics as a nihilistic process, the event signifies distinct moments in the unfolding of thought that provide the motivation for this unfolding.¹¹ These moments, though singular, are unified

⁹ Michael Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 55.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

temporally via a protension/retention scheme—the event's status is in-between this temporal unfolding.

In *ME*, Caputo examines the notion of the event in relation to the mysticism of Eckhart and contrasts it with Heidegger's account. For Heidegger, the event signals a non-historical account of the ways in which things come to be, to pass, *in time itself*.¹² Non-historical here signifies the events dis/connected quality—it is both conditional to its historical context, while implying a rupture in that historical process which is not reducible to that context. Importantly, Caputo's claim in *ME* is that this temporal account of the event contrasts with, though is somehow unified to, a mystical a-temporal notion of the event. In short, the event signals a moment of Heidegger's thought that although on its surface shows a family resemblance to themes that issue from thinkers like Eckhart is, at its core, radically distinct. Caputo writes:

There is in Heidegger—in contrast to Meister Eckhart's Christian Neoplatonism—a profoundly “secular” character, despite all of Heidegger's talk of the “gods” and the “holy.” Secular means having to do with the *saeculum*, the ages, the times. But the “times” are to be understood, for Heidegger, in terms of the mission (*Geschick*) of Being, and the mission of Being in terms of the Event of Appropriation (*Ereignis*).¹³

Heidegger's notion of the event is tethered to historical presuppositions that thinkers like Eckhart—being as they are in a medieval context that functioned before the historical turn—were simply exempt from. Hence, according to Caputo, “it is profoundly *uncharacteristic* of the mystic to be concerned with the historical; it is profoundly characteristic of him to identify his experience as an experience of a timeless now.”¹⁴

However, although this temporal division is heuristically helpful to identifying some key divisions between Heidegger and Eckhart, it is not the full picture. Indeed, Caputo further complicates the notion of time in Heidegger by discussing a seminar Heidegger gave on “Time

¹² *ME*, 228.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 227 (emphasis in original).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

and Being.”¹⁵ In this seminar, “Heidegger claims that the “it” (*das Es*) which “gives” (*es gibt*) is not time—for time is also “given” (*Es gibt Zeit*)—but the Event (*Ereignis*) itself. The Event, therefore, to the extent that it is the source of time, is itself beyond time.”¹⁶ Caputo continues by arguing that one way to understand how Heidegger is framing the event here, is to think it alongside his discussion of “rest” in his *On the Way to Language* where “the stillness, rest, conceived strictly, is always more in motion than all motion and always more restlessly active than any agitation.”¹⁷ Rest, Caputo notes, “is not an absence of motion” but something like “the assembling together of all motions.”¹⁸ Rest, that is, assumes the totality of motion in order for rest as such to occur; rest is thus imaged as an event of/in motion, not its cessation. Consequently, “since the whole which remains at rest is greater than any moving part, the whole is more in motion than any of its part.”¹⁹ It is via this framework that rest is paralleled with the event by Caputo. The event, he writes “as the abiding source of the succession of metaphysical epochs, is more in motion than the historical movement to which it gives rise.”²⁰ Hence, “while the event as the *source* of history is prior to time, it is still the source of *history*.”²¹ The event for Heidegger, Caputo is suggesting, has a properly transcendental function—it is the condition of possibility for eventual change in the history of Western metaphysics. Events happen, they turn history, but they are not *in* history.

Two points can be drawn from the above. First, Caputo’s analysis of the event in *ME* aims at making evident how a thinker like Heidegger differs from a mystic like Eckhart. Whereas Eckhart’s thought is unhistorical in origin, asserting an atemporal or perennial source for the unfolding of the true event (e.g., Christ’s resurrection) that thought can unify with, Heidegger’s

¹⁵ Ibid., 228.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

thought is radically historical and temporal. Caputo's scholarship at this stage of his thought, therefore, finds in terms like the event terms which make obvious how Heidegger differs from thinkers like Eckhart. This as opposed to Caputo advocating his own conception of the event. That being said, it is noteworthy that Caputo appeals to Eckhart's ahistorical mysticism in order to clarify his understanding of Heidegger's project. Second, Caputo's principal aim is scholarly edification, i.e., he is concerned with a descriptive account of the use of the term *Ereignis* in Heidegger's thought which aids in his explication of Eckhart. At this point in Caputo's development, his own use of the event is not evident.

Caputo continues his descriptive use of the event in *HaA* where, as with *ME*, the event is used to think through the differences between Aquinas and Heidegger. This is also true of his *DH* text. In these three early books then, the event is primarily engaged in order to clarify distinctions that emerge in the history of Western thought. But it is in *AE* that Caputo's own use of the term begins to take shape. In part, this is because in *AE* Caputo is trying to step past Heidegger, to follow his demythologization of the philosopher, while still finding productive insights that emerge from Heidegger's thought. What the event allows him to do in this work is to describe how ethics, or in this book, obligation, arises in social interaction, without positing either a subject that acts or an object (i.e., the ethical) that we act to repeat.²² The event's in-between status is an underlying motivation for Caputo's use of it. Caputo thus appeals to the history of the understanding of the event to help give shape to his own developing philosophical and indeed theological project. Thus, he writes that events "press hard upon us and demand a decision, a finite cut in the flow of events, or response to an ambiguous turn events, here and now."²³ Events happen; our response to the event and indeed their impact on us, is the evental process. Naming how events conspire to

²² *AE*, 106.

²³ *Ibid.*

galvanize a productive and fruitful relation with other people and communities, is how he uses it in *AE*.

One way to understand how Caputo uses the event in *AE* is best accounted for in his appeal to the middle voice that, echoing Gadamer, runs throughout this work and indeed is instrumental to his later project. On the middle voice, he writes, “Events knit themselves together in a kind of middle voice action that is neither purely active nor purely passive.”²⁴ Whereas ethical action proceeds by emphasising an active subject that stands at the core of each event, the notion of obligation that Caputo explores in *AE*, proceeds via the “the call of relation that proceeds all ethical action.”²⁵ Here, the event is prescriptive; Caputo wants to show that via the logic of the event we can discern a more complete or fuller account of relational activity. This is a relation that forms from the force of a relational dynamic that, *pace* Heidegger, stitches experience together in time while also being the condition of possibility for the emergence of experience itself. The event at this stage of Caputo’s thought is present, but is still largely anchored in Heideggerian thought.

It is curious that in Caputo’s *RH* text the event does not emerge as a dominant theme. On the occasions in which Caputo does discuss the event, it is in reference to Heidegger or Gadamer in a descriptive analysis of their hermeneutical suppositions. What makes this curious is that *RH* is Caputo’s first major independent work in which he is actively prescribing his own philosophical and hermeneutical strategies—the theme of the radical, which reverberates throughout Caputo’s later work, is first given focus here—but the event as such is not actively formalized by him here. With that said, near the text’s conclusion Caputo makes a remark regarding a deconstructive reading of Heidegger’s *Ereignis*. A longer quote from Caputo here will help contextualize his claims:

²⁴ Ibid., 233.

²⁵ Ibid., 236.

The question of a postmetaphysical ethics, thus, must be approached in connection with the delimitation of eschatological metaphysics which we have been pursuing. This delimitation lands us squarely in the play and in the dissemination of the manifold senses of Being. On this deconstructive rereading, Heidegger's most uncircumventable thought lies in the *Ereignis*, which is not "the truth of Being" (Being as *Ereignis*) but that which gives Being. The truth of Being is that there are many truths of Being.²⁶

This quotation is revealing in what it suggests about Caputo's trajectory. In shearing the event from Heidegger's onto-theo-logic scheme, Caputo is able to propose a reading that squares with his emphasis on "the flux" that runs throughout *RH*.²⁷ Events happen; they do so without the support of Being (Heidegger), or the overarching guidance of a Being (Hegel). The relational unfolding that Caputo argues undergirds experience is marked by unique eventual interruptions; the task of thought and indeed action is to honestly confront that which the event signifies without the aid of metaphysical and teleological supports. Thus, in line with his basic thesis in *AE*, the task of thought is to learn to productively move within the flux of experience, establish productive relations within the flux, and recognize that flux, not permanence, is our home. In this way, Caputo is able to ascribe universal significance to the event, without making the event a mere signifier of a universal.

It is his *PaT* text that Caputo's own distinct use of the event is given its first major expression. Cleaving to Derrida's notion of the event as *événement*, Caputo thinks the name of God as the name of an occasion of the other—of the in-coming of the unanticipated. Caputo writes, "getting ready for the 'invention' of the other, covenanting (*con-venire*) with its in-coming (*in-venire*), initiating a pact with the impossible, sticking to the promise of inalterable alterity, *tout autre*—that, says Derrida, 'is what I call deconstruction' [...]. That is his passion."²⁸ The event is here a rupture from 'I know not what', from that which takes one by surprise, whose otherness

²⁶ *RH*, 238.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

²⁸ *PaT*, 4.

shocks the familiarity of the present by the other of the unexpected. But, and key to understanding Caputo's project, this event of the other is not a total surprise. The event for Caputo is always an in-coming of what I do not expect, *against the horizon of what I know*. Events for Caputo do not signify an unmediated engagement with a force or impact whose ground is 'otherwise than being.' They are not expected, but they form *from* the ground of expectation. The event is here correlated to Derrida's Deconstruction project as a whole. Like Deconstruction, whose "point" is to "loosen and unlock structures, to let the shock of alterity set them in motion," "to produce new forms," so too does the event refer "to something whose coming the eye hath not seen nor ear heard" to, he notes, expose the structures of what are, to "the trauma of something unexpected."²⁹ Caputo needs to be understood here as being driven by the desire to show the ways in which experience and indeed thought is always already marked by a certain unknowability. This unknowability is not a Kantian noumenal/phenomenal distinction, as more recent scholars have suggested,³⁰ but is rather indicative of what Caputo calls the mystical element. That is, the emergence of the event arises as a consequence of a structural unknowability that is both epistemological and ontological. The language of Deconstruction, which is the language of theopoetics (to be discussed below), and indeed the language of the mystic, is privileged in its ability to name this radical unknowability.

Within this appeal to the event lay a response to a larger theological tension that was important in 20th century theology, namely the debate between Paul Tillich and Karl Barth. To yearn to engage the unexpected, the absolute *tout autre*, is to yearn for what Tillich argued undergirds kerygmatic theology, i.e., a theology that assumes the possibility of a relation with the revelation of God's utter otherness. For Barth, revelation is given directly and unmediated to the

²⁹ Ibid., 18.

³⁰ Joeri Schrijvers and Martin Koci, 'John D. Caputo's Radical Theology in Europe: An Introduction,' in *The European Reception of John D. Caputo's Thought: Radicalizing Theology*, ed. Joeri Schrijvers and Martin Koci (London: Lexington Books, 2023) 4.

subject or the community from this divine source. In contrast, Tillich, deploying his Protestant principle, argued that theological and revelatory claims are always to be understood as being mediated by and through human symbols. Human symbols are imperfect, they fall short of that which is signified. Consequently, the ideas and claims derived from theology and indeed philosophy are always themselves correlative to and mediated by the social, cultural, and historical context from which they arise. Caputo's thought is itself always correlational, there are no unmediated experiences or events for him—it is relation all the way down. This correlation supposition runs throughout Caputo's project, it is most discernible in his later work in which his engagement with Hegel's system and indeed Tillich's theology is given favourable focus. It is likewise evident in his debates and disagreements with contemporary Continental philosophers, for example his negative appraisal of Quentin Meillassoux's critique of correlationism.³¹ Against Meillassoux, Caputo argues that although the term correlation is not itself perfect, it nonetheless names “a law of direct proportions about knowing and the known; it is not and it certainly need not be, a form of idealism” as Meillassoux charged.³² For Caputo, who strongly rejects the Barthian principle of a *ganz andere*, we cannot escape our factual situation; we always interpret and experience within horizons of expectation. Thus, although the event signals a disruption of the order of things, it does not emerge *sui generis*.

Finally, in *PaT*, Caputo's account of the event is always expressed via the language of expectation and hope—of a certain type of human yearning that is irreducible. He correlates this yearning for the unexpected with the basic idea of the messiah in the Jewish and Christian tradition. Quoting from Derrida's reading of Maurice Blanchot's *Writing of the Disaster* (1980), Caputo notes “Jewish messianic thought (according to certain commentators) suggests the relation

³¹ *IoG*, 186-188, 197-200.

³² *Ibid.*, 200.

between the event (*événement*) and its nonconcurrence (*inavènement*).”³³ What messianic thought provides, Caputo further explains, is a “way to think about time, about events, about the way they eventuate precisely inasmuch as they do not occur.”³⁴ In short, if ingredient to what the messiah is is his expectancy, his status as hoped for, then his arrival in real time would negate that structural to-come which is elemental to what the messiah is.³⁵ Indeed, Caputo writes further, “even if the messiah is there, *là*, in the flesh, present in ordinary time, such a presence can never amount to a coming, for coming—*venue, venir, l’avenir*—does not belong to the order of presence,

‘*sa venue ne correspond pas à une présence*,’ but to the messianic order. Even if the Messiah stands before us, even if we poke him in the ribs, it will be necessary to say, to call and invoke, ‘*viens, viens*,’ for the coming of the Messiah is not a gross event, heavy and thick with presence. Blanchot’s “come” comes along with a ‘don’t come!’ if coming is reduced to being present.”³⁶

By unifying his account of the event with this messianic structure, Caputo makes expectation or yearning ingredient to the event’s emergence in *PaT*.

Like the messiah, there is no event which comes fully and in absolute presence. Instead, events are always expected in time as, in time, there is no presence *as such*, there is only the to-come. This to-come messianic principle assumes Husserl’s temporal protension/retention scheme—the present moment is always already caught within and between the pull of temporal duration. The event is not unlike the moment which arises between the protention of the future as it extends from the present and the retention of the past as it impresses itself into the present to-come. That which arises between these temporal movements, the present moment, never rests, it is itself always inscribed with the to come. The task of thought is to make itself ready for this surprise, this expectancy. Caputo finds in the language of hope something like an existential

³³ *PaT*, 79.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

account of this phenomenological notion of time; the ‘prayers and tears’ of the hopeful expectation of that which we cannot see coming, whose arrival seems and indeed is impossible, is the condition of possibility for hope *as such*. In short, for Caputo, the event interrupts by its expectant-unexpectancy—its hoped for to-come whose arrival is both impossible and necessary.

Caputo’s later major works, *WoG*, *CaC*, *IoG*, *FoG*, and *SoG*, all develop upon the notion of the event that he unpacks in *PaT*. A key difference from Caputo’s work in the 90’s compared to these texts from 2004 onwards is Caputo’s continued desire to think the implications of the event via the constraints of theology. In what he calls a “theology of the event” Caputo’s summarizes his understanding of the event in *WoG* via eight accounts. First, events are uncontainable; “they make names restless with the promise and future.”³⁷ This futural quality, as just noted in the discussion of *PaT*, is key to all of Caputo’s thoughts on the event. In *WoG*, in contrast to *PaT*, Caputo more deliberately wants to think about names like God as themselves harboring events. The outcome of this approach is to find in the event of the name God a signifier of weakness—the weakness of God is the event harbored in the hope contained in the expectancy of the promise given in God’s name. In short, this is a repetition of Caputo’s account of the messiah in *PaT* but stated in a more obviously theological way.

Events are also polyvalent, there is a structural repeatability that is elemental to its phenomenal quality. This distinguishes an event from a general occurrence, which is singular and ineffectual. Events are thus undergirded by a structural transferability, i.e., they carry forward (*ferre*) towards (*trans*) new events.³⁸ This iterative quality of the event echoes Derrida’s *différance*—it is the non-presencing and iterative spacing of the event from which its potency or structural force arrives/derives. The event names an irreducibly excessive characteristic of

³⁷ *WoG*, 2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

experience; this excessive quality names the capacity of the event to incite by insisting.³⁹ This claim regarding the excess of the event names not simply our experience of the event as excessive to the expectant order of things, but also the way in which the event itself *calls* us. That is, the event has within it the structure of a call, of an excessive more than whose entreaty comes upon and incites the subject. In short, events “require a response from us.”⁴⁰ This responsive quality of the event speaks to the theme of correlation in Caputo’s thought. Events speak *to us*, that is, although they speak to a structural impossibility or excess that is more-than-human, that excess is always already attuned to or in relation with what can be assumed within the horizon of human expectation.

Hence, events for Caputo have a sort of extra or hyper-phenomenological quality about them. They refer “neither to an actual being or entity nor to being itself, *but to an impulse or aspiration simmering within both the names of entities and the name of being, something that groans to be born.*”⁴¹ Elsewhere Caputo will refer to a things intensity or magnification when trying to name the ways in which events exceed themselves, a sort of virtual excess that emerges within the play of finitude. This virtual magnification is akin to the process of the event, it invites and “invokes” by naming a “disturbance within the heart of being.”⁴² Giving voice to this disturbance, its evental unfolding, is what Caputo has in mind with the event.

However, that which is promised in the event, that which is solicited in the call, is not necessarily a good thing. If there was a guarantee of the goodness of the event, then Caputo’s thought would align more closely with thinkers like Hegel in which the event that arises is always subordinate to the direction and pull of an overarching concept that felicitously governs its

³⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 5 (emphasis added).

⁴² Ibid.

unfolding. The arc of history, for Caputo, does not necessarily bend towards justice—the to-come is always already marked by an excessive unprogrammability that resists a predetermined moral telos. Thus, in emphasizing this quality of the event, Caputo makes its basic structure ‘weak’ as the event could, perhaps, yield a productive outcome—but it could equally not do that. This risky quality of the event is itself reflective of the risky quality of finitude itself—a quality I will unpack below in my discussion of weakness.

In his *SoG* text, Caputo’s definition of the event speaks both to the Derridean theme he pursued from *PaT* onwards, while also incorporating Tillichian themes that have galvanized his later work—an influence most notable from *IoG* onwards. To do this, Caputo weakens the “ground of being” that galvanizes Tillich’s project by thinking it alongside Derrida’s deconstructive project.⁴³ Here, the event is a specter that haunts the unfolding of things, it unsettles the settled by the imperative of an impossible perhaps whose coming, whose messianic call, disturbs the order of things by its promise/threat of the expectation of the unexpected.⁴⁴

In the above account of the development of one of Caputo’s key ideas, we can see its use from a descriptive account of Heidegger’s and Eckhart’s projects respectively, to its Derridean use as a process that speaks to the deconstructability of things, to its later theological use in which the event of God is the event of the disturbance of the futural to-come that always already threatens our finite and fleshy existence. I have also tried to stress the underlying mystical element of the event, its apophatic structure as a phenomenon that speaks not to a thing’s unknowability *as such*, but rather to the mystery of the call *in* things themselves. This is the desire that sparks the restless heart of being towards an excess ‘we know not where.’ What unifies Caputo’s account of the event, from his *ME* text to *SoG*, whether used descriptively or prescriptively, is the event’s excessive

⁴³ *SoG*, 12.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

quality—an excess that speaks neither to a Kantian unknown, a Hegelian *Begriff*, nor any metaphysical unseen, but rather to a more-than that disturbs finite being *as such*. For Caputo, this excess is that element that goes on *in* the event itself that is more than the event. This ‘in’ quality, as a final development, is drawn from Deleuze’s project.⁴⁵ Here, what is important about the event is not what occurs as a consequence of its unfolding or its emergence, but rather what gets itself said/done within the event that stirs the event to be more than the event itself. One name that carries the weight of this stirring ‘in’ quality is the name of God; here, the name God signifies not a force or actor who does things, but an *insistence* whose persistence within the order of existence ‘gets certain things done’—perhaps.

6.2 – Weakness

In an article published in a 2023 monograph on *The European Reception of John D. Caputo's Thought*, Erik Meganck provides an excellent account of the development of Caputo’s use of the term weakness. In his article, “Keeping Weakness Weak to Make it Strong: Caputo’s Theopoetics of Event,” Meganck links the term weakness and weak thought to the work of the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo. Meganck situates, and indeed Caputo affirms in his response to this article, Vattimo as the progenitor of weak thought. Still, Meganck notes key differences between the two. For Vattimo, an emphasis on weak thought signals an epochal shift in thought itself. Deploying a model not unlike the secularization hypothesis, Vattimo’s claim is that the modern world is such that “the reign of facts are over;” this ‘reign of facts’ is the sphere of strong

⁴⁵ Broadley stated Caputo’s use of Deleuze stresses Deleuze’s notion of repetition. For Deleuze, as Adrian Parr notes, “repetition is not a matter of the same thing occurring over and over again. That is to say, repetition is connected to the power of difference in terms of a productive process that produces variation in and through every repetition. In this way, repetition is best understood in terms of discovery and experimentation; it allows new experiences, affects and expressions to emerge” (Adrian Parr, ‘Repetition,’ in *The Deleuze Dictionary*, edited by Adrian Parr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010). The outcome of this Deleuzian focus, for Caputo, is a call to be responsive to the event not as a recapitulation of a pristine past moment, but, rather, it is a call to make oneself worthy of the event of repetition itself (*SoG*, 149). Caputo’s use of Deleuze’s idea of repetition, then, mirrors his use of Kierkegaard’s account of repetition.

thought. In its place is a weak thought which stresses only that we “interpret each other’s interpretations, out of mutual respect and friendliness.”⁴⁶ Thought, in short, has lost its status as the source of truth, it is now reduced in status and has been resigned to the public role of maintaining social niceties and establishing productive cultural norms.⁴⁷ This weakening of thought is applied theologically to thought on God, who, far from being negated as a consequence of this weak-thought model, is given new life breathnd status in modernity. Not satisfied with a strong death-of-God model, Vattimo’s weakening of thought recognizes the strong place of this weak God in modern thought—especially as regards ethical matters.

Caputo does follow Vattimo’s basic scheme; or, he at least follows in the wake of Vattimo’s use of the term weakness. This link is evidenced in Caputo and Vattimo’s exchange in their co-written text *After the Death of God* in which their conceptual overlap is made obvious. Meganck’s study demonstrates the similarities and differences between Vattimo and Caputo on weakness. But, Meganck, I argue, underemphasizes the organic connection that weakness as a general thematic has had in Caputo’s project. To show how a generalized weakness underscores Caputo’s project, I want to trace the development of weakness as a topic and underlying theme for Caputo by first exploring the term *minimalism* that he uses in his *AE* text. I want to suggest that his use of the term minimalism in *AE* accomplishes what, in his later work, weakness accomplishes. After establishing this link, I show how that minimalism theme developed into his focus on weakness in *WoG* and some of its later development in his more recent publications.

As was noted at the introduction to this section, Caputo’s thought straddles a twin tension regarding the validity of metaphysics. He is both against its use as a strong theory that accounts

⁴⁶ Erik Meganck, ‘Keeping Weakness Weak to Make It Strong: Caputo’s Theopoetics of Event,’ in *The European Reception of John D. Caputo’s Thought: Radicalizing Theology*, ed. Joeri Schrijvers and Martin Koci (London: Lexington Books, 2023) 238-239.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 239.

for the structure of Being and our understanding of God, while also being skeptical of our ability to think without metaphysics. In *AE*, Caputo devotes the bulk of his book to facing what he argues is the very real problem of asserting the force or value of ethics denuded of a metaphysical system. Ethics has classically relied upon a metaphysical structure in which rewards and punishments provide boundaries to our actions that keep us safe; we know how and why to act based upon this metaphysical system. Against ethics, Caputo advocates for an obligatory system that arises from finite impulses that resist systematization and thus “is not safe.”⁴⁸ That is, whereas ethics is the response one gives based upon the supports of a system guided by a strong *principle*, e.g., “the Voice of God” or the “call of Being,” obligation emerges from “the feeling that comes over us when others need our help, when they call out for help, or support, or freedom, or whatever they need, a feeling that grows in strength directly in proportion to the desperateness of the situation of the other.”⁴⁹ Obligation thus names how our finite relationships are compelled by, and inflected into action through, the recognition of the needful situation of the other. This rather than understanding our actions as formed from a consequence of an ethical demand that comes from a metaphysical *arche*. For Caputo, in short, “the power of obligation varies directly with the powerlessness of the one who calls for help, which is the power of powerlessness.”⁵⁰ The power of the powerless to incite or call forth obligation is the power of weakness, the power of what St. Paul called the *ta me onta*—which is a “*skandalon* for ethics” that seeks rules based on a guiding principle, rather than our being exposed to “the vulnerability, the frailty and the fragility” of the finite other.⁵¹

⁴⁸ *AE*, 4-5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

In *AE*, the theme of weakness, which Caputo later develops to circumvent the strong metaphysical and ethical tensions noted above, goes under the name of *minimalism*. And yet Caputo does not establish a direct link between minimalism and weakness in this text, or indeed in his later works. However, both terms should be understood as serving the same ends in his project. Indeed, in the same way that the language of weakness allows Caputo to creatively operate within metaphysics while still troubling its strong truth claims in texts like *WoG*, minimalism, in *AE*, functions in a similar way. Caputo writes,

At best (at worst) I am trying to hold metaphysics to a minimum, the minimum of metaphysics you need to get a discourse moving, while being vigilant about the sorts of metaphysical assumptions that inevitably work their way into our discourse. At most (at least), I am deploying a minimalist metaphysics.⁵²

He wants a minimalist thinking that works within metaphysics, but not without acknowledging the maximalist tensions that arise from such metaphysical presuppositions. In *AE* words like “event” and “happen” are terms he deploys to capture the productive force of metaphysical thought, without getting bogged down in metaphysical language.⁵³ What language like the event provides Caputo in *AE* is to “keep metaphysics at a minimum” for, he humorously continues, “the last thing I want is to set off another round of German metaphysics.”⁵⁴

What then is minimalism doing for Caputo at this stage of his thought? Caputo writes,

my minimalism is what is behind my affection for “anarchy,” for the *arche* is always a stroke of violence, a violent incision, a cutting up and ordering about the events, of the singularity of events, by a sweeping principle power, by a *principium*/prince, by a Meta-event that orders everything around.⁵⁵

Here, minimalism names the singular event which always already escapes the totalizing gaze of a metaphysical project that seeks to tame the “indefinitely redescrivable” and “indefinitely

⁵² Ibid., 93.

⁵³ Ibid., 94.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 220.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 221.

reconfigurable” processes of finitude.⁵⁶ Minimalism, he continues, “lets events happen, lets them be, lets them go, without imposing grand overarching schemata upon them;” minimalism thus begins, he writes, “in a maze (*thaumazein*). The violence would be to erase the complexity, to simplify the quasi system, to dominate the textuality of the event with the simplicity of a single system, of an overarching principle of interruption.”⁵⁷ By minimalism, then, he means an approach to thinking which keeps its totalizing tendency in check by noting the ways in which the singular and the iterative always already escapes the programmatic impulses of metaphysics. Minimalism thus accomplishes the same conceptual aim as does weakness in Caputo’s later work. To clarify this claim, I now turn to Caputo’s weakness as it develops in his later works.

It is noteworthy that the term minimalism, which plays a key role in *AE*, is not developed by Caputo in later works. For example, nowhere in *PaT* are the basic thematics on minimalism that he develops in *AE* extended—neither is, it should be noted, weakness. Indeed, when Caputo does discuss weakness in *PaT*, it is in reference to other thinkers, for example, in his discussion of Blanchot⁵⁸ or Derrida.⁵⁹ While minimalism as a term is not given analysis in *PaT*. This genealogical observation is not to suggest that the basic thematic that minimalism or weakness signifies in Caputo’s project was not still central in texts like *PaT*. Indeed, if we look at Caputo’s project retrospectively from *WoG* backwards, then in *PaT* we could argue that the logic or theoretical basis for weakness is given its first major philosophical grounding via Derrida’s deconstructive system. Indeed, Caputo’s chief aim in *PaT* is to show the ultimate fragility of our systems of thought and the error that arises from a type of thinking that uncritically assumes the validity of their assertions—of a strong faith in strong claims. Derrida’s *différance* is appealed to

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 222.

⁵⁸ *PaT*, 85, 350.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 369, n.5.

by Caputo to stress the ways in which systems are always already subsumed by a spacing that upsets the logic of totalization.

Weakness as a topic and concern is thus not aboriginal to Caputo. As Meganck noted, its specific terminological origin arises from Caputo's engagement with Vattimo. But, as the above shows, the general theme or connotation of weakness is not disconnected from Caputo's entire project. However, in *WoG*, weakness *as such* becomes the cornerstone of Caputo's project. Not, I would cautiously argue against Meganck, because of Vattimo's influence, but because in *WoG* the issues that motivated Caputo's early work are fully developed. How then does Caputo deploy weakness in *WoG*, and how does that formulation impact his later works?

A key tension in *WoG* for Caputo is how to name the *force* of the event, or that which *insists* in the name of the event, without making his theory of the event strong. He does not, he writes, "with all this talk of the stirring of the event ... mean to stir up expectations of power."⁶⁰ He thus tells his reader to expect a sort of "undernourished theology" (i.e., minimalist) when attempting to deploy his "hermeneutics of the event." This "theology without theology," which echoes Derrida's "religion without religion," is a "'weak theology' that accompanies Vattimo's 'weak thought,' or perhaps even as the weak messianic theology that should accompany Benjamin's 'weak messianic force.'"⁶¹ And although Caputo is himself somewhat unsure or indeed critical of Benjamin's thesis in general,⁶² he nonetheless provides a sympathetic reading of Benjamin's basic thesis in *WoG*. The core of what Caputo extracts from Benjamin's famous thought experiment is that: 'weak force' *names* "something unconditional but without

⁶⁰ *WoG*, 7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 74-75

sovereignty.”⁶³ Speaking to Benjamin’s analysis of what he calls “weak messianic power” and its paradoxical link with what he calls the progressive “concept of history,” Caputo writes:

[Benjamin] is speaking of the claim made upon us by those whose are the weakest of all, whose voice is the softest: the dead, those whose claim cannot be taken lightly. Benjamin describes the “angel of history,” which is for him a figure of the “messianic” view of history, as opposed to what he calls “historicism,” by which he means several things: a secular and Rankean science of history, one steered by an Enlightenment view of “progress,” in virtue of which the dead are sacrificed to the story of progress and imbedded in a tale told by the winners. The task of the messianic historian is to save or redeem the dead.⁶⁴

The angel of history that Benjamin images in his story moves forward but does so with his “back to the future, his eyes fixed on the ever-accumulated heap of ruins called history.”⁶⁵ Benjamin wants his readers to hear the weak voices of those over-run by the strong forces of history; to attune our thought and be “mindful” of the dead in order to re-collect and give voice to their entreaty and to in-turn be shaped by the recognition of the calamities that silenced them.⁶⁶ The angel is thus a paradigmatic figure of weakness, it looks backwards—indeed *it cannot look away*—and in looking at and hearing these voices, it gives presence to their loss and value to their weakness. If, in contrast, this were a strong messianic force, it would come on high, in the splendor and power, not unlike the vision of Christ’s triumphal return described by St. Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17. And so Caputo asks, why keep the title ‘messiah’ operative, why not call what Benjamin is trying to describe by another name? He writes, “why is it a ‘messianic’ power at all, even a weak one? Because a messianic force is an event” and remembrance is itself a messianic force.⁶⁷

In Benjamin’s telling, Caputo continues, we are the ones who were “expected” we are the “ones the dead were waiting for; we stand at the messianic point of redemption and remembrance.

⁶³ Ibid., 94.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 95.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

The ‘now-time’ (*Jetztzeit*) is a door through which at any moment the Messiah may pass.”⁶⁸ In short, the dead and the memories they pass on insist; we, in our present existence, give voice and actualization to what is being insisted in their calling. This insistent/existent theme, as noted above, is ingredient to Caputo’s account of the event and is deployed in his analysis of Benjamin to emphasize the messianic nature of the event as a call. In a similar vein to the American writer Maya Angelou’s poem *And Still I Rise* when she writes, “I am the hope and the dream of the slave,”⁶⁹ Caputo too wants to hear what was longed for in the past by those whose voices nullified by the strong forces of history, to hear their ‘prayers and tears’ and renew the present by their call for recognition and justice. It is also of note here that Caputo focuses on the *now-time* as that space within which regeneration occurs. I will return to this temporal theme when I reflect on the status of the ‘now’ and its redemptive/mystical conations in Caputo’s project in the next chapter. But what is key here is that ‘in this still small moment’—the now—is given the promise of transformation via the possibility of the messiah, i.e., that which promises transformation, as that which is always already a possibility whose actuality is given form in the *acts* we undertake in the present.

In appealing to figures like Benjamin and Derrida, Caputo deploys their thought in order to ‘hear something getting itself said’ under the name ‘God’ but in a register that neuters it from the power and pomp that has accumulated around God’s name over the centuries. Hence, whereas the name God emerges from the order of things, from the historical and cultural permutations that have given shape to it and compelled its reception and understanding, the *event* contained in the name of God is that which “disturbs the world with the possibility of being otherwise.”⁷⁰ In

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Maya Angelou, *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (New York: Random House, 1994), 163-164.

⁷⁰ *WoG*, 8.

thinkers like Benjamin and Derrida, Caputo hears a form of thought that captures not God *as such*, i.e., as a strong force that compels by asserting, but God *perhaps*, i.e., a weak force that compels by insisting. Events are thus weak, they have no sure footing or ground from which to direct—it is the order of the weak, those who, without power, nonetheless *obliges* those with strength to see their plight as outsider and marginalized.⁷¹

In every book of his that follows *WoG*, Caputo unpacks the theme of weakness in thematics similar to those noted above. One key issue that drives his analysis in later texts is his desire to evidence the status of ‘hope’ in his weak/evental schema.⁷² This desire to evidence the hope contained in the promise of the event, its weak though insistent force, is given focus in *IoG* with Caputo’s analysis of the ‘perhaps.’ Although not representing the shift in terminology from minimalism to weakness, which was noted above, the notion of the perhaps carries with it a logic similar to that of weakness. Several thematic claims are given by Caputo to unpack what he is intending by perhaps which I will here unpack with the aim of noting this link.

Not unlike what the poet John Keats called a “negative capability,” the perhaps is not a neutral space that names a simple ‘possibility’ in the order of things, rather it names the “ability to sustain uncertainty and to venture into the unknown.”⁷³ Perhaps is thus generative for Caputo, it has a horizontal and finite focus to its idea insofar as it “sustains our openness to the obscurity of what is going on beneath the surface of what is happening” in the world.⁷⁴ Along these lines then, the perhaps does not solicit a retreat into subjectivity in which a ‘come what may’ attitude arises in which there is little “need for commitment.”⁷⁵ To affirm the perhaps, is not to affirm a species

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 95.

⁷³ *IoG*, 8.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

of 'que sera, sera.' Instead, Caputo's account of the perhaps begins via premises located in Heidegger's statement regarding the "quiet power of the possible, where the power of the possible consists in the power of the impossible."⁷⁶ This perhaps structure, which itself echoes his account of the event as call, is itself grounded in Derrida's notion of the event. In what might be called a creative repetition of Derrida, Caputo replaces the word for justice that Derrida uses in the following statements with the word God in his opening analysis of perhaps in *IoG*, "one must always say *perhaps* for God." God for Caputo, like Justice for Derrida, signals both a futurity whose arrival is always expectant, but whose expectancy is necessarily unprogrammable; "God, as the experience of absolute alterity, is unrepresentable, but God is the chance of the event and the condition of history."⁷⁷ In short, if events name the possibility for the eventful to-come, they are the hope inscribed in that possibility, then that perhaps to-come is what Caputo means by the name 'God.'

Notice that in Caputo's reformulation of Derrida's statement regarding the justice to-come, he is consciously playing with deconstructive themes in order to speak differently the name of God. God is here not an ideal structure that we prop-up and order our actions towards via the logic of 'act as if;' God as perhaps is a to-come that, like the messiah, can never come, but whose presence as absence nonetheless haunts the now-time (*Augenblick*) by revealing the excessive more-than structure which the event as such names for Caputo. Weak thought, or what Caputo calls here "weak theology," trades upon this grammatological account of the perhaps whose outcome, Caputo notes, "is best suited to meet the needs of a coming theology, of a theology of the event, that is, of a weak theology."⁷⁸ In short, he writes, "weak theology operates in the spooky,

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 8-9.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 9.

shadowy order of the event, where the event is best addressed, and perhaps only addressed, in the fluctuating shadows and spectral grammar of 'perhaps'.⁷⁹

In texts that follow *IoG*, such as *HaH*⁸⁰ or *FoG*⁸¹, the above themes are repeated with different foci and emphases—however, the basic scheme that he established in *WoG* is repeated. In *CaC*, Caputo provides a more thorough account of weakness via a classically strong theological model which has been noted above. This is Caputo's analysis of Luther's *Heidelberg Disputations* and the juxtapositions that he offers there between a Theology of Glory and a Theology of the Cross. I have discussed above how Caputo reads and deploys Luther's theology of the Cross model, in both its representational significance and indeed its link to weak thought. What I want to stress here is the specifically 'fleshy' focus of Caputo's reading of the Theology of the Cross. Indeed, key to Caputo's analysis is that God's weakness as revealed in the image of Christ's wounded body on the Cross is a revelation of flesh. He writes, "*I read the wounds in the side of the risen Jesus not as glorified wounds but as symbols of wounded glory, a surprising and difficult glory.*"⁸² What though does he mean by 'wounded glory'? He writes, "the real glory is the difficult glory of the unconditional, found in bodies touched by the power of the unconditional, like loving the flesh and bones of others in all their fleshiness, vulnerability, mutilation, and mortality."⁸³ Flesh for Caputo is something like the ultimate image of weakness. Hence, God as Christ on the Cross is a revelation of the weakness and vulnerability of flesh. For Caputo, it is precisely in this weakness, in the vulnerability opened up by the possibility of our fleshly wounding, that our obligatory and indeed theological systems take shape. This weakness is thus generative—not

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ *HaH*, 114-123.

⁸¹ E.g., *FoG*, 56-71.

⁸² *CaC*, 61-62 (emphasis in original).

⁸³ Ibid., 61.

unlike his account of the perhaps, weakness does not withdraw but reaches out. That is to say, the experience of vulnerability that accompanies our fleshly bodies is simultaneously the experience of empathetically extending concern and hospitality to the flesh of the other who shares our vulnerability.

This focus on flesh as the site wherein weakness is revealed, shows us the direction that Caputo's earliest insistence on the bracketing of a strong metaphysics in favour of finitude leads him, namely, to a focus on the body. It is finite bodies, for Caputo, "all the way down;" and the life of these bodies is, he writes, "entangled in death," which is precisely what makes "life so precious."⁸⁴ This claim, that the value found in life emerges from its being ensconced by death is a key theme of Caputo's. To emphasize only life for Caputo, as for example Continental philosophers such as Michel Henry does, is but one more hope for a pure uncorruptible presence for Caputo. Following Derrida, Caputo argues in contrast to thinkers like Henry and indeed Marion that life is always wrapped up in death, and death in life.⁸⁵ We do not have 'life' but rather 'life-death' for Caputo. The language Caputo uses to capture this entanglement of life-death is *transiency*, language which itself is hinged upon the criticism of metaphysics that this section has been tracing. Indeed, in an exact reversal of the classical formation that argues that the authority and power contained in names like *God* is to be found in their capacity to signify absoluteness, unchangeableness, and eternity, Caputo argues that weak thought and weak theology hinges upon seeing value in the transiency, impermanence, and fragility. For Caputo, it is precisely because things end that we value them.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 61-63.

⁸⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Life Death*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Peggy Kamuf, trans. Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023), 1-2.

Here then we see Caputo preforming his own quasi-‘transvaluation of morals’, in which the metaphysical system he inherited as a young man as brother Paul with the De LaSalle brotherhood is reversed. Meaning or value for Caputo is inscribed in the lowest, not the loftiest. Our flesh and its wounds supply the basis for his ‘metaphysical’ reversal. Victory, Caputo writes, following the biblical scholar Craig Keen when commenting on the Cross, “comes not *instead* of defeat, but *in* defeat.”⁸⁶ In a similar logic that undergirds Luther’s theology of the Cross model, in which God’s revelation is not in glory, but in wounded defeat, is to be found the theological core of weakness for Caputo—whether that weakness goes under the name minimalism, the event, or the perhaps. In Caputo’s system, fragility and transiency are ways of finding the impossible within the possible.

The theme of weakness, then, can be traced back to some of Caputo’s earliest writings. It is a focus of his that is elemental to his basic theological, philosophical, and mystical vision. Indeed, in Caputo’s 1971 essay ‘The Rose is Without Why: An Interpretation of the Later Heidegger’ this tension between performing a “consummate resignation” of letting go and surrendering to things in order to more fully know God, was already a guiding interpretive framework for his thought.⁸⁷ And although this example from his earlier work addresses tensions between Eckhart and Heidegger along the theme of *Gelassenheit*, it serves to show that, even at that very early stage of his thought, Caputo has always favored an analysis of surrender, letting-go, minimalism, the perhaps, and weakness. These are all terms that turn on the power of the diminutive to indicate a more penetrating comprehension of finitude and indeed the infinite. Hence, to supplement Meganck’s argument regarding Caputo’s reliance on Vattimo, with which

⁸⁶ *CaC*, 63

⁸⁷ John D Caputo, ‘The Rose is Without Why: An Interpretation of the Later Heidegger,’ in *The Collected and Philosophical and Theological Papers Volume 1: 1969-1985, Aquinas, Eckhart, Heidegger: Metaphysics, Mysticism, Thought*, ed. Eric Weislogel (Bolton, ON: John D. Caputo Archives, 2021), 53.

this section opened, we can see that a ‘weak element’ stretches across all of Caputo’s publications. However, *how* one encounters the other via the pull of weakness, its obligatory call, leads us to the ethical core of Caputo’s thought, an ethical core that runs on a theme of generous welcoming—a welcoming that is both potentially fulfilling and risky. It is to this theme found in his focus on hospitality that I now turn.

6.3 – Hospitality

Unlike the topics of the event and weakness, my concern with the theme of hospitality is less focused on the genealogical development of its use by Caputo than in the suppositions that lay behind its assertion and in what I will argue is the dual use of its term. To the latter, I will suggest that Caputo’s account of hospitality is undergirded by a desire to be welcoming to the other as *person* in particular and to the other as *cosmos* more broadly. By cosmos, I simply mean the physical universe in its present and future reality—specifically welcoming a future to-come that, perhaps, does not include humans at all. In extending ethical hospitality to the cold ruined futurity of a cosmos heading towards entropic dissipation, Caputo wants to sidestep the anthropocentric ethical models advocated by thinkers as Levinas. This broader non-anthropomorphic development of Caputo’s is key to understanding Caputo’s latter focus on the post-human, *Ruinology*, and A.I.. In texts like *IoC*, *CaC*, and *SoG*, Caputo tries to think the theological and philosophical suppositions that motivate his work, suppositions classically founded upon the assumption of the centrality of the human, in a way that deprivileges this human-centric approach. This post-human focus of Caputo’s is a distinctly unique element of his thought. Before unpacking this later account in his work, I want to begin by situating Caputo’s discussion of hospitality within its philosophical and deconstructive origins.

Caputo’s understanding of religion is deconstructive in outlook. This deconstructive element is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in his account of hospitality. An example of this

is from his *DiaN* text where he explores the relationship between community and individual identity as it pertains to Derrida's system. Arguing against the thesis that deconstruction is individualistic in focus, Caputo writes "It would not be a distortion to say that deconstruction is to be understood as a form of hospitality, that deconstruction *is* hospitality, which means the welcoming of the other."⁸⁸ This focus on the communal nature of deconstruction via the theme of welcoming the other through the notion of hospitability undergirds Caputo's commitment to deconstruction and Continental theory in general.

