Derrida and Post-Modern Political Philosophy

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Abstract   *Western political philosophy may be more diverse than its supporters or critics have allowed in recent scholarship. This paper argues that political philosophy is the centre of Derrida's philosophical thought as a whole, and suggests that similarities between Isocrates and Derrida help us to better understand both the political thought of these thinkers and the historical diversity of Western political philosophy.*

INTRODUCTION

What philosophy is, and what sort of future it may have, is a question toward which we are compelled to turn in and by post-modernity. This question is too often avoided in the universities, hidden behind a variety of philosophical specialisms—analytic philosophy, applied philosophy, and a proliferation of "philosophies of"—which limit the scope and goals of philosophy by strictly limiting its method and subject matter, often in direct and dismissively critical contrast to previous practice.[1] None of these specialist philosophies take much substantive account of the questions asked in philosophy prior to our century: questions of the good, ontology, theology, or Being, have been set aside as opiates of the masses, linguistic bewitchments, the victims of scientific rationalism, or as too difficult for undergraduates. Yet as these sceptical breezes pass over the surface of modern thought within the universities, there are, fortunately, deeper currents within which fundamental philosophy has survived, which are beginning to flourish once again. The question at the centre of this paper is whether thinking about politics must merely be a "philosophy of," or a reasoned elaboration of doctrines proceeding from the hypotheses of academic discourse (e.g. Rawls, Nozick, Gutmann), or once again a necessary part of fundamental philosophy, or thought about Being or the whole.

The very name "post-modern" denotes a moment in the history of thought which remains somehow tied to what preceded it, the "modern." It is debatable whether modern philosophy begins with Machiavelli or, as our epistemological age would have it, with Descartes. Whichever position we may take in this debate, it seems that we must regard modern philosophy as unfolding out of political philosophy. It is clear enough that Machiavelli is a political philosopher, although it is now sometimes necessary to remind ourselves that Descartes too, from the perspective of his primary intentions,

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was a political philosopher. D'Alembert declared in the *Encyclopedie* that Descartes had, in his philosophy, "laid the foundations of a government more just and more happy than has ever been established."[2] Descartes himself argued that moral science, including political philosophy, is "the highest degree of wisdom."[3] He turned to metaphysics, the roots of his tree of knowledge, so that he would be able to think about politics, the fruit for which such a tree is desired. This beginning in, and thinking to, the political, remains a feature of philosophy coming after the modern. Post-modernism, at least in the form of the profound thinkers from which it originates, certainly also guides our thought to politics. Nietzsche and Heidegger both understood the relationship between their thought about Being and the enduring questions of political life, and each of them, in action if not in thought, was committed to definite political aspirations.

While the question of the relation between philosophy and politics has received much attention in relation to Nietzsche and Heidegger, we might usefully turn to the thought and writing—and peculiar influence—of a thinker who claims to have developed and surpassed the thought of these thinkers, Jacques Derrida. If, as I intend to argue here, thinking about politics reveals both the motivations and the primary intentions of Derrida's texts, then he may be the post-modern thinker who can best help us to see, in terms more immediately compelling to us now, the necessity of a re-asking of the question of the relation between philosophy and politics, or Being and justice, and of a return to the history of (political) philosophy in order to better understand the sense in which political thinking is a necessary, and perhaps the central, part of fundamental philosophy.

The following sections are intended to fulfil three intentions. First, I intend to provide a very brief overview of some of the main points of Jacques Derrida's thinking, in order to establish the constellation of ideas within which his political thought is developed. Second, I will argue that Derrida's thinking, including particularly his critical engagement with the history of Western philosophy, is best understood cumulatively as an identifiable ethical-political position. Third, I will conclude with some suggestions about Derrida's relation to thinkers with similar ideas in the tradition of Western philosophy.

1. Le Postmoderne explique aux enfants: Derrida

As developed by Derrida, and as augmented by his many academic followers, deconstruction has become a rather diverse and diffuse edifice ranging across specialties which include contemporary metaphysics and theology, literary theory, political theory, sociological theory, various modes of cultural theory, and so on. The purpose of this section of my paper is not, as it were, to provide an introductory "primer" on deconstruction, but to outline the logical structure of Derrida's conception of deconstruction before turning to an account of its relation to political thought and practice.

In Derrida's view, the history of Western philosophy is to be understood from the perspective of the history of metaphysics, and the history of Western metaphysics is the history of logocentrism and phonocentrism (from *phone*, Gr. 'voice'). Logocentrism signifies any form of thought based on an external point of reference, such as Truth,

or Being, which serves as a standard against which the content of thought is evaluated. Logocentrism in Western thought is manifested in phonocentrism. Phonocentrism derives from an original privileging of speech over writing in Greek philosophy. Speech was believed to be, or to allow, direct and unmediated communication of the signified by the signifier, where the signifier remains present to respond to any error or ambiguity present in the signifying. The particular values of speech are, consequently, presence and truth, or the goal of making the signified fully present while "erasing" the signifier. The complete presence of the object signified in speech is understood as knowledge, the goal inherent in spoken dialogue, and the privileging of this goal constitutes phonocentrism: Western rationalism seeks to achieve in thought just those characteristics which are apparently inherent in speech.

Derrida argues that the basis of phonocentrism and logocentrism is the metaphysics of presence, a thinking of the world grounded in conceptions such as Aristotle's *ousia* (substance), "the nature of things," or, in general, the view that a permanent and rationally ordered reality exists accessible to human thought, that being is present to human thought. The representation of such reality in speech is understood as a representation of the transcendental signified; the signifier refers to a definite and eternal signified. The metaphysics of presence is the determination of Being as presence, that is, as "humanity," *idea*, *telos*, *ousia* present to thought. The metaphysics of presence is the only metaphysics known to the West, according to Derrida, although in the final section of this paper I shall argue that he may be mistaken in this.

