

## WITHIN THE REASONABLE LIMITS OF THE TRADITION:

CHRISTOPHER NORRIS ON THE ETHICS OF DECONSTRUCTION

The slow end of this history, the slow end in which we have long been standing, is the domination of thinking as ratio (in the sense of understanding as well as reason) over the *being* of the essent. (*das sein des seienden*.) Here begins the contest between 'rationalism and irrationalism' that has been in progress to this day in every conceivable disguise and under the most contradictory titles. Irrationalism is only the obvious weakness and failure of rationalism and hence itself a kind of rationalism. Irrationalism is a way out of rationalism, an escape which does not lead into the open but merely gives rise to the opinion that we can overcome rationalism by merely saying no to it, whereas this only makes its machinations the more dangerous by hiding them from view.

Heidegger, *An introduction to Metaphysics*<sup>1</sup>

In a book that is distinguished by fine chapters on Rousseau and Kant,<sup>2</sup> Christopher Norris, in general accord with the orientation of recent work by John Llewelyn, Rodolphe Gasche, and Irene E. Harvey, seeks to draw out the 'philosophical consequences' (*D*, 22) of Derrida's thinking, in order to reassess the literary theoretical appropriation and domination of deconstruction. Norris understands Derrida's thinking from within the context of the dominant western philosophical tradition; indeed, he argues that Derridian deconstruction is at odds with all forms of 'postmodernism' (Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard, cf. *D*, 150-71) which claim to have broken with or overcome the exigencies of philosophical modernity. For Norris, it is in relation to the project of modernity, which commences with Descartes and reaches its decisive articulation in the Kantian voice of enlightened and Enlightenment critique, that Derrida's work demands to be understood. This is not to say that Derrida is a traditional thinker: rather, he is a thinker *of* the tradition, which he nonetheless submits to a rigorous rethinking. The radicality of the Derridian position can only be understood, Norris claims, from within the conceptual resources of the philosophical tradition. In his interrogation of, amongst other things, the principle of reason, which has had such a crucial influence on the development of western science, technology, and ideology, Derrida, according to Norris, must be understood from within the tradition of rational critique, even when the attempt is to think the limits of that tradition.

I have argued (and understand Derrida as arguing) that deconstruction is a

rigorous attempt to *think the limits* of that principle of reason which has shaped the emergence of Western philosophy, science and technology at large . . . . Thus the activity of deconstruction is strictly inconceivable outside the tradition of enlightened rational critique whose classic formulations are still to be found in Kant. (*D*, 162)

For Norris, then, Derrida's proper context is the tradition of rational critique typified by Kant; and although he recognizes that it would be a 'determinate misreading' (*D*, 148) of Derrida to represent his work as a strict continuation of the Kantian project, Norris claims that the analogy with Kant acts as a corrective to 'those other, equally myopic misreadings which treat Derrida as some kind of transcendental solipsist, labouring under the absurd delusion that there is nothing "real" outside the play of textual inscription' (*D*, 148-9). The radicality of Derrida's work consists in thinking the limits of the tradition of rational critique and in rendering those limits undecidable.

It would, however, be a fearful misunderstanding of Norris's position to infer from the above that he wishes to maintain Derrida's thinking within the limits of *purely* philosophical investigation; for much of his concern is with showing the *practical* consequences of deconstruction in the areas of politics and ethics (cf. chapters 6 and 8). In his discussion of Kant and Derrida, Norris takes up the Kantian distinction between the 'pure' and 'practical' employment of reason, a distinction which divides nature from freedom the sensible from the supersensible, and distinguishes the domains of epistemology and ethics.

In this context, it is Norris's discussion of the relation of the ethics of deconstruction to Kantian practical reason that is of interest. In thinking the limits of the tradition, Norris argues that Derrida's work is analogous with the Kantian project of thinking the limits of pure epistemological explanation. By probing the limits of pure reason, Derrida's thinking, he suggests, opens on to an ethical domain of practical reason that lies beyond epistemology. Thus, for Norris, Derrida's thinking opens out on to an 'ethical dimension' (*D*, 228) and has definite ethical consequences. With the explanatory tool of the distinction between epistemology and ethics, Norris thus articulates the radicality of Derrida's thinking, a thinking that is hinged upon the difference between the pure and the practical.

