Justice: Deconstruction and Hermeneutics

Interviews with Contemporary Thinkers

By

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CHAPTER 3

Hermeneutics and Justice: Richard Kearney

Richard Kearney is an Irish philosopher known for his work on imagination, hermeneutics, and narrative, as well as his explorations of hospitality, ethics, and postmodern spirituality. His philosophy centers on the idea of "the other" and the transformative power of imagination in ethical encounters, emphasizing that narrative and storytelling are fundamental to understanding ourselves and others. Kearney's thought is influenced by philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida, reflecting a deep commitment to bridging philosophical concepts with lived human experience.

One of Kearney's most significant contributions is his concept of anatheism, which he develops in his influential book Anatheism: Returning to God After God. Anatheism, which Kearney defines as a "return to God after God," is not a return to traditional religious belief but rather an openness to the sacred and the mysterious in a post-religious age. This approach, situated between atheism and theism, encourages a stance of "second faith" – a form of spiritual openness and ethical receptivity that seeks to engage with the divine without dogmatic certainty. For Kearney, anatheism is an ethical and imaginative response to the otherness of both the divine and human beings, inviting a renewed sense of wonder, humility, and hospitality.

Kearney's interest in narrative and hermeneutics is showcased in his earlier works, such as On Stories and The Wake of Imagination. In these books, he argues that storytelling and imagination are essential to human identity, shaping not only individual self-understanding but also collective social and cultural identities. The Wake of Imagination explores how imagination has evolved in Western culture, tracing its impact from mythological times to modernity. Kearney proposes that imagination allows us to see beyond the limits of our immediate reality, enabling empathy, creativity, and ethical openness. Through narrative, he suggests, we can transcend personal and cultural boundaries, fostering dialogue and connection across differences.

Another critical theme in Kearney's work is the ethics of hospitality, which he examines in Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness. Here, he explores how societies grapple with the presence of strangers and the unknown, urging an ethical response of openness rather than exclusion. Kearney argues that encountering the "stranger" – whether as an immigrant, a

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religious other, or even a feared aspect of ourselves – requires a willingness to embrace ambiguity and recognize the shared humanity that underlies difference. His approach to hospitality as an ethical imperative is especially relevant in today's globalized world, where cultural and religious diversity often lead to conflict rather than understanding.

Sema Cevirici Atilla [***SCA***]*: You have been in conversation with leading philosophers, literary theorists, anthropologists, and religious scholars such as Derrida, Levinas, Lyotard, and Gadamer. When did you come up with the idea of interviewing so many different philosophers on a wide range of topics? What motivated you to work on this research?*

Richard Kearney [**RK**]: I learned conversations at an early age in boarding school. I was educated by the Benedictines in a monastery called Glenstal Abbey in Ireland. I first learned philosophy around the age of fifteen. We were taught the philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre, and Camus. Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche were important as well. However, in any case, almost all the philosophers were atheists, and yet I was being taught by Benedictine monks who were Christians. It was very interesting, as they believed that unless you knew the arguments for atheism as well as the arguments for theism, theism would not be a genuine intellectual commitment, because you would not have a choice. From the very beginning, I learned that philosophy was about a dialectic or a dialogue between different opinions. It was indeed a very tolerant school and encouraged us to always listen to the arguments of opponents, in this instance Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, and Sartre, who argue that we cannot be free if God exists. Once you know the opponents' arguments, then you can have a genuine sense of recovering your own position. This is something that was confirmed when I went to Paris to study with Paul Ricoeur in 1977. In his seminar at the *Centre phénoménologique et herméneutique*, the first lesson he taught us doctoral students was that the shortest route from self to self is through the other. There is no access to truth, to understanding or to knowledge through oneself. In this sense, Descartes was wrong. He was right to start methodologically with doubting, yet he was wrong to conclude "*cogito ergo sum*." It is not "I think, therefore I am" but rather "We dialogue, therefore we are." The journey through the other was indeed very significant. To put it in technical terms, it was the primacy of heterology over egology. When Paul Ricoeur taught us about *le cogito*, he also called it the wounded cogito, the open cogito, the vulnerable cogito that was always exposed to others. In Paris, I also studied with Emmanuel Levinas. Both Ricoeur and Levinas were my dissertation directors at the University of Paris. According to Levinas, exposure to the other is how we first begin. The subject is not only a subject of knowledge but also a subject to the other. We are subjected to the call of the other, the summons of the other, the

needs of the other, and the commands of the other such as "Do not kill" or "Give me something to eat." These are primary before we ever have a sense of ourselves. That led then to my espousal of a hermeneutics of dialogue and a hermeneutics of hospitality, which I learned from Ricoeur and Levinas. Certainly, Ricoeur's philosophy of translation is also very influential. I have been writing about that in my recent book *Radical Hospitality*, co-authored with Melissa Fitzpatrick. It begins with an analysis of linguistic hospitality, which says that we are always translating back and forth between self and other. That is how I would begin to answer your questions.

SCA: *In an interview, Derrida was asked, "How can you read in the dark?" He replied: "We can only read in the dark." However, you do not agree with Derrida on this point. You argue that it is necessary to turn on the light a little bit. Obviously, you think that there is no absolute light for us mortals, but a flash of light is necessary to remove some of the darkness and confusion. What should we do if the light causes violence or the dark creates injustice? How can we save ourselves from this paradox?*

