

Derrida's (Ir)religion: A Theology (of Différance)

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Introduction

Différance. *Différance* can be understood as signifying both inequality and distinction, as well as identity and non-identity. At the same time, it is neither word nor concept, thought nor image, active nor passive. *Différance* prefers to play in the middle. According to Derrida, it indicates the middle voice, "It precedes and sets up the opposition between passivity and activity" (Derrida, 1973, p.130). *Différance* always implies a playful movement. (It is never stagnant). It is through play that it produces (that which it produces). Through its play, *différance* produces what we understand as differences between phenomena. "It is the nonfull, nonsimple 'origin,' it is the structured and differing origin of differences" (Derrida, 1973, p.131). It is because of *différance* that meaning is possible. Through the very movement (of *différance*), a phenomenon that is experienced as present, or that which appears on the stage of presence, shows itself as a relation to both the past and to the future. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), "There is an intention which always outruns the presentness of the present" (p.44.) This intention always retains the mark of a past element. According to Derrida (1973), both the past and the future create a present that is hollow, a present in relation to what is not (p.105). *Différance* always addresses that which is nameless. In a place where a name finds no home, the nameless signifies an indeconstructable space where every trace or mark is imprinted. This trace manifests itself in what is absent. In its manifestation, i.e., the manner in which it presents itself, it, in and of itself, remains undisclosed. "In presenting itself it becomes effaced; in being sounded it dies away" (Derrida, 1973, p.154). It is by reason of this effacement that the trace implies movement, a movement which neces-

sarily exceeds presence, a movement that exceeds presence and takes the place of being somewhere.

It would be easy to confuse *différance*, and its nameless place, for what is commonly understood to be God. God, unlike *différance*, signifies a metaphysical ground, or an “upon which” the eternal is placed. Yet, *différance* is neither eternal (nor sequential). There is no “upon which” anything can be placed. For the place is always shifting (moreover, the place is its shifting and vice versa). Since its indeconstructability is not due to a metaphysics of presence, it must emerge in the very spacing of what can be deconstructed. In this spacing, theologians and philosophers, at best, find themselves searching for answers to questions that have not been appropriately articulated. The term “appropriately” is not to be understood as signifying any particular truth or “rightness.” In operating within the indeconstructable space, questions have to be articulated in a manner that makes room for un-truth. If this is the case, do not questions cease to be questions, as traditionally understood by Western metaphysics? What happens when philosophers or theologians are prohibited from beginning a question with “What” or “Is?” What happens to the “answers” if what signifies un-truth is given a place? (Can such a question be asked?) Both of these questions are preliminary to asking but one, “What is a question?” Plato is a question. Aristotle is a . . . Descartes is a . . . Kant is a . . . Hegel is a . . . In essence, all of Western metaphysics is but a question. Yet, none of these questions signify what Derrida understands to be anything of a necessity. What is necessary is to go back “behind” and “below” the origin:

toward a necessity which is neither generative nor engendered and which carries philosophy, “precedes” (prior to the time that passes or the eternal time before history) and “receives” the effect, here the image of opposites (intelligible and sensible): philosophy. This necessity (*khora* is its sur-name) seems so virginal that it does not even have the name of virgin any longer. (Derrida, 1993, p.126)

It is impossible for Western metaphysics to precede the image of opposites because it is, in itself, the very language of oppositions: the philosophical discourse. Philosophy is unprepared to answer such questions that fail to recognize the truth, i.e., it can not tolerate anything that retreats from its view. For Derrida, this retreat, or re-trait, is but a word

in which a certain formlessness or namelessness has left its mark, something which philosophy cannot philosophize, something that resists philosophy, that withdraws from philosophy's view and grasp (Derrida/Caputo, 1997, p.98).

