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Deconstruction, justice and the question of education

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Gert J. J. Biesta

Deconstruction, justice and the question of education¹

Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel verweist auf die ethisch-politischen Dimensionen der postmodernen Philosophie der Dekonstruktion von Jacques Derrida. Ziel des Artikels ist es, die von Derrida aufgewiesene Beziehung zwischen Dekonstruktion und Gerechtigkeit zu verdeutlichen. Es wird herausgearbeitet, wie Derrida das Thema Gerechtigkeit dekonstruiert und inwiefern er das Verfahren der Dekonstruktion mit Gerechtigkeit gleichsetzt. Abschließend wird gezeigt, in welchem Zusammenhang Dekonstruktion, Gerechtigkeit und Erziehung stehen.

Summary

This article focuses on the ethical-political dimensions of Jacques Derrida's post-modern philosophy of Deconstructionism. Its aim is to clarify the connection between Deconstructionism and justice which has been asserted by Derrida. The article will examine how Derrida deconstructs the concept of justice and to what extent he equates the very procedure of Deconstructionism with justice. It will conclude with a consideration of the relationship between Deconstructionism, justice and education.

Justice, if it has to do with the other ... is always incalculable. (...) Once you relate to the other as the other, then something incalculable comes on the scene, something which cannot be reduced to the law or to the history of legal structures. This is what gives deconstruction its movement. (DERRIDA 1997, pp. 17-18)

1 Postmodernism and the question of justice

Among educators and educational theorists there exists a rather widely shared conviction that postmodern philosophy is unable to provide support for the type of moral and political project that education is (see, e.g., BEYER/LISTON 1992). Postmodernism, so it can be heard, „threatens to cripple the very concept of the political in the human and the social sciences“ (MCLAREN 1986, p. 392). It is „quite dangerous for political struggle, as teachers and educated practitioners who are trying to make sense of their own daily work, and that of their students, will recognize“ (MORROW/TORRES 1994, p. 58).

The postmodern predicament is perhaps best expressed by Zygmunt BAUMAN. He argues, that the „ethical paradox of the postmodern condition“ lies in the fact that postmodernism „restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised“ (BAUMAN 1992, p. xxii). The „irreparable relativism of any moral code“ (ibid.) leads to a situation where „there are no obvious social agencies that may guide the choice between indifference and solidarity“ (ibid., p. xxiii). It is not difficult to see that this poses a fundamental challenge to the possibility for the realization of the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and social justice.

Given this, it is not without significance that critical educators like Peter MCLAREN – who conceives of critical pedagogy as „a politically informed disposition and commitment to marginalized others in the service of justice and freedom“ (MCLAREN 1997, p. 289) – explicitly return to their Marxist roots in order to be able to address „the materialist and nondiscursive dimensions of social life“ that have become cavalierly dismissed in a postmodern research climate that seems to have become infatuated „with the primacy of textual exegesis“ (ibid., p. 193).

Doubts about the ethical and political potential of postmodern philosophy are not only being expressed by educators and (critical) educational theorists. There exists a wider and much more general concern about this issue. For quite some time now, the work of Jacques DERRIDA and „his“ philosophy of deconstruction² has been one of the central targets in this debate. Deconstruction is often accused of being a form of critical analysis which aims at tearing apart everything it finds on its way. It is seen as a form of textualization – for wasn't it DERRIDA who said that there is nothing outside the text? – with hyper-relativistic and nihilistic implications. Deconstruction, so the argument goes, is therefore ethically void, politically impotent, and utterly dangerous (see HABERMAS 1988, FERRY/RENAUT 1990; see also HOY 1989, FLEMING 1996, GIROUX/MCLAREN 1992).

What I want to argue in this article, is that these allegations seriously miss the point – or better: points (see DERRIDA 1995) – of deconstruction. What I want to make clear, is that deconstruction is *not* a skeptical or nihilistic position, but that it has a distinct ethico-political „horizon“ (BERNSTEIN 1992). Over the past years this horizon has become more and more visible, for which reason some authors now talk about the „ethical turn“ of deconstruction (see HONNETH 1994, BAKER 1995). Although there are different ways in which the ethico-political horizon of deconstruction can be characterized, DERRIDA himself has given the most acute and to my opinion also most accurate characterization of this horizon with his bold but challenging claim that „deconstruction is justice“ (DERRIDA 1992a, p. 35). The main aim of this article is to make clear how DERRIDA's claim about the intrinsic relationship between deconstruction and justice should be understood. This is not only meant to explain the logic of DERRIDA's claim. It should also bring into vision the specific character of the way in which DERRIDA „deals“ with the theme of justice.