RK: I think too much darkness leads to ignorance and violence. Too much light or the presumption of too much light and of some kind of absolute access to perfect truth, perfect enlightenment, and perfect illumination can also lead to violence. Therefore, I would say we are reading in the twilight, or we are reading between light and darkness. Derrida was also a very good friend and teacher of mine in Paris. We had many dialogues, and I have great respect for Derrida. However, this would be a difference between his more deconstructive approach and my hermeneutic approach. For Derrida, we are always "reading in the dark," as you put it. Understanding, to the extent that we have it, is always a sort of a blind leap. It is what he calls a mad leap in the impossible. That is indeed a very Kierkegaardian position. I believe that it is inspired by his Judaism, even though he always said he rightly passed for an atheist. As he always acknowledged, he was trained in the Talmudic tradition of thinking and was very close to Jewish poets like Edmond Jabès, Nelly Sachs or Paul Celan. In the Judaic position, we do not have knowledge of God. You do not write God's name or have images of God; thou shalt have no graven image of God. It is certainly true for Islam as well, but in Judaism this sort of apophatic negative theology meant that if you encounter the absolute, it is always in the dark. In the Bible, you only see Yahweh from behind and you never see God face to face. For this reason, I think that was part of his thinking. Obviously, Derrida was coming from Kierkegaard on the one hand, as he said that Kierkegaard was his greatest influence as a thinker. I think his Judaic background also had an impact. I would say structuralism played a significant role in the sense that it is not the human subject that can know, since we

are propelled by unconscious structural forces. One can find that in Lacan and French psychoanalysis. It is the unconscious that speaks through us. We do not know what we are saying, we do not know what we mean, we do not mean what we say, and we do not say what we mean. Therefore, we are always caught in this contradiction where it is the unconscious and the structures of the unconscious and language that speaks through us. We are caught up in this web, this text of language and there is nothing outside of the text. That is where Derrida is coming from. I understand all that, but I would tend towards with Ricoeur and hermeneutics and Gadamer, and towards more of a sense of the phronetic, what Ricoeur calls a narrative understanding or a phronetic understanding, whereby we are instructed by stories, the wisdom of stories, and tradition, as Gadamer would say. So we do not start in the dark; we start from a position of being already in a conversation. It is not total light, but a certain amount of light and always striving for more light through dialogue. A matter of provisional, transitional, approximative direction, of limited guidance, one step at a time, 'muddling through', but not nothing, not nowhere. Not a blind leap in the night – or when it comes to religion, irrational fideism. That is my difference with Derrida and with Caputo, and even Levinas, for whom understanding the other is *too* impossible and there is too much of a rupture. Pure interruption, pure madness and invasion, even to the point of 'persecution' and 'trauma'(for Levinas). It is a philosophy of rupture rather than of translation. Translation always acknowledges that when you are dialoguing with another person or reading a text, something is always lost in translation. You never have the perfect translation and you must renounce trying to get the perfect translation. As Ricoeur says, the story of Babel was the attempt to reach perfect knowledge. In the end, the Tower of Babel falls, because they cannot have divine knowledge, Adamic knowledge, that is, perfect knowledge. We can only have approximations. In other words, we are always going through hermeneutic detours. There is no direct access to truth. That would be a critique of Heidegger, Hegel or even Husserl: in their different phenomenologies, they did seek some kind of access to truth. For Heidegger, it is *Dasein*, questioning of being, which is the short route to being, whereas the kind of hermeneutics that I am more interested in with Ricoeur's narrative hermeneutics and narrative imagination always works through mediations in culture, in nature and in our relations with other human beings. It means that we are always reading signs and never get to some perfect signified, transcendental signified of pure illumination, pure knowledge, yet we get intimations, little epiphanies, hints, and guesses. That is my difference from Derrida. I would say it is a difficult hermeneutic of truth rather than an impossible hermeneutic of truth.

SCA: *Do you think that deconstruction is monstrous?*
RK: Not at all. I think deconstruction is a wonderfully critical tool of reading that is absolutely indispensable. I have personally learned a huge amount from Derrida and from Caputo himself who is a great friend and a great colleague. Far from being a monster, deconstruction is indeed a great ally and a reminder that we never know completely or absolutely and that we never know enough. Still, I think sometimes it goes too far in the direction of subordinating the self so much to the other that the self is humiliated and incapacitated. If forgiveness, justice, and translation is impossible, then you would ask what is there to be done and why we should even bother. I know Derrida struggled with that, for he was very committed to a progressive politics and ethics, as is Caputo, both profoundly moral ethical beings. However, sometimes I find the philosophy is so dark, apocalyptic and impossible. I know Derrida would say that it is impossible, but you must keep going. It reminds me of Samuel Beckett who says, "I can't go on. I'll go on." Thus, I do not believe deconstruction is at all monstrous, but I think that sometimes it does not sufficiently distinguish between *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, as I put it in my book of that title. When Derrida talks about hospitality in his books, he says that when someone knocks at the door, you open unconditionally. You do not discriminate, decipher or discern between different kinds of strangers; you just let the other in. You do not know whether it is the Messiah or a murderer, as Derrida states. I think that is going too far in terms of an unconditional openness to the other, even if Derrida says it is impossible. The impression is that if we were really hospitable, having pure, absolute and unconditional hospitality would mean letting the other in without asking questions. Whereas I believe that you let the other in, but you also ask questions. That is the difference.

Now if you are God then you do not ask questions, because God accepts everybody. I think that is true of the Abrahamic God for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. God is all-forgiving and can do the impossible. It seems interesting that when Jesus Christ is on the cross, he does not say, "I forgive my enemies who are crucifying me." Rather he says, "God forgive them" because as a human being, Christ cannot forgive the human being. We human beings cannot forgive unconditionally. We do not have access to absolute hospitality, absolute justice, and absolute bargain. We wish we did and it would be wonderful if we had it, but we do not. We live in a world of finite limits and we have to accept that. Derrida and Caputo accept that too, of course, yet the aspiration, the dream, and the desire for absolute hospitality is impossible. And if it is impossible and we are not God, then we are always in a position of being somehow diminished, humiliated and contaminated. It's almost a throw-back to the Augustinian position that we are all fallen creatures, desiring god but

incapable of reaching God. A sense that we are always falling short of the mark. And this ontological humility can sometimes feel like humiliation, abasement, a certain sense of impotence. A sense that there is nothing to be done. That is the reason why Derrida and Caputo – Derrida in particular – were accused of nihilism and cynicism, which I think was unfair. The right wing denounced deconstruction as a secret agent of postmodern relativism and nihilism, saying that deconstruction is about undermining family values, traditional pieties and so on. That seems very wrong to me. The ultra-conservative critics ignored the fact that Caputo and Derrida are actually engaging in micro-logical critical readings of texts on justice, law, and rights. The reason they criticize deconstruction is because deconstruction can give the impression that there is no access to truth or the other, no way of knowing where we are going, and that we are always reading and walking in the dark. Thus we are lost, and then the right wing jumps on this, saying that they are misleading us into some kind of pessimistic apocalyptic nihilism. I think that is one of the reasons why there was a big controversy about Derrida getting a doctorate at Cambridge – with many academics saying they could not give it to the cynical nihilist. And they were educated academics, not right-wing fundamentalsits. It was actually distinguished scholars saying this. Some of them do believe that deconstruction is monstrous and Derrida is a monster. Nonetheless, I would consider Derrida and Caputo not monstrous at all but scrupulous close readers of texts invigilating our 'impossible' access to truth.

