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DECONSTRUCTION. CRITICAL INTERVENTIONS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY AND BEYOND

Abstract. This essay seeks to make a case for deconstruction as a kind of critical intervention for responding to and dealing with the opportunities and challenges of the 21st century and beyond. Toward this end, it proceeds in three steps or movements. (1) The first part will deconstruct deconstruction, deliberately employing what will be revealed as an inaccurate vernacular understanding of the term in order to extract a more precise and technical characterization of the concept. (2) The second part will investigate the constitutive elements of deconstruction, focusing attention on its two-step procedure, which has been deliberately designed to be a kind of distortion of Hegelian dialectics. (3) Finally, the third part will examine the opportunities and the challenges of the theory and practice of deconstruction indicating how and why it can be considered a critical intervention, albeit one that is not without its own potential problems and vulnerabilities.

Keywords: binary logic; deconstruction; Jacques Derrida; Georg W.F. Hegel; philosophy

1. Introduction. 2. Deconstructing deconstruction. 3. Two steps to deconstruction. 4. Outcomes and results. 5. Conclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Deconstruction, like the concept of “time” in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine (Saint Augustine 1961, XI.14), is one of those words that we all think we know what it means until someone asks us to define it. And then we find ourselves at a loss; it seems we no longer know what it is we were talking about. This essay aims to remediate this problem. It seeks to identify, define, and clarify what many have found to be confused and confusing about deconstruction. And it does so not simply to correct past mistakes or misunderstandings, but to make a case for deconstruction as a kind of critical intervention for responding to and dealing with the opportunities and challenges of the 21st century and beyond.

In order to achieve this objective, the following proceeds in three steps or movements. (1) The first part will deconstruct deconstruction, deliberately employing what will be revealed as an inaccurate vernacular understanding of the term in order to extract a more precise and technical characterization of the concept. (2) The second part will investigate the constitutive elements of deconstruction, focusing attention on its two-step procedure, which has been deliberately designed to be a kind of distortion of Hegelian dialectics. (3) Finally, the third part will examine the opportunities and the challenges of the theory and practice of deconstruction indicating how and why it can be considered a critical intervention, albeit one that is not without its own potential problems and vulnerabilities.

2. DECONSTRUCTING DECONSTRUCTION

The word “deconstruction,” despite initial appearances, does not indicate “to take apart,” “to un-construct,” or “to disassemble.” Despite this widespread and rather popular misconception, which has become something of an institutional and institutionalized (mal)practice in both the popular and academic press, deconstruction is not negative. As Jacques Derrida (Derrida 1993, 147), the progenitor of the concept, pointed out in the Afterword to the book *Limited Inc*: “The ‘de-’ of deconstruction signifies not the demolition of what is constructing itself, but rather what remains to be thought beyond the constructionist or destructionist schema.” For this reason, deconstruction is something entirely other than what is typically understood and delimited by the conceptual opposition situated between the two terms “construction” and “destruction.” In fact, to put it schematically, deconstruction seeks to identify a non-dialectical third alternative. It is a kind of “thinking outside the box” that exceeds the grasp of the existing conceptual order.

It accomplishes this by targeting and working to disrupt the binary oppositions that organize what we say and how we think.

In the opening salvo of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Friedrich Nietzsche (Nietzsche 1989, 10) had pointed out that “the fundamental faith of the metaphysicians is the belief in opposite values.” These opposite values are formulated and expressed in terms of conceptual opposites or mutually exclusive predicates: being/nothing, inside/outside, mind/body, male/female, self/other, light/dark, natural/artificial, etc. “All metaphysicians from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceed in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just one metaphysical gesture among others, it is the metaphysical exigency” (Derrida 1993, 93). This is not, we should note, just a logical quirk of something called “metaphysics.” As Derrida explains in conversation with Julia Kristeva, even “everyday language” is the language of metaphysics (Derrida 1981a, 19). In other words, we typically make sense of ourselves and our world by deploying sets of terminological differences or binary oppositions.

