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The Flesh in Pain: A Conversation with John D. Caputo*

Introduction

This article aims to examine the concept of pain in the ethics of John D. Caputo. The author primarily analyzed the phenomenon of pain in *Against Ethics*,¹ *Demythologizing Heidegger*,² and several philosophical and theological articles.³ Caputo situates his idea within the phenomenolo-

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¹ John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics. Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with a constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993).

² John D. Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993).

³ John D. Caputo, “Sacred Anarchy: Fragments of a Postmodern Ethics”, in: *The Essential Caputo: Selected Writings*, ed. Keith Putt (Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2018), 287–304; John D. Caputo, “Bodies Still Un-risen, Events Still Unsaid: A Hermeneutics of Body without Flesh”, in: *Apophatic Bodies*, ed. Chris Boesel, Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 94–116; John D. Caputo, “Thinking, Poetry and Pain”, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 28 (1989): 155–181.

gical and ethical framework. Although the phenomenology of pain has recently gained more attention, Caputo's perspective remains largely overlooked. The philosopher is usually associated rather with post-secular theology or philosophy of religion. In this article, I would like to redirect the interest towards his ethical writings.

In this paper, I would like to show that Caputo's idea of linking ethical obligation with the experience of pain and suffering, although promising, has several flaws that need to be addressed. My critical-affirmative approach aims at improving this project. To accomplish this task, I would like to, first, present Caputo's theory in the larger context of the phenomenology of pain. That is especially important, taking into account that this aspect of Caputo's work has not been broadly discussed, except for a few minor texts.⁴ I will consider Caputo's direct inspirations, including the works of Emmanuel Lévinas, Martin Heidegger, and Elaine Scarry. Comparative analysis will help me with identifying the theoretical issue to which Caputo is responding. Secondly, I will discuss Caputo's phenomenology of pain and the way it relates to his ethical theory. In conclusion, I will make some critical remarks to demonstrate the positive and negative aspects of Caputo's project.

Obligation against ethics

I will begin by sketching a brief context for Caputo's moral theory. In his crucial work, *Against Ethics*, the author provides a critical approach toward ethical theory in general. Caputo advocates for the more situational and postmodern model of ethics, which is less concerned with providing general and universal rules and is focused on the uniqueness of every singular event. This vision of ethics does not seek a stable foundation but rather addresses the necessity of moral decisions in a post-modern reality stripped of metaphysical underpinnings.⁵ With these

⁴ See Merold Westphal, "Postmodernism and Ethics: The Case of Caputo", in: *A Passion for Impossible. John D. Caputo in Focus*, ed. Mark Doodley (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003); Łukasz Czajka, "Człowiek jako cierpiące ciało w filozofii Johna D. Caputo", *Przegląd Filozoficzny – Nowa Seria* 2(82) (2012); Łukasz Czajka, *Święta anarchia. Wprowadzenie do radykalnej hermeneutyki Johna D. Caputo* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Wydziału Nauk Społecznych UAM, 2014), 63–72.

⁵ This ethic was also called anarchical, as it may be seen as the attempt to create morality without raising metaphysical question of *arche*. See: John D. Caputo, "Sacred Anarchy".

premises, Caputo attempts to redefine the concept of moral obligation to highlight its value in contemporary, postmodern ethics. The author combines the phenomenological and hermeneutical methodology while describing the factual experience of being obliged.