Hospitality derives from the Latin *hospes*, which itself is derived from *hostis*, "which originally meant a 'stranger' and came to take on the meaning of enemy or 'hostile' stranger (*hostilis*) + *pets* (*potis*, *potes*, *potentia*), to have power."⁸⁹ Ingredient to this term, then, is a dual movement that stresses both extending welcome to the other as well as rejecting the other. This notion of rejecting the other, of being hostile to their entreaty, is situated on the affirmation that the one who rejects the other is also able to *give* welcome. This latter quality is what Caputo refers to as the *major domo* element of hospitality in which "the notion of having and retaining the mastery of the house is essential to hospitality."⁹⁰ In this way, hospitality occurs in the gap between both welcoming and rejecting the other, a "hostil/pitality."⁹¹ In the slash that separates both terms, which is simultaneously centripetal and centrifugal in direction, is found in Caputo's notion of hospitality. He writes, "a host is a host only if he owns the place, and only if he holds on to his ownership, if one *limits* the gift" or hospitality.⁹² Being hospitable then, is not about infinitely extending the gift of hospitality, of "surrendering my property or my identity;" rather, the condition

⁸⁸ *DiaN*, 109-110.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 110. Caputo is here following Derrida's analysis, which is itself a repetition of the work of Emil Benveniste in *La vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes I* (Paris: Minuit, 1969).

⁹⁰ *DiaN*, 110.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, 110-111.

of possibility for hospitality operates from the premise of ‘my place.’⁹³ Caputo writes, “like everything else in deconstruction, the possibility of hospitality is sustained by its impossibility; hospitality really starts to get under way only when we “experience” (which means to travel or go through) this paralysis (the inability to move).”⁹⁴ By impossible, Caputo does not mean a logical contradiction—e.g., a square circle—rather impossibility names the performative contradiction innate to acts like hospitality. To be a host to the other “requires that the host just, in a moment of madness, tear up the understanding between him and the guest, act with ‘excess,’ make an absolute gift of his property, which is of course impossible.”⁹⁵ It is impossible because asserting ownership is ingredient to being a host. One thus cannot completely surrender the space in which hospitality occurs, and yet, being a host necessitates this element of surrender.

Hospitality is thus “stirred from within” by this twin tension of wanting to give and the impossibility of giving.⁹⁶ It is here, at the gap found in hostility, that Caputo hears a religious chord reverberating within Deconstruction via the epistemic suppositions ingredient to these formulations. Caputo writes, “hospitality is not a matter of objective knowledge, but belongs to another order altogether, beyond knowledge, an enigmatic ‘experience’ in which I set out for the stranger, for the other, for the unknown, where I cannot go.”⁹⁷ The knowledge that Caputo is referring to is, first, not to be found in the order of correspondence. This is not knowledge whose criterion of truth stems from its correct approximation of external stimuli, but is better understood as the type of knowledge that thinkers like Gadamer advance when articulating the truth claims of the classic for the humanities: hospitality for Caputo, like the classic for Gadamer, opens up a field

⁹³ Ibid., 111.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 112.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

of understanding human experience and connectivity that is given by the force of the relation between that which calls (for Gadamer, the text, for Caputo, the other) and our response to that call and the way in which that response is both based on and opens up a relational world that is more than the simple physical relationship. Hospitality is thus troubled by the impossibility of its demand. This ‘troubling’ is founded on the centripetal nature of our subjective experience which assumes the necessity of being wary of the threat posed by the other. In short, Caputo writes, “in hospitality I must welcome the other while retaining mastery of the house, just so, the community must retain its identity while making the stranger at home.”⁹⁸ It is this back-and-forth twin tension that furnishes the logic or experiential matrix of hospitality for Caputo.

Caputo’s focus on hospitality begins, perhaps unsurprisingly, in *PaT*, rather than, for example, his *AE* text in which ethics and obligation are central. Indeed, even in *RH* the theme of welcoming the other and hospitality are not given full analysis. Given the importance of the theme of hospitality and the other for Derrida, Levinas, and Gadamer—all central thinkers in *RH*—this gap is curious. Though in his *MRH*, the notion of hospitality is discussed at some length.⁹⁹ In texts before *PaT* what Caputo does stress is the necessity of remaining open to the other as mystery—this being a core component of his mystical element theme. I will address those themes below, but first I want to flesh out hospitality as he discusses it in *PaT* and *WoG* in order to get a clearer sense of how these deconstructive themes developed and took shape in his work.

The theme of hospitality in *PaT* is grounded in Derrida’s account of the messiah as the structure of the unexpected to-come.¹⁰⁰ The structure of the event, as noted above, is a call that gestures towards the to-come. He writes,

⁹⁸ Ibid., 113.

⁹⁹ E.g., *MRH*, 57.

¹⁰⁰ *PaT*, 129.

for the *à-venir* of a justice or a democracy to come is not a future-present, not a presentable, re-presentable, utopian or Kantian ideal, not a horizon of expectation of this type; it is 'the unforeseeable, the unanticipated, the non-masterable, non-identifiable,' so that one cannot gauge the extent to which it is being approximated or realized, even while conceding that it is consistently deferred."¹⁰¹

And although themes like justice, democracy, and Marxism are examples of this messianic deferred to-come structure, it is at its core the *structure* of hospitality in which what we are hoping to welcome is "what we do not expect" which drives Caputo's interest.¹⁰² This basic structure, noted above in my discussion of the messiah, is abstracted from religious imagery such as the prophet Elijah in which his anticipated return is understood to signify deferred anticipation *as such*—for, if he comes, his status as 'to-come' is lost. However, it is Caputo's focus on what he calls the "atheological core" of this to-come that is instructive. Caputo writes "the idea is to remove the 'determinable' content from the messianic, so that we are not waiting for the liberator of Israel, since Egypt too deserves liberation, or for the second coming of Jesus, or for the classless society in which the state withers away."¹⁰³ Rather, following the logic of hostility, Caputo wants an "absolute (as opposed to determinable) responsibility, absolute hospitality, 'the 'yes' to the *arrivant(e)*, the 'come' to the future that cannot be anticipated."¹⁰⁴ In short, Caputo abstracts the hopeful *yes* given in the possibility inscribed in the messianic to-come, and universalizes it by departicularizing its historical and concrete instantiations. The to-come is given a transcendental-like quality, it is the condition of possibility of affirming that which we cannot see and hoping for that we which we cannot know.

Thus, this to-come structure is haunted, spooked, by a future we cannot see but whose expectation is always already before us.¹⁰⁵ This state of "absolute hospitality" generates or mirrors

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 135.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 145.

the state of anxiety regarding the unknown—as, the one we welcome to our home, may be *unheimlich*.¹⁰⁶ This risk structure is irreducible; it is an elemental aspect of finitude. The language that Caputo uses to capture the force of the future to-come that hovers over the present, is that of the ghost, the Specter, which is imaged as the future that haunts the past by inscribing the possibility of this absolute hospitality into the present moment; *es spukt* is the “trace or specter of the stranger, the uncertain, indefinite, undecidable outline of someone or something coming, something I-know-not-what.”¹⁰⁷ The other that we hope for in hospitality is a promise/threat who always already threatens us by their coming which we cannot be certain about—an unknown that we ourselves meet in the expectation of the impossibility of truly welcoming their otherness. Hence, as Caputo argues in *PaT*, Derrida provides him with the tools “that think the structural possibility of the religious, of a certain radical messianic structure, without the dangerous liaisons of the particular religions, without the dogma, without the determinate messianic faiths that divide humanity into warring parties.”¹⁰⁸ In short, Caputo abstracts the logic of hospitality from the religious examples that Derrida and others deploy and seeks a universalization of its underlying force—to welcome the other, in all their riskiness.

In works that follow *PaT*, the logic that undergirds Derrida’s account of hostil/pitality is extended to a variety of themes but is more specifically located or unpacked within a Christian thematic. For example, in *WoG*, he discusses the ‘event of hospitality’ via an analysis of passages like Mark 7:27-28, Luke 14:12-14, and Matt. 22:1-14 in which the themes of welcoming the unexpected other are reflected on.¹⁰⁹ Caputo’s underlying intent there is to show how the event of hospitality, which he places under the name ‘kingdom of God’, is not a specific place where we

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 195.

¹⁰⁹ *WoG*, 259-260.

attend (e.g., a church or specific assembly) but is “a way to respond to the event” of the to-come *as such*.¹¹⁰ For Caputo, this implies that in the ‘kingdom’ hospitality is a “weak force” in which the “mark of God” is found “on the face of the stranger”—i.e., the other, “not the same.”¹¹¹ What makes this event of hospitality an event of the kingdom of God, is that in our hospitable welcoming to the coming of the other, we are able to give space for “the *event* that stirs within the *name* of God” and thus make existent what insists in that name.¹¹² This is because, he writes “*the name of God is the name of an event, of an event that comes calling at our door, which can and must be translated into the event of hospitality.*”¹¹³

For Caputo, not unlike Levinas to whom this analysis tightly cleaves, ethics is a form of transcendence insofar as ethics for Levinas names the process wherein our centripetal focused nature becomes centrifugally directed. This though is an immanent transcendence, we extend past ourselves, from ourselves, to a horizontal other. In so doing we transcend our self-love, our *amore propre*. In this account of hospitality we can see the ethical core of Caputo’s account of religion: God for him is not an entity, but is an event of the ethical; the ethical for him is not a demand, but names the obligation that arises from recognizing the weakness of one’s own flesh and the subsequent translation of that weakness into a moment of empathic awareness in which my own vulnerability meets the vulnerability of the other. The meeting of my weakness, in the weakness of the other, is for Caputo what names the religious as an ethical call.

In *IoG*, *CaC*, and *SoG*, hospitality is thought along the same lines noted above, though with different foci. In *IoG*, hospitality is framed via a discussion of Luke 10:38-41 in which the welcoming of Jesus into Mary and Martha’s home is unpacked. Martha’s welcoming of Jesus as a

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 260.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 262-263.

¹¹² Ibid., 267.

¹¹³ Ibid., 269.

call to praxis, organizes Caputo's analysis. Following Eckhart, whose sermon on this passage argues against a more classical interpretation which prioritizes Mary's contemplative worship at Jesus' feet above Martha's worldly actions. Eckhart, in opposition, stresses the centrality of Martha via Christ's double use of her name, "Martha, Martha."¹¹⁴ For Eckhart, Martha's attention to the importance of providing material comfort to others are not distractions, "but a gift she enjoys beyond Mary who only has one gift, who knows only how to languish at the master's feet (*vita contemplative*)."¹¹⁵ Martha, Caputo notes, "knows that insistence requires existence" which is, at its core, what Caputo's account of hospitality is aiming at: to give existence to that which insists. This is, to put it in Caputo's style, *to welcome not an existent God almighty, but an insistent God who-might-be*. This perhaps, insistent structure, organizes Caputo's thought and is at the core of his notion of hospitality.

In *CaC*, hospitality as a theme is not discussed—i.e., there is no major section in the work that reflects on its implications. One place where the term is used is in the index to the first chapter that contains a discussion which followed a public presentation of this chapter given by Caputo.¹¹⁶ There, in a very helpful conversation, Caputo does discuss the centrality of hospitality in his reading of 1 Corinthians. In Caputo's response to a question about the "Lord of glory" and the "coming of the spirit" Caputo responds,

I think that [Paul] should stay with the power of the powerless, he should stay with the weakness of God, stay with the *τὰ μὴ ὄντα*, and not pull that trigger, not turn God into the Lord of Glory, unless you mean by that the majesty of hospitality, the majesty of forgiveness, the majesty of nonretaliation: the Lord of glory in *that* sense.¹¹⁷

This transvaluation of glory from heights to depths, from unchanging power to the diversity of the powerlessness, is elemental to what Caputo means by hospitality.

¹¹⁴ *IoG*, 44.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *CaC*, 44-47.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

In the above I have traced both how Caputo advances certain Derridean themes to clarify the structure of hospitality that runs throughout his work. I have shown how this theme emerged principally out of his analysis in *PaT* and, in most of his subsequent analysis on this topic, he repeats the basic thematics explored in that text. But there is another broader and less human-centric welcoming that organizes Caputo's project that I also want to situate under his theme of hospitality. This is Caputo's post-humanist focus. Broadly, this general theme of welcoming the non-human is fundamental to Caputo's project as a whole and, as I will argue below, is central to his notion of the mystical element. In the following, I will unpack how Caputo's notion of hospitality is extended to the non-human sphere. And although a variety of non-human themes galvanize his focus, it is his imaging of 'ruined time' or what he calls in *SoG* '*Ruinology*,' that I want to unpack. This ruined time image seeks to think human experience, religious themes, and the present moment, from the impossibly inhospitable future described by some theorists working in physics under models derived from quantum mechanics and astrophysics. What is distinctive about Caputo's discussion of hospitality is how he engages thought experiments which push the theological and religious themes of his work into radically un-human terrain.

My focus here is to show how Caputo's analysis of ruined time is fundamentally a claim undergirded by the desire to be hospitable to the inhospitable. The first thing that needs to be understood with Caputo's ruined time image is that it is motivated by the desire of thinking through the implications of the mythically framed cosmos as inherited from his Christian tradition and putting that image into conversation with the scientific cosmos imaged in modernity. This is the tension between what Wilfred Sellers calls the "manifest image" and "scientific image."¹¹⁸ The

¹¹⁸ Wilfrid Sellars, 'Fatalism and Determinism,' in *The Metaphysics of Practice: Writings on Action, Community, and Obligation*, ed. Kyle Ferguson and Jeremy Randel Koons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 295. Caputo uses Sellers' schema in his own lectures (e.g., John Caputo, "Lecture 11 – Caputo – On Žižek_Parallax View [11-16-2010] 1," on <https://johndcaputo.com>, mp3 file (12:45-12:55)).

scientific image is at base mathematizable and concerns quantifiable and material phenomena as its data, while the manifest image, what the humanities study, is non-mathematizable. The manifest image, what Caputo calls mytho-poetics, is the image of the cosmos as tiered, hierarchical, and teleological. This is the cosmos governed by the principle (*arche*) of the logos. But, Caputo asks, if we image the cosmos not from a starting point that assumes a *primaeval arche* from which derives the force of a governing teleological unfolding order but, instead, from the image given by theories generated by modern physicists, then another vantage point is opened up. One such theory is that offered by some astrophysicists who advance theories of absolute entropic dissipation. These theorists model the cosmos as extended to a future time, trillions trillions of years from the present, in which its generative reserves will have been spent. Following what Lyotard called the “inhuman,” this is the cosmos with no one “human or posthuman, to tell the story of the end of the cosmos and no one to tell it to, just mute, eternal darkness.”¹¹⁹ This then is a cosmos in which the logos of things “turns out to be an eerie, inescapable” logic of ruins—cosmology as Ruinology.¹²⁰ Caputo argues, deploying mystical imagery, that this ruined image is an “*exitus* without a *reditus*,” or “an expenditure without reserve.”¹²¹ What then, is it to have a relation, or indeed a *correlation* with this ruined image? How, precisely, can an account of the cosmos grounded in claims derived from the manifest image, encounter this radical account of the ending of all things provided by the scientific image? How can we find meaning in the utter void imaged by this image?

Two responses form Caputo’s reply to the above questions. It is to the mystics that Caputo finds one response. Caputo’s mystical rejoinder to the ruined time image is the one founded in ideas that go back to his earliest publications in which the poet Angelus Silesius’s reflections on

¹¹⁹ *SoG*, 305.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 309.

the rose ‘existing without why’ is discussed. For Silesius, the rose blooms not for a purpose, or to attend to an ordered teleological end, but simply to bloom *weil* it blooms. In the German word *weil*, ‘because,’ Caputo also hears the English ‘while’. The rose blooms for no other reason than it blooms for the sake of blooming, *because/while* it blooms. Consequently, via Silesius’s reflections, he argues for a sort of epistemic detachment regarding our intentional understanding of phenomena in general. This letting-be, or releasement, “represents an affirmation of the world without trying to ‘save’” it by giving to it a meaning that it might lose, “because *the world was never lost*.”¹²² This appeal to the value of an epistemic letting-go, *Gelassenheit*, is an appeal grounded in the assumption of the validity of the apophatic; but the apophatic that Caputo deploys in *SoG* differs in that here it is understood as an “*unconditional affirmation of what there is*” “without demanding *ontological assurance* of promising *eternal compensation* for our trouble.”¹²³ Hence, as was noted with the theme of transcendence in Caputo’s thought, because something is not eternal is not a condition of its unimportance, but is rather the condition of possibility for its importance *as such*. As he writes, “far from undermining the affirmation of the world, the prospect of oblivion incites a humble gratitude for life.”¹²⁴

What Caputo wants here, then, is a hospitable welcoming of the cosmos as it is, as it blooms. He wants to resist the metaphysical urge of meeting the scientific image of a cosmos subordinate to absolute entropy with a glorious image of a salvation to-come. Not unlike Luther’s Theology of the Cross, Caputo wants us to find hope in death and finitude—not hope in a static image of eternal splendor. For Caputo, that is simply Neoplatonism with a modern twist, and, as he ends his chapter on ‘Axiology: A Mortal God, A World without Why’ with remarking, “surely

¹²² Ibid., 330 (emphasis added).

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

we have had enough of Neoplatonism.”¹²⁵ Instead, via a logic that undergirds his larger radical theology project, Caputo wants to find a way to press the resources of theology to their limits, to find a way to accept a future in which theology, theologians, and indeed *theos* and *logos* are impossible. Via the mystical rose of Silesius and Luther’s hermeneutics of the cross, Caputo tries to think their value without attending to the metaphysical suppositions that undergird them. He wants us to face the very real possibility of absolute entropic dissipation and find in the cosmos that gives rise to that possibility, to that impossible future, the possibility of our impossibility. Between the spacing of a past we cannot image (i.e., before the big bang) and the inhospitable future is the gap within which we think, move, and pray. This in-between state is die *Jetztzeit*, the now, in which the slash that insists between the decision of “hostil/pitality” to the unknown inhospitable event of future to-come, is to be hospitability welcomed. For Caputo, the injunction to be hospitable stretches past the human, into the *inhuman*, the *ahuman*, and the *posthuman*—indeed, into the end of endings and beginnings themselves. A dark night without souls. It is then with this overlap between the deconstructive themes of spacing, the event, and hospitality, and the mystical and theological links with those terms in Caputo’s project that I turn to a key theme in Caputo’s project: radical theology.

6.4 – Radical Theology

There is, perhaps, no other word that best characterizes Caputo’s project than ‘radical.’ Caputo himself traces the term’s genesis to tensions he found between the theoretical claims advanced by a deconstructive perspective, and the productive interpretive outcomes generated by a hermeneutical analysis.¹²⁶ As is characteristic for Caputo, he situates himself between both positions, finding in the reserves advanced by theorists writing from both perspectives, something

¹²⁵ Ibid., 334.

¹²⁶ Caputo, *Introduction to volume 2*, 1.

productive. He writes, “hermeneutics is only possible as deconstruction and deconstruction is only possible as hermeneutics.”¹²⁷ What ‘radical’ first signifies for Caputo then is the slash between hermeneutical/deconstructive—the two relate cyclically. Hermeneutics identifies the places or situation within which any deconstruction takes place; we interpret a particular text, at a particular time, for particular reasons—that is our hermeneutical situation.¹²⁸ Deconstruction, which is one of the words that ‘radical’ contains, is “parasitical upon the situation which it de-situates or disturbs or destabilizes.”¹²⁹ Deconstruction is thus a “radicalizing agent” which is “adjectival or adverbial” to what is going on *in medias res*. Like deconstruction, then, ‘radical’ names a “*how* not a *what*.”¹³⁰ Deconstruction is the process of making evident how the starting point, the situation, from which we interpret a text, a person, a place, or an event, carries with it, a host of unreflected upon presuppositions which always already shape and order said situation. It operates on the awareness that our ideas are not ‘views from nowhere,’ that our beliefs are implicated in a host of assumptions which inform our interpretive strategies. Deconstruction, or a radical hermeneutics, destabilizes our position or our situation and sustains “a perilous position of optimal disequilibrium, a state of built-in unrest, flux, instability, just enough to keep things sufficiently off-balance without tipping them over.”¹³¹

Radical here, then, is deconstructive and performative. It issues forth from a suspicion with “the heart-warming assumption that the reason traditions endure is their deep truth, not their violence.”¹³² Radical thought, not unlike Caputo’s reading of Luther’s theologian-of-the-cross model, is a thought aimed at comforting illusions. It aims at exposing those illusions, of peeling

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

back things to their roots to their *radix*, to their base ground which is, here following Heidegger, the factual suppositions of Caputo's radical theology. Radical theology assumes that there is always something which escapes our interpretation, this is something like a *meta-hermeneutical* principle for Caputo; it is what he calls the quasi-transcendental conditions for the possibility of knowledge itself. Indeed, like the Socratic gadfly, radical thought aims to disturb the presumed security and knowledge that have accumulated in the polis. Caputo writes,

Philosophizing is not a matter of escaping the inescapable pre-givenness but of penetrating it all the more thoroughly, searchingly, as far as that is possible, since it is, in fact, impossible to ever do a complete search, which does not discourage us but makes it all the more compelling.¹³³

This is not a Kantian dualism. Caputo is not arguing that a noumenal unknown sits beyond the reach of reason, nullifying its aims and stultifying its reach. Caputo is rather, here, Heideggerian or Hegelian in outlook, it is "being which sets the conditions with which thinking can come to grips. Being deals the cards thinking is given to play."¹³⁴ But Being for Caputo is incomplete, it is what Žižek would call a non-all, a structurally indeterminant w/hole. Determinacy issues forth from beings who make possible the impossible, or who make existent what insists. Radical theology thus assumes a "pre-given situatedness" such as a social, cultural, or linguistic frameworks; these coded systems supply the correlative context from which the Deconstructive impulse of radical theology is compelled.¹³⁵ If this were not so, then, axiomatically, Deconstruction would be impossible. For, the condition of possibility of Deconstruction is that anything which is constructed, which arises from within a *con*-text is able to be de-*contextualized* and re-*contextualized*.¹³⁶ Hence, and as was discussed as a theme common to a variety of Continental thinkers in chapter 4, Caputo is arguing that a gap, the non-all, negation, excess, *différance*, etc.

¹³³ Ibid., 2.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

are not extrinsic to the order of being, but are precisely its condition of possibility. Being, for Caputo is “the ultimate unconditional condition,” it is the “wall against which thinking bounce.”¹³⁷ This correlational principle is elemental to Caputo’s project. In what follows I want to trace the genealogy of radical thinking in Caputo’s project to unpack how these basic assumptions have shaped his project as a whole.

For Caputo, the “beginning of radical hermeneutics” starts with the “end of German Idealism.”¹³⁸ This end was precipitated by the recognition of the differential or unprogrammable nature of phenomena--or, in short, the assumption that the particular, though part of a greater whole, is not the instantiation of a larger or more complete whole of which it is an instance. Radical hermeneutics as an extension of postmodern/structuralist thought denies that an absolute *Begriff* hovers over particular phenomena granting them legitimacy insofar as ‘the particular’ productively shares its unfolding with the telos of this *Begriff*. This is, of course, not simply a ‘radical hermeneutical’ claim but is ingredient to poststructuralist thought more broadly. Thus, it should not be surprising that the beginning of radical thought in Caputo’s project starts with his taking Derrida’s project seriously, specifically the aims and intentions of Derrida’s criticism of Husserl in particular and the history of western philosophy more broadly. How then did this engagement with Derrida take place, how did Caputo incorporate its themes and claims into his own thought, and how has this theme developed in his later work? Answering these questions motivate the following.

As noted above, *RH* was written in 1983-84 and was undertaken by Caputo via the impulse of “protecting hermeneutics from deconstruction.”¹³⁹ Caputo’s initial angst regarding Derrida was

¹³⁷ Ibid., 2.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 4.

governed by the claim that Deconstruction was simply a sort of wild anything-goes nihilism—that it was a haphazard and directionless analysis. In his study of Derrida's account of Husserl's phenomenology regarding what the latter would call the status of 'presence'—i.e., the assumption of the primacy of a being-given over and against the not-being-given—Caputo would change his opinion of Derrida. In Derrida's critique of Husserl, Caputo realized that Derrida was not critiquing for criticism's sake but was ultimately interested in evidencing the deeper logic of presence that theories grounded in phenomenology assume.¹⁴⁰ As Derrida noted, the not-given, the spacing and timing within which phenomena show themselves in Husserl's phenomenological analysis, are just as instrumental to the phenomena's being-given as their givenness. *The* example that became central to Deconstruction is that the spacing, or the non-given aspects of a text, are ingredient central to how information is communicated. Philosophically, Caputo roots Derrida within a history of thought that the American philosopher Richard Rorty called edifying philosophers, which includes others like Kierkegaard and Heidegger. These thinkers aim at a 'retrieval' or *Wiederholung* of a "primordial but latent understanding in which we always and already stand."¹⁴¹ They aim to show the space, the *khora*, within which thought plays. This 'always and already' primordial spacing indicates the unescapable finite conditions which form the con-text, the *hors-text*, of any and every situation that is experientially given. What unifies these 'edifying philosophers' is the claim that "metaphysics has systematically suppressed this authentic preunderstanding in favor of speculative constructions, i.e., metaphysics. Their work of 'retrieval' is meant to bring to a halt the flight of metaphysics from the finitude of limitations of man."¹⁴² In

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ John D Caputo, 'The Thought of Being and the Conversation of Mankind: The Case of Heidegger and Rorty,' in *The Collected and Philosophical and Theological Papers Volume 1: 1969-1985, Aquinas, Eckhart, Heidegger: Metaphysics, Mysticism, Thought*, ed. Eric Weislogel (Bolton, ON: John D. Caputo Archives, 2021), 420.

¹⁴² Ibid.

short, language grounded in metaphysics, “transcendental subjectivity,” or any overarching abstract model, divorces thought from its inescapable finite conditions. Otherwise stated, finitude is the gap, the spacing and timing, which has produced the conditions of possibility wherein thought is possible, but, simultaneously, in the cultural systems of thought that have been produced in the West, this finite spacing and timing has been ignored or relegated to the position of unimportance. Radical hermeneutics aims at making evident this preconceptual gap within which we write, read, and think.

It is against this deconstructive background that Caputo's *RH* text was formed. But if his project was reduced to the influence by Derrida alone, key elements of this radical *turn* would be ignored. For example, it is not Derrida with whom *RH* starts, but Aristotle and Kierkegaard. It is in these thinkers that he finds his starting point for a radical hermeneutics which is: “hermeneutics as an attempt to stick with the original difficulty of life, and not to betray it with metaphysics.”¹⁴³ By beginning with Aristotle, Caputo begins with two foci: the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Metaphysics*. What unifies both is a theory of *kinesis*, or our biological response to stimuli. Heidegger, whom Caputo is following in this analysis, reads the *kinesis* of Aristotle's *Physics* into Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in order to deconstruct *ousia* with reference to kinetic finite movements—the spacing—that compose the “turbulence” of physics which the *Metaphysics* smoothed over or arrested.¹⁴⁴ Metaphysical thought, Caputo argues, ignores the messy concrete particularities of factual existence and its incompleteness, so as to evidence an abstract but coherent and unified image of the world as complete. The history of thought in the West is organized by projects that maximize metaphysical theories to the detriment of a robust account of factual reality. Caputo follows this basic Heideggerian position with regards to metaphysics.

¹⁴³ *RH*, 1.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

Kierkegaard's project is one that begins from the problems noted above. Aiming his analysis against theorists like Hegel, Kierkegaard's thought in texts like *Repetition* (1843) sought to show the ways in which finite particularity always already escapes the grip of any overarching logic or system. In short, Kierkegaard thinks the possibilities contained in an analysis that prioritizes finite activity (*kinesis*) over systematized claims to coherency (*ousia*). Kierkegaard, thinking within the Greco-Christian framework that he inherited, argues that we are "either to affirm finitude with the category of repetition, or negate it with the category of recollection."¹⁴⁵ Metaphysics assumes a model of Greek recollection which tries to think the problems found in finitude, its 'booming buzzing confusion of things,' as mere misalignments with respect to an assumed unmoving image whose presence or unshakability, is true reality.¹⁴⁶ In this system the individual, whether individual movement, individual subject, or individual event, represents a problem in relation to the priority of stasis which premised on the image of an unmoving eternity. Moreover, this imaged unmoving eternity is a backward projected totality—the flux of temporality is thought against this backwards projected ideal, a "lost cognition," that it seeks to recoup in the present momentor, as Caputo writes, recollection is a "movement governed by a dynamics of nostalgia on which movement itself is something to be overcome."¹⁴⁷

Christianity, broadly conceptualized, is an inversion of Greek recollection. Because of the temporal and material implications of the incarnation (John 1:14) in Christian thought, the flux of finitude is understood as productively contributing to the image of totality it envisions. For Kierkegaard, importantly, this Christian image is not solely governed by the yearning of a lost past, but by the hope of a future to-come. This futurity is premised on the possibility of "effecting

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 16-17.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 14.

new life, not with awaking one who slumbers.”¹⁴⁸ The future is thus a motivating theme in Christian thought, it inscribes salvation as a process that occurs in finite movement (*kinesis*) and in time. In Christian thought, for Caputo in *RH*, the future is the actual whose possibility is “continually produced, brought forth anew, again and again.”¹⁴⁹

Caputo draws from the above the further conclusion that in the present moment (*Augenblick*), or in the becoming future of the present, there is opened up the possibility that time and eternity will “touch each other,” as for example in the incarnation of Christ. Thus, as Caputo notes, every moment of the Christian conception of time is touched by the eternal, has the eternal at stake, is charged with the energy and momentousness of an eternal—and that means of a future—possibility.¹⁵⁰ Christian repetition as Kierkegaard frames it here is thus not a Greek “re-production,” but a creative production which pushes ahead, which produces as it repeats, which produces what it repeats, which makes a life for itself in the midst of the difficulties of the flux.”¹⁵¹ In short, Christian accounts of time make finitude and its risky unfoldings part of, not separate to, the becoming true of truth itself.

Caputo’s radical hermeneutics, building on the tropes of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, is the attempt to think the difficulty of the flux of finitude and of the events in time; it “always has to do with keeping the difficulty of life alive and with keeping a distance from the easy assurances of metaphysics and the consolations of philosophy.”¹⁵² Likewise, the above shows how radical hermeneutics is fundamentally future directed. This is not to say that Caputo does not have a robust account of the necessity of having a productive relation to the past via its textual, historical, and

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 15.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 17.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 15.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁵² Ibid.

experiential contexts. But, he writes, he is not concerned with “historical genesis” as much as its “innermost direction and momentum.”¹⁵³ At its core, radical hermeneutics strives to keep the present open to the future by honestly confronting the difficulties of finitude, and finding in those difficulties, possible moments of immanent transcendence.

However, the question that is then raised is the question of the *meaning* of the flux of finitude; not simply its *what*, but its *why*. It is at this juncture that Caputo’s hermeneutics marries Caputo’s phenomenology. Phenomenology, in radical hermeneutics, is a supplement that, though essential to its analysis, is nonetheless second to the hermeneutical principles unpacked above. Caputo writes, “if Kierkegaard addressed the question of the constitution of the self in the flux, Husserl raised the question of the constitution of meaning and objectivity.”¹⁵⁴ That is, Husserl, he notes, reflects on the nature of the built up “unities of meaning” that emerge in time from the objects which compose finitude.¹⁵⁵ Meaning is imaged here as an interpretive achievement hard won from the flux of time. The break between hermeneutics and phenomenology, though, is a porous one. As Caputo notes, “Husserlian constitution is the epistemic parallel to existential repetition” in that,

for Husserl, everything rises slowly from below, is formed and reformed, and remains subject always to discreditation, to what he called, in an uncanny experiment, the possibility of the destruction of the worlds. The one “thing” which alone resists this destruction is no thing at all but the pure flux of internal time.¹⁵⁶

Where Caputo distances himself from Husserl is in his theory of ‘internal time’ which techniques like the *epochē* assume. That is, in the possibility of a present static moment of reflective awareness that the *epochē* supposes, Caputo finds one more attempt to shelter ourselves from the flux of finitude. It is an imaged space of pure presence undefiled by time itself in which the

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 3-4.

phenomenologist is able to reflect and analyze from.¹⁵⁷ Consequently, Caputo argues that Husserlian phenomenology is recollective in focus—it aims at a present *now* unimpacted by the flux of time.¹⁵⁸ Caputo turns to Derrida to correct this Husserlian tension. What Derrida's project showed was that “presence is the ‘effect’ of a process of repetition, that re-presentation precedes and makes possible the very presence it is supposed to reproduce, that repetition is ‘older’ than what it repeats.”¹⁵⁹

In short, radical hermeneutics is a hermeneutics that seeks *openings* which are generative and creative, not *resolutions* which are final. This is Caputo's Radical thought. But it also, as I will explore below, mirrors the basic thematics of his mystical element. In the mystic, in writers like Eckhart and Silisius, Caputo finds thinkers who strive to show the unsayability, the open question, contained in names like ‘God’. They write in such a way that the questions that prompt their mysticism, generate unexpected answers and new paradoxes. For Caputo, the mystic—like the Continental philosopher—writes not to resolve the paradoxes that motivate their writing into the ‘presence’ of an answer, but to extend those paradoxes into new, as yet unthought enigmas. He writes, “once we stop trying to prop up our beliefs, practices, and institutions on the metaphysics of presence, once we give up the idea that they are endowed with some sort of facile transparency, we find that they are not washed away but liberated.”¹⁶⁰

With the above as context, I want to unpack the movement that Caputo made from radical hermeneutics to his radical theology. Caputo's follow up to *RH*, *MRH* is a good place to locate this development as it extends the basic claims of *RH* but advances via more obviously biblical and theological themes. I will here unpack some of those discussions before delving into his later

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 58.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 7.

radical theology project more specifically. *MRH* furthers the claims of RH via an appeal to what I have been calling Caputo's hermeneutical apophatics. Hence, whereas in *RH* Kierkegaard's model of repetition combined with Husserl's phenomenological claims regarding the constitution of space and time, supplemented by a Derridean focus on difference, was key, in *MRH* it is the "absolute secret" which governs Caputo's focus.¹⁶¹ The absolute secret names "the structural non-knowing, 'blindness,' or unreadability by which we are beset in virtue of the absolute secret it is what gives us passion. We are driven by the passion of non-knowing."¹⁶² This structural unknowability names the secret that we are in, but not the secret we are "*in on*."¹⁶³ Metaphysics trades on the security of providing its initiates with knowledge of a secret order or structure that, in properly apprehending said hidden order, one is provided special epistemic insight. Radical hermeneutics operates on the premise that the condition for the possibility of knowing anything is the always already unknowability of things—an excessive element to phenomena that escapes the grip of reason. And although this claim certainly shares a genealogy with mysticism and the apophatic, a key difference should be noted. *Whereas mystical apophatics is provisional, the apophatic structure of radical hermeneutics is final.* The secret is that there is no secret. This is what the more in *MRH* signifies, it is a more radical claim regarding the difficulty of interpreting and unknowing, it is a more difficult hermeneutics.

This hermeneutical claim regarding the secret follows from *PaT* in which the apophatic gesture of negative theology was translated into what Caputo called a "General apophatics."¹⁶⁴ This apophatic structure aims at making evident the same claim that marshals mystical thought: one 'knows' in their unknowing because God is unknowable. But a general apophatics finds in the

¹⁶¹ *MRH*, 3.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *PaT*, 41.

unknowability of the future to-come, which is the event that stirs in every moment (*Augenblick*), a structure of futurity *as such*. This is the messianic principle which governed weak thought and indeed Caputo's account of the event itself. Not unlike Aristotle's *thaumazein*, we are surprised into wonder by the unknown that always already proceeds us by its call.¹⁶⁵ Or, more classically construed, general apophatics falls under the name 'faith' for Caputo. This link between what Caputo calls a general apophatics and its link with the 'absolute secret' is key to the link between radical hermeneutics and radical theology.

Indeed, what the term radical names is the desire to get to the root of things. Radical, from *radix* is Latin for 'root' and thus has the connotative 'thoroughgoing' or 'extreme.' Radical is thus driven by the desire to push past the surface level, into the depths.¹⁶⁶ But this movement into the depths is not a movement into a hidden essence that lay, like a metaphysical urge, behind the scenes driving it into ever new expression. Instead, the roots are historical, and history for Caputo is composed of events. Events name the call from the past, heard in the present, of a future to come. The condition of possibility for the emergence of this call is hope, or faith, in the unknown possibility that always already lies on the horizon. In this way, *radical* has the structure of faith in that it operates on the finite reality of the unknown and the human necessity of living within that unknown, to affirm a 'hope beyond hope' into a future 'I know not what.'¹⁶⁷ Radical hermeneutics moves in the space of the event, and the faith or hope inscribed in the futurity of the event. It assumes not a secret which, if one has the correct beliefs or insight, is revealed. Instead, it assumes the secret as the *sin qua non* of experience *as such*. This principle of a generalized apophatics is a principal component of the mystical element.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 46-47.

¹⁶⁶ John D Caputo, *In Search of Radical Theology: Expositions, Explorations, Exhortations* (NY; Fordham U.P., 2020), 50.

¹⁶⁷ *PaT*, 47.

Whereas in *WoG* the theme of the radical is certainly addressed, it is not until *IoG* that it emerges as a key thematic of Caputo's project in general. In *IoG*, in a chapter entitled, 'Theopoetics as the Insistence of a Radical Theology,' he writes: "What I mean by 'radical' is not foundational but non-foundational. I do not mean radically grounded but radically exposed. Radicality for me refers to our inescapable exposure to the unforeseeable, which requires having the spine for 'perhaps'."¹⁶⁸ By emphasising the notion of instance here, Caputo is privileging the principle of the virtual that has been noted throughout this analysis. Radical theology is radical because it does not ground itself in social or cultural structures of power—there is no Radical Theology of the *Vatican*. Instead, it is a hermeneutical principle, a Radical (Protestant) principle that "goes to the roots of classical theology and uproots them, pulling up the root of the logos of the old theology and replacing it with a poetics. What gives this perhaps quality to the insistence found in Radical Theology is its being tethered to what he calls in *IoG* 'Martha's world.' This is the world that Martha directs her action to in Luke. It is the world that blooms because it blooms. This, rather than reducing the world to a metaphysical reflection, sees in that which blooms a mere instantiation of an overarching principle."¹⁶⁹ If one were to name an overarching principle that does govern Radical Theology, it would be "radical honesty or what Nietzsche called truthfulness."¹⁷⁰ This principle is itself governed by a hermeneutical principle that takes as its standard that 'the other might be right;' which is itself a form of weak thought insofar as it assumes a deferential attitude to the other, to the event, and indeed to oneself. Thus, at the heart of Caputo's Radical Theology, lay a radical openness that seeks not the truth found in a tradition, but the truth that emerges from

¹⁶⁸ *IoG*, 63.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

any “enduring form of life”—whether that form of life be religious, political, cultural, artistic, etc.¹⁷¹

In *CaC* and *SoG*, Caputo develops the theme of the radical in ways similar to the above while attending to different topics. In *CaC* he deploys his radical hermeneutical theology to Luther’s theology of the Cross in what he calls a ‘Radical Theology of the Cross.’¹⁷² In this analysis, the representation of the cross is read in an (almost) literal sense: Christ on the cross is weak, powerless, without authority. What Caputo wants to avoid by taking this representation seriously is a Docetism in which the suffering shown in the representation of the cross is reduced to a metaphysical image of a higher more powerful more self-contained system.¹⁷³ In short, Caputo follows Luther and sees Christ’s weakness as real and absolute; Christ could not have “come down from the cross had he so chosen” and destroyed the Roman legions.¹⁷⁴ That would make of the cross a deception, it would negate the very human experience of desperation that occurs on the cross, making it a mere show. Hence, Caputo writes,

my claim is that if the mark of God in Christianity is drawn from the characteristic image of Jesus, then it is systematically found on the side of the ‘weak’ features—of forgiveness, peace, nonviolence, poverty—not of the strong or ‘virile’ features. If indeed *CRUX sola est nostra theologia*, then the human weakness must be an icon of the divine weakness and vulnerability, albeit in such a way that ‘the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.’¹⁷⁵

The weakness of God here is not the weakness which signifies Christ’s inaction; it is not strength denuded of itself. Rather, the weakness of God is the weakness of the insistence that gets itself called by representations like the Cross. The faith that is given by the call of the Cross is a faith “in the future, in the spectral possibility of being otherwise, of something completely different, or

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 73.

¹⁷² *CaC*, 17-47.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 22-23.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 23.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 24.

more life, which is the meaning of resurrection.”¹⁷⁶ In short, the cross is a revelation of weakness, of the ways in which events contained in the promise held by the name ‘God,’ are shown not in power and overcoming, but in fragility and surrender.

In *SoG*, Radical Theology is reflected upon via the nomenclature apophatics.¹⁷⁷ Here the focus shifts from the theological perspective that organizes *CaC*, though his analysis remains decidedly Christian in focus, to an emphasis on poetics—specifically a *theopoetics* rather than a *mythopoetics*. I will unpack these terms in greater detail in the next section. What I want to stress here is the general shift that *SoG* designates. Radical in this text has the meaning of risking the possibility that our understanding of the world, ourselves, and their events will run “up against something radically unknowable, leaving us confounded.”¹⁷⁸ In *SoG* this risk element is examined via his focus on a radical apophatics which is a shift primarily in terminology, as both words achieve a similar outcome in his project. But, and to make a more general claim, I want to suggest that one way to understand the difference between Caputo’s radical theology, which he voices in texts like *SoG*, and a classically conceived Christian perspective, whether that be Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox, is via a theory of revelation. Whereas classical forms of Christianity assume a specific revelation in which Christ’s revelation was specifically unique—it occurred at a specific time (*Kairos*), to a specific person (*Christos*), in a specific community (*Ekklesia*). Caputo, in contrast, is perhaps best understood as offering a general theory of revelation. Indeed, what is his ‘event’ if not a claim regarding the possibility of a revealing *now*, in this moment and, therefore, in every moment: the to-come. Christ’s event is an event which calls to a future to come; but *the promise of the event for Caputo is universal*. All events, perhaps, contain the promise of

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 42.

¹⁷⁷ *SoG*, xiii.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 41.

‘something radically unknowable, leaving us confounded.’ Caputo’s project, then, can be understood as an attempt to democratize the event of the cross, to strip the specificity of a historical moment as *the* moment or *the* event. For Caputo, there are no definitive (i.e. *the*) event, there are only events. In short, in radical thought, as Caputo conceives it, every event signals the possibility of a radically new moment, the structural to-come which haunts every moment. I will return to this theme in the next chapter when I unpack the temporal nature of Caputo’s mystical element.

6.5 – Mythopoetics and Theopoetics

The overarching theme which unifies all of Caputo’s major works and essays is religion. This focus on religion has been decidedly Western. Caputo is a Catholic thinker, interested in Christian themes, and European theological history. He is galvanized above all by the Christian mystical tradition. Hence, when he engages philosophy and post-structuralist thought, he does so in order to attend to tensions or issues that are religious in nature. But as with the topics discussed above, a complex history weaves together Caputo’s account of religion and the religious. To unpack how Caputo understands religion, I begin by unpacking a distinction that he makes in his latter works between mythopoetics and theopoetics. Despite the latter formulation of this distinction, I take it to be reflective of Caputo’s general view of religion. I then unpack Caputo’s engagement with an essay by Paul Tillich entitled the “Two Types of Philosophies of Religion” (1964). This essay provides insight into how Caputo frames Christian thought in general, but it also offers clues into how he understands religion as a social, cultural, and ontological event. I end by clarifying the distinction Caputo makes between religion as something that names an essence and religion as something that names a history.