The crucial thing here is, that DERRIDA does *not* articulate a new theory or a new philosophy about justice. His writing is rather meant to problematize the very idea of articulating a theory or philosophy „about“ something at all. The main problem he brings to the fore, concerns the question of the site from where one can theorize or philosophize.³ DERRIDA wants to challenge the idea – which he sees as central to Western philosophy – that theory and philosophy can occupy a neutral place *outside* of the field that forms their subject. He wants to argue against the idea of an absolute, uncontaminated outside as the site of philosophy and theory. The problem is, however, that this claim can not be argued for in a straightforward way, as this would only be possible if DERRIDA would hold that *his* philosophy would be able to escape the predicament. DERRIDA's writing – which we can no longer refer to as „a“ philosophy in the traditional sense of the word – is, therefore, a writing-from-within. Rather than being a neutral registration of the current state of Western philosophy, it has to be understood as an intervention in the course of Western philosophy, albeit an intervention-from-within. This intervention, as I will argue, is motivated by an attempt to open up Western philosophy (once again: from the inside) in the name of what is structurally excluded by it. It is for this very reason, that deconstruction is not a theory or philosophy about justice; justice is what motivates deconstruction.

This is not to suggest that what deconstruction has to say about justice will not be of any significance for the current debates about justice – although, as I will try to make clear in more detail below, it is a rather specific contribution. If we would want to read DERRIDA's writing as a theory about justice – and DERRIDA would be the first to admit that his writing would not be able to forbid such a reading – the main thing that comes to the fore, is that DERRIDA's treatment of justice is not articulated in the socioeconomic terms that for a long time have occupied a central place in the debates about justice. The main figure here is, of course, John RAWLS, who holds that „the primary subject of justice is the basic structure of society, or more exactly, the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation“ (RAWLS 1972, p. 7).

Besides this *distributional* conception of justice, which takes its point of departure in socioeconomic injustice and considers some form of redistribution as the road towards justice, there is an approach to the issue of justice which focusses on what Nancy FRASER (1995) refers to as „cultural or symbolic injustice“. The „remedy“ for this form of injustice, which, according to FRASER, has become the paradigmatic form of political conflict in the late twentieth century, is not to be found in redistributive measures. It lies in the *recognition* (of, e.g., sexual, cultural, racial, ethnic or national difference).⁴ If we consider the distributive and the recognition approach to justice as two ends of a spectrum (cf. GEWIRTZ 1997), we can see that DERRIDA's „treatment“ of the question of justice might best be placed on the recognition-end of this spectrum. While this reveals that the deconstructive account of justice does not automatically cover the whole spectrum, I want to suggest that to the extent in which deconstruction points to the necessity to subvert and interrupt – that is, in short, to deconstruct – any conception of justice in the very name of justice, it also offers an approach to justice that exceeds the very spectrum.

In the following pages I will present a rather extensive account of DERRIDA's writing. I will first, by means of an introduction, raise the question as to how justice can be done to DERRIDA's writing. I will then give a more „technical“ account of deconstruction. From here I will return to DERRIDA's claim that deconstruction *is* justice. In the concluding section I will briefly discuss how deconstruction, justice and recognition can be related (and in fact always already are related) to the question of education. This, so I hope, can provide a starting point for a reconsideration of the ethical and political possibilities of a deconstructive understanding of education.

2 Writing after Derrida. Or: How to do justice to Derrida's writing?⁵

In more than one sense writing about DERRIDA is an impossible task. Since the sixties, DERRIDA has published numerous articles and more than 35 books, and he continues to write at a speed „that is a little intimidating for his readers“ (BENNINGTON 1993, p. 3). DERRIDA's work is complex and difficult to read. He writes about, with, against and in/on the margins of the texts of major thinkers in the Western tradition – such as PLATO, ARISTOTLE, KANT, ROUSSEAU, HEGEL, NIETZSCHE, HUSSERL, FREUD and HEIDEGGER – both explicitly and between the lines. His writing often breaks with the conventional, lin-

ear presentation of philosophical argument and contains multiple experiments with typography, punctuation and pictorial form.

