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POSTSTRUCTURALIST DECONSTRUCTION OF MEANING AS A CHALLENGE TO THE DISCOURSE OF THEISM

Although it became customary to warn against confusing postmodernism with deconstructionism (deconstructionism having narrower focus), it seems plausible to suggest that their central agendas are not dissimilar. Moreover, from the philosophical point of view, it is the idea of the 'deconstruction of meaning' that can be said to constitute the foundation of postmodernism understood here as an intellectual movement. It is true that grounded in the poststructuralist language analysis, deconstructionism seeks primarily to challenge the attempts inherent in the Western philosophical tradition to establish ultimate meaning in a *text*. However, as one might have anticipated, the deconstruction of meaning of texts (especially philosophical texts) provided a basis for a large scale project leading to deconstruction of all 'truths', as conceived in the mainstream philosophical tradition. And it did it by questioning the coherence of the very concept of 'truth'. Eclectic as postmodernism is, it can be recognized by the fundamental assumption (with a clearly deconstructionist overtones) that there is no common denominator (like 'nature', 'truth' or 'God') that guarantees the one-ness of the world, or the possibility of objective or neutral thought. This assumption would suffice to make one expect that postmodernism will challenge the very foundations of any metaphysical or religious system of beliefs. And so it does. In this paper I would like to elucidate just one way this challenge may be construed, pointing to the example of Don Cupitt, the leading exponent of the 'antirealist' critique of the discourse of theism.

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Philosophical basis of the deconstruction of meaning

It would not be an exaggeration to state that the overwhelming majority of all Western philosophers since Thales of Miletus took it for granted, that philosophy is about the logical assessment of arguments in favour of some views about the reality. In other words, these philosophers thought of themselves as looking for truth about the reality. According to the leading exponent of deconstructionism, the late Jacques Derrida, the philosophical writings, although they seem to consist primarily of logical arguments, are in fact as full of metaphors as any literary text. Hence, the meaning of philosophical texts depends at least as much on the literary factors as on the arguments. How so?

In his *Grammatology*¹, presenting his 'science of writing', Derrida makes use of the deceptively simple idea of Ferdinand de Saussure that the linguistic sign acts reflexively, not referentially. Saussure held that words function not by pointing at the extra-linguistic world, but by specifying an entire system of meaning and value in which each word has its function. Understanding even the simplest linguistic sequence does not amount simply to pointing to a state of affairs in the extra-linguistic world, but requires a complex act of differentiation. Thinking along these lines, Derrida denied that writing is a sign that points to some extra-linguistic world. This proved to be a truly fruitful philosophical insight, from which many other deconstructionist views can be deduced. Following the leading American pragmatist, Charles Sander Peirce, Derrida argues that things themselves are signs, therefore that to which signs point are also signs. If so, then the meanings of words can be understood only in relation to the meanings of other words.

One of the conclusions of this analysis of the nature of meaning was that the meaning of a word is never entirely present. Derrida invented a term '*différance*' (combining French '*différence*', i.e. difference, and French '*différer*', i.e. defer) to stress that as words are understood by the way in which they are different from other words, their meaning is in some sense deferred, i.e. it cannot be pinned down precisely, because there exists no objective referent to which the meaning can be clearly attached. No surprisingly, that leads to the total abandonment of metaphysics. If the overall meaning of a philosophical text is not 'attached' to any objective, extra-linguistic reality, then philosophy is not at all about the logical assessment of arguments backing some views about the objective reality. If philosophers are not looking for objective

¹ J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press 1976.

truth (as they tend to think), what are they aiming at in producing philosophical writings? They are looking for value, as any author of such a literary genre as novel or poem – is the deconstructionist's answer.