The underlying logic of this way of thinking is the principle of non-contradiction. This principle, sometimes called the “law of non-contradiction,” has been, at least since the time of Aristotle, one of the (if not THE) defining conditions of human knowledge. As Paula Gottlieb explains in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry for the subject: “According to Aristotle, first philosophy, or metaphysics, deals with ontology and first principles, of which the principle (or law) of non-contradiction is the firmest. Aristotle says that without the principle of non-contradiction we could not know anything that we do know” (Gottlieb 2019). As proof of this, we only need to consider what has already transpired here: We have employed the law of non-contradiction in the very process of characterizing deconstruction by way of distinguishing it from what it is not.

Conceptual oppositions are undoubtedly useful and expedient. They not only help us make sense of the world; they appear to be

a fundamental principle of thought itself. Despite this, there are profound systemic problems. On the one hand, conceptual oppositions restrict what is possible to know and to say about the world and our own experiences. Opposites push things toward the extremes and produce a mutually exclusive either/or. As the late literary critic Barbara Johnson insightfully wrote in her book *A World of Difference*, “If not absolute, then relative; if not objective then subjective; if you are not for something; you are against it” (Johnston 1987, 12). Although this kind of exclusivity has a certain functionality and logical attraction, it is often not entirely in touch with the complexity and exigency of things on the ground. For this reason, we are generally critical of “false dichotomies” – the parsing of complex reality into a simple either/or distinction. There are, therefore, both ontological and epistemological reasons to question the hegemony of binary oppositions and the limitations that they impose.

On the other hand, conceptual opposites arrange and exert power. For any logical opposition or binary pairing, the two items are not typically situated on a level playing field; one of the pair has already been determined to be the privileged term. Or as Derrida explains, “we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand” (Derrida 1981a, 41). With the standard gender distinction situated between the two terms “male” and “female,” for example, it is the male who has been considered, from the book of *Genesis* to psychoanalysis and beyond, to be the original and basic form of the human species. In the Judeo-Christian creation myth, for instance, it is the man, Adam, who is created first, and the woman Eve is derived from him. Following this way of thinking, women have been routinely characterized as a derivative and negative counterpart. That is, they have typically been described by what they lack in comparison to the male. And this formulation – something that has been called *phallogentrism* – has

been leveraged to justify centuries of marginalization, oppression, and exclusion.

A similar, structural inequality has been identified with the terms that define conversation and debate about race in the United States and elsewhere. As W. Lawrence Hogue explains: “Within the white/black binary opposition in the West, the African American is defined as a devalued Other” (Hogue 2008, 45). Formulated in this way, white is a privileged term and black is determined and characterized as its negative counterpart and other. To make matters worse, this already unequal arrangement – one that encodes prejudice in the very terms by which we think and speak of racial difference – often has been and remains invisible to those who benefit from this privilege. This comprises what is designated by the phrase “the invisibility of whiteness.” It is for this reason, that racism is a structural matter and not just an empirical problem concerning the fact that there are individuals who have and express racist opinions or tell ethnic jokes. What is at stake in binary opposition, then, is not simply a manner of conveniently dividing up the world into this or that. Conceptual pairings – like male/female and white/black – no matter where they occur or how they come to be arranged, always and already impose unequal distinctions and distributions of privilege and power.

Conceptual oppositions, then, are neither neutral nor objective. As the science and technology scholar Donna Haraway argues, “certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals – in short, domination of all constituted others, whose task it is to mirror the self” (Haraway 1991, 177). Dualisms, then, are expressions of power. They are always and already hierarchical arrangements that are structurally biased. And it is this skewed hierarchical order that installs, underwrites, and justifies systems of inequality, domination, and prejudice. There are, then, important and pressing moral and political reasons to question systems of conceptual opposition and to attempt to think in excess

of and beyond the usual and inherited arrangements. As Hannah Arendt concludes, “we all grow up and inherit a certain vocabulary. We then have got to examine this vocabulary” (Arendt 2018, 461).

