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Derrida, Responsibility and Politics

Morag Patrick



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Abbreviations

Works by Derrida

- AT* 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy',
Leavey, J.P. (tr.), *Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (1984),
pp. 3–37.
- EW* "'Eating Well": An Interview', in Cadava, E. (ed.), *Who Comes
After The Subject*, Routledge: London, (1991) pp. 96–119.
- FL* 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority',
Quaintance, M. (tr.) *Cardozo Law Review*, Vol. 11, (1990), pp.
921–1045.
- LI* *Limited Inc.* Northwestern University Press: Evanston, (1988).
- MC* 'Mochlos; or, The Conflict of the Faculties', in Rand, R. (ed.),
Logomachia, University of Nebraska Press: London, (1992), pp.
3–34.
- MP* *Margins of Philosophy*, Bass, A. (tr.), University of Chicago
Press: Chicago, (1982).
- OG* *Of Grammatology*, Spivak, G. (tr.), Johns Hopkins University
Press: Baltimore, (1976).
- OH* *The Other Heading*, Brault, P. and Naas, M. (tr.), Indiana
University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, (1992).
- OS* *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, Bennington, G. and
Bowlby, R. (tr.), University of Chicago Press: Chicago, (1989).
- Pass* 'Passions' in Wood, D. (ed.), *Derrida: A Critical Reader*,
Blackwell: Oxford, (1992), pp. 5–35.

- PF* 'The Politics of Friendship', Motzkin, G. (tr.), *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 75, No. 11, (1988), pp. 632-644.
- Pos* *Positions*, Bass, A. (tr.), Athlone Press: London, (1987).
- PR* 'The Principle of Reason', Porter, C. and Morris, E.P. (tr.), *Diacritics*, Fall, (1983), pp. 3-21.
- Psy* 'Psyche: Inventions of the Other', in Waters, L. and Godzich, W. (ed.), *Reading De Man Reading*, University of Minnesota Press: Minnesota, (1989).
- SM* 'Spectres of Marx', Kamuf, P. (tr.), *New Left Review*, Vol. 205, May/June, (1994), pp. 31-58.
- WD* *Writing and Difference*, Bass, A. (tr.), Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, (1987).

Preface

How should one broach the question of the ethics and politics of deconstruction? Most simply, I shall defend here the proposition that this matter of approach merits considerable attention. The dominant tendency in much existing literature has been to broach the question of ethics and politics by posing a single question: What is the ethico-political *significance* of deconstruction? But perhaps a question of this kind is curiously misdirected with regard to deconstruction. Can such a question, a question of meaning and significance, really convey our most serious response to Derrida? If so, it is difficult to see how it shall even begin to address his deconstructive strategies as a thinking of the trace: a 'thought' which, strictly speaking, means nothing.

Derrida's challenge to semantic authority is frequently denounced as 'seriously disabling'; disastrous for metaphysics, for morality and politics. Against this view, I argue that deconstruction does not consist in an elimination of philosophical discourse and that what is most detrimental is a refusal to think through deconstructive analyses in relation to ethics and politics. In this regard, I suggest that many critiques of deconstruction are wanting. Their defect lies in submitting a discourse which is not entirely semantic to a question of ethico-political significance, thereby compromising the force of a basic deconstructive gesture.

Introduction

Jacques Derrida's 'deconstructive method' or 'deconstructionism' is renowned as a species of anarchic free play, an antifoundationalism which can only end in a ruinous irrationalism and thereby the denial of all possibility of discrimination or judgement. That his private (because obscure) game of free play should lead merely to ethico-political ambiguity is a view some find utterly naive, for the real effect of such irresponsibility of thought is a thoroughgoing nihilism. How shall we judge such claims about Derrida's inability or sheer refusal to discriminate? And how shall we judge Derrida?

In this study I examine some of the most prominent debates regarding the ethico-political significance of deconstruction, drawing attention to the type of question that is generally brought to bear in reading Derrida. I argue that the issue of approach or orientation, of the mode of reading and questioning deconstruction, demands close study if one is indeed to engage with Derrida's general theoretical propositions. For such engagement requires more than a survey of Derrida's texts, it exacts a thoughtfulness regarding one's solicitation of deconstruction. In defending this claim I will be guided by two motifs: that of the question and the response. This focus is apposite insofar as it is around reflections on the question and response that much of what is decisive for Derrida's own thinking gathers.

