

Truth & Postmodernism – a review of John D Caputo’s book: Truth

An event occurs between X and Y. It's a serious event. The police are involved. The press get hold of it. It makes headline news. The case goes to court. X and Y need legal representation. Evidence is gathered. Witnesses are called. Specialist experts are consulted. The case for both parties is presented before a judge and jury. The members of the jury hear arguments from barristers representing X and Y. Some members of the jury have experienced similar events themselves whilst others know only what they've heard in the media. Crowds have gathered outside the courtroom. Some waving placards for X and some for Y. Clashes occur. There are some violent outbursts. The jury struggle to reach a verdict. Even after all the evidence and witness testimonies it takes them a while to come to a consensus. Finally a verdict is pronounced. Further violence breaks out in the crowds. The event goes viral on social media and in public. Everyone has an opinion on it. The controversy rumbles on... will we ever really know what happened between X and Y??

The example above is a familiar image to most, if not firsthand through direct experience, then at least second-hand through the media: fiction and non-fiction – we will return to this later...

According to John D Caputo in his intriguing book *Truth – subtitled The Search for Wisdom in the Postmodern Age* – he says this: “If you ask postmodernists, 'What is truth?' they are likely to say, 'It depends.' Postmodernists tend to be a bit incredulous that there is just one thing called truth which is always and everywhere the same, and are more inclined to think there are a lot of different truths, depending on who and where you are; they are inclined to play it loose. Herein lies the problem. Playing it too loose with truth is called relativism - relativism means there is no Truth, just a lot of competing truths, depending on your language, culture, gender, religion, needs, tastes, etc., and one is as good as another. Who can say what is true? Who has the authority to pronounce on that? So the critics of postmodernism fear the worst: relativism, scepticism, nihilism, flat out anarchy. And, truth to tell, a lot of postmodern philosophers have created this impression because they have spent their time trying to take the air out of Truth. In the late nineteenth century, Nietzsche (one of postmodernism's patron saints) said Truth was an ensemble of fictions and metaphors that we had forgotten are fictions and metaphors. More recently, the highly influential philosopher Richard Rorty said truth was merely a compliment we pay ourselves when things are going well with our beliefs. Classical philosophers, love to capitalize Truth, while postmodernists generally avoid the upper case.”

He then goes on to compare Modernism (starting with the Age of Enlightenment and Pure Reason) to Postmodernism (starting with the Post-war Age of Deconstruction?) and moves on to say this:

“The time had come to look for an alternative to Modernism and Pure Reason. That alternative, I am calling the postmodern view of truth, turns on the idea of the event. Events are disconcerting, but they do not spell pure chaos. The event allows for reinvention while the forces lined up against it aim at preventing the event. The event is what we are referring to every time we protest against being done in by a rule - 'but this time it is different'. The difference, the idiosyncrasy, the unprogrammability, is the event. What is singular is not irrational; it requires discernment, not

simply the application of a rule. A computer can apply a rule, but it takes judgement to decide what is demanded by the singularity of a situation. If the event is the core of the postmodern view of truth, it needs to be fleshed out in more concrete terms to show how it is at work in everything from ethics to physics. From this larger story I will single out three highlights, in which I will try to distil the postmodern way. The first move, called 'hermeneutics', was made by French and German philosophers under the lead of Martin Heidegger; the second was the idea of 'language games' introduced by Ludwig Wittgenstein, the legendary Cambridge philosopher (born in Austria); and the third is the idea of 'paradigm shifts' developed by Thomas Kuhn, a Harvard historian and philosopher of science."

1. Hermeneutics - highlights that truth is not something that is simply "found" or discovered in an objective sense. Instead, truth is an ongoing process of interpretation, shaped by various contexts, perspectives, and experiences. This aligns with the deconstructive idea that meaning is contingent and subject to constant reinterpretation.

2. Language Games - Wittgenstein, Derrida et al were interested in the limitations of language and how it constructs our understanding of truth. They explored how language can both reveal and obscure truth, and the many ways in which language shapes our perceptions and beliefs.

3. Paradigm Shifts - after Thomas Kuhn coined the term in his book: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) it would no longer be possible to ignore the element of historical context in our understanding of truth, especially if we only concentrate on logic and reason.

Caputo's suggestion that the postmodern view of truth, turns on the idea of the *event* led me to the example at the start of these notes, that of the 'trial'. He mentions the function of a jury in the book, (a group of ordinary people) in arriving at a consensus. The 'event' that occurred between X and Y could have been anything from slander or theft, to assault or even murder. Establishing an agreed understanding of what happened – he suggests – is part of the truth process.

He goes on say:

"Wikipedia is a good example of an ongoing postmodern truth process which invites public input while also making an effort to monitor the reliability of what is posted there. Behind the scenes of most Wikipedia entries you'll find a host of lively debates about the accuracy of their content, which are the work of unpaid editors and contributors. But *caveat lector*, reader beware, you still have to be a discerning reader of electronic publications (*or even many examples of old-school printed publications!*) which lack the usual protocols of journalism and academic refereeing."

Caputo strives to find a middle ground between Absolutism: the modernists concern for logic and reason, rules and categories, "One Big Truth" – and Relativism: the postmodernists concern for the event and interpretation, plurality and perspectives, distrust of metanarratives – it makes for a thought-provoking read, but there are doubts as to whether he successfully achieves his aim.