It may be argued that strictly speaking poststructuralist deconstruction does not aim at showing that philosophical statements are meaningless or illogical, or that instead of expressing objective truth philosophers (unknowingly) express their personal interests. A consequent deconstructionist treats philosophical text as a literary text evaluating its content in terms of style of presentation, choice of metaphors, etc.² Be as it may, even if Derrida does not claim that philosophical statements are meaningless, he certainly denies that any philosophical statement can be true or false. One would think that one does not need more than that to challenge the coherence of any well-developed metaphysical or religious system of beliefs. As we will later see, this applies only to religious discourses as traditionally conceived. Don Cupitt, a radical theologian from the University of Cambridge, argues that it is perfectly possible to conduct a Christian discourse within a poststructuralist framework.

However, let us ask first why should a deconstructionist think no philosophical statement can be true or false? Firstly, in his *Dissemination*³ Derrida suggests that it was one of the great mistakes of the Western philosophical tradition to assume that as all Western philosophy consists of writings, by studying the texts one can go back to the authoritative source of the original thought of the author. Not so, claims Derrida. A written text contains always much more than its original author intended. A written text has a hidden content, e.g. all the assumptions of the author and those with whom he is in 'conversation' which underline the meaning of the text and prevent the text to have just one correct reading and to express one objective truth.

Questioning the function of philosophy, Derrida highlights the limits of language, like Kant or Wittgenstein before him. However, while Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* equated the limits of language with the limits of meaningful propositions, for Derrida language does not consist of statements which may be true or false. For him meaning is not identified with its referent. Words are given meaning not by their one-to-one relationship with things in the extra-linguistic realm, but by their intra-linguistic relations, most notably by their differences from other words. However, the obvious circularity of this process does not

² Cf. E. Matthews, *Twentieth Century French Philosophy*, Oxford: OUP 1996, p. 172 ff.

³ J. Derrida, *Dissemination*, London: Athlone Press 1981.

allow for complete determination of meaning. And given the inability to fix the meanings of words, no statement can be really taken to be true or false.

Now, it is not difficult to notice that the crux of the matter in this line of reasoning is the radical rejection of referentiality, in favour of reflexivity. This move generates the view that all systems of beliefs (being self-referential) are self-contained. The old one-world of modernity is thus gone, because the one-ness of this world was guaranteed exactly by the assumption that there exist an objective world of meaning, meaning fixed by such categories as 'reality', 'nature', 'God', and regulated by 'truth' understood in referential terms. Denying possibility of referentiality one is now left with his relative, local system of beliefs that constructs his world. Consequently there is no way one system could have stronger claims to truth than other systems. Deconstructing the meaning poststructuralists deny absolute status of any truth or nature or reality. Talking about 'truth' or 'nature' or 'reality' they have to ask: what truth, which nature, whose reality?

It is not my aim here to argue directly against Derrida's position. Critical literature pointing to possible inconsistencies in the deconstructionist project is already vast. Many critics rightly argued that one of the consequences of the deconstruction is the denial that authors have an intention, and that text has any meaning, and such assumption surely lead to nihilism or extreme relativism. Moreover, it has been argued, not without plausibility, that deconstruction leads to some form of solipsism, as it implies either that there is no reality 'out there, or that if there is some 'transcendent' reality, then one cannot know its true nature. E. Matthews came out with a specific objection to the poststructuralist critic of Western philosophy. He noticed that although it may be the case (as Derrida would like us to believe) that philosophical texts contain more than impersonal logical argument, it does not follow that philosophical texts do not contain arguments on which their claims depend.⁴ There may be much 'more' in philosophical texts than the logical arguments, but why should one assume that the logical arguments which are there in the texts are of some importance?

