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AROUND DECONSTRUCTION. AUTHOR'S RESPONSE

Abstract. In this paper I reply to the four critical articles that were provided in response to my book *Deconstruction* (MIT Press 2021). It proceeds in four steps: (1) I begin with a reply to Stanisław Chankowski's use of the psychoanalytic term "fetishistic denial" to describe the formal character of the text. (2) I then engage with the criticism supplied by Piotr Kozak, who questions deconstruction's theory of truth (or its lack thereof). (3) From this, I take-up and respond to Przemysław Nowakowski's proposal that deconstruction might provide a way to reimagine the interdisciplinarity of cognitive science. And (4) I conclude with a response to Michał Piekarski's mashup of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida, which supplies a reading of these two thinkers that is arguably greater than the sum of the parts. The objective of the reply is not to offer a defense of myself or my text but to engage with these interesting and insightful reviews in a way that opens the space for productive dialogue.

Keywords: cognitive science; deconstruction; Jacques Derrida; Plato; truth; Ludwig Wittgenstein; writing

1. Introduction. 2. Fetishism turned-up to eleven. 3. The truth of deconstruction. 4. Deconstructing cognitive science. 5. Bridging the divide.

1. INTRODUCTION

Shortly after publication of *Deconstruction* (Gunkel 2021) – a book that I wrote for the MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series during the COVID-19 pandemic – Michał Piekarski approached me with an idea for *Studia Philosophiae Christianae*. Instead of writing a book review – Piekarski had previously written an incredibly insightful review (Piekarski 2017) of my book on remix (Gunkel 2015) – he suggested hosting a kind of critical dialogue, where several readers/reviewers would be invited to develop a more substantive and sustained engagement with the book and its argument. I loved the idea. Four articles were solicited from Stanisław Chankowski (Chankowski

2022, 109-128), Piotr Kozak (Kozak 2022, 129-136), Przemysław Nowakowski (Nowakowski 2022, 137-144), and Michał Piekarski (Piekarski 2022, 145-160); and the review essays they produced were published along with a short introductory reflection that I had written for the occasion. Now we come full circle as I have the opportunity to reply to these four essays.

In responding to these incredibly insightful and attentive readings of my book, I will not assume a defensive posture and try to justify or reassert what is in the book or what I – the author of the text – had (supposedly) wanted to say. This is not only less than hospitable to others and the work they so graciously undertook and provided, but, perhaps even worse, it patronizes and reaffirms the logocentric privilege that deconstruction targets and (in a word) deconstructs. To even attempt to defend *Deconstruction* in this way would effectively undermine what one seeks to protect and defend. Thus, I will proceed otherwise, in a way that will remain faithful to deconstruction while also honoring the insights and contributions of others.

2. FETISHISM TURNED-UP TO ELEVEN

The first response from Stanisław Chankowski directly addresses this very problem. “I would,” Chankowski writes, “like to propose here the idea that if a text about a philosophical theory, such as the Gunkel’s, tries to capture its own conditions for being a proper philosophical text – for having a reflexive structure, in other words – it can do so either in the manner of a fetishistic denial or by developing its central problem to its extreme implications...” (Chankowski 2022, 110).

I agree with this perceptive statement. What I challenge is Chankowski’s next statement, namely that *Deconstruction* (the book in question) proceeds by way of fetishistic denial rather than “developing its central problem to its extreme implications.” In response to this conclusion, I reverse Chankowski’s criticism by making the following

counter claim: Chankowski's reading of *Deconstruction* misses the way the text pursues and develops fetishistic denial to its extreme limits and implications, and because of this Chankowski's own text falls into and cannot help but proceed by way of fetishistic denial.

In order to demonstrate and prove this thesis, we first need to get a handle on the concept. Fetishistic denial or disavowal (as it is also called) can be, as Chankowski writes, "summarized by the formula 'I know well, but all the same...' ... Fetishism in the psychoanalytic interpretation means that the subject denies the existence of a problem in order to maintain control over himself and his world" (Chankowski 2022, 124). Though this formulation is offered as a criticism, a failing, or at the very least a kind of disappointing outcome, fetishistic denial is not some failure or mistake that can be simply avoided. It is – to use the critical language of Immanuel Kant – the condition of possibility of writing philosophy.