Without form and name, *différance* is meaning-less. It is meaning-less because it does not have any prescribed fixed boundaries; hence, what can happen within a boundary-less space is unlimited. It is here where Derrida finds a kinship with negative theology. Both deconstruction and negative theology, especially in the sermons of Meister Eckhart, attempt to assert what can not be asserted. They also, along with the thought of Georges Bataille, have a "passion" for what is "impossible." Despite their similarities, there are also a few notable differences. First, negative theology posits a godly-being who resides in a space prior to the purely existential mode of being. Deconstruction would not necessarily, in the conventional sense, pose an argument against the notion of a space that precedes the existential. However, it would have difficulty accepting a godly-Being. In the indeconstructable space, there is neither a being nor a non-being, but, according to Derrida/Caputo (1997), a certain "quasi-condition" within which both are inscribed (p.103). Second, negative theology takes on a certain view that directs its gaze toward that which is above, i.e., it is always looking toward the transcendental, or mystical. Deconstruction has nothing to do with mysticism. (Yet, both mysticism and deconstruction exceed the boundaries of philosophy). They differ in that deconstruction does not to speak of anything that is transcendent (It could be argued that the *khora* is somewhat of a transcendent function). It prefers to speak of *différance*, the possibility and impossibility of whether or not the indeconstructable space, the *khora*, can be avoided. So, how is it possible to survive without the truth? It is this very question that will now direct our attention.

Surviving Without the Truth: A Deconstructive Faith

Whenever one speaks of the truth, one implicitly indicates an end of sorts, an end brought forth in the process of unveiling. This end signifies closure, a termination brought forth by a movement-toward-the-end, i.e., truth as a structural self-relation in the absence of necessity. The structure of termination, truth, or closure is apocalyptic, the "truth" of "truth": Whoever takes on the apocalyptic

tone comes to signify to, if not tell, you something. What? The truth, of course, and to signify to you that it reveals the truth to you; tone is revelatory of some unveiling in process. Unveiling or truth, apophantics of the immanence of the end, of whatever comes down, finally, to the end of the world. Not only truth as the revealed truth of a secret on the end or of the secret of the end. Truth itself is the end, the destination, and that truth itself is the advent of the end. Truth is the end and the instance of the last judgment. The structure of truth here would be apocalyptic. And that is why there would not be any truth of the apocalypse that is not the truth of the truth. (Derrida, 1992, p.53)

It should be to no surprise that the above passage has a conformable relationship to the New Testament Book of Revelation. With the talk of ends, “the last judgment,” and the “apocalypse,” it sounds as if an occult or secret truth is slowly being unveiled. Derrida very much wanted to clarify his own understanding of an apocalypse, as an “apocalypse without apocalypse,” i.e., an apocalypse that comes un-announced, from the apocalyptic structure as “revealed” in the various religious texts. In an essay entitled, *Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy* (1992), Derrida sought to show that the only secret was that there was no secret, i.e., that there was no “truth” to obtain (pp.25-71). Much like Kant, Derrida will have nothing to do with secret knowledge – with intellectual intuition, privileged access, *schwärmerische* Vision, divine mysteries or revelations – which are apocalyptic stratagems in which one purports to shed one’s textual skin (Caputo, 1997, p.94).

In Derrida’s “apocalypse without apocalypse” there is always a call of that which is impossible, as opposed to the postulation of mere possibility. The impossible is the very necessity of deconstruction. It is the untruth that all truth runs up against. It is the very boundary of what can appear as presence. Deconstruction asserts that all phenomena are supported by their being impossible. The impossible does not negate a (phenomenological) investigation. On the contrary, it facilitates it. The results of deconstruction become more fascinating because they are always unexpected; hence, an unexpected result is not even (a result). (There is no end in sight.) Without an end in sight, an apocalypse is not “seen” as coming; therefore, an unseen apocalypse is always an “apocalypse without apocalypse.” There is always a shock when an apocalypse

announces itself unexpectedly. It is akin to an unwelcome guest arriving at your door. You ask yourself, "At this time?" "Right now?" It disrupts present time, it reveals presence as always open to transgression. Because presence is always open to transgression, an apocalypse (that comes) is invisible, or unforeseen. So, to know that an apocalypse is coming or to see it just around the corner is impossible. It is not possible to know for sure whether or not some-thing will arrive. In the end, nothing is certain, not even the end itself. Rather than being distraught over the impossibility of certainty, of truth, or of end, the impossibility of limitation should be exalted and pursued with passion. The fact that we do not know what is coming, or if anything will ever come, leaves us with one possibility, the only possibility that can hope the (im)possible, faith.

