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Book Review

Ethics, more or less

A review of David Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology and the Future of Faith*

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David Newheiser's *Hope in a Secular Age* makes the case for an ethical discipline characterised by self-critical hope as a source for unpredictable transformation in secular politics. Against the view that hope, and especially religious hope, is illusory and unsustainable, Newheiser argues that a hope that acknowledges its uncertainty bears within it a promise for future transformation and sustains the urgent work of addressing present political injustices. Newheiser's account of hope is developed on the basis of his reading of two thinkers, neither of whom are consistently read in a particularly hopeful register: Dionysius the Areopagite and Jacques Derrida. Thus, Newheiser also develops the argument for approaching both Dionysius and Derrida, first of all, in conversation with one another, and secondly, with an ear attuned to hopeful affirmation. In claiming that the two authors "clarify the character of hope,"¹ the implicit claim is that hope itself is in need of revising – or deconstructing – if it is to bear any promise for ethics, secular politics, and the future of faith.

The first half of the book is dedicated to pursuing ethical readings of Derrida and Dionysius and elaborating the character of the hope found there. Newheiser first approaches Derrida, arguing that deconstruction can be understood as a response to an ethical problem: that the security asserted by the metaphysics of presence provides a reassuring certitude that is ultimately illusory.² Against the view that what Derrida affirms is only a kind of "total play" that would preclude the possibility of responsible political reflection altogether, Newheiser shows that, for Derrida, deliberation on particular ethical and political decisions is indispensable

precisely *because* of the undecidability that inhabits any such decision. The apparent negativity of deconstruction, particularly as it regards concepts such as justice and democracy, rather than a paranoid practice of mere exposure – that justice always exceeds the law and so cannot be attained, that all democracies must contain elements of the undemocratic to keep such “democracy” safe, and so on – is shown to bear a hopeful, indeed affirmative, comportment that keeps such concepts open to a future that remains to come. Precisely because our decisions provide no guarantees of justice or responsibility, Newheiser argues that Derrida’s insistence on critique “functions as an ethical practice of openness to the unexpected.”³ That Derrida calls justice and democracy impossible is a stumbling block for many readers here, and one that has led many to charge deconstruction with accusations of political nihilism. What Newheiser begins to elaborate in the early chapters, and returns to most forcefully in the second half of the book, is the precise character of the “impossible” in Derrida’s work; what is impossible is not what cannot happen, but what remains beyond the horizon of the possible as it is circumscribed in and by the present. Thus holding out hope for the impossible means nurturing the possibility of radical transformation; for Newheiser, then, Derrida’s insistence on critique can be said to constitute an ethical discipline insofar as it looks to preserve the (im)possibility of an incalculable justice that always remains to come.⁴ Nurturing this hope, then, also sustains urgent work *on* the present – driving engagement with and rectification of specific injustices as “justly as possible,” while at the same time remaining “open to revising one’s decision,” since “one can never be sure that one has decided well.”⁵

Newheiser then establishes his reading of the Dionysian corpus, focusing on the seemingly intractable contradictions found therein; that Dionysian negative theology is “resolutely affirmative” in that Dionysius “proliferates positive claims about God” even while concluding that “every name for God must be negated”;⁶ and that while he claims that God remains inaccessible to everyone, he also affirms a stratified hierarchy that ostensibly mediates access to God.⁷ Rather than looking to resolve these contradictions in favour of one side over the other, Newheiser argues that Dionysian *apophasis* is the practice of holding affirmation and negation in tension, by which every name for and claim made of God is both affirmed and negated. Dionysian *apophasis*, therefore, underscores the uncertainty of any affirmation, and its effect is the dispossession of the self in “abandon[ing] everything familiar in order to open oneself to unforeseeable development.”⁸ This helps explain the second contradiction, that between the ineffability of God and the ecclesial hierarchy that Dionysius affirms. Against the view that these should be treated in isolation, as separate parts of the Dionysian corpus, or the alternate view, that Dionysius sees the church as the source of sure salvation regardless of the inaccessibility of God in the present, Newheiser argues that the depth of Dionysian unknowing renders the ecclesial hierarchy itself fundamentally uncertain, calling “into question every claim to grasp the divine.”⁹ Ultimately, Newheiser argues, for Dionysius, Christian commitment consists in uncertain, fragile affirmations, and being raised up toward the divine is no certain path, but rather a struggle in which we always fall immeasurably short. Dionysius’s own attempts to speak of God, both affirmatively and negatively, thus always “remain provisional and subject to revision.”¹⁰