Consider two well-known examples: (1) Plato's *Phaedrus*, where Plato says (or better writes) the following: I know writing is not the proper medium of philosophical thought, but I make this statement and explain it in and by writing; (2) Hegel's Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where he openly admits that the preface is not the proper place or manner to do philosophy, yet he writes a preface – and an exceedingly long and detailed preface – that ruminates and obsesses about this very problem. In other words: I know the preface to a work of philosophy is a kind useless excrescence and not philosophy proper, but I write a preface nevertheless.

Thus, the question that has to be asked is this: Is it possible to say or to write anything about philosophy without fetishistic denial? Derrida's answer (and I know I should not try to speak for Derrida, but I do so nevertheless; so there it is again) is negative. This is because the double aspect of fetishistic denial seems to be the inescapable fate of any and all attempts to write philosophy. And Derrida himself has been taken to task on this very subject by Jürgen Habermas. Though Habermas (Habermas 1990) does not use the psychoanalytic term

“fetishistic denial,” he does criticize Derrida for what he (Habermas) calls “performative contradiction,” that is, an abrasive difference and gap between what one says and what one does in the saying.

For this reason, “fetishistic denial” may be nothing more or less than the psychoanalytic term of/for *différance*. It is the deferred (or denied) difference that opens the space for doing/writing philosophy. And it follows from this that the critique provided by Chankowski also exhibits fetishistic denial, when he advances the following as part of his argument: I know very well what is expected and needed for a handbook and the author has fulfilled that task, but I am nevertheless going to criticize the effort for delivering something that is not a handbook. And should the author of this critical rejoinder seek to dismiss or deny this fact, then that would be yet another instance of fetishism. For this reason, as Slavoj Žižek might say, all philosophers are perverts.

All of this takes us back to and deposits us in the *Phaedrus*. Philosophy cannot communicate its truth without engaging in a practice – writing – that is, according to this philosophical truth, the wrong way to say anything about philosophy. It is this problem – the problem that, from the very beginning splits philosophy against itself – that is the subject (and the object) of deconstruction. And *Deconstruction* (the book) if anything, follows this insight to its extreme limit, turning fetishistic denial up to eleven. And the contribution from Chankowski identifies and reaffirms this in both what it says (its content) and what it does (its form). Thus, what is offered as and seems to be a criticism of *Deconstruction* is in fact an instance of the very problem it seeks to identify and address. But that is not a criticism, it’s an affirmation of the fundamental conditions of saying/writing anything at all about philosophy.

3. THE TRUTH OF DECONSTRUCTION

In responding to Chankowski's text, it has been necessary to mobilize the concept of "philosophical truth." But what is meant by this term "truth" has, it seems, been left unaccounted for. The second review essay from Piotr Kozak picks-up on this and asks the question directly: What is truth for deconstruction? In responding to this query, Kozak advances two propositions. First, "unless we have a concept of truth, we can make no sense of deconstruction" (Kozak 2022, 134). Second, despite this "deconstruction cannot give us a theory of truth" (Kozak 2022, 134). It's a compelling argument, precisely because it draws on and mobilizes that "performative contradiction" criticism initially voiced by Habermas: Deconstruction is entirely dependent on something that it cannot provide.

I respond to this argument by making the usual (and somewhat annoying) deconstructionist reply: yes and no. Contrary to what is argued by Kozak, deconstruction does have a theory (and practice) of truth, but (and here's the difference that makes a difference) it is one that directly and deliberately undermines – or more precisely stated, deconstructs – the standard theory of truth that Kozak assumes and operationalizes. This particular theory of truth – something that is generally called "the correspondence theory of truth" – dominates Western thought and can therefore be found in the seminal works of the tradition. It is, for example, evident in the scholastic definition of truth as *adaequatio intellectus et rei*, the adequation of thought to things; René Descartes's claim that "the word »truth«, in the strict sense, denotes the conformity of thought with its object" (Descartes 1991, 139); and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, which grants without any critical hesitation whatsoever that truth is "the agreement of knowledge with its object" (Kant 1965, 97).