Derrida contrasts phonocentrism and the metaphysics of presence with writing. Writing is unlike speech because the author may not be able to find the correct signifier for all contexts and interpreters, but must rather leave a text to an unforeseen audience of readers who may distort the signified. In other words, in writing the author is not fully present, and the writing is consequently "iterable," or subject to repetition by authors other than the original author and to misinterpretation because the signifiers are read without the author. By writing the author allows the differentiation of the signifier from the original signified.[4] Derrida argues that a distinction between, and comparison of, speech and writing shaped Western thought from Plato to Nietzsche and, to some degree, beyond.[5]

Derrida does not wish to reverse the Western tradition's privileging of the metaphysics of presence and phonocentrism in order to define a new departure in Western thought by privileging the metaphysics of graphocentrism. On the contrary, he argues that the metaphysics of presence and phonocentrism ought now to be deconstructed in order to show that they contain within themselves the values of writing, and thereby to allow the values of writing and of speech to exist simultaneously and in a playful and indeterminate relation with one another. Phonocentrism values Truth and the elimination of error through dialogue with a present author, so that knowledge is understood as the goal and value of thought. In contrast, graphocentrism values the indeterminacy of the text, and therefore a plurality of interpretations and an openness to the Other present in other interpretations. The nature of texts makes such deconstruction possible. Texts simultaneously affirm and deny the metaphysics of presence in such a way as to give rise to paradoxes which challenge the coherence of this metaphysics, and which consequently challenge any defining of Being as presence. In any given presence, spoken or written, there are "traces" of the non–present, where such traces consist of distinctions,

word-meanings and associations which are constitutive of the meaning of any given signifier but not explicitly present in it. The non-present is not the same as the absent. For example, the term of moral opprobrium "Scrooge," meaning miserly and pitiless, carries within it the trace of Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," and specifically, a Malthusian conception of the poor which will be present to a greater or lesser degree depending on the reader. What is present to any given reader of a text depends on these traces and their historicity, and the degree to which they are received. This ambiguity and variability of signification depends on "difference," or distinctions which underlie what is signified by a signifier and what is not. Such difference, or Derrida's "differance," refers to differing, in the sense of the distinctions made by the author when writing the text, and to deferral, in the sense of postponing the deciding of the meaning of the text until a subsequent distinction of traces is made by the reader. In other words, the meaning of any text, or indeed any part of a text or even of a word, is ultimately indeterminate because interpretation is play within "difference," within the origins of immediate differences in previous and future differences and traces which are undecidable. The deconstructionist critic, from this perspective, does not deconstruct the text, but rather finds and exposes the indeterminacy and instability of meaning at the core of the text, and the *differance* which is its source, thereby allowing the text to deconstruct itself. By allowing the deconstruction of the text, the critic makes possible the undecidable "play" (jeu) of meanings or interpretations possible within the *differance* that exists between the opposite poles of each distinction (or trace of previous distinctions) within the text.

Derrida's texts both articulate and exemplify what he claims is a new mode of the interpretation of texts, and consequently of the history of Western thought. This new mode of interpretation is in turn founded on a new theory of the nature of texts, and of speech and writing. Specifically, texts require a double mode of reading, which is to say that one must read texts with two intentions. First, one must endeavour to understand the text as it has come to us in the history of Western thought, while at the same time, endeavouring to discern the negation of this understanding which is integral to the text, and thereby requires us to allow the text to deconstruct itself.

This double mode of reading is necessary because texts are constructed from distinctions and "traces" of thought which cannot be reconciled or synthesized. Fundamental to any understanding of this necessity are logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence, both of which Derrida regards as defining features of Western thought. According to this Derridian view, post-metaphysical philosophy consists of continually re-reading and deconstructing the history of philosophy. This is because reading and deconstructing the history of thought has as its goal the identification of the hierarchies it has established and now presupposes, the privileging of presence and speech over author and text in particular, and the subsequent deconstruction *and abolition* of these hierarchies. The task of thought then becomes the thinking, but not the deciding or choosing, between the undecidable alternatives, and therefore a keeping of all such alternatives before the mind. The question facing us is whether this Derridian view does in fact constitute the beginning of a new post-philosophical era in the history of thought, a new era of thought "after philosophy."

I will attempt to clarify this question, if not to answer it, from two closely related perspectives. First, I shall examine Derrida's relation to, and account of, the history of philosophy, and ask whether he constitutes something (according to taste, exhilaratingly

or horrifyingly or trivially) new in that history, or whether he can better be understood as the most recent spokesperson for a (now rhetorically flamboyant) position, and therefore debate, which is an enduring part of the Western tradition and which has been recently forgotten: the heritage of Isocrates. Second, I will try to better understand the nature and intention of Derrida's thought by arguing that he is best understood as a political (post-)philosopher who, when the crucial questions arise, refuses to philosophize. To draw these two perspectives together, I will argue that Derrida ought not to be regarded as an erratic eruption out of and against Western philosophy, but rather as the most recent articulator of a long-standing tradition within Western philosophy, and that his conformity to many of the dominant strands of moderately radical politics helps us to understand this. Derrida does not constitute a new era of philosophy, but rather a moment in its history worth serious study; there is no doubt that he is a learned and *seriously* playful thinker whose intentions are generous and humane.