Finally, it needs to be noted that thinking and speaking in this way is not optional. Because of these profound systemic problems, there are good reasons to challenge the hegemony of binary opposition. But doing so is difficult, if not exceedingly impossible. Organizing things in terms of logical opposites does not appear to be a choice or a matter of individual volition. It is, as Nietzsche had pointed out, the “fundamental faith” that underlies and empowers all modes of thinking, up to and including that by which one would endeavor to question and to criticize it as such. Consequently, organizing things in terms of logical opposition, whether indicated by the name “dualism,” “oppositional logic,” “digital,” “dichotomy,” or “principle of non-contradiction,” is not a choice or a matter of individual volition. One does not, for example, decide to think in terms of oppositional logic or not, which is obviously just one more binary opposition.

Consider, for example, one of the proposed solutions to the gender binary that has been advanced in the context of discussions concerning the rights of transgender and gender fluid individuals. Gender identity, it has been argued, does not easily accommodate itself to the existing rules of the game – the mutually exclusive dichotomy that distinguishes male from female. In response to this, there have been efforts to articulate an alternative to the male/female binary. One possible alternative has been called “non-binary,” which immediately, and not surprisingly, produces another duality or binary opposition: non-binary *vs.* binary. This is the thoroughly insidious and seemingly inescapable nature of the problem: opposing binary opposition by deploying the usual strategies of contradiction, reversal, or revolution not only does little or nothing to challenge the basic structure of the dominant system but is actually involved with and contributes to what one had wanted to oppose or criticize in the first place. Audre Lorde accurately formulated the problem: “The master’s

tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 1984, 110). But what other tools are there? How is it possible to say anything at all about that which ruptures and exceeds the limits of available words and concepts without (re)using those very words and concepts?

3. TWO STEPS TO DECONSTRUCTION

Binary oppositions are a problem. But directly opposing binary opposition is already part and parcel of the problem. This does not mean, however, that such structures and formations are simply beyond inquiry or constitute some kind of inescapable *fait accompli*, to which one must and can only surrender. It does not, it is important to note, simply disarm or render impotent any and all forms of intervention, whether political, social, philosophical, or otherwise. What it does mean, is that the engagement – if it is to be effective – will need to operate in excess of mere opposition and be structured in a way that is significantly different and otherwise. This is accomplished (or, perhaps more accurately stated, this comes to pass) by way a double gesture. As Derrida explains in the course of an interview with Jean-Louis Houdebine and Guy Scarpetta: "We must proceed using a double gesture, according to a unity that is both systematic and in and of itself divided, according to a double writing, that is, a writing that is in and of itself multiple, what I called, in '*La double séance*,' a double science" (Derrida 1981a, 41). This "double science" consists of two phases: *overturning* and *displacement*.

OVERTURNING

Because the two terms that comprise a conceptual opposition are structurally arranged and formulated as an order of subordination, one of the two terms already governs the other or has the upper hand. Deconstruction begins with a phase of overturning the existing hierarchy. This "flipping of the script," or what Derrida also describes

as “bring low what was high” is, quite literally, a *revolutionary* gesture insofar as the existing order – an arrangement that is already an unequal and violent hierarchy – is inverted or overturned (Derrida 1981a, 42). “To overlook this phase of overturning,” explains Derrida, “is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition” (Derrida 1981a, 41).

But inversion, in and by itself, is not sufficient. It is only half the story. And this is the reason why it is just a “phase” or the first step. As Derrida points out and is well aware (and he is following, among others, Nietzsche on this point) a conceptual inversion or revolutionary gesture – whether it be social, political, or philosophical – actually does little or nothing to challenge or change the dominant system. In merely exchanging the relative positions occupied by the two opposed terms, inversion still maintains the binary opposition in which and on which it operates – albeit in reverse order or upside-down. Simply turning things around, as Derrida notes, still “resides within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it” (Derrida 1981a, 41).

DISPLACEMENT

For this reason, deconstruction necessarily entails a second, post-revolutionary phase or operation. “We must,” as Derrida describes it, “also mark the interval between inversion, which brings low what was high, and the irruptive emergence of a new ‘concept,’ a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime” (Derrida 1981a, 42). Strictly speaking, this new concept is no concept whatsoever, for it always and already exceeds the system of opposites that define the conceptual order as well as the non-conceptual order with which the conceptual order has been articulated. As such, it “can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabits philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, without ever constituting a third term, without ever

leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics” (Derrida 1981a, 43).