SCA: *If the other transcends all our categories of interpretation and representation, then how can we tell the difference between the good and the bad? You must have some kind of critical hermeneutic to make this distinction. How does this hermeneutic make a just differentiation between the benevolent and the evil?*

RK: One can never do it absolutely. We have no absolute access to the absolute. Therefore, it is always a matter of negotiations, navigations, narrations, and mediations. We are always doing the best we can to translate a situation that we confront into as just and fair a judgment as we can. There are no absolute criteria, but there is a plurality of signposts. One of them is the Aristotelian tradition of phronesis, of practical wisdom. That is available for us in the philosophical tradition. It is not absolute, because phronesis as practical wisdom is not *sophia* or *theoria*, as Aristotle says. It is not perfect analytic transparent knowledge or absolute knowledge. It is provisional knowledge where you try to do your best. He compares it to the architect who might have a good model or a good idea, say a blueprint of the building that they want to make. Still, they have to contend with the structure and the quality of the soil, the climatic conditions, whether it is on a mountain or in a valley, whether there is water available or not, whether it is dry or moist. All of these circumstances

and conditions inform the ultimate making of the building. In other words, you can set out with an ideal, but that is not always what you will end up with, since the ideal has to be translated into the limits, the conditions, the circumstances, and the contingencies of the real. So, one is always translating. The Aristotelian notion of phronesis would be one model which you learn through habituation and through responding as wisely as possible to the situation, given the fact that you bring a certain number of presuppositions from your tradition, as Gadamer would say. However, your presuppositions and ideals, whether they are religious or you get them from your spiritual tradition or the Abrahamic biblical tradition, can be values that you bring with you. You can bring with you the Greek and Roman values of law and justice, and so on. Those are signposts that I am taking from Aristotle. There is also the tradition of the Enlightenment which emphasizes the rights of man – that is another set of signposts. Unlike Descartes, I do not personally believe in innate ideas, such as that we have an innate idea of God or the good. As a hermeneutic thinker, I do not appeal to innate ideas as such, yet I think we do have experiences phenomenologically, which all human beings share to some degree, of exposure to other people who call to us in their need. For that, it does not matter whether you are Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Zoroastrian or atheist. The appeal of the other person that says, "Do not kill and give me food," in Levinas' words, is something that calls us to justice phenomenologically. Thus, it is not just a question of us in our own minds saying, "How do I know what is the right thing to do?" or "How do I judge between good and evil?" There is somebody who is telling me to do good. In other words, that person is saying, "Share your food with me, give me shelter. I am a widow, an orphan, a stranger at the door." When that happens, every human being is summoned and called to be. We can also refuse that, as we are free to say yes or no. Still, it is a phenomenological summons that comes to us in that moment. They do not mention, "as Jesus says, as the prophet says or even as Aristotle says." They just say, "Do not kill me, give me food." That is a phenomenological appeal that comes to us irrespective of traditions or our hermeneutic presuppositions.

SCA: *Levinas says the other is always the orphan, the widow and the stranger that is the victim, not the victimizer. As you well know, Levinas was subjected to serious criticism after his statements about the Sabra and Shatila massacre in a radio interview. In this regard, can we arrive at a decision about whether the other is the victim or the victimizer by getting rid of our belief systems and ideologies?*

RK: That was probably Levinas' political Zionism or his moral commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people. However, he was wrong in that statement, which to me is just a reminder of how difficult moral judgments are. Even somebody like Levinas in that situation was not able to hear the cry of the

victim in the camps at Sabra and Shatila. He was deafened by the cry of his own people, whether it was in the Holocaust or elsewhere, such that he was not able to listen to the cry of the stranger. He was listening to the cry of the victims in his own tradition. It is a good reminder of how somebody who has devoted his life to moral philosophy, as in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, and who has contributed arguably more than anybody in the 20th century to a phenomenology of justice, hospitality and goodness, which claimed God is the absolute goodness, could make a mistake when it came to the Palestinian-Israeli situation. That is just a reminder to me that no moral philosophy has the truth and is impervious to error. In fact, I would say maybe Levinas was too lacking in hermeneutics, because he appeals to the phenomenological call of the other that breaks through all my previous oppositions, hermeneutic interpretations, narratives, memories, and traditions. Hermeneutics is not a good word for Levinas. With regard to the Palestinian-Israeli situation, he was not aware of his own hermeneutic prejudices in that instance. So that answers the second part of your question. He was not really aware of his own hermeneutic ideologies, as they work unconsciously. Therefore, that is where phenomenology needs hermeneutics to support it and give it a certain distance from a primary sensibility. Apparently, Levinas was working from sensibility, which, as he says, is the primary source of morality. If sensibility is the primary source of morality, it must be careful not to become removed from phronetic and narrative understanding, which would be much more aware of how ideologies inform the way we make our judgments. I agree with you that Levinas needs more hermeneutics than that.

I would say Gadamer and Ricoeur sometimes need more phenomenology of the flesh. I have critiqued Ricoeur and hermeneutics in that regard. At times hermeneutics can become too textual and can forget the flesh. For instance, Ricoeur's early work on the phenomenology of the will was very based on a phenomenology of the body, passions, the flesh, and so on. In 1960, with *The Symbolism of Evil*, he turned more towards a textual hermeneutics. He always said that hermeneutics needs to be grafted onto phenomenology and phenomenology always needs to ground hermeneutics. I think he was right about that, but in his later work at the very end, he was coming back to more of a balance between a hermeneutics of the text and a phenomenology of the body. I think that is right and I try to create that balance in my own work as well.