On a more prosaic level, however, as the intellectual triviality and authoritarian political dogmatism that Derrida himself recognizes in many of his North American followers suggests, Derridian deconstruction is a movement which probably cannot be sustained without his charisma and learning. What Derrida can help us to see, and what wreckage in the universities left in the wake of his followers will make it necessary to see, is a renewed appreciation of the value of a philosophical study of the history of political philosophy as a necessary part of fundamental philosophy, of the resources it offers to those grappling with the questions of post-modernity, and of the kind of higher education that such questions demand and such history merits. His arguments require historical study in original languages, the study of complete books, the study of the complete works of thinkers of the past, and are at most merely mimicked by the academic habit of too many positivists, analytic philosophers, and postmodernists of Adeconstructing@ translated fragments of texts. While the Derridan project may not be sustainable without him, the questions he raises, and the resources needed to think them, will remain available to us, as they always have been, in the history of (political) philosophy.

2. DERRIDA AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

The Politics in Derrida and Deconstruction

Although Derrida is known for some of his practical political commitments, against racism, sexism, and South African apartheid, and for representative, parliamentary democracy and the European Community,[6] we are concerned here with the extent, if any, to which Derrida is concerned with anything that could be called (post-) philosophical thinking about politics. Opinions differ about the nature and extent of Derrida's interest in political questions of this kind, insofar as his writing is concerned. On the one hand are those who claim that Derrida's scholarly and philosophical writings, and in particular his deconstructive activity, have neither political motivation nor political intention, though they have had some political effect through his followers.[7] On the other hand are those who claim, more generally, that Derrida is either uninterested in political philosophy and, to the extent that he has an interest in politics, it is only a peripheral interest which is expressed through a cynical or sceptical approach to political

categories such as "justice," "freedom," or "rights," which he seeks to deconstruct (read: debunk). A careful reading of Derrida's texts reveals that neither of these interpretations is adequate, and that *all* of his writings are better understood as a record of his thinking about politics, and particularly of his attempt to articulate his political "position." To the extent that his writings are literary, theological, or historical, they are such because he is led to them by, and from them back to, his primarily political intentions and motives. Following the great revival of Heidegger, Derrida places political philosophy, thought about justice, within fundamental philosophy, thought about Being.

We can begin to approach a little closer to the centrality of Derrida's political position and "responsibility"—and I use these Derridian terms consciously—by examining the interpretations of his thought offered by others, critics and disciples alike, side by side with his responses to them. On the one hand are methodological revolutionaries such as A. J. Ayer, who deride Derrida as "a literary gadfly unworthy of the attention of serious thinkers," and former chairman of the National Endowment of the Humanities, William Bennet, for whom Derrida and deconstruction are the embodiment of irrationality, ignorance, and political irresponsibility.[8] It is clear enough that Ayer and Bennet attack Derrida without much direct familiarity with his texts or ideas, and resort to attacks which are metaphorical insinuations—Derrida as "gadfly"—rather than in accordance with the very principle of reason they would pretend to uphold. As Derrida observes,

> We can easily see on which side obscuration and nihilism are lurking when on occasion great professors or representatives of prestigious institutions lose all sense of proportion and control; on such occasions they forget the principles they claim to defend in their work and suddenly begin to heap insults, to say whatever comes into their heads on the subject of texts that they obviously have never opened or that they have encountered through a mediocre journalism that in other circumstances they would pretend to scorn.[9]

As Derrida suggests, these critics are "nihilist" in part in the sense that, while they pretend (perhaps even to themselves) to be upholders of open-minded and rational reading and debate concerning the true and the just, they are in fact intolerant (and smug) defenders of very particular conceptions of reason and its "proper" function within the authoritative framework of apparently unquestionable institutions: habit and power, not reason, is what defines value for them. What is perhaps more difficult to discern is that this same criticism, and its political emphasis, is the one which Derrida also brings against many of his own "followers."

A large and increasingly powerful coterie of (especially) American academics present themselves as followers of Derrida, though Derrida has repeatedly and (relatively) explicitly dissociated himself from them, and rejected their ideas.[10] Once again the emphasis of Derrida's criticism and dissociation is political. Terry Eagleton argued that,

> If the American deconstructionists considered their textual enterprise was faithful to the spirit of Jacques Derrida, one of those who did not was Jacques Derrida. Certain American uses of deconstruction, Derrida has observed, work to ensure "an institutional closure" which serves the dominant political and economic interests of American society. Derrida is clearly out to do more than develop new techniques of reading: deconstruction is for him an ultimately *political* practice, an attempt to

dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought, and behind that a whole system of political structures and social institutions, maintains its force.[11]

Political and literary theorists such as Edward Said, Frank Kermode, and Richard Bernstein have made the same observation, but have found themselves unable to discover the specific content and justification for Derrida's political position. For present purposes it is important to note that while Derrida's criticism of his American ''followers'' takes some account of their trivialization of his interpretive ideas, and of their sometimes insufficient familiarity with the texts they would ''deconstruct,'' his concern for the standards of academic competence are not given the attention they deserve. He places greatest emphasis, though, on what he regards as the inadequacies of supposed followers' political effects and aspirations. As Bernstein observed, in an article very sympathetic to Derrida but exasperated with his North American disciples,

> Indeed, there is something grotesque and even perverse about the ''reception'' of Derrida and deconstruction, especially by *some* members of the Anglo-American literary ''community'' where this ''movement'' has been most influential. For it is marked by an intellectual elitist arrogance, and frequently degenerates into little more than a sophisticated word play by coteries of academics who delight in their own ''precious'' verbal wit and cleverness. Despite the claim that deconstruction may be ''too political for some,'' the ''reception'' of deconstruction has been almost totally apolitical-stance—except, of course, for that domestic parlour game called ''academic politics.''[12]

Derrida's critical response to his ''followers'' is political in two senses. First, Derrida insists that the potentially radical political implications of his ideas are effectively neutralized by their absorption into an academic enclave which is so completely taken up with the ''deconstruction'' of texts that it is for all practical purposes politically disconnected and consequently impotent.[13] Second, and more fundamentally, Derrida responds to his ''followers'' (and some of his critics) by observing that their ostensibly ''open–minded'' academic enterprise is in fact an exercise of intolerance and exclusion, an exercise of institutional power in the service of the self-interest of a self-privileging elite, and a value dogmatism which precludes accommodation of the Other, ultimately because it perpetuates the metaphysics of presence which Derrida seeks to understand and bring into question. Derrida makes an *ethical-political* distinction between deconstructionists and Derridian deconstructionists.