According to Caputo, while one can never know the sources of moral obligation, everyone has had the experience of being obliged.⁶ The author decides to begin his phenomenological analysis with that experience. The obligation for Caputo is linked to the feeling of being tied (the etymology of the English word “obligation” comes back to Latin *ligo, ligas, ligare* – to bind) by the external force manifesting itself in the encounter with the Other. What matters here is that the Other, described by Caputo, appears in front of us in their vulnerability, as a fragile flesh, susceptible to suffering and injury. However, the Other possesses a unique strength (a power of powerless) – the ability to demand the fulfilment of moral obligation.⁷ The call from the Other forces me to respond and take responsibility for them. I am obliged to respond by the power of that external force, which I can neither know nor understand. Obligation undermines one’s autonomy and reveals our exposure to the Other. Caputo reevaluates the philosophical tradition, challenging the primacy of autonomy in ethics, by looking more carefully at one’s heteronomy.⁸

Caputo’s ideas can be seen as a part of an ethical tradition rooted in the appreciation of otherness, the origins of which can be traced back to the philosophy of dialogue, with Emmanuel Lévinas and Jacques Derrida providing a certain culmination. In *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas characterizes the Same (*le Même*) as originally separated from external reality that he treats as an object. This enables the egoistic enjoyment (*jouissance*).⁹ The Same uses the elements of the external world to satisfy his desires and needs (*besoins*). In this way, the Same overcomes the otherness of the world, which is reduced to the object of its cognition or possession. Only the appearance of the Other as the absolute Other (*Autrui*) allows one to challenge the dominant position of the Same because it is the encounter with someone who always defies my power and my

⁶ Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 6–8.

⁷ Ibidem, 149.

⁸ In his work, Caputo distinguished two different approaches toward the notion of difference, both important for his ethics: heteronomy and heteromorphism. The first shows the difference between me and the singular Other, while the latter is connected with the affirmation of difference in terms of plurality. See: Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 53–62.

⁹ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l’extériorité* (Kluwer Academic, 1990), 117–124.

knowledge.¹⁰ There is always something in the Other that is fundamentally incomprehensible and that cannot be objectified. The encounter with the Other transforms the condition of the Same by challenging his egoism and forces him to take responsibility for the Other.

There are of course many differences between Lévinas and Caputo.¹¹ I would like to focus on only one of them, which is particularly relevant for this study. Levinas has described the encounter with the Other in terms of the experience of the face (*visage*): something elusive, irrepresentable, inexpressible, and unknowable. It is not the face understood as the physical part of the human body, but the face as a unique dimension of the Other: "The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face".¹² For Lévinas, the face is an expression of the idea of infinity, which transcends me as the subject. This face has the ability to command the subject with the ethical call "Thou shall not kill" [*"tu ne commettras pas de meurtre"*].¹³ Meanwhile, Caputo – as a postmodern thinker – prioritizes the idea of finitude, and, as a consequence, the author rejects Levinas's concept of the face. For Caputo, I am experiencing the obligation while encountering the Other in their finitude – as visible, material, vulnerable flesh, susceptible to pain and suffering.¹⁴ This is precisely the suffering of the damaged body that demands my response in the form of moral re-action (that is ethical obligation as well as political activity).

Caputo's ethics comes close to the contemporary ethics of care in many places, even if the author himself does not devote much attention to the notion of care itself (the notion of care is discussed, among others, in *Demithologizing Heidegger*,¹⁵ but rather in the context of a critique of the Heideggerian notion of *Sorge*, which would, according to Caputo, distort the real model of care). As characterized by Virginia Held, the ethics of care is distinguished by five basic determinants.¹⁶ Firstly, the ethics of care starts from an understanding of human interdependence on each

¹⁰ Ibidem, 28.

¹¹ I have described the relations between Caputo and Lévinas in the article "The Concept of Heteronomy in the Ethics of Lévinas and Caputo", *Sensus Historiae* 3(53) (2023): 101–119.

¹² Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, transl. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 50.

¹³ Lévinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, 217.

¹⁴ Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 19.

¹⁵ Caputo, *Demythologizing*, 44–58.

¹⁶ Virginia Held, "The Ethics of Care", in: *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 537–566.

other. Caring is supposed to be the attitude that is born in response to this interdependence. Second, the ethics of care is to value the role of emotions (such as, for example, compassion) in moral decision-making. Thirdly, the ethics of care challenges abstract and universal ethical principles, in favor of valuing the particularity of each situation. According to another indicator, the ethics of care rejects the rigid division between the public and private spheres and shows that moral theory cannot focus exclusively on public actions, but should also include what happens in the privacy of the home. Finally, one of the key features of the ethics of care is, for Held, a critique of individualism and the strong liberal subject cut off from external reality. Instead, the ethics of care presents the concept of a relational and interdependent subject.