SCA: *You said in an interview, "I learned a lot from deconstruction, but I am closer to hermeneutics." Do you agree with Caputo's definition of deconstruction as radical hermeneutics? How would you evaluate the relationship between hermeneutics and deconstruction in the context of a concern for justice?*

RK: In the first instance, I appreciate John Caputo's work on hermeneutics and his embrace of what he calls *radical hermeneutics*, which for Jack is another

name for deconstruction. Jack does not see any difference between deconstruction and radical hermeneutics. So, I do see a tension between deconstruction and hermeneutics. Therefore, I propose *diacritical hermeneutics* as opposed to radical hermeneutics, although myself and Jack are very much in dialogue. It is a very robust creative friendly dialogue that has been going on for more than 20 years now. You could put it in simple terms as: Jack is representing Jacques Derrida and I am representing Paul Ricoeur. Actually, we both occupy a position somewhere in the middle between those thinkers. My preference for diacritical hermeneutics over radical hermeneutics is that as a linguistic term, diacritical comes from diacritical signs, which are inflections such as diaeresis, accents or umlaut that create a slight difference in meaning by virtue of accents. That is, I am using that as a model or even a metaphor for a certain way of reading that is not a reading in the dark, as Derrida and Caputo would say all reading is. That was actually a phrase used by Derrida in a response to me at the Villanova Conference organized by Jack Caputo about 30 years ago. Then, I said to Jacques Derrida in the presence of Jack Caputo: "Is deconstruction always a reading in the dark?" To which he replied: "Yes, it is always a reading in the dark." My response to that would be no. Sometimes it is written in the dark, and that is deconstruction or radical hermeneutics, where one deals with impossible meaning, aporias, contradictions, undecidabilities, and so on. That is important and necessary. It can be seen as a philosophical equivalent to negative theology. It is what you cannot say and trying to speak the unspeakable, but I think it is unthinkable. Thus, that is significant and there is definitely a role for that. Still, it is only one aspect of hermeneutics. It is hermeneutics at the edge, hermeneutics at the limit, hence radical hermeneutics, whereas I have been trying to develop a hermeneutics which operates in a gray zone. It is not pure light and it is not pure dark. It is in a gray zone. That's why it calls for diacritical reading, or reading between the lines, as it were. In my hospitality project *Guestbook* and my book *Radical Hospitality*, I discuss intermediary meaning, mediated meanings, double meanings, covered meanings, symbolic meanings, mythical meaning, unconscious meanings, ulterior meanings, all of which call for interpretation. I do not believe that we always have to read in the dark or take blind leaps of faith as Derrida talks about ultimate justice, ultimate alternatives, and ultimate forgiveness. We can dream of these impossibilities and desire them which is kind of a madness, as he says. I believe that is important, yet that is the language of the prophet Jeremiah. We also need Isaiah and we need to bring some light to the dark and have this gray zone, as I call it, where diacritical hermeneutics works. I can point out the example of hospitality. The word *hostis* is at the root of hospitality and hostility. We need to discern, decipher and read between the lines to be

able to distinguish, discriminate, discern, however modestly and provisionally, between the *hostis* as enemy and the *hostis* as friend. *Hostis* as in the instance of somebody who is directing a missile into your local school, supermarket or apartment block, that is, a stranger who is an enemy trying to kill you, versus somebody knocking at the door. When you open it, you welcome that person into your door, because that person seeks shelter and food. We have to be able to tell the difference between the two. Derrida says, and this was a dialogue we had together in Dublin, that when somebody knocks at the door, you do not know whether it is the Messiah or a psychotic murderer, and you cannot tell the difference. That would be pure hospitality or absolute hospitality. Derrida accepts, as does Jack Caputo, that real hospitality is always a compromise. You need certain parameters, yet most of the time within a series of parameters, guidelines, indications, and signposts which we need, we never get pure light, but we are not in utter darkness, either. That is the diacritical move of always trying to discern and interpret according to very subtle fluctuations and modifications of meaning, as when we relate to somebody having a conversation. We do not really know the other person, yet we know something about the other person. This goes for all our relationships to people, to God and absolute others. In everyday life, we are always in a gray zone of mediated meanings in our relationship with all three others. That is true of human beings. It is also true of our relationship to other species and to the things of the earth in our ecological age. That's why you have to be able to interpret and, as I put it, read between the lines.

SCA: *In your book* Strangers, Gods and Monsters, *you state that Lyotard rejects any attempt to express the horror of the Holocaust because such an effort would undermine the uniqueness of the Holocaust by comparing it with other genocides or other atrocities in history. Therefore, for Lyotard and other skeptics, no analysis of the memory is possible, and only what cannot be remembered is just. You do not agree with this view, because you think if representation reduces the horror of Auschwitz, as Lyotard puts it, then we might be taking a wrong path by rejecting representation. Can we say that your definition of justice differs from what is unrepresentable, incomparable and indeterminable, and is closer to an area of representation that preserves differences? How would you define justice in this context?*

RK: I understand what Lyotard is saying in light of Adorno's famous question: "after Auschwitz who can write poetry'. It is so horrible nothing can be said. The only appropriate response is silence. I resist this position, however, because, as Levinas once said, if we are silent about the Holocaust the Nazis have won. So it's one thing to make a hyperbolic statement with Adorno and Lyotard, that the evil of the Holocaust is unsayable, unthinkable, unimaginable, unrepresentable

– which is true up to a point. But only up to a point. We shouldn't stop there. If anything, that is where we should *start,* insisting that in spite of its unspeakability we still have to try to say something that records the horrors and the trauma, albeit in traces and charged signs. We are ethically obliged to remember what happened, the horror which took place, and to do so in two senses: in the sense of history and in the sense of story. First, as history, we need remember the Holocaust by counting the bodies, thereby resisting the deniers and 'negationists'. And the same goes for the ethical duty of narrative memory when it comes to other genocides and unspeakable crimes which many wish to deny – the Armenian and Rwandan genocides, the Irish or Ukraine famines and so on. And it's also important to be able to compare and contrast different genocides and collective traumas. Each one genocide is utterly unique, but its suffering must also be shareable. If we cannot imagine what another people suffers, we cannot empathise. It is crucial to be able to bear witness and sympathise with the horrors that other people endure, to experience a solidarity of sufferings across racial, cultural and historical divides. There are no exclusive victims of evil or victors of good. 'Nous sommes tous des juifs allemands', as Daniel Cohn-Bendit said in 1968. In narrative imagination, we are all Armenians, Rwandans, Ukrainian and so on. So basically, what I'm saying is we need to remember historically that this happened and tell it as it happened. That's the duty of history – to tell it as it happened. And then, second, comes the duty of story: to represent and reimagine it 'as if' if happened like this and 'as if' we were there to experience that suffering. So, whether it's Art Spiegelman's comic strip story about Nazi cats hounding Jewish mice or whether it is Claude Lanzmann's film, *Shoah,* or Stephen Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*, or the multiple stories and *Memoirs* written by Primo Levi or Milena or other survivors of genocides, it is crucial that such stories – using powerful narrative imagination – be told so that we can not just know the facts (which is the crucial function of history) but also feel the horror, be moved and struck by the pain, so that we say 'this must never happen again'. We need powerful literary, as well as empirical-forensic, testaments to the Holocaust. So that can remember both what happened and how it happened. Both the telling it as and telling it as if, are necessary for a full account.