The fact that apparent misunderstandings of Derrida's texts served as the basis for political criticisms and misuses of those texts, along with the fact that Derrida's corrections of his critics have been more forceful and unambiguous than his responses to his equally misguided ''followers,'' raises the question of the extent to which Derrida can be held responsible for the political interpretations and consequences of what he has written. Derrida has famously argued that one consequence of textuality is that texts can be interpreted independently of the author's intentions, an argument which has sometimes been taken to imply the author cannot be held fully responsible for some of the ways in which his texts are used. The key question concerns the parameters of ''fully'': the implication seems to be that, in Derrida's view, authors *do* bear some responsibility in this regard, but he fails to specify how much. In his discussion of the (mis)use of Nietzsche's texts by Nazi ideologues, for example, Derrida asserts that, ''it cannot be

entirely fortuitous that the discourse bearing his [Nietzsche's] name in society, in accordance with civil laws and editorial norms, has served as a legitimating reference for ideologues."[14]

The misuse of Nietzsche's texts cannot be "entirely fortuitous" because, in Derrida's view, they lend themselves to such misuse. As Derrida observes,

> it is not enough to say: "Nietzsche did not say that", "he did not want that", or "he would have surely vomited this", that there is falsification of the legacy and interpretive mystification going on here. One may wonder how and why what is so naively called a falsification is possible (one can't falsify just anything), how and why the "same" words and the "same" statements—if they are indeed the same—might several times have been made to serve certain meanings and certain contexts that are said to be different, even incompatible.[15]

If, as Derrida implies, Nietzsche bears at least some responsibility for the political consequences of his texts (and again the precise degree is not specified, a serious fault in political thought that is to *successfully* seek to avoid tyranny), on the grounds that the texts lend themselves to such abuse, then it would seem that Derrida too ought to be held responsible for the political misappropriation and consequences of his own texts. This is a question to which we shall return.

Evidence of Derrida's primarily political intention is, of course, discernable in more than his responses to critics and wayward disciples. The centrality of the political in Derrida's thought and writing (and speech, if published transcripts of discussions are not writing) must ultimately be explicated through a careful reading of his texts, to which I will turn in a moment. Nevertheless, the fact that such an explication is possible and, more importantly, can be reliably said to capture Derrida's authorial intentions, can be supported with reference to his unambiguous assertions. As Derrida wrote,

> Deconstructive readings and writings are ... not simply analyses of discourse .... They are also effective or active ... interventions, in particular political and institutional interventions that transform contexts without limiting themselves to theoretical or constative utterances even though they must also produce such utterances.[16]

As the discussion above might seem to imply, and as previous interpretations of Derridian deconstruction sometimes assume, the political intention (and effect) of deconstruction appears to be defined negatively, in the sense that de-construction exposes and dismantles thought and practices which privilege one set of ideas or people over another. Derrida has in fact described his "principle motivation" in deconstruction as the endeavour "to free oneself of totalitarianism as far as possible."[17] As Derrida himself emphasizes, however, deconstruction is not merely negative or de-constructive, but is motivated by an affirmative intention as well. He suggests not only that he is motivated by a constructive intention but that his or any critique logically *must be* grounded in the affirmation of an alternative to what is critiqued. In his words, "I cannot conceive of a radical critique which would not be ultimately motivated by some sort of affirmation, acknowledged or not."[18]

There is a logical and normative *necessity* in all critique: any critique *must* utilise criteria of error or reprobation which the critique thereby affirms as a part of discourse and action, and which motivates the critique. In the case of Derrida's statement here,

however, there is little to be discerned beyond the implication that freedom from totalitarianism is based on an affirmation of some conception and valuation of "human freedom." There is little we can say about what the affirmative political position of Derridian deconstruction might be. In the next section we will turn to the general question of the nature of the positive or affirmative political *intentions* and motivations of Derridian deconstruction, before turning in the subsequent section to identify more specifically at least the outlines of Derrida's affirmative political *position* within his thought.

The Political Centre of Derrida's Critique of Metaphysics

To begin with a suggestion offered by Richard Bernstein,[19] we can define the domain of the "ethical-political" in Derrida's thought in terms of the classical Greek (particularly Aristotelian) notions of *ethos*, *polis* and *nomos*. Derrida, both following and challenging Heidegger in this as in so much else, observes that, traditionally, *ethos* was understood to refer to habit or custom in matters of practice, *polis* referred to communal relations among citizens, while *nomos* (law) connected *ethos* and *polis* in practice as well as in a unified practical philosophy.[20] Any attempt to link *ethos* and *polis* in this way raises both practical problems and theoretical questions, particularly the Socratic question of the relation between the good for man as citizen and the good for man, or, how a human being ought to live. Derrida approaches this normative question from the perspective of an observation provided by Heidegger in his "Letter on Humanism":

> Thus the saying of Heraclitus (Fragment 119) goes: *ethos anthropoi daimon*. This is usually translated, "A man's character is his daimon". This translation thinks in a modern way, not a Greek one. *Ethos* means abode, dwelling place. The word names the open region in which a man dwells. The open region of his abode allows what pertains to man's essence, and what in thus arriving resides in nearness to him, to appear. The abode of man contains and preserves the advent of what belongs to man in his essence. According to Heraclitus' phrase this is *daimon*, the god.[21]

Heidegger implies here that there is a relation of fundamental philosophical importance between what is nearest and familiar to human beings, and ontotheology, and this is precisely the implication which is developed by Derrida in "The Ends of Man":