As some poststructuralists deny these charges, one would need to enter a more detailed discussion than the one the format of this paper allows. As my interest is in the consequences of the deconstructionist assumptions for the discourse of theism I will limit myself here to one brief comment and then I will proceed to show how the poststructuralist

⁴ Cf. Matthews, 177.

approach is applied by a theologian. I suggest that one does not need to go in much trouble to make a case for a claim that theism understood as a system of beliefs (or 'truths', i.e. beliefs accepted as true) about the nature of God (taken to be a self-initiating Reality), about the nature of man and of the Universe, and so on, is hardly conceivable without the idea of referentiality, underlying the correspondence theory of truth. The disappearance of transcendental reference creates a crisis in the heart of religious thinking because it is grounded in the idea of the Absolute. It seems that while recognizing limitations of human capacity for understanding (fixing the meaning) and affirming limits of human language, theists had traditionally this one answer to the poststructuralist's questions: what truth, which nature, whose reality? God is the Truth and the condition of truth; the nature is what is conceived by God; the reality of creation is wholly dependend on the Creator of which He is the center. This is the 'reference' of the theistic worldview. No doubt, it may constitute a point of departure for the 'reflexive' aspects of the theistic discourse, but it is hard to conceive a theistic discours without the idea of God as the ultimate point of reference.

Don Cupitt's application of the poststructuralist principles to the discourse of theism

Rejecting the referentiality of the philosophical discourse poststructuralists denied the possibility of metaphysics. Don Cupitt is concerned not so much with arguing for the impossibility of metaphysics, as with pointing to the undesirability of metaphysics in religious context. Cupitt rejects, what he calls 'Platonic metaphysics', which in his opinion dominated religious discourse in the West providing framework to the dogmatics of Christianity. One of the bitter fruits of this domination is supposed to be the serious distortion of the proper nature of religion, as 'belief-in' (belief in God grounded in trust and personal commitment) became too easily supressed by 'belief-that' (dogmatic formulas about the nature of God). Of course, it is not Cupitt's stress on personal relationship with the transcendent God which is a source of our worry here. The point is that Cupitt rejects 'metaphysical Christianity' for the same reasons postructuralists reject the 'hegemony' of the modernist 'common denominators' ('nature', 'truth', 'God', etc.). Cupitt simply denies the relevance of any transcendent reality or transcendent values for us conducting our lives *hic et nunc*. One could say that Cupitt rejects the idea of 'referentiality' of the theistic discourse. He does not believe that we could or should settle such questions as 'who am I?', or 'how should I live?' trying to

address them from the standpoint of God, eternity, 'eternal truths', or anything that metaphysically transcends my individual standpoint.⁵

Considering postmodern condition of Christian morality Cupitt argues that there just aren't any unchanging ethical meanings and rules to be discovered or applied. Morality is a skill to be learned not by abstracting from time, contingency, emotions, etc. and referring to some timeless and transcendent values, but by being in touch with my own feelings and the other's feelings. The moral obligation is thus to be worked out 'reflexively', as it were, not 'referentially'.⁶ Platonic metaphysics making us to believe that this world contains no real being, no absolute knowledge, no true perfection, does a disservice to religion as it encourages in a believer the desire to escape from the world.⁷ By encouraging us to seek the 'real thing' in the transcendent world metaphysics imprisons us in the referential mentality which distracts us from focusing on *hic et nunc* of our lives.⁸

Where is the God of theism in this picture? What is the meaning of this deconstructed, non-metaphysical 'God'? In the first place, it has to be noted that for Cupitt the supposed two parallel worlds of material bodies and of spirit/mind are merely mythical.⁹ The only 'real world' is the world of our experience. And there is nothing to be gained by postulating some extra-world beyond the world of our experience now, as postulating some transcendent metaphysical realities does not change the quality of our experience now. Cupitt rejects the very idea that 'God' is a reality which transcends the world of our experience. Cupitt's God is not 'out there', as there is nothing 'out there'. He calls the traditional picture of God as a transcendent Being a 'realist' picture. Trying to retain as much as possible from the traditional theistic discourse on the linguistic level, he abandons the idea that the language of religions refers to anything transcendent. Religious language does not *refere*, but rather *reflects* our attitudes to the world of our experience.