This “new concept” that is the product of the second phase occupies a position that is in between or in/at the margins of a traditional, conceptual opposition or binary pair. It is simultaneously neither-nor and either-or. It does not resolve into one or the other of the two terms that comprise the conceptual order, nor does it constitute a third term that would mediate their difference in a synthetic unity, as is the case with Hegelian dialectics. Consequently, it is positioned in such a way that it both inhabits and operates in excess of the conceptual oppositions by which and through which systems of knowledge have been organized and articulated. It is for this reason that the new concept cannot be described or marked in language, except (as is exemplified here) by engaging in what Derrida calls a “bifurcated writing,” which compels the traditional philosophemes to articulate, however incompletely and insufficiently, what necessarily resists and displaces all possible modes of articulation.

Perhaps the best example and illustration of deconstruction’s two-step operation is available with the term “deconstruction” itself. In a first move, deconstruction flips the script by putting emphasis on the negative term “destruction” as opposed to “construction.” In fact, the apparent similitude between the words, “deconstruction” and “destruction,” is a deliberate and calculated aspect of this effort. But this is only step one – the phase of inversion. In the second phase of this double science, there is the emergence of a brand new and exorbitant concept. The novelty of this concept is marked, quite literally, in the material of the word itself. “Deconstruction,” which is fabricated by combining the de- of “destruction” and attaching it to the opposite term “construction,” produces a strange and disorienting neologism that does not fit in the existing order of things. It is an excessive and intentionally undecidable alternative that designates a new possibility. This new concept, despite first appearances, is not negative. It is not the mere opposite of construction; rather, it exceeds

the conceptual order instituted and regulated by the terminological opposition situated between construction and destruction. “It is only on this condition,” Derrida concludes, “that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to intervene in the field of oppositions that it criticizes” (Derrida 1982, 392).

4. OUTCOMES AND RESULTS

The value of all of this is that deconstruction, although informed and made possible by an engagement with the past, provides a way forward into possible futures that are not merely beholden to a repetition of what has gone before. The *raison d'être* of deconstruction, then, is that it opens up the opportunity and possibility to think, to speak, and to act *otherwise*. In other words, it provides a way to identify, to think about, and to say something that is different and to do so in a way that can make a difference. But again, the skeptic might ask (and should ask): why? Why mess with the status quo, when it seems to work just fine? Or to put it more directly: If it ain't broke, why bother trying to fix it?

This skepticism appears to be entirely reasonable. The principle of non-contradiction and the arrangement of things into conceptual pairs seems to be a fundamental baseline. Operating in terms of this logic is not an option. We do not, for example, decide to speak and think in opposite terms or not, which is obviously just one more binary opposition; we are already situated in languages and systems of thought that are essentially oppositional in their structure and modes of operation. As Aristotle had asserted in the *Metaphysics*, the principle of non-contradiction – whether it concerns ontological facts, epistemological limits, or logical expressions – is fundamental and essentially beyond demonstration (Aristotle 1980, 1006a, 1-5). Or as Derrida had explained – channeling the Aristotelean principle of non-contradiction without identifying it as such – this all or nothing way of thinking is not voluntary; it is all or nothing: “Every concept

that lays claim to any rigor whatsoever implies the alternative of ‘all or nothing.’ Even if in ‘reality’ or in ‘experience’ everyone believes they know that there is never ‘all or nothing,’ a concept determines itself only according to ‘all or nothing.’ It is impossible or illegitimate to form a philosophical concept outside this logic of all or nothing” (Derrida 1993, 116-117 – translation slightly modified).

Consequently, thinking and speaking in terms of conceptual opposites makes sense. And it makes sense, precisely because it is the very terms and condition of making sense. The problem with this, as Derrida and others have pointed out, is that these logical oppositions are already prejudicial. They are not and have never been neutral determinations of objective facts. They institute difference and this difference always makes a difference – socially, politically, ethically, ideologically, etc. Conceptual oppositions, wherever and however they appear and are formulated, institute and organize unequal hierarchies that are determinations of value and exertions of power. The promise of deconstruction, then, is that it provides a potent mechanism for thinking our way out of the maze of troubling oppositional pairs and dualisms by which we have made sense of ourselves, our world, and others. All of this sounds promising, especially for individuals and communities who have been, for one reason or another, situated on the “wrong side” of these oppositional pairs and dualities. But it is not without costs and potential risks – three in particular.