Given that both authors, in Newheiser's reading, develop a form of critique that both affirms and negates its object, Newheiser draws them together to produce an ethical account of hope that he sees as structurally consistent, though different in its object, across the work of both. While neither hold the same hopes, he argues that both hold onto their commitments in the same way – which is to say, a little loosely. That is, both, in his view, affirm particular hopes; neither see hope as constrained by what is possible in the present; and, for that reason, both see the object of hope as necessarily uncertain. Hopes are uncertain in more ways than one; they are liable to be disappointed, and should also be held open to revision. There is something implicitly radical about this account of hope, in that while we might normally assume – and several authors that Newheiser takes on argue – that hope implies, at least in some sense, that we think its object is attainable, the hope that Newheiser draws out from Derrida and Dionysius holds out for the impossible.

As he rightly points out, hope (and, we might add, the hoper) is most in danger when its object is out of reach.¹¹ The hope advocated here might accordingly seem the most dangerous kind, that is, a kind of cruel optimism, rising up when that which ignites hope “actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving,” or doubly cruel insofar as inhabiting such an impossible hope itself becomes perversely sustaining even while it does us harm.¹² Newheiser acknowledges the dangers of such desires, but is careful to clarify the sense in which both authors hope for the impossible, in noting that “although Dionysius and Derrida describe a hope that incorporates a sort of indeterminacy, they do not claim that the object of their hope can never arrive.”¹³ Rather, both hope for something that exceeds the horizon of expectation in the present, as well as, potentially, our ability to identify it as such, should it arrive – the experience of the divine for Dionysius, and what we might call the *à-venir* or the future-to-come in Derrida. The significance of this is not merely to attest that hope does not require its object to be possible. The unspoken consequence, insofar as Newheiser claims that Derrida and Dionysius “clarify the character of hope,”¹⁴ is that hope that holds out for the impossible is the *only possible hope*. This isn't to say that one can only hope for things that can never come to fruition, but rather that the act of hoping requires a certain unknowing; hope is always, in some sense, hope for the unexpected or the unforeseeable.

The determination of hope, however, is accorded a special significance here. In Newheiser's engagement with Derrida in particular, the concrete names that Derrida affirms serve as the locus of contestation with other commentators on Derrida, particularly John D. Caputo. In developing his account of hope in relation to secularisation, Newheiser revisits the contested relationship between Derrida and negative theology, taking on the opposing claims made in the influential accounts of Caputo and Jean-Luc Marion. The two authors serve an additional role here, beyond staking out the argument over Derrida's (ir)religiosity: for Newheiser, they also exemplify what appear to be the available possibilities for faith in secular modernity: either a loose kind of spiritual indeterminacy (Caputo), or overconfidence in the security offered by worship (Marion). Here, Caputo's “religion without religion” is characterised as – possibly reduced to – a purely indeterminable faith in which hope has no object.¹⁵ Newheiser provides an important corrective to many readers of (Caputo's) Derrida in arguing that Derrida affirms determinate traditions and determinate names for what is hoped for;

democracy and justice, most obviously, but even – in what may appear as a garden-variety liberal attachment preventing any kind of true radicalism on Derrida's part – Europe.¹⁶ Newheiser is also right to point out the “widespread elision between Caputo and Derrida” in this regard, that is, that many commentators “treat Caputo's comments as if he spoke for Derrida.”¹⁷

Against the indeterminate messianism that he sees advocated in Caputo's reading, Newheiser argues that Derrida affirms concrete hopes, even those that are impossible or that always remain to come. But the hopes that Derrida affirms are those that are *constitutively* to come, such as democracy, of which Newheiser writes:

This entails that it [democracy-to-come] cannot be identified, but that does not mean we must cease to speak of it. On the contrary, Derrida holds the indeterminate futurity of democracy to come in tension with determinate attempts to promote democracy in particular contexts... In his view, particular attempts to pursue democracy carry within them a hope for democracy that is undetermined. Rather than opposing indeterminate openness and determinate commitments, as Caputo claims, Derrida suggests that they are inseparable.¹⁸

Putting aside whether this apparent opposition is substantiated in Caputo's work, Newheiser gets right to the heart of Derrida's hope. That is, what is nurtured as a promise under the determined name of democracy is not “more democracy” in the sense that most liberal democracies might themselves imagine – which is to say, tweaks to the system –but the “absolutely undetermined messianic promise” that democracy names.¹⁹ Affirming the inherited name of democracy at once affirms a certain determination of the concept – what is affirmed in democracy is not, for example, the authoritarianism that can arise from it – and at the same time the promise of the messianic, that is, of resolute openness to what is to come, of “an alterity that cannot be anticipated.”²⁰

This affirmation of what is to come, despite the depths of our unknowing regarding what may arrive, is for Newheiser not only – as it is most obviously in Derrida – what makes ethical responsibility both possible and urgent, but is also the mark of *an* ethics that he identifies in Derrida's work (as well as Dionysius's). For Newheiser, Derrida's works well before the ostensible “ethical” or “political” turn demonstrate that deconstruction is an ethical practice insofar as it sustains hope for transformation; Derrida's “discursive negativity” functions as “an ethical practice of openness to the unexpected.”²¹ Hospitality serves as an example of this ethics at work; or, more accurately, this ethics works in and through hospitality. That we desire hospitality despite its lack of assurance or even possibility, for Newheiser, elaborates the ethical posture of deconstruction in contrast to the ostensibly unethical alternatives; closure, complacency, and despair.²² In making this argument, Newheiser provides an important corrective to Martin Hägglund who, it should be noted, could be seen as the real antagonist of the book's entire argument – who claims that “the command to ‘respect’ the alterity of the other does not make any sense if the other wants to destroy me.”²³ According to Hägglund, unlike many influential interpreters of Derrida's “ethics” such as Drucilla Cornell or Simon Critchley,²⁴ Derrida has no particular respect for the other, and no particular desire to “say yes” to who or what comes. Instead, for Hägglund, the affirmation of alterity in Derrida's work is not normative but inherent; everything and every

system is open to what is other to it.²⁵ From Hägglund's standpoint, because unconditional hospitality is both impossible and dangerous, Derrida does not desire unconditional hospitality, and nor does – or even can – anyone else. Newheiser responds that for Derrida, despite such dangers, “hospitality may nevertheless be pursued, for desire is not restricted to that which is safe.”²⁶ Indeed, Derrida explicitly aligns desire *with* the impossible, situating the impossible as “the condition of desire.”²⁷ As Newheiser puts it, “pure hospitality cannot be instantiated, and for this reason it is impossible. However... impossibility functions not to exclude desire, as Hägglund would have it, but to inflame passion all the more.”²⁸ The fact, then, that we desire to welcome the other even while the other might do us harm, and even while we cannot know the stakes in advance, evinces for Newheiser a discipline of hope that allows us not only to affirm the other before all recognition or decidability, but also to reaffirm our decision – or critique it, which might mean deciding that our decision was, in retrospect, unjust. The impossible, for Newheiser, can be desired and pursued, but not with any assurances or certainty in doing so; the double movement of the affirmation of an impossible hospitality or a justice that remains to come, along with the reaffirmation in the present of our uncertain decisions – even while we may betray or be betrayed by such affirmations— constitutes the ethicality of being open to the other. In placing hospitality at the centre of ethics, as “essential to ethical relation,”²⁹ Newheiser makes the desire for the impossible not only exemplary of but necessary to this “ethics of uncertainty.”