As we can see, Caputo's philosophy fulfils virtually all the characteristics mentioned above. The author strongly draws attention to human interdependence and gives primacy to emotions in ethical theory. Caputo also emphasizes the singularity of each situation, thus opposing efforts to build a universal ethical theory, abstracting from the context of world events. The critique of the liberal strong subject remains resolutely present in his thinking. Caputo redirects our thinking to an image of the body dependent on both biological factors (e.g., the ill body, the disabled body) and social factors (e.g., the female body). Although the author does not explicitly address the division between the private and the public sphere, the examples he cites (especially those of caregivers of sick bodies as women realizing an ethical ideal) allow us to see this feature in his philosophy as well. It is worth noting, however, that Caputo conceptualizes the relationship between me and the Other rather in terms of responsiveness, responsibility, and hospitality, and much less frequently mentions care. Perhaps, in this way, he wants to avoid paternalism (which is a rather frequent objection to the ethics of care).

Towards a phenomenology of physical pain

The description of the encounter with the Other in terms of experiencing their vulnerable flesh, susceptible to pain, leads Caputo to further consideration of the phenomenon of pain in general. Caputo situates his reflection in the broader context of the history of phenomenology. In his opinion, classical phenomenology (authors such as Edmund Husserl¹⁷ or

¹⁷ Husserl has analyzed the categories of body/flesh in, for example, in fifth of *Cartesian Meditations* (Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, transl. Dorian

even Maurice Merleau-Ponty¹⁸) has been usually dealing with the active, subjected, living body – the body that enables intentional acting in the world. However, they paid very little attention to the other dimension of our bodily experience – the body understood as flesh, as a material object, subjected to biological and physical processes.¹⁹ Examining the flesh reveals that our embodiment positions us not only as active participants in the world but also as passive objects upon which external forces may act. The experience of pain is inextricably linked to the experience of our body as flesh: our flesh can even be understood in terms of the condition of the possibility of feeling pain.²⁰

It is important to acknowledge that Caputo criticizes the state of phenomenology and philosophy prior to the publication of his book in 1993. The author could not have predicted that philosophy in the 21st century would pay much more attention to the problems of disease, vulnerability, and pain.²¹ I believe that his claims are valid in referring to classical phenomenology, but not necessarily with the new phenomenology.

Caputo disagrees with a philosophical tradition of interpreting the experience of pain, which describes pain and suffering as a means of spiritual enrichment. This was the case in the writings of Ernst Jünger and Martin Heidegger,²² who referred to how an artist's suffering led him to the creation of a masterpiece.²³ Caputo is deeply opposed to this narrative. He claims that these situations are extremely rare; in most

Cairns (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982), 119–128). Husserl's writings mention the problem of pain. See: Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigation*, Vol. 2, transl. John N. Findlay (Toronto: Humanity Books, 2000), 572.

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty does mention the problem of illness (see: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, transl. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 126–127), however, Caputo claims that this example serves only as an occasion to describe (by contrast) the proper body (Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 195).

¹⁹ See: Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 194–196.

²⁰ In his theological writings, Caputo has described the body of the resurrected Jesus in terms of a body without flesh: the body that is capable of acting, but that cannot be hurt or wounded anymore. See: Caputo, "Bodies Still Unrisen", 94–95.

²¹ See, for example: Saulius Geniusas, *The Phenomenology of Pain* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2020); Havi Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Havi Carel, *Illness: The Cry of the Flesh* (London: Routledge, 2015).

²² Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, transl. P. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 179–184.

