The Will to Be Misunderstood

I want to situate my paper in the broader context in which I wrote it. The context is the problematic of power.\* I use the term problematic of power because the way that power is conceptualized—as system, structure, as force, coercion, subversion, as juridical, productive-determines the possibilities of resistance. My understanding of power has been shaped by Nietzsche, primarily his critique of science, Critical Theory, primarily by Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of the enlightenment, Marcuse’s concept of one dimensionality, and most recently by Foucault’s theory of power/knowledge. If I were to characterize my understanding of power in in a phrase, it would be Adorno’s ‘the whole is a lie.” If I were to characterize it as an image, it would be the panopticon, but with these additions-each prisoner would have a cell phone and access to social media, each night they would return to their cell, even though the gates to the prison were open, and before falling asleep they would collectively/virtually celebrate their freedom.

This is the problematic of power, at least, when power is conceptualized as universal, total and ubiquitous. And when this concept of power is shaped by Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s radical critique of reason, and the postmodern critique of grand narratives, including the Marxist narrative, it is necessary to ask the question, is resistance possible at all? Or to phrase this question in the terms of critical theory, given this conceptualization of power, can we speak any longer of an emancipatory project? My thinking was, at the time, from what point of view, or position could we critique power, or even talk about a critique of power that was not part of the system of power itself? And does it even make any sense to talk about possibilities of resistance when unfreedom is experienced as freedom? Critical theorists were aware of this aporia—power as totalizing and an emancipatory project. They explored at different times various possibilities: Freud, Marcuse’s the “great refusal,” Adorno’s negative dialectics, Habermas’s theory of communicative action. I found none of these adequate to the task.

It was in this context that I turned to the poststructuralist thought of Jacque Derrida. I thought, and hoped, more hope than thought, that poststructuralism might provide a position from which to critique power and the means to restructure an emancipatory project. A central theme of poststructuralism and Derrida in particular is that of form and content. And the form/content question/problem is the focus of my paper. Derrida assumes that the tradition of western philosophy is embedded in, constructs, reconstructs and legitimations the structure of power in society, the hierarchies, inclusions and exclusions, its values, and its violence. If this is true, how can philosophy provide a position from which to critique the system of power, which would also include a critique of itself. Derrida’s strategy is twofold: he adopts a logic of the other, a logic of *differance*, and he adopts a form/style consistent with the logic. The form/style involves new terminology, new ways of using traditional terminology, and process of “thinking” and ‘writing” that is ambiguous, multivocal, and opaque. His form style is a new way of writing, a new language. This strategy, according to Derrida, leads ultimately, not just to the realization that the excluded other is a necessary component in the west’s self-understanding of itself, and the violence towards the other is embedded in our institutions, but it also leads us to place of exile from the familiar, conventional and taken for granted. From this position of exile, a space has been opened in which society appears unfamiliar and questionable.

As I said, the main focus of the paper is the theme of form/content, and the main question the paper addresses is: does Derrida’s adoption of this radical form/content approach provide the basis for critique and for the restructuring of the emancipatory project? I point out in the beginning of the paper an important contradiction in Derrida’s thought in regard to this question. This contradiction involves Derrida’s own self understanding of his style/form and his feeling that he, or deconstruction is misunderstood, frequently intentionally, and apparently as a result the claims that deconstruction is a position, an intervention and that it is both moral and political, too political for some. Derrida’s defenders frequently argue the same. An example is

Mark Dooley and Liam Kavanagh in the Philosophy of Derrida. Commenting on the exchange between John Searle and Derrida, they say Searle “misrepresents Derrida” and compounds this misrepresentation by demonstrating a “disrespect for the very protocols of professional

rigor that he wished to represent.” (Wow, seriously) Derrida comments on his exchange with Searle and says, that the debate was governed by “the most demanding norms of philosophical discussion” even though the form of his responses were a “multiplication of discursive gestures, statements and forms of writing.” (How could one ever misunderstand).

Derrida is quite clear about his form/style and its goal. In fact, it seems has if it was adopted to intentionally encourage misunderstanding. He says about his style, it is analogous to

Menippean satire, “or something like philosophic parody where all genres—poetry, philosophy, theater, et cetera—are summoned up at once . . .it is something like farce.” In the same work, he states:

Perhaps the desire to write is the desire to launch things that come back to you

as much as possible in as many forms as possible. It is the desire to perfect

a program or a matrix having the greatest potential variability, undecidability,

pluravocality, et cetera, so that each time something returns it will be as

different as possible.

