

ARTICLES : SPECIAL ISSUE  
A DEDICATION TO JACQUES DERRIDA - MEMOIRS

## Derrida's Influence on Philosophy ... And On My Work

*By Simon Critchley\**

A vital measure of the influence of a thinker on a discipline is the extent to which they transform its customs, protocols and practices in a way that makes it difficult to conceive how things were done before they appeared on the scene. Such transformations are usually simply incorporated into the discipline and presupposed by those who come after. This is why we often have a thankless relation to the most influential thinkers - because their innovations are now the way in which we are accustomed to see and do things. Definitionally then, great thinkers are often those who change the way we do things in a peculiarly thankless way. Jacques Derrida was a great thinker. He exerted a massive influence over a whole generation of people working in philosophy. His death is an unfathomable loss. In what follows I would like to thank him for what he enabled people like me to presuppose thanklessly in our practice.

How did Derrida transform the way in which people like me *do* philosophy? Let me begin negatively with a couple of confessions. I was never a structuralist and always found Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics a deeply improbable approach to language, meaning and the relation of the latter to the world. There is no doubt that Saussurean structuralism enabled some stunning intellectual work, particularly in Claude Levi-Strauss's anthropology, Jacques Lacan's reading of Freud and Roland Barthes's brilliant and enduring literary and cultural analyses. But that doesn't mean that Saussure was right. Therefore, Derrida's early arguments in this area, particularly the critique of the priority of speech over writing in the hugely influential *Of Grammatology*, left me rather cold. Talk of "post-structuralism" left me even colder, almost as cold as rhetorical throat-clearing about "post-modernism." So, in assessing Derrida's influence, I would want to set aside a series of notions famously associated with him - like *différance*, trace and archi-writing - in order to get a clearer view of what I think Derrida was about in his work.

---

\* Professor of Philosophy, New School for Social Research, New York and University of Essex. He is the author of the book *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (1992; second edition, 1999). Email address: [critchls@newschool.edu](mailto:critchls@newschool.edu).

I have a similar scepticism about the popular idea of deconstruction as a methodological *unpicking* of binary oppositions (speech/writing, male/female, inside/outside, reason/madness, etc. etc. etc.). In my view this is a practice which led generations of humanities students into the intellectual *cul-de-sac* of locating binaries in purportedly canonical texts and cultural epiphenomena and then relentlessly deconstructing them in the name of a vaguely political position somehow deemed to be progressive. Insofar as Derrida's name and half-understood anthologised excerpts from some of his texts were marshalled to such a cause, this only led to the reduction of deconstruction to some sort of entirely formalistic method based on an unproven philosophy of language.

In my view, Derrida was a supreme reader of texts, particularly but by no means exclusively philosophical texts. Although, contrary to some Derridophiles, I do not think that he read everything with the same rigour and persuasive power, there is no doubt that the way in which he read a crucial series of authorships in the philosophical tradition completely transformed our understanding of their work and, by implication, of our own work. In particular, I think of his devastating readings of what the French called "*les trois H*": Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, who provided the bedrock for French philosophy in the post-war period and the core of Derrida's own philosophical formation in the 1950s. But far beyond this, Derrida's readings of Plato, of Rousseau and other 18<sup>th</sup> Century authors like Condillac, and his relentlessly sharp engagements with more contemporary philosophers like Foucault, Bataille and Levinas, without mentioning his readings of Blanchot, Genet, Artaud, Ponge and so many others, are simply definitive. We should also mention Derrida's constant attention to psychoanalysis in a series of stunning readings of Freud.

In my view, what confusedly got named "deconstruction," a title Derrida always viewed with suspicion, is better approached as *double reading*. That is, a reading that does two things:

On the one hand, a double reading gives a patient, rigorous and – although this word might sound odd, I would insist on it – *scholarly* reconstruction of a text. This means reading the text in its original language, knowing the corpus of the author as a whole, being acquainted with its original context and its dominant contexts of reception. If a deconstructive reading is to have any persuasive force, then it must possess a full complement of the tools of commentary and lay down a powerful, primary layer of reading.

On the other hand, the second moment of reading is closer to what we normally think of as an interpretation, where the text is levered open through the location of what Derrida sometimes called "blind spots." Here, an authorship is brought into

contradiction with what it purports to claim, its intended meaning, what Derrida liked to call the text's *vouloir-dire*. Derrida often located these blind spots in ambiguous concepts in the texts he was reading, such as "supplement" in Rousseau, "pharmakon" in Plato, and "Spirit" in Heidegger, where each of these terms possess a double or multiple range of meanings that simply cannot be contained by the text's intended meaning. Many of his double readings turn around such blind spots in order to explode from within our understanding of that author. The key thing is that the explosion has to come from within and not be imposed from without. It is a question of thinking the unthought within the thought of a specific philosophical text. Derrida often described his practice as parasitism, where the reader must both draw their sustenance from the host text and lay their critical eggs within its flesh. In the three examples of Plato, Rousseau and Heidegger, the crucial thing is that each of these conceptual blind spots are deployed by their authors in a way that simply cannot be controlled by their intentions. In an important sense, the text deconstructs itself rather than being deconstructed.