²³ Caputo, *Demythologizing*, 149–159.

cases, pain is not at all the source of creativity, and it can lead even to complete stagnation and passivity. That is why, in his writings, Caputo tries to highlight this passive dimension of pain. To do so, he will refer not to the classical phenomenologist but to Elaine Scarry's study of tortures,²⁴ which shows the extreme situation of objectification of the human body/flesh in pain.

Caputo's methodology combines phenomenological descriptions of pain with a hermeneutical focus on its cultural representations. While he frequently references the biblical tradition, he also acknowledges other literary works, such as *Antigone*. This decision is related to Caputo's belief that our experience is never "pure", but is always mediated to some extent by cultural representations, such as language. A certain weakness of Caputo's theory is that the author does not distinguish between pain and suffering and seems to treat these concepts interchangeably. Naturally, the two categories remain closely related: pain can be the cause of suffering, while suffering in the vast majority of cases manifests itself through body and somatic experiences, such as pain. Nevertheless, philosophy and medicine allow us to draw distinctions between these concepts. Pain is usually identified with an unpleasant sensation manifesting itself in the body (either in a specific part of the body or the body as a whole). Meanwhile, suffering remains linked to the category of personal identity. According to Eric J. Cassell:

Suffering occurs when impending destruction of the person is perceived; it continues until the threat of disintegration has passed or until the integrity of the person can be restored in some other manner. It follows, then, that although it often occurs in the presence of acute pain, shortness of breath, or other bodily symptoms, suffering extends beyond the physical. Most generally, suffering can be defined as the state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of a person.²⁵

In his view, suffering implied a breakdown of the sense of unity and a sense of loss of the future. The author pointed out that in some cases pain can be both suffering (for example, when it becomes unbearable, incomprehensible, or constantly recurring), but in many situations these concepts remain distinct. The problem was similarly conceptualized by Paul Ricoeur, for whom suffering involves a breach in the conduct of

²⁴ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

²⁵ Eric J. Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 33.

a coherent narrative about one's life.²⁶ The author pointed out that suffering encompasses disruptions of the various elements that make up human identity, such as disruptions in language and communication, disruptions in one's capacity to act, disruptions in one's relationship to self and others, or the loss of meaning. Suffering, therefore, is a category referring to an individual's relationship to himself and others, while pain represents a sensation occurring in the body. Caputo, by disregarding this distinction, seems to make a certain reduction of suffering to pain. I will return to this issue later in the article.

The author's phenomenology of pain shows two different aspects of this experience. Firstly, he characterizes the subjective, immanent sensation of my own pain; secondly, the author describes it regarding the pain of the Other. In this section, I will focus on the experience of my pain.

Caputo describes the physical pain as non-intentional,²⁷ which means that it is a mental state that does represent anything, it does not refer to any object or content external to it. The pain is not about something else, it does not represent anything outside the pain itself. Moreover, the author claims that pain often disrupts the subject's intentional relations with the world. Caputo's analysis corresponds here to Elaine Scarry's work, which demonstrated the process of losing the intentional correlation with the external world in the case of torture victims. Scarry has shown that extreme physical pain may limit the subject's experience, as their perception is fully occupied by the pain itself. Torture victims had lost their sense of the reality of the external world and began to regard their pain as the only real experience, as if there was no reality outside of

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *La souffrance n'est pas la douleur*, in: *Souffrance et douleur. Autour de Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Claire Marin, Nathalie Zaccai-Reyners (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013), 13–34.

