Deconstructing Moral Responsibility: Book Review Essay

Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death,* **trans. David Wills. University of Chicago Press, 1995.**

John Caputo, *Against Ethics.* **University of Indiana Press, 1993.**

Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An essay on the understanding of Evil,* **trans. Peter Hallward. Verso, 2001.**

Bruce Hiebert*

Moral responsibility, the view that human beings have a responsibility to be virtuous in their social lives, no longer has the logical base it once did. Three books that dissect this situation are Jacques Derrida's *The Gift of* Death (1995), John Caputo's *Against Ethics* (1993), and Alain Badiou's *Ethics* (2001). While they do not mark out the full range of ethics from post-modern perspective, they are three early works and represent three important strands of post-modern thought. What they share is a common understanding that the traditional philosophical and religious meta-narratives of human existence and meaning do not or cannot apply any longer. It does not matter if it is Heidegger, Kant, or Aquinas: the traditional Western ways of thinking about moral responsibility have fallen. One cannot call upon God, or the Categorical Imperative, or some kind of Utilitarian calculus to determine what is the right thing to do. Not one withstands critical analysis.

What many post-moderns agree upon is human differences are such that each individual human is qualitatively distinct and thus hidden from others; each of us is Other. The problems of interpretation and context are so extreme as to make a mockery of any efforts to construct a position of meaningfulness that might apply to all humanity; we cannot know another person in such a way that we can make meaningful statements about what is good for another. And since God is long dead, at least as a moral authority, there is no place of transcendence authority from which to address moral conditions.

DERRIDA

The purest articulation of this situation is Jacques Derrida's. In *The Gift of Death* he takes on and eliminates key Christian and religious perspectives on moral responsibility. At the same time, he critiques some of the emerging deconstructionist responses to moral responsibility. The consequence is that after Derrida, the prospect for human moral responsibility, at least as it is normally perceived in the West, appears dim.

In the four slim and confusing chapters of *The Gift of Death,* Derrida first eliminates the possibility of moral thinking that engages in political action. He argues that in the context of human differences, it is not possible to articulate a political vision that is responsible to the values and needs of others, since political action moves to change social conditions regardless of

* Ph.D. R.C.C., Associate Professor, University Canada West

what others might think or need. The second chapter puts forth the case that it is only in the context of our own deaths that we have the opportunity to create personal meaning. He suggests we might live morally through the meaning we construct in the face of our death, asking at each point how our actions reflect the nature of our coming end. This, he says, is the gift of death. The third chapter explores the case of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac. Here Derrida demonstrates that any sense of personal moral responsibility—including that which emerges in the face of death—cuts the decision maker out of social relationships; one cannot think for oneself and behave in a socially responsible manner. Chapter four then challenges Christianity to overcome its failed inner turn to personal moral responsibility by returning to the text of the Bible, specifically Jesus' command to love enemies.

Alongside these deconstructions, Derrida includes a wide range of observations regarding the way moral meaning is constructed and applied, from the philosophical to the linguistic. Each page flows with critiques of major thinkers of all types. The consequence is the deconstruction of all efforts of individual moral construction.

ALTERNATIVES

Within the post-modern movement there is a wide range of alternatives to counter the absence proclaimed by Derrida. These alternatives attempt to reveal a root for ethics that both accepts and at the same time transcends difference. Moral responsibility is not dead, they proclaim, but merely rooted in other phenomena than that of either God or another universal.

Caputo

John Caputo's *Against Ethics* begins with an extended critique of Western ethics. The first seven chapters place a series of challenges before traditional Western thinking. While Caputo believes that each one of his challenges has weaknesses, he believes that collectively make a convincing case for the abandonment of traditional views of moral responsibility, be they religious or philosophical. Chapter eight then offers a poetic argument for the importance of recognizing human existence as that of bodies.

In the last two chapters, nine and ten, Caputo weaves together what he identifies as an ethic of obligation. Our fleshly existence, he says, ties human beings together in a web of obligation. We smell, we eat, we die, we rot; we are flesh united in our vulnerable, disastrous human existence. It is a suffering that evokes mutual recognition and subsequently produces calls for justice in the situation. His ideal, he makes clear, is the companionship a therapist offers a client—to sit as a supportive presence with a suffering other. He is also clear that our mutuality sometimes calls for armies and the march of armies against unjust others. The realistic consequence is a call for laws to minimize the violence. In our mutual suffering, he suggests we must do what we can to create conditions that permit a return to joy.