First developed in *IoG*, the mythopoetic vs theopoetic schema echoes a fairly classical division. Mythopoetics names the mythical set of beliefs that assumes the existence of an

“omnipotent Superbeing in the sky, who outknows, outwits, outwills, and outmans us.”¹⁷⁹ This mythic structure functions on the logic of the secret and the revelatory “hidden answer,” i.e., a creed, claim, belief, or understanding of that secret, “that we could never have come up with on our own (at least those of us who happened to be lucky enough to be standing in the right place at the right time to receive the revelation as the divine motorcade goes speeding by).”¹⁸⁰ Moreover, mythopoetics is a worldview grounded in metaphysical claims that replicate social hierarchies, cultural norms, and belief patterns that, Caputo argues, have had negative consequences in modernity. For example, more classical worldviews that explicitly assume patriarchal, racist, and homophobic perspectives give those biases a cosmic origin and legitimacy that, without said mythical framework, they might not have. For Caputo, this mythical image is no longer able to provide a sufficient standard for producing knowledge and facts about the finite material world, nor are they guidelines for the maintenance and replication of a functional social sphere. But these claims should not be read as issuing from a critique of religion as such. Indeed, what theopoetics provides is precisely a sympathetic evaluation of religion; it seeks to name the fruitful elements of the mythical system that profitably invite emulation.

Caputo's theopoetics is directed against the strong claims of an absolute force which governs the cosmos with a clear and distinct order, and advances *weak* claims that emerge from those that try to ‘hear something else getting itself said in the tradition.’ This is where theopoetics starts, it rejects an economy premised on a metaphysical order that supervenes in finitude from a hidden beyond. Caputo writes, in theopoetics “everything turns on rejecting supernaturalism, that is, the cluster of distinctions between natural and supernatural, transcendence and immanence,

¹⁷⁹ *IoG*, 97.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

reason and faith, human knowledge and divine revelation, and time and eternity.”¹⁸¹ Metaphysics is a systematic attempt to organize the world on distinctions like “essence and existence” while Caputo’s poetics “turns on the distinction between insistence and existence.”¹⁸² This emphasis on insistence, as was explored above, is an emphasis that stresses the event and the call as constitutive to a proper expression of religion. Theopoetics builds on these themes and names the promise or the ‘spirit’ of a tradition whose existence comes to be in our response to its call; our response to its insistence gives to it existence.¹⁸³

The theopoetic/mythopoetic distinction itself turns on two separate though related philosophical tensions. In the first, we can see the distinction between a Kantian notion of religion and Hegelian notion of religion operating behind the scenes. Kant, Caputo argues, reduced religion by arguing that its mythical structures were the irrational side of its ethical and therefore rational core. For religion to get something done in the world, it accomplishes it via the ethical norms that follow from its mythical structures. In short, for Kant, the Beatitudes of Matthew 5, not the chorus of angels occupying a supersensible realm described in texts like Revelation 9, are the proper expressions of religion. This position is grounded in a philosophical claim that Caputo is “convinced of,” namely, that any metaphysical speculation that turns on “forms, substance, essence and existence, monads, Spirit” lead to a “highly imaginative and impressionistic account” of the cosmos that will ultimately end in antinomies.¹⁸⁴ That is, metaphysical speculation allows one to produce equally valid arguments for or against God—it is thus, at its root, an irrational venture. These superstitious accounts are what Kant denounced as a ‘transcendental illusion’ and occur because “the wheels of conceptual thinking are lifted off the ground of empirical experience

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid., 14.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ *IoG*, 192.

and allowed to spin to infinity where, lacking all traction, they get absolutely nowhere.”¹⁸⁵ In short, metaphysical speculation does not tether its truth claims to the finite and transient structure of things—it is free floating, free wielding.

Caputo in principle agrees with Kant's general critique, he shares his distrust in metaphysical systems as a consequence of the inevitability of the antinomies that result from these systems. But Kant's system itself operates on a distinction between reason and unreason that Caputo rejects. For Kant, religion is reasonable when it displays obvious and tangible pursuits in ethics. Religion is unreasonable when it advances speculative claims regarding the logic, structure, and force of invisible order. And although Caputo utilizes this basic division in his mythopoetic/theopoetic scheme, he ultimately rejects this Kantian reason/unreason divide in favor of a Hegel's more organic account of religion.

Whereas Kant drops the “acid of reason” on religion, subordinating its imaginative structures to the logic of true and untrue, Hegel takes a more organic view of religion and sees its imaginative and representational images as productive moments in the life of thought. Indeed, theopoetics ‘turns’ on the logic of Hegel's *Vorstellungen* which stands in marked contrast to Kant's reading of metaphysics as a mere ‘transcendental illusion.’ This emphasis of Hegel's is seen in his introductory *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (1821, 1824, 1827, and 1831), in which he argued that the stories and words that appear in texts like the Bible are an “unsystematic account” of the Absolute which require, through thought (*Denken*), clarification. Thought, in short, makes explicit what is implicit in the stories and images that compose the biblical texts.¹⁸⁶ Symbols, in short, are not something to be thought away by the purity of reason, rather, faith and religion reflected in texts like the Bible show the actual life processes that give expression to the life

¹⁸⁵ CaC, 130.

¹⁸⁶ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 94.

contained in the religious representation. These expressions do not function on a true/untrue scheme but on a gradation—it is *the becoming true of the true* that is key for Hegel. Thus, while Kant wants to separate irrational religious representation from its rational or ethical output, Hegel wants to think them together—he wants to erase the divide that Kant's rationalism imparted to philosophy of, or analysis about, religion.

Caputo's focus on Hegel's logic of the representation (*Vorstellung*) is key to understanding how Caputo engages religious thought and texts. A *Vorstellung* is, Caputo writes, "sensuous in its form—narratives, parables, stunning images and sayings, song, and dance, hymn and ritual—but supersensuous in content, because it is telling the story of the Spirit's self-reconciliation and of the becoming real of freedom."¹⁸⁷ These sensuous or fleshy representations "seize our imaginary, its images stir our soul, its ideas and ideals touch our heart."¹⁸⁸ For Caputo, following Hegel, when philosophy thinks about religious matters it is incumbent that it take seriously the representations which compose the tradition. They are thus, unlike Kant, not to be understood as mere irrational problems, but the concrete and lived unfolding of the rational. For example, stories surrounding the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ are stories in which human thought (*Denken*) thinks the "stages or forms that the spirit has taken" in history.¹⁸⁹ Christ's story reflects these stages in human thought—both in the representations themselves and in the history of interpretation that have followed upon those representations. These stories are not accidental features of religion, they are precisely what animates, motivates, and generates human thought and experience. Thus, it is incumbent for thinkers like Caputo, following Hegel, to take seriously these representations and the historical processes within which they are inscribed.

¹⁸⁷ *CaC*, 129.

¹⁸⁸ *SoG*, 213.

¹⁸⁹ John D Caputo, '09-08-09 Hegel Philosophy of Religion 2.mp3,' on <https://johndcaputo.com>, uploaded Nov 19, 2010: 10:40.

For Hegel, representations need philosophical thought to make explicit their implicit ideational form, and that forms specific correlation to the Absolute Spirit. But Hegel's system is episodic, developmental, and teleological—thought (*Denken*) images religious representations to gain clarity about an unfolding dynamic process that reflects a supersensible order. But while Hegel understands *Vorstellungen* as specific moments in the life of the *Absolute Spirit*, the becoming true of the *True*, Caputo understands representations as *events* in the life of a particular religious or cultural tradition. Caputo, in short, denies the universality of any representation. Caputo thus follows Hegel's basic system, but he detaches the language of an overarching spirit, an absolute *Begriff*, from the economy of the *Vorstellungen* in what he calls his “headless Hegelianism” or a Hegel “without absolute knowledge, where the wings of Hegel's *aigle of savoir absolu* have been clipped.”¹⁹⁰

Hence, following Hegel, Caputo makes “cautious use” of the “pictorial narratives” that are constitutive of religious expression.¹⁹¹ They are important, but not determinant. He argues, specifically, that these images are the types of images that emerged in early Christianity “after the death of Yeshua.”¹⁹² What Caputo emphasizes is a reading that “speaks in a sensuous way of our carnal life, of being poor, hungry, blind, or imprisoned, and of defeating the forces that bring about poverty, blinded, and imprisonment.”¹⁹³ The *truth* that Caputo hears in the call that issues from images like the Cross, are truths made true only insofar as they are given existent expression in the world—i.e., their material and existent outcomes. That is, it is not simply the representation of the Cross alone that constitutes change, but the communities that have formed as a result of those representations and the actions they have undertaken in the world, to reduce the plight of the poor

¹⁹⁰ *CaC*, 130.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

and give voice to the weak. Hence, rather than an Absolute Spirit granting legitimacy to the representation, for Caputo, it is finitude whereby the truth of the tradition is given expression and determination. In short, he argues, “Christianity is a *Vorstellung* without a *Begriff*.”¹⁹⁴ Its truth value is circumscribed by the finite and material, not the infinite and spiritual, realities.

What, though, is the representation a representation *of*? If its representations are not specific cases of a universal, or a reflection of another order, from whence do they arise? There are two helpful ways of thinking about Caputo's response to these questions. First, the representation is not so much a re-presentation for Caputo—i.e., it does not re-presence an absent presence. Instead, their insistent structure, or their capacity to galvanize the moment and image a future to-come, is a consequence of the events coming-to-be, not its coming-to-presence. This is a model that assumes organic development, not ideational reflection. In Caputo's language, representations are evental and therefore developmental.

How, though, does a representational event come-to-be? As has been noted already, in Caputo's system events insist and we give them existence. But in our existent act we do not repeat or re-presence a virtuality contained in the promise of the insistent. Following Deleuze's formulation of the event, Caputo argues that it is our task to make ourselves ‘worthy of the event;’ to make our life an existent approximation to the insistent coming-to-be of the promise/risk of the event. In our response to the event, in our desire to make our existence reflect the implicit structure of the event contained in representations like the Cross—a representation grounded in an images of weakness—is where the event fundamentally arises in Caputo's system. Writing on this correlative claim with specific reference to his account of the *Vorstellungen*, he writes, “*that is what I am analyzing under the notion of an event which we should make ourselves worthy, of a*

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

call to which we should be the response, or an insistence for which we should supply the existence."¹⁹⁵ This approach is not unlike the parishioner hearing their pastor preach; they listen to the words of the gospel and seek instruction on how best to enact the promise contained in the good news.

Hermeneutically, Caputo's position echoes Gadamer's basic claim in *Truth and Method*, namely, that when we read or when we engage the other (e.g., the other found in religious representations), we expose ourselves to what we read, or see, or engage, and allow ourselves to be "instructed by it" in such a way that our existence echoes the virtual insistence contained in the literary representations.¹⁹⁶ Caputo similarly wants us to be instructed by religious representations, to hear something getting itself said in the tradition that is more than the tradition—to extend its call to new ways of living. That, in short, is what he thinks religion in general can offer to modernity, and is more specifically the task he sets for those Radical theologians who follow in his wake.¹⁹⁷

In addition to the hermeneutical foundations there is a phenomenological kernel to Caputo's theopoetic/mythopoetic scheme. Indeed, aside from thinking religious representations as evental and thus insistent in structure, representations are also reflections of a specific life-world and a specific historical context. In order to *hear* in a specifically constituted historically derived representation a more general claim, i.e., to de-contextualize the original representation and re-contextualize it into a new and as yet unimagined context, one needs to hear in the event the lifeworld

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 102 (emphasis in original).

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 133.

¹⁹⁷ A current example of thinker who has taken up Caputo's project, and to whom Caputo is himself fond, is the theologian Peter Rollins. His theology developed out of the late 2000's emergent church movement and specifically deployed Caputoian themes in his writings and his seminars (e.g., Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2006); Peter Rollins, *Insurrection: To Believe Is Human; to Doubt, Divine* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011); Ward Blanton, Clayton Crockett, Jeffrey W. Robbins, Noëlle Vahanian, Peter Rollins, Creston Davis, and Catherine Keller, *An Insurrectionist Manifesto: Four New Gospels for a Radical Politics* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2016).

it constitutes so as to imagine it otherwise via its own insistent possibilities. The truth value of a poetics is thus decidedly phenomenological in that what is being described is a process that unfolds within experience.¹⁹⁸ In *SoG*, Caputo offers a concrete illustration of this phenomenological element. He specifically compares the shift from a mythopoetics to a theopoetics as a shift that mirrors Husserl's *epochē* claims. That is, a reduction is required of the mythopoetic image in order to hear what is getting itself said otherwise in theopoetics. Caputo writes, "in the *epochē* we weaken theology, a work of logos, into a theopoetics, a work of imaginative construction, by suspending the supernatural attitude and bracketing the supernatural signified."¹⁹⁹ In this movement theopoetics treats its textual tradition, its sacramental rites, its mythical claims, etc., "not as supernatural interventions but as a phenomenological invention or inbreaking of a new vision of life."²⁰⁰ In these existent moments calcified in the historical permutations of the tradition's lived structure is to be found the possibility of a new life. This claim is fundamentally premised on Husserl's retention/protection scheme, though inflected by Derrida's Messianic to-come, in which in the bracketed in-between moment (*Augenblick*) arrives the possibility of an as yet unimagined future. The task of Radical Theology is to think these possibilities and make explicit their implicit potential.

Thus, theopoetics operates on the logic of the phenomenological reduction. But, in Caputo's system, it is perhaps better understood as an echo of the phenomenological reduction, not a copy. This is because the content of myth is not a phenomenological given that arises from *die Sache selbst*, but a quasi-phenomenological event that arises from the imaginative structure of the human lifeworld. Its data is the objects formed in the intentional gaze of the (modern) subject

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 131.

¹⁹⁹ *SoG*, 8-9.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 9.

organized by the life world of the religious imagery—it seeks, in that intentional sphere, in the manifest image, an insistent imagery that thinks this lifeworld otherwise. Theopoetics reduces or ‘turns down’ the importance of a Supreme Being or any overarching principle in our thought by striving to show how this Supreme Being is neither Supreme nor a Being. Rather what sustains any being, Super or otherwise, is a weak force, a small voice, an insistence that, in the booming and buzzing confusion of things shows itself not as a ‘Being Almighty’ but a *being-who-might-be*.

At its core, then, Caputo’s theopoetic/mythopoetic model is both hermeneutical and phenomenological in outlook. When we think about the Christian religion in modernity for Caputo, we do so via the interpretive constraints of its textual *and* lived dimensions. He cleaves to the importance of this traditional lifeworld from which the Christian tradition arose; its concerns, tensions, and motivations speak to an irreducible human element. He does not think we can overcome, nor should we want to overcome, this context. But texts and traditions are active and living things for Caputo. How we engage those texts and traditions in modernity is through reading strategies which find in these texts and traditions new ways of imagining the past they describe so as to make them relevant to our time. Caputo’s project as a whole skirts this twin tension in which the mythic and hierarchical elements of the religious tradition are abandoned in favour of a quasi-demythologized outlook that sheds religion of these negative characteristics, while nonetheless cleaving to the claim that the imaginative core of religious expression holds a type of truth that we cannot do without.

In short, the *Sitz im Leben* that gave birth to the mythical cosmos, according to Caputo, has not been overcome by the forces of modernity. There is an ‘irrational’ element to our experience, our knowing, and our being that is irreducible to the human experience. This irreducible theme is called the apophatic element in *SoG*, it is what Caputo thinks the ‘radical’ in radical hermeneutics

names in *RH*, what Derrida's *différance* gestures to in *PaT*, and it is the 'mystical element' that he identifies in Heidegger's work. Religion for Caputo is an attempt to name this 'haunting' principle in human experience, the 'restless heart' named in Augustine's *Confessions*. For Caputo, religion does not console or solve these tensions, so much as it is a space of voicing these tensions—of magnifying them. Indeed, and as I will unpack in the next chapter, Caputo's aim is to detach us from the hope of a programmable or determinate response to these tensions, and to instead learn how to more productively live those tensions. As mentioned earlier, the one thinker that Caputo has drawn on to think about what it means to live with these tensions is Paul Tillich. To clarify this link and Tillich's influence on Caputo, I now turn to Tillich's 'Two Types' essay.

The first major influence of Paul Tillich on Caputo's thought is seen in his *IoG*.²⁰¹ There, relying on Tillich's 'Two Types of the Philosophy Religion' essay, Caputo deploys the divisions that Tillich uses in that essay and indeed in other published works, to think through the theological and religious claims that key Continental theorists have advanced. This 'turn' to Tillich is a later development of Caputo's. Indeed, even as late as *WoG* where Tillich's theology is engaged, it is not done so in an obviously focused way. In that text, Tillich's emphasis on ultimate concern and correlationism are drawn on analogically, but not systematically.²⁰² That said, Tillich's influence in the general milieu within which Caputo thinks, is shown in *WoG* via Caputo's reference to thinkers like Charles Winquist—a notable theologian in his own right, and the holder of the chair of philosophy at Villanova before Caputo's tenure.²⁰³ But in texts published from the 2010's onwards, i.e., *IoG*, *CaC*, *FoG*, *HaH*, and *SoG*, Tillich emerges as a central thinker for Caputo. It is in a course that Tillich taught in 2009 'Radical Theology: From Hegel to Zizek,' as well as a

²⁰¹ That said, citations to Tillich's *Two Types of the Philosophy of Religion* essay go back to *ME*, e.g., *ME*, 231-232.

²⁰² E.g., *WoG*, 196, 288.

²⁰³ *WoG*, 332, n13.

course that focused on the exchange between Žižek and John Milbank in *The Monstrosity of Christ* (2009), where Caputo began to more systematically engage Tillich's work for use in his own thinking.

Tillich's 'Two Types of the Philosophy of Religion' is important not only heuristically for Caputo, as he finds within it a clear summery of a variety of complex theological and philosophical problems. But the essay and Tillich in general are also important for Caputo's overall theory of religion. I take the latter impact of Tillich on Caputo's thought, and the subsequent systemization of Tillich for Caputo's radical theology project, to be of central importance to the Caputo's more recent work. Tillich is heir to both Hegel and Schelling's philosophy, and as Caputo developed his own theory of religion, he found in Tillich a thinker who voiced the productive elements of these German philosophers.²⁰⁴ In what follows, I trace Caputo's use of Tillich's account of theology and religion from a variety of Caputo's texts to help evidence Caputo's own evaluation of religion. I begin with Caputo's 2010 lecture on Tillich's Two Types article.

Caputo begins his lecture of the Two Types remarking,

That thing on the two types of the philosophy of religion; you'd be hard put to ever write anything better than that. There is so much in it, and it is so perfectly clear, I think, that it's amazing. If you made an anthology of the ten best articles that have ever been written in philosophy and theology since 1900, that would be in there. I mean, it's an amazing piece of work.²⁰⁵

It is the clarity of thought and the scope of analysis that Caputo finds admirable about this article. It is in the specific division between what Tillich called the ontological and the epistemological account of God that galvanizes Caputo's interest. Tillich begins his article by establishing a binary that he sees in the history of theological speculation on the nature of God. Two approaches, he

²⁰⁴ See for example, Caputo analysis of Schelling's *unvordenklichkeit* in *SoG* (e.g., 141-44). Schelling's appeal to a sort of anonymous transcendental ground from which meaning arises is echoed by Tillich in his 'ultimate concern' trope.

²⁰⁵ John Caputo, '10-06-09 Tillich.mp3', on <https://johndcaputo.com>, uploaded Nov 19, 2010: 56:34.

argues, animate this history “the way of overcoming estrangement and the way of meeting a stranger.”²⁰⁶ And although Tillich’s article touches on a variety of other issues, this division is the central theme that occupies my focus here. At its core, Tillich’s model is existentialist in focus, as the fulcrum upon which he establishes his thought is the impact it has on the individual theologian. The influence of these existentialist themes are evident in his descriptions of the two types when he writes,

In the first way man discovers himself when he discovers God; he discovers something that is identical with himself although it transcends him infinitely, something from which he is estranged, but from which he never has been and never can be separated. In the second way man meets a stranger when he meets God. The meeting is accidental. Essentially, they do not belong to each other.²⁰⁷

The first way is what Tillich called the ontological type, the second he called the cosmological type. In the ontological type, estrangement is overcome by discovering the always already relational status that persists between the individual and God. In this account, God is not so much an other to whom one relates, so much as the very process of relation itself. Thus, what one discovers from this perspective is a deepening of the already deeply unified ground that persists between the subject and God. In the cosmological type, God is understood as radically other than the subject; this difference is ontological, God is a category of being distinct from the category of finite being. The outcome of the cosmological type, Tillich argues, is that it “brings God’s existence down to the level of that of a stone or a star, and it makes atheism not only possible, but almost unavoidable, as the later development has proved.” That is, God is reduced to one more object, one more bit-of-being, in the cosmological approach and “ceases to be Being itself and becomes a particular being, who must be known, *cognitione particulari*.”²⁰⁸ For Tillich, only the

²⁰⁶ Paul Tillich, “The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion,” in *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford U.P., 1964) 10.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

ontological type, in which God is not an object formed in the light of truth but the very light itself, can God be truly understood. Thus, God names a power or insistence in the ontological type. God is.

This power of being is the *prius* of everything that has being. It precedes all special contents logically and ontologically. It precedes every separation and makes every interaction possible, because it is the point of identity without which neither separation nor interaction can be thought.²⁰⁹

God is here relation itself—not an object to whom we relate. The latter point results in what Kant would call an antinomy wherein the logical possibility of an absolute God could be proven or disproven by reason and thought itself. While the former position affirms God as “the power in everything that has power, be it a universal or an individual, a thing or an experience.”²¹⁰ In this way, Tillich’s model is Hegelian; the name ‘God’ corresponds to an unconditional principle that is true in its relational becoming, not its status as the highest and truest thing. Tillich calls this relational ground “the unconditional,” a term that mirrors Caputo’s notion of the impossible.

The claim that God as the unconditional/impossible can be found ‘in anything that has power’ is also a position that undergirds Tillich’s well-known statement identifying God as ‘ultimate concern.’ For Tillich, in books such as *The Courage To Be* (1952), God is not a Being that exists but a promise that insists. And not unlike Caputo, Tillich argues for a certain type of courage to enact that insistence—its reality, its ‘to be’, requires human courage to give it existence. The name of God, then, for Tillich, does not signify an entity but a possibility. Indeed, it is from claims like this that Tillich’s broader theology-of-culture project gets situated; similar to the study of theology, when we study culture, we are studying those objects, events, and situations that are of ultimate concern to a community or an individual. Caputo can be understood as heir to both the

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 25.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

theological claims regarding the ontological status of God in the “Two Types” essay, and the further abstraction regarding the centrality of ultimate concern for human experience that follows from those ontological claims. In short, Caputo’s notion of religion can be fruitfully situated alongside these Tillichian claims.

That being said, and before clarifying the preceding claims, it should be noted that Caputo differs with Tillich on a key fundamental point. As Catherine Sarah Moody notes, Caputo,

disagrees with Tillich’s ontological conceptualization of the unconditional as Being Itself: “to speak of the ground of being is still to speak of the power of God.” For Caputo, the unconditional isn’t an underlying depth of force but the weak force of an event and is better thought of as what Derrida calls the undeconstructible. Caputo therefore advances the cause of radical theology by aligning Tillich’s theology with his own deconstructive theology.²¹¹

Moody is correct. Caputo hears a Hegelian metaphysical eagle, as it were, hovering over Tillich’s ‘deep ground.’ Notice, too, Moody’s emphasis on the rejection of the Romantic affirmation that the deeper a truth is the truer it is, i.e., the more it penetrates into the heart of being. Caputo, despite his love of Eckhart, resists this *pietization* of the ground of Being. This, I would add, highlights Caputo’s tenuous relationship with history and the past as sources of present truths. Caputo’s project above all affirms the future, or the necessity of facing it. This affirmation of the future stands in marked contrast to the Romanticist and German Idealist idealization of the past. As noted above, this suspicion of a romanticized past is key to Caputo’s critique of Heidegger in his *DH*. There, Caputo argued that Heidegger’s fetishization of the past led him into his fascist and Nazi sympathies. For Heidegger, the Greeks stand out as a pure origin from which springs a font of truth that, over time, was encrusted with the imperfections of being. If those imperfections are racialized, as Heidegger himself did in his comments about the Jews, then the idolization of an originary pure

²¹¹ Katherine Sarah Moody, ‘John D. Caputo,’ in *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology*, ed. Christopher D. Rodkey and Jordan E. Miller (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 109.

state is made into a political philosophy. But, as was noted, Caputo radicalizes what he does find productive in Heidegger's thought and, in doing so, adopts a future-oriented thinking. Caputo's thought, in short, images the future as primary and problematizes the idealization of the past. This futurity carries a theological implication. God as the impossible perhaps is not anchored in the disclosure of a pure 'time-of-origin,' but in the future to-come, in the promise contained in the name God. In the moment (*Augenblick*), which is an anticipation caught in an always already relation with the possibility of *a* to-come, arises the possibility of God. I will return to this futural element in Caputo's thought below.

Tillich's division between the ontological type and the cosmological type is influential in Caputo's thought on several accounts. First, it corresponds, roughly, to Caputo's own division between confessional and radical theology. For Caputo, radical theology is the radicalization of the traditional structure of confessional religion. Confessional religion, e.g., the Christian tradition, is composed of founding texts, rites, and ceremonies that sustain the tradition being analyzed. Without these communities and their traditional forms of religious expressions, he notes, "there would be nothing to *radicalize*, nothing to reflect on and inflect, in short, nothing for radical theologians to *do*."²¹² The reason that Caputo's theopoetics reflects Tillich's ontological approach here is that Tillich's ontological model—following Augustine, Luther, and Hegel—seeks to name a principle or force that gets itself expressed by the traditional accounts under that name, without hypostatizing that name. Indeed, at its core, the ontological approach names elements of God that are contained within and by the tradition, but in a way that allows the name of God to be more than the confessional or traditional account of God.

²¹² Caputo, *Radical Theology*, 6 (emphasis in original).

In addition, and as just noted, Tillich's affirmation of the ontological type is premised upon a genealogical development that Caputo both follows and indeed places himself within. This tradition begins with Aristotle and his focus on this world as that from which knowledge arises, and extends to Hegel's thesis that God is but one more *Vorstellung*, one more representation. This for Caputo is a further *antimetaphysical* claim—it denies 'God' the position of the highest reality and makes it rather the highest image or representation. When Tillich, Caputo writes, in his 'Two Types' essay,

labeled the Supreme Being, the high and mighty God of religion, a half-blasphemous and mythological' construction, an idol from which a theological atheism frees us, and when he said that a religious language about God is 'symbolic,' Tillich had Hegel and Schelling, whose later lectures were attended by Kierkegaard, in the back of his mind.²¹³

In short, this is a theology that seeks to locate religious language as an extension of finite and material, not infinite and supersensible, phenomena.

Finally, Tillich's formulation affirms a generalized theology of culture which, as noted above, undergirds Caputo's basic claims regarding the efficacy of the ontological approach. As Caputo writes in *SoG*, "Every theology is a theology of the culture it inhabits; every culture is inhabited by a theology, by something which bares its heart."²¹⁴ Culture and theology are both inhabited by an excessive ground which for Caputo signifies the event. Indeed, if religion is composed of representations (*vorstellungen*) for Caputo, these representations are representations of the event—rather than being representations of the Absolute Spirit. Culture, too, is as evental as theology; indeed, in the quotation above, Caputo essentially echoes Tillich's basic formulation that "religion is the substance of culture, culture the form of religion."²¹⁵ There is no ultimate

²¹³ *FoG*, 96.

²¹⁴ *SoG*, 337.

²¹⁵ Paul Tillich, 'Aspects of a Religious Analysis of Culture,' in *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 42.

division between culture and religion—both come from the same human predicament, i.e., the drive to understand the secret or the unknown.

Here we can draw upon Caputo's account of the event and what I argued above is its universal structure to help gain clarity. Because there is no event as such, "the event," there are only events, and because an event is not a localized phenomenon, but a generalizable quasi-transcendental phenomenon, Caputo's project finds in thinkers like Tillich ways to unify the classically divided secular/sacred distinction. There is nothing within Caputo's system that would justify an overt evaluation of a specific event or phenomena—'the true' for Caputo designates not a movement from non-truth to truth, but a becoming true of the true. That becoming process, organized as it is around the event and the future-structure of the event, inscribes in every cultural form the emergence of something as yet unforeseen. This unforeseen is what Tillich called the unconditional, what Schelling called the *Unvordenklichkeit*, what Hegel called the Absolute Spirit, what Derrida called the secret, and what Caputo calls the impossible. All these terms account for an excessive structure that reflects the ontological fabric of the cosmos—this rather than arguing that the unknown element or the impossible names an epistemic limitation. Clarifying this final point brings us to Caputo's final use of Tillich's *Two Type* essay, what Caputo calls 'The Two Types of Continental philosophy of Religion.'

Caputo's account of the two types of Continental philosophy of religion (*CPoR*) provides insight into how Caputo thinks about the relationship between Continental philosophy and religion, the philosophy of religion, and indeed religion itself. It is an approach to religion that rejects an essentialist core, but sees in the history of the accumulated effects that compose said region, a sort of structural constitution. First, reflecting the genealogical focus noted above, Caputo divides the *CPoR* into two broad camps. The first is a radical tradition that begins with Hegel, finds expression

with Tillich, and is given more radicalization by thinkers like Derrida and Žižek. The second is the tradition that begins with Kant, finds expression with Barth, and is given more recent expression by thinkers like Merold Westphal.²¹⁶ In the Kantian vein, “postmodernism ends up as a way to contain the trouble that irrupts in modern materialism, a way to limit trouble in order to allow the old Augustinian dualism to emerge in a different form.”²¹⁷ Here religion is defended by noting the limits of rationality—a quasi-fideism in which the mythical assertions of religious traditions are granted legitimacy by a simultaneous claim regarding the inability of Enlightenment reason to itself establish clear and discernable truths. Human knowledge is in itself limited, a position which leaves the “door wide open for the possibility of faith in the God of metaphysical theology, or of the various confessional theologies, but without the pretense of achieving metaphysical knowledge.”²¹⁸ In contrast, is the Hegelian vein, which Caputo supplements with the polysemous nature of the event, as noted above. By doing so, he negates the dualism of a two-world metaphysics and cleaves instead to a finite and material affirmation of the religious. The religious here forms not via the call of an Other, a *Totaliter Aliter*, but via the insistent repetition of the finite event. This event is a-theistic—but not non-theistic. Indeed, it seeks to hear the promise inscribed in the name ‘God,’ but devoid of God as such. Indeed, Caputo argues that the Hegelian version finds in the atheist critiques of modern thought something agreeable. Like Tillich, he writes, “the Hegelians think that if God is taken to be an entity, even a prime entity, ‘the right religious and theological reply is atheism.’”²¹⁹ We can see here the logic of the perhaps undergirding Caputo’s twofold account of *CPoR*, namely, what Caputo calls God-perhaps and indeed God perhaps-not. Caputo writes, “In the Kantian version, ‘perhaps’ keeps God safe from trouble; in the Hegelian

²¹⁶ Moody, 109.

²¹⁷ *IoG*, 99.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

version, 'perhaps' signifies the trouble with God."²²⁰ In this 'troubling' lay a deeper affirmation, not of a supersensible to-come, but of the finite itself. This affirmation is precisely what Caputo's post-theism seeks to affirm: this world, in all its flourishing fullness and ambiguity.

Caputo's philosophy of religion then aims to be a radicalization of the religious impulse. He thinks with and alongside metaphysics to move beyond it. In Caputo's project, metaphysical language and religious representations are poetizations of the linguistic impulse of human experience. For Caputo, following Merleau-Ponty, the various religions, like language, represent so many ways to "sing the world."²²¹ And, in the same way that a language is not 'wrong' in its expression, religion as such is not wrong in its expression. Both are attempts at giving voice to the relational experience that occurs between individuals, groups, and communities, as they engage with and are animated by the impulses of finitude. Language, like religion, is revelatory for Caputo because, as he notes, "a revelation is a world disclosure, a constellation of elements—linguistic, cultural, economic, social, political, ethical, religious, and who knows what else."²²²

Religions reveal the world in a certain way, it is the site of a relation. Caputo's philosophy of religion begins from this valuation of the religious impulse. He takes seriously their imaginative entreaty and seeks, via this affirmation, to give new expression, in a material key, to their entreaty. In his mythopoetic/theopoetic division, we see this focus unfold. Caputo invites his readers to philosophize about religion, to take it seriously (which does not mean to take it literally) but differently. He wants them to be surprised by the event contained in religious language so as to enquire more deeply into its linguistic and representational resources. In so doing, his readers, the hope is, will translate the impulses that generate religious language into new and unforeseen ways.

²²⁰ Ibid., 103.

²²¹ Ibid., 95.

²²² Ibid.

But this is not to deny the risk involved in religion. Religion is like fire, Caputo has argued: you can either do something productive with it—like cook food and warm your house—or, if you don't watch out, it can burn everything down.²²³ Hence, Caputo is not squeamish about pointing out the flaws and tensions that he sees issuing from religion. Especially religious language that takes its representations to be factual accounts of an invisible supersensible order. Instead, as I have noted above, for Caputo, as he writes, "Religion is a *Vorstellung* not of a metaphysical substance but of the insistence of the event. A *Vorstellung* is a way to poetize the pressure exerted by insistence, what is called the 'event.'"²²⁴ What these representations signal is *life* for Caputo. What they do not signal is an essence; *religion is not an essence, it is a history*. There are family resemblances amongst and between religions, these resemblances reflect the diversity and indeed similarity of human culture. But it does not signify a deeper essential or perennial unity that holds these representations together. Instead, it is the insistence of the event that undergirds the religious impulse for Caputo—as it does for most of his philosophical and theological claims. But at its core, the event is an event of life. That is, the insistence of life itself, of a generative finite structure that exceeds itself for no other reason than excess. This is the generative impulse that Caputo's project seeks to name—the simple giving of life without the need of life itself to satisfy the demands of reason and economy. This affirmation by Caputo is fundamental to his mystical element in which religion, life, God, and the subject themselves, live 'without why.'

6.6 – Concluding remarks

In the above account, I have mapped key terms, concepts, and themes from Caputo's wider project. I have clung largely to terms and issues that relate to religious thematics in his work. This focus derives organically from Caputo's project. Caputo is a theological and religious thinker, his

²²³ *SoG*, 218.

²²⁴ *IoG*, 94.

terms and concepts, especially those deemed more philosophical in origin, have as a basis a religious pedigree that is advantageous for the present analysis. As such, this focus of mine should be expected. Caputo identifies himself as a religious thinker, deploys ideas within religious communities and contexts with the aim of productively extending religious ideals and concepts into a postmodern milieu, and writes for both religious audiences as well as to academics concerned with religious themes. And yet, for many religious insiders, Caputo's project would ring hollow; his focus on immanence rather than transcendence, events rather than truth, poetics rather than myth, and the imaginary rather than the theological, places his religious and theological aims far outside the orthodoxy of modern Christian thought—whatever the tradition or denomination. But Caputo is suspicious of uncritical religious, theological, and mythological mindsets—indeed, much of contemporary society's problems for Caputo stem from assumptions that derive from the religio-mythico-ethico mindset that he has criticized throughout his writing career. Those difficult elements of religion mirror those problematic elements of mysticism that I have stressed, namely: a Neoplatonic essentialism, a mythologically supported hierarchical vision of the cosmos, and a literalist reading of scripture that denies modern scientific accounts of reality. Caputo's critiques of many of the basic assumptions that galvanize modern Christian thought thus makes him an insider that many insiders would not recognize.

But the above portrait of Caputo also makes of him an insider to religion that many outsiders would not recognize. In part, this is because Caputo is not interested in defending religion so much as he is in defending the passion that compels his love of religion. His basic hermeneutic can be identified as critical and thus unfavorable to certain religious expressions and worldviews. But critical for Caputo does not mean critique for critique's sake. Rather, it is critical in the sense that Caputo wants to push our understanding of 'the religious' to the limits that he argues they

have, to explore religion and mythology via those limits, and find new pathways to express religious dynamics in those limits. Seen in this light, Caputo might be best considered a poststructuralist heir to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's 'religionless Christianity.' Caputo too wonders about a religionless Christianity and indeed a religionless religion. He wants what is getting itself said under and by the name of religion but denuded of metaphysical and classical foundations he finds indefensible in a climate impacted by poststructuralist developments. These foundations image the finite and material world as mere shadows on the cave wall. And yet, as the above analysis shows, Caputo is sympathetic to religion, to mythical thought, to theology, to the ethical systems that flow from texts like the New Testament, and indeed from the inspiration he draws on from religious thinkers. Caputo strives above all to remain sympathetic to the religious imagination while nonetheless being ruthlessly honest about the problems and issues that arise from this religious milieu. For him, religion is not an epistemic venture that generates truth via its close proximity to a divine revelation; instead, the truths that it generates emerge from its performative, linguistic, and creative outputs.

In words like the event, weakness, and hospitality, Caputo finds terms and concepts that allow him to productively intervene upon Christian theology and the problematic elements that he finds therein, and translate and transform its key tenets into tenets that cohere with themes and tensions germane to Continental philosophy and modern thought in general.²²⁵ Not unlike the early Greek Church fathers, who translated biblical and doctrinal themes via Platonic and Aristotelian resources, Caputo thinks biblical and doctrinal themes via the resources of the Continental philosophical tradition. In this tradition, he finds avenues of thought that allow him to express what he argues are the delicate—the weak—truths and claims that emerge within the Christian tradition.

²²⁵ In addition to Continental thought, Caputo also attempts to wed these themes and tensions to a mélange of scientific, liberal, socialist, and Catholic claims.

In thinkers like Hegel, Derrida, Heidegger, Levinas, and Gadamer, Caputo finds strategies of interpretation, conceptualization, and ethical claims that allow him to express what he argues are key poetic ‘elements’ of Christian thought. These poetic elements, what he calls theopoetics, expresses a non-foundationalist, non-essentialist, non-metaphysical deployment of Christian themes and ideas. This is a prescriptive project for Caputo. His project echoes what Christina Gschwandtner calls “postmodern apologetics.”²²⁶ That is, Caputo’s work strategically deploys Continental thought to better express his understanding of the Christian tradition. That said, he is not trying to make converts to the Christian tradition like other academic Christian writers, e.g., N.T. Wright,²²⁷ but, more in the vein of Schleiermacher, Caputo is writing about religion to his ‘cultured despisers.’ He does this by showing the almost intractable relationship between Western thought and Christian thought—finding in both its positive and negative outcomes, something worth saving. At its core, its elemental structure, what Caputo finds in the Christian tradition that is worth saving, is what he called in his first book, ‘the mystical element.’ It is towards an analysis of this mystical element in Caputo’s work that my analysis now turns.

Chapter 7: The Mystical Element of Caputo’s Thought

In this chapter, my focus shifts from a broader analysis of the key ideas and motivating factors of Caputo’s project to his specific engagement with mysticism. I have two major intentions with this chapter. First, I trace the development of the phrase mystical element in Caputo’s work from his earliest to his most recent publications. My aim is to show how Caputo’s engagement with mysticism has altered as a consequence of the various works he has published and the themes of those works. However, I am also tracing how Caputo’s engagement with mysticism has remained relatively consistent throughout his works. This consistency is evident in the two major accounts

²²⁶ Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics*, 10-11.

²²⁷ For example: N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018).

of the mystical that he provides throughout his career: as (1) a Neoplatonic discourse that is essentialist in focus and ontologically hierarchical, which Caputo critiques, and (2) a poetical style of language that seeks to disrupt and displace ossified structures of thought by appealing to strategies of communication apophatic in form and intent, which Caputo celebrates.

After tracing the development of his use of the mystical element, my analysis shifts to a prescriptive approach in which I reflect on the link between key themes from mystical theology and Caputo's own work. Here I explore (1) the link between *Gelassenheit* and intentionality in Caputo's project. Specifically, I want to unpack how Caputo's use of intentionality, influenced as it is by Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida, impacts his reading of *Gelassenheit*, a concept whose basic meaning is organized around the proper focus of intentionality. I then turn to (2) the language of mystical thought more specifically and examine Caputo's use of the middle voice. The middle voice is a term used by others in the Continental tradition, for example, Heidegger, to express a non-subjective way of desiring the relational activity between a subject and an object. In short, the middle voice cuts away at the presumption of a stable entity called a subject relating to a stable entity called an object, and instead expresses the relational dynamic that unifies these both. Caputo's focus on the middle voice is synonymous with what he calls the mystical voice and further underscores the performative linguistic use of the mystical element in his work.

Key to this section is what I am arguing substantiates Caputo's approach to mysticism, namely, an underlying relational ontology. For Caputo, it is relation *all the way down*, we cannot step out of this relational or correlational dynamic—it is the *sin qua non* of experience for him. Indeed, at the core of Caputo's theological assertions is this relational claim: what Caputo's project fundamentally struggles with is naming how it is that God is implicated in, and thus never divorced from, finite experience. By finite experience, Caputo means the messy transient flux of material

existence, the desire to relate to this flux being that which the name 'God' names. The name God is the name for relation *as such*, for the desire of relation. Mystical discourse privileges this back-and-forth in-between dynamic by decentering the subject, God, the tradition, the text, and experience itself. The voice it uses, its linguistic strategy, actively seeks to deprivilege any singular perspective by emphasizing, instead, the relational dynamics that underscore experience. Evidencing how Caputo has relied on the mystical element throughout his writings, how that element has shaped his thought, impacting his reading of the Continental tradition, as well as his own theological claims, motivates the following.

7.1 – The Mystical Element

As with the above analyses, my focus here is genealogical and explanatory. I will begin by tracing the development of Caputo's use of the phrase mystical element, and indeed mysticism itself, and unpack how the various ways in which he has engaged this term signal both Caputo's unique deployment of 'the mystical' as well as how his own reliance upon the mystical has shaped his thought. In addition, and building on this, I end by stressing the relationship that Caputo's project, from its origin to his most recent texts, has had with mysticism. Specifically, I want to clarify the general way in which mysticism as a topic coheres with Caputo's project as a whole. To do this, I stress the link between his notion of the event, weakness, hospitality, and radical thought with his engagement with mystical ideas. Although I will rely on key terms like Eckhart's *Gelassenheit* or Silesius's 'The Rose Without Why,' my aim here is not to specifically unpack those ideas in this section. Rather, a broader or more general analysis of Caputo's specific engagement with mysticism is my focus.

I frame Caputo's engagement with mysticism via his discussion of his earliest works from his preface to volume one of his *The Collected Philosophical Papers*. There, retrospectively, he writes,

Indeed, how 'letting-be' or 'releasement' and the 'hermeneutics of facticity' could be reconciled has been a kind of ongoing and life-long question for me. The one emphasized composure and non-willing, the other anxiety and decision-making, which is the problem on which Heidegger's 'turn' turns.¹

I take this to be *the* tension that motivates Caputo's project. This, though, is not a tension that he is seeking to solve. Indeed, the supposition of Continental thought for Caputo is not that it seeks to solve paradoxes—that is the Analytic *foci*—but to explore further, think through, and indeed translate those paradoxes into new and as yet unthought areas. Caputo, like so many thinkers in the Continental tradition, does not see the aim of philosophical thought to be subordinate to clarification. Rather, and following thinkers like Heidegger, Caputo sees the task of thought to evidence the always already difficult dimension of human experience via the enigmas of language. What then is the tension or key issue that his mystical element identifies, and how does it relate not to Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity, but to Caputo's own Radical Hermeneutics—which is itself, to be clear, a species of Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity. To answer this question, I begin with a discussion of the mystical element in *ME*.