COMMUNICATIONS PROBLEM

If conceptual opposition (or, if one prefers, the principle of non-contradiction) is not optional but part and parcel of the languages we speak, then any effort to intervene in and disrupt the functioning of this conceptual order necessarily confronts the structural limits of language and the possibility of clear and effective communication. This is why, in “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable,” Nietzsche cannot help but end with what is essentially unnamable,

for that which exceeds the grasp of available concepts – that which is neither *being* nor *appearance* and both *being* and *appearance* – is not able to be designated by any of the available words (Nietzsche 1983, 486). As soon as we open our mouths to try to identify this third alternative, as soon as we say something like “It is...” or “It is called...”, we have fallen back into the system of logical oppositions and terminology that we had sought to challenge in the first place. It is, therefore, not possible to say anything about deconstruction without using the very resources of that which is to be deconstructed.

In responding to this necessary and unavoidable problem, language itself comes to be twisted and contorted in such a way as to make that which is essentially oppositional in its basic structure articulate what can no longer and never was able to be comprehended by such an arrangement. The manner by which this perversion of language is accomplished typically entails the use of two related strategies.

On the one hand, there are *neologisms*, the fabrication of brand-new words to designate new concepts or possibilities. Derrida is well-known for his neologisms, perhaps the most famous/notorious being *différance*, which is a way to think and write difference differently. “I have,” Derrida explains, “attempted to distinguish *différance* (whose *a* marks, among other things, its productive and conflictual characteristics) from Hegelian difference, and have done so precisely at the point at which Hegel, in the greater *Logic*, determines difference as contradiction only in order to resolve it, to interiorize it, to lift it up (according to the syllogistic process of speculative dialectics) into the self-presence of an ontotheological or onto-teleological synthesis” (Derrida 1981a, 44). For Derrida, the visibly differentiated *différance* designates a different way to think and write of a difference that remains in excess of the Hegelian concept of difference, which was exclusively understood as negation and contradiction. *Différance*, to say it differently, is a way for thinking and describing another modality of difference that is not beholden to or limited by the principle of non-contradiction.

On the other hand, there is *paleonymy*. Paleonymy is a Derridean neologism fabricated from available Latin components to name the reuse and repurposing of an “old name in order to launch a new concept” (Derrida 1981a, 41). Achieving this requires that the term be carefully selected and strategically reconfigured in order to articulate something other than what it was initially designed to convey. It therefore requires what Derrida characterizes in terms of a double gesture: “We proceed: (1) to the extraction of a reduced predicative trait that is held in reserve, limited in a given conceptual structure, *named X*; (2) to the delimitation, the grafting and regulated extension of the extracted predicate, the name *X* being maintained as a kind of *lever of intervention*, in order to maintain a grasp on the previous organization, which is to be transformed effectively” (Derrida 1981a, 71). Understood in this way, paleonymy is a kind of verbal remix that samples a deep-cut from the available linguistic catalogue and then recontextualizes it to generate something that is new, fresh, and unexpected. These “old names” may be archaic words that have almost fallen off the linguistic radar, like Derrida’s appropriation and use of the ancient Greek words *χώρα* (*chora*) and *φάρμακον* (*pharmakon*). Or they can be common and more popular words that are stuck with a significant difference that makes them slide away from their usual meaning and usage, as Derrida had done with the term *writing*.

REAPPROPRIATION

Because of this inescapable communications problem, the interventions of deconstruction always and necessarily risk becoming reappropriated into and domesticated by the existing systems of conceptual opposition that they work to undermine and exceed. The peculiarity of a neologism, for example, comes to be domesticated, through the actions of both advocates and critics, by making it conform to existing conceptual structures, often in the face of

explicit statements to the contrary. And this has, in fact, been the fate of the term *deconstruction* itself. Despite what Derrida explicitly states about deconstruction designating what remains to be thought “beyond the constructionist or destructionist schema” (Derrida 1993, 147); the word has been routinely reabsorbed by and understood according to the constructionist/destructionist schema. In this way, the neologism comes to be domesticated and commodified through a misappropriation that makes deconstruction just another name for criticism, a synonym for analysis, a new term for dismantlement, or the mere opposite of assembly and construction.