> The ontological distance from *Dasein* to what *Dasein* is as ek-sistence and to the *Da* of *Sein*, the distance that first was given as ontic proximity, must be reduced by the thinking of the truth of Being. Whence, in Heidegger's discourse, the dominance of an entire metaphysics of proximity, of simple and immediate presence, a metaphorics associating the proximity of Being with the values of neighbouring, shelter, house, service, guard, voice, and listening.[22]

Derrida argues that this relation between the metaphysics of proximity, or the familiarity of the near, and ontology, must be critically examined. The deconstruction of these categories, and the relation between them, is present within them:

> Is not this security of the near what is trembling today, that is, the co-belonging and co-propriety of the name of man and the name of Being, such as this co-propriety

inhabits, and is inhabited by, the language of the West, such as it is buried in its *oikonomia*, such as it is inscribed and forgotten according to the history of metaphysics, and such as it is awakened also by the destruction of ontotheology? But this trembling—which can only come from a certain outside—was already requisite within the very structure that it solicits.[23]

There is, in Derrida's view, a fundamental relationship between the instability, and hence deconstruction, of what is nearest and most familiar to us in the household sphere of our ordinary lives, and his study and deconstruction of metaphysics, ontotheology in particular. To understand the specifically political nature of these two deconstructions, and of the relation between them, we must concentrate on Derrida's understanding of the tradition of Western metaphysics.

Derrida understands Western metaphysics in terms of the relationship between our conception of proximity or presence and our conception of ontology, though in such a way as to give primary emphasis to normative conceptions and questions. In his view the "traditional form" of metaphysics can be understood in terms of,

> 1. The hierarchical axiology, the ethical-ontological distinctions which do not merely set up value-oppositions clustered around an ideal and unfindable limit, but moreover *subordinate* these values to each other (normal/abnormal, standard/parasite, fulfilled/void, serious/nonserious, literal/nonliteral, briefly: positive/negative and ideal/nonideal)... 2. The enterprise, of returning "strategically," ideally, to an origin or to a "priority" held to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order *then* to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just *one* metaphysical gesture among others, it is *the* metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent.[24]

Derrida's reading and deconstruction of Western metaphysics, of ontology or ontotheology, is primarily ethical–political in motive and intention. In his view, the *importance* of the inadequacies of the Western conception of Being within a metaphysics of presence is that such a conception, first, leads to particular distinctions or "value-oppositions," and then, second, arranges these oppositions hierarchically. Specific conceptions of good, normal, ideal and god, for example, are privileged over others, while these others from which they are distinguished are subordinated or repressed by a combination of power, or even violence, and metaphysical blindness.[25] Consequently the deconstruction of these distinctions and hierarchies is valued by Derrida primarily in terms of his own political motivations and intentions. As he says in his moving discussion of Levinas,

> To let the other be in its existence and essence as other means that what gains access to thought, or (*and*) what thought gains access to, is that which is essence, and that which is existence; and that which is the Being which they both presuppose. Without this, no letting-be would be possible, and first of all, the letting-be of respect and of the ethical commandment addressing itself to freedom. Violence would reign to such a degree that it would no longer even be able to appear to be named.[26]

This letting-be of the other in its essence is the crucial consequence for Derridian deconstruction because it is the condition for the very existence of an ethical–political community. Derrida argues that deconstruction as he advocates it is valuable precisely because it allows us to recover "the *respect* for the other *as what it is*: other. Without this acknowledgement, which is not a knowledge, or let us say without this 'letting be' of an existent (Other) as something existing outside me in the essence of what is (first in its alterity), no ethics would be possible."[27]

An ethical–political intention and position is at, or is, the centre of Derrida's writings and thinking. By deconstructing metaphysics, Derrida intends to demonstrate to us that our most fundamental distinctions are ultimately groundless, and that any hierarchical ordering of them, and *a fortiori* any institutional privileging or repressing of the distinguished categories, or their derivatives, must be groundless as well.[28] Derrida's deconstruction of metaphysics is undertaken in order to construct a more adequate conception of the ethical–political in thought. As an alternative Derrida here alludes to an implicit ethical–political position which places particular value on respect-for-the-other as an acknowledgment, and on freedom, but we must examine his writings from a different perspective if we are to be able to decide whether Derrida articulates this position adequately.

Derrida as Political (Post-) Philosopher

I have argued that Derrida does have a political intention which is central to his thought, and that by his own account he bears some responsibility for this intention, and the way in which it has been interpreted. We need to turn now to two questions: the way in which a political intention is central to Derrida's thought and writing, and what the substance of that political position is.

Derrida is a political philosopher in the sense that, according to his own emphasis, deconstruction is concerned above all with justice and law, and the avoidance of tyranny.[29] The fact that Derrida has repeatedly characterized deconstruction, and the whole of his thought and scholarship generally, as nearest in intention to the tradition of political philosophy raises the question of how we are to understand his interpretations of Plato, Hegel, Heidegger and others, particularly when these interpretations have little, if any, relation to political philosophy as it is now understood and practised in the universities. We can acquire this understanding if we realize that *all* of Derrida's thinking proceeds as follows: (1) beginning from observations of political practice, Derrida (2) extracts the fundamental categories of thought that underlie such practice, (3) traces these categories to their ontotheological foundation, (4) deconstructs this foundation, (5) replaces the original categories with the *differance* that lies between them, (6) from this *differance* elaborates a political position, and finally (7) advocates a new political practice on the basis of this position. The "deconstructionism" of Derrida's followers misrepresents Derrida's intentions by moving from (1) directly to a politicised version of (4), in which the texts are not allowed to deconstruct themselves but are rather found to be "exposed" only in the sense that they are incompatible with the political doctrine (or "ideology," the preferred rhetorical term) of the critic, and then back to a new (1), which in fact was presupposed from the beginning. The text is not allowed to deconstruct itself from within, but rather is critiqued relative to an external and opposing political doctrine

which is given precisely the "privileged" status Derrida seeks to deconstruct. This Derrida does not do.