The impossibility of transcendence

Postructuralists suggested that it is impossible for us to reach out to some extra-linguistic world. And so does Don Cupitt. He believes that once humans became conscious users of their languages as sign-systems through which all thought and knowledge is mediated, there can be no

⁵ Cf. D. Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, London: SCM Press 1987, 42ff.

⁶ Cf. D. Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, London: SCM Press 1988, 31ff.

⁷ Cf. D. Cupitt, *Only Human*, London: SCM Press 1985, 213.

⁸ Cf. D. Cupitt, *The Time Being*, London: SCM Press 1992, 11f.

⁹ Cf. D. Cupitt, *Lifelines*, London: SCM Press 1986, 61.

sense in the idea of transcending language, i.e. the idea that there can be some reference-point external to the realm of human experience that might help us to establish truth-relation between language and extra-linguistic 'reality'. Truth as correspondence with an objectively existing world is a misconception as there is no extra-linguistic reality to be related to. We are totally enclosed within the limits of the world of our human experience, the world defined by our language. Derrida was right. There is nothing outside the text, because however far we go in our search for some extra-textual reality as an objective criterion for fixing the meaning of the text, we will never be able to step outside the textual realm. The textual logic governs all thought, therefore our relation to whatever we define as 'reality' will still be subject to that logic.¹⁰ And what is this textual logic about? The meaning of every word can be given only in terms of its relationships (especially difference) from other words. It follows that all explanation must be 'immanent'.¹¹ But if so then we cannot speak about transcendent truths, because we have no transcendent vocabulary to our disposal; and we cannot speak about timeless truths, because our vocabulary is not timeless. Every word has its history. Its meaning is a product of history, never fixed once and for all, always evolving, because language is a changing human improvisation. There is no sense in the idea of testing whether our understanding of the world as expressed in language is correct, as the meaning is evolving in time and space (i.e. from person to person, from culture to culture, etc.).¹²

So for Cupitt there is only human world and no possibility to step outside, as 'Platonist metaphysics' would like us to do. We can only see and know the world from our human point of view. And this point of view is perpetually shifting, hence there are no absolutes in this world.¹³

„Creation Out of Nothing“

By now the reader most probably impatiently anticipates the question: where does religious faith fit into this picture? What makes Don Cupitt a theologian? What does he mean by 'religion' and 'faith'? The answer to these questions can be more easily understood when one considers Cupitt's answer to even more fundamental question: why and

¹⁰ Cf. D. Cupitt, *Lifelines*, 193.

¹¹ Cf. D. Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, 8.

¹² Cf. D. Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, Xpress Reprints 1996, 41ff.

¹³ Cf. D. Cupitt, *The World to Come*, London: SCM Press 1982, VIII-XI.

what for do we use language in the first place? We use it, says Cupitt, to „coordinate our activities” and to „cope with our world”.¹⁴ The reason is *pragmatic*. We find ourselves *hic et nunc* living in this world and we have to 'cope' with it. We have to do something with our world and with our lives. By the way, the terms 'our world' and 'our lives' do not refer to the world of the humankind. 'The world' is always primarily 'my world', the local world, the world defined by limits of shared meaning. There is not just one world. Different individuals, groups and societies 'make' their worlds. How does one 'make' the world? By choosing the rules that guide *practice*, including linguistic practice. In such way we generate meanings of our lives.

The number of possible worlds we may construe is infinite, because there is no absolute truth that could constrain the making of the world.¹⁵ All world-views and ways of life are language games and everybody is free to play the game he chooses.¹⁶ We ourselves are responsible for creating our world. Things don't have any 'intrinsic value'. They have only the value we ascribe to them. A thing is only as valuable, as much it means to us. We create our world by investing value in things. And we create it *ex nihilo* ("out of nothing"). We create it imposing meaning upon the 'nothing' of the pre-human world, and injecting values into otherwise meaningless life.¹⁷