In Part One I examine the basic features of Derrida's work, focusing in particular on his relationship to the questioning form. Far from having abandoned questioning and critique, I suggest there is a line of questioning distinctive of deconstruction. This questioning is directed at the founda-

tions of legal, moral, and political authority, and at the very questioning form and its philosophical authority. In the first part of the study I concentrate on this question of the question as preliminary to the discussion of ethics and politics contained in Part Two.

Derrida locates himself in a tradition of thinkers who reflect upon the possibility of philosophy, a tradition engrossed in a certain 'dialogue of the question'. In Chapter One this dialogue is shown to consist in an interrogation of the history of the question. This in turn leads to consideration of the possible distinction between 'questioning in general' and 'philosophy' as a determined mode of the question itself, and of the future for thinking at the end of philosophy. Derrida does not subscribe to the view that philosophy is finished. He speaks of the 'closure' rather than the 'end' of philosophy. More precisely, he speaks of the closure of philosophy as metaphysics or logocentrism. This thinking of 'closure' may be contrasted with Heidegger's thinking of the end of philosophy as metaphysics. The alignment helps to elucidate Derrida's thesis that in Western philosophy understanding tends to be grounded in notions of presence (*logos*). Beyond this, it highlights the importance for Derrida of securing a question that would further and transform thinking, a question that would no longer be philosophy's question. However his strategy for transgressing philosophy must also be distinguished from Heidegger's. According to Derrida, the latter's discourse constantly risks consolidating through repeating that which is implicit in the founding concepts of metaphysics. It is to reduce this risk of regression that Derrida aims at a questioning that would consist not merely in the analysis of conceptual oppositions. A deconstructive questioning is also productive or transformative. Yet as we shall see, the transformation cannot be accomplished in just any manner, it requires adherence to certain protocols of reading.

Following this account of deconstructive questioning I turn in Chapter Two to the scope, legitimacy, and force of Derrida's interrogation of philosophical authority. Here I highlight the importance of the strategic considerations informing his work. I begin by showing how the general principles which guide his critical reading shape his distinctive treatment of the methodological problems of delimitation, circularity, and excess; problems which he sees as pertinent to any critical reading. I argue that Derrida's texts are marked by a recognition of the necessary metaphysical

complicity which such reading entails and by the attempt to give rigorous account of such. The rigour of this account is paramount not least because Derrida's principles of reading lack absolute justification, they merely clarify by exclusion a task of reading. Which is to say that his deconstructive gestures cannot be furnished with methodological or logical assurances from within the closure of logocentrism. In this light I examine arguments from Richard Rorty and Jürgen Habermas with regard to the pragmatist and transcendental orientation of Derrida's thought. In the final section I argue for the force of Derrida's questioning. Critics such as Peter Dews, Richard Wolin, and David Wood find the force of deconstructive writing diminished by the fact that deconstruction remains definitively governed by philosophy itself. Against this view I stress the importance of the strategic aspect of deconstructive interventions whereby Derrida concedes the necessary metaphysical complicity of his discourse, even as he attempts to undo the same. The double bind logic in which he is thus implicated follows unavoidably from his observance of certain protocols of reading. I suggest that his strict formalization of this paradox is both the strength and weakness of his position. On the one hand, it involves a certain violence in preparing the stage, in setting up oppositional limits from which his reading may begin its work of undoing or erasure. Yet this only confirms Derrida's own thesis regarding the profoundly political character of his interventions. On the other hand, where it is indeed a matter of a certain weakness, a weakness with which he seeks to make this violence communicate, the ethical stakes and the force of his thinking unfold. For what makes a critical difference to the experience of paralysis in the double bind is Derrida's success in showing that responsibility is something of which one cannot have an objective knowledge. In the remaining chapters I explicate this recasting of responsibility and bring it to bear on questions of the ethico-political significance of deconstruction.