The thesis of *ME* is that "there is an important and far-reaching kinship between 'thinking' and mysticism, a kinship which illumines Heidegger's thought and highlights certain features in Heidegger's work which might otherwise go unnoticed."² Caputo's text seeks to establish this unified link that Heidegger's thought, i.e., *Denken*, has with the mystical theological tradition. In this way, Caputo's *ME* traverses or indeed seeks to negate the boundaries that separate mysticism and thus religion from philosophy. Caputo, in short, thinks these two strands of thought in union; they are not separate, but work jointly. This conjoinedness is what the term element names in *ME*. Caputo continues, "this likeness of Heidegger to the mystic, this kinship between overcoming

¹ Caputo, *Introduction to Volume I*, 5.

² *ME*, 6.

metaphysics and the mystical leap, is what we mean by the mystical element in Heidegger's thought."³ That is, Heidegger's desire to overcome metaphysics shares a family resemblance to the mystical leap—this resemblance Caputo calls an element.

Heidegger's thought issues from his own engagement with medieval philosophy and theology. This is evidenced both in his PhD thesis on Duns Scotus, as well as his earliest lectures and published writings. For example, Caputo quotes from an early text of Heidegger to show this link,

In the medieval world-view, scholasticism and mysticism belong essentially together, The two pairs of 'opposites,' rationalism-irrationalism and scholasticism-mysticism, do not coincide. [...] Philosophy as a rationalist creation, detached from life, is powerless; mysticism as an irrationalist experience is purposeless.⁴

Both philosophy and mysticism belong together. For Caputo, though, this unity is not merely a structural unity or an analogous similarity between Heidegger and Eckhart. It is a historical unity.⁵ There exists a history of thinking that links Heidegger and Eckhart or mysticism and philosophy. One could of course abstract and analytically discuss the connections that exist between the various arguments and positions that exist between these thoughts and thinkers around their shared structural assumptions. For Caputo, however, it is *in history* that this unity occurs. This is a claim not unlike Caputo's general theory of religion, in which he stresses not the essential unified structured of religion, but a historical unity between these phenomena. The element here is thus, second, historical, an element that is revealed by the structural similarity between mysticism and philosophy.

What though does he mean by structural similarity between mysticism and philosophy, and what is the source of its historical unity? First, Caputo begins his analysis by taking Eckhart as a

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁵ Ibid.

“paradigm or model of the mystic” and proceeds in this inquiry to relate that model to Heidegger.⁶ Heuristically, this approach allows him to establish boundaries between the mystical and philosophy. Not unlike Durkheim, in his use of ideal types when studying social formations, Caputo deploys these boundaries so as to “determine the respective regions” of both systems.⁷ In short, his comparative analysis necessitates the establishment of fixed, though arbitrary, boundaries around each object of analysis. These boundaries, though artificial, are heuristically productive in that they facilitate comparison. Hence, his study of the mystical proceeds via an appeal to a model that, although imperfect in its capacity to, with precision, name the contours of Eckhart’s thinking in particular and mysticism in general, nonetheless allows him to make generalizable and comparative claims that provide descriptive and indeed explanatory power concerning the relation between figures as Eckhart and Heidegger. The language that Caputo uses to show this structural similarity via his comparative approach is analogy.⁸ Hence, the element in mystical element is also a term deployed by Caputo to name the analogical relationship between Heidegger and Eckhart, between philosophy and mysticism.⁹ However, as he notes his introduction to *ME*, despite this analogous relationship, thinkers like Heidegger are “separated by an abyss from mysticism.”¹⁰

What then is this abyss? What constitutes the parameters around which a figure like Eckhart is assigned the nomenclature mystical while Heidegger is denied that status? In short, what is the *mystical* in mystical element? Caputo does not provide a precise definition of mysticism in his work. Partly this is because he is not analyzing mysticism *as such* in *ME*, but rather Eckhart’s

⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., xvii.

¹⁰ Ibid., xvii.

mysticism. That being said, a general account of the mystical can be abstracted if we examine how Caputo frames Eckhart's project. First, Caputo is clear that Eckhart's mysticism is circumscribed by the conviction of the always already unified relationship between the subject and God. This claim of a unified reality between the subject and God underscores Eckhart's relationship to Neoplatonic thought.¹¹ Indeed, even language like subject and God presuppose a finite/infinite difference that Eckhart's thought seeks to overcome. This erasure of the finite/infinite difference is accomplished through a mode or technique of thinking which is activated by certain modes of linguistic deployment. Specifically, Eckhart's system appeals to apophatic discourse. Here, the fixity of God and indeed the subject that relates to God is framed via the position that language is unable to adequately make univocal statements about either. What this mysticism is not, according to Caputo, is a system of metaphysical speculation—nor, though, is it against metaphysics. Rather, what galvanizes Eckhart's mysticism is his focus on (1) finite/infinite unity, (2) apophatic language, and (3) detachment. These three themes constitute, or are constituted by, the linguistic focus of Eckhart's mysticism. These linguistic themes, though, are subordinate to, or circumscribed by, a further theme: (4) the performative or *lived* element of mysticism—which was a theme noted above in my analysis of Hägglund's criticism of Caputo. In what follows I want to unpack these four aspects of the mystical element in order to illustrate the linguistic-performative structure of Caputo's account of mysticism. Not unlike Denys Turner's linguistic performative account of mysticism discussed in chapter 2, *for Caputo, I want to stress, the mystical element of religion names a linguistic strategy aimed at inculcating in the receiver of the text/teaching a mental and lived disposition (i.e., detachment)*. What precisely detachment *is* and how one expresses it, lay at the heart of Eckhart's mystic and indeed of Caputo's own mystical element.

¹¹ Ibid., 105.

The principal idea that undergirds Eckhart's mysticism, according to Caputo, is Eckhart's belief in the always already unified link between God and soul. A key passage drawn upon by Caputo to show this link is from his *Blessed are the Poor Sermon* which was discussed in chapter 2. Eckhart writes, "When I stood in my first cause, then I had no God, and there I was the cause of myself. I willed nothing; I desired nothing, for I was pure being and a knower of myself in enjoyment and truth."¹² Eckhart frames the relationship between God and the soul, before creation, as unified by an unmediated unity. The soul preexists in the mind of God. In its finite and temporal expression, the soul leaves this unified state (*exitus*) and is born into the world. In the world, the task of the soul is to return to God and to this unified state (*reditus*). Hence, not only does Eckhart assume a unified link between God and subject, but he does so via a Neoplatonic *exitus/reditus* scheme. One term deployed by Eckhart to name this unified relationship is *funklein*, which is the "little spark" in the subject which shares in, or is a small drop of, the "divine Reason."¹³ There is a logic of similarity that governs this term, as the *funklein* names that part of the soul whose ground or depth (*grund*, *logos*, reason) meets with or is connected to, the ground of God.¹⁴ Because the soul's ontological structure, its deep ground, is sustained by and participates in the deep ground of God's being, then it is thus possible to know God.¹⁵ The underlying principle here is the underlying epistemic principle of mystical thought: *like knows like*. Hence in this spark, Eckhart writes, "God's ground is my ground, and my ground is God's ground."¹⁶ This connective link "touches neither time nor flesh," rather, it speaks to a "hidden" "eternal now" which names the "meeting place in which God and the soul dwell together in a single timeless 'moment.'"¹⁷ In the moment

¹² Ibid., 129.

¹³ Ibid., 110.

¹⁴ Although important here, I am largely going to ignore the epistemic assumptions—and indeed Caputo's treatment of those assumptions—that undergird Eckhart's thought (see, *ME*, 110-113 for this analysis).

¹⁵ Ibid., 111.

¹⁶ Ibid., 110.

¹⁷ Ibid., 110-112.

(*augenblick*), indeed in every moment, there exists the possibility of the breaking through (*durchbrechen*) of God in the soul—a breaking through in the flowering moment of recognition that the roots (*radix*), the ground, that connects God and soul flourishes forth and makes visible the always already unified state that persists between God and subject. This is a fundamental element of Eckhart's mystical ontology.¹⁸

The principal means through which the above breaking-in process occurs is via the force of apophatic language. For Eckhart, the truth that emerges in an economy predicated on linguistic negation is the recognition of the unified link between God and soul. In part, this is because, as Bernard McGinn notes, “our intellect works by comparing one thing with another (*esse hoc et hoc*), but nothing can be compared to God because nothing is distinct from him.”¹⁹ Eckhart's negative assumes, then, that human language is unable to “express the divine nature” since God utterly “surpasses the measure of our intellect” so that “there can be no real ‘knowledge’” of God.²⁰ Caputo traces this apophatic focus back to a statement of St. Augustine that Eckhart favorably quotes: “what one says about God is not true; but what one does not express is true.”²¹ In short, “nothing created is able to express the divine being,” nor, to be clear, can concepts or thoughts.²²

Two strategies arise in Eckhart's project as a consequence of this apophatic focus. First, is a focus on negative predication and/or paradox. This emphasis is evidenced in statements of Eckhart's such as ‘I pray God to rid me of God.’ God is here the God that emerges in the mind of the thinking, willing, and acting subject which, in turn, makes God a predicate of human thought.²³ Eckhart's apophaticism seeks to go past the image of God as conjured in the mind of the finite

¹⁸ Ibid., 103.

¹⁹ McGinn, *Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, 99.

²⁰ *ME*, 117.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., xviii.

subject and reach into the still silence of the infinity of the Godhead. Caputo writes, for Eckhart, “whatever we *want* of God is not God, for that is God *insofar* as he has been brought under the sway of human willing.”²⁴ According to Eckhart, Caputo continues,

The only way to God—that is, to the truly divine God, what Eckhart sometimes called the Godhead beyond all God—is to shut down the whole operation of knowing and willing, that is to say, to suspend the operations of subjectivity, to disconnect the *ego cogito*, and let God *be*, let God be *God*.²⁵

Ingredient to Eckhart’s formulation is the premise that human thought is clouded by the impermanence of finitude which, when trying to think God, finds only its own egoic intention. Negative theology is thus a strategy aimed at bypassing the limitations of created entities whose status as created are, as a consequence, unable to image the uncreated nature of God.

The second strategy that Eckhart deploys is detachment. God’s uncreated otherness has the structure, Caputo stresses, of withdrawal.²⁶ Indeed, strongly stated, God for Eckhart names “that which always already remains behind, in *lethe*, always deferring behind the signifier.”²⁷ The soul’s task, then, is not to find ways to overcome the withdrawing nature of God by pushing into or seeking ways around this withdrawal, of producing clearer and more robust accounts of the otherness of God. Rather, this withdrawal structure is engaged by surrendering to this divine unknown capability and letting God be God—to, Caputo writes, “preserve Him in His withdrawal.”²⁸ To preserve God in his withdrawal is the intention that undergirds Eckhart’s focus on detachment.

But what specifically is detachment *doing* in this scheme? On the side of the subject, *Gelassenheit* means to “let go, to relinquish, to abandon” one’s attachment to finite things.²⁹ This

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., xix.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 119.

more active element of detachment, in which one strives to let go, is supplemented by a more passive element in which one is receptive to, and makes space for, God. He writes, detachment “negatively, means to be empty of creatures, and positivity, to be full of God.”³⁰ How, though, does this fullness come about from detachment? To underscore this connection in *ME* Caputo deploys what may be his earliest printed use of Martha as a representational cipher of one’s proper relation to God. Here, long before texts like *IoG*, in which ‘Martha’s World’ is given prominence, Caputo writes that “the perfection of Martha is the diligence with which she prepares a clean and pure dwelling for the divine guest.”³¹ Spiritually, one prepares for God by letting go of the need for God, by abandoning one’s finite desires and indeed infinite desires. When one suspends attachment, Caputo writes, “God rushes in upon the soul like the sunlight upon a rose provided only that the soul ‘open’ itself up.”³² God rushes in because God is always already present—in detachment, in foregoing the illusions of finite desire; the unity between “God’s ground” and “my ground” is made manifest.³³

The above accounts are key theological claims derived from Eckhart’s system. In each term and theme is expressed a theological idea that, for Caputo, is fundamental to Eckhart’s mysticism as well as, I am arguing, Caputo’s own notion of mysticism more broadly. But Eckhart’s project also aimed at concrete actions, not mere theological formulae. Indeed, as much as his account of detachment is an account of the necessary byproducts of his unified image of God and the soul as well as his emphasis on apophatics, it is also a performative claim. This performative claim is central to how Caputo has read Eckhart throughout his published works. In the Mary and Martha story, once again, Caputo finds the radical core of Eckhart’s project. As noted above, Eckhart’s

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 118.

³² Ibid., 99.

³³ Ibid., 99-100.

telling of the Mary and Martha story is one that prioritizes Martha's action over Mary's contemplation. Martha becomes a paragon of detached engagement when she fully serves and is fully detached from the Christ who is in her midst. Caputo writes, "The created things with which Martha occupies herself do not enter the ground of her soul; they do not disrupt her unity with God."³⁴ She has learned to inculcate the living practice of detachment and has thus learned how to "dwell in the world and to concern oneself outwardly with created things, all the while retaining an inner calm."³⁵ Indeed, Caputo further argues that when Martha challenges Jesus by asking him to intervene and incite Mary to action, "*she is asking Jesus to dispel Mary's illusion that perfection can be achieved by wishing for it and by basking in religious feelings. She is asking Jesus to show Mary that true perfection in this life is not withdrawn from activity but that it nourishes itself in the midst of activity.*"³⁶ Caputo goes further and argues that Eckhart's act-oriented mysticism "anticipates the Reformation critique of monastic Christianity," which was premised on the claim that one gets closer to God by withdrawing from the world.³⁷ What is key for Caputo in his formulation of Martha is that Eckhart is a mystic who "shatters once and for all the complaint that mysticism" is quietist.³⁸ Eckhart's theological claims, his focus on the unity of God and subject, the centrality of apophatics, and the necessity of detachment, results in a valuation of finitude via the "eyes of eternity" in Caputo's analysis.³⁹ The 'eyes of eternity' are the eyes which God sees the world, namely in its essential being; this essential being is shown forth not in withdrawal and passivity, but in the "active and robust commerce with things."⁴⁰ In the mystical element of Caputo's thought, mysticism names inculcating this attached/detached model.

³⁴ Ibid., 138.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., (emphasis added).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 139.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

The mystical element in *ME*, then, are those themes found in Eckhart's thought that reflects an underlying unity between the finite and infinite. But, and more important for Caputo, the mystical element is something active, lived, and/or performed. It is not a passive recognition of the unity of all things, but an active and lived affirmation of this unified vision. This is key to Caputo's use of the mystical element in his later work. There, the mystical element serves as an affirmation of living, acting, and thinking that emphasizes a surrender of the desire of certainty. I will detail these specific instances below. However, before I detail these instances, I want to stress how Caputo distances Heidegger from Eckhart so as to make evident precisely how someone like Heidegger is *not* a mystic nor is his thought a form of mysticism, while nonetheless situating Heidegger along Eckhartian and mystical themes.

What then, in light of the above discussion of the mystical element of *ME* is the 'abyss' which separates Heidegger from Eckhart while nonetheless allowing for the analogy that the element names? First, Eckhart performs a "powerful deconstructive effort aimed at undoing the onto-theo-logical God," to go beyond the "constructs and idols of metaphysics."⁴¹ Eckhart does this by arguing for the ever-withdrawing nature of God, i.e., God's hidden recesses which always already escape our knowing and experience. Heidegger's project echoes these Eckhartian themes but is something like a secular version of Eckhart's project. Heidegger too delimits metaphysics by arguing that its ultimate outcome obscures its underlying aim—namely, in its desire to capture a 'beyond' it hypostasizes this beyond, i.e., the withdrawing nature of God and Being, and thus obscures the very thing metaphysical discourse aims to clarify. For example, with thinkers like Aquinas whose system operates on the distinction between Being (*esse*) and beings (*ens*), Heidegger argues that the *space* within which this distinction occurs is eclipsed. By space,

⁴¹ Ibid., xviii.

Heidegger—and we can include Caputo in this general image—means the Open (*Offene*), the background in which the very difference between Being and beings occurs, is ignored.⁴² In part, this is because the Open names a space of pure groundless difference. Caputo writes, “instead of thinking the groundlessness of this Open, it carries out *within* it a sustained exercise in founding and grounding beings upon Being, organized around the grounding power of *esse* as *actualitas*.”⁴³ For Caputo, and here I am skirting the larger Thomistic/Heideggerian debate that frames the background of both *ME* and his *HaA* book, Heidegger thinks this Open via mystical-like language. Indeed, Aquinas himself, and this is central to Caputo’s reading of Aquinas, thinks the Open too, but he does so via an appeal to the apophatic assumptions of mystical thought which is brought to the fore in his famous ‘all but straw statement’ in which a mystical or beatific vision destroyed or overcame his metaphysical system. Caputo argues that Eckhart’s appeal to mysticism is a further radicalization of Aquinas’s system. In Eckhart, however, the onto-theo-logical image is overcome not by metaphysical language, but by a “religious mysticism” that finds within the thought of thinkers like Aquinas, a way past the divisions between Being and being via an appeal to a deeper more primordial abyss.

But in Eckhart’s system, as seen in his apophaticism, this abyss is ultimately provisional. Which is to say, for all of Eckhart’s appeal to negation and the impossibility of God, these statements are understood by Caputo as strategies whose aim is the identification with a very real Godhead. His project, though delimited, is delimited in order to make possible the real presence of a transcendent other with whom and to whom we are related. In addition, the God to whom we relate in Eckhart’s system is the God revealed in the Bible. Thus, the ‘risk,’ as it were, of Eckhart’s negative theology and the denial of metaphysics that organizes his system, is circumvented by an

⁴² Ibid., xix.

⁴³ Ibid.

ultimately hopeful image of presence. Whereas Heidegger, in contrast, “pursues a darker, riskier, more uncertain path, always exposed to the dark plat of the *Ereignis*, a path with markedly Nietzschean tones.”⁴⁴ This riskier path and its evental structure, Caputo argues, is framed throughout Heidegger’s career by “heroic stories about magnificent times and the days to come.”⁴⁵ Even the Open of the later Heidegger is organized by the privileging of certain epochs and events over other epochs and events, e.g., the Greeks over the Romans. This is the danger that Heidegger’s thought presents. What Caputo rejects about Heidegger is that his thought assumes that the past is more attuned to the real or the ‘true.’ But in Heidegger, Caputo nonetheless found a thinker who thinks the possibility inscribed in thinking the religious language of mysticism otherwise; who found in religious language the possibility of new ways of thinking, and of providing divergent accounts of being human in modernity. Otherwise stated, Heidegger’s is a secularized version of mysticism—he is not seeking a unified relation with God or even Being, so much as he is trying to *intensify* our understanding of ourselves and our relation to finitude via the language of thinkers like Eckhart. Caputo’s project repeats this Heideggerian approach.

I noted above how the mystical was an important aspect of Caputo’s *HaA* text. Outside of the specific argument that Caputo makes with reference to Aquinas and the importance of the beatific vision in his thought, I want to note how mysticism and the mystical function in that work more broadly. What is noteworthy, first, is how Caputo’s analysis replicates Heidegger’s basic assumptions about the link between mystical theology and scholastic philosophy/theology. For Heidegger, Caputo notes, scholastic thought must be understood as being unified with the mystical: “in the medieval worldview scholasticism and mysticism essentially belong together.”⁴⁶ That is,

⁴⁴ Ibid., xxi.

⁴⁵ Ibid., xxiii.

⁴⁶ *HaA*, 44.

scholastic thought attempts to make sense of and indeed assumes the perspective advanced by mystical authors and thinkers. Scholasticism for Heidegger thinks within the horizon of medieval mysticism.⁴⁷

But this mystical, outside of being part of the religious economy of the medieval world, functions, for Caputo, deconstructively.⁴⁸ As with *ME* in which Eckhart's mysticism was understood to be a sort of critical supplement to metaphysics, so to in *HaA*. Here, Aquinas's vision near the end of his life is understood by Caputo as signaling an overcoming of metaphysics in a manner similar to Heidegger's own intentions.⁴⁹ Indeed not only is metaphysics disturbed by the mystical element of medieval thought, but reason itself, its 'hold' on truth, is also complicated by the force of the mystical. Caputo writes:

Now, mysticism is not thought, as I have tried to show on another occasion, but like thought, it lies beyond the sphere of influence of the principle of sufficient reason. It abjures concepts and ratiocination's, it is a simple immediacy and pristine contact of the soul with God, it has nothing to do with calculative reason."⁵⁰

Here we can see with greater clarity what Caputo, following Heidegger, implies by arguing that mysticism is the presupposition to scholastic thought. The mystical gestures at a silent force or "unspoken horizon" of thought. Hence, not unlike the productive element of the negative for Continental thought that was traced in chapter 4, mysticism is understood to be productive here insofar as it wrestles with what is excluded to or excess from the given (i.e., rational) order of things. Developing strategies (e.g., apophatic discourse) that productively inculcates the negative as a lived *quale* thus animates the background of the work of thinkers like Aquinas—in short,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 211.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 247.

Caputo writes, the mystical names “an experience which does not come to word because it cannot.”⁵¹

The above division can also be read along Caputo's later distinction between the mythopoetic and the theopoetic. The mythopoetic would be the appeal to reason and rationality in Aquinas's thought insofar as that rationality is organized to meet the demands placed on it by the medieval religious cosmology. While theopoetics is like the mystical element, which is a “poetic” rather than “philosophical” influence.⁵² This influence stems from a presupposition regarding the deep unity between all things, and the linguistic and practical techniques or strategies deployed to evidence, participate, or experience this unity. Mysticism, then, “is the fulfillment of metaphysics” it indicates the true aim of scholastic thought, which is union with God—i.e., a union that surpasses the distinctions that operate behind rationality and mythology.⁵³ As Caputo writes, “*For what else is mystical experience but an overcoming of representationalism in favor of an immersion of the soul in the encompassing presence of the divine.*”⁵⁴ In short, the mystical in *HaA* names a strategy of thought aimed at evidencing the unrepresentable ground that unifies the soul and God.

What I want to stress here is how Caputo is using the mystical element to develop his argument. Far from asserting an essentialist or perennialist position regarding the mystical that we examined in chapter 2, his argument is rather the opposite. Mysticism is described by Caputo as a sort of deconstructive trojan horse in the medieval cosmos. It is structurally like religion; it makes claims for the same desire of reconciliation with the transcendent. And yet, its linguistic and performative outcomes are dramatically counter to the religious aims of medieval and indeed modern thought. This is because the mystical in *HaA* is an experiential counter to the rationalized

⁵¹ Ibid., 249.

⁵² Ibid., 254.

⁵³ Ibid., 265 (emphasis added).

⁵⁴ Ibid., 268.

mythic structure of thinkers like Aquinas and his *Summa*. Otherwise stated, the mystical is a sort of release valve for metaphysics in *HaA*; it relieves the negative pressure built up by a system that, fundamentally, can neither hold nor maintain the ‘strong’ metaphysical order that medieval scholasticism assumed. In the mystical element, then, Caputo finds a living and thinking that is ‘otherwise,’ a fundamentally critical and deconstructive response—a weak response—to the imposing system given by thinkers as Aquinas. What the mystical element provides in *HaA*, not unlike *Gelassenheit* in *ME*, is a “religious detachment” that allows for a fuller “openness to the mystery” that religions like Christianity are gesturing at. The mystical element is that part of religion that stresses openness to the mystery, but via a detached or, indeed, weak way.

How Caputo engages mysticism in *RH* establishes a trend in subsequent books. Specifically, in the final chapter of *RH* he provides a sort of mystical dénouement in which he summarizes key themes and tensions from his book by way of reference to themes aboriginal to mystical discourse. In *RH*, in the final chapter entitled ‘Openness to the Mystery,’ he attends to the hermeneutical issues outlined in his text by way of Eckhart’s mystical theology. He begins by situating Eckhart with Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida, as a “great master of disruption, of thinking through and thinking against the grain of everyday conceptions.”⁵⁵ It is Eckhart’s rejection of the claim that names and assertions about God can be stated with certainty, that Caputo finds this disrupting theme. Caputo establishes this link because he sees, as his early works suggest, a link between religious thought, mysticism, and modern philosophy. Caputo begins his analysis by arguing that Eckhart’s claim that the ground of the soul and the ground of God is the same ground, furnishes an intellectual claim that radical hermeneutics itself builds on. In abstraction, Caputo argues that what Eckhart’s position about the unity between God and the

⁵⁵ *RH*, 268.

subject imply, and indeed the breakthrough (*Durchbrechen*) which makes visible this unity, is the awareness that in that connection, “in these deep waters, in this strange, uncanny, and uncomfortable sphere, the soul was imitated into a chastened sense of the mystery of the Godhead.”⁵⁶ Caputo is arguing that a correlation exists between the breakthrough that Eckhart notes, and the “breakdown” offered by a deconstructive or critical framework.⁵⁷ The state of awareness that Eckhart’s *Durchbrechen* assumes, he argues, is not unlike Heidegger’s appeal to the force of the *unheimlich* as naming that which “we are deprived of all the familiar creature comforts of home (*Heim*).”⁵⁸ Caputo suggests that “radical hermeneutics leads to rather the same sort of result.”⁵⁹ Indeed, he argues that the uncertainty which Deconstruction assumes, an uncertainty regarding the things of the world, the status of truth, and the permanence of the subject, is analogous to what Eckhart’s system aims at.⁶⁰ Caputo writes, “I would say that in the thin membranes of structures which we stretch across the flux, in the thin fabric we weave over it, there are certain spots where the surface wears through and acquires a transparency which exposes the flux beneath.”⁶¹ In the same way that mystical apophatics pushes past the structures of mythopoetics and breaks into the primordial flux that theopoetics gestures at, so too does deconstructive thought push past the structures of reason, custom, and social norms, to the differential play—the Open—within which thought operates.⁶² For this reason, radical hermeneutics is a “distant cousin, an analogue perhaps, of what Eckhart called *Durchbrechen*.”⁶³ He writes,

⁵⁶ Ibid., 269.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 269-270.

⁶³ Ibid., 270.

what breaks down in the breakthrough is the spell of conceptuality, the illusion that we have somehow or another managed to close our conceptual fists around the nerve of things, that we have grasped the world round about, circumscribed and encompassed it. Breakthrough is the counter metaphoric to the metaphoric of the concept.⁶⁴

Caputo sees in Eckhart a critique of absolutes, whether the absolute knowledge or *Begriff* of thinkers like Hegel, the absolute valuation of reason that governed Enlightenment thought which sees its models and assumptions as providing clear and certain accounts of reality, and the absolutes of strong theology. What mysticism provides—and this is indeed how Caputo conceptualizes ‘the mystical’, as with radical hermeneutics—is as an interpretive framework that refuses closure by submitting the idols of the mind, specifically, the accreted structures of social and rational construction, to what Tillich called the Protestant principle. In short, Caputo is arguing that in the same way in which Eckhart’s mysticism overcame the metaphysics of the schoolmen by an approach that did not negate that metaphysics but thought it otherwise,⁶⁵ so too is radical hermeneutics and radical theology a project aimed at extending the productive kernel of religious thought, but devoid of its metaphysical architectonics. Otherwise stated, Caputo translates Eckhart’s theological assumptions into the flux of finitude. And the order that does emerge in finitude is not subordinate to any overarching scheme, system, or *Begriff* that ‘holds’ or stands over the truth which emerges from its play. Like Eckhart, how one gains access to or understanding of that play of difference is by honestly confronting that void—to pay attention to the flux that rumbles below the images that we hold fast.

Importantly however, in the same way that Caputo does not want to fetishize religious and metaphysical systems and their overt evaluation of the meaning that arises from these systems, so too does he *not* want to fetishize the absence of meaning that arises from holding to the ‘tragic

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ That is, it deployed the language of metaphysics so as to hear something else getting itself said by that metaphysics, something that was not predicated on the certainty of the system, but on the promise of the God that lay beyond the system.

sense of things.' Instead, as he notes, radical thought "swings off towards both Augustine and Nietzsche, both the saving hand of the Father and a wild cosmic play."⁶⁶ In *RH*, Caputo couples his focus on the flux of things with a Levinasian ethics of the face. In the face is a call to a "shadowy place, a flickering region where we cannot always trust our eyes."⁶⁷ The specifics of Caputo's argument is less important than noting how in the finite, in the human, he finds a space to tether the mystical element, that is, the element that points not to certainty, strength, and absolutes, but to the question, weakness, and the perhaps. The face, via Levinas's scheme, facilitates that correlation. Important is how Caputo frames the face as the site of a flux, a flux which reflects the larger fluctuating play of finitude. He writes,

the flux flows through these words and inhabits the gestures of this speaker and curls up into the enigmatic knot which is the face. The face is a complex, fluctuating, wavering spot in the flux, a good example of the *da*—in *Da-sein*, of a place where the dynamics of closure and dis-closure plays itself out palpably—a clearing indeed but an *a-lethic* one which is not neat and unambiguous.⁶⁸

In the subject, its living finite form, is to be found a trace of this fluctuating play; in the flesh of the subject, in the words they speak, and the angsts they feel, is given a space for this "abyss within" to speak the abyss from which they arose.⁶⁹ Caputo strives repeatedly to evidence how it is that one attends to the needs of the very real other to whom one's ethical obligation is owed, and to the flux or play within which this obligation arises.

Near the end of *RH*, Caputo advocates for what he calls a "generalized *Gelassenheit*" whose task it is to "let all things be what and how they are."⁷⁰ This is not a quietism or pacifism in which one is resigned to accept the injustices of the world. Rather, it names the desire to be

⁶⁶ Ibid., 272.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 273.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 274.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 288.

instructed by the “hidden powers” of the “*lethe*”, the depth dimension in things.⁷¹ This is a task aimed not at deciphering the secret or finding “the speaker beneath” the play of finitude, but to preserve and keep open the play of finitude—to allow its question, its ‘unsolvability’ to remain unsolved. To remain, in short, open to the mystery of things.⁷²

Finally, what is significant here is how mysticism functions as a sort of ethico-religious supplement to radical hermeneutics. What Caputo is arguing is that radical hermeneutics assumes or is founded upon the radical openness of all things. This is more than an epistemological claim concerning the inability of the mind to find totality or closure, it is an ontological claim concerning the very fabric of reality. Things are radically open, we are radically open, and thus we need a hermeneutics that is radically open. The condition of possibility for understanding is this openness. And mysticism, radical hermeneutics being its heir, is a religious representation of this urge that Caputo argues is at the heart of human experience.

In *PaT*, Caputo thinks the unity between the Continental philosophical tradition and mystical theology more concretely. Before *PaT* his engagement with mysticism was supplemental to either his analysis of Heidegger or, as in *RH*, the mystical was a productive analogue to radical thought. But in *PaT* Caputo’s use of the mystical shifts. In part, this is an outcome of Caputo seeing in Derrida’s thought a link with Christian thought. *PaT* thus makes use of a variety of themes from the biblical and theological to make sense of Deconstruction. Be that as it may, I want to focus on Caputo’s stress on the dissimilarity between negative theology and Derrida’s Deconstruction in what follows, as this discussion provides insight into the development of the mystical element in Caputo’s thought.

⁷¹ Ibid., 288-289.

⁷² Ibid., 290.

PaT initiates as a challenge to Mark Taylor's thesis in his 1984 *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* which argued that Deconstruction was a species of 'Death of God theology' and that *différance* was itself another name for God.⁷³ The outcome of this argument was to make *différance* something holy or something that emerges as a part of a divine unfolding—in short, *Erring* had the effect of making Deconstruction one more theological and teleological narrative.⁷⁴ In part, this response explains Caputo's focus on the apophatic in the book's first chapter where the first section is entitled 'God is not *différance*.' That said, this focus on apophatics is also, and indeed more obviously, a focus that emerged from a Deconstruction conference held in 1993 in which negative theology and Deconstruction were compared. It is interesting that Caputo does not use the phrase 'mystical element' in *PaT*, nor is the mystical in general used in his discussion. For a book whose title could otherwise be called *The Mystical Element of Derrida's Thought*, this absence or shift of focus is noteworthy. How, then, is the term mystical being used by Caputo in this text?

The principal use of the 'mystical' in *PaT* is adjectival and comparative. Mystical is used by Caputo throughout *PaT* as a word that signifies 'depth' or as a shorthand for Neoplatonic thought more broadly. A good example of both, is in the text's introduction,

For it is important to see that Derrida's religion is more prophetic than apophatic, more in touch with Jewish prophets than with Christian Neoplatonists, more messianic and more eschatological than mystical. His writing is more inscribed by the promise, by circumcision, and by the mark of Father Abraham than by mystical transports; more like Amos and Isaiah than Pseudo-Dionysius, moved more by prophetic-ethico-political aspiration than by aspiring to be one with the One. The non-knowing, the "without knowing" (*sans savoir*, what he calls in *Cinders* "the passion of non-knowing," *la passion du non-savoir*, of deconstruction has more to do with bearing an ethico-political witness to justice than with the *docta ignorantia*.⁷⁵

Caputo assumes a divide here between the Hebrew biblical tradition and the Greek philosophical tradition. This divide is best conceptualized spatially: whereas Greek thought is vertical and

⁷³ *PaT*, 4, 14.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

upward directed as represented in the *exitus/reditus* scheme discussed in chapter 2, ethical thought derived from the Hebrew Bible is horizontal and outward directed—its ethical commitments are founded on stories of human relations.⁷⁶ This divide is also conceptual: whereas Greek thought is deductively metaphysical and directed to the One, Jewish thought is inductively ethical and directed to the many. And finally, this divide is epistemic: whereas Greek thought seeks a *docta ignorantia* so as to more fully understand the divine plenitude, Jewish thought negates to protect the promise inscribed in the name ‘God.’ The mystical, then, in *PaT* is synonymous with Neoplatonism and signifies a metaphysical thought structure that is opposite of, though related to, Deconstruction.

For example, and borrowing Derrida’s own terminological focus, Caputo is clear that “if *différance* is a certain *nomen innominabile*, it is not a mystical but a grammatological one.”⁷⁷ That is, in using the term *différance*, Derrida is not intending a term that signifies difference *as such*—a sort of differential *presence* that sits behind *différance*. Caputo argues that that would be a mystical use of the term in which a deeper and more profound depth is assumed to reside behind the force of *différance*. Considered grammatologically, *différance* refers to the “differential matrix that generates names and concepts” syntactically, not an unnameable principle.⁷⁸ In short, mysticism is shorthand for essentialism; it names a religious principle that assumes a presence whose enduring force supplies the ground (*Grund*) of its truth. Caputo writes,

Lacking all ontological profundity, all mystical depth, all royal dignity, all principial honor, forever uncapitalized, *différance* stretches out laterally over the surface of our beliefs and practices as the chain of substitutability. *Différance* is not the trace left behind by the *deus absconditus* but the coded tracing within which are generated all names and concepts, all

⁷⁶ This understanding of Jewish thought is largely influenced by his reading of Levinas (see for example: John Caputo – Levinas 1 – Intro. Mp3 lectures, 57:00-1:00:52).

⁷⁷ *PaT.*, 8.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

the relatively stable nominal unities, including the name of the unknown God, or G-d, or *Gottheit*, including even itself, the name *différance*.⁷⁹

What I want to stress here is how Caputo compares *différance* to the mystical in a negative manner: *différance* is decidedly not essentialist and not metaphysical in the way in which Deconstruction uses *différance*. And yet, it should not go unnoticed that despite the divide, Caputo's analysis nonetheless sees a correlation between both. One overlap where this is evidenced is in Caputo's discussion of *khora*, i.e., a Greek derived name for the spacing of *différance*. Caputo writes, "More desert-like than of the more familiar deserts, than the Nothing that gives Dasein anxiety, the mystical *Gottheit*, or the death of *God-khora* is the desert in the desert, inoperable, immemorial."⁸⁰ *Khora* is, according to Caputo following Derrida, a more radical empty 'space' than the space imaged by mystical theology. It is an utter void. But its voidness or negation shares a similar or productive topography with the void imaged by mystical discourse. In both voids lay a possibility, a perhaps, that inspires the mystic and indeed inspires the thought of Caputo.

MRH and *WoG* repeat Caputo's engagement with the mystical in *PaT*. His analysis in *MRH* is galvanized by what he called in *PaT* a "generalized apophatics" in which he argued that a "mystical unknowing could serve" as a more general epistemic model by "putting us on guard whenever the eagle of philosophical knowledge hovers over us, its claws outstretched, claiming to grasp the Essence of this or that."⁸¹ The apophatic thus serves as a corrective to an overconfidence of a particular form of reason. While in *PaT* the mystical was used as shorthand for a Neoplatonic essentialist metaphysics and was challenged as such, in *MRH* and *WoG* Caputo stresses the theme of apophaticism in mysticism and, in doing so, affirms its basic intent. Indeed, as already noted in *RH*, Caputo's appeal to radical hermeneutics and radical thought is an analogue of apophatic

⁷⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 156.

⁸¹ *MRH*, 5.

thought insofar as radical thought digs below the clear and certain images that present themselves to thought and finds instead an undifferentiated ontological play that resists epistemic “circumscribability”. Radical thought, then, like the apophatic claims that undergird mystical theology, is premised on the ultimate unknowability of things, and generates practices (e.g., *Gelassenheit*) to encounter that unknowability. This apophatic focus is, as with *PaT*, given its fullest expression in *MRH* in the final chapter. Caputo argues that mystical silence “*is in fact an operation within language, of textuality and ecriture.*”⁸² Mystical thought thus “calls upon” the “discursive resources” of *différance* to express its apophatic structure. This structure informs his model of mystical thought. Hence, as he writes,

Mystical theology is always a paradigm for me, whose import is to raise our level of vigilance, to watch and pray, to be permanently on the alert against setting the effects of difference upon the altar of the things themselves (be they perceptual, scientific, or theological) and then falling down in worship.⁸³

This general claim which stems from *MRH* sees in mystical theology a form of communication aimed at disrupting those patterns of thought that ossify and lead to what philosophers would call the ‘fallacy of misplaced concreteness.’ Like Tillich’s Protestant Principle, or Luther’s Theology of the Cross, or even how Caputo reads Eckhart, all finite presentations are to be met with a degree of doubt—not doubting the ontological or even epistemic reality of the event, object, phenomena, etc., but doubting the tendency to make of those presentations, absolute representations.

In the final chapter of *MRH*, entitled ‘The Prayers and Tears of Devilish Hermeneutics: Derrida and Meister Eckhart,’ Caputo discusses mysticism via the theme of silence and the secret. In this discussion, similar to his comparison between Heidegger and Eckhart and Heidegger and Aquinas, Caputo draws upon mysticism as an epistemic analogue between Derrida and Eckhart.

⁸² Ibid., 11 (emphasis added).

⁸³ Ibid.

For example, on the matter of silence Caputo argues that “mystical silence” sees the divine secret it hopes to understand as provisional, opting not to speak about those unknown matters whose revelation is forthcoming. In contrast, the “silence” advocated for by thinkers like Derrida assume an absolute secret—it is a secret *all the way down*. Or, whereas “mystical silence” assumes a secret we hope to be *in on*, the secret that thinkers like Derrida discuss is the secret that *we are in*.⁸⁴ In short, he writes “mystical silence lays claim to know The Secret but to be, alas, unable to say it.”⁸⁵ While the secret that galvanizes Derrida’s and indeed Caputo’s thinking is a silence galvanised by a “praying and weeping for the coming of the *tout autre*, for something that the eye hath not seen nor ear heard.”⁸⁶ This comparison is instructive for understanding Caputo’s linguistic-centric reading of mystical theology, parsing this argument out here, then, should prove productive.

Caputo argues that mystical prayer and thought is governed by the claim that “silence is the highest praise” when speaking about God.⁸⁷ Hence, he writes, “mystical life is mystical prayer and praise, singing to God in the highest, praising God to the heights, pushing language to its very limits, to the breaking point, which is silence.”⁸⁸ Silence is a species of language. Language is the condition of possibility for silence; or, silence is, Caputo writes, “that point in language where language grows white hot, where driven to an extreme it finally can stand no more and turns on itself, consumes its own substance and effaces itself.”⁸⁹ Silence is language *without* language. And mystical thought is premised on the assumption that this point in language, the point in which it is absolutely unable to say something about that which it wants to predicate, namely God, speaks to an absolute in the presence of? which we must be absolutely silent. Caputo writes, “mystical

⁸⁴ Ibid., 249.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 250.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

language is the best example of this self-effacing, self-wounding language, for mystical language is language without language about a God without God.”⁹⁰

What mystical thought and prayer aims at is an absolutely unknown other, an other whose otherness resists linguistic predication or intentional circumscribability. Like Eckhart who prays to be rid of God, i.e., to be rid of the thought that says God can be named or understood by finite names like ‘God,’ Caputo is arguing that mystical thought always aims past the known of language to the unknown which resists language. In this way, mystical theologies use of language is not unlike Deconstruction’s, which itself assumes that language always falls short of circumscribing its object; that language and indeed thought is always motivated by an unknown event, phenomena, etc. that always already inhabits the future to-come. Hence “what unites deconstruction and mysticism...is their common structure as prayer, a prayer for something unimaginable, inconceivable, *impossible*.”⁹¹ By structure of prayer, Caputo means the structure of a hopeful expectation in the unknown to-come. Key, then, for Caputo: both Deconstruction and mysticism operate on the structural hope of this unknown to-come. At the heart of both systems is an affirmative desire for the *tout autre*, the other—this is what Caputo argues is core to the “*language*” structure of mysticism and Deconstruction.⁹² He writes, “the desire for mystical silence, like *eros* itself, issues in a prolific and fecund language—of liturgy, literature, and theology. Far from standing simply outside or exterior to language, mystical silence occurs in and as a mystical caesura *within* language.”⁹³

Importantly, this silence is not a “prelinguistic, or non-linguistic contact with The Secret, with unmediated being, *kath’auto*,” i.e., Caputo rejects the claim that mysticism and the mystical

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 251 (emphasis in original).

⁹³ Ibid.

speak to an enduring perennial truth. In part, we can see in this rejection Caputo's alignment with thinkers like Tillich and his critique of kerygmatic theology which assumes that what is revealed in the Bible is a truth whose source is utterly alien from finite experience. Following Tillich, thought and therefore mystical thought, is always correlational for Caputo, it is always the thought by someone for something. Thought is never an unmediated connection with an essential reality unstained by finitude. Mystics have not, Caputo writes, "been secreted away from the human condition and given privileged access to The Secret."⁹⁴

Moreover, Caputo is not only denying that mystical thought has access to an unmediated transcendent presence, but he is also arguing that it is a radically finite activity. Caputo goes further and argues that, in correlating Eckhart's use of language with Derridean *différance*, he wants to show, "first of all, that mystical life is inscribed within difference" which means that "mystical discourse is one of the most resourceful ways desire has found to express itself."⁹⁵ Mystical discourse is another species of the differential play of language, and language for Caputo is driven by the desire for the always already unknown that haunts the present, and images a to-come. What is revealing about this chapter, then, is how Caputo explicitly correlates mysticism and deconstructive thought—both, he is arguing, are structurally inhabited by a desire of the to-come, in which a futural excess stands on the horizon of experience that solicits.

