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**ON THE PHILOSOPHICAL STYLES OF THE TIMES: SOME  
QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE MEANING OF  
DECONSTRUCTION**

**Abstract:** The present paper deals with the philosophical styles of the hermeneutic project and deconstruction and tries to answer the question whether there really is, as Derrida argues, a fundamental difference, even an opposition between them. In this sense, taking the questions Derrida addressed Gadamer in their famous Paris encounter in 1981 as a clue, the author retraces the fundamental articulations of deconstruction, descending from Derrida's own description of the idea to his actual deconstructive practice, and shows that the presupposition Derrida takes as separating the hermeneutic project from deconstruction is actually one these two share in common.

**Key words:** hermeneutics, deconstruction, good will to understand, good faith, promise, testimony

Most general introductions to contemporary philosophy seem to teach us there are different styles of doing philosophy and different manners of approaching a problem philosophically. One is to develop the philosophic endeavor as a systematic approach whose main task is to create narratives about man and world and everything in between on the basis of a more or less complex conceptual core.

Of course, regardless of how detailed or coherent (and thus persuasive they are), inasmuch as they are meant to explain something, narratives in general and philosophical narratives especially, are prone to go wrong. They reflect either too closely and too much the thinking of their author – and here the very fact that they have an author, that they sprung from someone’s head is already more than enough –, or they reflect too ambiguously the things or states of facts they are meant to explain.

That is why another style of doing philosophy is to avoid stories as much as possible, writing only fragments, brief passages exposing the points where the stories written by others have gone wrong and hinting at the reasons why this happens (without indicating them). The whole picture with regard to these reasons is up to the reader to put together on the basis of the pieces (s)he is presented with. For, obviously, such tying of effects to causes could easily become a story in its own right, leading to a change of style or, better put, an effacing of the second style of doing philosophy and its transformation into the first.

The first style of doing philosophy is best exemplified by Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, while Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction typifies the second. Both philosophers recognize this about themselves expressly.

As Gadamer himself recalls *Truth and Method*, his *magnum opus*, is the product of his many years of lecturing – i.e., telling stories – to his students; the work assumes explicitly the task of telling the story of understanding, of what it means to understand, and even though it does it in writing, here, the story of understanding is told as if it were actually spoken (the orality of Gadamer’s style is in fact one of the main causes of the difficulty we have in understanding his thought).

Derrida, on the other hand, admits straightforwardly: “I have never known how to tell a story.”<sup>1</sup> And he substantiates his claim by pointing out the fragmentary nature of his work and the intricate relations between his texts. In the interview with Henri Ronse in *Positions* he observes:

“Derrida: One can take *Of Grammatology* as a long essay articulated in two parts (whose juncture is not empirical, but theoretical, systematic) into the middle of which one could staple *Writing and Difference*. [...]

Ronse: And *Speech and Phenomena*?

*Derrida*: I forgot. It is perhaps the essay which I like most. Doubtless I could have bound it as a long note to one or the other of the other two works."<sup>2</sup>

Given the seemingly simple opposition between these two styles of doing philosophy the way in which a confrontation between them would unfold as well as its outcome might seem to be easily anticipatable. The proponents of the fragmentary style would pick on different overgeneralizations and understatements (proven to be so against a factual background) occurring in the texts and would want to imply that they amount to something systematically wrong in the story proposed, that they prove the *de facto* impossibility of telling stories.

In order to defend themselves, the proponents of the narrative style on the other hand will point out that precisely because a collection of fragments can mean many things, it can also mean nothing.

In this sense, the actual confrontation between Gadamer and Derrida reserves us no surprises. When the two met in April 1981 at Goethe Institute in Paris<sup>3</sup> Derrida questioned Gadamer's thought on three accounts:

1. The good will to understand, the desire to be understood and for consensus in understanding that functions as a basic presupposition of philosophical hermeneutics (actually, of any hermeneutic project whatsoever). For Derrida, this presupposition, taking the form of an unconditional axiom – everybody wants to be understood, every text is written so that it can be understood –, is the sign of philosophical hermeneutics' belonging to a determinate epoch of the history of metaphysics: that of the metaphysics of the will, that determining the meaning of being as willing subjectivity.
2. The idea of "context of interpretation" which, despite being presented as all encompassing, might still not be able to contain some forms of interpretation, such as that undertaken in and by psychoanalysis.
3. The rapport of interpretation, the rapport between the interpreter and what (s)he wants to understand which, insomuch as it is established unilaterally by the interpreter might very well erase the alterity of what is to be understood, reducing the foreign meanings to what the interpreter already knows.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, all these are merely touched upon by Gadamer both in his Paris talk and his work as such. Seeing himself confronted in such a manner though, he rebukes Derrida by questioning the sense (whether there is any) of his interpellation. Why would the axiom of good will be the sign of metaphysics? How does the desire for consensus and understanding imply the determination of the meaning of being as will? Is

it not rather something we all manifest whenever we read and write, or when we talk to each other? Does Derrida himself not express such good will when he addresses his questions of Gadamer? Does he not express a desire to be understood?