With Augustine, Derrida posits the importance of the witness who does not proceed by way of knowledge. With Kierkegaard, he takes a passionate leap of faith into the unforeseeable abyss where no philosophy is certain. Like both of these thinkers, Derrida de-emphasizes the visual. However, unlike either of these thinkers, Derrida sees faith, and its accompanying blindness, not as a longing for the presence of a deity, or a supernatural experience beyond the limits of reason, but as a passion for what is impossible, namely the experience of something unforeseen, never knowing whether or not that unforeseen something will ever be realized. And to give witness to this faith, as it reveals itself in existence, as that which is believed but can not be seen, is the manner in which all truth is overpowered, rendering faith deconstructive rather than philosophical or theological.

A discourse on Derrida's understanding of a deconstructive faith illustrates two important principles. One, it is important to emphasize that faith does not have to be identified with religion. As Derrida indicates in his essay entitled *Faith and Knowledge* (1998), "Faith has not always been and will not always be identifiable with religion, nor, another point, with theology" (p.8). Derrida is indicating that deconstructive faith has to be distinguished from a particular order of messianic faith, i.e., a faith within a determinable horizon. However, this does not mean that Derrida will do away with messianism all together. Quite the contrary, the very idea of the messianic, of messianicity, is to shatter horizons, to let the promise of something *tout autre* shock the horizon of the same and the foreseeable (Caputo, 1997, p118). Recall the words of Jesus: "The Son of Man will come like a thief in the

night.” The messianic will come (*Vien*) without expectation, without foresight, and without warning. It is by virtue of this warning that deconstructive faith is so dangerous, dangerous in that it never gets prepared to receive anything. The possibility for getting prepared is precisely the impossibility of knowing for certain whether or not anything will come, for we do not know “Who” or “What” we are awaiting. There is always a distance between the person who has faith and that which is being awaited. Furthermore, there is no determinable object of faith that is attainable. In Buddhist terms, “the journey is the goal.” Or, in the words of Kierkegaard (1946):

If one who lives in the midst of Christianity goes up to the house of God, the house of the true God, with the true conception of God in his knowledge, and prays, but prays in a false spirit; and one who lives in an idolatrous community prays with the entire passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol: where is there most truth? The one prays in truth to God though he worships an idol; the other prays falsely to the true God, and hence worships in fact an idol (p.212).

It is not Kierkegaard’s distinction between what constitutes a Pagan (False) and a Christian (True) that is important. Rather, it is his emphasis on passion, a passion for the infinite, on that which is uncertain. (Remember, for Kierkegaard the object of Christian faith is never certain, for one cannot be brought into the presence of the Absolute; therefore, the truth lies within the relationship between God and the individual.) The only certainty for Kierkegaard is that God cannot be pursued in an objective way. If this is the case, there is no rational or reasonable way to determine that such a relationship between God and the individual exists. This sort of relationship proves to be impossible. Yet, it is precisely the impossibility that disrupts the determinable horizon, and opens up the space where the messianic promise can appear.