Here is the context where religion appears on Cupitt's stage. We find ourselves in need of coping with our life and our world. And we are free to choose a game which will fulfil this function. Religion is simply one of the available games to be played. One becomes authentically religious by choosing freely to bind religious obligations upon oneself and to commit oneself to the pursuit of religious values.¹⁸ Cupitt finds it desirable that religion is being practiced for its own sake, that is without hoping for eternal reward, for example.¹⁹ Although, to be precise, we always play our game because it helps us to cope with our life. As this approach to religion is purely pragmatic, the practice of religion makes sense only if it is meaning-generative. Systems of religious beliefs (including the discourse of theism) are to be evaluated by measuring how successfully they serve this pragmatic function. Cupitt thinks that 'God' is a very good candidate for a generator of meaning, as in the case of billions of people 'God' plays this role fairly well.

¹⁴ Cf. D. Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, 41-43.

¹⁵ Cf. D. Cupitt, *Lifelines*, 62.

¹⁶ Cf. D. Cupitt, *What is a Story*, London: SCM Press 1991, 93.

¹⁷ D. Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, London: SCM Press 1990.

¹⁸ Cf. D. Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, London: SCM Press 2001, 124f.

¹⁹ Cf. D. Cupitt, *The World to Come*, 13.

As it may be said (at least in figurative sense) that Cupitt's God is the source of meaning for someone who chooses to commit, one can say that God plays the role of a Creator. But more precisely, it is the believer who creates his 'God'. And does it arbitrarily. For Cupitt, religion has nothing to do with the assent of the intellect to some doctrinal propositions, because 'religious truth' is a matter of practice.²⁰ Sacred scriptures, liturgy, prayer, indeed the whole religious tradition has its rightful place in Cupitt's poststructuralist religion, because they provide resources for generating the meaning. The role of religious stories, myths, doctrines and rituals is to express the world-view and the freely chosen way of life, and to help to reinforce the commitment to it. Of course, religious stories by no means reflect the objective nature of things, but are optional fictions which should be freely accepted as such.²¹ It goes without saying that the use of these resources is to be pragmatic. There is no point in using what does not serve well our individual needs in our individual circumstances, therefore if some religious beliefs or some religious practices do not fulfil their pragmatic function, they can and should be discarded and replaced.²² Churches are there to facilitate religious practices, while society's role is to negotiate a consensus between coexisting different ways of life within the same social space.

Cupitt's problems with coherence

Judged against the background of Christian tradition Cupitt's position is nothing else but a straightforward atheism. In the context of his poststructuralism theory there is no point in asking whether or not God exists. The proper question is to ask what are the rules that govern the use of the word 'God' in the language of the particular person or group of people. It is difficult to take Cupitt's revisionist Christianity to be anything more than some sort of atheistic humanism with 'Christian face'. Having said that, it would be pointless here to open a debate with Cupitt over the existence of God. It is more fitting to uncover few elements in Cupitt's line of thought which shows his position to be less than fully coherent. Let me do it by asking Cupitt few uneasy questions.

If there is no extra-linguistic reality and so no truth that would lead or constraint our choices, and we are completely free to choose out of the infinite number of alternative games/worlds, how are we going to decide

²⁰ Cf. D. Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, 130.

²¹ Cf. D. Cupitt, *What is a Story*, 93.

²² Cf. D. Cupitt, *Only Human*, 211.