SCA: *Can you say more about this double hermeneutic duty to remember horror by both history and story?*

RK: Let's come back to the Holocaust, about which so much has been written. The crimes and the sufferings of the concentration camps need to be remembered lest the Nazis win by history consigning it to silence and allowing the possibility that it happen again. Let us not forget the infamous Wannsee Convention of 1942 where Hitler and Himmler gathered the SS leaders to discuss

the 'Final Solution' in Berlin and had them all swear a vow of total secrecy. Regarding the liquidation of Jews, all empirical or logistical evidence was to be removed. Nobody must record or represent it. The Nazi order was clear: don't speak about the Holocaust under any circumstances. Then along come Adorno or Lyotard after the war and repeat the injunction, albeit for very opposite reasons, namely – representing or writing about the holocaust is to betray its unspeakable and unimaginable horror. The only appropriate and respectful response being 'silence'. But what we all need to say about the holocaust is what Daniel Cohn-Bendit (a German Jew) said about all those taking part in the 1968 revolt (in France and US and Prague and Northern Ireland and elsewhere) – 'nous sommes tous des juifs allemands!'. We must all empathise and imagine ourselves as each other and with each other. That is what solidarity with the oppressed and the suffering throughout the world demands. There is a recognition of the uniqueness of the Jewish shoah but also an awareness of the quasi-universal character of all human suffering and horror. Without diminish the singularity of any particular people we can sympathise with the pain of all peoples. Uniqueness of unspeakable trauma does not mean exclusiveness or exclusion from fellow suffering, from fellow solidarity with everybody else suffering evil and injustice in the world.

It is crucial that we continue trying to represent the Holocaust or other unspeakable genocides and historical traumas. While acknowledging that such acts of representation can never be complete or even adequate – there will always be something lost (even perhaps 'betrayed') in the translation from unspeakably to speech or image. There are limits to what and how evil can be communicated, but to refuse to communicate it at all is to give into it. It is to risk making evil irresistible, totally incomprehensible – to succumb to its demonic and deranging mystique, so to speak. We have to keep on trying to represent the unrepresentable, to speak the unspeakable so that, as Primo Levi says, it may never happen again. It's a huge ethical problem that we have to confront if we want to resist the dehumanizing lure of radical evil. Let me give you an example from the story of Schindler's List. I was giving a talk on Stephen Spielberg's film on the subject at McGill University in Montreal about 30 years ago and at the end of my talk a little old lady came down who'd been sitting at the back and she said to me: "I was one of the survivors of the Holocaust, I was on Schindler's List. I escaped the camps thanks to Oscar Schindler and managed to emigrate to Montreal where I've been living since. And for fifty years I never spoke to anybody about my experience. I couldn't. I never spoke to my husband, my children, my doctor, my Rabbi, my psychiatrist – nobody – until I saw the film made by Spielberg and when I saw myself being played by a fictional character I suddenly was able to return to the death camp, to return

to my inexperienced experience through the detour of representation, vicariously, by proxy, through the mediation of imagination – an historical fiction with actors and imaginary scenarios depicting the original horror. Then and only then was I able to speak of it all to my family and friends about what had happened'. In sum, she needed the hermeneutic detour of imaginary mediation, so that she could see herself again through the eyes of another, re-member herself so to speak, rejoining the two separated parts of herself, namely, her past traumatized self (frozen in time) and her present living self. This is the greatness of story when it comes to history, of art when it comes to pain, of narrative when it comes to trauma (what Freud called the transition from melancholy to mourning through the 'talking cure'). But imagination is not of course always on the side of the angels. There can be bad representations too – that distort, disable and dishonor the pain of the past. There are many examples of propagandistic or abusive representations used for distorted ideological purposes, or simply for cheap soap opera sensationalism and Hollywood escapism of facile frisson and *Schadenfreude*. So to serve memory well, we need – I repeat – to observe: 1) the historical recording of reality (the 'hard facts' of empirical forensic evidence which gainsays the Holocaust deniers and negationists); and 2) the art of good storytelling which supplements and complements historical truth with affective and imaginative truth. We need to both tell it as it actually happened in the past and relive it as if we are experiencing that past (through imagination). There's a double duty of representation, of just memory – to tell the past as both history and story.

SCA: *You say that making a choice between Chora and God is a necessity for believers. Because, for believers, this cannot remain ambiguous, otherwise you rightly say that the God of religion would have turned into an absurdity. Do you think deconstructionist indeterminacy and undecidability turn into a problem rather than a functional one when it comes to belief? Is faith, like justice, a state of urgency that cannot wait?*

RK: I would say that deconstruction has an indispensable role in making us vigilant. Deconstruction teaches us to attend to micrological nuances of reading and the tacit undecidabilities of meaning. So, it definitely has a role in the work of interpretation; but I repeat – it is not the last word. At best, it is the beginning, it exposes the limits and parametres of what we can know, say and believe. You start with the impossibility of belief but you don't stop with the impossibility of belief. When Mary tells Gabriel that what he is announcing is impossible (*adunaton*), he replies that what is impossible to humans is not impossible to God. In genuine acts of faith, you go from the impossibility of belief to the possibility, but that possibility is not an easy or immediate possibility. It's a possibility beyond the impossibility of belief. A belief after