It matters little (or, at least it should) whether Derrida really wants to be understood. But, it would mean a lot if it turned out that the presupposition of a good will to understand functions also as an axiom of deconstruction. For, this would constitute another way of effacing the fragmentary style of philosophy.

In order to establish whether this is the case we would like to turn to Derrida's own circumscription of deconstruction. To make sure we get a good understanding of it we will begin with the description of the idea of deconstruction, descending afterwards to the concrete level of its practice. The most suitable textual basis for proceeding in this endeavor is, in our opinion, the *Letter to a Japanese Friend*<sup>5</sup> inasmuch as this small piece approaches the matter systematically, identifying point by point several (non-)characteristics of deconstruction.

First of all, as Derrida notes in his *Letter*, of importance for the meaning of deconstruction is the context in which it appeared, a context dominated by structuralism. Deconstruction bears upon itself the mark of this context, it shows quite clearly the time and place of its birth but its fundamental gesture is an anti-structuralist one for it is oriented towards the dismantling of structures.

Second of all, deconstruction is neither *analysis*, nor *critique*. The idea of critique is in fact one of the favorite themes of deconstruction. And it is not a form of analysis because its dismantling of structures never arrives at a final element, at an absolutely simple thing which cannot be deconstructed anymore.

Third of all, deconstruction is not a method, it is "*pas de methode*," and it cannot become methodical inasmuch as it wants to remain the same.

And finally, deconstruction is neither an *act*, nor an *operation* for it is not related to a subject – be it individual or collective – which could apply it to an object at will. Deconstruction is an event, it happens purely and simply and, at the same time and through the same movement it deconstructs itself. Precisely because of this the deconstructive process is never-ending.

The fact that the idea of deconstruction is not the idea of an act or operation, that deconstruction is not a method though does not imply an arbitrary effectuation. On the contrary, when it happens, whenever it is at work in the margins or within any text of the Western tradition, deconstruction always unfolds in a methodical manner. Derrida himself

says it explicitly. In *Force and Signification*, talking about the way in which the dismantling of structures is performed he notes:

“Structure can be *methodically* threatened in order to be comprehended more clearly and to reveal not only its supports but also that secret place in which it is neither construction nor ruin but liability. This operation is called (from the Latin) *soliciting*. In other words, *shaking* in a way related to the whole (from *sollus*, in archaic Latin ‘the whole’, and from *citare*, ‘to put in motion’).”<sup>6</sup>

What guides deconstruction’s methodical shaking of the textual structures is, of course, the text itself. Obviously, not through what it shows explicitly. In such case the practice of deconstruction would be a mere variant of what is traditionally called interpretation. Rather, the text guides deconstruction through what it tries to hide in and through what it says, through the symptoms it manifests.

But, actually, how are we to distinguish between the sign and the symptom? How do we know that there is something hidden, something kept at distance behind what is said?

Philosophical hermeneutics has a simple answer to these questions. As we know, for Gadamer the reading of any text is opened by a “fore-conception of completion” whereby the text is taken to form a perfect unity of meaning that is completely intelligible and which, *in concreto*, presents itself as a harmony between the meanings all its passages and, in the end, of all its words. Through the lack of such harmony, through the fact that the different passages of the text do not connect with one another, by contrast, the interpreter understands that the signs of the text must be taken as symptoms and that (s)he has to give up the restorative attitude in favor of that of the hermeneutics of suspicion.<sup>7</sup>

Even though for Derrida such a solution is obviously unacceptable, this does not actually pose any problems. For him, every sign ought to be taken straightforwardly as a symptom and every text must be seen as a veil of something that is hidden behind it. Deconstruction...