which world are we going to 'create' for ourselves? No doubt, Cupitt's immediate answer will be: choose what will work for you in practice. But on closer examination such directive is 'empty'. After all, how am I going to decide whether practicing religion (or playing any other 'game', for that matter) does 'work' for me? What is it suppose to do for me 'in practice'? Is it suppose to make me happy? Or to make my life 'meaningful'? But on what ground am I going to decide whether, as a result of my decision to get involved in religious practice, my life became 'meaningful' or 'happy'? Is it not the case that in order to be able to assess the fruits of my choice of the 'game' (and perhaps to revise some part of the practice or to choose entirely different game) I need to know at least two things: (1) what is the measure of 'meaningfulness' or 'happiness' of life?, and (2) what is the procedure of measuring the condition of my life? It is hard to see how Cupitt could answer these questions. After all, if nothing has any intrinsic value, but only the value I impose upon it, comparing my life with lives of other people in order to evaluate the usefulness of some practice for my life makes no sense whatsoever, as there can be no common measure between us (and even if there was one, we could still ask why should we choose this measure and not some other?). Clearly, to decide what course of action to take one needs some point of *reference* to assess possible outcomes. But this point of reference has to be ultimately *transcendent*, otherwise the circularity of the process of assessment of what is good for me to choose (which 'game' to play) will prevent me to take off the ground. So paradoxically, the theoretically ultra-pragmatic framework which Cupitt's proposes seems to prevent any rational choice of action.

When I say that the point of reference has to be transcendent I don't mean necesarilly 'out-of-this-world'. It has to be transcendent in the sense of transcending the self-referential, reflexive language-world, Cupitt is talking about. We need to be able to fix at least some 'meanings' unambiguously to be able to rationally decide what course of action to choose. Let's take a simple example. There is a person B who is a 'nihilist', in the popular sense of the word, i.e. does not recognize any moral code or principles. Let's assume in addition that this person is an ideal egoist and is concerned only with what he judges to be good for him. How in pratice is he likely to decide the course of his action? Is it not probable that he will do what will be a source of satisfaction or pleasure for him? But why should he behave like that? Because he *knows* that some action *x* or *y* gives him enormous pleasure. But what does it mean that he 'knows' it? Surely it means that he believes that *it is true* that action *x* is for him a source of pleasure, because his beliefs is validated by correspondence to the reality of the

feelings of which the action x is a source. It is unlikely that he considers action x to be a source of pleasure because he *freely decided* to impose a meaning or value upon a value-neutral element of his 'linguistic world'. I suggest therefore that Cupitt's totally voluntaristic 'philosophy of action' is incoherent and has no practical application.

Having said that, let us assume for the sake of argument that in principle Cupitt's proposal is viable and it is possible to create the whole world of meaning 'out of nothing' and to make it the basis of action. But if there are no objective moral truths and so no truth constraints on our beliefs but all beliefs equally acceptable, how is it possible that we give unanimously negative evaluation to some moral beliefs, like e.g. Hitler's conviction about the need to care for racial purity of the nation. Cupitt argued in a number of places that certain views are pragmatically unacceptable, as (in his opinion) pragmatism requires that the values we choose must make life worth living. Well, from Hitler's point of view his moral choices might well satisfy such condition. And after all, *whose* life is supposed to be worth living? Here we touch upon another highly controversial consequence of the poststructuralist rejection of genuine referentiality. Why should we, while 'creating' our world, take at all into account other people? In what way are *they* part of our world? Are there any constraints on our choices considering our 'imposition' of meaning and value upon elements of our world? Couldn't I decide that in my world other people have no value whatsoever (with all the consequence of such choice)? And if not, why not? Surely, Cupitt cannot provide any satisfactory answer to this question, without accepting some measure of referentiality. After all it is by reference to what we all consider to be an 'objective value' of human life, a value which has nothing to do with arbitrary choices of individuals of societies, that we take murder to be unacceptable. And even if one concedes that this 'objectivity' is not sanctioned by an Absolute, but is either a matter of human insight in what is 'intrinsically' valuable, or is a matter of 'common sense', it boils down to the same necessity of establishing truth of some beliefs by relating 'realities' (things or states of affairs) which have its meaning and value independently of any arbitrary choice of poststructuralist creators of meaning.

It does look that at least in the case of human beings *creatio ex nihilo* is a tricky undertaking. From nothing tends to come out nothing. Don Cupitt and his poststructuralist colleagues do face a fundamental problem: to be able to create something out of nothing it is necessary to be at least omnipotent and omniscient. Certainly, Cupitt leaves to many crucial questions unanswered to satisfy these minimal conditions without which his ambitious project is worth only as much, as much it means to him.