One of the major reasons why the deconstructive labour at the limit of the philosophical tradition should open out on to an ethical dimension is provided, claims Norris, by the influence that the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas has had upon Derrida's work.

What Derrida finds in Levinas is an attempt to *think the limits* of this tradition and to make out the points where it encounters the 'violence' of an alien (ethical) mode of thought. (*D*, 231)

Although Norris is aware, through a reading of 'Violence and Metaphysics', that 'Derrida is by no means an uncritical exponent of Levinas' texts' (*Z*, 233), he also recognizes that 'it is clear that Levinas exerted a deep and lasting

influence on Derrida's thought' (D, 234).

What is one to make of this 'Levinasian' conclusion to Norris's appraisal of Derrida? Let me state first that I believe Norris is correct in claiming that we need to understand deconstruction in terms of 'an ethical injunction' (D, 236), and that this aspect of Derrida's work 'has yet to be grasped by most of his commentators' (D, 228). Nevertheless, I am sceptical about the way in which Norris formulates these issues and my question to him is the following: by retaining Derrida at the limit and, consequently, *upon* the parameters of Kantian critique and by assimilating his thinking to the distinction between pure and practical reason (or epistemology and ethics), does he not leave the institutions of reason and rationality *intact*, thereby reinscribing those elements of Derrida's thinking that are transgressive of logocentrism back within the reasonable limits of the *ratio*?

I suspect that Norris would not think it entirely unfair if his account of Derrida were labelled a 'rational reconstruction' of deconstruction. Indeed, much of his energy is directed against the notion that deconstruction is 'a species of last-ditch irrationalism' (D, 169). However, can Derridian deconstruction be maintained within the limits of reason and rationality? An approach to this question can best be seen if we turn - *pace* Norris (D, 157-62) - to Derrida's essay, 'The Principle of Reason: the University in the Eyes of its Pupils'.<sup>3</sup> A substantial portion of this text deals with Heidegger - and here I broach what I consider to be the most serious weakness of Norris's book: the absence of any extended discussion of the crucial relation of Derrida's work to that of Heidegger - and pursues Heidegger's interrogation of the status of the Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason as the ultimate ground upon which all thinking stands. Briefly, the principle of sufficient reason is the claim that nothing is without reason and consequently that there is a rational explanation for the existence of every entity. But is thinking exhausted by rationality? Is there another ground for thinking other than the principle of sufficient reason? When we ask the question of the reason of reason, the *raison d'être* or Being of the *ratio*, then is all such inquiry rational? Are there reasons of which reason knows nothing?

For Heidegger, thinking is not exhausted by rationality. When Heidegger examines the principle of reason, *nihil est sine ratione*, he changes the sense of the proposition by placing the emphasis upon the *nihil* and the *sine*; thus for him, it is precisely *nothing* that is *without* reason. According to Heidegger, the question of the Nothing (*das Nichts*) allows access to the question of the Being of entities, of what is, in such a way that the question of Being is not from the start determined on the ground of rationality; i.e. that whatever *is* can be explained rationally. In this way the whole status of the *nihil* becomes problematic and Heidegger is able to ask: 'How is it with the nothing?' (*Wie steht es um das Nichts?*).<sup>4</sup> In Heidegger's 'What is metaphysics?' and elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> he burrows into the ground of the *ratio* and claims that the principle of sufficient reason dissimulates a nothingness, a groundless abyss (*Abgrund*), which, when investigated, permits us to transcend the totality of entities circumscribed by reason and pose the question of the Being of the *ratio*.