Key, then, to Caputo's argument is that thinkers like Eckhart evidence how language is itself "self-defeating."⁹⁶ Eckhart, Caputo writes,

is a salient example of the recognition that language is caught up in an enterprise that is significantly self-defeating, that the terms we employ to assert something are caught up in complicitly with their opposites, so that language keeps unsaying what it says, undoing

⁹⁴ Ibid., 252.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 253.

what it does, and in general failing again and again to make good on its claims in a definitive way.⁹⁷

In short, Caputo argues that because words are not what they signify they, of necessity, fall short of what they signify. That language has this gap or 'wound,' or that an inoperativity governs its unfolding, is central to how Caputo as a deconstructive theologian thinks the relationship between language and mysticism. He is offering a sort of hyper-nominalist claim regarding the structural inadequacy of words to signify beyond themselves. And yet, Caputo is arguing that part of what makes Eckhart's project so pivotal is that he deploys this nominalist argument *to* language about God, without submitting God *as such* to the nominalist reduction. That is, although language is seen to be inadequate at describing its subject matter, e.g., God, this points to a problem with language for Eckhart, not God.

Caputo argues that Eckhart's sensitivity to language emerges from his scholastic training "Eckhart, I maintain, had an acute sense of the 'textuality,' the interdependence and differential structure of the terms of scholastic discourse."⁹⁸ He thus had "no high confidence" in the capacity of "any particular name" which was directed by the intention of a finite subject to meet the infinity of the Godhead.⁹⁹ Indeed, Caputo argues that Eckhart's system was organized by a basic critique regarding the "contingency of the signifiers we deploy."¹⁰⁰ This distrust of words to signify with corresponding clarity the things of the world, and indeed God, is key for Eckhart and is the logic that sustains his "I pray God that he may make me free of God" discussed in chapter 2.¹⁰¹ And although Caputo notes that from an exegetical perspective, i.e., a critical historicist perspective, one could argue that at the root of Eckhart's prayer is a prayer for the absolute presence of the

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 255.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

absolute One, Caputo ultimately wants to reject that claim. And here we see precisely how Caputo reads a mystical thinker like Eckhart. Although he is sensitive to the context and milieu within which someone like Eckhart is writing, i.e., the historical suppositions and limitations of his thought, Caputo strives to hear something getting itself said in Eckhart's work that gestures past the specific arguments he makes. Caputo writes,

Now it is my claim that if [Eckhart] thought (as he certainly did) that there was a higher, unitive way, a silent mystical way *beyond* language, he was in practice at the same time—whether he liked it or not, whatever his *vouloir dire*—putting such a way into question.¹⁰²

In short, what Caputo wants to affirm from Eckhart's project is Eckhart's desire to speak past 'God,' or any idol or name, and to speak instead to the impulse, force, intention, or promise that a name like 'God' signifies. Eckhart, whether he knows it or not, speaks to the passion inscribed in the name God, not God itself. Hence in Eckhart's prayer to be rid of God, Caputo hears a prayer to be rid of closure, i.e., the closure that a name like *God* often signals, the further desire to remain open to the possibility inscribed in the hope contained in the name of God—which for Caputo is always a futural event, a to-come.

Caputo's argument, in short, is that Eckhart's desire, his true intention, is to think past the limits of God, indeed of limits themselves, and to think rather the pure possibility that 'God' *as such* names. Hence, Caputo writes,

I am arguing that if we pressed these considerations upon Eckhart it would show clearly that, in the end, he had very little invested in the metaphysics of presence, in Neoplatonic henology, and that everything he had to say revolved around seeing the failure of signifiers to catch God in their net.¹⁰³

This reading of Eckhart is an example of Caputo's radical hermeneutical style. He argues that what belongs to the "innermost tendencies" of Eckhart's thought are these radically finite and radically anti-metaphysical claims. What Caputo sees in Eckhart's mystical theology is a linguistic economy

¹⁰² Ibid., 256.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 257.

organized by an apophatics which denies the ability of thought to go beyond itself to a non-contextual sphere. Instead, a radically finite context circumscribes the intention of a thinker like Eckhart in Caputo's reading. For Eckhart, Caputo is arguing, "The name of God is the name, not of some transcendental signified beyond language, but the name of what language most deeply loves and affirms, dreams and desires. The name of God is the name of yes, the name of the yes, yes, not a determinate yes but the *archi-yes* that accompanies every name."¹⁰⁴ This use of language mirrors Deconstruction's use of language: *différance* too is the name for an *archi-yes*, for the deep affirmation in things which sustains the to-come that Caputo argues is the event of religion and indeed of mysticism.

Hence, "what deconstruction and mystical life have in common is not some secret access to the Secret outside the play of signifiers, to some *hyperousios* that stills our tongue, but to desire, dreaming, hoping, and praying."¹⁰⁵ The difference, as I have noted above, is that Derrida's *différance* is not a provisional 'secret;' it does not name a secret that will, at some point, be clarified by the presence of God. In contrast, Eckhart's language is provisional. At the heart of Eckhart's thought lay a hope for a presence that extends past the booming, buzzing, confusion of things to the Godhead. In both instances, however, we can see two important examples regarding Caputo's engagement with mysticism. First, is the centrality of language to his mapping out of the difference between both systems. It is a linguistic difference, for Caputo, because it is a finite difference. Language speaks to finitude, to one's context. But there is also a transcendental argument that haunts Caputo's reading. This would be a quasi-transcendental argument, for Caputo, which rests on the claim that being itself is something we cannot but passionately yearn to articulate, engage, hope, and indeed dream for. We are touched by a longing that rests not only in the heart of the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 258.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 263.

subject, but indeed is constitutive of being itself. It is what we long for in what we long for, in Caputo's project.

WoG is, as I noted above, Caputo's most important theological book. This is because the themes and issues that he addresses in *WoG* extend central claims of his earlier work, most notably his 'radical' project, and lay the foundation for the key themes from his latter publications. For that reason, it is interesting how little of a role that the theme of mysticism has in *WoG*. That is, he does not unpack a 'mystical element' in religion, nor does he engage mysticism with any serious focus. Given the prominence of mystical themes in Caputo's earlier works, and given the theological focus of *WoG*, this absence is noteworthy. That said, the basic argument and indeed thematics of a 'weak' God and a 'weak' theology that organize this text, do draw upon the influences of mysticism that run throughout his early publications.

How then does Caputo engage the mystical in *WoG*? True to form, Caputo concludes *WoG* with a chapter entitled 'A Concluding Prayer' which, when thought along the centrality that he ascribed to prayer and its link to mysticism in *MRH*, is one indicator for how mystical themes have been more broadly infused in *WoG*. Prayer for Caputo issues from a certain radical undecidability that marks what might be called his (*theo*)anthropology. This anthropology names the subject that, in Augustine's *Confessions*, is spoken by the phrase "*Quaestio mihi factus sum.*"¹⁰⁶ For Augustine, this is the subject formed by the wounds of a desire contained in the name God, of the subject who comes to an understanding of who they are from this desire, and, in that desire and understanding, discovers the deep ground of God within their soul. For Augustine, who went out in search of God and found God not 'out there' but in the soul itself, God is a response known in the question that itches at the core of the subject—theology is a mode of thought that seeks to make that desire felt

¹⁰⁶ "I have become a question to myself." *WoG*, 298.

by the questions it asks of its adherents. In Caputo's project, similarly, he stresses the underlying desire and questioning that lay behind the act of prayer.

However, whereas for Augustine this questioning state is provisional, finding its hopeful ending in the fatherland on the horizon where the relation to God will be more proximate, Caputo's focus on unknowability or questioning is final—it is *undecidability all the way down*. How does Caputo frame this questioning theme and its correlation to the subject that his project images? That is, what is the merit derived in evidencing this theme? Caputo writes “Who are we? *Quaestio mihi factus sum*. We are the nameless ones who are driven by the undecidability of the desire for God, made restless by the trembling of an indiscernible event, praying not to get any more lost than we already are.”¹⁰⁷ We are uncertain because our state is uncertain; we gain certainty not by erecting idols of certainty, but by detaching from the need for certainty, and surrendering to uncertainty. It is from this destabilized subject that desires for a destabilized God, for a weak God, that organizes this final section. But note that it is the event of undecidability itself that Caputo both desires and is troubled by—likewise, it is not *the* event but *a* event that is key for Caputo here.

Indeed, the shift from a Confessional theology to Caputo's Radical theology is circumscribed by the shift from the definite to the indefinite article that precedes ‘event.’ As he writes,

For when we speak of the “I” or the “we” or the “self,” we are employing a certain shorthand that glosses over the complexities, that hastily summarizes the current state of an inner anarchic conflict in which there are numerous competing forces, constantly shifting, and unsteady alliances and unexpected turns yet to be taken.¹⁰⁸

Multiple events, situations, and phenomena conspire to form the experience of subjectivity. The subject for Caputo, as he suggests throughout *MRH*, is a sort of inwardly directed centripetal

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 283.

movement that results in a self-conscious awareness which is galvanized by a profound restlessness. He writes,

I am disoriented by the night of truth that wrings from me the confession, the concession, that if truth be told, I do not know what event stirs within the names I hold most dear, nor do I know what name to save in order to release the event I hold most dear.¹⁰⁹

God, like the subject, is the name of an 'event that stirs' and indeed is the stirring of the event itself. Both the subject and God meet at this unknown, unknowable, and unknowing juncture. Not unlike Eckhart's claim that at the ground of the soul is the ground of God, Caputo is also arguing that our uncertainty is met by God's uncertainty in a felicitous and generous manner. Indeed, we could push this link further, radicalize it even, and argue that what Caputo is suggesting is that God and the subject are both desiring impulses that yearn for a 'I know not what;' both are compelled by a restlessness, seeking in the other a relation that satiates this disquiet. By stressing this restlessness, Caputo is also eschewing theological and philosophical formulas that provide systematic accounts, strong narratives, and theories of truth grounded in correspondence. This is because restlessness names a sort of permanent *unheimlich* feeling that draws one towards understanding, but the outcomes of this understanding does not guarantee an absolute truth.

There is then a sort of poststructuralist *docta ignorantia* that governs Caputo's project; though unlike Dionysius, Eckhart, and Cusa's *docta ignorantia*, Caputo universalizes their *docta ignorantia* by infusing its basic anthropological assumptions into assumptions regarding the very name of 'God'—where God is no longer the master signified (Absolute Spirit) that supplies certainty (*Denken*) to the unknowing that the mystic aims for. Instead, for Caputo, it is unknowing and uncertainty, *all the way down*. He writes,

I am praying for the truth, where the truth is found, not in a proposition but in a confession, a truth is not a matter of establishing an *adequation* but of a confession of our inadequacy. Truth means truthfully to confess the poverty of our philosophy, the weakness of our

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 285.

theology, and the humanity of our confession. Truth is a matter for prayer, not epistemology.¹¹⁰

We can see here how the tensions regarding the certainty ascribed to the epistemic claims of philosophical truth that has galvanised much of Continental thought in the 20th century, when joined with the underlying distrust in theology and metaphysics that Caputo argues galvanized thinkers like Eckhart, produce a criteria that compels Caputo's own mystical claims. Caputo is not striving to evidence clear and certain truths from a model grounded in unimpeachable axioms. We always start our analysis *in medias res*; and where we are, he argues, is in a profoundly uncertain state. There are no absolutes—not even the claim that there are no absolutes is absolute; this is the logic that underscores his appeal to the perhaps. However, like thinkers from both the Continental and the mystical traditions, this unknowing state is not a limitation to one's insight and understanding *but is precisely the condition of possibility wherein knowledge arises*. This is an idea whose genealogy can be traced back to Aristotle's claim that knowledge begins in wonder, in a sort of sustained awareness of the questionability of reality and a faith in the capacity of the unquenchable desire which sustains that interest to generously produce understanding. Prayer is an echo of that desire in Caputo's system, because prayer, too, starts from a recognition of a lack, and the hope that that lack will be overcome by a promise contained in the possibility of a future to-come.

What Caputo wants in response to his prayers is not knowledge that satisfies or idols that masquerade as certainty, but a knowledge that reflects this uncertainty. I will here suggest that 'knowledge that reflects uncertainty' is precisely the epistemological outcome of the 'mystical element'. Caputo writes, "I am praying because I am lost, praying not to get any more lost than I already am, fully conscious that every prayer worthy of the name suffers through a dark night of

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 286.

the soul, suffers a loss of faith and its own kind of prayerful atheism.”¹¹¹ Prayer is not grounded in a foreknowledge of a divine economy that grants security to the person who prays; prayer is rather an act initiated on the premise that in our unknowing state we pray to an ‘unknown’ God for we ‘know-not-what.’ Caputo’s intention is to make this awareness obvious in the mind of his reader, to show how, via an appeal to philosophers from Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida, theologians from Aquinas to Tillich, and from mystics like Eckhart and Silesius, thought must expose itself to the risk of its error. Caputo writes “The ultimate risk that a theology of the event incurs. The ultimate risk incurred by the irruption of theology’s truth, is to expose itself to the loss of the name of God itself.”¹¹² Here, not unlike Hegel’s account of Christ on the Cross, Caputo finds the ultimate moment of religious expression to be found in the representation of hopelessness and the subsequent hope that that hopelessness will—perhaps—be overcome. Continuing, Caputo writes, “In that way we can make Meister Eckhart’s magisterial prayer of mystical atheism our own, praying for God to rid us of God, saying, praying, *adieu à Dieu*.”¹¹³

Hence, Eckhart and mystical theology are appealed to as paradigms for thinking about the radical unknowability at the heart of all things—of the cosmos, ourselves, and God. In *MRH*, mysticism in general and Eckhart’s mysticism in particular, captures a type of epistemic uncertainty that Caputo argues is aboriginal to experience as such. This emphasis on the unknowability of things carries with it a critique of theology, which in itself is a paradoxical gesture as Caputo appeals to theology and the God imaged by key theologians, to think theology otherwise. He writes “Let us say that the paradox of weak theology is that even as it is a turning to God by God, it is also praying to be able to pray in the wake of God, in God’s aftermath, preparing

¹¹¹ Ibid., 292.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

for something I know not what, for which we pray to be able to pray.”¹¹⁴ Theology and philosophy are here made subordinate moments in the unfolding process of the event, which Caputo takes to name an ontological reality that philosophy and theology strive to name, but always fall short. That said, theology and philosophy are also ways of expressing desire and a hope for the event, they keep open and make obvious the radical undecidability at the heart of things. Making obvious this lack of closure is key to Caputo's project and is indeed key to the evolution of the mystical element in his thought. As Caputo writes near the conclusion of *WoG*,

everything turns on keeping the gap between the name and the event open, on keeping the tension between them strong and alive, and thereby to be transported by that tension into the passion of life. The passion of life, the passion of desire, the passion of prayer, is fueled by revving up this tension to the breaking point.¹¹⁵

Caputo's weak theology operates on this mystical element, this is the element that makes the idols of representation subordinate to a deeper mystery—a truer ground—which is, for Caputo, no ground at all. Instead, “swept up in the winds of solicitation and invitation, of promise and prayer for the event” Caputo argues that, following Deleuze, a sort of ‘crowned anarchy’ settles in upon things.¹¹⁶ The task of thought is to prepare the ground for that emergence, to welcome its risk, and to hope for a new event, a new promise.

In the works that follow *WoG*, Caputo extends this mystical unknowing theme in both the epistemic and ontological modes noted in *WoG*. In *IoG*, mysticism is again taken as both a synonym for Neoplatonism and its problematic focus on the absolute presence that sustains all things,¹¹⁷ as well as being shorthand for the suspension of idols and metaphysical thought that, as was noted above, he argues is central to Eckhart's project.¹¹⁸ In *IoG*, the theme of insistence or the

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 294.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 298.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ *IoG*, 10.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 46-47.

‘perhaps’ is correlated with the notion of mystical unknowing discussed above; non-knowing is that type of knowledge which has “always unnerved the churches” and, for that reason, mystical thought is given its radical nomenclature.¹¹⁹ In *IoG*, unlike *MRH*, Caputo is more concerned with showing the immanent implications of his theological claims. That is, themes like insistence are thought along their finite outcome whether in physics, biology, technology, and in the philosophies of new materialists like philosopher Slavoj Žižek. This is specifically evidenced in Caputo’s focus on what he calls ‘Martha’s world,’ a theme discussed above. Martha, for Caputo, is a distilled representation (*Vorstellung*) of the lived outcomes of Eckhart’s mystical “atheism”. She is a mystic of the Cross, not a mystic of Glory. Martha “wants the impossible, not in eternity, but back here, on earth, in space and time”; hers is thus a living mysticism in the style that Caputo advocates. Even with Jesus before her, she does not uncritically bend her actions to his presence, but questions him, questions the finite state of things, yearns for better ways of relating to reality, and seeks to instantiate those changes in the moment.¹²⁰ Martha is Radical Theology’s saintly figure. In Martha, Jesus is God but a weak God, a God whose force is felt not in the imposition of his will, but in the insistence of his promise.

In *FoG*, the above division between mysticism as a Neoplatonic discourse and mysticism as a radical discourse is repeated. That said, Caputo’s discussion of mysticism in *FoG* is instructive for how he views its basic themes in light of his project post-*WoG*. For example, when discussing Eckhart’s prayer, ‘I pray God to rid me of God,’ Caputo writes: “that is a memorable formulation of a mystical atheism and of radical theology.”¹²¹ It is noteworthy that Caputo uses the phrase ‘mystical atheism’ once again, and in the same way in which he used it in *IoG*. Likewise, it is

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 41.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 254.

¹²¹ *FoG*, 12.

noteworthy that Caputo correlates mystical atheism with radical theology. Indeed, as Caputo's thought developed from *ME* the correlation between what mysticism is doing—especially Eckhart's apophatic strand—and what it is that Caputo has been trying to do with radical thought has been sharpened. In part, as I have been stressing, it is Caputo's claim that a critique of idols sits behind the work of Eckhart, Tillich, Derrida, Heidegger, etc. and helps forge their link and sustains Caputo's interest. Caputo continues from the above quotation, "Eckhart perfectly encapsulates a kind of mystical folly and a paradox worthy to be pondered, revisited daily, and held (deeply, of course) in our hearts."¹²² This productively paradoxical element of mysticism is to be repeated because, he continues, there are,

profound resources [in] the mystical tradition which [have] learned how to not speak by speaking, to advance while erasing its own tracks, to twist and turn language so as to expose the ruptures and omissions and distortions that inhere in everything we say when we approach matters so deep.¹²³

That is, for Caputo, mystical thought proceeds via an engagement with language in which its capacity to provide exact predicative claims is ignored, while its capacity to provide an existential understanding which is *more than* those words, that is, it is the paradoxical event of those words themselves, is key.

In order to flesh out the above claims, I want briefly now to turn to a section from the sixth chapter from *FoG* entitled 'Muting Mystical Theology.' A specific point that is addressed in this section, which warrants attention here, concerns the exact nature of God that Caputo's radical mystical atheism assumes. Specifically, does our understanding of God require a notion of transcendence? Or, can 'God' be productively imaged by immanent language? In Caputo's retrieval of mysticism, in which he places its themes and assumptions in conversation with

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

Continental thought, he answers positively to the latter question. The difficulty of expressing what 'God' or the name 'God' could possibly signify in a linguistic economy, predicated on the value of finite discourse, still remains. How then, in light of these issues, does Caputo discuss God and mystical thought in this section? First, it is noteworthy how Caputo frames this section. He writes, "the itinerary of weak theology on the road to freeing God from being is to say: God is not a being; but neither is God the ground of beings."¹²⁴ Note that Caputo sees weak theology, and indeed radical theology, as a task aimed at 'freeing God' from a discourse that subordinates God to finite aims. Here, echoing Tillich's rejection of what in his 'Two Types' essay he would argue is the cosmological approach to God, Caputo argues that God cannot be conceptualized as one more being—i.e., a stranger one discovers. However, Caputo also rejects what Tillich would call the ontological approach to God—i.e., a Being more intimate to myself than myself. Caputo continues, but "neither is God the hyper-being, the *hyperousios* of mystical theology."¹²⁵ This is a claim that Caputo has articulated since *ME* but was first most clearly expressed in *RH*, namely, God is not the Being-as-presence imaged by writers like the Pseudo-Dionysius. And yet, as he continues, the apophatic approach which mystical thinkers use, is the "forbidden fruit" of weak theology because weak theology "sounds just like" apophatics. Caputo argues that as "much as I love" mystical theology, his weak theology "parts company" with it on "a crucial point," namely, the claim that "the God of mystical theology is—alternatively—both the highest of the high and the deepest of the deep."¹²⁶ The problem that Caputo finds with mystical theology here is "if we speak of God in the highest, mystical theology will un-speak that and say that the God beyond God is higher than

¹²⁴ Ibid., 69.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

any height; and if we speak of the depths of God, mystical theology will say that by saying the Godhead of God is deeper than any depth.”¹²⁷

What Caputo finds ultimately unsatisfactory, or indeed dangerous about these positions, is that theology becomes here a strategy aimed at protecting God; its task is to maintain God's superessential hyper-being as pre-eminently disconnected from finitude and its limitations. Whereas weak theology, Caputo's theology, starts from the assumption that we can never get past our finitude, and that this inability is not a limitation, but is precisely the possibility from which the name 'God' can be spoken of at all. In Caputo's radical theology, “we are not praising anything, and when we are silent, it is because we remain radically disoriented, not knowing which way to turn.”¹²⁸ This radical theological claim is a repetition of what Caputo argues marshals mystical theology, which is specifically *not* metaphysics. This point should be stressed: part of the high valuation that Caputo ascribes to mystical theology here is the way in which it skirts a metaphysical description of the supersensible and its operations. That is, mystical theology is “not metaphysical in its *discursive form*, since it unsays any attempt to form concepts or propositions about god, or to make arguments about the existence of the *hyperousios*.”¹²⁹ As I have noted above, mystical theology for Caputo turns on a paradoxical use of language whose outcome is performative in nature, meaning it repeats its intentions by playing with language and being shaped by that linguistic play; here though, he is clear, the performative-linguistic nature of mystical theology stems from its ability to work on and within orthodox or confessional theology. Mystical theology productively unsays the structured and orthodox ways of speaking God.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 70.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Mystical theology is thus always an insider phenomena, working within the constraints of a tradition by seeking to extend its possibilities and reimagining its representations. Caputo continues, “mystical theology is not saying that we cannot get as far as metaphysics but that we cannot be content with metaphysics since metaphysics cannot get as far as God.”¹³⁰ In this telling, mystical theology is a strong theology that protects God by expelling him from the play of signifiers; rather than, as with radical theology or mystical atheism, exposing God to the uncertainty of finitude and thinking ‘God’ in light of that uncertainty—a sort of radical theology of the Cross. What Caputo is ultimately on guard against is a Neoplatonic metaphysics that smuggles in a strong metaphysics via apophatic language, or a German Idealist imaged God as the ‘ground of being.’ What both systems do, Caputo writes, is “undo the unconditionality of the unconditional” by making God a character in the story that metaphysics is trying to tell. Clarifying the ‘unconditionality of the unconditional’ in Caputo’s latter works is where I now turn.

In his *HaH* text, Caputo explicitly indicates the centrality of mysticism and mystical theology in his thought via this text’s more autobiographical theme. Key to this work is Caputo’s discussion of Silesius’s ‘The Rose is Without Why’ poem. What I want to unpack here is the distinction between the conditional and the unconditional as Caputo frames it via this poem. This binary, I will suggest, is indicative of Caputo’s basic ontology and indeed anthropology—a sort of theo-onto-poetics. By conditional, Caputo means attending to those activities which serve one’s immediate concrete needs—in short, these are ends-directed secular activities (economic, biological, etc.) undertaken in secular time. While the unconditional refers to those “things that we are not doing *for* something else but for themselves.”¹³¹ The unconditional is a term which captures the sense of the ‘Rose without Why’ in that the rose, in Silesius’s poem, is not something *for*

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ *HaH*, 32.

another thing, that is, its value is not located in the *saeculum*, as something whose value is exchange oriented. Rather, the rose is unconditional insofar as it is not something which is subordinate to the logic of planning, outcome, and exchange. Rather, the rose's value is unconditional, it blooms for no conditions but that of blooming. Caputo writes, "in the time of the unconditional something is affirmed for itself, without why. The unconditional is found not in eternity but in a caesura inside time; it is made entirely of time; it is time all the way down."¹³² The unconditional is thus relative to what is conditional; its unconditional status refers to a possibility inscribed within finitude that is unmappable or unprogrammable rather than an unconditional essence whose force is supersensible. Caputo writes, moments of unconditionality "do not signal another world but *embody another way of being in this world. In them we catch a glimpse not of eternal life but of living otherwise in this life.*"¹³³ Indeed, and much more specifically, it is precisely that the unconditional is temporal, finite, and momentary that, for Caputo, its significance arises.

The tension between the conditional and the unconditional also needs to be understood existentially. Broadly, Caputo's conditional/unconditional division echoes Heidegger's distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity. Caputo advances two temporal models that will help clarify this link and claim. The conditional operates on what Caputo calls the "*time of the economy*" while the unconditional operates on the "*time of the gift.*"¹³⁴ Economic life mirrors rational life and subordinates the meaning and intention of social and individual action to the logic of investment and return. While the gift is 'an expenditure without return,' it is given without expectation—it is sufficient unto itself. The difference between the conditioned and the

¹³² Ibid., 33.

¹³³ Ibid., (emphasis added).

¹³⁴ Ibid., 34.

unconditioned is not innate to a phenomena, event, or situation *as such* but rather stems from how we act, talk, and think about these matters. It is a perspectival claim that marshals this conditional/unconditional distinction. As Caputo writes, “Given the right *conditions* anything can rise up or break out into *unconditional* splendor or unconditional worth.”¹³⁵ How then does one act so as to evidence this unconditional *element*?

The action or intention that Caputo appeals to when advocating an unconditional response to the unconditional phenomena, is detachment or *Gelassenheit*. He writes,

The unconditional is embedded deeply in the most quotidian things, things as simple as the rose. At such moments the task is to let the rose *be* the rose that it is, not in the sense of causing it to be, bringing it into existence...but in the sense of savouring its splendor, immersing ourselves in its majesty, its sheer givenness to—here is my term of choice—its sheer grace.¹³⁶

Caputo is advising us here, giving his readers a suggestion about how to act authentically to the demands placed upon us by the recognition of the self-sufficiency of phenomena. Specifically, he is arguing for the necessity of being detached from one's desire to make a finite object into an unconditional ends *as a finite object*. In this act of letting go, an act that is prompted or instigated by the linguistically paradoxical structure of mystical thought, a “moment of grace” occurs within which the “caesura” that is opened up by an intention that sees in the quotidian and conditional a splendor that is unconditional. Like Heidegger's authenticity/inauthenticity division, in which being authentic means, *inter alia*, accepting one's temporality, Caputo is arguing that unconditionality is a radical affirmation of finitude. We can also perhaps productively compare Caputo's scheme here to Augustine's division of *Uti* (used) and *Frui* (enjoyed).¹³⁷ *Uti* is not unlike the disposition of conditionality. *Uti* enjoys an object as an object formed for the subject, its value is placed within an economy of use/ends. While *Frui* is not unlike Caputo's unconditional, one

¹³⁵ Ibid., 35.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson (The Bobbs-Merrill Company; New York, 1958) 9-11.

enjoys the activity insofar as said enjoyment is not for the object but for how said enjoyment points back to God and thus bypasses a finite use/ends economy. Caputo provides a sort of a Heideggerian repetition of this *Uti-Frui* distinction in which *Uti* and *Frui* are repeated by Heidegger's authenticity/inauthenticity scheme. But where *Frui* for Augustine implied enjoyment of God's infinitude as authentic enjoyment, Caputo's model of the 'Rose without Why' argues that enjoyment (*Frui*) emerges in actions that take finite engagement as ends in themselves—not ends that satisfy an economy of desire, but a simple recognition of the flourishing fullness of the things.

What *religion* is doing here is providing the representations and desires that make the conditional into the unconditional. These representations make inauthentic relations which seek enjoyment from finitude by subordinating them to images of metaphysical transcendence, into authentic images that find in their finite image an intensity of finitude itself. Religion is thus alchemical for Caputo, it transmutes by inciting, and it incites by transforming. This formulation is given the expression 'passion' which is a theme that runs throughout his work. The task of mystical thought and thus of the religious impulse that animates it, is to give passion to life—or, to show the always already unconditional moment which, if we learn to let-go, will emerge, not as a radiant sign of a metaphysical suprasensible order, but as flourishing moments of finitude itself. What 'letting-go achieves is the possibility of living the difference between the conditional and the unconditional. This is what Caputo is aiming at, to think through what it means to properly negotiate and inhabit the distance that separates the conditioned from the unconditioned—which is a finite task, not an infinite burden.

The outcome of this desirous letting-go of finitude, its releasement from an economy of reciprocity, is something like the smile on Sisyphus from Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). For Caputo, "the smile is a silent affirmation of life, a subtle embrace of life, a weak force strong

enough to sustain life and give it hope.”¹³⁸ Religion is an affirmation of life, indeed life in its authentic and inauthentic forms. This affirmation is (paradoxically) absolute for Caputo, he wants it extended universally. But it is not quietistic, that is, he is not advocating for a mere acceptance of what is. Indeed, religion is best when it intervenes on social and personal matters and improves the lives of those caught up in its representations: “let us say that religion is a way of being bound back to this cosmic smile, not in the sense of creating an economic debt but by way of returning its smile, with a joyous affirmation of the world that greets a smile with a smile.”¹³⁹

We have seen above, for example in our discussion of hospitality, how vital ethics is for Caputo. By ethics, he has in mind a radical hospitality in which the other is welcomed as the other—in all of the risk that that entails. I say this here because Caputo’s project does wed to a type of nihilism in which the instruction to accept, ‘to smile’ at, finitude leads to what Hegel called the ‘beautiful soul.’ But Caputo is not arguing that we mildly accept what occurs without reservation. Caputo’s model is not that of the beautiful soul, nor is he Panglossian in outlook. His radical atheism see-saws between a critique of idols and the demand to a critique those critiques, which is what the ‘rose without why’ signals in his work: it is a deeper more radical critique of the demand of critique itself. It is a deep affirmation from the ground of affirmation that always already subsists and sustains the human condition. Indeed, it is the exact opposite of a mere acceptance of the status quo—it affirms the affirmation that always already subsides in all things. In Caputo’s system the ‘Rose without Why’ is the ‘yes, yes, come, veins’ affirmation that runs throughout his work and gives style and form to Caputo’s later writings. And yet, Caputo is also not simply affirming life in a pollyannish vein. His is a project that exists in the in-between, between

¹³⁸ *HaH*, 41.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

affirmation and condemnation, authenticity and inauthenticity, *Uti* and *Frui*, the conditional and the unconditional, finitude and transcendence.

In *CaC* Caputo does not extend his notion of the mystical beyond how he framed it in *FoG*, *WoG*, and *IoG*. This is not to say, though, that the analysis that Caputo offers in *CaC* and the ways in which he expresses his notion of the Cross via the theme of the perhaps, ignores the mystical themes I have outlined. But mysticism and the mystical do not receive special analysis or focus in this work. In contrast, Caputo's *SoG* text consciously deploys the mystical as a productive heuristic category to extend his notion of what religion is doing and how it functions in modernity. In *SoG*, the mystical serves to illuminate Caputo's basic philosophy of religion—a philosophy, as discussed above, which is premised around the generative capacity of representations to galvanize the subject around pivotal finite events.¹⁴⁰ Caputo begins *SoG* by placing it in conversation with *ME*, arguing that what religion has always meant to him occurs under an “obscure imperative.”¹⁴¹ This imperative is the call that he answered as the young man who joined the De la Salle brotherhood, and is the call that has linked him with the study and analysis of religion throughout his academic career. He names this call “the mystical sense of life, the ‘mystical element’ in something—in whatever it was, not just religion, in whatever I was studying, teaching, lecturing, writing about.”¹⁴² The mystical element, then, in *SoG* is not unlike Tillich's ultimate concern. It names the pre-condition for interest itself, the *ur*-concern or what Heidegger ontologically specified in terms of *Sorge* (care), which both compels, sustains, and advances our productive interest in things. He continues, “the mystical ‘element’ is not a thing but a quality *in* things, in

¹⁴⁰ For a more extensive treatment of his philosophy of religion, see: John Caputo, ‘Radical Theologians, Knights of Faith, and the Future of the Philosophy of Religion,’ in *Reconfigurations of Philosophy of Religion: A Possible Future*, ed. Jim Kanaris (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2018), 211-236.

¹⁴¹ *SoG*, ix.

¹⁴² *Ibid*.

anything, in all things, great or small.”¹⁴³ This focus on the *in* was noted above in our discussion of the event. Here, we can see how his account of the event which, following Deleuze, names that which is going on in the event; its call rather than its outcome, is intrinsic to how he is here conceptualizing the mystical.

But Caputo is wary of the term ‘mystical’—it carries the baggage, as has been noted, of a Neoplatonic metaphysics which trades in strong theological ideas. Hence, he uses the term “apophatic element” rather than “mystical element” in *SoG*. This shift in terminology aims precisely at circumventing those strong metaphysical tendencies that belong to a mysticism that yearns for absolute presence with the One. In short, what mysticism as a species of Neoplatonic metaphysics asserts is a type of certainty—about God, the soul, the cosmos—that the term apophatics does not. For Caputo, here, the “apophatic arises from a kind of archiexperience of something unencompassable, an encounter with something that lays claim to us before we make any claim to it.”¹⁴⁴ Indeed, as he continues later in *SoG*,

Far from being the captive of monastic solitude, otherworldly ecstasy, or exotic experiences, *the apophatic is the stuff of everyday life, found in every register, in every place. It is the uncommon in the most commonplace, the abyss opened by a cup of tea and a madeleine, putting the exceptional within the reach of everyone.*¹⁴⁵

Finitude is marked by the possibility of an excess, an unconditional, which the conditioned—perhaps—reveals. The apophatic element is linked with the mystical element via a kernel of unknowing that Caputo finds fundamentally productive to thought. Indeed, and this point needs to be stressed, Caputo’s project as a whole is one predicated on an epistemic uncertainty grounded in an ontological rather than a purely epistemological division. Caputo continues, “I have in mind a kind of nocturnal phenomenology, describing a condition in which I am genuinely lost, hounded

¹⁴³ Ibid., x.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., (emphasis added).

by doubts and insecurity. The power of being for me means being overpowered by it.”¹⁴⁶ We are overwhelmed by the fullness of being, the booming buzzing, confusion of things—it as all too much, as it were. This excess of being, of information, of experience, is almost Sartrean in its outcome: though for Caputo, we are not so much nauseated by the presence of being as we are put into question by its overpowering condition. We ‘become a question to ourselves’ as a consequence of the unconditional call of Being. Thus, as he notes, even the phrase apophatic element assumes too much. It provides a degree of certainty about the uncertain—i.e., the uncertain can be mapped and responded to accordingly. But Caputo wants risk, *all the way down*. There is no space for comfort, there is only a hope that things might be otherwise and a recognition that they might be worse.

In *SoG*, Caputo takes up two perspectives which allow him to think through this utterly risky element of his thought. But, and against the criticism of thinkers like James Olthuis,¹⁴⁷ this risky element is saturated in hope for Caputo. That is, Caputo is not arguing that the necessity of risk or uncertainty negates the possibility of a radical hope. It is a hopeful recognition of the always already riskiness of things that is key to Caputo’s later engagement with the mystical. For Caputo, I argue, the mystical or apophatic element is a moment in thought in which the riskiness of things, their material conditions, is met with a hope, albeit a weak hope, a perhaps, that is unconditional. Without the conditional, there is no unconditional, without the unconditional, there is no conditional. Caputo’s mystical or apophatic element in *SoG* turns on this tension—unpacking this claim organizes what follows.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., xi.

¹⁴⁷ See for example, James H. Olthuis, ‘The Test of *khôra*: *Grâce à Dieu*,’ in *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, ed. James H. Olthuis (London: Routledge, 2002), 110-119.

Caputo's appeal to Schelling in *SoG* can be seen as an appeal to what might be called 'Eckhartian themes' in Schelling, specifically via the notion of the *Unvordenklichkeit*, the unprethinkable. The basic claim that undergirds this notion is that "being *precedes* thinking, that being arrives on the scene before thinking has a chance to prepare for its arrival, not just historically but structurally. Thinking will always arrive too late."¹⁴⁸ That is, the *unvordenklichkeit* names the precondition upon which the possibility of thought is able to arise—this pre-thought pre-given structure necessarily eludes conceptualization. This claim, importantly, is not simply an epistemological claim regarding the limits of human thought but is an ontological claim regarding the structure of being *as such*.

Caputo contextualizes Schelling's formula as a response to Hegel's basic claim that "Being reflects the categories of reason, and reason articulates the categories of being."¹⁴⁹ In Hegel's model, being and thought are unified or, as Caputo notes, "contemporaries."¹⁵⁰ Schelling's model, like Tillich who indeed was following Schelling, sees "Being as the unconditional" which supplies the ground upon which reason and thought unfold.¹⁵¹ Hence, this *Unvordenklichkeit* structure names the prior condition of possibility for thought. This claim has two outcomes, first, it asserts a temporal gap between being and thought—i.e., being precedes thought. Though, and to be clear, this temporal chasm does not make the *Unvordenklichkeit* a creative *arche* which emanates out and creatively brings to rise 'thought.' Instead, and second, it assumes a deep ground of connection between being and thought, a persistent unity that is accomplished without the aid of reason. The encounter with the being of thought "is not the discovery of something new but the realization of

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 141-142.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 142.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

something older than old, from time immemorial.”¹⁵² One way to see how Caputo is using Schelling here is to situate his discussion within Tillich’s ‘Two Types’ essay. Being is not like the God discovered in the epistemological type, i.e., a stranger who we discover out there, as if it were radically other than the thought that thinks it. Rather being is like the God discovered in the ontological type, i.e., as the awareness of “something unconditional which is the *prius* of the separation and interaction of subject and object.” Thought discovers in being a pre-structure that, although unencompassible by thought itself, is nonetheless the source or ground of thought, and is thus always already ultimately related to thought.

This unprethinkable ground or *prius* is also an echo of Eckhart’s argument regarding the ground of the soul and its connection with the ground of God’s being. What Schelling’s thought does, along with Tillich and Eckhart, is to make the “implicit explicit, taking what we take for granted and making it a matter of wonder and astonishment demanding elaboration”—which, Caputo notes, is ultimately a hermeneutical task.¹⁵³ That is, Schelling makes explicit the implicit pre-structure that must precede thought—that must be the source from which thought itself emerges. Hence, and key here, Caputo notes that ultimately claims like Schelling’s *Unvordenklichkeit* are “paradoxical” as what it is that this analysis is attempting to do is “to bring the unprethinkable to thought, just far as that is possible, to catch the pre-philosophical in act without turning it into more philosophy, to turn on the lights fast enough to see the dark, all of which is impossible.”¹⁵⁴ This is like the critiques marshalled by some German Idealists against Kant’s ‘noumenal’: *that* one can think the unprethinkable suggests that to some degree it *is* ‘thinkable.’ It is at this point, however, that Caputo’s ‘apophatic element’ is important. As, “the

¹⁵² Ibid., 143.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

principle of the unprethinkable means that pure reason could never be pure, and pure reflection could never be possible, because being could never be really neutralized.”¹⁵⁵ Reason and its effects do not provide pure disinterested accounts of being because reason and thought are always already inscribed within a horizon of being that escapes the grip of reason. Not unlike Heidegger’s critique of Husserl regarding the neutrality of *epochē*, Caputo is arguing that we are, thought is, always already *in medias res*—it cannot be, and we cannot be, separated from it. His appeal to Schelling’s *unvordenklichkeit* is thus done in the spirit of making obvious the inescapability of our conditioned and correlational experience.

In Caputo’s analysis, Schelling’s *unvordenklichkeit* becomes a synonym for thinking the possibility of the weakness of God as a future event. As what Caputo develops in *SoG*, *unvordenklichkeit* is something like God’s possibility, the perhaps, or to-come structure of the event contained in the name of God which is given reality or concrete existence by finite humans who make themselves ‘worthy’ of the event that gets itself said under the name ‘God.’ Otherwise stated, *unvordenklichkeit* is to thought for Schelling as God is to individuals for Caputo. In the first is supplied the structure of possibility, in the later is supplied the structure of actuality. A key outcome of Schelling’s analysis here is that he puts the “very existence of God at risk” which is indeed why Caputo sees Schelling as a radical thinker—he is willing to dig deep into the roots of the name of God and find its pre-existent structure, not in order to magnify God’s power, but to show how finite beings are the entities that give existence to this pre-existent.¹⁵⁶

Hence, Schelling is included in Caputo’s ‘radical theology’ genealogy insofar as Schelling performs a “radical version of the *Deus absconditus* in Luther and the dark ruminations of Jacob Boehme on the *Ungrund*—and further back still the Rhineland Mystics’ distinction between the

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 144.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 150.

Gott of reason and revelation and the abyss of the divine *Gottheit*.”¹⁵⁷ However, Schelling provides a supplement to this mystical genealogy by problematizing the assumption that organizes mystics like Eckhart in which the “ever-concealed Godhead is *better* than God” a valuation or hierarchical claim that is also antithetical to Caputo’s weak theological model.¹⁵⁸ Caputo’s account of Schelling’s *Unvordenklichkeit* is revealing on two fronts. First, it shows how Caputo is thinking about being, the relationship between thought and being, and the relationship between the present, the past, and indeed the future. In each relational dynamic, a radical unknowable or unprogrammable structure precedes the coming to be of what is, which is an argument or analysis of Caputo’s that draws parallels with Derrida’s notion of *différance* and indeed Tillich’s notion of ultimate concern. Second, Caputo’s focus on Schelling’s *Unvordenklichkeit* shares an important genealogy with principles and themes from the mystical tradition, namely, Eckhart and the Rhineland mystical tradition. In part, this reflects the very core of *SoG*, which is to make evident what Caputo is calling the ‘apophatic element.’ This, as was noted above, is a sort of analogous account of the mystical element that galvanized his project in *ME*. But more than that, his use of mysticism here shows how ‘the mystical’ functions as an analytical category whose outcome provides the basis for a more ‘Radical’ theology. The mystical, via themes like *Gelassenheit* and *Gottheit*, is deployed by Caputo to advance his theological claims. This second order use of a first order discourse is how Caputo deploys the mystical themes in texts like *SoG*.

Another theme that marshals *SoG*, and is indeed connected with the *Unvordenklichkeit* theme, is the notion of ‘ruined time’ which is itself a species of Caputo’s general focus on the future. Caputo writes, “the unprethinkable belongs not only to a past we will never make present

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

but also to a future we cannot foresee.”¹⁵⁹ This claim is indicative of Caputo’s larger apophatic or mystical element project which assumes the radical unknowable structure of things. Reality always already includes a gap, a fissure, or difference, which is repeated foreword by the events in time that issue forth from this unknowability. The task of thought for Caputo, indeed of his mystical element, seeks ways to confront and productively inscribe this unknowable element into thought. But whereas his analysis of the *Unvordenklichkeit* has something like a descriptive aspect to it, insofar as Caputo is *describing* the ways in which thought necessarily—descriptively—follows being, his discussion of ‘ruined time,’ though also following a descriptive analysis, carries with it a largely prescriptive claim. I have discussed the general arguments and claims which undergird his ruined time image above.¹⁶⁰ In this future, there is no redemption, no hope, no *why*, because there will not be entities capable of living and giving meaning to this future. But here I want to note how Caputo’s appeal to mystical themes helps him think through the nihilistic tensions he identifies with ruined time. Indeed, what does this thought experiment of Caputo’s accomplish? Why, for example, image this notion of futurity? Caputo has discussed the links between thinkers like Lyotard or Derrida as impacting his account for ruined time. Via Lyotard, ‘ruined time’ is a notion of the future that is “inhuman,” or what Caputo calls posthuman.¹⁶¹ To think from this ending is to follow, too, Ray Brassier and his 2007 *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*, which Caputo discusses in *IoG*. Brassier advocates modes of thought that begin from the premise of this ultimate future demise—that we think about ourselves, our world, and the cosmos from the recognition that ultimately the future is futureless.¹⁶² Caputo echoes Brassier, but refuses the notion

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 143.