But the problem of writing about DERRIDA is not just a technical problem. It is not just the problem of finding a way to represent a corpus that can hardly be represented because of its scale. It is not just the problem of conveying the original meaning of an oeuvre that is complex and unconventional. For it is precisely the assumption that meaning can be grasped in its original moment, that meaning can be represented in the form of some proper, self-identical concept, that DERRIDA is most determinedly out to challenge.

This helps to understand why DERRIDA's writing is often unconventional and oblique. DERRIDA's writing is a „writing on writing“ (DERRIDA 1983, p. 45) that doesn't want to betray itself, that doesn't want to restore the kind of order it puts into question. At the very same time, however, it is precisely this which makes writing *about* DERRIDA into a Catch-22, because getting DERRIDA „right“, that is giving the final representation of the original meaning of his oeuvre, is at the very same time *not* getting him right.

This Catch-22 is not simply the last word about DERRIDA and deconstruction. For we might argue that the very *impossibility* of getting DERRIDA right is precisely what opens up the possibility of writing about DERRIDA in the first place (see BENNINGTON 1993, p. 15, p. 38). At this stage we can at least imagine that if our writing were to be identical with DERRIDA's writing, it would be impossible to recognize it as writing about DERRIDA (it would not even count as writing about DERRIDA). In order to „re-present“ DERRIDA's writing, in order to say the same thing as he says, in order to capture his writing in its singularity, we are therefore obliged to say something different.

Both among followers and critics of DERRIDA there are those who have taken this to mean that deconstruction is a kind of „hermeneutics free-for-all“ (NORRIS 1987, p. 139), a joyous release from all the rules and constraints of interpretation and understanding. But this interpretation, which suggests that deconstruction is basically a *skeptical* position, overlooks a crucial „movement“ in DERRIDA's writing.

It is true, that DERRIDA has challenged the common understanding of writing and reading as two oppositional activities, one actively producing, the other passively consuming. DERRIDA points to a certain complicity between writing and reading, in that a text needs to be read in order to be or become a text. This implies that writing – and human communication more generally – always entails a *risk*: the risk of misunderstanding.

If this were all there is to say, it might be correct to conclude that DERRIDA simply wants to invert the opposition between understanding and misunderstanding, so that the latter would henceforth take priority over the former and would thereby become the rule or the law. But this interpretation overlooks the fact that DERRIDA has not so much questioned the possibility of understanding as such, but first and foremost the way in which we conceive of the *relationship* between understanding and misunderstanding.

This relationship is commonly understood as a *binary opposition*, an opposition of two, mutually exclusive options. The opposition implies a *hierarchy* in that understanding is considered to be the normal situation and misunderstanding the aberration. Understanding thus defines what „real“ or „successful“ reading is, while misunderstanding is conceived as the distortion of this normal situation, a distortion that comes from without. As soon as it is acknowledged, however, that misunderstanding is *always* possible (which is not the same as saying that it is always the case), we need to ask whether we can still hold that misunderstanding constitutes an accident, that it is a risk that befalls communication from

without. According to DERRIDA this is *not* the case. He argues that misunderstanding is as much a part of language and communication, is as much on the „inside“, as understanding is (DERRIDA 1988, pp. 15-17). It is „a *general possibility inscribed in the structure of positivity, of normality, of the ‚standard‘*“ (ibid., p. 157).

From this it follows that the idea of normal communication as successful understanding is not a fact, but rather an „ethical and teleological determination“ of what normal communication is (ibid., p. 17). This means that the purity of normal communication can only be maintained by an act of *exclusion*. This not only reveals – and here we encounter a characteristic deconstructive movement – that what one tries to keep outside of communication (viz., misunderstanding) inhabits the inside. DERRIDA also holds that there would not even be an inside without that fact. We might say, therefore, that the term excluded by the binary divide (understanding versus misunderstanding) returns in some sense to sign the act of its own exclusion. And, even more important, that this apparent complicity is precisely what outlaws the legality of this exclusion in the first place (see BENNINGTON 1993, pp. 217-218; see also DERRIDA 1981a, pp. 41-42).

This reveals that deconstruction is far from an attempt to make misunderstanding the rule or the law. DERRIDA only wants to make clear that the structural possibility of misunderstanding must be taken into account when describing so-called normality, and, so he adds, „that this possibility can neither be *excluded nor opposed*“ (DERRIDA 1988, p. 157). The condition of possibility of communication can therefore neither be found in pure understanding (or pure misunderstanding), nor in some higher unity of understanding and misunderstanding. What DERRIDA rather wants to bring into view is the ultimate *undecidability* of this opposition, an undecidability which cannot be traced back to some original, pure unity, but which itself is always already at work.