disbelief. Or what I call anatheism as a movement beyond theism and atheism to a second moment of belief (see *Anatheism; Returning to God After God*). Deconstruction provides the atheistic moment of disbelief, atheism, impossibility. As Derrida says, "I rightly pass for an atheist'. Deconstruction is a-theism. And this can be read, from a religious standpoint, as opening up the possibility-beyond-impossibility of a 'religion without religion' or what Derrida and Caputo also call a 'messianicity without messianism'. I see this as a salutary and preparatory moment in the life of authentic faith. A sort of preliminary or purgative atheism equivalent to (but not identical to) what the John of the Cross and other mystics called the dark night of the soul – a moment of doubt, unknowing, abandonment in the very midst of one's journey towards or back to God. What the Patristic fathers called 'negative theology, a via negative which opens a way towards the possibility of a god beyond or before or beneath 'God'. It is what Keats calls 'negative capabiliity' – the ability to 'be in the midest of mystery, uncertainty and doubt without the irritable reaching after fact and reason'. It is why Eckhart prayed to God to rid him of God. And it is that feeling of abandon and abandonment which even Christ experienced on the cross when he cried out, in a moment of terrible darkness – "my God my God why have you forsaken me". An indispensable prelude to his ultimate leap of anatheist faith: 'Unto thee I commend my spirit'. The 'Thee' here being the God beyond the the old God. The God of new life and rebirth after the death of the old God of triumph, power and theodicy (who did not rescue him from the cross or turn all stone to bread during the famous temptation of Christ in the desert). The God after the God of the Grand Inquisitor (so brilliantoy portrayed by Dostoyevsky). Reconstructive anatheism may (or may not) follow from such a moment of deconstructive atheism. But it cannot exist without it. Otherwise religion can remain at the level of dogmatic certitude, a naive childish passive faith in a Alpha-Mega-Omni God of power and might, magic and manipulation – so powerfully exposed by Freud, Marx and Nietzsche – what Ricoeur calls the three great masters of the 'hermeneutics of Suspicion'. To which list we could add Derrida and the deconstructionists.

Which raises the old problem of evil and theodicy, going back to Voltaire's critique of Pangloss in *Candide* or more recently, Elie Wiesel's claim that 'God died in the hangman's noose in Auschwitz'. The old question: how can God be good when we look around us and see evil everywhere, to which theodicy replies that evil is all part of the hidden will of God. Ins pite of all the earthquakes and genocides and wars and violations of man against man, we are still living in the 'best of all possible worlds'(Leibniz). We are all actors in the secret plot of divine redemption through suffering. Against such perverse and pathological theism, we need a good dose of atheist deconstruction – all the

hermeneutics of suspicion we can get. So that a possible God may be reborn, may return after (*ana*) the death of God. It's not necessarily a different God, it can be the old God returning as new wine in new wineskins, the promise of a former god or gods – as announced in the Quran, the Torah, the Gospels, the Upanishads – but now recovered, reimagined and retrieved in new ways after atheistic deconstruction. A radical deconstructive hermeneutics of religion is not just an act of destruction (as it is often misread) but an invitation to re-read the sacred scriptures and re-engage with traditional inheitied ceremonies and rituals but in a new diacritical way. That is what the Greek prefix 'ana' means, as defined in the Oxford English History: again, back, after, up in time and space. It is a moment of return which, if faith is authentic, takes the form of a spiral (repetition forward) rather than a vicious circle (repetition backward).

SCA: *As you know, Levinas, referring to the example of Cain and Abel, states that all immorality begins when we lose our sense of responsibility. When God asks Cain where is your brother, Cain says, "Am I my brother's keeper? According to Levinas, with this Cain's answer, all kinds of immorality had begun. Levinas continues, "of course I am my brother's keeper. I am a moral person, if I don't look for a special reason to be a moral person. Because my brother's responsibility is what makes me an ethical being." Add to this, there is a passage in your book* Strangers Gods and Monsters: *"The world belongs to everyone, but within the borders of nation-states it is more important to some. Therefore, immigration law is inevitable, and deconstructionists accept it. But they keep insisting that there is something beyond the law. That thing is justice." In the context of both examples, how do you see current immigration policies of countries, "who are our brothers" and what are our responsibilities towards them as their keeper? To be fair towards our brothers and sisters, should we go beyond the law?*

RK: That is a great question and it is where deconstruction and hermeneutics need each other. It is where Caputo's radical hermeneutics and my diacritical hermeneutics may complement each other. The world does belong to everybody and it is unfair that certain people – those in Western Europe, the United States or the Northern Hemisphere – have plenty of resources while those who live in certain countries in the Southern Hemisphere are starving or living in appalling circumstances of war, poverty and disease. It is unfair that one part of the world has everything and another does not, which is a fact. Radical hermeneutics would say the world belongs to everybody, therefore unconditional pure absolute hospitality should have no borders. Nobody should need a passport to ask for bread and shelter. It should be an unconditional welcome. In a way, that unconditional welcome is what gods do. It is what Allah would enjoin, or Yahweh or Christ. You accept everybody. But we also live in a world where we are not gods. It would be ideal if we could practice divine justice,

divine hospitality and divine forgiveness everyday of our lives. But we do not alas. Yet we do our best in spite of everything, and perhaps trying to respond to a divine call in the face of the other. We do our best to discern, discriminate and read diacritically the faces of strangers at our borders and in our midst. We live in that tension – which is often tragically limited and disappointing. So we need radical hermeneutics to say everybody is welcome, and then we need diacritical hermeneutics to say, "Unfortunately, we do not have enough housing at the moment to take on a million people, but we can take a thousand. We do not have enough food to take a thousand, so we can take a hundred." That limitation is our finitude. It is the fact that we live in a finite, not an infinite, world. The absolute is the divine. But humans can aspire to be divine and we can be called by the divine to always be more just, always be more forgiving more hospitable. That is the call of the absolute which Levinas and Derrida have done so much to foreground and emphasize. But then we have the hermeneutics of our everyday situations with limits, finitude and tragic shortcomings. There we are faced with the difficult task of dialogue and negotiation, of trial and error, of risk and wager. How is justice possible while safeguarding or respecting the civic rights and resources of our own community?