In Derrida's reading of Heidegger in 'The Principle of Reason', he seeks to extend these investigations to the question of the university. Derrida claims that the rational structure of the university ('nobody has ever founded a university against reason', *PR*, 7) is suspended over a *nihil*, a groundless abyss which cannot be thought by reason. And, as Norris correctly claims, this meditation upon the *nihil* and the Being of the *ratio* leads to neither nihilism nor irrationalism; for, as my epigraph from Heidegger points out, irrationalism is antithetically dependent upon the principle of reason which it rejects and is thus circumscribed by the arc of a dialectical, metaphysical circle that encloses both the rational and the irrational. Derrida's (and Heidegger's) 'position' is well summarized by the following sentence: 'Reason is only one species of thought - which does not mean that thought is irrational' (*PR*, 16). *Thought* (and Derrida appears to use this term in a thoroughly Heideggerian manner throughout the essay) is not exhausted by the rational; yet this does not mean that thinking becomes irrational, but rather that it is caught in a double bind or double gesture, between rationality and its 'nihilation', clinging to the ground whilst looking down into the abyss.

There is a double gesture here, a double postulation: to ensure professional competence and the most serious tradition of the university even while going as far as possible, theoretically and practically, in the most directly underground thinking about the abyss beneath the university, to think at one and the same time the entire 'Cornellian' landscape - the campus on the heights, the bridges, and if necessary the barriers above the abyss - and the abyss itself. (*PR*, 17)

To be bound to a double bind means obeying a double necessity: first, we are bound to a modernity that is grounded upon the principle of reason and, secondly, we are bound to ask for the reason of reason, which takes us in a direction that is *otherwise* than modernity (a formulation which seeks to resist the connotations of periodization, epochalization, and completion, suggested by the use of the prefix 'post' in some versions of postmodernism).

Whilst Norris is correct in claiming that Derrida operates at the limits of rational critique, I would wish, in the light of the above, to extend his insight and ask: Can the very thinking of the limits of reason itself be called rational? Should we not rather commit ourselves to a thinking that recognizes the inescapability of rationality, and consequently of modernity, whilst, at the same time, recognizing the necessity of the escape from reason?

I would now like to turn to Norris's implicit use of the distinction between pure and practical reason which is reflected, for him, in the difference between epistemology and ethics. For Norris, Derrida's project of thinking the limits of the tradition is a speculation upon the limits of conceptual, epistemological explanation (*D*, 225). Norris claims that when the epistemological limit is transgressed, one enters into the domain of ethics. Yet, taking as a point of departure Norris's argument that Derrida's work must be considered from within the Kantian tradition of rational critique, it is clear that, for him, the distinction between epistemology and ethics can be assimilated to that between

the pure and practical employment of reason in Kant. Thus Norris embeds both sides of the limit that divides epistemology from ethics into the ground of reason, whether pure or practical. The dual necessity which ties together the Derridian double bind is woven from the nets of reason.

If my portrayal is correct, then my objection is the following: although I believe Norris is justified in arguing that Derrida considers it impossible to imagine dispensing with the conceptual resources of the rationalist tradition of modernity, I believe that he is mistaken in claiming that what lies beyond the tradition, in this instance the ethical (or the non-philosophical), can be understood through the rationalist, categories of Kantian ethics. The double bind of deconstruction is bound both to the rationalist tradition of logocentrism and to the thought of the other to the *logos*. The question is, can the other to the *logos* can be assimilated into the *ratio*? In *Of Grammatology*, in a section entitled 'The Exorbitant Question of Method', when Derrida sketches the 'methodological' presuppositions of his deconstructive reading of Rousseau, he claims that he wanted to attain a certain point of exteriority with respect to the totality of the logocentric epoch, so that a deconstruction of the logocentric totality could be broached from a position that exceeds the orbit of that totality.<sup>6</sup> A deconstructive reading operates by employing the resources of logocentric or rational conceptuality (the *ratio* being a moment in the history of *logos*, or, more precisely, in the history of its translation) in order to engage that conceptuality in a dislocation where it is drawn outside itself and where the rational is led beyond its own reasonable limits. Of course, such a project continually risks falling back inside that which it deconstructs, since it is forced to employ the conceptual resources of the tradition; yet the necessity, for deconstruction, remains that it seek to maintain its exteriority to the tradition. Bearing this in mind, it would be a misunderstanding of Derridian deconstruction to seek to retain it within the parameters of the *logos* and the *ratio*. All rational reconstruction calls for its own deconstruction.