The foregoing makes clear, that misunderstanding is the essential and hence necessary risk of all communication and interpretation. There is only one way to evade this risk, which is *not* to engage in an act of reading or interpretation at all. While this might be the only way to be absolutely respectful of the singularity of DERRIDA's writing, it makes this singularity opaque, silent, unidentifiable and unrecognizable at the very same time.

This means, then, that for the singular to be possible as a singularity, it must take the risk of a „repetition in alterity“ (BENNINGTON 1993, p. 86), the risk of misunderstanding, the risk of *translation* – „and for the notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of *transformation*“ (DERRIDA 1981a, p. 20). Only this „repetition in alterity“ opens up the possibility for the singular to be recognized in its irreducible singularity and thus the possibility to do justice to the singular. Here we encounter what GASCHÉ (1994, pp. 14-15) refers to as „the law of singularity“, which is the inevitable dissingularization of the singular through the repetition without which it could not hope to secure its singularity.

Reading DERRIDA and writing about DERRIDA therefore means translating DERRIDA. Translation is not the transmission or reproduction of an original meaning that preceded it, because the originality of the original only comes into view (and DERRIDA would add: only comes into existence; see, e.g., DERRIDA 1988) *after* it has been translated. Translation, then, might best be understood as a *response*, a response to the singularity of the text (see GASCHÉ 1994, pp. 227-250). For this response to be a genuine response, it has to be *singular* itself (a „response without norms“; DERRIDA/EWALD 1995, p. 289), and not just a repetition of the text or a response preprogrammed by the text. This implies that a genuine response has all the allure of irresponsibility: it is singular, untranslatable, and never an unconditional affirmation. And yet, for a response to be genuine and responsive it also

has to be *responsible* in that it needs to do justice to the singularity of the text (not in the least because the survival of the text is dependent on this response).

Writing about DERRIDA therefore means responding to DERRIDA in order to do justice to DERRIDA's writing. How can this be achieved? Let me begin again.

3 From metaphysics to the other

3.1 The myth of the origin

The theme that runs through DERRIDA's writing right from the beginning is the theme of the *origin*. Or, to be more precise: the theme of the thought of the origin, the theme of the philosophy of the origin, the theme, in short, of *metaphysics*.

DERRIDA argues, that the history of Western philosophy is one continuous attempt to locate a fundamental ground, a fixed permanent center, an Archimedean point, which serves both as an absolute beginning and as a center from which everything originating from it can be mastered and controlled. An origin which „closes off the play which it opens up and makes possible“ (DERRIDA 1978, p. 279). Since PLATO, this origin has always been defined in terms of *presence*. The origin is thought of as fully present to itself and as totally self-sufficient. It is identical to itself and in this respect it conforms to the logic of identity. The „determination of Being as *presence*“, DERRIDA holds, is the „matrix“ of the history of metaphysics (which coincides with the history of the West in general) (see DERRIDA 1978, p. 279).⁶

The „metaphysics of presence“ (DERRIDA 1978, p. 281) includes more than just the determination of the meaning of Being as presence. The metaphysical gesture of Western philosophy includes a *hierarchical axiology* in which the origin is designated as pure, simple, normal, standard, self-sufficient and self-identical, in order *then* to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident etcetera.⁷ This is „*the* metaphysical exigency“, that which has been „the most constant, most profound and most potent“ (DERRIDA 1988, p. 93).

DERRIDA's writing wants to put this metaphysical gesture into question. He acknowledges that he is not the first to do so. NIETZSCHE, FREUD and HEIDEGGER have all in their own way exposed and criticized the metaphysical desire, the desire for fixed, self-present origins, of Western philosophy (see DERRIDA 1978, p. 280). But there is a crucial difference between NIETZSCHE's „demolition“ or HEIDEGGER's „destruction“ of metaphysics and the work DERRIDA is engaged in. DERRIDA argues that NIETZSCHE, FREUD, HEIDEGGER, and all the other „destructive discourses“ wanted to make a total break with the metaphysical tradition. They wanted to end and to overcome metaphysics. DERRIDA tells us, however, that such a rupture is not a real possibility.

