

Derrida's Love of Philosophy:  
From Deconstruction to Aporia

Derrida's Legacy  
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I'd like to thank Felicia McCarren for this opportunity to pay my respects to Jacques Derrida, by trying to show you in some small way what a great thinker he was. His works *were* hard to read, but that's not a bad thing: making you slow down and think might also make you question the imperative of efficient information processing hidden behind the demand for "clarity." Sometimes things are complicated and you need a complicated thought to unpack them. But you can also say things simply, as Derrida did on occasion, and as I'll try to do today. So I'll say it simply: Derrida was a great philosopher, and that simply means love was the motivation for everything he did.

In looking at Derrida's career, many people claim to see a "political turn" with the 1989 essay "Force of Law." So on this reading, the early Derrida is concerned with metaphysics and literature and the later Derrida with politics and ethics. I disagree. The concerns have always been metaphysical/literary and political/ethical at once, but the "methodology" changes: from deconstruction to aporia.

It is true the early Derrida follows Heidegger in seeing the history of philosophy as the history of texts whose surface allegiance is to "presence." This is what they called "metaphysics." That is, traditional philosophy tries to ground difference – the world – in a single, self-identical point outside the world: the Good beyond Being for Plato, the Prime Mover of Aristotle, the God of the medievals, and so on. Of course Derrida is a far more sophisticated reader than this caricature lays out, but in this context, let's let it go at that. That reading is called "deconstruction." Its job is to show that the supposedly self-present point outside the world is only a projection, a desire to escape difference. Derrida calls a structure of difference a "text," so "there's nothing outside the text" [= *il n'y a pas de hors-texte* = there is no outside-the-text] simply means "there's nothing outside the world." In other words, we can't make appeals to some transcendent source of meaning: we have to figure it out ourselves down here on earth. This is atheism, to be sure, but after this past election it's time to insist as often and as publicly as possible that it's also what many people have said was Jesus' message in Mark 1:15: the kingdom of heaven is at hand, not up in the sky, but here in the solidarity of those struggling for peace, love, and justice. And as Elvis Costello sang, "what's so funny about peace, love and understanding"?

Derrida always said he only deconstructed those texts he loved. So what is "deconstruction"? A classic deconstruction has three steps: diagnose, overturn, re-inscribe. (1) Diagnose oppositions as hierarchies: that speech is better than writing is important for many in grounding meaning in a mind or soul open to God's word. (2) Overturn that hierarchy by showing that the predicates of the denigrated term are in fact essential to the privileged term: the differential structure of writing is part of the way philosophers describe the soul's speech to itself and to God. (3) Re-inscribe the previously overturned hierarchy in a new "economy": "archi-writing" is the field from which our common notions of speech and writing both arise. [Often Derrida will use the name of the previously denigrated term as the name for this "third term": *différance*, trace, supplement, and so on. But not always: "living on" becomes the name for the third term underlying the difference between life and death. This is an index of the "affirmative" nature

of Derrida's thought, his love of life.]

But for Derrida, philosophical texts [in the sense of "book"] are also indices of political structures. We study them to get at the structures, not solely for their own sakes. Another way of saying this is to say we study them the way they've been read badly, for Derrida quickly dropped the idea that the orientation to presence was the "author's intention." Instead, the orientation to presence became one way to read the text, and the demonstration of the role of difference – that is, deconstruction – became another reading linked to the first. The political question is: "why have the presence-oriented readings been dominant"? Why have they so ruthlessly persecuted those who read the kingdom of heaven as the struggle for peace, love and justice?

Deconstruction is a response to, an affirmation of, political struggles against those systems pledged to presence: the purity of master races, the divine plans that guarantee a land to a people, the march of mankind to the end of history, the civilizing process that will lift up the savages, the development that will help the poor, and so on. Thus Derrida will say "deconstruction is a maximum intensification of a process already underway." Deconstruction is an academic echo of political struggles against racism, patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism. Or, we should say, since the academy is part of the political machine, deconstruction is directly political from the start: this isn't just academics flattering themselves, because it matters that when racists or patriarchs or colonists or capitalists claim their exploitation follows the word of God or the laws of nature or the science of economics that we can show how these claims are constructions, not divine, natural or scientific, that they rest on violence and force, not on reason and certainly not on love.

So, let's not think that because after 1989 Derrida began directly addressing justice, friendship, hospitality, cosmopolitanism, forgiveness, rogue states, and the like that he wasn't "always already" political. But there is a difference after 1989: Derrida began thematizing his work as revealing "aporia," as the call to undergo the "experience of the impossible." How he gets to "aporia" is a love story. Derrida's first (philosophical) love was for Husserl, and love for Levinas' love of the other and for Heidegger's love of difference led him to deconstruct Husserl's love of presence. His love for Paul de Man brought him to think of the gift, and mourning de Man's death brought him to think of de Man's love of aporia, to which his thought passes. Paul de Man's gift of love then for Derrida is the thought of aporia.

Love is aporetic: it's impossible, yet we're called to experience this impossibility. First, let us use the aporia of the gift as our model, following the analyses in *Politics of Friendship*. Pure love is impossible, it cannot be experienced or be present, for any love that is acknowledged or recognized by lover or beloved would fall into an economy, a reciprocity of mutual benefit and hence cease to be love and become a mere "friendship of utility," as Aristotle might say. That is, such a friendship is not really a loving friendship, an *aimance*, since it reduces the alterity of the friend to a mere element in a calculus of utility. Yet for the relation to the other to be a relation, there must be a moment of re-appropriation that reaches through a certain self-image, through a certain narcissism (Derrida 1995d, 199). But then we are back at the beginning once again: any relation to the other that passes through a living present is an appropriation, a domestication, which destroys alterity. But yet again, it must be my love, I must be the one committed to the other, the one who gives my love, for what is a love that is not my commitment?

Another way to articulate the aporia of love would be to use the model of the aporia of decision: pure love is impossible because it cannot follow a program of previous love without the risk that the partners are simply "in love with love" and not with each other; but on the other hand, not just any relation deserves the name of love, and so it cannot not have a relation to past loves.

So to wrap up, in following Derrida's injunction to "double affirmation": he loved wisdom, and he loved the love of wisdom, philosophy. And he gave us, through his love, a great philosophy, the only philosophy, that of love.