Kozak mobilizes and relies on this concept of truth in his analysis. And this can be demonstrated and documented by simply noting the numerous ways in which he utilizes the word "correctness"

to stand-in for or explain “truth.” Two instances: (1) “We need a correctness criterion to determine whether the new concept is relevant to our understanding of the world”; and (2) “If one wants to introduce correctness conditions to the deconstructive method, the simplest way is to take truth as the fundamental concept of our descriptions” (Kozak 2022, 133).

If one begins with and remains within the framework of the “correspondence theory of truth” – or what Martin Heidegger calls truth as “correctness” or *ὀρθότης* – then Kozak is entirely correct. Deconstruction cannot supply nor achieve this correctness condition. And Derrida openly admits it with what has got to be the most famous (or notorious) of statements attributed to him: “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte” (there is nothing outside the text). This assertion deliberately interrupts and short-circuits the basic operating conditions of the correspondence theory, severing the assumed connection between sign and signified or, to use Kozak’s terminology, concept and world.

In saying this, Derrida is not making some antirealist claim, namely that nothing is real or objectively true and everything is just a socially constructed artifact or opinion (Kozak’s word). Instead, this is an expression of a more originary understanding of truth, one Heidegger initially develops by way of an engagement with the ancient Greek concept of *ἀλήθεια*, which he translates as “uncovering” or “revealing.” Thus, truth for deconstruction is not about measuring and accounting for the correctness of a statement to that which the statement is about. It concerns the uncovering of what is in and by *λόγος*.

This is, it is important to point out, not some innovation that can be credited to Derrida or blamed on deconstruction. It was already the principal innovation of Socrates. In the *Phaedo* – a dialogue that concerns the final hours of Socrates’s life – the aged philosopher pauses to reflect on his life’s work. He describes how he initiated his research by trying to emulate the example established by his predecessors, seeking wisdom in the investigation of things. He explains

how this undertaking continually led him astray, and how he finally decided on an alternative strategy, investigating the truth of things in *λόγος*, a Greek word that means “word” but is typically translated by a number of related terms, including “language,” “reason,” and “logic.” “So I thought,” Socrates explains, “I must have recourse to *logos* and examine in them the truth of things” (Plato 1990, 99e).

What Socrates advocates, therefore, is not something that would be simply opposed to what is often called “empirical” or “objective knowledge.” Instead, he advocates an epistemology that questions what Briankle Chang (Chang 1996, x), author of *Deconstructing Communication*, calls the “naïve empiricist picture,” which assumes that things can be immediately grasped and known outside the concepts, terminology, and logics that always and already frame our way of looking at or talking about them. In other words, Socrates recognizes that the truth of things is not simply given or immediately available to us. What these things are and how we understand what they are is something that is, at least for our purposes, always mediated through some kind of logical process by which they come to be grasped and conceptualized as such.

Thus, it is not the case that deconstruction does not furnish a theory of truth. Rather, deconstruction does not adhere to and play by the rules of the correspondence theory of truth. If one looks for truth as correspondence in the work of deconstruction (and by extension the work that is titled *Deconstruction*) it will fail to appear. And it is only from that perspective that it is possible to conclude that deconstruction does not give us a theory of truth. If, however, we proceed from truth as *ἀλήθεια*, we will find in deconstruction a way of thinking truth that is, in truth, different and otherwise.

4. DECONSTRUCTING COGNITIVE SCIENCE

At one point in Kozak’s review, he notes the way that Derridian deconstruction – which is a concept belonging to the continental

tradition in academic philosophy – diverges from the work of analytical philosophers, such as Quine and Searle. In fact, one of the important political disputes in 20th century philosophy occurred when, in response to Cambridge University’s plans to award an honorary degree to Derrida, many of the big names in analytic philosophy, including Quine, signed an open letter vehemently opposing the effort.