There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We ... can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. (DERRIDA 1978, p. 280)

While DERRIDA definitely wants to „shake“ metaphysics, he acknowledges that this cannot be done from some neutral and innocent place outside of metaphysics. What is more to the point, to put it simply, is to say that DERRIDA wants to shake metaphysics by show-

ing that it is itself always already „shaking“, by showing, in other words, the impossibility of any of its attempts to fix or immobilize being through the presentation of a self-sufficient, self-identical presence.

This implies that deconstruction is not something that is applied to the texts of the metaphysical tradition from the outside. It is, therefore, „not a method and cannot be transformed into one“ (DERRIDA 1991, p. 273). Rather

„deconstructions“, which I prefer to use in its plural form ... is one of the possible names to designate, in short by metonymy, what occurs [*ce qui arrive*], or cannot manage to occur [*ce qui n'arrive pas à arriver*], namely a certain dislocation which in effect reiterates itself regularly – and everywhere where there is something rather than nothing (DERRIDA/EWALD 1995, pp. 287-288).

3.2 The presence of the voice

One of the most pervasive ways in which the metaphysics of presence has been present in Western philosophy, is in the form of the privileging of voice as the medium of meaning and the consequent dismissal of writing as derivative and inessential. This order is based upon a rather straightforward logic in which spoken words are seen as the symbols of mental experience, and written words as the symbols of spoken words. The priority of spoken language over written or silent language stems from the fact that when words are spoken, the speaker and the listener are supposed to be simultaneously present to one another. Writing, on the other hand, is considered to be subversive in so far as it creates a spatial and temporal distance between the author and its audience.

DERRIDA refers to the privilege of the voice over writing as *phonocentrism*. *Phonocentrism*, he argues, is in a sense a necessity, in that it is a phenomenon that not only occurs in Western culture, but can also be found in other cultures (see DERRIDA 1984, pp. 115-116). What is, however, a „uniquely Western phenomenon“ is the translation of phonocentrism into a metaphysical system which assigns the origin of truth to speech or *logos* (DERRIDA 1976, p. 3). DERRIDA discusses this specifically Western response to the „phonocentric necessity“ under the name of *logocentrism* (see DERRIDA 1983, p. 40).

The deconstruction of logocentrism occupies a central place in DERRIDA's „earlier“ writings, where he raises the question whether it is possible to articulate the presence of speech (or speech as presence) in such a way that it is self-sufficient, simple, identical with and present to itself; in such a way, in short, that it is pure and uncontaminated by what it is not, namely writing.

„PLATO's Pharmacy“, a long section in *Dissemination*, takes up the question of the priority of speech over writing in the form of a close reading of PLATO's dialogue the *Phaedrus* (see DERRIDA 1981b, pp. 61-171). PLATO's text presents itself as an attempt to articulate the priority of speech over writing and to show the philosophical, moral and political dangers of thinking to invert that priority. What DERRIDA's reading of the *Phaedrus* reveals, however, is precisely the failure of the text to achieve what it argues. Most obvious in this respect is, of course, the fact that PLATO argues for the inferior character of writing by means of writing itself. This predicament, which repeats itself wherever philosophy refuses to acknowledge its own textual status and aspires to a pure contemplation of truth, it is a common pattern in the history of Western thought, for which reason we might say that logocentrism is first of all „the desire *not to recognize* this order of necessity“ (NORRIS 1987, p. 127).

What DERRIDA reveals in his reading of the *Phaedrus* – although this is far from the only place in his work where the point is made – is the impossibility of articulating the opposition between speech and writing as a stable opposition in which speech is the pure and self-sufficient origin and writing its derivative, completely opposite and completely external to speech. What his „deconstructive reading“ makes clear is that the presence of speech (as origin) cannot be articulated without the „help“ of that what is thought of and defined as totally different from speech, without the „help“ of what is absent.

It will be clear from what we have seen so far, that this should not be understood as a plea for the inversion of the opposition between speech and writing. After all, such an inversion would only replace one origin (speech) for another (writing), but would leave the metaphysical order itself, the order of original presence versus derivative absence, in its place. What DERRIDA attempts to bring into view, is the ultimate *undecidability* of the oppositions that constitute and govern this order (an undecidability which, contrary to Hegelian dialectics, can never be resolved in a „third term“; see DERRIDA 1981a, p. 43), and thereby the ultimate *impossibility* of articulating anything whatsoever as a pure, uncontaminated, self-present origin.