The strategy of paleonomy is exposed to a similar difficulty and is often easier to domesticate, because it does not take much interpretive effort to make an old name function in the old way. Derrida was well aware of the risk: “To put the old names to work, or even just to leave them in circulation, will always, of course, involve some risk: the risk of settling down or of regressing into the system that has been, or is in the process of being deconstructed” (Derrida 1981b, 5). *Writing*, for example – which for Derrida “*simultaneously* provokes the overturning of the hierarchy speech/writing, and the entire system attached to it, *and* releases the dissonance of a writing within speech, thereby disorganizing the entire inherited order and invading the entire field” (Derrida 1981a, 42) – has often been reappropriated into the existing hegemony of logocentrism. Critics like René Wellek, Walter Ong, John Ellis and many others have taken Derrida to task on the assumption that he simply overturns the speech/writing hierarchy and, in the face of what appears to be overwhelming empirical evidence to the contrary, dares to promote writing to the position of priority. All of this is perpetrated in direct opposition to or in complete ignorance of carefully worded explanations that have been specifically designed to preempt and protect against such misunderstandings.

Consequently, deconstruction, whether employing the strategy of neologism, paleonomy, or some hybrid mixture of the two, always

and necessarily runs the risk of having its interventions reappropriated into the field of conceptual oppositions in which and on which they supposedly work. This exposure to misunderstanding and domestication is not the result of an individual critic who has it in for deconstruction, even if critics have often exploited this situation for their own purposes. Instead, it is a systemic necessity and unavoidable by-product of logic and language. If the logical exigency of conceptual opposition is not optional and resistance to it is effectively futile, then any alternative, no matter how well articulated and contextualized, is immediately and unavoidably exposed to the risk of reappropriation. "The hierarchy of dual oppositions," as Derrida concludes, "always reestablishes itself" (Derrida 1981a, 42).

INTERMINABLE ANALYSIS

Finally and following from this, there neither is nor can be finality. Because deconstruction is always and necessarily exposed to the risk of reappropriation, the work of deconstruction is never complete or able to be finished. It is and must be what Derrida calls "an interminable analysis," a never-ending engagement that must continually submit its own innovations, movements, and conclusions to further scrutiny (Derrida 1981a, 42). For this reason, deconstruction does not and cannot conform to traditional models of knowledge production and representation. Its investigations do not and cannot supply anything like a definitive answer or conclusive solution, in the usual sense of the words. Its different queries, no matter what angle or aspect is pursued, entail instead an endless reproduction of questioning that becomes increasingly involved with the complexity of its own problematic. Although this is something that clearly cuts against the grain of common sense, it is necessary if the projects of deconstruction are to be at all successful, consistent, and rigorously applied. This conclusion has a number of consequences, which are (not surprisingly) somewhat inconclusive.

First, this particular form of what appears to be endless self-involvement has engendered important ethical questions and political concerns. “The growing self-reflexivity of theory,” Mark Taylor writes, “seems to entail an aestheticizing of politics that makes cultural analysis and criticism increasingly irrelevant” (Taylor 1997, 325). In other words, the main concern with deconstruction is that as it becomes more and more involved in its own questions and problematics, it appears to be increasingly cut off from the real questions and issues that matter. “Instead of engaging the ‘real,’ theory seems caught in a hall of mirrors from which ‘reality’ is ‘systematically’ excluded” (Taylor 1997, 270). This line of criticism is nothing new for philosophy or philosophers. Consider the case of Thales as recounted in Plato’s *Theaetetus*: “While he was studying the stars and looking upwards, he fell into a pit, and a neat, witty Thracian servant girl jeered at him, they say, because he was so eager to know the things in the sky that he could not see what was there before him at his very feet” (Plato 1987, 174a)

So it is with the critics of deconstruction, who find the very idea of an interminable analysis to be self-involved or solipsistic and a potentially dangerous kind of intellectual distraction that could lead one to miss and completely disregard what is most important and closest at hand. At the same time, however, deconstruction already has a response to this criticism, which, it rightfully points out, necessarily mobilizes and is formulated in terms of the classic logical oppositions that deconstruction had put in question in the first place. So instead of providing an easy excuse for dismissing deconstruction, this criticism betrays the very problem-space of ethics and politics to which deconstruction responds and for which it takes responsibility.