The third review from Przemysław Nowakowski is situated at what is arguably the epicenter of this dispute, insofar as he seeks to apply the “gesture of deconstruction” to the relatively new field of cognitive science. From its beginnings, as Nowakowski explains, cognitive science has been “the result of a balanced, symmetrical integration of psychology, AI, linguistics, neuroscience, philosophy, and anthropology.” But, as is almost always the case, what sounds good in theory often does not materialize in practice. As Nowakowski describes it, “this idealized model of cognitive science is both a standard to strive for and a source of constant disappointment when the models fall short” (Nowakowski 2022, 138).

Deconstruction, Nowakowski suggests, could provide a way to challenge and move beyond many of the inherited and often unquestioned conceptual oppositions – like integration *vs.* fragmentation, cooperation *vs.* dominion, and symmetry *vs.* asymmetry – that have and continue to limit the interdisciplinarity of the science. “Perhaps,” he writes in the conclusion, “we (as cognitive scientists and philosophers of cognitive science) should reevaluate our ideas about interdisciplinarity and, through the gesture of deconstruction, embrace its divergence, constant transformation, and move toward a less stable and more inclusive state” (Nowakowski 2022, 142).

Perhaps the most important word in this statement is “perhaps.” It gestures in the direction of a possible future outcome while remaining hesitant about its actual efficacy. It is a way of asserting something while remaining uncertain about its success. It is recognition of the inescapable risk involved in any such undertaking. It might

just work; then again, it might not. This *undecidability* is consistent with the movement of deconstruction, which, unlike a standard method in both philosophy and sciences, cannot be assured of its own success prior to being put into practice.

Nowakowski, to his credit, is willing to run that risk, even if the odds appear to be against him. And the odds are against him. First, the analytic/continental divide is, like all such binary oppositions that order and organize the entire domain of philosophical thinking, an unequal hierarchy with analytic philosophy already having the upper hand. This is especially evident in cognitive science, where analytic philosophy not only dominates but does so to such a complete extent that continental thought is not even marginal but virtually excluded. The field is very comfortable with the big names of analytic philosophy, like John Searle, Daniel Dennett, Willard Van Orman Quine, etc. Rarely, if ever, will you find any reference to Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, Gilles Deleuze, etc. Thus, the task of introducing deconstruction into the field of cognitive science can only proceed and perhaps succeed if the analytic/continental binary is itself submitted to the movement of deconstruction. What is needed is nothing more or less than a deconstruction of (academic) philosophy.

Second, the success (or failure) of this effort is complicated by the lack of a shared vocabulary between the two factions, with each side dismissing the other for its seemingly impenetrable jargon. The concept “deconstruction” is just as alien to the language of analytic thought as the term “enactivism” is to efforts in continental philosophy. And on those rare occasions, when the one side seeks to engage with and/or respond to the other, it often transpires and proceeds by way of misunderstanding, reductionism, and domestication. This, in fact, has been the fate of deconstruction, which analytic philosophers have (mis)taken to mean a nihilistic form of destruction or, in the best of situations, a kind of reverse engineering. The book *Limited, Inc.*, which features a lengthy debate between Derrida and

Searle, provides what is probably the best illustration of the challenges that one inevitably faces when trying to speak across this seemingly insurmountable divide.

Finally, and because of this, those on one side of the analytic/continental divide often recuse themselves of needing to engage with or even read the work of those on the other. Analytic philosophers typically do not read Derrida or other continental thinkers, and continental philosophers often excuse themselves of the need to read or engage with the texts of analytic philosophers, like Bertrand Russell, Daniel Dennett or Ludwig Wittgenstein. This mutual avoidance means that even the best of intentions might not ever succeed. Not reading or engaging with the work of others is a sure-fire way to protect the status quo and keep things under control. But it is also a missed opportunity for thinking otherwise and beginning to explore other – often unheard of – possibilities.

5. BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

The final review essay from Michał Piekarski pursues this opportunity, embarking on the dangerous but potentially fruitful journey of building a bridge between Derridian deconstruction and the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, specifically his magnum opus, the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. Derrida – despite his rather obsessive engagement with both the major and minor texts of the Western philosophical canon – never took-up and responded directly to the work of Wittgenstein. And Wittgenstein, though he himself did not live long enough to have had the opportunity to read (or decide not to read) Derrida, exhibits a similar problem insofar as generations of Wittgenstein scholars typically do not recognize or engage with the works of Derrida or the concept of deconstruction. And the one book on this subject, Henry Staten's aptly titled *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (Stanten 1984), is that kind of exception that proves the rule.