“...that is, a writing interested in itself which also enables us to read philosophemes – and consequently all the texts of our culture – as kinds of symptoms (a word which I suspect, of course, as I explain elsewhere) of something that *could not be presented* in the history of philosophy, and which, moreover, is *nowhere present*, since all of this concerns putting into question the major determination of the meaning of Being as *presence*, the determination in which Heidegger recognized the destiny of philosophy.”<sup>8</sup>

With this, the deconstructive project cannot get any further from the hermeneutic philosophy and the distance between the fragmentary

and the narrative style could not grow any bigger. Here, Derrida opposes directly the complete hermeneutic trust in what gives itself to be understood. But, of course, this opposition is not given an axiomatic value; it cannot be. For if it were, if Derrida attributed the idea that all utterances are veils of something else the status of a principle, i.e., if he gave in to generalizing the mistrust in texts to all possible forms of utterance, he would situate the deconstructive project within the same epoch of the history of metaphysics to which, as he claims, philosophical hermeneutics belongs.

In truth, one can see all utterances as veils, one can take all signs as symptoms only if one presupposes a generalized "will to deceit," situated in clear opposition to the "good will to understand", but still implying the determination of the meaning of being as willing subjectivity. That is why Derrida sees himself forced to acknowledge that at least some utterances must be taken at face value, that some signs must be seen as saying what they mean and mean what they are saying. Apparently, Derrida's choice is to put his trust in the spoken discourse of the living other.

Years after the encounter with Gadamer, in *Of Hospitality*, Derrida writes:

"Just as any utterance implies a performative promising to address itself to someone else as such ("I am speaking to you, and I promise you the truth"), just as any speech act promises the truth (even and especially if I am lying) – well, anyway, I can always lie, of course (and who could swear or prove that Kant himself never lied?), but that will signify quite simply that therefore I'm not speaking to someone else, end of story. And in doing this, I am not recognizing either the essence of speech as giving one's word, or the necessity of founding a social bond."<sup>9</sup>

It is somehow puzzling to see the philosopher of grammatology, the thinker who wanted to invent a science of writing and the fervent denouncer of the metaphysics of presence privileging here the presence of the other, the speech and the voice that makes it resound. For somebody familiar with Derrida's early work, lines like these are unrecognizable, and this all the more due to their arbitrariness. Why is the alterity of the living other more trustworthy than the alterity of the text? How are they in fact different? Why would writing equate with a perversion of the authorial intention and how can speech manage to preserve it? Or, to make our questions more concrete, tying them to the last two fragments quoted above: Why are statements promises even when we lie while texts symptoms of something that *could not become present* itself?

Derrida never offered an answer to any of these questions. That is why one would be tempted to take the passage that forces us to pose them as singular and as a mistake, a slip from the French philosopher's part.

The fact though is that they are not. Few years later after *Of Hospitality*, in *Faith and Knowledge*, in line with the idea of statement as promise, Derrida goes so far as to identify the essence of the word as word in testimony. And, almost repeating what he said about promise, about testimony, he notes:

“In testimony, truth is promised beyond all proof, all perception, all intuitive demonstration. Even if I lie or perjure myself (and always and especially when I do), I promise truth and ask the other to believe the other that I am, there when I am the only one able to bear witness and where the order of proof or of intuition will never be reducible to or homogenous with the elementary «fiduciarité», the ‘good faith’ that is promised or demanded. The latter, to be sure, is never pure, is never pure of all iterability nor of all technics, and hence of all calculability. For it also promises its repetition from the very first instant. It is involved «engagé» in every address of the other. From the instant it is co-extensive with this other and thus conditions every ‘social bond,’ every questioning all knowledge, performativity and every tele-technoscientific, including those of its forms that are the most synthetic, artificial, prosthetic, calculable.”<sup>10</sup>

*Faith and Knowledge* though, not only offers the confirmation of the unmotivatedness, the arbitrary character of the distinction between the alterity of the text and that of the person; it actually renders even more problematic the deconstructive project and, along with it, the fragmentary style of philosophy. For, inasmuch as testimony is taken to be the very essence of language, if it is true that we come to testify through every speech act we utter and every word we lay upon the blank page and if the thing we testify is none other than our “good faith” towards the other and our need to have good faith in the other, than have we not discovered and are we not affirming here another form of the unconditional? Is not the good faith presented as always promised and demanded, as coextensive with and conditioning any “social bond” taken to be the first axiom of ethics? In such case, is deconstruction not situating itself within a clearly defined moment in the history of metaphysics? Does it not belong to that epoch determining the meaning of being as faith?

Even if we leave all these questions behind we are quickly confronted with others, equally problematic. By taking the good faith promised and asked for as the fundamental condition for any act of language undertaken in any form possible and for the very social bond that holds us together, are we not actually presupposing the good will to understand each other and one another as well? Why would one promise and ask for good faith without presupposing the good will to recognize the promise as a promise or to receive it?