The reason that Derrida adopts this form/style and the logic of supplementarity is obvious: his intention is to avoid what Habermas refers to as the “performative contradiction,” using reason in the totalizing critique of reason. This strategy creates what Derrida calls “non-site, or non-philosophical site, from which to question philosophy.” And this “non-site” is the reason why Derrida believes deconstruction should be taken seriously, why it is “too political for some,” “a response to a call,” “an openness towards the other, and “subversive.”

I have been accused, though not recently, of being too subtle. I am sure that is not the case here, but just in case, I need to mention my own amusement at Derrida’s joy in playing the philosophic parodist, and his concern that he is misunderstood. As I say in the paper, “there are limits to farce, parody and satire. There is a danger that the laughter of the parodist, or satirist, might be taken simply as the laughter of the clown, rather than the laughter of the Nietzschean *ubermensch*. And I would say that something else has to be at play, when one claims that one wants things to “come back” with the “greatest potential . . . undecidability” and then claims that he has been misunderstood, even intentionally.

Despite the above, I examined Derrida’s claim that deconstruction is an intervention on behalf of the other, is political, and is ethical. I point out in the paper that Christopher Norris and Terry Eagleton support Derrida’s claim. Norris says: Eagleton says:

I was more skeptical. In the paper I argue that three assumptions underlie Derrida’s thought and that these assumptions need to be justified argumentatively to warrant this claim. The first assumption is that there is a “thing” or “phenomenon” called western metaphysics, and that in its anxious quest for certainty has created monologue, a “metaphysics of presence,” which privileges the Same and excludes the Other, is violence towards the Other. Derrida says in Structrure, Sign and Play: The second assumption that needs to be defended is that this phenomenon is ubiquitous, that it is present as a foundation in all discourses, all codes and all institutions.

In regard to the first assumption, I argue in the paper that it cannot be defended. Obviously, there is a history and tradition which is called western metaphysics. But is it a monologue, is it defined solely, or always by a quest for certainty, is it always violence towards the Other? Edward Said points out that both Foucault and Derrida have a similar strategy, they both “define” the situation, the “challenged entities,” and, then, they persistently attempt to “de-define” the entities that they have defined. In the paper I make two points regarding Derrida’s definition of the tradition. The first is Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics which reconstructs the concept of phronesis, or practical reasoning. And second is the pragmatic tradition and its questioning of foundations. An example would be John Dewey’s The Quest for Certainty. But in the paper, I point out another problem also related to “defining” and “defining” the entities. If this definition of the tradition is problematic then Derrida’s method of deconstructing “exemplary” texts is just arbitrary. For a text to be identified as exemplary, the deconstruction of which would reveal the ubiquity of a metaphysics of presence, there must be a definition of what that text is an example.

In regard to the second assumption, there are certainly ideological underpinnings to all of the institutions in western society, not only, the institutions, but norms and values, hierarchies, inclusions and exclusion, and that these ideological underpinnings have justified and legitimated violence towards peoples, and they have philosophical roots. I discuss briefly how philosophy has justified the acquisitive individual of capitalism, how the grand narrative of reason marginalized women, and minorities and justified the violence of colonialism, and philosophy’s role in justifying human domination of nature has led to the environmental crisis. But, even dominant trends, are not universal, ubiquitous or determinative.

In regard to the third assumption that deconstruction as form and the logic of supplementarity is political, Derrida says it is a positive response to an alterity . . . an openness towards the other.” And as I have mentioned before, he argues that it is “at least a way of taking a position, it is a work of analysis, concerning the political and institutional structures that make possible and govern or practice, competences, performances . . .[it] should seek an new investigation of responsibility.” But the question arises, does this radical questioning of texts constitute a critique of society. And Derrida argues yes, because, part of his critique is the deconstruction of boundaries, and one of the boundaries his thought challenges is the boundary between text and world. He says that the deconstruction of the text places the reader in a place of exile. This state of exile is what he means by “undecidability.” But he argues that this state of exile is not indifference, but is a moment of autonomy, a space in which critique can happen, what he calls decision. He says,

A decisions can only come into being in a space that exceeds the

calculable program that would destroy all responsibility . . . there can be no

moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way

of the undecidable. (Sounds kind of religious, a Heideggerian return to Being)

My response to this is twofold. First, what would be the criteria for making a decision in this position of exile/undecidability. He argues that it dereify, critiques “natural kinds,” and in doing so opens a space in the name of what. I turned to Derrida for my second response. In an interview, Derrida is asked, “Can the theoretical radicality of deconstruction be translated into political praxis”? He answers, “I must confess that I have never succeeded in directly relating deconstruction to existing political program.” He then goes on to say, deconstruction allows us “to preserve a distance and suspicion with regard to the official political codes governing reality, and, second, “to intervene in a practical and engaged manner whenever the necessity arises.” My immediate response is when wouldn’t that be in our time.