This mutual avoidance is not just curious; it's a missed opportunity for a deconstruction of the analytic/continental divide, which, at this point in time, looks to be more a product of a lingering dispute in academic politics than it is about anything substantive. And Piekarski's text responds directly to this challenge, demonstrating not only the ways in which deconstruction can provide an analytic framework for reading and responding to Wittgenstein's work but also how the concepts and terminology developed by Wittgenstein have the potential to make Derrida's seemingly impenetrable prose accessible to a wider audience.

In responding to this final essay, I do not want to focus on the content of Piekarski's mashup of Derrida and Wittgenstein. Instead, I want to address its form. And I want to do so because there is something to the way that Piekarski develops his text that – irrespective of the actual content communicated – can be important and useful for moving forward. In other words (specifically two words that are derived from and central to the argument that is developed in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*), I will not focus on what Piekarski is *saying* but on what his text is *showing*.

In combining Derrida with Wittgenstein, Piekarski plays the role of philosophical DJ or remix artist. Like a hip hop producer, he carefully selects his samples from the available source material, he isolates the most interesting and exciting discursive hooks, and then he combines and intertwines the one with the other. Here's one interesting and particularly skillful recombination: "Wittgenstein does this in order to re-establish the separation between *saying* and *showing*, which is a fundamental distinction in the *Tractatus*... *Showing* is a kind of deciphering what a sign – what is graphic, script/graphic – shows. Such signs, adds Derrida radicalizing this idea, are internal and precede words" (Piekarski 2022, 150-151). And in so doing, DJ Piekarski synthesizes something new that is arguably greater than the sum of its parts. There are at least three important take-aways from this.

First, this activity is only possible in and by writing. In sampling and remixing the work of Derrida and Wittgenstein what is manipulated are textual samples extracted from works that have been attributed to these two authors, and what results is another text that is the product of this effort. In this undertaking, the written text is not (and cannot be) regarded as some secondary operation that merely communicates thought, as Aristotle (Aristotle 1938, 16a, 3) had initially proposed in *De Interpretatione*. Instead, thought emerges in and by the confluence and confrontation situated in the material and materiality of the writing. But this is not, it is important to point out, some revolutionary reversal that overturns the usual order of things. It is itself a deconstruction of the logocentric privilege.

Second, such an effort can only be successful if it already suspends and even violates the integrity and assumed intentions of the author. This is something that originally worried Socrates about writing, and he says as much in Plato's *Phaedrus* (Plato 1982, 275e): "And every word, once it is written, is bandied about alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak." For this reason, the written text is characterized as a "bastard child," who is cut-off from the protection of its father. But in being cut-off, a text is open – endlessly open – to the activities of reading, interpretation, and remixing. This was the point of Roland Barthes's seminal essay on the subject, "The Death of the Author." By this phrase, Barthes did not mean the end of life of any one particular individual, but the terminal limits of the concept of the "author function," as Michel Foucault (Foucault 1984, 119) will later call it. Thus, the meaning of a particular piece of writing cannot be assured by reference to the (absent) author and their assumed intention to say something (which is, we should note, the assumed order of precedence operationalized by communication theory) but emerges in and through the process of reading.

Finally, and by way of conclusion, these results need to be turned around and applied to what has transpired here. That means, on

the one hand, that this response to the four reviews cannot be situated as and should not be mistaken for a defensive justification of what the author of *Deconstruction* had actually intended to say. Such a corrective would not only mobilize and draw its legitimacy from the correspondence theory of truth but would reassert the authority of the author and the assumed privilege vested in him by logocentric metaphysics. On the other hand, however, simply pointing this out and then proceeding as if it did not make a difference would run the risk of both fetishistic denial and performative contradiction. To avoid these potential pitfalls, it has been necessary (already from the very beginning) to renounce these metaphysical assurances. But to do so is to affirm the abyssal nature of deconstruction as an interminable analysis, where there is, in fact, nothing outside the text.

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