The fact that the deconstructive project might not be after all that different from the hermeneutic one that is hinted in the above questions seems to become substantiated if we bear in mind the way in which Derrida describes language in and for itself as well as for us on the basis of the thesis of the testimonial nature of words. Here is what he says further on in *Of Hospitality*:

“‘Language’ – let us understand this word in both a narrow sense and a broad sense. [...] In the broad sense, the language in which the foreigner is addressed or in which he is heard, if he is, is the ensemble of culture, it is the values, the norms, the meanings that inhabit the language. Speaking the same language is not only a linguistic operation. It's a matter of *ethos* generally.”<sup>11</sup>

“[In a restricted sense language is] the discursive idiom that is not coextensive with citizenship (French and Quebecois, or English and American people can basically speak the same language). [...] Inviting, receiving, asylum, lodging, go by way of the language or the address to the other. As Levinas says from another point of view, language is hospitality.”<sup>12</sup>

It is quite difficult to discern the difference between what is said here about language and the way it is understood through the narrative style of doing philosophy. Here is what Gadamer notes in *Truth and Method* about language, following Humboldt:

“Not only is the world world only insofar as it comes into language, but language, too, has its real being only in the fact that the world is presented in it. [...] To have a world means to have an orientation (*Verhalten*) toward it. To have an orientation toward the world means to keep oneself so free from what one encounters of the world that one can present it to oneself as it is. This capacity is at once to have a world and to have language. The concept of *world* is thus opposed to the concept of environment, which all living beings in the world possess.”<sup>13</sup>

Insomuch as language institutes man's humanity by raising him or her to world it is obvious that every act of language is an act of life involving the *ethos* as such and, through it, the rapport with the other. But this thesis of the co-institution (and co-originary) of language and world whereby deconstruction, the fragmentary style is situated in the proximity of philosophical hermeneutics and the narrative style is not just one among others. It is, in fact, the thesis instituting the narrative style of doing philosophy adopted in hermeneutics. For it justifies philosophy's narrativity, it justifies narrativity as a philosophical approach to man and world and everything in between. In truth, the task of telling stories can appear and is worth taking up only in so far as the significance of man, the world and everything in between can be transposed in the significations

of language and photographed in the meaning of words. If this were not possible there would not actually be anything to narrate.

Thus, we have to ask ourselves one last thing: given that through its textual practice and in the margins of the works by which it constitutes itself, deconstruction arrives at defending the fundamental thesis of philosophical hermeneutics, then is there really a difference between them? In such case, does deconstruction not transform itself in a branch; does it not become an offspring of hermeneutics? Does the possibility of the fragmentary style of doing philosophy not get erased through its very practice?

Or, maybe, the difference between hermeneutics and deconstruction ought to be searched for elsewhere? Maybe their difference should not be reduced to the difference in their styles of philosophizing? Maybe there is actually a substantial rather than formal difference between them, although much of what Derrida says and does seems to point to the contrary.

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<sup>1</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires pour Paul de Man* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), 27. Translation is mine.

<sup>2</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 4.

<sup>3</sup>The meeting between Gadamer and Derrida took place at Philippe Forget's invitation, and was expressly envisaged as an occasion for sparking a long awaited dialogue between the most prominent figures of the two main philosophical movements of the Continent. As Philippe Forget recalls: "I was hoping that this event [...] would make a contribution towards forming the conditions under which these two currents of thought would confront each other head-on rather than mutually avoiding each other – in other words, that they would agree to subsume denial within challenge." (See Philippe Forget, "Argument(s)," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction. The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane Mitchell and Richard E. Palmer (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 129.) By putting the conference under the heading of "Text and Interpretation" the organizers tried to satisfy not only the formal condition for such a "head-on challenge" to take place, but also for a true hermeneutical dialogue in the strict Gadamerian sense of the term. Of course, nothing ensued.

<sup>4</sup>See Jacques Derrida, "Three Questions to Hans-Georg Gadamer" in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, 52-54.

<sup>5</sup>See Jacques Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese Friend" in *Psyche. Inventions of the Other*, Vol. II, ed. by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottemberg (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 1-6.

<sup>6</sup>J. Derrida, "Force and Signification" in *Writing and Difference*, trans. By Alan Bass (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. H.-G. Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations in Phenomenology: Dialogues and Bridges*, 303.

<sup>8</sup> J. Derrida, *Positions*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> J. Derrida, *Of Hospitality, Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 67.

<sup>10</sup> J. Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge" in J. Derrida & Gianni Vattimo (eds.), *Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 63.

<sup>11</sup> J. Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 133.

<sup>12</sup> *Idem.*, 133-134.

<sup>13</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer & Donald G. Marshall (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), 440-441.

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