

## REVISED SYLLABUS

*Rel 660: The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion*  
*Syracuse University - Fall, 2010*  
*Dr. John D. Caputo*

### *Topic*

This course raises the question of the future of continental philosophy of religion and, by extension, the future of continental philosophy itself. Having recently experienced a so-called “theological turn,” continental philosophy is at present—after the passing of Foucault, Levinas, Lyotard, Deleuze and Derrida—undergoing another mutation, in part motivated by a reaction against the theological turn and a desire to defend a more radical materialism and materialist realism. Historically, this has meant a return to the early modern tradition before Kant, on the one hand, and to Hegel on the other hand.

The course will begin with the work of Catherine Malabou (Paris-Nanterre; b. 1959) whose work is based upon an important reading of Hegel, where she finds her signature idea of “plasticity.” Malabou is also close reader of Heidegger and Derrida, and she was personally close with Derrida in particular, but she is an independent thinker and critical of the religious and Levinasian interpretation of Derrida. By “plasticity” she means the capacity in things for endless auto-deconstruction and even for auto-destruction (as in “plastic explosives”) which she links with a new materialism and a critique of capitalism. We will follow her through her interpretation of Hegel and the death of God, her book on plasticity, and her philosophical intervention upon the neurosciences by way of her reading of the plasticity of the brain.

Then I turn to a radical breach in the continental tradition, the turn now being taken not only against the theological turn but against the basic tendency of continental philosophy ever since Kant, a turn that advocates a return to the pre-critical metaphysics and mathematicism of Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza. This movement is spear-headed by Badiou and his critique of Deleuze. Deleuze falls afoul of Badiou’s critique even though it is Deleuze himself who first recommended a return to Spinoza’s metaphysical immanentism. The thrust of this critique is to defend the early modern (not the postmodern), universalism (not singularity), rationality (not the critique of reason), the infinite (not finitude and mortality), materialism (not the varieties of post-Kantian “idealism”), the real (not constructivism, the “constructions” of the real, the various theories of “constitution” proposed by continental philosophers from Kant to Husserl to the post-structuralists, and finally atheism (not the postmodern return to religion). There was of course a reaction against the “theological turn” right from the start registered by Dominique Janicaud, but that objection was made in the name of phenomenology itself. The more radical critique has come from Badiou and Zizek, who mocked postmodernism for reducing truth to relativism, politics to political correctness, and finally falling into a kind of fuzzy Levinasian religious funk, a final sop for the tender-hearted. This represents a return to the mathematical realism of Descartes and Galileo, a new “Cartesian Meditation” meant to restore the old one and to counter Husserl’s critical adaptation of Descartes as a proto-transcendental philosopher.

I have discussed Badiou in previous courses, so I want to take up in this course a more recent manifestation of this line of criticism that has engaged the imagination of a younger generation of continental philosophers. [See *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010) and their “Introduction: What is Continental Philosophy

of Religion Now?"] We will read three authors in this movement. I begin with Quentin Meillassoux (b. 1967), one of Badiou's students, whose *After Finitude* (2006) represents a brazen critique of the "correlationalism" of Kant and the subsequent phenomenological movement in the name of what is called "speculative realism." Because the world is always treated as the correlate of an act of constitution, Meillassoux complains, continental philosophers are bereft of a way to speak of the "ancestral," of the world prior to, independent of and without human beings. Meillassoux laments that the Kantian/postmodern critique of "reason" and of the "real" (the "great outdoors" outside our constructions) has opened the doors for "fideism," for a "return of religion," which fills in the gap opened up by its skepticism about ultimate reality with everything from creationism to postmodern pieties. Interestingly, however, Meillassoux also proposes an idea of a "virtual divinity" that arises from his speculative realism. Then I will turn to the work of François Laruelle (b. 1937), a hitherto obscure figure now coming to the attention of the Anglophone world; he is an older and independent figure whose work is often linked with the Badiou school. His *Future Christ: A Lesson in Heresy* (2002) brings to bear his enigmatic notion of "non-philosophy"—the work of suspending philosophy in order to rediscover an immanence prior to philosophy—upon the figure of Christ as a "nonreligious" messianic, neither priest (religion) nor philosopher, but a witness to pure immanence. I will conclude this section with a reading of *Nihil Unbound* by Ray Brassier (b. 1965), which is a stirring embrace of a radicalized "nihilism"—in the long run, nothing matters, the universe will end up cold and dark—that is influenced by both Laruelle and Meillassoux. Although these thinkers reject the "neo-vitalism" of Deleuze, which is for them a version of transcendence and even "theophany" (Hallward), they sustain a running dialogue about radical immanence with Deleuze. A good deal of the work and commentary on the work of these authors that is available in English can be found at the "Speculative Heresy" website (<http://speculativeheresy.wordpress.com/>) under "Resources."

I will then turn to Žižek's *The Parallax View*, taking up the middle section of the book (which I skipped last year), where Žižek addresses the problem of materialism that is widely debated today and very polemically presented by Meillassoux and Brassier. Like Malabou, Žižek makes use of a Hegelian perspective to throw important light on how to avoid what he thinks is a vulgar and reductionistic materialism in order to explain human freedom and to offer a theory that he thinks not far removed from a genuinely theological materialism, an atheistic or death of God theology.

So contemporary continental philosophy of religion—indeed continental philosophy *tout court*—finds itself today in the middle of the problem of the death of God all over again. The atheism of Laruelle and Meillassoux, as well as of Agamben, Badiou and Žižek, goes along with an interest in reinterpreting God and immortality, Christ and St. Paul, mysticism and the messianic in ways that are immanentist, non-religious and "heretical." But if all this looks a good deal like a "death of God" theology *redivivus*, are we to think that this is not the end of a continental philosophy of religion but the beginning of another round of it? Is this the future of continental philosophy (of religion)?

The course will conclude by addressing these questions with the help of Derrida and his notion of the "perhaps." We will go, in a sense, from "plasticity" to "perhaps." To that end, we will go back and read the "Preface" he wrote to the Malabou book—"The Time of *Adieux*," of farewells, of farewells to God, of farewells of God to God, of the so-called death of God. We will also ask ourselves whether Derrida can be re-read as a "speculative realist," whether *différance* is a principle of reality or a principle of our "correlation" with reality? I will also

use Derrida's "As if it Were Possible," Steven Shakespeare's book on Derrida and theology, and a handout or two of my own to wrap things up—or rather to unwrap them and leave the future open.

#### *Required Texts*

Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic* (Routledge, 2005)  
Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction* (Columbia, 2009)  
Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (Fordham UP, 2008)  
Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude* (Continuum, reprint, 2010)  
François Laruelle, *Future Christ: A Lesson in Heresy* (Continuum, 2010)  
Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)  
Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (MIT, 2006)  
Steven Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology* (London/New York: T & T Clark, 2009)  
Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine* (Stanford, 2005)

#### *Course Requirements*

- (1) Seminar Participation (20%)
- (2) 2 Research Papers (40% each) (4,000-4,500 words each)