The impossible relationship between God and the individual can be thought to pre-exist in the indeconstructable space, the space where the difference is allowed to play. A spacing where this relationship is permitted prohibits faith from being determined, in any orthodox sense of the word. It keeps a safe distance from ever

letting faith be a faith in a determinate thing or person, from every contracting the tout autre within the horizons of the same. (Caputo, 1997, p.150)

Kierkegaard asserts in his Christian faith what Derrida asserts in a deconstructive faith. Both stress the affirmation of the impossible. However, Derrida, unlike Kierkegaard, allows his affirmation to remind him that he does not know what God is, or whether he believes in God or not, or what he loves when he loves God. (In this sense, Derrida is anti-Christian. He would be “spit out” by Jesus for being “luke-warm”). Kierkegaard presumes that the object of his faith is uncertain, or never objectively knowable, yet he never ceases to call his God by a name. He portends a paradox when one does not exist. For Derrida, the name of God must not be spoken. His deconstructive faith entails learning how not to speak the name, i.e., how to *sauf le nom*: The name of God (I do not say God, but how to avoid saying God here, from the moment when I say the name of God?) can only be said in the modality of denial: above all I do not want to say that (Derrida, 1992, p.95).

It is only by not speaking (the name) that (the name of) G-d is saved. Two, along with Kant, Derrida espouses a (reflecting) faith that is non-dogmatic, and independent of historical revelation: It (a reflecting faith) does not depend essentially upon any historical revelation and thus agrees with the rationality of purely practical reason, reflecting faith favors good will beyond all knowledge. It is thus opposed to dogmatic (dogmatische) faith. If it breaks with this “dogmatic faith,” it is in so far as the latter claims to know and thereby ignores the difference between faith and knowledge (Derrida, 1998, p. 10). Kant asserts that nothing can be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good, without qualification, except a good will. By taking up this Kantian faith that favors a good will, Derrida enters the realms of ethics and morality. However, unlike Kant whom acts out of a duty to a moral law, Derrida’s duty or responsibility binds him, along with Levinas, to the other:

Duty or responsibility binds me to the other, to the other as other, and binds me in my absolute singularity to the other as other. God is the name of the absolutely other as other and as unique. As soon as I enter into relation with the absolute other, my singularity en-

ters into relation with him under the mode of obligation and duty. (Derrida, 1995, p.68)

In contrast to Kant, duty to the absolute other often betrays the categorical imperative: “Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” As the story of Abraham points out, this is not always possible. When told by God, as the absolute other, to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham is placed in a double bind (He is being told by God to disobey a commandment that God himself has commanded). The categorical imperative provides no solution in this case. Abraham is being ordered by God, the *tout autre*, to transgress the universal law, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of the Amorites; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I will tell you” (Genesis 21:2). It is not possible to work through this dilemma simply using the faculty of reason. God’s commandment (against himself) moves beyond the borders of what can be cognitively understood. If one stops and thinks, it is already too late. Responding to a call from the absolute other has to be immediate, without hesitation. “And Abraham rose up early in the morning and saddled his ass and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son, and cut wood for the burnt offering and rose up and went to the place of which God had told him” (Genesis 22:3). A response, without hesitation, to the other, implies sacrificing all others: I am not able to respond to the call, to the request, to the obligation, nor even to the love of an other without sacrificing to him the other, the other others. Every other is wholly other (Derrida, 1995, p.68). Here Derrida agrees with that which is most existential. An actualized possibility is always the death of some other possibility. Death is all around, sacrifices are constantly being made. In many cases, sacrifice involves the sacrifice of ethics, the sacrifice of knowing how to respond within a determinable horizon. God’s call to Abraham was a disruption of the determinable horizon where Kantian ethics reigns supreme. There is no room for the messianic within the horizon that Kant provides. For messianicity has nothing to do with, “how one should act,” in an ethical sense. Rather, it is the disruption of the horizon; thereby, making room for the sacrifice to appear. Derrida (1995) writes:

As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others. I offer a gift of death, I betray, I don't need to raise my knife over my so on Mount Moriah for that. Day and night, at every instant, on all the Mount Moriahs of this world, I am doing that, raising my knife over what I love and must love, over those to whom I owe absolute fidelity, incommensurably. (p.68)

If I dedicate my life to a particular cause, I sacrifice all other causes. If I choose to help somebody, I sacrifice helping another. In every case where I decide to act, I am always sacrificing something. Also, I am always being sacrificed. When my wife spends time with her friend, she is sacrificing me. When someone helps another, they are not helping me. Hence, I can not exist without sacrifice. For, at every moment, I am always "raising the knife" and having the knife "raised over me."