If Derrida's deconstructive scholarship often concentrates on ontotheology or questions related to it, it is because they constitute both the foundations of the political positions he wishes to challenge, and the point of departure from which he articulates his own alternative political position: Derrida's concern with ontotheology is placed by him within a conception of political thought which defines the goal and limits of fundamental (post-) philosophy. Although the negative radical political critique which is *implied* by popular American academic interpretations of deconstructionism is now widely recognized, Derrida himself has argued that neither the substantive political critique nor the positive political position integral to *his own* thought has been recognized.[30] An examination of Derrida's often moving and eloquent study of South African apartheid, "Racism's Last Word," will serve here as an illustration of how this authentic understanding of his thought can be acquired.

Derrida presents his study of apartheid as a "theological-political discourse" which raises the "onto-theologico-political" question.[31] He places his deconstruction within an impressively thorough study of the history, political basis, and institutional and jurisprudential articulation of apartheid throughout the history of South Africa as a Dutch, then British, colony, and finally as an independent state. Of particular importance, in Derrida's view, is the deconstruction of "human rights" within the context of apartheid. Although he acknowledges that the failure to recognize human rights in South Africa is in important ways rooted in the conflict between the literal (ideal) and the contextual (effective) meaning of these words, he emphasizes that the fundamental problem is in the metaphysical basis of "human rights." Derrida argues that "human rights" are based on two, ultimately self-contradictory, components of an ontotheology which grounds the conception of "human." I will examine each of these components in turn before turning to an examination of the way in which they are said to contradict one another.

Derrida observes that human rights are based on the conception of the human. This conception is, in his view, particularly well captured in Thomas Jefferson's "A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress Assembled, July 4, 1776" (The Declaration of Independence).[32] Jefferson proposed that "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with inalienable rights."

Derrida draws our attention to the way in which this apparently straightforward political description constitutes a conjunction of three distinct kinds of metaphysical claims: ontological claims concerning the natural order; theological claims concerning the origin of that order; and theologico-political claims concerning the derivative political prescriptions present to thought within that order. Specifically, Thomas Jefferson's political argument rests on the claim that human beings, through the use of natural reason (self-evident truths), are able to discern ordered relations within nature (men are equal), and that men are equal and possess political rights in accordance with the will of their creator. In other words, Derrida argues, this declaration of rights rests entirely on the inclination of Western metaphysical thought to observe regularities in nature, to believe that such regularities are intelligible, and to infer from such intelligibility that the regularities are caused by (a) Being. Western ontotheology is the product of an attempt to

identify ontology with its theological source, in order to create in thought a source of eternal and knowable criteria against which human political judgements and actions may be measured.

Derrida also emphasizes that the Declaration's claim that men are *created* equal implies that they are equal and endowed with rights *by birth* or *by nature* ("natural rights"). Only human beings have such rights by birth or by nature, which implies, first, that human beings are by nature—that is, by birth—different from animals and, second, that human beings are entitled by nature to greater moral consideration than are the animals, which are placed in a hierarchy derived from this difference, below them. This in turn implies that the natural equality of human beings rests on a more fundamental inequality existing *by birth* between human beings and other animals: in the ontological order of nature, and therefore in natural rights, inequality by birth is more fundamental than equality by birth.

The morphological characteristics which define "races" within humanity are present at and by birth. In other words, the *differences* between races exist naturally by birth just as differences between human beings and other animals exist by birth. Such differences, according to Western ontotheology, are not invented by human beings but are rather discovered by human beings in nature, and therefore are a part of the ontology established by the creator. If this is so, then differences between the races are ontotheological, and therefore have a more fundamental status than any equality between the races which rests on human conceptions of value understood to be historically or culturally relative rather than natural.[33] In this way, Derrida's deconstruction of human rights shows that they are based on a conception of natural distinctions or differences which is ultimately self-contradictory.

Derrida argues that our present understanding of human rights rests on a self-contradictory ontotheological foundation within which natural differences are more fundamental than natural commonalities because commonalities can only be defined with reference to previous distinctions. The political aspirations embodied in human rights are constantly undercut by what are regarded as natural, and therefore ontotheologically grounded, distinctions between races, sexes, sexual orientations, and so on. Within each of these distinguished classes are natural differences, while between all of these classes are also natural commonalities. For example, women differ in height from other women by nature, but at the same time are not different from men with reference to other natural characteristics. It is therefore arbitrary, according to Derrida, to choose any natural characteristic—height, hair colour, sex, race—as a basis on which to distinguish human beings into classes, and subsequently as a basis according to which they can be hierarchically ordered. Only by deconstructing such differences, by pointing out their arbitrary nature, and their self-contradictory ontotheological foundation, can we overcome the political injustices which derive from them. All conceptions of a "natural order" ultimately result in an arbitrary restriction of human freedom, and therefore *ought* to be deconstructed—the *ought*, as R. M. Hare has always told us, being morally prescriptive.

In arguments of this kind, Derrida is explicitly developing the thought of Heidegger, and to some extent also that of Nietzsche. These two thinkers, as well as Karl Marx,[34] also argue that no ontological order, natural or theological, is available to human thought. Yet the political aspirations and/or consequences of their thought could by no means be

said to bring about the greater openness to differences and the more adequate human freedom that Derrida asserts will be the political consequence of his deconstruction of ontotheology. It is perhaps worth remembering that much of the tragedy and human suffering of political history can be accounted for by the persistent failure of ambitiously idealistic ideologues and peoples to recognize that if there is nothing we can claim to know, then there is nothing to limit the exercise of our power, power being a feature of human existence which no amount of thought can eliminate. In the classroom or the literary conference, the term "power" can be sociologically and conceptually deconstructed, but phenomenologically it cannot be: the political principle and the practical political result of literal deconstruction may well be "Might is right."

