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Life After Derrida

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“My desire resembles that of a lover of the tradition
who would like to free himself from conservatism”

Jacques Derrida

Death is a recurrent theme in Derrida’s work. According to him, the conditions for any sign to have meaning, any trace to be readable, or any utterance to be heard, do not lie in the living presence of an animating subject of some sort, but in the absolute and irredeemable absence of any such subject. On Derrida’s own account, the life of a text, or a body of work, is sustained not just in spite of but because of the absence of an authorial presence. It is often said that deconstruction therefore justifies interpreting texts in any way you wish. This is half right. It holds only on condition that you remain absolutely faithful to the text itself! As a philosopher, Derrida was less a critic, more of an advocate. His engagement with the tradition of Western philosophy is governed by a double responsibility: to acknowledge one’s debts to others at the same time as asserting one’s own position, deciding for oneself between different interpretations. In the wake of Derrida, then, theory is a mournful practice, suspended between “two infidelities”. If one says nothing of one’s own, remains satisfied with just quoting, then one effaces oneself in front of the one to whom one owes a debt: “But this excess of fidelity would end up saying and exchanging nothing. It returns to death. It points to death, sending death back to death” (Derrida 2001, 45). On the other hand, if one avoids this identification, so that what is said about other writers really comes from oneself, then one risks making them disappear again: “We are left then with having to do and not do both at once, with having to correct one infidelity by the other” (*ibid.*). Derrida leaves us with a whole new genre of theory, in which thinking is nothing more than the *working through* of an inheritance. But the guiding responsibility of this working through is not simply to preserve what is past or to revere what is dead. It is to keep ideas alive.

This theme of inheritance and responsibility is the key to appreciating the political resonance of Derrida’s writing. His work is often credited with having catastrophic political effects, at the same time as it is dismissed as inscrutable, empty, and trivial. Some people complain that it is motivated only by a destructive urge to overthrow all standards and values. Some people like it for the very same reason. And some people think it is unforgivably evasive about its political implications. Once upon a time, it was enough to dismiss Derrida as just a narrow textualist, an idealist even. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a persistent complaint about Derrida concerned the absence in his work of any substantive engagement with Marx or Marxism. When he finally relented in the 1990s, the puzzlement set off by *Specters of Marx* (a book all about ghosts), only made it clear that the demand that Derrida ‘do’ Marx was never really an invitation to engage, but always more of a demand to conform. Around this time, Derrida’s political currency was being inflated in other quarters. Derrida is the patron saint of poststructuralist anti-essentialist-anti-foundationalism. The poststructuralist canonization of Derrida rests on a kind of political formalism. His

name is invoked as the authoritative reference point for various poststructuralist shibboleths - about binary oppositions being bad, all closure being fissured, all arbitrary relations being open to re-inscription, all meaning being indeterminate, all knowledge-claims being socially constructed (and contestable), and so on and so on. In this genre, the political salience of deconstruction follows from its disruption of all stable relations, its undermining of all naturalised essences, its rupturing of all false universalisms.

As pedagogy, poststructuralism invites us to move forward by forgetting all about ideas and traditions that we never knew about in the first place, and sometimes didn't even know we didn't know about. If Derrida's work has a future, as part of a living tradition of inquiry, then it is not likely to flourish as a variant of poststructuralism. The political resonance of his work does not lie in exposing contingency, in stripping away, in taking apart, or in decoding. Deconstruction is not a hermeneutics of suspicion. Rather, the value of Derrida's work lies in reckoning with the relationship between what is given and what is possible. This is understood not as a relation of negation or transcendence, but rather a patient relation of inheritance and responsibility - working through questions of what one should affirm, what should be subjected to criticism, and what should be abandoned. This type of reckoning requires a certain degree of patience. Paradoxically, then, the worldly resonance of Derrida's work lies in his identification of a disjuncture between the rhythms of political affairs and those of intellectual reflection, all the while emphasising the compelling relationship between these two rhythms. This means that you won't get much satisfaction from Derrida if you read his work for immediate political gratification. But that shouldn't be a cause of disappointment. Quite the contrary, it might make you wonder what it is that those theories that do offer such rewards have to sacrifice in order to pay-off in this way.

The emphasis in Derrida's work on the theme of patiently *responding to* and *answering for* others suggests that his ideas are most likely to flourish in the future because of the revival of interest in the philosophical topic of the public use of reason. Derrida's work over the last 15 years or so focussed on a family of related virtues: hospitality, forgiveness, confession, tolerance, testifying, bearing witness, gift relations, mourning, justice, responsibility, friendship. These all refer to a set of attentive, generous, and responsive ways of relating. What is at stake here is an effort to think about the conditions for a *politics of acknowledgement*. And in this respect, it is noteworthy that much the most interesting work being done on Derrida's ideas follows from the recognition that it is pertinent to the concerns of so-called 'Analytical philosophy'. The touching point is the work of J. L. Austin. The unresolved puzzle bequeathed by Austin concerns the *force* that different actions can carry, and in particular, the force of different acts to bring into existence, or to *convene*, scenes of public engagement. This theme of publicness is also central to the unexpected rapprochement between Derrida and Habermas (Habermas and Derrida 2003). The shared terrain of this drawing together is a concern with Kantian topics of universality, obligation, and publicity; the defining tension remains their differing estimations of Heidegger's work.

Of course, the idea of the public use of reason is intimately related to our inherited notions of criticism and critique. Derrida's mode of philosophical inquiry is really old fashioned. It involves addressing questions of interlocutors. It is often presumed that simply by asking questions, Derrida undermines the very grounds of justice, truth, or morality. The controversies that punctuated Derrida's academic and public career reveal the expectations that people bring to their engagement with complex

conceptual and philosophical ideas. Do we really expect that theories could ever provide grounds for good politics, good moral judgments, or good taste? Just imagine what life would have to be like if one really needed firm foundations – epistemological, ontological, or moral – to actually act in the world. Derrida asks us to think about reasons, principles, foundations, and justifications in more *ordinary* ways, as ways of getting-along with other people.

Derrida helps you to learn new things. He opens up new horizons, rather than closing them down. He keeps the questions coming. He makes bad jokes. Derrida is fun to read. But always remember, you are not supposed to invest too much faith in either theory or theorists.

References

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