For me, Derrida's philosophical exemplarity consists in the lesson of reading: patient, meticulous, scrupulous, open, questioning reading that is able, at its best, to unsettle its readers' expectations and completely transform our understanding of the philosopher in question. Because Derrida was such a brilliant reader, he is a difficult example to follow, but in my view one must try. This is what I would see as the pedagogical imperative deriving from Derrida's work. What one is trying to cultivate with students – in seminars, week in, week out – is a scrupulous practice of reading, being attentive to the text's language, major arguments, transitions and movements of thought, but also alive to its hesitations, paradoxes, quotation marks, ellipses, footnotes, inconsistencies and downright conceptual confusions. Thanks to Derrida, we can see that every major text in the history of philosophy possesses these self-deconstructive features. Deconstruction is pedagogy.

Returning to the question of influence, although all of Derrida's training and the great majority of his publications were in philosophy, it is difficult to think of a philosopher who has exerted more influence over the whole spread of humanistic study and the social sciences. The only comparable figure is Michel Foucault and just as it is now unimaginable to do historical or social research without learning from what Foucault said about power, subjectivity and the various archaeologies and genealogies of knowledge, so too, Derrida has completely transformed our approach to the texts we rely on in our various disciplinary canons. In a long, fascinating and now rather saddening interview with *Le Monde* from 19<sup>th</sup> August 2004, which was republished in a ten-page supplement after his death, he describes his work in terms of an "ethos of writing." Derrida cultivated what I would call a *habitus* of uncompromising philosophical vigilance at war with the governing

intellectual common sense and against what he liked to call - in a Socratic spirit - the *doxa* or narcissistic self-image of the age.

Derrida's treatment by mainstream philosophers in the English-speaking world was, with certain notable exceptions like Richard Rorty, shameful. He was vilified in the most ridiculous manner by professional philosophers who knew better but who acted out of a parochial malice that was a mere patina to their cultural insularity, intellectual complacency, philistinism and simple jealousy of Derrida's fame, charisma and extraordinary book sales. In the English context, the incident which brought matters to a head was the initial refusal in late Spring 1992 to award Derrida an honorary doctorate at the University of Cambridge, a refusal that found support amongst prominent voices in the Philosophy Faculty. After finally receiving the honorary doctorate with his usual civility, humour and good grace, a letter was sent to the University of Cambridge from Ruth Barcan Marcus, the then Professor of Philosophy at Yale, and signed by some twenty philosophers, including Quine, who complained that Derrida's work "does not meet accepted standards of rigor and clarity." I would like to take this opportunity to register in print my gratitude to these know-nothings for the attention they gave to Derrida because it helped sell lots of copies of my first book - on Derrida and ethics - that also came out in 1992 and paid for a terrific summer vacation.

At the heart of the many of the polemics against Derrida was the frankly weird idea that deconstruction was a form of nihilistic textual free play that threatened to undermine rationality, morality and all that was absolutely fabulous about life in Western liberal democracy. In my view, on the contrary, what was motivating Derrida's practice of reading and thinking was an ethical demand. My claim was that this ethical demand was something that could be traced to the influence of the thought of Emmanuel Levinas and his idea of ethics being based on a relation of infinite responsibility to the other person. Against the know-nothing polemics, deconstruction is an engaged and deeply ethical practice of reading of great social and political relevance. Derrida's work from the 1990s shows this relevance with extraordinary persistence in a highly original series of engagements with Marx. It also shows this relevance to a vast range of subjects in law and transnationalism which must be of particular interest to the readership of the *German Law Journal*, including: European cultural and political identity, the nature of law and justice, democracy, sovereignty, cosmopolitanism, the death penalty, so-called rogue states, and finally with what Derrida liked to call an alternative possible globalisation, an "*altermondialisation*."

Derrida's work is possessed of a curious restlessness, one might even say an anxiety. A very famous American philosopher, sympathetic to Derrida, once said to me, "he never knows when to stop or how to come to an end." In the interview

with *Le Monde*, he describes himself as being at war with himself: "*je suis en guerre contre moi-même*." He was always on the move intellectually, always hungry for new objects of analysis, accepting new invitations, confronting new contexts, addressing new audiences. His ability in discussion simply to listen and to synthesize new theories, hypotheses and phenomena and produce long, detailed and fascinating analyses in response was breathtaking. I saw him do it on many occasions and always with patience, politeness, modesty and civility. Derrida had such critical and synthetic intelligence, a "brilliance" as Levinas was fond of saying. I remember sitting next to Derrida on a panel in Paris and thinking to myself that it felt like being close to an intellectual light bulb. The whole ethos of his work was at the very antipodes of the inert and stale professional complacency that defines so much philosophy and so many philosophers. He found the Ciceronian wisdom that "to philosophise is to learn how to die" repellent for its narcissism and insisted that "I remain uneducatable (*inéducable*) with respect to the wisdom of learning to die."