²⁷ The status of the intentionality of pain is one of the topics in philosophy that still has not received a satisfactory solution. Proponents of the concept of the intentionality of pain usually identify the intentional content of pain with the body or damage to the body (see: Franz Brentano, *Untersuchungen zur Sinnespsychologie* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1907), 119–125). The sensation of my pain, for example, informs me of a wound in my body. On the other hand, proponents of the non-intentionality of pain recognize that pain has no content that can be separated from the experience of pain itself (for example, Caputo believes that reflection on pain can intentionally direct itself to the damage to my body, but in this case we are talking about a cognitive act secondary to the experience of pain. The latter, according to Caputo, does not refer to any content (Caputo, 1993, 285). More arguments for nonintentionality in pain see in: Carl Strumpf, "Über Gefühlsempfindungen", *Zeitschrift für Psychologie und Physiologie der Sinnesorgane* 44 (1907): 1–49.

pain. According to Scarry, they have lost not only their relation with the outside world, but even with themselves. This suggests that pain may be described not only as non-intentional but also as a source of disruption to one's intentional relationships in general.²⁸ For Caputo:

Flesh is the site of breakdown and destruction of the world – in the blindness of pain, of the interiority of agony, in the solitude of misery, in the worldlessness of suffering. Pain is not an intentional state. It not only resists language, reducing us to primitive shrieks that are prior to language. Pain does not reach out to the world, but, rather, is the occasion upon which one's world is destroyed.²⁹

Pain, according to Caputo (and many other philosophical researchers³⁰), is a deeply private and subjective state. It means that I cannot have the epistemological access to the pain of another person, I am not able to verify whether they are correct while speaking about their own pain. Furthermore, communicating pain becomes nearly impossible: pain can be expressed through language or non-verbal communication; however, this will capture only a small part of own's experience.³¹ Caputo again refers to the work of Elaine Scarry's analysis. Scarry has demonstrated that the experience of extreme pain can destroy one's ability to verbal expression, as pain distorts language.³² This means that people subjected to extreme pain are not only unable to communicate their suffering, but they may become unable to communicate at all.

Caputo's description of pain is, however, more ambiguous than Scarry's (which probably results from the fact that she is focused on the extreme situation of violence). On the one hand, pain (and pleasure) are described as the experience through which I become conscious of my body/flesh. This is somewhat similar to Heidegger's analysis of instrumentality. In everyday life, I use my body unreflectively, without thinking about it. Only the feeling of pain (or pleasure) snaps me out of this state and draws my attention to the body itself and the body considered as flesh. Through the immanent, uncommunicable experience of pain and my own body, I can understand myself as distinct from other be-

²⁸ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 53–55.

²⁹ Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 205.

³⁰ See: Murat Aydede, "Introduction", in: *Pain. New Essays on its Nature and the Methodology of its Study*, ed. Murat Aydede (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), ix–xvii.

³¹ Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 205.

³² Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 54.

ings. In this sense, pain can be one of the ways through which I know my subjectivity.³³ At the same time, the extreme pain seems to disturb one's subjectivity. Caputo describes it in terms of reduction of the body into flesh.³⁴ As a result, the person who suffers experiences something like auto-alienation: the pain becomes the only thing that fulfills their consciousness.

Let us now consider the other perspective described by Caputo – regarding the other person's pain. Even though I can never fully know another person's suffering, I can tell that someone is in pain, mainly by observing the non-verbal signs (such as facial expressions). The Other's vulnerable flesh becomes the surface where the moral obligations manifest themselves. Flesh in pain demands from me (and from my active body) to respond to its command – to counteract suffering. The obligation, however, should be perceived as the external force that binds me and forces me to act by its demand. Therefore, obligation is also a sign of my passivity: I am, at least to some extent, dependent on the call of the Other.

Obligation is the relations of flesh to flesh, a transubstantiation in which the flesh of the Other transforms my body into flesh. Under the touch of the Other I become flesh. The I – which is structurally an agent body – is transformed from agent to respondent, from agent to patient, and becomes the patient of the Other's suffering. The *patients*, the suffering, damaged flesh of the Other, becomes the transformative agency that by confirming from on high, converts the I into flesh, becomes the agent of the conversion of the I.³⁵

The regard for the suffering of the Other is, for Caputo, another example of a situation that we cannot understand, as it cannot be described in terms of a rational, teleological structure. We can never claim that there is a higher purpose in someone's suffering, as this would mean justifying someone's pain, and, for Caputo, pain is always unjustified. Therefore, we cannot know the reasons for someone else's suffering, we can only read out of it our moral obligation and responsibility for the Other. Caputo's phenomenology of pain is not strictly descriptive discourse, but it is always normative. It leads him to serious political and moral consequences. According to the first of them, we – both as individuals and members of society – are always obliged to respond to one's suffering and to try to build the structures (for example, by deconstructing unjust laws) that

³³ Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, 71.