This reading is consistent with Derrida's remarks on ethical and political decision in relation to a justice that remains to come. This “hopeful” political interpretation is perhaps most evident in *Specters of Marx*, in which Derrida argues that insofar as there is a promise of political justice (“a democratic promise” or a “communist promise”) it must “always keep within it... this absolutely undetermined messianic hope at its heart.”³⁰ Without hospitality as the experience of the impossible, he argues, “one might as well give up on both justice and the event... One might as well give up also on whatever good conscience one still claims to preserve.”³¹ Indeed for Derrida it is the experience of the impossible, and the very lack of decidability, that opens the space of ethics and politics:

Ethics, politics, and responsibility, *if there are any*, will only ever have begun with the experience and experiment of the aporia. When the path is clear and given, when a certain knowledge opens up the way in advance, the decision is already made, it might as well be said that there is none to make: irresponsibly, and in good conscience, one simply applies or implements a program.³²

Of course, this does not leave us with a straightforward ethico-political orientation. Newheiser's “ethics of uncertainty” certainly avoids the risks of a “deconstructive ethics” that Derrida warns against:

A consensual euphoria or, worse, a community of complacent deconstructionists, reassured and reconciled with the world in ethical certainty, good conscience, satisfaction of service rendered, and the consciousness of duty accomplished (or, more heroically still, yet to be accomplished).³³

By the same token, we might question whether or not we would want to describe such an uncertain affirmation as “an ethics,” or as evidence *of* an ethics. That is, should ethics be understood in terms of normative principles that allow

decisions to be made, with if not full ethical certainty, then at least “good conscience,” affirming the uncertainty of any decision and nurturing an “undetermined messianic promise” – even if it is affirmed under the determined names of democracy, responsibility, or even Europe – cannot hope to meet this standard. It is for this reason that Geoffrey Bennington has argued that “ethics is metaphysical through and through and can therefore never simply be assumed or affirmed in deconstruction. The demand or desire for a ‘deconstructive ethics’ is in this sense doomed to be disappointed.”³⁴ To act on the basis, then, of preserving and affirming uncertainty, insisting on “never [being] sure that one has decided well,”³⁵ would perhaps, then, mean putting aside if not ethics “itself” then at least a certain view of ethics as a program for responsible action.

How small and uncertain, then, can ethics be? Newheiser acknowledges that without content, hope, no matter how disciplined, cannot be advocated as a virtue, noting in a parenthesis:

Because I believe rationality is extrinsic to hope, I am reluctant to call hope a virtue: whether hope is good or bad depends upon its content, but hope itself lacks the criteria to adjudicate such questions.³⁶

Even the content of hope, too, must remain uncertain, subject to a “self-critical vigilance” that provides no guarantees regarding justice. By this standard, we could suggest – perhaps unfairly – that Newheiser’s redeployment of the name of ethics for something far less certain (and less metaphysical) than ethics properly speaking might be an attempt to salvage some assurance, if not of “the consciousness of duty accomplished,” then perhaps that of a duty or justice “yet to be accomplished.”³⁷ On the other hand, however, we might suggest that the attempt to keep the name of ethics serves to keep ethics open to whatever might exceed this metaphysical determination. That is, even while the term “ethics” escapes unscathed in Newheiser’s account, perhaps his insistence throughout on “holding affirmation and negation in tension in order to resist the danger of complacency and despair”³⁸ – as an ethical practice – can also be turned on ethics “itself.” Notwithstanding his appeals to its “good name,” that is, the manner in which Newheiser articulates this ethics throughout underscores its attendant risks of pervertibility and self-negation. We might suggest, then, that the ethics of *Hope in a Secular Age* (and hope in a secular age) could signal the possibility of an ethics *sous rature*: one that is negated insofar as an ethics of hope refuses to settle into an ethics proper as a self-assured program for just action, but affirmed insofar as the name might nurture a promise for something *other than*, or *more ethical* than ethics, something that remains to come.