Chapter Three contains an overview of several prominent appraisals of deconstruction's ethico-political implications. It will be shown that the relation between deconstructive thinking, ethics, and politics is routinely broached as a question of the ethico-political *significance* of deconstruction. Prevalent responses to this question include the assertion that deconstruction is negative and nihilistic given the pantextualism and destruction of subjectivity it entails. More incisive responses take the

rigorous undecidability of deconstruction as their focus. Such is the focus for critics as otherwise diverse as Thomas McCarthy, Richard Wolin, Simon Critchley, and Drucilla Cornell.

In Chapter Four I specify the risk in being guided by such a question of significance given Derrida's aim to disclose a non-site which would be the other of philosophy, a space indefinable or unlocatable by means of philosophical language. Briefly, my worry is that to proceed by way of this question of significance (and by extension of meaning) alone is to miss much of what is decisive with regard not only to Derrida's interrogation of the authority of philosophical discourse and its very questioning form, but also regarding the ethical and political as they are reinscribed in his work. The problem is elaborated through a discussion of the deconstructive thinking of context and the ethical considerations it raises. Focusing on Derrida's invocation of 'unconditionality' as that which is prior to and independent of any given context, but which intervenes in the determination of a context nevertheless, I consider how the question of significance bears upon this theme of unconditionality. Does the question of significance evoke, or can it only negate, unconditionality? Finally, I suggest that if one is not merely to perpetuate the very questioning mode which Derrida seeks to interrupt then another approach to these ethico-political issues is required. I argue for an approach which designates the relation between ethics, politics, and deconstruction with reference to Derrida's recasting of responsibility.

Throughout the second part of this study I show how Derrida's interrogation of philosophical foundations disrupts the assurance with which we generally assume moral and political responsibility. In aspiring to take up the duty in deconstruction Derrida unfolds a responsibility that is irreducible to the traditional category of human subject, and hence impossible to confine within the associated categories of law, morality, and politics. It remains in the final chapter to explicate the manner in which he can be said to assume such an excessive or incalculable responsibility, and the sense in which this constitutes the moment of ethics, politics, strategy, and rhetoric in his work. This leads in conclusion to a discussion of how consistent and convincing Derrida's arguments are for assuming responsibility without a concept, without rule or example.

Part One
THINKING AFTER METAPHYSICS



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1 The dialogue of the question

For the question is that of the response (*AT*, 22).

How should one broach questions of the ethical and political with regard to deconstruction? How is one to judge and hence respond to Derrida? In this book I examine prominent debates concerning the force and ethico-political significance of deconstruction. Throughout I take the issue of what is involved in questioning and evaluating deconstruction to be paramount.

The division of this study into two parts reflects my interest first in Derrida's thinking about the discipline of the question, and second in his responses and thinking of responsibility. In Part One I aim to clarify basic features of Derrida's work and particularly his involvement with the questioning form. I argue that Derrida has not simply dispensed with questioning, nor critique, and that his thinking is eminently ethical and political. This much is borne out by his remarks in the essay 'Force of Law':

a deconstructive line of questioning is through and through a problematization of law and justice. A problematization of the foundations of law, morality and politics. This questioning of foundations is neither foundationalist nor antifoundationalist (*FL*, 931).

In this chapter I explore what such deconstructive questioning consists in. Above all, I aim to show that Derrida's concern with the force of law extends beyond the foundations of legal, moral, and political authority, to the questioning form of thought and its philosophical authority. This deconstructive questioning, he suggests,

does [not] pass up opportunities to put into question or even to exceed the possibility or the ultimate necessity of questioning, of the questioning form of thought, interrogating without assurance or prejudice the very history of the question and of its philosophical authority. For there is an authority – and so a legitimate force in the questioning form of which one might ask oneself whence it derives such great force in our tradition.

As I hope to make clear, this concern with legitimate force, with law, and thereby with *logos* and logocentrism pervades Derrida's work. I shall begin with his interrogation of the history of the question and its philosophical authority, and locate Derrida in a tradition of thinkers who reflect upon the possibility of philosophy. My exposition of his thinking of the closure of philosophy as logocentrism draws on Heidegger's thinking of the end of philosophy as metaphysics. The connection helps to elucidate Derrida's thesis that in Western philosophy understanding tends to be grounded in notions of presence (*logos*). Beyond this, it highlights the importance for Derrida of securing a question that would further and transform thinking, a question that would not be philosophy's question. However Derrida's strategy for transgressing philosophy must also be distinguished from Heidegger's. For the latter's discourse, Derrida claims, constantly risks consolidating through repeating that which is implicit in the founding concepts of metaphysics. It is to reduce this risk of regression that Derrida himself aims at a questioning that would consist not merely in the analysis of conceptual oppositions. A deconstructive questioning is also productive or transformative. Yet as we shall see, the transformation cannot be accomplished in just any manner, it requires adherence to certain protocols of reading.