³⁴ Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 207.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 217.

will help to minimize people's suffering. Secondly, we are obliged to commemorate the victims of the past, non-culpable³⁶ suffering. This is an especially challenging task for Caputo, as we are required to speak about something that we cannot speak about, or at least not accurately. We are obliged to speak about pain even though pain itself cannot be communicated through language. According to the author, this impossible discourse is one of the main tasks for poetry.

This conviction aligns seamlessly with Caputo's hermeneutic approach. The author claims that our moral obligations are manifested in the Other's suffering flesh, yet I acknowledge it through various cultural filters, literature included. The author's study refers mostly to the Bible, with a special emphasis on the persona of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus embodies both the figure of suffering³⁷ (exemplified by the crucifixion) and the embodiment of moral responsibility, as seen in instances such as the biblical narrative where he heals a sufferer on the Sabbath, defying conventional laws.³⁸ The biblical tales serve as a compelling poetic narrative illustrating a potential journey of commitment.

Critical voice

In the following section, I will discuss several flaws in Caputo's project. Firstly, the author does not present a clear distinction between pain and suffering. It seems that all of the possible signs of pain are considered negative. However, many examples of pain should not be regarded as suffering and could be even presented as something positive. One such example is the pain that leads to pleasure and health in therapeutic massage. Another example is the tattooing or piercing practice. Each of these

³⁶ An important problem for any ethical concept starting from suffering is the question of how to recognize who among the suffering requires help and to what extent this help is to be provided. In Caputo's case, a legitimate question can be raised as to whether every victim of suffering demands my moral response and remembrance. For example, one might ask whether a justly convicted prisoner suffering in prison is also a victim of suffering. Caputo will of course promote attitudes of mercy and forgiveness, but everything has its limits. For the author of *The Other*, calling me to a moral response will always be the victim, never the aggressor. I have described this problem more extensively in the article: Adriana Mickiewicz, "The Concept of Heteronomy in the Ethics of Lévinas and Caputo", *Sensus Historiae* 53(3) (2023): 101–119.

³⁷ Caputo, "Sacred Anarchy".

³⁸ Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 146–150.

situations involves some level of pain, but not suffering; they may even result in bringing joy and happiness to the subject. I believe Caputo's project should be revised to focus primarily on our vulnerability to suffering (not so much about pain). Obligation should manifest itself not through flesh in pain but through one's suffering.

Secondly, I believe that Caputo's description of the relationship between the subject of moral obligation and the victim of suffering is still based on the binary oppositions between hero and victim as well as the oppressor and victims. As a result, the latter is always described in terms of passivity but also some innocence. At the same time, the subject of moral obligation and the subject of violence is characterized by their capability to action (to threaten the Other or to take responsibility and respond to their demand).³⁹ The question remains whether this model is not too paternalistic. Does it not reinforce the stereotype of a victim's inability to defend themselves? Although Caputo describes the victim as possessing the special power of imposing moral obligation (the power of powerlessness), there is no assurance that this obligation will be fulfilled. A similar charge against ethics starting from suffering was presented by Alain Badiou.⁴⁰ The French philosopher said that it is a vision of the world in which the suffering subject is reduced to a weak, fragile victim to be protected. Moreover, the central place begins to be taken by the compassionate subject, who has the right to make moral judgments (e.g., judging when and how to help), even though he remains only an external observer of events. For Badiou, it is particularly dangerous to reduce the sufferer to a passive posture and *de facto* prevent him from resisting. This objection may prove to be a principle against Caputo's theory.