While Derrida deconstructs all efforts toward moral responsibility that rest in the individual, Caputo instead calls for a recognition of our mutuality in suffering and sees that as the basis for a type of moral responsibility. He is cautious about it and concerned that it is not read as an absolute call. Instead, he says that this mutuality arises in the moment, on the basis of events. Things happen; we each have a responsibility to respond to the suffering of the others we

encounter. After that we should only cautiously extend our care to a basic set of rules to minimize further suffering. No moral responsibility exists past that point. He indicates that once we try to universalize, we enter a new realm of violence.

Badiou

Contrary to both Derrida and Caputo, Alain Badiou posits a very different version of moral responsibility. While sharing the same presuppositions as Derrida, in *Ethics,* Badiou argues for a radically different response. He suggests that what Derrida and all those who focus on the Other miss, is the possibility of human transcendence. We can, Badiou argues, become immortal. We do this through the possibilities of truth brought into human existence through events.

Central to Badiou's perspective is the way events impinge upon human existence and demand a response. They mark absolute shifts in the possibility of existence and are evident in something as simple as a lover's kiss, or as abstract as a new scientific theory. After such an event, one must accept or deny the truths embedded in the event. Moral Good is the drive to live in pursuit of those truths, while Evil is any form of denial of the event. Since events are uncommon, on a day-to-day basis, human existence is mundane and as morally indifferent as animals. Consequently, Badiou articulates a call for humans to step out of an animal existence and seek immortality through the pursuit of the truths found in events.

Badiou seeks to ensure the recognition that the transcendence that grounds morality is located, not in a philosophically identified absolute, but in the transient and world-changing nature of events. Nor can the truths embedded in events be captured or defined. A truth captured is no longer true. Events continue to roll over human existence with transforming outcomes. Moral responsibility is a constant quest to keep up with the truths of events.

MAKING SENSE OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

What these three authors do is eliminate the possibility of the Western dream of universal ethics. This dream, which drives the ideals of a universal political order or the various United Nations declarations regarding rights, turns out to be a fantasy. The immediate, the contingent, and the transformative ride roughshod over every effort to turn the world into a place of thoughtful, universal, individual moral responsibility.

However, for two of the three, this does not mean the end of efforts to construct the basis for a consensual moral responsibility. Whether it is Caputo's fleshly mutuality in suffering, or Badiou's description of the transcendent possibilities for Good and Evil that reside in the truths of events, or even other examples of universal yet contingent bases for moral responsibility, the quest for inter-human discussion and action toward goodness remains. Whether either Caputo's or Badiou's approach fails (and I believe both do), it remains true that in our humanity, there are commonalities that might be drawn upon to construct more limited grounds for universal moral responsibility.

Then there is the question of whether the foundation of individual moral responsibility is itself suspect in other ways. As the traditional African concept of Ubuntu suggests, there are

ways of conceptualizing human dynamics and therefore of moral responsibility that do not require the precedence of the self. It is possible that in the formative presence of communities, we can find new ways of moving toward mutual responsibility. What does it mean to be a moral human who is always in community and in a world where it is communities that encounter each other?

One might also consider the possibilities found in the human brain. We all (or almost all) have systems for empathy, critical analysis, creative imagination, effective negotiation, and reasoned decision-making. We share the underlying human needs for association, strength of self, and purposeful engagement in the world. We build relationships of intimacy and compassion. These components of our humanity are not trivial. I suspect that should we look carefully at what we intrinsically share as humans, we might find ourselves finding grounds for effective cooperation.

Finally, while Western ethics collapses due to the encounter with its own limits, chaos does not subsequently break out (except in the minds of moralists and philosophers). We globally encounter each other in very different cultures, each of which forms an ethos with its specific forms of moral responsibility, and yet, while violence is rampant, it is not due to any difference of ethos. Making do, problem solving as we go, seems to be at the heart of actual human existence. Perhaps worries about the failure of conceptual moral responsibility are misguided. It is possible human beings will simply go on making up moral traditions, rules, and habits, learning from the past and projecting as best we can into the future.