The corollary of the above is that the distinction of pure and practical reason is one that is maintained *within* the logocentric closure and *within* the reasonable limits of the tradition. Thus, in order to maintain an ethical dimension to Derrida's work in a way that is more responsive and responsible to deconstructive reading, the question becomes one of trying to find an ethics that is other to logocentrism and other to Kantian practical reason. The thought of Emmanuel Levinas provides, I believe, an approach to this question.

Can Levinasian ethics be assimilated to the model of Kantian practical reason? Although Levinas is generally favourable to Kantian ethics, particularly the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative (the formula of the end in itself),<sup>7</sup> he would diverge from Kant on the question of the claims to autonomy, law, and universality that ground Kant's project. For Levinas, the ethical relation is not ratified by a procedure of formal universalization, where I must consider that my maxim is capable of becoming a universal law in a possible Kingdom of Ends, but rather through the concrete particularity of my relation with the singular other person (*autrui*) whose rights I must respect over my own. For Levinas, the straightforwardness or rectitude (*droiture*)<sup>8</sup> of

the face-to-face relation with the other person takes precedence over the universal rights (*droits*) of 'Man' and of the citizen. However, as Levinas is keen to point out in *Totality and Infinity*,<sup>9</sup> the statement that the ethical relation cannot be reduced (or indeed enlarged) to the claims of a universalizing (logocentric) rationality should not imply that the relation to the other person is mystical or irrational. The ethical relation does not represent a scandal for reason; rather it is the relation to the other which, Levinas claims, founds and sustains reason (a point which Derrida does not fail to recognize in 'Violence and Metaphysics', where he speaks of the Levinasian rupture of the *logos* making possible 'every logos or every rationalism'<sup>10</sup>). Levinasian ethical rationality is a particular, local employment of reason which is founded upon discrete and plural relations to the radical alterity of the other person and which can only be betrayed by the universalizing machinery of the Categorical Imperative procedure. It would be mistaken, therefore, to assimilate Levinasian ethics to the model of Kantian practical reason.

It is at this point, and by way of conclusion, that a distinction can be made between the ethics of the tradition and the ethics of radical alterity. In the tradition, ethics is often conceived to be a collection of laws, general principles, and moral rules, which are capable of (or make some claim to) universality and, therefore, prescribe human action. Invariably, such an ethics is dependent upon a metaphysical or logocentric foundation: practical reason being the subject-matter of the *second* critique, which comes after the *philosophia prote* and prolegomena of the *first* critique (whilst recognizing the claim to the primacy of practical reason). If ethics can perhaps be traditionally determined as the construction of an ethical system which is bound to a universal and rational Moral Law and binding upon particular moral agents, then it is clear that the ethics of alterity is of a different order. The goal of the ethics of alterity is not the construction of a moral system composed of principles and laws; it is rather the attempt to articulate the sense (*sens*: both signification and direction)<sup>11</sup> of the ethical relation, a sense which precedes, informs, and disrupts the articulation of traditional ethics, and which Levinas claims to find in the face of the other person (*autrui*). This sense is an aspect of ethics that has been dissimulated by the logocentric tradition and it can, perhaps, only be betrayed by the construction of a moral system. The face of the other person, in her or his destitution or majesty, the irreducible and wholly concrete alterity of another human, is otherwise than logocentrism and constitutes the basis for an ethics that is itself 'first philosophy',<sup>12</sup> a heteronomous ethical relation that is the condition for the possibility (and impossibility) of the *ratio* and all rationalisms.