Given that Derrida's argument as we have so far examined it deconstructs previous political philosophy without defining a position which is sufficiently substantive to motivate allegiance in thought and action, and given the demonstrated political extremism of the German philosophical tradition within which his own deconstructive work is rooted, the question that must be asked is how does Derrida avoid what he himself recognizes to be the catastrophic moral and political consequences of this tradition. This question needs to be raised with greater urgency perhaps now that the anti–Semitic and Nazi inclinations of the deconstructionist Paul de Man have been exposed,[35] and now that the similarity between Derrida's political thought and the thought of conservatives of the Right such as Burke, Popper, and Oakeshott is being articulated.[36] This is a question which, so far as I understand, Derrida was unable to answer, and I shall do no more in the remainder of this paper than try to explore some of the routes through which an answer, positive or negative, may be found.

Derrida's Political Position

Derrida seeks to avoid the political consequences of the Heideggerian critique of ontotheology by deconstructing and moving beyond it. This deconstruction focuses on Heidegger's conception of ontological difference and the historicity of Man. These are, I assume, familiar subjects, and I will trace them in outline before turning to a more detailed examination of Derrida's position in relation to them.

Heidegger opposed the traditional Western ontotheological conception of Being by introducing, or re-introducing, the notion of ontological difference, the notion that, while Being and beings are intimately related, there nevertheless remains a radical separation between Being and beings.[37] No intelligible order exists which can be known independently of its human articulation. This does not mean, however, as it apparently did for Marx and Nietzsche, that any articulation of order within the world was a product of human labour or human creativity. On the contrary, Heidegger argued that Being is revealed to human beings over time, though this does mean that what is intelligible to the human mind varies over time in accordance with the revealing of Being. Human beings have a choice between a descent into nihilism driven by technological transformation through the attempt to master and control the world, or, as Heidegger recommends, an openness (or, strictly, *Ent-scheidung*, a not–closedness) to a historical revealing of Being, an attitude of "letting things be" (*Gelassenheit*).

Heidegger's conception of man as an essentially historical being is clearly integral to his conception of Being. Man is conceived to be fundamentally different from all other forms of existence or being in the sense that only humans possess *logos* or a faculty of reasoned speech. This faculty allows humans to understand and articulate their relation to others and to being insofar as it is revealed in time: human beings are "being-in-the-world" and not "being-in-itself."

Although Derrida recognizes that Heidegger's conception of ontological difference constitutes a radical critique of, and departure from, Western metaphysics, he by no means accepts this critique as it stands. On the contrary, Derrida deconstructs the Heideggerian conceptions of Being and Man in a manner which, in his view, avoids both the perpetuation of the residue of Western metaphysics which remains in Heidegger's thought, and the political consequences of that thought. This deconstruction brings us to Derrida's most fundamental—in the sense of most political—categories of thought, and to the *trace* of Heidegger which conditions the resulting political position.

Derrida argues that Heidegger's ontotheological difference, for all its apparently radical departure from Western ontotheology, nevertheless retains and perpetuates, in its specific "openness," a conception of Being as revealed, and consequently the inclination toward totalization and, therefore totalitarianism. In Derrida's view, any attempt to think in terms of Being involves making distinctions which are ultimately arbitrary and self-contradictory, and converting distinctions into hierarchies which are unjust.[38] Correlatively, Derrida argues that Heidegger's privileging of human being rests on a distinction between human and nonhuman, in terms of the possession of *logos* and potentially conscious historicity, which is arbitrary and therefore can be deconstructed.[39] Heidegger's definition of the human in terms of *logo* totalises human being without sufficient regard for difference, between the sexes, for example. Moreover, as Derrida also argues, Heidegger draws too great a distinction between, and consequently an arbitrarily hierarchical ordering of, human being and the rest of conscious being. Similarly, Derrida argues that Heidegger's conception of the historicity of human consciousness, or the revealing of Being in time, fails to take account of the distinctions which exist in any thinking of such a revealing, and that it is therefore better to leave aside the question of Being altogether in favour of an acceptance of non-ontological *differance* as the most fundamental category of thought.

Derrida's political position, and the two categories of thought which define it, are articulated with reference to *differance*. To be sure, the nature of this articulation, or even any assurance that there can be one, remains obscure, and its practical feasibility remains doubtful.[40] The most we can say is that Derrida's political position is articulated in terms of "openness" and "freedom." Critics of Derrida have asserted that his commitment to openness and freedom is either arbitrary, in the sense that he provides no reason why others should share this commitment, or is in some way a relapse to metaphysics, in the sense that the two parts of this commitment appear to be understood as criteria of judgement which exist somehow in the world independently of human thought. Both of these criticisms are mistaken.

According to Derridian deconstruction, the fundamental category of human thought is *differance*, which is understood as the origin of difference originating within language and the indeterminacy of meaning. It is not metaphysical because it is not a concept or entity, but rather exists within language between any word or concept

and its opposite comprising a distinction. Derrida's political position, and the conceptions of "openness" and "freedom" which give it content, is an elaboration of *differance* understood as what is revealed by the deconstruction of all previous metaphysics.

