Caputo on Obligation without Origin: Discussion of Against Ethics

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"How much distance does a life require?" This poetic question is an appropriate one to address to John Caputo's book when distance is measured by radical differences. The question, in the context of its poem, speaks in the experience of life's arrival from nowhere specific, of the persistence of "nowhere" in our everyday lives, of the blending of "here" and "nowhere" in the fullness of our joys. It is not unlike the experience of coming to be/passing away—at once and inseparable—that composes our lineage's question of being on Heidegger's account. All three—Heidegger, Emily Grosholz (the poet), and John Caputo—know that nonorigin "gives" more than explanations or all other fixations can either hold or save. It happens as strange distance—like "pool and splash of sunbeams on the floor"—in everything present, including the floor. Caputo has taken this kind of distance with such seriousness that he finds himself required to alter his beliefs as well as his authorial appearance as a good man. He finds himself obligated to write against ethics when "ethics" means a rationally or theologically or ontologically based—any theoretically based—group of prescriptions and explanations for human behavior. "Ethics lays the foundation for principles that force people to be good; it clarifies concepts, secures judgments, provides firm guardrails along the slippery slopes of factual life." Although Caputo notes that ethics contains obligation, which in its difference from ethics is both the "undoing" of ethics and the
possibility of a deconstruction of ethics, he does not undertake such a
deconstruction (5). Instead he provides poetics, commentary, and rhetoric
that are designed to turn the reader towards his or her obligation.
Obligation derives from the needs and suffering of other people. Given
the influence of Johannes de Silentio in the book, I understand Caputo
to be providing a context that might bring, in Levinas' word, the "call"
of the other to audibility through the indirection of his writing: indi-
rect communication of something not subject to the authority of words.

If there were apparent and indelible origins for whatever appears,
even awesome and incomprehensible origins, we could be for ethics,
because we would have something enduring in the appearance and
presence of things which would allow criteria for appropriate
relationships. But in the absence of definitive, originary presence we
must think in the distance that interlaces our lives together without
ontologically definitive congruence. We must think in the absence of
originary being. For Caputo this means that we must think on the
surface with regard to what specifically goes on among us and without
the benefit of reflective and poetic height or depth that are made
possible by the immanence of Being or God. He likes the style of
Johannes de Silentio, that friend of Christianity who cannot quite make
the leap of faith about which he knows and writes so much. Even the
possibility of faith has its distance for Caputo. But distance and human
relation find a constructive connection in the experience of obliga-
tion according to Caputo, and it is in obligation that this book finds
its center for speech in the face of the distance that life requires.

For Caputo obligations and obligation are facts. He finds them al-
ways already given in his life. He finds not just a sense of responsibil-
ity for his family and friends, but obligation in the very happening of
his life, something like an existential structure when one knows existence
to be a relational event and not only a subjective one. But obligation
is not really a structure. It is the other modifying me by the other's
transcending, needing, perhaps suffering occurrence in my life, rather
much as Levinas says it happens. Obligation happens in the other's
being already in my life, not in the call of God or being or reason.

We might suppose that obligations keep popping up because we are
herd creatures. Interrupt the herd and you interrupt obligatoriness.
But it will return because we are still of the herd. We could offer
other speculations about causes, which Caputo does not do, or we could
suggest other speculations by indirection, which Caputo does suggest.
But in either case we could take Caputo seriously, perhaps in this in-
stance more seriously than he takes himself, and agree with him that
obligations are given in our lives, while at the same time finding that