As I have elsewhere argued in greater detail,<sup>13</sup> if there is a new possibility of ethics being prepared in Derrida's work, then it is one that would perhaps correspond to the Levinasian ethics of alterity, an ethics which cannot be reduced or assimilated to the principles or procedures of Kantian practical reason. Although, as a recent publication makes clear,<sup>14</sup> Derrida has many reservations about the word 'ethics' - reticences which echo those voiced by Heidegger in his *Letter on Humanism* - these reservations are themselves in part allayed by the sense that Levinas gives to the word ethics. In a discussion

of Levinas, Derrida says:

I believe that when Levinas speaks of ethics - I wouldn't say that this has nothing in common with what has been covered over in this word from Greece to the German philosophy of the 19th century, ethics is wholly other (*tout autre*); and yet it is the same word. (70-1)

Levinas's displacement of the sense of the word 'ethics' leads Derrida to conclude that its use may be 'much less restrictive' (71) in Levinas's work than elsewhere. For Derrida, the emphasis in Levinasian ethics upon the irreducible singularity of the relation to the other person renders it capable of exceeding the ethics of the tradition.

The respect for the singularity or the call of the other is unable simply to belong to the domain of ethics, to the conventionally and traditionally determined domain of ethics. (71)

Indeed, Derrida wonders whether the title 'ultra-ethique' (71) might not be a more fitting description of Levinas's project. The possibility of such an 'ultra-ethics' or ethics of radical alterity is glimpsed over the horizon of the tradition of Kantian critique, in the face of the other person who founds and nourishes a local and plural rationality. To think the ethics of deconstruction is to attempt a thought that cannot be maintained within the reasonable limits of the tradition. Deconstruction is the critique of critique, a dissenting and perhaps unreasonable voice in the Kantian tribunal of reason.

#### NOTES

- 1 *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1953, 136) in English as *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, Conn, and London: Yale University Press, 1959), 178-9.
- 2 *Derrida* (London: Fontana Modern Master, Fontana, 1987); after referred to as *D*.
- 3 In *Diacritics*, XIX (Fall 1983), 3-20; hereafter referred to as *PR*.
- 4 *Was ist Metaphysik?* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1969), 27, 33. 'What is metaphysics?', trans. D. F. Krell, in *Basic Writings*, edited by D. F. Krell (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 98, 104.
- 5 cf. *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984); *The Essence of Reasons*, trans. Terence Malick (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1969); *Der Satz vom Grund* (Pfullingen: G. Neske, 1957).
- 6 'Nous voulions atteindre le point d'une certaine exteriorite par rapport a la totalite de l'epoque logocentrique. A partir de ce point d'exteriorite, une certaine deconstruction pourrait etre entamee de cette totalite, qui est aussi un chemin trace, de cet orbe (*orbis*) qui est aussi orbitaire (*orbita*).'*De la grammatologie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967), 231.
- 7 'Act in such a way that you always treat humanity whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.' Kant, *The Moral Law*, trans. H. J. Paton (London: Hutchinson, 1958), 91. Levinas makes a favourable remark on this subject in an interview with *Le Monde* in

- 1980: 'J'aime la seconde formule de l'imperatif categorique, celle qui dit de "respecter l'homme en moi et en autrui". Dans cette formule, nous ne sommes pas dans la pure universalis, mais déjà dans la présence d'autrui.' In *Entretiens avec 'Le Monde'. I. Philosophies* (Paris: Editions la Decouverte, 1984), 146.
- 8 *Totalite et Infini* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), 33. Trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 63.
- 9 *ibid.*, 176-9; trans. 201-4.
- 10 *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967), 145. Trans. Alan Bass (London and Henley: Routledge, 1978), 98.
- 11 'Ma tâche ne consiste pas à construire l'éthique: j'essaie seulement d'en chercher le sens . . . . On peut sans doute construire une éthique en fonction de ce que je viens de dire, mais ce n'est pas la mon thème propre. *Ethique et infini* (Paris: Fayard/France Culture, 1982), 85.
- 12 *Totalite et Infini*, 281; trans. 304.
- 13 cf. 'The chiasmus: Levinas, Derrida and the ethical demand for deconstruction', *Textual Practice*, 3, 1 (1989), 91-106.
- 14 *Alterities* (Paris: Editions Osiris, 1986). All subsequent page references given in the text.