Janusz SALAMON

POSTSTRUKTURALISTYCZNA DEKONSTUKCJA ZNACZENIA JAKO WYZWANIE DLA DYSKURSU TEIZMU

Streszczenie

Nie zapominając o tym, że postmodernizm (nawet jeśli pozwolimy sobie spojrzeć nań z esencjalizującej perspektywy filozofa) jest zjawiskiem znacznie szerszym niż poststrukturalizm i dekonstrukcjonizm, wolno zauważyć, że wśród fundujących postmodernizm pryncypiów szczególną wagę ma wypracowana na gruncie poststrukturalizmu idea 'dekonstrukcji znaczenia'. Choć poststrukturaliści parają się w pierwszym rzędzie dekonstruowaniem znaczenia w ramach analizowanych tekstów, trudno nie zauważyć, że z przyjmowanych przez nich założeń można wyciągnąć wnioski o fundamentalnym znaczeniu nie tylko dla całej filozofii, ale również dla dyskursu religijnego. Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą ukazania jednego ze sposobów, w jaki pomysły poststrukturalistów mogą stać się narzędziem dogłębnej rewizji rozumienia religii. Dokonywana w tym duchu analiza poglądów Dona Cupitta, niesłychanie wpływowego eksponenta 'antyrealistycznej' krytyki dyskursu teistycznego, zmierza przede wszystkim do zwrócenia uwagi na ściłą zależność między linią argumentacji Cupitta a dekonstrukcjonistycznymi propozycjami J. Derridy. Ustalenie tej zależności jest o tyle ważne, że uzasadnia konkluzję, iż koncepcja Cupitta dzieli główne słabości filozofii Derridy, toteż argumenty krytyczne wysuwane pod adresem tego ostatniego mogą być z powodzeniem spożytkowane w ewentualnym przedsięwzięciu apologii tradycyjnego, 'realistycznego' pojmowania dyskursu religijnego w obliczu postmodernistycznej krytyki.

Wśród głównych tez derridiańskiego dekonstrukcjonizmu znajdujemy sugestię, że ludzki świat sensu jest w całości rzeczywistością wewnątrzjęzykową. W poszukiwaniu znaczenia nie możemy wykroczyć poza tekst w kierunku obiektywnej rzeczywistości pozajęzykowej, która mogłaby służyć za punkt odniesienia (referencji) pozwalający na jednoznaczne ustalenie znaczeń i prawdziwości twierdzeń. Jako, że zdaniem Derridy znaczenia słów można uchwycić tylko poprzez ustalenie różnic w ramach odniesienia do znaczenia innych słów, ustalenie 'ostatecznego' znaczenia w ramach całego dyskursu nie jest w ogóle możliwe, gdyż język jest rzeczywistością 'refleksyjną' a nie 'referencyjną'. Ustalenie 'obiektywnego' znaczenia byłoby bowiem możliwe tylko wówczas, gdyby istniała możliwość skorelowania znaczenia z elementem rzeczywistości pozajęzykowej, która jest oznaczana. Jedną z filozoficznych konsekwencji

takiego stanu rzeczy jest m.in. to, że żadne twierdzenie nie może być w ścisłym sensie prawdziwe lub fałszywe. W ogóle takie 'totalizujące' kategorie jak 'prawda', 'natura', czy 'rzeczywistość' (w ich tradycyjnych, 'metafizycznych' sensach) nie ma w ogóle miejsca w derridiańskim dyskursie. Myślenie o rzeczywistości w kategoriach 'platońskiej metafizyki' jest jednym z głównych przedmiotów ataku ze strony poststrukturalistów.