A deconstructive faith is sacrifice. First, it sacrifices the god that is known. (It is a faith in God without God). Second, it sacrifices the object that one believes in. (It is a belief in the unbelievable [the impossible]). Third, it sacrifices faith itself. (It is a faith without faith.) And finally, it sacrifices definiteness. (It is being undecidedly sure.) A deconstructive faith is a faith where decision, inscribed in indecision, is an element of what it means to be faithful. It (indecision) is first, last, and constant, the element, the space in which faith makes its leap, the horizon in terms of which faith understands its limits, understands that it is faith, through a trace darkly (Caputo, 1997, p.63).

Conclusion: A Deconstructive Witness

In a deconstructive faith, there is nothing outside the witness. Neither is there anything inside the witness. If there is neither inside nor outside, to whom does one witness? Moreover, what is being witnessed?

We begin with another question, "Who is doing the witnessing?" This is a very difficult question to answer because all our thoughts and words are nothing but boundaries. This, however, is not a flaw confined

to any particular language, but is inherent in all languages by virtue of their very structure (Wilber, 1998, p.22). A language of no boundaries is no language at all, and deconstruction, playing with logic and form, sounds very paradoxical and contradictory. The problem is that the structure of any language cannot grasp the nature of what the witness is, anymore than a bottomless bucket could hold water.

The witness has no conceptual identity, it pre-exists name and form. There is really no Western parallel that explicates what is meant by a “deconstructive witness.” Hence, we have to turn to the East. In Indian Philosophy, the “witness” becomes “Witness” (*saksin*). It is the “pure” awareness which is not itself an object of thought (Coward, 1992, p.205). Since it is not an object of thought, it can never, at any time, under any circumstances, be seen, heard, known or perceived. It is the seer that is not seen. It is the hearer that is not heard. It is the knower that is not known. And, it is the perceiver that is not perceived. In the words of Lao Tzu:

Because the eye gazes but can catch no glimpse of it, It is called elusive. Because the ear listens but cannot hear it, It is called the rarefied. Because the hand feels for it but cannot find it, It is called the infinitesimal. (*Tao Te Ching*)

A deconstructive faith not only involves blindness, as Derrida indicates, but also involves a sacred deafness, and muteness, as indicated by Lao Tzu. Our eyes, ears and tongues are always structurally prevented from knowing the identity of the deconstructive witness. There is no way for anyone to gain access to it. No oracle, psychonaut, magician, priest, philosopher or psychologist will reveal its nature, for there is no nature to be revealed.

If the witness has no nature, what is being witnessed? A deconstructive witness witnesses deconstruction. One does not simply witness deconstruction; one becomes deconstruction, i.e., without vision, hearing, or speech a witness notes the arising and falling of phenomena, the play of differences in the indeconstructable space. In witnessing, there is a capacity to deploy attention: a tiny root tension underlies all attention, for it is a subtle contraction in the field of nondual, or choiceless awareness. But how can there be any attention in deconstructive witnessing, for there is no focus on one thing in exclu-

sion to the other? There is simply everything that is arising and falling, and you are that, through all changes of state. Thus, with deconstructive witnessing, the tension that is witnessed uncoils in the vast expanse of the indeconstructable space, the *khora*. There is nothing to look at because you are blind. There is nothing to hear because you are deaf. There is nothing to speak of because you are mute. You are simply everything and no-thing, dispersing to no-end. This is pure freedom, radical liberation. With constant (deconstructive) witnessing, there is release, release-from-the-world because you are no longer its victim but its witness; therefore, there is no need to witness to anybody. The witness is not victim to the world because she is not empowered by its truth. Following Augustine, a deconstructive faith gives witness to the "truth in life" (Caputo, 1997, p.312). Nothing more and nothing less.

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