¹⁶⁰ That is, for Caputo, the image of the future described by contemporary models derived from astrophysics, see the ultimate futurity of the cosmos in a ‘trillion trillion’ years as a state of absolute entropic dissipation

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 305.

¹⁶² *IoG*, 188-189.

of totality that Brassier gives to this entropic desolate future state. Caputo, rather, argues that “this nihilism is not without value, and that it is not for nothing.”¹⁶³ What Caputo does find generative about this future image is that it aligns with what he calls the “hermeneutics of trouble” which is a synonym for his radical hermeneutics.¹⁶⁴ In short, this notion of the future exposes the present to the risk of the to-come, which is the structure of the event of the perhaps and thus the same model that he applies both to his account of the subject and God.

The futurity that Caputo is discussing with ruined time is, then, one more attempt at making obvious the finitude of all things and the way in which finitude is marked by a haunting of a to-come that it cannot see. Finitude for Caputo, above all, signifies the reality that everything will end—but, despite this ending, despite the possibility of no to-come, we find hope in the present to meet this coming in-human void. Hence, even the future of no future, a radical image of otherness, is encountered as a space of hope for Caputo. What I want to highlight here is not so much the end-to-come imaged by ruined time, nor its link with the *Unvordenklichkeit*, but rather the in-between *now* moment (*augenblick*) that this dual past/future scheme offers Caputo's theopoetic project. Indeed, at the core of what Caputo is doing when thinking through the implications of ruined time is to further widen the scope of our human cosmos, *even if that cosmos includes a future that is decidedly unhuman*.¹⁶⁵ Caputo's apophatic imagination, or his radical mysticism, requires thinking through the limitations of our finite cosmos to better embrace understand our own finite condition. As he notes, in “classical mysticism” the image of the cosmos “was supplied by an unholy wedding of pre-Copernican cosmology with Neoplatonism, a great chain of being going out (*exitus*) from eternal unity into multiplicity and returning back again (*reditus*).”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Ibid., 189.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ *SoG*, 313.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

Caputo's notion of ruined time frames the cosmos as an "*exitus* without *reditus*," an "expenditure without return" in which what was spent in finitude is not rewarded with a futurity that grants to finitude an ultimate payment. Instead, he notes, "the vast, ever increasing expanding and for that very reason also mortal cosmos is the setting in which we today *reimagine* the mystery, the occasion for the apophatic imagination to *reconfigure*, the framework in which we revisit the world in axiological terms."¹⁶⁷ By axiological, Caputo means a focus not on "first principles" but rather, following Heidegger, on that which is "held in highest regard and prized for its own intrinsic worth."¹⁶⁸

God, in this representation, is taken by Caputo to signify the "unconditional worth of being," that which is "*worthy* of being *unconditionally affirmed*, not in spite of its mortality but precisely in virtue of it."¹⁶⁹ Here, the Eckhartian/Schellingian/Tillichian focus of God as the ground of Being, the ontological type, is fused with Luther's *ToC*, with the result being that the sustaining ground of all things, God, is revealed in impermanence and transience.¹⁷⁰ The representation that Caputo relies on to evidence what it would mean to faithfully confront the notion of finitude affirmed in ruined time is Silesius's mystical rose.¹⁷¹ What Caputo finds generative about the image of the rose is that "by 'releasing' (*Lassen*) the rose—God, the world, love, life—from the demand of reason to know why, the poet allows the rose to be *for itself*, cherished for its own worth."¹⁷² Reason, which is the force that animates metaphysics, subordinates experience to the demands of a governing telos and makes of individual phenomena mere parts in a greater story. While the "mystical poet, by contrast, ponders over (*Denken*) the

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 322 (emphasis in original).

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 319.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 320-322. It is noteworthy that Caputo appeals to Buddhist doctrines of Sunyata to clarify his position here.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 323.

¹⁷² Ibid.

self-standing of the rose, devotedly holding it in sacred memory (*Andenken*).”¹⁷³ By letting go (*Gelassenheit*) of the need to control or organize or dictate the *how* and *why* of reality, Caputo is arguing that we can more fully confront the *what* of reality. This *what* is, of its own accord, sufficient; it does not rely on an external mediator to grant it meaning—it is intrinsically meaningful in its immanent and utterly material expression.

Here, in Caputo’s most mystically affirmative writings, he is closest to the late Heidegger, specifically his “The Ground of Truth” essay:

the world worlds (*die welt weltet*) of itself, in the open, as an open region. The worlding to the world is the *prius* that is *prior* to the principle of sufficient reason, prior to the seeking and rendering of reasons, prior to the distinction between reason and the irrational—and, we might add, prior to the pretentious supernatural revelations pretending to supervene up on it.¹⁷⁴

What Caputo is advocating here is a sort of performative mysticism, in which, via the linguistic resources of the mystical tradition where paradox and apophatics reign, one learns to live and act in the world divorced from the need of control, strength, and the surety of reason. The outcome of this mystical element is a perspectival shift in which, via letting go and speaking authentically this letting go, the world is more fully engaged. Indeed, although Caputo argues that the cosmos he describes is an *exitus* without a *reditus*, the disposition that results from this letting go is a sort of return to this more simple or primal unconditional ground. That said, unlike Heidegger, Caputo does not prioritize this unconditional ground—indeed he unburdens words like ‘primal’ from ‘ground’ in fear that the metaphysical urge to ascribe to that ‘primal’ sphere an originary *arche* will reassert itself. The difference from Heidegger on this point for Caputo is that whereas Heidegger’s thought is retroactive and retrospective, taking the past as primary, Caputo’s is ultimately futural—he does not negate the significance of the past, but his analysis always

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 324.

prioritizes the present moment and the to-come. Indeed, as has been noted above, what the present moment (*Augenblick*) signifies for Caputo is a present anticipation of the to-come that always already sits on the horizon and troubles the present by its threat/promise. Hence, as he writes, “axiological letting-be represents an affirmation of the world without trying to ‘save’ the world because *the world was never lost*.”¹⁷⁵ Caputo, unlike Heidegger and Eckhart, is not trying to save the present by felicitously aligning it with an originary structure whose truth has been ‘lost’ and requires a present retrieval. Caputo, in short, is not a Romantic.

And yet, this letting-be state that Caputo advocates, even with its futural intentions, is something like the mystical desire for unity with God. That is, the outcome that Caputo imagines in his many discussions of ‘letting be’ is a type of unity with the image of God as the unconditional ground of Being. The individual who lets go, though, is not fused with the One in ecstatic union, but, via the simplicity of detachment and the clarity that comes from preforming and speaking the mystical element in a productive way—who fully negates the strong theological formula of classical metaphysics and recognizes in finitude moments that speak to the promise harboured in the name of God—experiences the opening in the present of a fullness. This is not a liberative fullness, i.e., Caputo is not arguing for a sort of postmodern Platonic Myth of the Cave in which the subject is granted a fuller insight into the truth of things against the shadows on the wall. Instead, we might call this a negative fullness, i.e., Caputo is arguing in a critical fashion that by negating the force of Neoplatonic metaphysics in one’s perspectival claims, one is more fully able to see the booming buzzing confusion of things. But he also arguing in a precritical and I would say ‘mystical’ fashion, i.e., his project is affirming a type of understanding that is generative in its

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 330.

relational awareness of and with finitude. There is a qualitative shift in awareness that Caputo, via his appeal to mysticism, is seeking to unpack.

This is the event of the mystical element in Caputo's thought. Although it is radically finite and anti-metaphysical, meaning, in short, that Caputo rejects narratives of escape, it is nonetheless compelled by a belief in the capacity of thought and action to productively conspire in the single moment (*Augenblick*), a moment which hovers between the *Unvordenklichkeit* of a past it does not know and the ruined time of a future it cannot fathom. This now moment is not a moment of eternity in which an unknown excess breaks in and upon the subject revealing as yet unimagined mysteries, but the simple awareness of the always already fullness (blooming) of things. In short, what Caputo's mystical element offers is a thoroughly postmodern evaluation and projection of key themes from mystical thought, but still galvanized by a postmodern distrust of master narratives, metaphysics, and 'escape.' He deploys a type of thinking and writing, the mystical, which turns on themes of escape and metaphysics, but transmutes those themes and translates them into a postmodern context in which finite and material concerns dominate.

7.2 – Comparative exegesis

In what follows I provide two thought experiments in which I intervene upon Caputo's project to make explicit how it is that he has translated and transformed mystical ideas and themes. In both sections I evidence how Caputo uses the mystical theme/concept under discussion in his own work, and why. Central to each section will be a comparative analysis of the similarities and differences between the theme/concept's use in the mystical tradition and its parallel within the Continental tradition. Hence, this is an analysis by analogy; an analysis that follows Caputo's own analogous look at the mystical element in Heidegger's thought. My objective is not to evidence a 1:1 correlation between the mystical theme/concept and the Continental theme/concept. Not only would that analysis be difficult to fully evidence, but it would also miss how Caputo—and indeed

the Continental tradition—is actually deploying mystical themes. Caputo, like Heidegger or Derrida, is not attempting to reproduce the theme/concept in a modern guise, but instead wants to intervene upon and translate the terms original use into a specifically modern space that is removed from the mythical assumptions that governed their initial emergence. What I want to stress in each discussion is how the ‘role’ or function that the mystical theme/concept had in its initial formation, mirrors the ‘role’ or function that the specific Continental theme/concept has in Caputo’s project. What this link will show is not only how Caputo relies on the mystical element to advance his own theories and claims, but how, too, he is creatively intervening upon and shaping mystical discourse. The outcome of which is a translation of mystical themes/concepts into modern and post-modern contexts. Terms like *Gelassenheit*, in Caputo’s project, are removed from their original context and given a divergent conceptual space to be thought, engaged, critiqued, and deployed. In this way, and not unlike Underhill, James, Hollywood, or de Certeau, Caputo’s engagement with mysticism results in an alteration and *re-formation* of its guiding assumptions but expressed under new conditions with new questions and new tensions governing its output. Evidencing and clarifying this link marshal the focus of this section.

7.2.1 – *Gelassenheit* and Intentionality

In this section, it is the relationship between Caputo’s use of the term *Gelassenheit*, and how that use mirrors an account of intentionality that has governed Continental thought since Husserl, that will be explored. Indeed, if *Gelassenheit* is a ‘letting go’ of intentional attachment to finite objects with the aim of inculcating a more proximate link to the infinity of God,¹⁷⁶ the question I want to explore is: what is the theory of intentionality that Caputo reads into this terms

¹⁷⁶ As Caputo notes in a lecture on Eckhart, humanity’s “very being is intentionally directed to the world. It’s intentionally aimed at the world, at creatures, at its fellow creatures. And it enters into commerce with the world in its sensible life, its embodied sensible life, and its higher faculties of intellect and will...” (John Caputo, 10-20-09 Altizer and Eckhart, *Caputo Class Lectures*, Mp3 file; 56:30-57:02).

use via debates from the history of Continental philosophy? By unpacking this link, I hope to evidence how key assumptions that govern the theory of intentionality offered by Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida's analysis on the topic, inform Caputo's understanding of what is accomplished in *Gelassenheit*. I will suggest that what is ultimately being 'let-go' for Caputo is a type of intentionality that obscures a more felicitous relationship to finitude. I conclude this section by drawing a parallel with Caputo's notion of *Gelassenheit* and his discussion of Aristotle's *phronimos* in his *AE* text. I argue that the 'space' or moment (*Augenblick*) that results from properly inculcating Caputo's account of *Gelassenheit* is similar to his account of the *phronimos* who acts without the assurance of clear direction or firm supports. Like the *phronimos* who responds productively to the spontaneity of the moment, the space opened up by Caputo's account of *Gelassenheit*, too, is a space that has 'let go' of overarching (e.g., metaphysical) supports. Hence, like so much of Caputo's thought, *Gelassenheit* is one more attempt by Caputo to name the necessity of confronting the real, denuded of metaphysics.

Intentionality *as such* is a not a governing concern of Caputo's. That is, Caputo does not provide a systematic and formulaic account of intentionality in his writing. However, given the centrality that he affords Husserl's theory of intentionality in his genetic explanation of the development of Continental philosophy, it is nonetheless a theme or issue that lay behind much of his critiques and claims. One text where this theme is prevalent is Caputo's *RH* text. Although this text is earlier in his writing and thus could be seen to reflect an underdeveloped aspect of Caputo's thought, the basic ideas he outlines in *RH* regarding intentionality are consistently deployed in his later works.

First, as a general axiom of Caputo's project, his is a phenomenological (inspired) project. He is, in short, a type of phenomenologist. As such, the intentional awareness of the 'subject'

viewing the ‘object’ of analysis, the phenomenon, remains an underlying assumption regarding how it is we can extrapolate knowledge or understanding from experience. Hence, Caputo cleaves to the basic axiom that governs phenomenological thought: ‘consciousness *is* consciousness *of*’—or, our understanding of the phenomenal world is governed by a directed oriented conscious ‘act.’ For Husserl, the “intentional arrow” of the phenomenological investigator, their focused awareness of the phenomenon under analysis, is subordinated to the methodological constraints of the *epochē*.¹⁷⁷ The *epochē* is a ‘cut’ into, or a bracketing of, the perceptual awareness of the phenomenological researcher; it is undertaken in order to gain unfettered awareness of a specific phenomenon. The phenomenologist brackets the natural attitude, or ones ordinarily given intentional awareness of said object, so as to dim the given perceptual assumptions which lock said phenomena in presuppositions that denude it of its phenomenal ‘givenness.’ The task of the phenomenologist, for Husserl, is to bracket those pre-given intentional presuppositions so as to let the phenomena flourish uninhibited by subjective assumptions.

A pivotal moment in the development of Continental philosophy, in Caputo’s telling, is Heidegger’s rejection of Husserl’s *epochē* approach. Heidegger argued, against Husserl, that we cannot bracket the natural attitude because we cannot bracket our own situated contextual *Sitz im Leben*. We cannot, as it were, cut out our perspectival position when reflecting on the world, as we are always already implicated in a perspective that cannot of itself be neutralized. Heidegger argued, in short, that the presupposition regarding the possibility of a neutral perspective carries a non-neutral claim, i.e., a claim about the capacity of consciousness to neutrally describe the world. Caputo endorses Heidegger’s critique.

¹⁷⁷ On the “intentional arrow” that guides Husserl’s phenomenological analysis, Caputo notes in a lecture “Husserl speaks of the intentional arrow when he says ‘consciousness intends its object like an archer aiming at an object’ (John Caputo, 01-02-27-1-Caputo. Caputo Class Lectures, Mp3 file; 20:40-21:00.).

In *RH*, Caputo discusses Husserl's theory of intentionality via a larger discussion regarding the theme of repetition and the constitutionality of experience. What undergirds Caputo's analysis is a concern about the nature of the horizon of interpretation upon which phenomenological analysis unfolds, and the degree to which that horizon is pre-determined or pre-established by the intentional subject. In short, can phenomenological analysis be neutral or is it implicitly marked-out in advance by fore-structures that determine its unfolding? For Caputo, "intentionality is not a simple or blank looking-at...but a complex, highly structured interpretive act."¹⁷⁸ That is, intentionality, i.e., 'consciousness of,' is not a "simple and unfettered consciousness" that itself meets a "purely given" phenomenal field; rather, following Heidegger, Caputo argues that it is composed of, or implicated in, a "complex activity in virtue of which objects are enabled to appear at all."¹⁷⁹ The outcome which guides this view of intentionality is one that is a "summons to understand givenness in all its complexity."¹⁸⁰ The 'complexity' that underlay finite phenomena cannot be reduced by a finite perspective which is itself marked by a complexity that is not reducible to a neutral given. Rather, what experience is, according to this phenomenological viewpoint, is the by-product of "certain fore-structures which provide its antecedent conditions of possibility."¹⁸¹ This preunderstanding is something like the potentialities from which the actualities of experience draw upon or are formed. Phenomenological analysis, especially Husserl's, seeks to map these preunderstandings so as to gain a clearer understanding of the actuality that emerges from phenomenological analysis. Hence, as Caputo writes, "intentional

¹⁷⁸ *RH*, 39.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

analysis has to do with a subtle blending of the potential and the actual, the implicit and the explicit.”¹⁸²

This assertion, that a play of complex potentialities unfold in every intentional act, implies that behind the actual given phenomena lay a play of potentialities that exceeds its given form. Axiomatically, then, “experience always contains a *plus ultra*; it always means more than “what is meant at the moment explicitly.”¹⁸³ This basic phenomenological claim informs key elements of Caputo’s thinking, especially in his account of the event which names a radical excess that governs both the event of intentional relation and indeed of objective givenness. This excess is shown via a complex of “presence and absence or, better, the explicit and the implicit, the actual and the potential.”¹⁸⁴ This presence-absence or actual-potential structure provides the “ring of horizons” around which the perceptual object, given in intentionality, arises. We cannot, as a consequence, step outside of or neutralize these horizons.

Horizons themselves are ‘fixed’ by a “predelineated (*Vorgezeichnet*)” anticipatory structure, a trace, that organizes its actual showing. Caputo writes, “The notion of pre-delineation, *Vorzeichnung*, is one to which I attach a great deal of importance. *Vor-zeichnung* means to trace or sketch beforehand, to trace something lightly in advance. One thinks of a light pencil sketch which a painter might then fill in with his oils.”¹⁸⁵ Intentionality, for Caputo, has a pre-structure that is, in effect, marked-off or distinguished by a differential presence-absence play. This fore-structure is analogous to the trace which has a kind of “shadowing or adumbration” that always already accompanies experience. “Intentionality is possible only to the extent that the object is adequately foreshadowed, traced in advance, prepared for by what we can only call here a certain hermeneutic

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 40.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 40-41.

fore-structuring which provides the preliminary or anticipatory preparation for the actual appearance of the object.”¹⁸⁶

One outcome of the above model of intentionality is that the absent or potential fore-structure is included in the present or actual phenomenal object. In Caputo's later writings, for example in *SoG*, this gap, absence, or fore-structure is explored via his analysis of Schelling's *Unvordenklichkeit*. Indeed, Caputo's radical hermeneutic/theological program is shot through with the claim that an unprogrammable gap, fissure, or *différance* always already accompanies or is harboured in/by, that which we are analyzing. For example, Caputo writes, “consciousness builds up and constitutes, makes up the object by making up for what is missing at any given moment—and this by a retention (repetition) which is compounded with protention in such a way as to bring the flow of *Erlebnisse* to a contingent rest.”¹⁸⁷ Consciousness as consciousness *of*, as an intentional act, is an interplay of presence and absence, both are constitutive of its production. Hence what is constituted in consciousness according to Caputo's analysis, is not a re-presentation of a more original or primal presence—of a correlation between a present intentional act and a pre-existent presence; instead, the anticipatory structure of intentionality supplies the “enabling conditions of possibility” of presence itself. As such, Caputo's project is ungirded by what he calls a quasi-transcendental structure—it is “quasi,” in this formulation, because the conditions of possibility for intentional presence are also the conditions of possibility for its absence.

This feature of Caputo's argument regarding intentionality is key to his most basic claims against thinkers like Heidegger, Hegel, and indeed central aspects of the Christian tradition: repetition in the present is not a repeating-forward of a primal or truer originary ‘past.’ Intentionality thus does not meet a primal given presence and repeat that presence ‘correctly’ via

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 41.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 41-42.

an *adaequatio rei et intellectus* model of representation. Instead, repetition assumes a “non-originary origin,” a gap, which moves forward by repeating what it creates. Consequently, no originary experience exists, no primal presence, that bracketing the natural attitude (*epochē*) reveals. Instead, for Caputo, phenomenological intention reveals above all else the necessity of a re-presentation of a gap, an undecidability, that always already accompanies intentional consciousness.

One outcome that follows from the above account of intentionality concerns the relationship between the intentional act and that which such an act signifies. In short, does the intentional act *of necessity* carry a signifying function? According to Caputo, Husserl argues that “unfulfilled intentions” are ingredient to consciousness; indeed, not only can expressive intention’s function “in the absence of their objects,” but “that is their essential function.”¹⁸⁸ The prime example of this is speech, whose operation is productive precisely in the absence of the referent it aims to signify via the speech act. As such, Caputo, notes, “fulfillment is contingent,” that is, “what is structurally necessary to the sign is the capacity to take the place of another, to stand for something else (*für etwas*), to hold the place for what is absent.”¹⁸⁹ Hence, not only is the intentional act composed of a presence/absent structure, a gap, but that towards which the act is aimed can also be absent.¹⁹⁰ It is worth noting that Caputo finds in both claims regarding the negative aspects of intentionality, a productive claim regarding the nature of consciousness, language, and intentionality itself. Experience, he argues, is structurally incomplete but that incompleteness is productively constitutive to its constitution.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 140.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ As Caputo notes in a lecture when speaking of Derrida’s critique of Husserl’s claim’s regarding the “intentional arrow” or aim of consciousness “Derrida takes up this image [of the intentional arrow] when he says ‘well if the archer hits his target, he’ll wound it.’ So he says, ‘the intentional arrow of this name does not hit its target, or by hitting it, wound it. The failure of the arrow to hit its target, is the condition of its success’ (John Caputo, 01-02-27-1-Caputo, *Caputo Class Lectures*, Mp3 file; 21:00-21:24).

However, on its surface, in the intentional act itself, this gap or fissure is not obvious. Indeed, what philosophy and theology provide Caputo, what they do best, is to make obvious these incomplete elements that are structurally ingredient to thought itself. What Caputo finds troublesome with thinkers like Husserl and their theory of intentionality, is that they tend to infuse intentionality with a *telos* that is extrinsic to its actual unfolding. Husserl “represents an external *telos* to which he subjugates the *eidos* of language.”¹⁹¹ In short, a metaphysical theory is advanced so as to account for the present/absent structure of experience. In so doing, these thinkers deny the productive function of the absent, the gap, the deferred, in the act of consciousness and indeed *in experience itself*, because the gap is subordinated to a metaphysical economy that makes the gap part of a larger process. Still, Caputo is clear that although Husserl’s system might in fact ignore the full force of the absent in the production of conscious intentionality and overtly stresses the teleological function of thought, Husserl was nonetheless aware of many of these ambiguities and tensions. Quoting from Derrida, Caputo states “Husserl describes, and in one and the same movement, effaces the emancipation of speech as non-knowing.”¹⁹² Speech, as a key example of the presence/absent structure being noted, is compelled by a radical negative element, an unknown gap which always already accompanies its unfolding. We gain in our understanding of the phenomenal world and indeed the subject who intuits it, when this unknown gap, or difference, is recognized as constitutive of intentionality. Caputo writes,

It is this liberation or emancipation of signs from intuitive fulfillment and even from truth and objectivity, according to Derrida, which liberates them from metaphysical constraints and releases the play of *différance*. Signs and traces are what they are when they are liberated from intuition and allowed to produce their own effects, *sui generis*, in a free play of their own.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ *RH*, 140.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 140-141.

Derrida—whom Caputo cleaves to in this analysis—wants “to free up the play of signifiers in order” to “let loose” the endless “associative play” that undergirds the “essential freedom of signifiers” that result from the intuitional act—to, in short, shorn them of their metaphysical impulses and “let loose a *logos* not held captive by intuition and objectivity.”¹⁹⁴ I want to stress Caputo’s use of the phrase ‘let loose’ here. Whether it is accidental or purposeful, ‘let loose’ parallels the basic meaning of *Gelassenheit*, letting-go-ness.

Before unpacking this ‘letting loose’ function of intentionality, I want to briefly touch on some of the implications of Caputo’s analysis of intentionality in *RH*. Indeed, what can we make of Caputo’s above claim that signs and traces, when “liberated from intuition,” persist in a “free play of their own”? Unpacking this question will help explain one of the uses of *Gelassenheit* in Caputo’s system. What I want to stress here is the moment (*Augenblick*) that is opened up in the repetitive spacing that theories like Deconstruction emphasize via their account of *différance*. On one level, *différance* must be understood as a descriptive account of the way in which spacing is constitutive to the production of meaning making. This is a non-subjective, non-experiential, account of the ways in which structure is always inhabited by de-structuring forces. And yet in Caputo’s analysis we can hear a sort of existentialization of this differential principle—not unlike the mystic, Caputo finds in the space opened up by the linguistic resources of the Continental tradition a moment of subjective clarification or, we might say, illumination. But this is an illumination without a guiding light—like Hegel’s *Denken* shorn of its anchor-hold by the absolute *Begriff*.

Two basic themes from Caputo’s analysis should help clarify this point. First, the repetitive element noted above must be understood as a “nonderived re-petition” which is immanent

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 141.

to the “spacing out process of internal time” consciousness and is the condition of possibility for meaning *as such* in Caputo’s project. This temporal gap, which manifests in, for example, linguistic expressions, names a ‘weak’ force whose persistent insistence is the very condition of possibility for any and every existence. More specifically, this insistent temporal and spatial structure is the condition of possibility for objectivity and indeed subjectivity. “[I]n that space arises both subjectivity and intersubjectivity as well as all ideality and objectivity. That spacing, which is just as much a timing, that is, a nonderived re-petition process, is what is ultimately productive.”¹⁹⁵ Not unlike his formulation regarding the weakness of God, in which God’s insistence, God’s possibility, names God’s reality more than God’s actuality, the productive components of experience that undergirds Caputo’s notion of intentionality, language, and indeed experience itself, is given its force by the insistent possibility of spacing *as such*.

But what is this moment, this spacing itself? In Caputo’s project, I argue, this spacing is given what we might call a quasi-existential veneer in which the experience of the knowledge of the spacing is vaunted for the type of awareness its *understanding* grants. To be sure, this is not a Schleiermacherian *Gefühl*, as if Caputo wants his readers to fetishize the experience of the awareness of this gap. Still, it is impossible to survey Caputo’s *oeuvre* without noting the quasi-liberative value that he does assign to letting things be, of surrendering the impulse of intuitional control. What then *is* this moment, this spacing, or letting-be in Caputo’s project? What occurs when one lets its free play ‘loose’? We can see two distinct movements in Caputo’s formulation of the emergence of this moment in *RH*. First, there is the moment of recognition regarding the temporality of the flux and the non-permanence of finitude. As Caputo writes, “in repetition, we are stripped of the illusions of permanent presence, divested of its comforts, exposed to the

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 144.

ébranler.”¹⁹⁶ Letting go of the need for permanence, which is for him a metaphysical ideal, is a liberative surrender to the flux and to the risk imbued in finitude. Caputo continues,

now it is in this work of dis-illusionment, *this emancipation from the metaphysics of comfort*, that I locate an element of a deep hermeneutic, that is to say, a hermeneutic which breaks the spell of illusion and *awakens us to the abyss*, to the flux which we are caught up in.¹⁹⁷

In almost an exact reversal of Plato's cave analogy from the *Republic*, Caputo sees liberation arising from a recognition of the temporally finite nature of things. In impermanence, he finds a type of permanence. This permanence is not the permanence of safety, but the permanence of disquietude, the *unheimlich*, the uncanny that we must always face up to. “What I call radical hermeneutics involves just this readiness for this anxiety and solicitation, *the readiness to be shaken*, the openness for *différance*.”¹⁹⁸ This is the existential state opened up or let loose by being *open to différence*. One is, in short, open to the possibility of the risk/promise contained in the present and the future to-come.

However, unlike thinkers such as Kierkegaard who almost fetishize the anxiety and uncertainty that confronts the individual who fully faces the conditional and indeed the unconditional, for Caputo, in contrast, this ‘readiness’ or ‘openness’ is ultimately subordinate to a playfulness. This focus on play in Caputo's hermeneutics is a focus that he draws out of Derrida's project,

we must understand that any talk of solicitation and anxiety in Derrida is subordinated to a Dionysian laughter and exuberance. He spirits the signifier across the border of a priori grammar and sets it free to produce effects in its own region, without regard to intuition and objectification. Whatever solicitation and trembling is here is made to dance. Whatever anxiety is here has learned how to laugh.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 146 (emphasis added).

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., (emphasis added).

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., (emphasis added).

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 147.

In short, phenomena shorn of its intuitional grasp is to be understood as being saturated by a play of its own character: *Es spielt, weil es spielt*. This “grammatological liberation” is a liberation of the signifier from the signified with the consequence that one releases the intuitional object “into a free play.”²⁰⁰ Following Derrida, Caputo calls this process of releasement dissemination from *disseminare*, to spread seeds or information. One outcome of this focus on dissemination, as indeed a focus on *différance as such* engenders, is a rejection of the operation of reason or of a *logos* as governing the unfolding of phenomena. This is a type of reduction in which the “logico-natural attitude, the naïve belief in *logos* as reason, of logo-centrism” is bracketed in favor of a type of understanding that is concerned with negating the impulse of intuitional “control.”²⁰¹ In short, dissemination is a rejection of the claim that “everything is governed by a wise architecture, which is a law of dialectics” that seeks to totalize phenomenal experience by making the particular a moment in the life of the universal.²⁰² Instead, dissemination echoes the logic of re-repetition that governs Caputo’s basic claims regarding intentionality; dissemination, he writes, “is precisely productive repetition, a repetition which takes again (*gjen-tagelse*) by taking differently, as opposed to re-productive hermeneutic repetition which wants to escape the play by finding the high ground of the meaning which repeats backward.”²⁰³

At this point I want to return to the theme of *Gelassenheit* more specifically. I will unpack the links between Caputo’s theory of intentionality, meaning making, and repetition with his general application of *Gelassenheit* in several of his key texts. What the above has made clear, is that (1) Caputo’s theory of intentionality is a theory of repetition in which that which repeats in the intentional act is not secondary to that which is repeated. Indeed, fundamental to this account

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 148.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 149.

²⁰² Ibid., 150.

²⁰³ Ibid., 151.

of repetition is the claim that there is no prior moment/event that functions independent of repetition. For Caputo, thought goes astray when it makes of the present moment a reflection of a truer past moment. (2) Caputo finds in the recognition of this non-original differential structure, a moment of clarifying awareness. But this awareness is not the awareness of a true presence that sits behind or is the ground upon which the experience unfolds, which would indeed be antithetical to Caputo's basic project. Instead, and as noted above, *there is a sort of existential awareness that Caputo argues one gains by letting-go of the assumption that one's intentional acts are sustained by a deeper sustaining presence.* In letting-go of the assumption that intentional acts provide the subject with safe access to a firm ground the subject 'surrenders,' as it were, to the risk of flux. As Caputo writes, "no one is granted a seat above the flux from which to survey the whole"—we are always already saturated by the uncertainty of experience. The task of thought, for Caputo, is to make that uncertainty or risk productive to experience—too, like with his theory of intentionality, recognize the absence of a guiding presence behind its activity. In mystical thinkers like Eckhart and his notion of *Gelassenheit*, Caputo finds the conceptual resources to express the basic philosophical assumptions regarding the nature of intentionality he abstracts from thinkers like Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida. And although Caputo rejects the specifically Neoplatonic metaphysical convictions that undergird Eckhart's notion of *Gelassenheit*, he nonetheless finds in its basic letting-go structure, a fruitful parallel or analogy.

In the concluding chapter to *RH*, entitled, 'Openness to the Mystery' Caputo explores the outcomes that occur as a consequence of letting-things-be. Building on his discussion of intentionality Caputo argues for what he calls a "generalized *Gelassenheit*" or a "universal letting-be" in which the "task is to let all things be what and how they are."²⁰⁴ In Caputo's discussion he

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 288.

unpacks how the self is inscribed by “difference and non-identity.”²⁰⁵ He links his notion of what openness to the mystery would be, to Heidegger’s notion of truth as *alethia* or unconcealment. Caputo’s position is that in overcoming attachment to the ‘presence’ of our experience, ourselves, and indeed our notions of God and the Other, we allow ourselves to be, or we recognize that we are, “the opening through which the flux resonates.”²⁰⁶ Here we touch on a core of Caputo’s thought on the abyss, the *Urgrund*, the *Unvordenklichkeit*, or a “*theolgia negativa*,” as not being instances of a deeply serious and sacral ‘depth dimension’ that resists play, joy, and laughter. For Caputo, the flux, its abyssal differential ground, does not offer the philosopher or theologian the opportunity to sink into the reality of an ungrounded angst—a sort of *Sturm und Drang* despair. Instead, a kernel of hope and play is ingredient to all of Caputo’s work: “All this talk of the abyss and openness to the mystery must be understood as the willingness to stay in play with the play. The question is whether and how, hearing the movements of that play, we are able to join in it. *The play is all.*”²⁰⁷ Reality at its elemental base for Caputo is fundamentally participatory. In this formulation, in which the differential ungrounded insistence of reality is named, it is named as a site of playful invitation: *we play with reality, reality plays with us*. Play for Caputo names the back and forth, in-between, relational dynamic that is something like that which insists in the ‘insistence of God’—it is this inter-active *relata* that Caputo wants his readers to notice. This play is a nameless play, it plays because it plays, it is not God, the subject, or the world that runs it. Instead, the play is something like the combined or total engagement of *relata as such*.

A final word now about Caputo’s account of the intentional subject that he abstracts from the Continental tradition to underscore how he understands the suspension of intentionality that he

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 289.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 290.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 293 (emphasis added).

works with from the mystical tradition. First, Husserl's theory of intentionality carries with it a basic presupposition of an intending subject that intends towards an intended object. In this account, Caputo hears the language of essentialism—specifically the essentialism of the subject. Whereas Caputo wants to stress the fragmented nature of things—whether of language, religion, politics, or indeed the subject. He writes, “If we have learned anything in the last one hundred years of European thought, it is that the self is anything but what it pretends to be...The ‘self’ is much more a place of disruption, irruption, solicitation.”²⁰⁸ In short, the self—or indeed any presumed independent presence—is a site of relation that responds to the/an other; one is thus a site of a relational dynamic rather than a static whole. There is then, no ‘self-identity’ that sits behind or governs actions like intentionality. In effect, the semblance of the self, like the semblance of the text in Deconstruction, is an illusion projected upon the self by a host of conceptual configurations that deny the transiency or impermanence of the self.²⁰⁹

Caputo's thought aims at making evident this non-foundational claim: subjectivity, like any claim to permanent self-consistent identity, is premised on ideological structures that assert strong independent and stable identities. Via this basic premise Caputo's theory of *Gelassenheit* unifies with thinkers like Eckhart and indeed much of the Western theological tradition, especially the mystical tradition that has been inspired by Augustine: namely, rejecting the claims that the desiring subject instantiates stable order. Indeed, for Eckhart, letting-go or detachment assumes a sort of non-egoic anthropology (if we can call it that) in which what the subject *is*, is a compilation of incorrect-attachments. To desire correctly, to attach rightly, is to surrender all forms of egoic attachment, as all forms of egoic attachment presume an economy of finite relation which of necessity prioritizes finitude over infinitude. As McGinn notes, “the process of detaching the soul

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 289.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

from all things, especially from the created self, raises the question of the status of the “I” and subjectivity in the Dominican’s mysticism.”²¹⁰ As was noted in chapter 2, there is not so much a subject-willing for Eckhart as there is ‘willing’—when willing lets-go of its intentional grip on finitude, the emptiness or space opened up by that surrender is filled with God.²¹¹ In Eckhart’s metaphysics, when one lets go of all finite projections and attachments, even the attachment of a finite subject to an infinite God, then they have a sort of “absolute self-emptying” which “forces” God to fill the vacuum in the soul because it is really nothing else but its own emptiness.”²¹² For Eckhart, the subject is a play of attachments that conspire to lead the subject from God into the world. Read in this light, Caputo’s basic claims regarding detachment as ‘suspension’ is not so much a suspension of intentionality as a suspension in the belief that that intentionality signifies a stable subjective presence.

I want here to extend the epistemic and anthropological links between the presuppositions and tensions that animate theories of intentionality that stem from Continental analysis and its theory of intentionality, and the benefits that emerge from its suspension which undergirds Eckhart’s notion of *Gelassenheit*. I want, likewise, to push past an analysis that notices conceptual links between these systems and think rather about the ‘state’ that emerges in the subject that follows from Caputo’s discussion of *Gelassenheit*. What, in short, is the ‘state of experience’ permitted by *Gelassenheit* according to Caputo? Indeed, if for Eckhart *Gelassenheit* is the suspension of egoic attachment to finite phenomenon with the result that one is filled with the presence of God in that now denuded space, what is detachment ‘doing’ according to Caputo’s translation and transforming of it via tensions from the Continental tradition? Is it inducing a

²¹⁰ Ibid., 138.

²¹¹ McGinn, *Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, 137.

²¹² Ibid.

feeling? An 'experience'? Or, as he stated about his use of the mystical element, is all of this analysis merely a helpful analogy? To answer this question, and by way of concluding this section, I want to turn to an essay that Caputo wrote around the same time that he published *RH*, entitled 'Three Transgressions: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida.' In particular, it is *Gelassenheit* as both a post-metaphysical critique as well as a 'suspension' of intentionality in this article that I want to develop.

It was noted above that in *RH* Caputo names what he calls a "generalized *Gelassenheit*." This "universal letting-be" describes something like a universalized anthropological claim. He is asserting a common capacity for all humans to let-go and let-be. Caputo shares this assumption with mystics like Eckhart. Both assume the total translatability of letting-go to human experience *as such*. For Eckhart, that claim rests upon a mythological and cosmological claim regarding the capacity of the mind to, via surrender, cohere with or be in close relation to the Godhead. Caputo does not have this mythological framework. Indeed, as has been noted throughout this study, Caputo's project is built upon the rejection of the mythological worldview assumed by Eckhart. How then is *Gelassenheit* universalizable? This question is made more complex by Caputo's rejection of a stable subject—if there is no common 'subjective identity,' how can *Gelassenheit* have a 'universal' or generalized applicability? In order to have a common application, a common core or essence is assumed, which is precisely, as I have noted above, what Caputo's account of intentionality seeks to disrupt. If, then, Eckhart's theory of *Gelassenheit* assumes the presence of God as a consequence of its undertaking, what is it that Caputo understands to be occurring when 'the subject 'lets-things-be' according to his *Gelassenheit* scheme?

In 'three transgressions' Caputo discusses the critiques of metaphysics that stem from Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida. Metaphysics represents here what Caputo calls a hermeneutics

of “comfort” while thinkers like Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida seek reassurance in discomfort.²¹³ For example, when commenting on Nietzsche, Caputo writes,

the history of metaphysics is just this attempt to sweeten, blunt and falsify the sharp and dangerous edges of ‘truth.’ ‘Meta-physics’: that means a faith in binary oppositions in which becoming is blunted by being, error by truth, time by eternity, body by soul, the sensible by the super-sensible.²¹⁴

To overcome the false comfort of metaphysics, one needs to “think without illusion,” to face up to the reality of things.²¹⁵ For Heidegger, thought is enraptured by the *Gestell*, or framework, that both trades on the comfort of metaphysics and provides the impetus for the destructive behavior of modern society in which “mankind is carried along on the way towards the total domination of the earth, and of one another.”²¹⁶ In this framework, Caputo notes, “Heidegger rightly argues, thinking does not let Being be, does not let it come to presence. In this way thinking is itself prevented from attaining its own nature as thinking, for thinking is letting be.”²¹⁷ The *Gestell* as framework warps thought, or its intentional focus. Indeed, Caputo continues, for Heidegger, “every such projective undertaking, every attempt to provide the horizon within which entities appear, remains itself conditioned and derivative.”²¹⁸ Beyond the horizon established by the *Gestell* is the Open which is something like the condition of possibility for “projection” and intentionality *as such*—the Open is the field, the *Khora*, upon which is inscribed “metaphysical conceptuality” and indeed any projection from *Dasein*.²¹⁹

²¹³ John D Caputo, ‘Three Transgressions: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida,’ in in *The Collected and Philosophical and Theological Papers Volume 1: 1969-1985, Aquinas, Eckhart, Heidegger: Metaphysics, Mysticism, Thought*, ed. Eric Weislogel (Bolton, ON: John D. Caputo Archives, 2021), 387.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 388.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 393.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 394.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 395.

Metaphysics, then, is a *vor-stellen*, or indeed a *vor-stellungen*, which domesticate the flux of being by setting “things within a framework of our own devising.”²²⁰ In this system, being becomes a mere prostheses for the demands of an inauthentic subject and indeed an inauthentic culture. *Gelassenheit* is here a sort of salve to the problem of metaphysics, in this account it names the “suspension” of the *Vorstellen* which is the suspension of metaphysics.²²¹ However, in Heidegger’s affirmation of *Gelassenheit* as a suspension of the *Vorstellen*, he envisages a “recovery of the region in which we have been all along,” i.e., the Open.²²² That is, a primordial depth dimension buried in the heart of being, given expression in past moments and cultures like the pre-Socratics, which is present when the demands of inauthentic *Dasein* are let go. In contrast, and key to this discussion, *Caputo’s use of Gelassenheit is less a recovery of a past and more an affirmation of the to-come*. But Caputo does follow Heidegger in the basic claim that *Gelassenheit* names a space in which the “noisiness of representational thinking has been drowned out,” in which, in short, the *Vorstellungen* of metaphysics, the authority and intentional significance of those phenomena, has been negated.²²³

[B]y surrendering the projective attempts of *Vorstellen* to encompass and surround the open, we are “granted” or admitted into” an experience of the Open. We experience the “unencompassable” character of that which horizontal representational thinking wants to encircle. Releasement (*Gelassenheit*) or releasement from *Vorstellen*, from horizontality, from all willing, from every form of the will-to-power.

In short, released from the grip of an intentional activity aimed at finite projections, *Dasein* surrenders to a more primordial Open that always already precedes every mental activity. *Gelassenheit*, then, is a “meditative-poetic letting be” type of thinking that “humbles the self-assertiveness of metaphysical rationality.”²²⁴

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid., 396.

Derrida is treated rather lightly in Caputo's 'Three transgressions' article; it will not be until his 1995 *PaT* that Caputo provides a more systematic account of Derrida and Deconstruction. And yet even in this 1985 article, the basic kernel of what Caputo finds productive in Derrida's thought is given focus, even if only briefly. Caputo argues that Derrida's critique of metaphysics mirrors more closely Nietzsche's than it does Heidegger's. Although Derrida's basic critique of metaphysics project is an echo of Heidegger's, Derrida's focus on language, his "semiological component" weds him closer to Nietzsche.