I believe that Caputo's project should not abandon the fact that the victim remains not only passive flesh but, in the vast majority of cases, also an active body.⁴¹ We are not purely heteronomous or autonomous, but rather somewhere in between.

³⁹ Ibidem, 213.

⁴⁰ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, transl. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2011), 11–12.

⁴¹ One can distinguish the situations in which the victim of suffering indeed cannot actively protect their rights (e.g., the fully pearlized person). Caputo would probably argue that even in this case the flesh remains somehow active as it can still lay demands and impose moral obligation. Moreover, this situation is very extreme: in the vast majority of cases, victim of suffering can act and actively protest against their situation. Only by acknowledging this capability, we may maintain an attitude of caring for others, without paternalism.

Thirdly, Caputo is so concentrated on the physical manifestations of pain that he overlooks the other types of suffering, such as mental illness.⁴² The problem of suffering in mental illness has been mentioned in his book *More Radical Hermeneutics*,⁴³ however, it was never thoroughly examined in the ethical framework. I believe that Caputo's project should be extended to include broader analyses of human suffering and vulnerability, which cannot be reduced to physical injury.

A fourth potential objection is whether such a strong focus on otherness can provide a good foundation for ethical attitudes such as solidarity, needed for social life. After all, emphasizing the incomprehensibility of the Other's pain can be a factor that deepens the distance between moral subjects and exacerbates their alienation. Caputo's theory can be contrasted at this point with Richard Rorty's concept. The two authors remain very much alike in many places. Rorty, like Caputo, does not believe in the legitimacy of creating a theoretical ethics, based on universal, metaphysical principles. Instead, he sees great importance in sensitizing societies to the suffering of others. This is precisely the role that literature, among others, is supposed to play. It is worth noting, however, that according to Rorty, noticing the pain of another becomes the basis for solidarity. The subject then sees in others suffering beings, not an abstract "them" but "one of us" – people equally susceptible to pain and suffering.⁴⁴ Only this makes it possible to develop interpersonal (and, perhaps, interspecies) solidarity. It is worth considering, then, whether suffering can be seen precisely as an element that unites rather than separates people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to state that Caputo's ethical project may very well correspond to contemporary problems (even if it still requires several improvements). The Caputo project presents a flexible ethic that can be easily adapted to many, varied situations (as opposed to the rigid,

⁴² This argument has been raised also in: Merold Westphal, "Postmodernism and Ethics: The Case of Caputo", in: *A Passion for Impossible. John D. Caputo in Focus*, ed. Mark Doodley (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 165–166.

⁴³ John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics. On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 37.

⁴⁴ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xvi.

codified ethics). At the same time, by referring to human (and non-human) vulnerability to suffering and the phenomenon of embodiment, the author avoids relativism, a common pitfall for postmodernists. The vulnerability to pain and suffering may be after all described as something cross-cultured, inherent to every subject who possessed flesh. As a result, it may be a good theory for modern, globalized, and multicultural societies. For Caputo, ethics should be primarily concerned with the responsibility, understood in terms of responding to the Other, who comes to me in their vulnerable flesh. I believe that starting from vulnerability rather than from autonomy is a good first step, as it draws our attention to the enormity of suffering and injustice and motivates us to act against it. Moreover, vulnerability analysis leads to a more accurate description of the human condition. In this regard, Caputo remains consistent with a wide range of feminist thinkers, who have abandoned the primacy of autonomy in ethics and instead turned to a model of concern for the suffering and fragile life (for example, Judith Butler or the authors associated with the ethics of care). I believe, however, that Caputo's approach should be completed by the study of different forms of suffering and vulnerability as well as the aspects of human (maybe even non-human) autonomy.

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Summary

This article critically examines John D. Caputo's early ethical project, primarily as described in his work *Against Ethics*. The central theme of flesh in pain is crucial to his ethical approach. This paper highlights the positive aspects of his work while addressing its potential flaws.

Keywords: body, flesh, pain, suffering, moral obligation