Questioning the foundation of philosophical authority

For Derrida, there is a certain discipline of the question which deconstruction, following Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, takes up and extends. This shared concern with the question, with its possibility and its liberty, is also Derrida's point of departure in the essay 'Violence and Metaphysics'. Those who reflect upon the possibility of philosophy, its life and death, he describes as 'already engaged in, already overtaken by the dialogue of the question about itself and with itself' (*WD*, 80). And in so far as this dialogue entails interpreting the history of the question, it also sets the scene for that combat which is 'embedded in the difference between the question in general and "philosophy" as a determined – finite and mortal – moment or mode of the question itself' (*WD*, 81). It is this interface between the dialogue of the question and the possibility of philosophy that I shall pursue in an analysis of Derrida and the end of philosophy theme.

Derrida perceives a certain difference to be embedded in the dialogue of the question: a difference between philosophy as a questioning force, 'philosophy as a power and adventure of the question itself', and philosophy as an established manner of the question, 'a determined event or turning point *within* this adventure'. Thus even as his focus in 'Violence and Metaphysics' is the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, it is clearly the manner of conceptualizing and thinking through this difference upon which the essay pivots. On this basis the thought of Levinas is set apart from that of Husserl and Heidegger, 'the two Greeks', for whom the difference at issue is most adequately thought via a total repetition of philosophy's Greek origin (*WD*, 83). By contrast, Levinas's thought aims to liberate itself from the Greek source and perhaps from every source in general, it 'fundamentally no longer seeks to be a thought of Being and phenomenality' (*WD*, 82). This implicates Levinas neither in a subordination of metaphysics (his work remains metaphysical in its primary possibility), nor in a dissociation from the category of the ethical (which now finds its basis in a nonviolent relation to the infinite otherness of the Other), but rather in an appeal to an opening within experience itself.

This distinction between approaches promises too much in the direction of my enquiry simply to be passed over. Yet I will need to proceed somewhat more directly. So I propose to follow this line while limiting

myself to discussion of Heidegger and Derrida alone. I justify this selection first given Derrida's own equivocation, evinced in 'Violence and Metaphysics' and elsewhere, about confining Heidegger's work to the exposition outlined above.¹ And second, in following through on Derrida's questioning of the question and its philosophical authority, I cannot see any adequate way forward that would permit side stepping Heidegger. Perhaps I need only recall the directive in *Of Grammatology* for this to be convincing: 'One must ... go by way of the question of being as it is directed by Heidegger and by him alone, at and beyond onto-theology, in order to reach the rigorous thought of that strange nondifference and in order to determine it correctly' (*OG*, 23). Becoming clear as to what such 'going by way of' amounts to is a crucial step in explicating Derrida's thinking about the limits of philosophy.

From first glance there is an obvious convergence of the Derridian and Heideggerian paths. Whereas Heidegger has sought to distinguish between the different senses in which philosophy could be said to be at an end, Derrida has attempted to multiply the distinctions between closure and end. When questioned about his 'apocalyptic tone' he replies that he wanted to speak of 'discourses on the end rather than announcing the end ... to analyze a genre rather than practice it' (*AT*, 30). Of course the situation is slightly more nuanced than this in that Derrida concedes that he does at times practice this genre too. However to proceed more slowly, let us first consider Heidegger's discussion of the end of philosophy.

Heidegger and the end of philosophy

The concern to demarcate different senses of the end and closure of philosophy is an issue closely allied to my initial interest in the dialogue of the question, and the distinction between the question in general and philosophy as a determined mode of the question. The connection is perhaps most obvious and certainly decisive in Heidegger's later work. The importance of a title like that of the 1964 essay, 'The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking', is precisely that it 'designates the attempt at a reflection which persists in questioning'. A reflection moreover which would also be a further instance of Heidegger's repeated attempts since 1930 to instigate an immanent critique of *Being and Time*.²