Derrida posits a pure system of differential, arbitrary signs, which amounts to no more than a system of repetition, a code of repeatable signifiers. By means of this code, 'meanings' are seen to be contingent effects, products of the system, arising purely as a function of the system, without privileges or priorities."²²⁵

In short, Derrida's critique of metaphysics follows the linguistic turn in Continental thought in which metaphysical language and that which said language attempts to articulate, e.g., a supersensible order, cannot escape the differential structure of the linguistic signs that seek to articulate its reality. Thus, as Caputo writes, "Derrida appropriates Nietzsche's theory of fictions and enlists it in a Heideggerian project of the deconstruction of the history of metaphysics, which is carried out by means of a semiological critique of language and a differential system of slippage and dissemination."²²⁶ Derrida's project thus represents a critique of metaphysics insofar as the order that metaphysics both presupposes and advances assumes a stable or constant framework which the disruptive and uncontainable elements of language, thought, being, and experience, simply cannot sustain. The centre, as Yeats writes, cannot hold; things fall apart.

In all three thinkers, Caputo finds an echo of the basic theme of *Gelassenheit*, a letting be. And in the same way that Caputo argues mystics like Eckhart provide a critique of metaphysics

²²⁵ Ibid., 398.

²²⁶ Ibid.

via the imperative of detachment, e.g., 'I pray God to rid me of God,' so too does he find in Derrida, Heidegger, and Nietzsche, a similar type of critique. In the latter, though, *Gelassenheit* is not a provisional 'letting-be' in order to have a more complete connection with God. Rather, letting-be for these thinkers radicalizes Eckhart's critique of metaphysics (as Caputo frames it) by extending its basic formula not simply to the 'God' that Eckhart prays to be rid of, but to the entire semiological and mythical structure that sustains the metaphysical image of God. The outcome of this critique of metaphysics is simultaneously a critique of the social, cultural, political, and ethical structures that were formed by, in this instance, European societies that followed the metaphysical claims of Christian dogma. Implicitly then, a critique aimed at metaphysics is at the same time a critique aimed at those institutions, ways of thinking, and patterns of behaviour, that ground the legitimacy of their acts in this classical metaphysical scheme. Hence, Caputo finds in the use of *Gelassenheit*, or indeed its analogical deployment in modernity, an ethical-political use.

The Nietzschean-Derridean strategy, the appropriation of Nietzsche in contemporary French philosophy, is a fruitful philosophy of protest and disruption, which is carried out in the name of liberation or emancipation. It has an ethico-political cutting edge which is entirely missing from Heidegger's more meditative work. This is not to say that it has nothing to do with *Gelassenheit*, with letting be, but rather that it is an emancipatory application of *Gelassenheit*. It is intent upon disrupting all repressive and centrist discourse—be they phallo-centric, ethno-centric, theo-centric, anthropo-centric or logo-centric—every discourse which tends to create undisturbable limits and order, hegemonic rule, privileged, hierarchized oppositions, etc.²²⁷

Gelassenheit, or its conceptual structure, is wed to a general theory of critique in which the fluidity or play, the letting-go to let-be that *Gelassenheit* signifies in mystical discourse, is given a social critical role. Structures that ossify and give rise to authoritarian mores, be they political, religious, cultural, or communal, yield to the play that *Gelassenheit* signifies. The basic or fundamental task of *Gelassenheit* is to disrupt hegemonic structures.

²²⁷ Ibid., 400.

The above cited 'Three Transgressions' article was framed around Caputo's position that Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida, represent three transgressions of metaphysics, three ways of trying to overcome its influence and effects in thought and society. I want here to think about Caputo's own project as a fourth transgression. His obviously includes elements of the three thinkers noted. Caputo's use of *Gelassenheit*, and indeed the 'experience' that his use of it suggests, indicates a further type of critique of metaphysics. What makes Caputo's use of *Gelassenheit* distinct from the history of its uses explored in this study is Caputo's focus on futurity—on the to-come, *l'avenir*. And although Derrida obviously informs Caputo's perspective on the to-come as key to a deconstructive hermeneutics, Caputo's to-come carries with it an emancipatory element or something like a 'mystical experience' that I want to suggest his use of *Gelassenheit* assumes. This 'mystical experience' is an experience of one's responsibility to the future and the uncertainty of things, which is experience denuded of its mythological and metaphysical structures. And yet, Caputo also seems to indicate a type of epistemic clarity that arises from letting-be. This clarity, though, is not insight into the 'correct' way to be, but epistemic insight into the unprogrammable. To make this point clear, I will argue that his use of *Gelassenheit* builds upon a notion of emancipatory action that has motivated Caputo's system his *AE* text and his discussion of the *phronimos*.

Caputo is not assuming a moment of transcendent liberation as a consequence of *Gelassenheit*. But he is suggesting that a more beneficial outcome follows from a perspective that inculcates its basic thematic of egoic surrender to the possibility contained in the future to-come. Like Husserl's *epochē*, *Gelassenheit* names a type of intentional suspension. In the suspension of the natural attitude, Husserl argued that a type of clarity is afforded the phenomenological researcher. This is obviously not a noetic clarity like the one Plato argued for in the *Republic* in

which a suspension of the importance given to material phenomena leads the mind to a higher more deeper understanding of being. And yet, Husserl's faith in the clarifying powers that follow from the suspension of intentionality or judgment does indeed echo classical epistemological assumptions about the mind's relationship to the world and how truth emerges in that relationship. Caputo is also not cleaving to Heidegger's use of *Gelassenheit* in which a truer *prius* is opened up in the letting go of utilitarian or programmatic reason. Heidegger's project is too focused on the past and a proper recovery of an originary experience. Caputo is instead closest to Derrida in his use of *Gelassenheit*—even though Derrida does not himself make overt use of this term. But in Derrida's system Caputo finds a conceptual scheme that mirrors what he finds productive in *Gelassenheit*, that is, letting-go of any appeal to metaphysical safety. Hence, for Caputo, the moment or space imaged by his use of *Gelassenheit* does not draw on classical mystical conceptions of transcendence. Caputo does not seek metaphysical safety.

That said, I want to think about the moment (*Augenblick*) that emerges in the act of *Gelassenheit* in Caputo's system as something like a postmodern conception of transcendence. *Gelassenheit* is not an ideal in the classically construed mystical conception of an *eidos* that illumines, because it is not a species of knowledge for him. Likewise, *Gelassenheit* for Caputo does not name a letting be in order for the divine *pleroma* to itself rest in, or participate with, its adherent. It is not, as the theologians discussed in chapter 2 assumed, an illuminative *eidos* that one strives to instantiate or apply in every situation. Rather, *Gelassenheit* for Caputo is perhaps best understood as indicating something like a responsibility or an obligation—it is a *disposition* towards the world that follows from the act of *Gelassenheit*. In short, for Caputo, the act of *Gelassenheit* should be seen as inculcating *the present state of anticipatory readiness for the promise of the to-come*. In letting go of the need for strong supports, Caputo wants his readers to

instill a sort of present responsibility for the to-come. *Gelassenheit* is for him an act which makes any moment into a space of obligatory welcome for the future to-come. We cannot know or have knowledge of this to come for Caputo.²²⁸ Likewise, we cannot necessarily know how to act, how to be sufficiently responsible, to that which comes. If *Gelassenheit* provided that type of knowledge, then we could refine our understanding of the situation and deploy a better response to the to-come as a consequence of said knowledge. That would, however, be to deploy a more classically conceived notion of epistemic transcendence which parallels Plato's divided-line scheme. Rather, *Gelassenheit* in Caputo's use of it has to do with the restlessness of the heart in an Augustinian sense. But this restlessness is not made tranquil by attaining the "eternal wisdom which abides beyond all things."²²⁹ Instead, Caputo's use of *Gelassenheit* is an awareness of the restlessness of the moment, of the subject formed in and by this restlessness, indeed of the experience that issues from this restlessness, and the recognition of the responsibility to act obligingly to the incoming of the uncertainty of the future despite this restlessness. In short, *Gelassenheit* does not provide epistemic clarity, but existential responsibility. It is the space opened up in the moment which allows one to hear the demand placed upon them by an uncertain and risky to-come, of the other denuded of supports and certainty.

Hence, we might say that *Gelassenheit* equips the Caputoian subject with the same anticipatory state which, in *AE*, he argued that the Greek *phronimos* were equipped with. The *phronimos* is the ideal governing subject that emerged in Aristotelian thought who knows "how to react" to the demands of the day.²³⁰ In *AE*, Caputo stresses the *phronimos* capacity to also respond

²²⁸ See, for example, Caputo's debates with Richard Kearney. For Kearney's position, see his 'Khora or God,' in *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus*, ed. by Mark Dooley (State University of New York Press; New York, 2003) 107-122. For Caputo's response, see his *Abyssus Abyssum Invocat: A Response to Kearney* in *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus*, ed. by Mark Dooley (State University of New York Press; New York, 2003) 123-127.

²²⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press: New York, 2008) 172.

²³⁰ *AE*, 67.

to those particular moments that do not lend themselves to formalized rules of response.²³¹ To, in short, properly respond to those actions and events that have not yet been anticipated, namely, the unknown. Hence, the strength of the *phronimos* was found not simply in that the Greeks knew what to do with the expected, to, as Caputo writes “bring to bear a general scheme upon the particularities of the situation;” but more importantly they were equipped with the capacity to respond productively to the particularity of those moments that were unique and unexpected.²³² The *phronimos* responded felicitously to the unanticipated event.²³³ Caputo writes, “Aristotle’s *phronimos* knows how to take the measure of the measurelessness, knows how to cope or deal with it; that is what having *phronesis* means. He abandons the security of the universal in order to cope with the unintelligibility of the singular.”²³⁴ The *phronimos*, in the unexpected and the singular, must respond to those events without the comforting security of a guiding concept or *nous*.²³⁵ As Caputo quips, “*Phronesis* is a Greek way to love the abyss.”²³⁶ The *phronimos* thus has a detached perspective to their actions in that they can respond to the particular event without the support of custom to provide certainty.

Caputo notes that the *phronimos*, despite being able to operate in the unknown, nonetheless deploys schemata—models—that allow for the most fortuitous outcome of the singular and unknown situation. They ultimately subordinate their actions to guiding principles like *arete* and *dike*. These principles act to help orient the *phronimos* in their decisions. What Caputo argues in *AE* is that our postmodern world requires that we respond, like the *phronimos*, to unanticipated events but, unlike the *phronimos*, we cannot appeal to any overarching ethical principles. The

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid., 68, 99.

²³³ Ibid., 99.

²³⁴ Ibid., 101.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

postmodern world, Caputo argues, does not easily provide absolute supports to determine and guide our actions. This is why Caputo appeals to the importance of obligation in *AE*, which, as I noted above, is what 'radical ethics' means for Caputo. What he calls a "postmodern version of Aristotle" is something like a *phronimos* who acts without the assurance of clear direction or firm supports while still being obliged to act accordingly to what comes. The space or moment that Caputo argues that the *phronimos* acting without assurance operates from, is a space that has 'let go' of metaphysical supports. *Gelassenheit*, like his account of the *phronimos*, names a space in which one acts responsibly to the always already unknown that confronts one, without assurance that said responsibility will result in security.

In this way, *Gelassenheit* is a type of *epoche*. It brackets the natural attitude that demands security, clarity, and firm guardrails around our actions in the present and the future to come. Like Heidegger, Caputo thinks that this uncertain element is irreducible to experience; we cannot negate its force. Following Derrida, Caputo hears in the promise contained in the truth of the uncertain, in the riskiness of things, a type of knowledge that is productive for human experience. *Gelassenheit* is not so much a suspension of intuitional control regarding human experience into the future as it is a recognition that we simply do not have firm supports about the future. Paralleling Eckhart's notion of *Gelassenheit*, we might argue that what ushers in or 'floods' the Caputoian subject who negates this intuitional control over the future to come, who surrenders to its unprogrammable *différance*, is a responsible attitude that obligatorily welcomes the coming of the other, of the future, without the need for certainty. This is a postmodern translation of the mediaeval and indeed classical notion of spiritual detachment, shorn of its metaphysical and epistemic suppositions. It is utterly finite in viewpoint, intent, and hope.

And yet, by way of conclusion, I want to suggest that Caputo does still want to domesticate experience to the rigour of surrender itself. He is arguing that we can confront the 'booming buzzing confusion of things' with a calm attitude. We can know that, despite the uncertainty of the external, a type of internal calm can equip us with a correct way of moving forward. This is the prescriptive assumption governing his use of *Gelassenheit*: acting from the position of *Gelassenheit* is better than not. This is not a critique of Caputo, but it does highlight perhaps a limitation of the extension of 'mystical' ideals denuded of their metaphysical supports. For, even a thinker like Caputo, who is hyperaware of these supports and conscious to avoid their problematic outcomes, cannot fully loosen their spiritual foundation and the suppositions that these foundations suppose. His use of it, though filtered via debates in the Continental tradition and a firm criticism of metaphysics, cannot help but repeat its emancipatory suppositions. He finds in terms like *Gelassenheit* a strategy for positively responding to the tensions of modernity. This strategy is not one of radical avoidance, as he would argue the classical metaphysical approach issues from, but radical acceptance. Caputo transmutes *Gelassenheit's* spiritual focus and metaphysical suppositions into finite and immanent ones. I will return to these claims in the final chapter. Before doing so, I want to end this chapter by reflecting on the linguistic suppositions of Caputo's use of the mystical element.

7.2.2 – The Middle Voice and the Mystical Voice

Caputo's 'mystical' element represents above all a style of thinking, writing, and speaking. This style is evidenced throughout his works by his penchant for not simply deploying thematics, terms, and ideas derived from mystical authors, but how to convey these ideas compellingly. Caputo voices his philosophical, religious, and theological claims within an approach to language that echoes how he understands mystics to be using language. One example of this style can be seen in what he refers to as the 'middle voice.' I argue this middle voice approach marks Caputo's

own distinctive voice and style and further underscores the mystical element of his approach. This approach includes the apophatic approach of mystical discourse, but stretches beyond this 'negative' use of language. Hence, although I will emphasize the apophatic suppositions of language that motivates Caputo's thought and its link with his mystical use of apophatic language, I am not here focusing on the apophatic in his project. In part, this is because this apophatic aspect of Caputo's thought has been discussed elsewhere and is indeed a feature of Caputo's thought that he has himself addressed. But the middle voice, which includes but is not limited to the apophatic, shows the wider impact and influence of the mystical element in Caputo's thought itself. To that end, this final analysis is aimed at showing the general approach to language that organizes Caputo's analysis and the mystical suppositions that undergird his approach.

The middle voice describes a grammatical inflection of the Greek and German language, amongst others, in which verbs and predicates denote a subject who both preforms and receives the action expressed by the verb. In classical Greek, the middle voice signified "a reflexive action that begins and ends in the subject, like, for example, when I say in English "I give myself time to deliberate."²³⁷ It is *middle* in that the action of the subject and the object of reference are not clearly defined—in short, the middle voice denotes ambiguity, not clarity. What Caputo finds instructive with the middle voice is the in-between subject/object link that it assumes: there is no privileging of one or the other in relation to the action being deployed. What I will call Caputo's 'mystical voice' is an echo of this middle voice.

The theme of the middle voice has animated Caputo's project since *AE* in which he uses the ambiguity assumed by this voice to describe how objects, events, and persons are to be understood, both in themselves and in how they relate to one another. For example, Caputo's

²³⁷ *IoG*, 271, n 21.

account of the event in *AE* is filtered through an appeal to the middle voice: “Events knit themselves together in a kind of middle voice action that is neither purely active nor purely passive.”²³⁸ That is, whereas ethical action proceeds by emphasising an active subject that strives to instantiate a morally objective ideal, the notion of obligation that Caputo explores in *AE* proceeds via the “the call of relation that proceeds all ethical action.”²³⁹ This relational ‘call’ names a back-and-forth in-between dynamic that belies what Caputo argues metaphysical thought assumes, namely, a stable subject compelled by a stable metaphysical order. Indeed, as was noted in the previous section, Caputo’s project is animated by a rejection of a stable subjective identity. Middle voice here, then, names an approach to describe human actions and events without assuming that signifiers like ‘subject’ and ‘object’ refer to stable entities that exist outside of the linguistic chain.

As a first observation, we can see in Caputo’s use of the middle voice, an echo of Nietzsche’s distrust of language.²⁴⁰ And although Caputo is convinced by Nietzsche’s basic linguistic claims, he is distrustful of the skepticism that permeates Nietzsche’s project. Indeed, although Nietzsche’s linguistic claims form a dominant core of the Continental tradition’s approach to language, whose impact on Heidegger and Derrida directly influenced how Caputo uses language, there is a pessimism about this approach that is ultimately antithetical to Caputo’s general approach. Instead, Caputo’s use of the middle voice parallels more closely Gadamer’s use of the middle voice and indeed of language itself. For Gadamer, the middle voice signals not a tension regarding language’s capacity to identify a stable referent, rather that tension is something like the condition of possibility of communication itself.²⁴¹ For Gadamer, language is not simply

²³⁸ Ibid., 233.

²³⁹ Ibid., 236.

²⁴⁰ See for example, Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, 84.

²⁴¹ Eberhard, 101-102.

about talking or communicating. It is about “being that can be understood.”²⁴² Language as interpretation makes obvious a relational ground upon which all communication occurs, the communication of the community or what Gadamer calls the *sensus communis*.²⁴³ The middle voice for Gadamer indicates the productive space within which interpretation begins. When we interpret we interpret from the stance that the other might be right, we relate productively to the possibility that other has something to teach us.²⁴⁴ This relational dynamic, founded on the presupposition of the communal structure of language, is the hermeneutical starting point of Gadamer’s theory of understanding and has impacted Caputo’s own view of how we interpret, why, and for what means.

Caputo himself is using the middle voice in an “impersonal sense to say things are getting themselves said and done without an identifiable agency under the name of God.”²⁴⁵ Conveyed in this use of the middle voice is Nietzsche’s distrust of language, as well as Gadamer’s claim that understanding always begins in this in-between space that the ‘middle voice’ signifies. In *IoG*, Caputo argues that an appeal to the middle voice is done in the space opened up by post-Husserlian phenomenology. In Husserl’s system, there is assumed to be a stable subject who relates to a stable object; abstracted from the presence of both stabilities is a phenomenological description. For Caputo, this phenomenological account uncritically prioritizes the primacy of stable binary relations in the creation of understanding.²⁴⁶ Caputo appeals to the thought of Bruno Latour, and his analysis of the creation of knowledge in a scientific epistemology, as a thinker who moves past the primacy that governs the binary assumptions which inform Husserl’s phenomenology.²⁴⁷

²⁴² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (Continuum; New York, 2006), 470.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 292.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 271, n21.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Caputo notes that Husserl's failure was not to recognize "that the relation [between phenomena and phenomenologist] is more than two."²⁴⁸ "That is why, following Derrida, I like to emphasize the middle voice, something that is 'getting itself done' by means of what Latour would call a multiplicity of agencies (actants) difficult to identify, with no clear discernable doer."²⁴⁹ In this way, we can see that the 'middle voice' names something like the general approach of Caputo's system as a whole. That is, not unlike terms such as weakness, event, or insistence, the middle voice is a phrase that Caputo deploys to indicate the irreducibly relational core of everything. What there are for Caputo are sites of relation. The middle voice is a linguistic strategy that performatively evidences this relational dynamic.

Before unpacking these claims more fully, I want to flesh out how Caputo uses the middle voice in *IoG*. Why does Caputo refer to the middle voice at all in *IoG* while earlier texts like *WoG* and *RH* do not refer to this phrase. Interestingly, in *PaT* he refers to the middle voice twice, both times as an example of a way that linguistic discourse can sidestep strong metaphysical notions of presence.²⁵⁰ While in *CaC*, he uses the analogy of the middle voice to describe his basic theological claim on weakness, writing "The name (of) 'God' is the name of the event that is getting itself called, in the middle voice, in what we call (in response to this event) "God," an event that is being promised, ever soft and weak, ever insistent and incessant."²⁵¹ Or, as he similarly states,

It is what is called for, what gets done, in and under the name of God, often quietly, often under other names, where the grammar is the middle voice. We decline the tug of war about whether God is doing something (theism) or we are (humanism) in order to mediate something that gets-itself-done in the middle voice. Something happens in the middle space between God and us, between the world and us, in the space that opens up in the triangulation of cosmos, God, and us, which stakes out cosmo-theopoetic space."²⁵²

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ *PaT*, 168, 185.

²⁵¹ *CaC*, 33.

²⁵² Ibid., 263.

Finally, when speaking of life in general via a discussion of Silesius's 'The Rose is Without Why,' he writes "Life is a pure gift, a pure gratuitousness, given in the middle voice, where life gets itself given, with neither a pure giver giving, nor a pure recipient made absolutely dependent on this gift, a gift given as an emergent event, a gift emerging eventively as given."²⁵³ In each of these quotations from *CaC*, Caputo's stress on the middle voice is a stress that tries to find a non-indicative way to name our relation to God and indeed to life. This middle approach is one that denies agentic control to any side of the relation—the relation between God and humans, and indeed life and human experience. What is key, then, is the centrality of *relation* as a governing insight that motivates Caputo's use of the middle voice.

In *FoG*, which like *CaC* followed the publication of *IoG*, the middle voice receives similar focus. In *FoG*, though, Caputo provides something like his own definition of the middle voice. Writing on the problem of using strong language to describe God, he writes, "That is why I say we should stick to the middle voice, and always say that a call is *getting itself called* in the traditions and languages we inherit."²⁵⁴ This phrase 'getting itself called' or 'said' is how Caputo understands the middle voice to function. It names what is getting itself called under names like God, justice, hope, and indeed the to-come, without the necessity of a *prius*, *arche*, or presence from which its force arises. It is what is "called for" *in* the promise of the event of the to-come, not *what* calls from these events, but what is called *in* and *under* these events.

Before addressing Caputo's use of the middle voice in *IoG*, and so as not to obscure the direction of this analysis, I am ultimately arguing that Caputo's use of the middle voice, his mystical voice, is fundamentally gesturing at and is an echo of Eckhart's 'I pray God to rid me of God' statement. This prayer of Eckhart's is a prayer undertaken in the middle voice, not its direct

²⁵³ Ibid., 153.

²⁵⁴ *FoG*, 78 (emphasis added).

grammatical form, but its lexical structure is aimed at the 'middle' insofar as it seeks a negation of rigid identity—specifically, as Caputo reads Eckhart's prayer, a negation of metaphysical identity. What the middle voice accomplishes in Caputo's project is a denial of this metaphysical identity as it takes shape hierarchically. In the 'middle voice' Caputo finds a strategy of communication akin to mystics like Eckhart that intends to overcome a dualistic account of the relation between God and the subject. The middle voice, although used differently than Eckhart, is nonetheless understood by Caputo to be accomplishing a similar aim: talking about God without affirming the radical otherness of God. The middle voice in Caputo's use aims at making evident the middle, the *in medias res*, of all things. How then does Caputo accomplish this in *IoG*?

In the first chapter of *IoG* Caputo uses the middle voice theme to understand the relation between existence and insistence when thinking about God. In insistence,

something is calling, or rather something is getting itself called, in and under the name of God, of "God—perhaps," inasmuch as the caller in the call is structurally inaccessible, unidentifiable. It may not be God. It belongs to the very nature of responsibility that the caller of the caller in the call is structurally unknowable, unnamable."²⁵⁵

First, notice Caputo's apophatic gesture here: the name of God signifies an unknowable, an unnamable. ~~phenomenon~~. But I would stress the language of *gesture* rather than an outright affirmation of the apophatic that classically galvanizes mystical thought. The difference is that whereas in mystical thought, for example the theology of pseudo-Dionysius, negative language is deployed as a provisional strategy; it is an affirmation of the inability of finite language to circumscribe the fullness of God, which is a limitation ultimately to be overcome in the *Parousia*. In Caputo's affirmation of the 'unknowable, unnamable' elements contained in the name God, he does not think that this unknowable element is merely a provisional strategy but is constitutive of the name 'God' *as such*. The secret for Caputo, following Derrida, 'goes all the way down.' The

²⁵⁵ *IoG*, 15.

image of God that Caputo wants to affirm is one that echoes this secretive or ‘structurally inaccessible’ reality—there is, in short, an irreducibly aporetic structure to things of which the name God is not immune. Indeed, for Caputo, the name God is itself a signifier of this aporetic structure. And not unlike his appeal to the importance of obligation over ethics, this unknowable element is not a limitation but precisely the condition of possibility for hospitably welcoming this unknown other. We are, Caputo will affirm throughout his career, called to be responsible, to be hospitable, to the coming of the unknown other—who, he notes, “might not be God.’ Consequently, risk is always implicit in relation. We are fully responsible, Caputo notes in an almost Sartrean manner, when we act in spite of the uncertainty that accompanies the unknown other. Hence, as Caputo continues, accepting this radical unknowability “is the only way to assume real responsibility. Once we claim to know “this is God, “this is the law,” “this is Nature,” then we can always plead that we are just obeying orders, just doing our duty, and thereby avoid responsibility.”²⁵⁶ Affirmations regarding the objective status of the Other, Caputo is arguing, denudes us of our obligatory responsibility to the Other by turning our responsibility into a formalized rule. Instead, the call of the Other, Caputo notes, “always takes place in the middle voice, meaning we go too far if we presume to identify the caller. If we are called upon in a radical way, we don’t get to call out the caller.”²⁵⁷ In this way, Caputo’s appeal to the middle voice is an appeal that echoes his notion of weakness: we cannot know the other, we can only know our relation to the other, and strong theories of metaphysics subordinate the other to the sphere of comfort and duty. Caputo, instead, wants a theology that faces up to the risk in things, that denudes us of the supports of a strong metaphysical system that domesticates ‘God’ to a ‘known entity,’

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

and lives instead in the middle, in the in between, in which he finds the condition of possibility for welcoming this other—in all its riskiness.

The above account of the middle voice is given further validation as *IoG* continues. Indeed, much in the same way that the ‘middle voice’ is a way to speak about obligation or God, it is also a way to speak about the structure of the event, all of which is a way to use language that bypasses the assumption that the speaking subject and its spoken object are stable referents. “[S]o I am saying, do not separate the doer from the deed. There are events, events happen, events get themselves said and done, in the middle voice, in and under many names. “Obligation,” for example. Or “God,” for example.”²⁵⁸ Events, too, Caputo stresses, are in the middle voice—they are fundamentally a way of describing activities and phenomena as moments of relation; not a relation between opposites, but relation *as such*. Caputo fleshes this relational dynamic out further when elaborating on the connection between what the middle voice accomplishes and what the name of God harbours:

The name of God is the name of trouble. The insistence of God means that God calls for a response or, since God is not somebody who “does” things like call, it means that the calling takes place in the middle voice, in and under the name of God. *God calls in the middle voice*. The call is perfectly figured in an unexpected and insistent knocking on our door. A disturbing visitation in the night is an uncertainty in which all the sting of “perhaps” is perfectly concentrated, in which the dynamics of “perhaps” and a theology of insistence is both modeled and put in play.²⁵⁹

Caputo continues by noting that hospitality, the obligatory core of his system, rests on the non-foundational non-certainty assumed by the middle voice. We cannot see what comes to our response of what calls; it might be felicitous or threatening. This unknown element as the structure of the event or of the name of God, speaks in the middle voice, which is another name of the uncertainty, risk, and indeed ‘insistence’ of these qualities in all things. “[T]he provocation of God,

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 30.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 39 (emphasis added).

then, takes place in the middle voice, and the only thing that is manifest, the only thing we can see, is the response.”²⁶⁰ The theological example of the proper response to the event is the figure of Martha; her actions comport the response of the unknown other whose presence requires finite and tangible ‘this worldly’ action—indeed, it is the only response that *matters*.²⁶¹ In short, the middle voice is a linguistic strategy that allows Caputo to describe the force of the unknown, without essentializing that force.

I have said repeatedly that God is not the hyperousiological mystery cultivated in negative theology, but a call from I know not where, and that the call is not the work of a Prime Caller but of a calling that gets itself called in the middle voice, in a mundane and this-worldly way, which bears an interesting comparison to his own idea of the auto-formative collective. There is no Caller calling, no entity or agency behind it, and certainly no immaterial being or region of ideality.²⁶²

As with all the terms and issues addressed in the previous chapter, Caputo’s focus on the middle voice stresses not one position or vantage point over against another. As he notes near the conclusion of *IoG*, the middle voice captures the chiasmatic structure of reality which, as I have been stressing, is fundamentally relational, non-oppositional, and ‘weak’. Before I anchor Caputo’s use of the middle voice more specifically within mysticism itself, I want to develop the link between the middle voice, Continental thought, and mysticism more broadly.

The theme of the middle voice is not a dominant theme in the study of mysticism, or of Continental philosophy. And yet scholarship on Eckhart, Hegel, Heidegger, Gadamer, and indeed Continental thought in general, has noted the influence of this mode of communication.²⁶³ In those

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 48.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid., 148-149.

²⁶³ See for example: Kisner, Wendell. 2014. *Ecological Ethics and Living Subjectivity in Hegel's Logic: The Middle Voice of Autopoietic Life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Llewelyn, John. 1991. *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience: A Chiasmic Reading of Responsibility in the Neighborhood of Levinas, Heidegger and Others*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Eberhard, Philippe. 2004. *The Middle Voice in Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Basic Interpretation with Some Theological Implications*. Hermeneutische Untersuchungen Zur Theologie, 45. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck; Lewin, David. 2011. “The Middle Voice in Eckhart and Modern Continental Philosophy.” *Medieval Mystical Theology* 20 (1): 28–46.

studies that do exist on this topic, there is a common appeal to evidence how the middle voice circumvents theories of subject-object relation in favour of a chiasmatic or relational dynamic. For example, John Llewelyn notes,

Both Levinas and Heidegger aim to make their readers sensitive to a dimension outside the categories of active and passive potentiality, beyond *dunamis*, *ergon* and *energeia*, a dimension of non-allergic height in Levinas's case, but also in Heidegger's case a dimension beyond effect and cause, and beyond the quasi-dynamic conflict of wills typical of Newtonian theories of human relations.²⁶⁴

Llewelyn's account of each use of the middle voice, equally applies to Caputo. The middle voice is an attempt to circumvent active and passive categories. It moves beyond language of height, cause and effect, and indeed beyond seeing human action as simply a *parole* of willed conflictual egos.

David Lewin similar observes, quoting Roland Barthes, that the middle voice was formed in ancient languages like Sanskrit, Greek, and Indo-Persian before "the emergence of the subject/object polarity" that dominates modern languages.²⁶⁵ He continues, following Louis Dupre,

The structure of ancient Greek—particularly Aristotelian—thinking, presents human making as a fostering of what nature grants, a bringing-forth of things into their own nature. Thus nature's own intentionality is creatively borne in the event of *poiesis*—or bringing forth.²⁶⁶

The middle voice, Lewin argues in a manner that reflects almost exactly Caputo's use of the middle voice, captures the 'event of *poiesis*' precisely as a 'bringing forth.' This bringing forth understands human action as something that fosters 'what nature grants'—or, as Silesius frames it, 'the rose blooms without why,' which names a process of things collaboratively coming into 'their nature.' The middle voice, as Lewin discusses it, speaks to a worldview not framed around

²⁶⁴ Llewelyn, 210

²⁶⁵ Lewin, 32.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

the modern polarity of subject/object, but to an account of the cosmos that sees “intentionality resid[ing] not only within the interested subject, but the cosmos itself is replete with an order akin to intentionality.”²⁶⁷ In effect, the middle voice speaks to a worldview not immediately subordinate to a dualistic perspective—it speaks to a sort of impersonal intentional unfolding in which what appears, appears without particularizing the force which either compels its unfolding or receives what is disclosed.

Robert Smith, in his *Language, Literature, and Mystics: Pursuing the Middle Voice Through Huxley, Powys, and Wordsworth*, stresses the link between the middle voice and the ‘mystical voice.’ He writes, “if the middle voice declares oneself to be acting upon oneself, and even benefitting oneself, then the ‘mystical’ sense might be that in acting upon oneself one deposes oneself, in a passivity that precedes any dialectic of active and passive; that is, one gives oneself.”²⁶⁸ Smith’s aim is to evidence how certain writers from the English Romantic movement evidence this reflective middle voice, and how that use of the middle voice expresses something like a mystical encounter with the other. His argument is that there is a narrative of ‘self-sacrifice’ that the middle voice in its Romantic guise assumes, which is also the dominant mode of expression in mystical thought. In mystical thought, Smith argues, the subject negates themselves via discourses like the middle voice with the aim of making evident the always already existing relational link between the subject and the transcendent.²⁶⁹ In negating the assertive intentionality of the willed subject, in other words, the mystic makes space for or evidences God’s presence, to, as he notes, put oneself in a “passivity that precedes any dialectic of active and passive.”²⁷⁰ Smith’s parallel between the middle voice and the mystical voice is one that finds, in both, a desire to

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 344

negate firm boundaries, foundations, or distinctions between actor and acted, subject and object. Both 'let go' of the need to stabilize a linguistic referent in the chain of signifiers that organize speech. In writers like Huxley or Wordsworth, Smith detects not simply a reiteration of the middle voice, but a reinvention of it for the Romantic period. Citing Barthes, Lewin writes, "One cannot invent new voices, [Barthes] says. 'One tries to rethink the lost category and to take it as a metaphorical model.' And one multiplies the field of application and usage."²⁷¹ Caputo too rethinks the 'lost category' of the middle voice; it is the 'metaphorical model' that he deploys to rethink what it means to image God and our relationship to God in modernity—that is, a non-metaphysical, non-hierarchical, materialist, praxis-oriented theology.

A point evidenced by the above is the link between the middle voice and the negation of willed subjective action. As suggested, this link shows the connection between *Gelassenheit* and the use of the middle voice. Several scholars have noted this link. One area in which the link between *Gelassenheit* and the middle voice has been explored, is in Heidegger's work. For example, Ian Alexander Moore, in his *Gelassenheit, the Middle Voice, and the Unity of Heidegger's Thought*, argues that "Heidegger's appreciation of the middle voice stands as a significant contribution to efforts to think outside of metaphysical binaries such as activity and passivity."²⁷² In Heidegger's thought, the middle voice shows itself in certain expressions that came to dominate his later career. For example, "*die Welt weltet*," "*Das Ding dingt*," "*Zeitlichkeit zeitigt*," "and, not least, words derived from *Lassen* such as *Gelassenheit*."²⁷³ Smith's analysis unpacks the development of the use of the middle voice in Heidegger's project, which I will largely

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Smith, 27.

²⁷³ Ibid., 29-30.

sidestep here. However, some key developments are important to note. For example, in a lecture Smith gave in 1929 entitled *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, Heidegger,

describes these more ontic relations to beings in terms of middle-voiced letting-be. It is on the basis of the primordial projection of being that we are able to encounter or be addressed by entities within the world as meaningful. While it may seem that turning our attention to beings is an activity or form of spontaneity, Heidegger contends that it is rather 'in its genuine essence precisely a letting-encounter [*Begegnenlassen*],' which he glosses as both 'a peculiar passivity' and 'in a certain way spontaneity, but one which, in terms of intentionality [intentional], has the character of taking-in [*Hinnehmens*], of receptivity'.²⁷⁴

For Heidegger, the middle voice represents a sort of spontaneous reception of Being that (in his discourse, at least) lets Being be. Or, as Smith frames it, Heidegger is "at once letting ourselves be encountered and letting ourselves encounter, in between, or rather before the separation into, subject and object."²⁷⁵

A further example of the middle voice which relates to *Gelassenheit*, and indeed Heidegger's reimagining of transcendence, is *apophainesthai* or 'appearing,' 'presencing,' or 'bringing into presence.'²⁷⁶ As Moore notes, the "philosophical task" of Heidegger's project is to mine into the history and meanings of terms like *apophainesthai* to hear in their original use a relational attitude to Being that can be repeated in modernity.²⁷⁷ Quoting from Heidegger, Moore writes of "'a peculiar releasement [*Gelassenheit*], in which beings in themselves come to word,' and in which being itself becomes question worthy."²⁷⁸ In Heidegger's project, which echoes in Caputo's, the aim,

is to let such transcendence show itself of its own accord. As this originary transcendence is middle-voiced, so must be our philosophical approach to it. Recalling the middle-voiced language of *apophainesthai* in *Being and Time*, Heidegger says that, '[Transcendence] is 'to show itself,' not like a present-at-hand, describable painting, but rather to bring

²⁷⁴ Ibid, 31.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, 32.

²⁷⁶ Ibid, 33.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

transcendence into a phenomenon, to bring it to show itself, means first of all to let it form itself [*sich hi/den lassen*] in the ground of its essence'.²⁷⁹

As Moore continues, "To let something show itself is not to force it into appearance, nor simply to wait passively for it to do so, but to bring or help it along, to participate in, but not to determine, the process, the middle-voiced happening of its self-revelation."²⁸⁰ Caputo repeats Heidegger's basic application of the middle voice via the theme of *Gelassenheit*. He also wants to find a way to let that which appears to show itself. However, whereas Heidegger's use of the middle voice and *Gelassenheit* aim at a recovery of an original, Caputo's use of them aims at felicitously engaging the future to-come.

In Heidegger's use of the middle voice and the ontological suppositions that follow from it, Moore argues, there are neither subjects or objects.²⁸¹ Instead, "there is only the event from which they issue and in which they are implicated. The middle voice of *Gelassenheit* is precisely one way in which to express such an event."²⁸² Events happen; letting go of a binary viewpoint, via the middle voice, is a way to let that which reveals itself to reveal itself without the intentional error of an assumed metaphysical transcendence. Lewin echoes Moore and sees within Heidegger's use of language an echo of Eckhart's use of the middle voice which is precisely not a negation of subjectivity or subject intentionality, but instead voices something between activity and passivity that orients us to the "genuine mystery" of things.²⁸³ What is given expression by the middle voice, addresses "the ground from which the subject-object structure emerges."²⁸⁴ That is, in using the middle voice Heidegger, like Eckhart, is not seeking to negate subjective will nor the object that the will desires, so much as he is trying to indicate "something that appropriates us, as

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 39.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Lewin, 37.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 41.

much as something we appropriate.”²⁸⁵ Lewin’s argument is that what Heidegger expresses in his use of the middle voice, is the linguistic form of mystical contemplation.²⁸⁶ Lewin writes,

What does unite Heidegger and Eckhart more clearly here is the participative dimension of what manifests in the realm of human existence. If, like Heidegger, we attend to what gives itself to be thought, then we will, as thinkers, be both active and passive. This is the mode of contemplation where true philosophy, in its participative guise, responds to the call of being, a call at once philosophical and theological.²⁸⁷

In short, by overcoming the language of subjectivity and objectivity, in which what is known is known via the act of an intending subject toward an intended object, we become aware of, or sink deeper into, the ground upon which this dualism unfolds. This ground, what Heidegger calls the Open or Eckhart calls *das Grund*, is both the in between upon which these binaries unfold as well as indicating a primal origin that contemplative thought aligns with.

The use of the middle voice then, is a linguistic strategy whose aim is to inculcate in the reader a desire beyond desire. At its core this must be understood as a mystical claim; it seeks to make obvious the always already state of unification that persists between the subject and the object—between the individual and God. The middle voice clarifies how the binary ‘subject/object’ is an accident of language and perception. For Eckhart, Heidegger, and indeed Caputo, the middle voice is what Denys Turner would call a linguistic performative strategy whose causal outcome is the ‘recognition’ of this unified reality. But as noted above, there is a difference in Caputo’s use of the middle voice, and what it is he understands it to be signifying, when compared to Eckhart and Heidegger. For them, the middle voice aims at a recovery of a primal origin whose truth is evidenced via the signifying capacity of the middle voice—a primal non-binary origin which can be *heard* via the use of the middle voice. Caputo’s project, as has been stressed throughout this study, fundamentally rejects this appeal to a more pure and primal origin.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 42.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 44.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

And yet, Caputo's appeal to the *Unvordenklichkeit* in *SoG*, and other latter texts, does reference a sort of originary ontological structure that precedes thought and indeed experience. What makes Caputo's appeal to the *Unvordenklichkeit*, or indeed to Derrida's *différance* and, we might add, Tillich's 'ultimate concern,' is his commitment to thinking the future. The middle voice for Caputo speaks to an in-between differential 'unthought' *Open* upon which or in which or through which a ground of meaning arises. But this ground for Caputo is not a foundational *arche* or *principium*; it is not the primal origin that his 'mystical element' speaks to. Caputo is here anti-foundationalist, he denies the primacy of origins. Instead, the to-come, the future, the temporal unknown that always already lay on our horizon, is as generative, structural, and consequential as any origin. And yet Caputo is also not prioritizing the future as itself a new *prius*; he is not assigning the future a more important status compared to the past. Instead, and via the middle voice, what Caputo's project stresses is the value of the in-between. *This is Caputo's mystical element; it is the element of his thought that values the between as the generative place from which we live grow and find our meaning.* In the middle voice, in what I am calling, following Denys Turner, the performative linguistic resources of its structure, is found a means to indicate this in-between, relational, middle space that Caputo continuously returns to from *ME* to *SoG*. This space, this moment (*Augenblick*), is tenuous, momentary, weak—it lacks the foundation of the *arche* and it denies certainty about the to-come. For Caputo it is precisely from this in between middle space as momentary, fleeting, and transient that its relational value emerges. In the tenuous present moment is where finitude is magnified and its reality is intensified—not because this moment is a part of a greater whole, but simply because the moment happens. The moment, Silisius' Rose, is without why—it blooms because it blooms. In letting go of the need for metaphysical supports and accepting the weakness of the (finite) moment, revealed via the linguistic resources of the middle voice, is opened up

something akin to what Caputo might call a 'transcendent experience.' This transcendence, as I will unpack in my concluding chapter, is not a vision of a metaphysical truth, but a way of more fully experiencing finitude.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

One of the leitmotifs of Caputo's project, as has been shown throughout this study, is his desire to overcome our reliance upon metaphysics. In Caputo's earlier work, this desire cleaved more closely to Heidegger's anti-metaphysical aims. Metaphysical thought is compelled by a desire for safety, it takes the form of a flight from the finite. Whereas Caputo reads Heidegger to be arguing that the task of philosophy was to fully confront finitude without the guardrails of metaphysical speculation, Caputo himself argues something similar about the task of theology itself: to think of God, and what it means to be faithful to that God, without the intrusion of speculative metaphysics. Here the paradoxical aspect of Caputo's project comes to the fore, he wants a non-metaphysical account of a metaphysically derived entity and process, while still wanting an analysis of finitude that takes into account the fullness of a metaphysical poetics. In short, he wants us to see finitude decoupled from its mythical and metaphysical supports, while still finding in metaphysics something salvageable and valuable for the human experience. This valuable aspect of religion is the mystical element. In the mystical element, and indeed in mysticism itself, Caputo finds a compromise to the above tension: it speaks to a tradition steeped in and shaped by a host of irreducible metaphysical assumptions, while simultaneously being a tradition that he argues is subversive of metaphysics. This subversive quality shows itself in apophatic thought, in which the God imaged by metaphysics is denied predication. And although classical apophatic thought understands this limitation to be provisional, Caputo sees in the history of the reception of apophaticism, a movement towards non-metaphysical thought—especially as it takes shape in

modernity. A key thinker in this history is Meister Eckhart whose “I pray God to rid me of God” voices the subversiveness of the apophatic tradition: not only can God not be spoken of, but the very image of a metaphysical God ‘out there’ needs to be abandoned. But again, whereas Eckhart understands this abandonment (i.e., *Gelassenheit*) to be provisional, Caputo hears in what Eckhart is saying a radically anti-metaphysical claim. In Caputo’s appeal to weakness, the event, hospitality, and indeed the mystical element is found a similar inclination as the one that drove Eckhart, he prays to God to rid himself of God.