Do tego ataku na metafizykę (i na gruncie podobnych filozoficznych założeń) dołącza się Don Cupitt, który mieni się w pierwszym rzędzie teologiem (jest bowiem anglikańskim duchownym). Cupitt argumentuje, że 'platońska metafizyka' zdominowawszy na dwa tysiąclecia teologiczny dyskurs teizmu, wypaczyła istotę religijności, która nie polega na 'wierze, że...', lecz na 'wierze w...'. Ponadto utwierdzając w ramach tego dyskursu hegemonię takich 'transcendentnych' pojęć jak 'prawda', 'natura' czy 'Bóg', odwróciła uwagę wierzących od tego, co jedynie realne: od świata ludzkiego doświadczenia istniejącego 'tu i teraz', zachęcając do eskapizmu w horyzoncie Transcendencji. Rzecz w tym, że dla Cupitta 'rzeczywistość transcendentna' jest iluzją. Nie istnieje nic poza światem, który sami kreujemy obdarzając słowa i rzeczy znaczeniem i wartością. Wszelkie znaczenie i wartość są jednak nieredukowalnie 'immanentne', gdyż nie są one tym czym są dlatego, że odnosimy je do czegoś istniejącego poza rzeczywistością językową. Ludzki świat wg Cupitta jest rzeczywistością 'refleksyjną', a nie 'referencyjną'.

Gdzie w tym świecie jest miejsce dla Boga i religii? W pojęciu cupittowskiego świata 'Bóg' jest jeszcze jedną 'wartością', którą sami tworzymy. W tej perspektywie pytanie o to, czy Bóg istnieje, nie ma dla Cupitta sensu. Możemy jedynie pytać o reguły użycia słowa 'Bóg'. Są to zresztą reguły, które sami tworzymy w obrębie naszej 'gry językowej'. Religia jest właśnie jedną z takich gier. Mamy absolutną wolność wybrać grę, jaka nam odpowiada, gdyż nie istnieje obiektywna 'prawda', która byłaby dla nas punktem odniesienia w dokonywaniu naszego wyboru. Poszczególne gry mają znaczenie czysto pragmatyczne: są przydatne w tym, żeby coś zrobić z naszym życiem, nadać życiu jakieś znaczenie (jako, że nie ma ono samo w sobie żadnego obiektywnego sensu, różnego od tego jaki sami tworzymy). Wybór religijnej 'formy życia' jest po prostu częścią kreacji naszego 'lokalnego' świata, którego centrum sami stanowimy. Jest to wybór całkowicie arbitralny, ale nie bardziej arbitralny, niż wybór jakiegś innej 'formy życia'. Zasadność takiego wyboru opiera się na jego pragmatycznych owocach. Jeśli religia sprawia, że moje życie staje się dla mnie bardziej sensowne, to mogę powiedzieć, że moja religia jest 'prawdziwa' (bo w sytuacji niemożliwości autentycznej referencji jedyną 'teorią prawdy', jaką możemy się posłużyć, jest ta, która odwołuje się do użyteczności).

Ta niewątpliwie dogłębnie rewizjonistyczna 'teologia' jest w szczególności w zupełności nabudowana na fundamentcie założeń, które można znaleźć w pismach wiodących poststrukturalistycznych proponentów 'dekonstrukcji znaczenia'. Pomijając fakt radykalnego zerwania przez Cupitta łączności z tradycją chrześcijańską w jej samorozumieniu, koncepcja Cupitta robi wrażenie niespójnej w swoim wymiarze pragmatycznym, który sam Cupitt uważa za centralny. Bliższa analiza pokazuje bowiem, że nieusuwalna 'refleksyjność' dyskursu religijnego, tak jak Cupitt go rozumie, i brak autentycznej referencji (możliwej tylko przy założeniu możliwości odniesienia do Rzeczywistości metafizycznie Transcendentnej) sprawia, że trudno sobie wyobrazić dynamikę 'wyboru wiary' i oceny pragmatycznej wartości/'prawdziwości' religii. To zaś oznacza, że praktyka religii (która dla Cupitta jest jedynym wymiarem religii nadającym jej znaczenie) jest niemożliwa.