Second, recursive efforts like that of deconstruction often appear to be less than scientific or at least contrary to a concept of science understood and imagined as linear progress that seeks objective knowledge. But this conclusion is not necessarily accurate. Everything depends on how one understands and operationalizes the term

“science.” In having the configuration of an interminable analysis, deconstruction dissimulates (with at least one crucial difference) the *speculative science* that is the hallmark of Hegel’s philosophical sciences. For Hegel, “speculative” was not, as is often the case in colloquial usage, a pejorative term meaning groundless consideration or idle review of something that is inconclusive. Instead, Hegel understood and utilized the term “speculative” in its original and strict etymological sense, which is derived from the Latin noun *speculum*, meaning mirror. Understood in this way, a *speculative science* is a form of self-reflective knowing. That is, it consists in a mode of cognition that makes its own operations and outcomes an object of its consideration.

Like the speculative science that was described by Hegel, deconstruction does not approach and ascertain its object of investigation from the outside but makes itself and its own innovations the subject of investigation. It is, therefore, a thoroughly self-reflective undertaking that continually must submit its own operations and advancements to reevaluation. However, unlike the Hegelian system, which did have a definite teleological orientation and exit strategy, deconstruction appears to be caught in the vortex of what can only appear to be an infinite regress of endless self-reflection and auto-affective inquiry. This is not, despite first appearances, a pointless exercise or an instance of what Hegel had called “a bad or spurious infinite” (Hegel 1969, 137). It is an interminable struggle that occupies the space of thinking and works within its structures to articulate, however tardy and incomplete, what necessarily remains in excess of its seemingly totalizing grasp.

Third, though this outcome clearly cuts across the grain of the usual set of expectations, it is a necessary and unavoidable aspect of the philosophical enterprise. The prototypical philosopher, Socrates, does not get himself in trouble for proclaiming inconvenient truths or peddling fake news. He gets himself in trouble with his fellow citizens and is eventually put to death for merely asking questions. Since Socrates, philosophers (on both ends of the analytic/continental

philosophical divide) have characterized the task of philosophy in similar ways.

“I am,” Daniel Dennett explains, “a philosopher, not a scientist, and we philosophers are better at questions than answers. I haven’t begun by insulting myself and my discipline, in spite of first appearances. Finding better questions to ask, and breaking old habits and traditions of asking, is a very difficult part of the grand human project of understanding ourselves and our world” (Dennett 1996, vii). Slavoj Žižek provides something similar: “There are not only true or false solutions, there are also false questions. The task of philosophy is not to provide answers or solutions, but to submit to critical analysis the questions themselves, to make us see how the very way we perceive a problem is an obstacle to its solution” (Žižek 2006, 137). Consistent with this effort, deconstruction does not seek to provide definitive answers or solutions to existing problems. It seeks to demonstrate how the very way we conceive of and talk about a problem is already a problem and a potential obstacle to developing a solution.

5. CONCLUSION

In the final analysis we can say that deconstruction is neither a form of analysis nor does it seek out, achieve, or have any pretensions to finality. It is and can only take place as an endlessly open form of engagement with existing systems of thought in an effort to challenge the status quo and provide potent opportunities to think, speak, and act otherwise. This does not mean, however, that deconstruction is a form of textual free play where anything goes and all things are permitted. Quite the contrary. It proceeds by and necessitates excessive attention to the exigencies of language and logic in order to follow and apprehend every nuance of their intricate operations, procedures, and protocols. And it does so not to repeat what has gone before – even if, at times, it comes close to repetition – but to extract

from such effort a difference that opens onto alternative opportunities and challenges that can make a difference.

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