Unlike Eckhart, however, Caputo’s prayer is addressed not to God, but to the name God—that is, to any name that carries with it what Tillich would call ultimate concern. In these names, in their linguistic structure and performative use, is located something—an excess—that Caputo wants his readers to hear. He wants his readers, in short, to be put into the position of the accusative with respect to the excess that names like God evoke. What the above analysis shows is that it is in language, its written and spoken forms, that Caputo directs his reader’s attention—as, it is in language wherein the name God has currency. Indeed, two basic linguistic suppositions galvanize Caputo’s project: (1) language has the capacity to go beyond itself and signify what was classically understood to be metaphysical heights, but, for Caputo, signifies excess *as such*. On this point, as was discussed in chapter 4, Caputo’s appeal to the theme of excess is a theme derived from the Continental tradition. (2) Language has the capacity to name the finite and our experience of the finite denuded of this appeal to excess—metaphysical or otherwise. Caputo’s project can be understood as an attempt to harness the problematic aspects of metaphysical thought and its linguistic outputs by subordinating its drives to the demands of finitude. Hence, not unlike the basic linguistic presuppositions that organize Luther’s *Heidelberg Disputations*, Caputo is suspicious of the ornaments of language and their capacity to blind us to the things themselves.

Like Luther, Caputo is suspicious of theologians who use language that is, as C.S. Lewis wrote, “breathed through silver,” to speak about metaphysical and theological truths while ignoring the mundane reality of the Cross.¹ Unlike Luther, Caputo does not think that a return to the Bible alone or that any belief in a return to a truer and more primal origin can amend this problem. Instead, for Caputo, it is the future as a repetition of a past that never was—and indeed a future that we cannot see coming—that animates his thought. The religion and religious worldview that emerges from this claim is one that names and confronts the future to-come denuded of the supports of metaphysical language—at its core, this is the aim of Caputo’s work.

In this way, Caputo’s project is an echo of Hegel’s. Like Hegel, and unlike Kant, Caputo does not want a rational critique of religion—he does not want the acid of reason poured over religion and religious devotion. He does not want a rational deconstruction of the irrational forces of religion so as to produce an ethically amenable religious worldview that coheres with modern advancements. Instead, and in an echo of the often-quoted line from Wagner’s *Parsifal* “The wound can be healed only by the spear that smote it,”² Caputo also cleaves to the notion that in religious language and expression is to be found a solution to the problems instantiated by religious language and expression. Caputo’s critique of religion is simultaneously met with a celebration of religion. In the history of the Christian religion, in its social, cultural, and theological developments, are to be found moments of what he calls the “poetics of life.”³ In his classical, medieval, reformation, enlightenment, modern, and post-modern discussions of the religious Caputo wants his readers to hear a general affirmation of experience and life. While not denying

¹ Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Their Friends* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 43.

² E.g., Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 171.

³ *IoG*, 225, 234.

the problems of these earlier religious models, indeed his *oeuvre* is a sustained critique of the problematic aspects of these systems, he is nonetheless guided by the motivation to think through its *entirety*—the good and bad, rational and irrational, ethical and unethical, as total components of the human experience. For Caputo, religion is a human phenomenon that addresses human needs, speaks about and to human fears, and motivates human action. As he is quite clear about in his writing and in his lectures, the study of religion is a Humanities venture.⁴ And part of being a human for Caputo, a key motivation for human action and drive, is a desire *beyond* desire. To be *in the world* is to have a desire to go *beyond the world*; finitude is marked by a desire for infinitude. In the mystical element of religion Caputo finds a way to express that desire but without the aid, support, or suppositions of a metaphysical worldview.

In short, Caputo wants transcendence without a transcendental or a transcendent. There is no metaphysical *a priori* structure devoid of empirical constraints, no transcendent that is separate from what it transcends, and no *place* to transcend to. For him, it is finite relation *all the way down*. Indeed, what Caputo's system is allergic to at its core is any desire that makes a metaphysical *Other*—i.e., as place, space, or entity—*more real* than our finite existence. He wants to dislodge our addiction to the beyond so as to signal the virtues found in the present and the factual. But again, Caputo is not like a traditional critic of religion, he does not argue that we must abandon our religious sensibility. For him, its desiring, phantasmatic, creative, and sustaining aspects can be productive. But these religious forces need, as it were, to be shorn of their metaphysical and speculative abandon. This approach reflects Caputo's style and sensibility as a philosopher and theologian more broadly. His approach is pragmatic, tempered, and compromising. He is not fundamentally *against* religion, nor is he fundamentally *for* religion. As with the theological and

⁴ Caputo, *Lecture 13*, 44:15-44:43.

philosophical themes and claims that galvanize his work in general, he aims to occupy a middle ground. Like Derrida, he advocates for a “religion without religion;” like Bonhoeffer, he wants a “religionless Christianity.” That said, and not unlike both these thinkers and their statements on religion, it is not entirely clear what a “religionless religion” would look like for Caputo. With that said, and before reflecting on the mystical element more particularly, I want to consider what I take to be Caputo’s religionless Christianity.

Aside from the obvious critique of metaphysics as perhaps *the* chief candidate for a religionless Christianity which galvanizes Caputo’s thought, I want to suggest that Caputo’s key insight into theology and the status of the religious in modernity turns on *the future*. The future as the to-come, as the unknown *X* that always already haunts us in the present by its structurally unknowable element is, as has been stressed throughout this study, central to Caputo’s thought. The influence of this focus is Derridean, as discussed in chapter 5, 6, and 7. And although Caputo is certainly influenced by Derrida’s focus on the future, I think we need to be sensitive to Caputo’s own religious and indeed theological use of this idea. By religious, I mean that Caputo finds in the future a translation of the messianic principle that he understands to be fundamental to the religious imagination of Christianity. For him, Christ is *the* to-come *as such*. This conceptual parallel between the future and the Christ is the space within which Caputo’s key theological insights emerge. In the future Caputo finds a theological model that speaks to a beyond; but a beyond whose emergence is factual, empirical, and worldly—this worldly focus, as noted in my analysis of *AE*, emerges from our social obligation to what St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:28 called the *ta me onta*. Nonetheless, Caputo treats the future as the structure of the unknown which he argues is fundamental to the religious imagination, while still distancing himself from metaphysical language and its *a priori* supports.

Caputo's future oriented theological claims, I argue then, is a way for him to think about what it means to *do* theology in the present. That is, Caputo's futurity is a way to extend theology, or how he understands its communicative and linguistic force, to the contemporary theologian who takes up his challenge in modernity. As Caputo writes in *IoG*,

I am dreaming of a new species of theologians, of theologians to come, theologians of the "perhaps," a new society of friends of a dangerous "perhaps." I would like to think we are, perhaps, already a little like these theologians we see coming and that they will be a little like us. But, of course, since we cannot see them coming and do not know what they will be like, we can only call, come.⁵

Hence, Caputo is not only thinking about the future in theological terms, but he is also considering the future of theology itself. Like his notion of the event, the theologian of the future is focused on the to-come. However, unlike classical theologians who also anticipate the eschatological event of Christ's arrival, Caputo does not envision the to-come as a restoration of an original *arche*, *principium*, or *pleroma*. As he argued in *RH*, Caputo's system is not based on the idea that repetition repeats a past origin, but rather that it creates as it moves forward. Caputo's concept of religionless Christianity is primarily future oriented, and so is the theologian to-come that he envisages.

Caputo's focus on the future, though, is not to imply that he has no appreciation or reverence for tradition, the past, or history; throughout his works he stresses the value of those themes. As noted above, he argues that without the constraints and aids of tradition, his own radical and deconstructive claims would be moot. However, unlike classical Christian thought and classical theological models, Caputo is not guided by the presumption that a lost origin will reemerge in the future to come. As noted in my discussion of *DH*, this is not simply a theological ideal for Caputo, it is also a philosophical one. Caputo distrusts any ideology that anchors its truth

⁵ *IoG*, 3.

claim in an originary experience that, though lost now, will be made whole again. I argue that this viewpoint of Caputo's is religionless insofar as one key element of religion is that it is a system of thought that values past key moments—what Mircea Eliade called a “time of origin”⁶—and the belief and expectation of a return *now*, or in the future, of that origin. Caputo's Christianity is a Christianity that denies the primacy of one specific original event, while still seeing in its history *events* that repeat a dreamed origin that casts that dream expectantly into the future. But, and this is key, Caputo does not think that that origin is more true than the to-come. Indeed, the to-come, or the hope in the to-come, is what gives value to the past for Caputo—not the other way around.

When we consider the above in light of Caputo's use of mysticism, we can see more clearly how his use of the future impacts his use of the mystical. As was noted in chapter 3, the study of mysticism is organized by various models and approaches. A dominant, or indeed *the* dominant model, as Caputo explains it, is the perennialist one. There, mysticism and the mystic are understood to be speaking to a perennial truth that unifies the various historical expressions of mysticism. Perennialism assumes a primal metaphysical order that the mystic taps into via their mystical practice. This perennial origin is imaged as providing the foundation and criteria by which to engage with, evaluate, and advocate for, mystical thought. Caputo's system is, needless to say, fundamentally anti-perennialist. As was shown throughout this analysis, he denies the necessity of grounding truth claims in an origin in order to understand the value of said truth claim. Hence, we might argue that Caputo has a religionless mysticism in the same way that he has a religionless Christianity, though, to reiterate, the key factor in this religionlessness is not simply his rejection of metaphysics and origins, but his high valuation of the future.

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1987), 68; for a discussion of Eliade's notion of time see: Daniel Fishley, 'Time of Origins Charles Taylor, Mircea Eliade, and Sacred Time,' in *Arc: The Journal of the School of Religious Studies* 45 (2017): 47-66.

To state matters clearly: Caputo's mysticism is anti-perennialist; it fundamentally denies an essence to the mystical, and thus denies that the mystic taps into a primal mystical principle when engaged in their practice. For Caputo, for whom context and correlation is irreducible, there are no perennial truths—there is nothing, as Derrida would argue, outside of its context. But, although Caputo denies an essence to religion and therefore the mystical, he does not deny that ideas have a history, and that historical accretions develop around an understanding of an idea which does allow for generalized statements to occur about said phenomenon.⁷ In this way, although Caputo denies that a perennialist force compels the development of the mystical and unifies mysticism as an activity ordered by an essentialist structure, he nonetheless does argue that something goes on in the event that occurs under the name of mysticism that is fundamental to its expression. If he did not hold to this latter position, he would not engage texts by Eckhart, Silesius, or Augustine with the seriousness that he does. He would not engage these texts, their authors, and the implications of their claims with the interpretive intention of translating their ideas into a modern context. But because he does find a commonality in mystical expression, e.g. apophaticism, and because he does hold that mystical claims made by Eckhart, e.g., *Gelassenheit*, can still be productively applied to modern tensions, then he does see a historical thread that binds these activities. But he does not assume that a perennialist force unifies these themes. Instead, as I will explain shortly, it is in language that he finds something like a historical unity to the mystical.

However, before I turn to the linguistic suppositions of Caputo's use of mysticism and the theme of futurity, I want to identify an issue that has been raised in my analysis of Caputo and explore its problematic as I see it. First, to state the issue clearly: what is the result, or the outcome, of attending to the mystical element in religion? That is, what is the state or the experience that

⁷ Caputo, *Lecture 13*, 45:45-46:00.

emerges for the individual who follows Caputo's directive regarding the mystical element of religion? For someone who lets-things-go in a detached way, who understands that phenomena blooms because it blooms, who overcomes the binary of God as an entity 'out there' and the Cartesian subject as utterly distinct from that entity. In classical mysticism, galvanized as it is by a perennialist claim, the contemplative vision that arises in the mind's eye of the devotee *necessarily* results from their practice of, e.g., *Gelassenheit*. As was noted in chapter 2, there is a presumed economy of relation between the mystical activity, the force which sustains said activity, and the causal outcome of said activity. But Caputo's system does not appeal to a metaphysical order that compels this causal necessity; there is no perennial truth that organizes his understanding of *Gelassenheit* as a consequence of deploying this mystical insight. And yet his advocacy of these ideas is generated by the assumption that their deployment will result in something like a consistently beneficial outcome for those who undertake its call. Otherwise stated, there is a prescriptive undercurrent to Caputo's mystical element: *we are better off* if we are detached, if we let go, and if we see that things bloom because they bloom without an appeal to a strong metaphysical support. Caputo, then, must be understood as prescriptively using mystical themes in his work. There is, fundamentally, a value to mystical thought that his entire oeuvre, from *ME* to *SoG*, is advocating for.

But again, and to press this point further, what is the *outcome* that occurs in the life of the individual who takes up Caputo's prescription? I will provide some tentative suggestions here, as I do yet not have a firm or clear proposal. First, Caputo cannot be arguing that mystical thought generates an experience that is subordinate to or emergent from a revelatory vision from *beyond*. Like Tillich, Caputo's correlational assumptions deny that thought arrives at conclusions from data supplied by the intrusion of a kerygmatic truth that derives from a metaphysical Other. Instead, for

Caputo, the outcome of inculcating mystical themes, practices, or ideas such as *Gelassenheit* must be the correlative of a finite relation. That is, a set of finite actions or dispositions lead to the positive outcome that he sees occurring from *Gelassenheit*. I argued in chapter 7, in my analysis of Caputo's use of *Gelassenheit*, that one way to understand the outcome of adhering to what he calls the mystical element mirrors how he describes the actions of the *phronimoi* in *AE*. The *phronimoi* is the Aristotelian subject imbued with the virtue of *arete*. What Caputo sees as valuable in the model of the *phronimoi* is that they are the ones who respond adequately to those tensions where there is no rule that exists which can be applied to solve said tensions. In short, Caputo's emphasis on the *phronimoi* focuses on their presumed capacity to respond to those scenarios that have not been anticipated by the status quo.

In *AE*, Caputo argues that this capacity of the *phronimoi* to respond fully and adequately to unanticipated events is the ethical disposition required in our postmodern world. For Caputo at least, the postmodern experience is without the supports of any ethical, metaphysical, or indeed social system that can provide formalizable rules which can then be appealed to as a standard or criteria when determining one's actions. Instead, we need to detach or let go of the assumption that overarching metanarratives supply us with ethical, philosophical, and indeed religious clarity. Like the *phronimoi*, we need to understand that we are continually being confronted with cases or events whose novelty resists formalizability. We thus need to let go of the urge to make of a particular moment a case of a universal; that way, although safe, fails to meet the reality of our concrete finite existence, untethered as it is from metaphysical supports that provide security. In Caputo's system, Aristotle's *phronimoi* meets Eckhart's *Gelassenheit* in that both detach from an absolute standpoint, both recognize the value of an unprogrammed response to finitude, disconnected from the supports of a metanarrative that, although secure, fails to fully meet the needs of the present

moment. Caputo's *Gelassenheit*, I am suggesting then, inculcates in the mind of the subject who follows Caputo's prescriptions, the ability to calmly respond to the needs of the present without appealing to a system, metaphysical or otherwise, that makes of the present moment a mere case of a universal. There are no universals for Caputo, no guardrails by which to navigate what James called the "blooming buzzing confusion" of finitude.⁸ There is the moment (*Augenblick*) in which the future, the unknown event/events on the horizon, presses upon us. We cannot formalize rules that provide a secure response to this futurity. Instead, what we can do is detach from the metaphysical, ideological, and mythical supports that seek to provide rules for the unknown. In detachment, then, is found security.

What then is the outcome of the mystical element for Caputo? It is the detached attitude that emerges in the individual who understands that finitude is unprogrammable, and the belief that the best way to navigate this unformalizable reality is a sort of calm demeanor that meets the demands of finitude, not by advocating new strong ideological supports, but by letting go of the controlling desire that seeks to subordinate the messiness of life to the comfort of rules and systems. This, then, is not a revelatory insight emergent from a practice aligned with a perennial truth. Instead, it is a sort of practical response to the postmodern situation as described by Lyotard when he argued that postmodernism is "incredulity to metanarratives."⁹ Caputo's entire philosophical and theological claims can be seen as organized in response to that basic philosophical claim. *Caputo wants a philosophy and a theology that is strong enough to face the world denuded of its classical metaphysics, while being weak enough that it does not result in new metaphysical absolutes.* *Gelassenheit* fulfills this need, in part because *Gelassenheit* is more

⁸ William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 488.

⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

performative than it is metaphysical—a position I noted when discussing Martin Hägglund's critique of Caputo. That is, its truth is shown not in the theoretical or indeed theological assumptions that underlay it, but in the outcomes of the individuals who live it—following Eckhart, this is the distinction given between a *Lesemeister* who intellectualizes and conceptualizes abstract truths and a *Lebemesier* who lives said truths. Caputo wants his readers to live these truths.

There is, then, a positive outcome of adhering to the mystical element according to Caputo's system: a lived clarity emergent in the everyday experience of the individual who strives to detach and live without why. This is the underlying transformational assumption to his use of the mystical element: the non-calculative thought of the mystical element of religion, when lived authentically, impacts upon every aspect of one's life. And yet Caputo's system is not a Pollyannaish retreat into hopeful and idealistic supports. He is not arguing that a proper inculcation of the mystical element of religion will, of necessity, result in a positive outcome—risk is always ingredient to experience for Caputo. *Hence, the mystical element of religion is that element that allows one to productively confront any activity, risky or not, without the desire to subordinate that engagement to the security of a system.*

Human action uncluttered by the intentions of a consciousness impacted by metaphysical speculation is the aim of Caputo's mystical element. A sort of response without restraint which is nonetheless guided by a type of wisdom that thrives in novelty. This response is productive in our modern context where all that we have are novel situations which require novel responses. And although I have stressed that Caputo is not advocating an essential structure to the mystical element's unfolding, a lack that complicates the outcome that Caputo argues follows from inculcating the mystical element, something of a clarity of understanding exists that *necessarily* follows from living its injunction. As suggested above, this necessity is a historical and lived one,

not an essentialist and conceptual one. It sees in the habits of communication that have accreted over centuries of thought about the mystical as capable of generating certain outcomes. The historical basis of this claim for Caputo is linguistic in structure. Mystical texts and thought speak, write, and communicate in a style of thinking that is performative in outcome, that is, it incentivizes certain actions and behavior over others, as well as linguistic; it accomplishes that incentive via patterns of speech and writing.

With the above claims in mind, I want to conclude by arguing that (a) Caputo's approach to mysticism mirror's Denys Turner approach to mysticism, what Nelstrop calls the performative linguistic type or model of the mystical; and (b) that Caputo's use of futurity in the mystical suggests a departure from classical uses of the mystical. I will suggest that scholars in mystical studies, and those who study the ideational development of Continental philosophy, gain in their understanding of how the mystical has come to be used and analyzed in modernity, if they see the distinctive approach taken by Continental thinkers such as Caputo. And although this study has not been able to unpack the wider uses of the mystical by others in the Continental philosophical tradition, Caputo, to my mind, is representative of a larger trend in Continental thought wherein religious themes such as the mystical are deployed, both in continuity with their traditional uses and expressions while at the same time representing a radical departure in how those themes are expressed.

Turner's focus on language, as was noted in the introduction and in chapter 3, is largely driven by a critique of the focus on experience in mystical studies. He argues that the modern association which links mysticism with an exaggerated existential experience—i.e., access to a dimension beyond experience that is nonetheless experientially *felt*—is just that, a modern association. In texts like *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* and *The*

Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism, Turner argues that what galvanized mystical thinking in its medieval and classical expressions, was two things: a belief regarding the absolute otherness of God and the capacity of metaphors and allegories to productively gesture at that otherness.¹⁰ In part, this tension was furthered by the unitive assumption that organizes mystical thought, namely, the possibility of union between the subject and God. This presumed potential unity was complicated by the theological claim that sees God or the Godhead as utterly distinct from the creature. In this metaphysical economy, metaphor was understood to be a means through which this division could be, if not overcome, blurred. As Nelstrop notes when remarking on Turner's discussion of Bernard Clairvaux's commentary on the *Song of Songs*, "Turner argues that this is why medieval authors related this book to the soul's union with God... They saw it as a resource to discuss the otherness of God and the problems posed by trying to relate to that which is completely different from oneself."¹¹ Metaphor is understood as a linguistic strategy aimed at quelling the absolute difference that separates God from the world. Metaphor, like apophatic language, operates on the economy of the paradox and seeks to extend, rather than limit or negate, the impossibility of the finite/infinite relation. Indeed, as Nelstrop rightly notes, Turner understands the aim of these linguistic strategies to "bring the reader to a point of silence, as language collapses."¹²

The approach to writing that motivates Turner is reflective of the monastic approach to literature which flourished in the early Middle Ages. This approach was examined and defined by Jean Leclerc in his *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*. Leclercq's heuristic divides the medieval approach to textual analysis into the scholastic and the monastic. In the former,

¹⁰ Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1995).

¹¹ Nelstrop, 133.

¹² Ibid., 15.

commentary is directed towards the mind and to the intelligence—clarity and logical cohesion is thus central; in contrast, the latter's aim was "to touch the heart rather than instruct the mind."¹³ Otherwise stated, monastic theology, which is the contextual basis for Eckhart, sought union with God via an approach to scripture that stressed a sort of admiration or overvaluation of words and their formal arrangement. This rather than the scholastic approach in which speculation on the logical integrity and the internal coherence of the meaning of the words and statements being analysed was stressed.¹⁴ Leclerc argues that the monastic style is typified by theologians like Bernard of Clairvaux whose writing and analysis was infused with a stress on adoration.¹⁵ This reverential attitude impacted, for example, liturgical practices where, Leclercq notes, "grammar was elevated to the rank of an eschatological fact."¹⁶ That is, in the intense focus and devotion given to scripture and commentary that was developed by monastic theologians, grammar, rhetoric, and emphatic stylistic forms of writing were understood as potentially transformative insofar as the text's excessive style could lead the mind into union with God.¹⁷ Unlike the scholastic approach that sought coherent logical formula extracted from the obvious meaning of a word—Anselm's "God is that than more than which nothing greater can be conceived," for example¹⁸—the monastic approach sought participation with the divine via the pleasurable symmetry of language. Here, a style of writing emerged in the monastic approach that valued ornate sentences, beautiful imagery, desirous themes, paradoxical claims, and apophatic assertions, all as means by which to lead the minds eye up to the divine. Stated otherwise, in the

¹³ Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982) 107.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 281-283.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 293.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 308.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 308.

¹⁸ Anselm, *St. Anselm's Proslogion with A Reply on Behalf of the Fool*, trans. M. J. Charlesworth (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 137.

monastic approach, the text became an immanent sign of the desired potential for one's unity with God.

Turner's focus, although less experientially focused than Leclerc's, argues the same fundamental point regarding the generative view given to the text in this period. For medieval thinkers like Eckhart, according to Turner, the focus on allegory and apophatics "serves the same purpose as negative language and literary devices such as paradox—it points to the unknowability of God; God who is so different that it is not possible to even distinguish God from ourselves because we just do not know where to begin."¹⁹ For Leclerc, too, language and the written word in this period was understood to evoke the feeling that this theological claim seeks to evidence.

Regardless of whether or not one fully accepts the above claims made regarding the nature, interpretation, and understanding of the written word in the textual tradition of the Middle Ages, what should be taken seriously are the claims being made about the centrality of language as *the* means by which to express the paradoxical relationship between the finite and infinite at that period. Indeed, even if Turner's basic claim is challenged, i.e., that mediaeval exegetes were not as concerned with heightened experiences in the same way that modern mysticism has stressed that theme, his stress on the use of language as a spiritual technique aimed at evidencing the otherness of God, is helpful both for understanding its mediaeval uses and its modern development. Likewise, Leclerc's study, though certainly a romanticized account of the use of texts in the Middle Ages, is illuminative for its focus on the ways in which strategies of reading and analysis were developed by monastic theologians with the aim of inculcating a sense of unity with the transcendent. In Caputo's project, I am suggesting, the valuation of the text and rhetorical techniques like apophaticism or the devotion given to the ornamentation of the written word and

¹⁹ Nelstrop, 134.

the stress on paradox that was developed in the monastic theological tradition, is extended into postmodernity. Caputo is heir to these medieval texts, the monastic commentaries, and their authors. In both his approach to Continental philosophy and his religious and mystical focus can be found this high valuation given to the expression of language in paradoxical and transformative ways.

In light of the above, I want to argue that this high valuation given to language is helpful for understanding how the Continental philosophical tradition has interpreted and understood mysticism more broadly, and it is helpful for understanding how thinkers like Caputo have engaged and used the mystical element more specifically. Caputo's entire project, I argue, is one that values the playful aspect of language insofar as it reveals an as yet unexpected dimension of thought and experience—this playful aspect marks, for example, Caputo's writing style in texts like *PaT*. This valuation of language is similar to Turner whose own understanding of mysticism turns on “the dialectical play between saying and unsaying” or, as Eckhart would frame it, between praying to God and praying to be rid of that God.²⁰ Turner's own antiperennialist position marries Caputo's antiperennialism. Both see the underlying intention of mystical discourse to be a presently occurring experiential disruption in which the current moment is interrupted by paradoxes expressed in language, and whose outcome is the hopeful invitation to the unforeseen to-come. Though, I argue that even in Turner's account, which certainly aims at being anti-perennialist, a type of perennialist expectation marshals his notion of the mystical. As, for Turner, the aim of paradoxical language about God is to bring language “to a point of collapse” so that all finite attempts to name the fullness of God are seen as insufficient.²¹ Otherwise stated, Turner's understands the apophatic or the paradoxical elements of language as ultimately provisional

²⁰ Nelstrop, 199.

²¹ Ibid.

attempts by finite actors to name the infinite. This is shown by the dialectical play of language in which the inability of language to name the fullness of God shows, paradoxically, the fullness of God. For example, Nelstrop, commenting on Turner's approach to language as exemplified by his understanding of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, writes that for Turner,

The Cloud-Author overcomes the separation between intellect and will by retaining a dialectical process similar to that which Turner identifies in the writings of Pseudo-Denys. He suggests that *The Cloud*-Author does so by means of an active strategy of image negation that leads the soul to 'unknow'... This process involves both the extensive use of image and symbolism, and its self-negation. Turner asserts that images and symbols thus come to perform a similar function to the interplay of cataphatic and apophatic statements that we find in earlier mystical texts.²²

Turner thus appeals to a sort of crypto-perennialism in that, in order to get past the text and into God, one needs to go through the text and experience, as it were, the reality of this beyond via the insufficiency of language. In short, to get beyond the written word, you need to pass through the written word. Here, the inoperability of language is performed within the paradoxical and/or apophatic statement of God's revelation. In Turner's account, the mystical element of the mystical text is shown linguistically via the irreducible paradox of God's absolute Otherness and God's simultaneous presence to the mystical subject.

Caputo's use of the mystical can be productively thought alongside Turner's model. Caputo too finds in language, whether from the Continental tradition or the theological, a way to think the religious in modernity. As Caputo notes throughout his later writings, God is a name that gets things done or certain things get done or are said under the name God.²³ But, as has been explored throughout this study, God is not a name that signifies an existent entity for Caputo. Instead, God is the name of what goes on under that name in the event/s that unfold from that name's calling.

²² Ibid.

²³ E.g., *WoG*, 20; *SoG*, 3.

In mystical language, in that element of the religious in which this insistent structure is spoken, is the mystical element.

Caputo, though, does not relegate the mystical element to the sphere of religion alone. For him, any discourse whether it be philosophical, theological, poetical, or artistic, that speaks to the always already insistent presence of the to-come, carries this mystical element. In all of these discourses the present moment is haunted by a stirring of we “know not what”²⁴ that these creative and imaginative activities gesture at. Indeed, the structure of the mystical element for Caputo can be abstracted from this formulation: the mystical element is *both* the structure of the always already *and* the structure of the to-come. It is both a present moment, which is always already here—it does not arrive via calculation, reason, or purpose; the moment always already is, because it is. But unlike most thinkers who aim to articulate a theory of the mystical by appealing to the fullness (*pleroma*) of a/the moment, that is, to the completeness of the moment devoid of further signification, Caputo’s ‘present always already’ is like the Augustinian subject described in *The Confessions*—it has a restless heart, waiting for the expectancy of Christ’s to-come.²⁵ But Caputo’s restlessness is irreducible; there is no hoped for stasis that can satiate this urge. Indeed, to the contrary, what the imaginative or the mythopoetic does for Caputo is precisely to instigate this urge—or, more precisely, it makes obvious and compel this always already human condition.

The mystical element in Caputo, then, is ultimately a revelation about finitude, about the human condition. Indeed, as I have stressed, Caputo’s account of religion is that it is fundamentally a human activity—consequently, he argues that Religious Studies proper is a Humanities discipline.²⁶ Hence, the mystical element is that element of religion that names the radically finite,

²⁴ *SoG*, 100; *FoG*, 89; *IoG*, 5, 12; *WoG*, 108, 111; *PaT*, 331, 337, 338; *HaH*, 184; *CaC*, 41.

²⁵ Augustine and Chadwick, *Confessions*, 3, 5.

²⁶ Caputo, *Lecture 13*, 11:19-11:30.

temporal, and transient; and, further identifies how to productively live, hope, and pray for the promise of the finite to-come that always already hovers over the present moment, without making of that moment, a mere case of the to-come. Caputo wants to decouple the experience or expectation of the to-come as itself somehow subordinate to present events. Likewise, the present moment, as was discussed with his account of Husserl's notion of retention in chapter 6, is not a recapitulation of a lost past. His project is ultimately governed by what is commonly described as anti-foundationalism: there is no ground, no presence, that can be appealed to as the basis for which something emerges—the rose is without why, it blooms because it blooms. If there is something like a transcendence that Caputo wants to think through, some excess whose existential outcome is the awareness of a more-than finite, then we could say that the transcendent for him takes the structure of the future that *haunts* the present. But the future is not some thing or entity that has a determinant impact on the present. Instead, it is not the future *as such* which is transcendent but the *relation between* the present moment and the future to come wherein transcendence emerges. To stress a theme which I have noted several times, Caputo's project is one that seeks to think the in-between. In the relata, the between, the correlation, occurs the possibility of an excessive moment—an event—which galvanizes the past of which the event can be traced, the future to which the event is addressed, and the present moment as that in which the event occurs. This temporal scheme, as explained in chapters 5 and 6, informs the basic phenomenological suppositions of Caputo's project and can thus not be decoupled from his understanding of religion and the mystical. But as I also stressed, Caputo's notion of futurity is more than simply an affirmation of the unexpected to-come; the to-come is infused with the possibility of productive as well as risky change. The ultimate image of this futural risk is Caputo's account of ruined time.

With Caputo's emphasis on ruined time, an emphasis that runs from his *AE* text to his most recent *SoG*, we see an extension of this futural image pushed to its posthuman, inhospitable borders. I take ruined time to be something like Caputo's correlational focus extended to its limits. This is an image of the to-come utterly devoid of individuals receptive to its coming status—as, it is a future devoid of a subject of whom this ruined time is a correlate. Ruined time, then, is like the intrusion of the real into the mythopoetic—or, following Wilfred Sellers, we could call it the intrusion of the scientific image into the manifest image.²⁷ The manifest image, Caputo's mythopoetics, is necessarily subordinate to empirical realities like entropic dissipation. But this empirical subordination, in which the objective reality of the material conditions upon which imaginative structures (*Vorstellungen*) like religion arise, does not negate the truths or meanings that emerge from these imaginative structures. Indeed, that the truths and meanings Caputo finds expressed in Christianity are temporal and transient does not negate the value that he ascribes to its truth claims. To the contrary, Caputo finds in the transiency revealed by the scientific image a means to magnify or intensify finitude and the stories we tell about it. Here we see Caputo arguing against the basic supposition that informs perennialism, specifically, that value and truth emerge from their correspondence to an eternal and unchanging presence. Truth, in contrast, is a weak thing; it is without (as Caputo constantly reasserts) eternal supports and unhinged from strong absolutes. This is both a claim regarding the types of truth that emerge from the manifest image, in which human experience is central, and a strategy for dealing with truths from the scientific image, in which human experience is merely episodic. Caputo wants his readers to philosophize, mythologize, poeticize from the thought of the very real reality of entropic dissipation, of endings,

²⁷ Caputo, *Lecture 11*, 12:45-12:55.

and indeed of death. Caputo wants to evidence the reality that death is a part of life, and life is infused with death. Near the conclusion of *IoG*, Caputo summarizes it as follows.

The new cosmology requires, elicits, or provokes a new cosmopoetics, which has an ear for the voices that call from the limits, and an eye for its non-formalizable features. The very thing that would seem to make life impossible—a gratuitous and temporary episode in a vast and pointless narrative, a short story in a cosmic epic without purpose, a tale told by the idiot of entropy that is what makes life possible. The very thing that destines life to impermanence and extinction makes life a precious event. The very thing that makes life meaningless gives it meaning. Life is an “accident” all the way down, neither the becoming accidental of the essential nor the becoming essential of the accidental, which renders the category of “accident” obsolete and means that we must abolish the distinction between the accidental and the essential. Life is a totally fortuitous event. If the cosmic dice were rolled again, they might never again have produced life, and certainly not the life which we ourselves have here, at this moment, in this moonlight, with this spider, as Nietzsche's Zarathustra puts it so perfectly.²⁸

Life is tenuous, even fortuitous. And no amount of metaphysical speculation regarding the nature of the One and its connection to the many, or religious imagery of the coming presence of Christ, or mystical practices that seek unity with the transcendent, can withhold the intrusion of the real and the end of things.

Not unlike Kant, Caputo wants his readers to emerge from their self-imposed immaturity and confront the reality of things as they are. And not unlike Luther, Caputo wants an account of the cosmos divorced from speculative language that makes of the wounded and dying body of the cosmos, a glorious eschatological image of metaphysical splendor. And indeed, not unlike Derrida, Caputo wants us to see the world decoupled from notions like pure presence, absolute truth, and eternal life, and see instead the gaps, the contextual, and the impermanent life-death structure of our experience and indeed of the cosmos itself. And finally, not unlike Eckhart and Silisius, Caputo wants his readers to let go of the need for strong metaphysical supports; to let go of the demand for certainty and presence and accept our always already fragile material experience. He wants us

²⁸ *IoG*, 244.

let go of the desire for pure life—our own, our world's, and our universe's—and see that permanence, presence, and life is always bound up with impermanence, absence, and death.

These claims sit at the heart of Caputo's project, and indeed sit at the heart of his mystical element. These claims are not undergirded by a rejection of myth, or religion, or even spirituality. His project cleaves to a Hegelian affirmation of the importance of the imaginative for human experience. Caputo does not want to smash idols. But he is skeptical of *strong* myths that use *glorious* language to describe metaphysical *certainities*. The mystical element of religion is a type of thinking and a type of activity that encapsulates these qualities. It is a type of thought that resists totalization by appealing to paradoxical, apophatic, and stylistic modes of communication that purposefully entangles language within its own immanent tensions—and for Caputo, there are only ever immanent tensions. The outcome of this, like Aristotle's *phronimoi*, is that Caputo's mystical subject has learned how to expect the unexpected—to act without certainty. But religious language also builds a self, a cosmos, and a mythic structure within which “we live, and move, and have our being.”²⁹ These structures provide safety; they give the illusion that the words, concepts, and images (*Vorstellungen*) encased in these mythic structures signify a secure hyper-hierarchy. And although Caputo criticizes these safety-providing structures, he does not deny the importance of security for the human experience; but he problematizes them insofar as we use the supposed safety of metaphysics to ignore the riskiness of experience.

More broadly then, we can see that Caputo's use of the mystical element carries with it a certain conception of what religion is and how it functions—both classically, in modernity, and in the future to-come. Hence, the mystical element of religion is a sort of religious servomechanism that both comforts and disturbs. It settles the unsettled and unsettles the settled. It accomplishes

²⁹ Acts 17:28

this through a certain performance of language, in which the ideas, concepts, and themes that animate the religious tradition, namely, Christianity, are turned in upon themselves, thought otherwise, and made uncanny. That is, in the mystical element of Christianity the linguistic resources of the religious tradition are deployed in such a way as to extend its traditional thematics, for example, God's transcendence, but in a way that both negates said thematic while simultaneously affirming said thematic: "I pray God to rid me of God." In this way, Caputo's project is still tethered to the religious and metaphysical dynamics of Christianity, its biblical context, and the Neoplatonic assumptions that, as was discussed in chapter 2, form the basis of the mystical tradition. But Caputo's system does not look back to the foundation of mysticism for direction or respite—he wants his readers ever focused on the future, the to-come.

If we think of Caputo's project in light of the academic study of mysticism that was explored in chapter 3, we see, too, that Caputo is both part of that academic development as well as being disconnected from it. Broadley, he is connected to the academic study of mysticism insofar as his work is a development upon the ideas and historical analysis that the last 100 years has given to that discipline. The modern study of mysticism gave shape to the data about the mystical, and in so doing formed the conversation about the mystical that thinkers like Caputo have drawn upon in their own analysis. Without that academic background, knowledge of theologians like Eckhart and the nuanced engagement that Caputo brings to Eckhart, would not be possible. Consequently, as I discussed in the Introduction when considering Gadamer and de Certeau, we need to understand that Caputo's mystical element is produced in the echoes of scholars like Hügel and Underhill whose own mystical element developed out of an urge to classify and organize religious behaviors and claims. Caputo's engagement with mysticism, though certainly less descriptively academic than early scholars James sought to be, or even of later

scholars like Hollywood and McGinn, is nonetheless a scholarly treatment of a social phenomenon whose classical and mediaeval expression is discernable in a modern and postmodern context. Accordingly, Caputo's engagement with mysticism places him in the various approaches to the mystical that was examined in chapter 3—specifically, as I argued, within Turner's performative linguistic model. But as I have also stressed, Caputo's influence by the Continental philosophical tradition has shaped his engagement with mysticism in a way that distances him from that scholarly tradition. I argued that it his focus on finitude over transcendence and the future rather than the past that galvanizes this distinction.

At the conclusion to Louise Nelstrop's *Christian Mysticism: an Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches*, she labels the engagement with mystical themes by writers like Derrida, Lyotard, and Marion a "re-reading of the Christian mystics."³⁰ This re-reading is characterized above all by an analysis that stresses the link between certain notions of mystical interiority and these modern thinkers' conceptualization of subjectivity.³¹ What goes unquestioned by Nelstrop is precisely the difference between early analysis and engagement with mysticism by scholars like Underhill, James, and Turner, and their contrast to Derrida, Lyotard, and Marion. Indeed, what makes the latter thinkers a re-reading while the former are counted as modern critical responses? Part of the reason that sits behind the nomenclature "re-reading" is a result of Derrida, Lyotard, and Marion using the work of mystics like Pseudo-Dionysius as a "resource for their own analysis" rather than engaging mystical discourse as a way to think about the transcendent and the subject's relationship to the transcendent. That is, although Underhill studied the historical development of mysticism and sought to map its development, she was also an insider who saw the traditions chief claims as true. Underhill, in short, assumed the possibility of a unity between

³⁰ Nelstrop, 254.

³¹ Ibid., 252-254.

the subject and the transcendent. We might make the distinction being noted here as that between a second order and a first order reading. That is, whereas Underhill engaged mysticism in a scholarly way, she did so in order to make evident the perennial truth of mystical discourse. While Derrida can be said to treat mystical thought in a second order analytical way. Derrida, and Marion to a lesser extent, is not engaging mystical thought as a resource that provides techniques which help unify the subject to God. Instead, it is the linguistic and conceptual resources of the tradition insofar as those resources can be said to provide clarity about modernity and modern experience, that is of interest. In that way, Nelstrop's division is coherent and demonstrates a distinction in how mysticism is being used and studied in modernity. However, Nelstrop's division works to deny the productive impact that writers like Derrida have had on the development of mysticism in modernity. Less a "re-reading," the Continental tradition as exemplified by thinkers like Derrida, engage the ideas and ideals of mysticism as seriously as any insider—but, for him, the cash value of this engagement is a deeper understanding of finitude, not infinitude.

How, then, are we to understand Caputo's engagement with mysticism? Is his also a re-reading of the tradition heard in another more immanent and factual way, as if he were merely rearranging the words of key thinkers and translating their major ideas in a modern guise? Or, does his project perhaps better represent a development of the inner ideational structure—its 'unit ideas' as Lovejoy would frame it—of mystical thought but reimaged and rearticulated in a modern context? Or, at the very least, in an account that Caputo recognizes to be modern. As I noted in chapter 1, an underlying impetus for this project has been to map how concepts change and alter across time, and how, importantly, conceptual translation is key to that process. If we understood Caputo's project to merely be a re-reading, I think we would miss the active, prescriptive, and desirous elements of Caputo's engagement with mysticism. Far from a re-reading or indeed a

reading Caputo is better understood as actively employing mystical themes, tropes, and concepts throughout his work so as to both *clarify* his own philosophical and theological models, as well as to *impart* the important lessons and ideals that he sees being expressed by mystical authors. If religion for Caputo means “living in constant exposure to the unconditional, open to something excessive, exceptional, unforeseeable, unprogrammable, something slightly mad relative to the rationality of means-and-end thinking,” then his mystical element is a distilled version of that demand.³² Mysticism, the mystical, and the mystic, provide, for Caputo, an example of a way to live authentically in the modern world. The mystic does this by voicing the theopoetic dimension of human experience. And without this impulse, he writes, the perspective and prescription of the “mystical poet’s sense of the unconditional, everything would be a means to an end, everything would be ground-up in serving a purpose, and nothing would be worth anything unless we could use it for something else.”³³ The mystical element of religion, for Caputo, is an antidote to the malaise of modernity. It infuses the finite with purpose not by reenchancing the world by making the finite a case of a universal, but by providing the linguistic, perspectival, and conceptual apparatus to *let finitude be* by seeing that it flourishes without purpose. Our universe, our world, and ourselves, in Caputo’s mystical element, blooms because it blooms—it is all without why. This then, far from being a mere re-reading of the mystical, intrudes upon the mystical in order to find in its conceptual and linguistic resources productive tools that can be applied to a modern context.

In this way, Caputo’s engagement with mysticism via the resources of the Continental philosophical tradition provides scholars of religion with insight into a unique development and expression of religion in modernity. His project shows the outcomes of the religious, metaphysical,

³² *HaH*, 37.

³³ *Ibid.*, 36.

and transcendental undercurrents of Continental philosophy, but deployed by a thinker with a lifelong “taste for the mystics.”³⁴ And although the study of religion, and therefore the study of mystics for Caputo is a study to be undertaken by the Humanities³⁵—i.e., by a disciplinary model that sees the resources of the mystical tradition as fundamentally aimed at human experience—one cannot but hear in Caputo a longing for his own proximity to the beliefs, experiences, and claims of the mystic. But this perhaps nostalgic longing for the mystic and the mystical element of religion stumbles upon Caputo’s firm conviction that we must disabuse ourselves of a longing for a beyond, for safety in that beyond, and for the mythical hopes that we project onto that beyond. Caputo’s mystical element is not aimed at an eschatological moment of salvation, but an immanent confrontation with risk.

For this reason, Caputo’s mystical element, though filled with the same hope and zeal for religious transcendence and spiritual unity that animated Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Augustine is tempered by a type of modern fatigue with the infinite. No longer convinced by what he would see as a pollyannish hope in the fullness of a future to-come, Caputo’s mystical element settles for the affirmation of the emptiness of the moment. In letting go of the desire and the impulse to infuse glory into the wounded body of human experience, Caputo finds in the moment of this surrender a profoundly deep affirmation of finitude. This affirmation of the moment *is* the mystical element of religion for Caputo.

³⁴ Ibid., 23.

³⁵ Caputo, *Lecture 13*, 11:19-11:30.

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