Hope in a Secular Age provides a thorough exposition of Derrida’s engagements with negative theology, supplemented with unpublished archival material that will be of interest to those well-versed in the debates on the subject within the secondary literature. The manner in which Newheiser draws together Derrida and Dionysius as sharing a hope identical in kind, but not in content, provides a compelling claim to consider Derrida’s engagements with Dionysius beyond the ground staked out by previous commentators, particularly in the terms of Newheiser’s claim that the point of contact between the two hinges on ethics rather than epistemology. But Newheiser’s treatment of Derrida in terms of an ethics of hope might be the most significant contribution (as well as the most easily overlooked). In identifying an ethical comportment in the practice of deconstruction

and in Derrida's interest in negative theology that goes beyond a normative ethics of respect for the other as the stranger, Newheiser signals that there is more to be done with hope – not as a principle to guide responsible action, but (“merely”) as a disposition. There are questions that remain to be addressed, the most urgent of which might be whether such emphasis on hope as a source for political transformation might risk appropriation into a neoliberal political order that would advocate for hope in lieu of material change. It is for this reason, then, that such “self-critical vigilance” as Newheiser puts forward is absolutely necessary. Far from immunising against such risks, the (deconstructive and apophatic) hope that Newheiser identifies in Derrida and Dionysius must be taken up, responded to, acted upon, and yes, critiqued – which is to say, affirmed as a promise of what remains to come.

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Notes

¹ David Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology, and the Future of Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2019), 108.

² *Ibid.*, 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26, 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹ Ibid., 54.

¹⁰ Ibid., 62.

¹¹ Ibid., 83.

¹² Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

¹³ Newheiser, *Hope*, 83.

¹⁴ Ibid., 108.

¹⁵ Ibid., 86–87.

¹⁶ See, for example, Wendy Brown's argument that Derrida's equivocation (and that of others of the post-Marxist European left) between democracy and the political, and democracy and freedom, "recenters the West as a beacon of civilisation at precisely the moment when it is (a) being decentered and (b) looking episodically barbaric" (Brown, "Sovereign Hesitations," in *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, eds. Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac [Durham: Duke University Press, 2009], 129).

¹⁷ Ibid., 89n12. Newheiser's disagreements with Caputo are too extensive to focus on here, and he raises many important objections, especially to readers of Caputo who take Caputo's work to be authoritative on questions of Derrida and religion. However, it's worth noting that a similar elision appears to crop up at certain times in Newheiser's text, that is, between Caputo's own arguably "spiritually indeterminate" theology as espoused in later works such as *The Weakness of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006) and Caputo's description of the messianic in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997). Caputo clarifies throughout *Prayers and Tears* and other texts the necessary determination of the messianic and the necessity of affirming traditions in Derrida's work, in a manner that, I think, in no way contradicts either the absolutely undetermined hope that he sees in Derrida, nor Newheiser's claim that Derrida sees "indeterminate openness and determinate commitments" as inseparable (*Hope*, 76). Indeed, I think that Caputo sees this relation—or at least reads it in Derrida—in much the same way as does Newheiser. For brief examples, see *Prayers and Tears*, 181–85, and in Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 173–75.

¹⁸ Newheiser, *Hope*, 76.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 2006), 81.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Newheiser, *Hope*, 19–25, 156.

²² Ibid., 122, 102–3.

²³ Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 100.

²⁴ See Drucilla Cornell, *Philosophy of the Limit* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), and Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

²⁵ Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 106.

²⁶ Newheiser, *Hope*, 123.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, "On the Gift: A Discussion Between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, eds. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 72.

²⁸ Newheiser, *Hope*, 123. For another insightful critique of the relationship between desire and the impossible in Hägglund, see Michael Naas, "An Atheism that (*Dieu merci!*) Still Leaves Something to be Desired," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 45–68, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.0.0066>.

²⁹ Newheiser, *Hope*, 122. Newheiser attributes this claim to Derrida. In the text in which this appears, this is Derrida's interpretation of Levinas, although I do not think it is misguided to also attribute this view to Derrida. See Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 50.

³⁰ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 81.

³¹ Ibid., 82.

³² Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 41.

³³ Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey Jr. and Ian McLeod (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 17.

³⁴ Geoffrey Bennington, "Deconstruction and Ethics," in *Deconstructions: A User's Guide*, ed. Nicholas Royle (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000), 64.

³⁵ Newheiser, *Hope*, 31.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁷ Derrida, *On the Name*, 17. Following this thought, we could also come out against ethics altogether. There is perhaps something of a missed encounter here between Newheiser's treatment of ethics and Caputo's *Against Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), which, in its deconstruction of ethics in favour of obligation, affirms many positions strikingly similar to Newheiser's.

³⁸ Newheiser, *Hope*, 86.