Let's take a classic example from Kant. If somebody knocks at the door and asks you if you are hiding someone, Kant says you have to tell the truth whatever the circumstances, which seems ridiculous to me when it comes to reality. Because if you are hiding Jewish children and a Nazi comes to the door, you should not say "Yes, I'm hiding the Jewish children." Instead, you should tell a lie in order to protect them. Sometimes one has to compromise and accept the lesser evil in a world of tragic limits. Moving from Kant to Dorothy Day, the Catholic worker, activist who used to run hospitality houses in rundown areas of New York, Detroit, and Chicago. When she was running shelters for battered women, the homeless and the hungry, she would have a real dilemma sometimes when there would be a knock on the door at midnight and somebody would ask to be taken in. This is where diacritical hermeneutics comes in: she had to weigh up her responsibility to decide who to welcome and who to refuse. To decide to take in someone who genuinely needed help, food, and shelter as opposed to someone who was coming in to violate a battered woman whom she had let in one hour earlier. She was responsible for trying to discern, however difficult it might be, whether this is Jesus knocking at the door ("I am standing and knocking at your door") or whether it is Jack the Ripper wanting to come in and violate the women and children that she is protecting. So that is a terribly difficult moment, because when the door opens and you see the stranger, you do not know whether it is Jesus, Jack the Ripper or a combination of both. You have to make a call, which is definitely not a blind call. It is

discernment, an interpretation, a reading, even though it happens instantaneously. You cannot go and have a philosophy seminar about it. You have a couple of seconds or minutes to decide, to talk to the person, look at them, weight them up. You try to discern diacritically the inflections at the level of word, body, mood, and gesture to decide whether that person is a violent threaet or somebody who genuinely needs help or, sometimes even a mixture of both. These are the hard cases encountered by a hermeneutics of hospitality. Another example one might give is *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo where Monseigneur Myriel takes Jean Valjean into his house and gives him food and shelter. It is a discernment that he makes. Though Jean Valjean is a criminal and nobody else in the village of Digne would welcome him (he wears an identity marker designating that he is a criminal), Monseigneur Myriel can discern diacritically that maybe there is something in Jean Valjean that is inherently decent and redeemable. A wager that if he is received as a guest by a host and given food and shelter he will actually change and become a better human being. The possibility of transformation through grace and hospitality.

These are the kinds of diacritical interpretations and readings that we perform all the time. They are difficult, and there is a reason for that. It is not only about reading texts but also reading people's faces, actions, tones, as I try to show in recent works such *Carnal Hermeneutics*[1] and *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action.*[2] Therefore, we need to supplement radical hermeneutics that says everybody is welcome with a diacritical hermeneutics that says everybody is welcome under certain conditions. We acknowledge that there are certain limits, and we cannot but be sad about those. As Derrida once said, you cannot feed every cat in the street but you should feed some. Derrida admits that we have to make compromises. Nevertheless, my point would be that those compromises are actually very common, and it is what we do the ninety percent of the time when we are making those qualifications, modifications, ponderings, mediations in order to have as much peace, justice, forgiveness, and hospitality as possible.

SCA: *It seems that the problem of evil will not come to an end as long as humans exist, yet the end of evil would also depend on human existence. How hopeful are you for humanity, the future and our current world politics with regard to justice?*

RK: I'm hopeful because the alternative is too awful to contemplate. I believe in a hope without hope – similar to the notion of God without God, beyond God, after God of anatheism. There's also a hope beyond hope, without hope, after hope understood as false hope. Buddhism and Albert Camus have very

1 Edited by Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, Fordham University Press – 2015.

2 Richard Kearney and Melissa Fitzpatrick, Fordham University Press – 2021.

keen critiques of illusory hope which offers facile consolations and cheap grace, refusing to face up to the tragedy of reality. To that extent we need to deconstruct and surpass what Kierkegaard calls the facile hope of Prometheus without succumbing to apocalyptic pessimism or nihilism, namely the passive quietism that says there's nothing to be done. Therefore, we need a real hope beyond naive hope. And this usually requires some passage through a moment of hopelessness, just as anatheism requires an atheistic purge of dogmatic theism. It is the same with hope. It is one of the three great virtues – faith, hope and charity. We have talked about faith and love (mercy) earlier. I think the same process needs to be undergone with regard to hope so that we can move from a facile infantile hope – "I hope Santa Claus will come", "I hope I'll be a millionaire in the morning" which in adults can express itself as an escapist denial of reality – to a deconstructed hope. However, this deconstruction should not be seen as the last word but as a necessary prelude to a renewed hope after the journey through hopelessness. T.S. Eliot talks about 'waiting without hope', so as to make way for a new hope beyond hope, after hope. Look at the current nature of our ecological crisis, our climate emergency, the rise of totalitarianism in so many parts of the world, the threat to democracy and freedom as well as global pandemic. When you look around you, there is so much suffering, and yet as a Christian I would look again here, while taking on board the Buddhist critique of illusory hope, at Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*. Moltmann was was a Protestant, German theologian of the 20th century who had a big influence on the theology of liberation in Latin America, which struggled for justice against the totalitarian dictatorships and regimes. But the moment in Christianity already mentioned – and you can also find similar ones in Islam, Judaism and, other religions – is when the crucified Christ says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He has given up hope, and that is a moment of absolute hopelessness, but then he moves on to what I would call an anatheist hope when he says, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." He feels abandoned by the Mega-God of power and might, a God who does not come to save him, anymore than he saved the Jews in Auschwitz, or the dying and starving in Somalia or Eritrea or Syria or Ukraine. We have to give up hope in a God who will come down and rescue us on the cross, in the gas chambers, in the killing fields of Cambodia or the famine fields of Somalia. And then we are free to hope in spite of everything, after hope, beyond hope. We can hope in the God of little things, of 'the least of these'(*elachistos*), namely a God without power, a God of impossible possibility, a God who may be in every moment, however impossible it may seem, suffering and acting with us in our darkest moments (*Emmanuel*). I think the hope in the impossible becoming

possible is fundamental to genuine faith. This is the opposite of the God triumphant, as witnessed in the triumphalist Christianity of the Inquisition and the Crusades, those who support the likes of Donald Trump or Vladimir Putin. We know about the perversions of religions, yet we still hope in the alternative 'power of the powerless', a *potestas* of divine *potentia* (translating the Greek *dunamis*) which Cusanus calls 'God as *Posse*' and we call the God who May Be. A *Posse* which has nothing to do with *imperium.* Here we hope anatheistically that love can still exist and prevail in spite of all. This is what Etty Hillesum discovered when she was in a concentration camp: even in the most appalling circumstances, there was the possibility of sharing your bread, comforting somebody on the way to the gas chamber or just putting your hand on another person's hand. That can happen in spite of everything. This is what I would call a second anatheist hope beyond both naïve hope and despondent hopelessness.