Differance leads us, first, to openness. The deconstruction of metaphysics reveals *differance*, or the undecidability of meaning that underlies any distinction. Within this undecidability of meaning is to be found both the privileged meaning of traditional metaphysics, and the Other. Deconstruction allows us to be open to this other in the realm of thought. Such openness to *differance* and the Other is the political correlate of such openness in thought. Openness to *differance* and to difference also constitutes an awareness of the undecidability of meaning, and a willingness to allow thought to play within the various meanings available in any distinction. Such playfulness in thought and language is free in the sense that it is restricted neither with reference to its origin in a distinction, nor with reference to any given meaning or goal. Thought is free to play within meaning, and the political correlate of such freedom is a willingness to acknowledge the Other fully as it is, freely, itself. Derridian deconstruction reveals the inescapable *differance* within all metaphysics, and on the basis of this non-ontological thought turns to openness and freedom as the constituent parts of the derivative position in thought and action.

3. Derrida's Relation to Western Political Thought: Themes for Further Study

The practical political positions of Derrida and Heidegger are fundamentally different, if not opposed. This opposition, however, must not be allowed to obscure a more fundamental commonality in the political thought of these two men. First, most of what now passes for political *philosophy* effectively dissociates such philosophy from fundamental philosophy, in part by attempting to ground thought about politics in artificial and practically impossible categories such as the Original Position (Rawls), the Ideal Speech Situation (Habermas), or a libertarian State of Nature (Nozick). In contrast, Heidegger and Derrida share with the pre-modern, that is, the pre-Machiavellian, tradition of political philosophy the view that thought about politics must lead to and be a part of thought about ontology and Being. The political differences between Heidegger and Derrida arise because Heidegger moves from the nihilistic potential within (post)modern political thought to fundamental philosophy and from fundamental philosophy back to a new political doctrine prescribing the goals of future action. Derrida, on the other hand, moves from the nihilistic and totalitarian potential of contemporary political thought to a deconstruction of metaphysics, but then moves from this deconstruction to openness and freedom which specify what we ought not to do rather than constituting a political doctrine prescribing the goal of future action. The radical political difference between Heidegger and Derrida therefore draws our attention to their shared, and perhaps more radical, return to a conception of political philosophy as a thinking which must be intimately related to, or even the centre of, fundamental philosophy. It may be hoped that a renewal of this elevated understanding of political philosophy will be the most beneficial consequence of Derrida's thought and influence.

A second, and directly related, way in which Derrida's thought may be beneficial is by encouraging a return to a more inclusive understanding of the history of Western political philosophy in its own terms. Others have already argued that Derridian ideas and arguments can be found in classical texts, such as Hesiod's Theogony, to which he has not addressed himself.[41] The classical political philosopher who comes closest to Derrida's position is the once forgotten and until recently ridiculed Isocrates, as Stanley Rosen has already hinted—but no more than hinted—in his *Hermeneutics as Politics*.[42] Isocrates argued that human thought is able to acquire knowledge of the things of the world, but is unable to acquire knowledge about any fundamental substances or causes of the things in the world, and that the attempt to acquire such knowledge is futile. In political terms such knowledge is futile because human beings cannot know the future, and therefore cannot know what would be true in the future, or what can serve as a basis for political judgement. There is, according to Isocrates, a fundamental uncertainty in human thought and expression as a consequence of the relationship between time and the objects of thought. He also argued that philosophers who do succumb to the temptation to seek after knowledge of this more fundamental kind find themselves tempted to believe that they have sometimes acquired it. The belief that one possesses such godlike knowledge is, as Isocrates observed, too often a temptation to believe that one must therefore also have a dispensation to rule. In a manner which is strikingly similar to Derrida, though no doubt importantly different in some details, Isocrates claims that the knowledge sought by fundamental philosophy is unattainable, and that the search for it is objectionable not merely because it is futile but because it can lead to or sustain political totalitarianism. Isocrates' alternative political position is also similar to Derrida's in a manner which merits reflection.

Isocrates observed that the Greek city states articulated and defended their independent political identity and goals with reference to theological arguments concerning the origins of their *polis*. Such arguments, particularly in the politically volatile circumstance of the Hellenic world of his day, were seen by Isocrates to culminate in aggressive nationalism, and an intolerance within each *polis* toward other cities. In part as a solution to such intolerance, Isocrates proposed his famous pan-Hellenism as a political objective for the whole of the Greek world. According to Isocratic pan-Hellenism, each *polis* would be assured that its unique customs, laws, and political traditions would be fully respected by all of the others, while at the same time it could join with the others in an increasingly inclusive political federation. This seems to me sufficiently similar to the reasoning which has led Derrida to support arguments for a pan-European (and not only European) federation which protects diversity and respect for the Other within a larger political organization. In light of Derrida's well-known advocacy of a European Community, it is perhaps significant in this context that the founders of the League of Nations, the United Nations, and movements toward European integration all explicitly cited Isocrates' pan-Hellenism as a model for their goal.[43]

If there is any substance to these similarities between Derrida and Isocrates (and I think there is, but it needs further development), then it would be clear that Derrida does not simply stand against the Western tradition. On the contrary, the position he is developing has clear antecedents *within* the history of Western thought. Consequently, an engagement with his deconstructions and political position can be undertaken on the basis of, and as a continuation of, the debate between the Isocratic

and Socratic traditions of political thought, as others have already persuasively recommended.[44]

Finally, a philosophical argument with Derridian deconstruction, particularly if it should prove possible to understand this argument within the context of the historical quarrel between Isocratic and Socratic political philosophy, can have at least one other benefit for us. Derrida reminds us, in a way reminiscent of the life of Socrates, that recent philosophy, especially within the universities, has focussed so intently on questions of epistemology or methodology that it has forgotten the troubling *questions* of its own motives and value, particularly before a citizenry and governing class which are increasingly sceptical, if not derisive, about any philosophy. The future of philosophy depends to some extent less on how we approach questions of truth than on how we approach questions of value. The relationship of philosophy to the regime, and the responsibility of the philosopher to the just regime, might once again be placed among the primary philosophical questions, and so help political philosophy return once again to its proper place within fundamental philosophy.

NOTES

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