The same anatheist dialectic applies to a hermeneutics of love. Love, as we all know, is often naïve – a sort of infatuation or obsessive attachment. You are not really in love with the other person; you are in love with the idea of love. In Kierkegaard's *Diary of a Seducer*, we can see his description of Don Juan, and we see the theme of the erotic aesthetic in several of his other works as well. For Kierkegaard, as later for Freud, we need a radical hermeneutic deconstruction of that notion of love as an aesthetic unconscious projection that is all about ego fantasy and really nothing about the other person. It is neither attentive nor receptive. As Kierkegaard says, that aesthetic project undergoes what he calls *taedium vitae*, that is, weariness of life. The aesthetic project burns out and then the person trapped in the aesthetic stage has a choice between giving up altogether on love and becoming a cynic, or moving on to what he calls a choice for the ethical or the religious. If one chooses the ethical, then it is a return to love in terms of serving your neighbor through human affection, service, welfare, marriage, and family, all of those commitments to other people beyond the ego fantasy of the aesthete. Or one can chose the religious where we commit ourselves to an impossible love in the absolute. I would say that love after love, after the first infectious love, is ethical-religious. It occupies a position between our moral-social-political need to help our fellow humans and the desire for an absolute impossible love. And though Kierkegaard separated ethical and religious love, I think (with Levinas) that the two are often fundamentally mixed. When we are called to share bread with someone, we respond to both an ethical need from particular unique men and women in the here and now and what I would call a quasi-messianic appeal to all men and women, to humanity as it were. A fundamental solidarity with everyone. In other words, genuine love is both singular and absolute It involves mercy for

the suffering hungry person in front of me and a compassion with all suffering humanity.

Dostoevsky touches on something like this when he writes (in the person of Zossima) that 'Everyone is responsible for everyone else, but I am more responsible for everyone else than anyone else'. When you are confronted with the suffering of others in an earthquake, it does not matter whether you are Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Jew, you dig the bodies of the children out of the rubble and you turn to your neighbor and say, "I know you are suffering, because I have lost a child and you have lost a child." Love here is absolute in that it absolves itself from obstacles and division, it works across borders and boundaries, in spite of all particular differences of race, color or creed. The Hebrew word for mercy is *racham* which shares the same root as recham, meaning womb. It comes from the stomach, the belly, the core of your being. That is where love for the absolute comes from, for all fellow human beings (who for Levinas are traces of God). In fact, the Buddhists would go further – and I agree with them – and say that it is a compassion for all living sentient beings. Coming to the third term of the trinity of faith, hope, and love, this is the root of absolute love. It is actually what many call God. Mercy for the widow, the orphan and the stranger. A messsianic love beyond ID papers, rules, regulations, borders, and passports. It is that movement beyond ego projections or fantasy attachments that may first seem impossible, but then becomes possible in an act of radical hospitality of the heart – a loving possibility beyond the impossible. That is what I mean by a carnal hermeneutics of the heart which makes the impossible possible.

SCA: *At this point in the debate on justice, it seems that justice is a horizon that can never be reached, and that injustice is a reality. For this reason, can we say the best way to achieve justice is to define injustice and eliminate the cases of injustice instead of describing justice and developing theories?*

RK: A theory of justice will never do full justice to justice. Justice is ultimately about responding to the call of the other in the immediacy of the moment – "Where are you? Share your bread, Do not kill" (Levinas again). It stems from the primary summons from the other person in need. Then, we make laws which are necessary for a greater distribution of goods, universal healthcare for as many people as possible. Laws govern the moral-political-social operations of justice. But our human laws and conventions, however just, will never be just enough, and therefore there is a justice beyond all our laws. Derrida and Caputo would call that messianic or absolute justice, which I sympathize with, because even if it is summoned in the here and now of suffering people it is always in part still to come. So, justice is ironically something that is always already there, for it is in our everyday acts, however simple, of being kind, good, generous and just to those in our world and at the same time, always still to come. A justice

that can never be fully grasped, realized or defined, but that calls us to act more justly all the time and to never stop acting thus. Like Samuel Beckett's unnamable narrator who says "I can't go on. I'll go on." It is i performative contradiction in that I cannot achieve justice for all, or even enough justice for anyone person here and now, but I will keep on trying. Or like Camus' Sisyphus raising the rock to the top of the hill, though never getting to the top of the hill, because absolute justice is God and human mortals are not gods. Still, you can always desire God, work and struggle towards God, all the while and thinking as best you can theoretically and hermeneutically, trying to imagine more what justice would be like by writing works of philosophy and theology, of literature and art. In other words, I am not against the theory of justice – whether it is John Rawls or Hannah Arendt or anyone else – but the theory is always inadequate and is never sufficient *vis*-à-*vis* the fullness of justice. That's why, any theory of justice needs to be supplemented by imagination – the desire to always imagine new kinds of possibilities for justice in the future. For example, if we do not think about the possibility of ecological justice for our world, if we do not plan for it and imagine what the extinction of the world would be like or what a response to that threat might entail, we will just slip into paralysis. Thus, we need a theory and a project of justice, an imagining of justice, which can move from dream to praxis, from text to action. You don't give up because you do not have full absolute justice now. You keep going. I think the answer to the question of what is to be done is always more just thinking, more just imagining, and most importantly more just action. The model of diacritical hermeneutics suggests we move from action to text then back to action. In other words, we move from trying to be just in our everyday actions – of sharing bread and not killing our neighbor – to texts where we write, think, theorize and discuss (as you and I are endeavoring to do in this dialogue) so we can be hopefully more just afterwards. We do philosophy and make literature, we read the scriptures and classics about love and justice, and then return to action in the ordinary universe. The return to action is hermeneutically and diacritically mediated by the passage through thinking, writing, and imagining. It is what Ricoeur calls the movement from prefiguration (our every efforts to transform our world) to configuration (the hermeneutic writing and reading of texts) to refiguration (the return from text to action). Thinking begins and end in action. What I call anacarnation. And the end of it all is peace.

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