3.3 The ubiquity of writing

And yet there is a sense in which DERRIDA does argue that „language is first ... writing“ (DERRIDA 1976, p. 37) – a sense which immediately follows from the impossibility to grasp a pure, uncontaminated self-present origin. To understand why this is so, we need to follow DERRIDA in his exposure of logocentrism in the traditional (that is metaphysical) theory of meaning. According to this theory, meaning is a relation of identity between a word and an object. Stated in more technical terms, a *sign* is a word. The sign „cow“ is made up of the sound „cow“, the *signifier*, and the concept or meaning of „cow“, the *signified*. (The actual animal is the *referent*.)

The relation between the signifier and the signified is understood in terms of *representation*. The signifier re-presents the signified, or, to be more precise: the signifier re-presents the *presence* of the signified. This implies that the presence of the signified is the origin of and the warrant for the meaning of the signifier. However, in order to serve as origin and warrant, the signified itself has to be *unsigned* and *unrepresented*. It has to be what DERRIDA calls a „transcendental signified“. The fact that the traditional theory of meaning depends upon the existence of an unsigned or transcendental signified reveals its logocentric character. As DERRIDA reminds us, „I have identified logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence as the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for such a signified“ (DERRIDA 1976, p. 49).

But although it is a powerful desire, a desire so powerful that it has been able to exert its influence on almost every corner of Western thought, it is, as DERRIDA attempts to show again and again, a desire that gets stuck in its own presuppositions. In its most simple form, this is, because for the transcendental signified to be articulated as a presence, as an origin, it needs to be signified. But if this is so, then it follows that „every signified is also in the position of a signifier“ (DERRIDA 1981a, p. 20), that – in short – „*the thing itself is a sign*“ (DERRIDA 1976, p. 49).

According to the phonocentric order, speech is a sign of an original presence (for example of a thought), and writing is the signification of speech. The derivative character of

writing can therefore be expressed by saying that writing is „a sign of a sign“. As soon as it is acknowledged that the original, the thing itself is a sign, then it follows that even the first act of signification is not the signification of an original but of something which is itself already signified. It follows, in other words, that the first act of signification already operates in the field of the sign of a sign. It is in this („vulgar“) sense that DERRIDA holds that „language is first ... writing“.⁸

3.4 Difference and *différance*

Precisely at this point we encounter one of the most complex, though intriguing, dimensions of DERRIDA's writing. The problem, stated simply, is that as soon as it is acknowledged that there are no simple, unsignified, transcendental signifiers that fix and warrant the meaning of our words, that there are no originals to which our words can refer, we come in a position where even this acknowledgement itself seems to have become „floating“. The metaphysical tradition had tried to deal with this problem by „forgetting“ the textual status of its own writing, by assuming that it was possible to occupy a place outside of the order of writing. DERRIDA's writing occurs beyond this naivety. But he also acknowledges that there cannot be a total rupture, because such a rupture would deprive us of the very means to criticize metaphysics. Which puts DERRIDA in the awkward position „of having to account for an error by means of tools derived from that very error“ (JOHNSON 1981, p. x).

DERRIDA tackles this predicament with the help of a theory of signs and of language developed by Ferdinand DE SAUSSURE. Contrary to the idea that language is essentially a naming process, attaching words to things, DE SAUSSURE argues that language is a system, or a structure, where any individual element is meaningless outside the confines of that structure. In language, he holds, there are only *differences*. But – and here the ideas of DE SAUSSURE coincide with DERRIDA's deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence – these differences are not differences between positive terms, that is between terms that in and by themselves refer to objects or things outside of the system. In language, DE SAUSSURE argues, there are only differences *without* positive terms (see DE SAUSSURE 1974).

But if this is so, if there are no positive terms (which is the same as saying that there are no transcendental *signifieds*), then it follows that we can no longer articulate the differential character of language itself by means of a positive term either. Difference without positive terms implies that this dimension must itself always remain unperceived, for strictly speaking, it is unconceptualizable. It is a difference that cannot be brought back into the order of the same and, through a signifier, given an identity. This means, then, that „the play of difference, which, as SAUSSURE reminded us, is the condition for the possibility and functioning of every sign, is in itself a silent play“ (DERRIDA 1982, p. 5).

If, however, we want to articulate that which does not let itself be articulated and yet is the condition for the possibility of all articulation – which we might at least want to do in order to prevent metaphysics from re-entering the field – we must first of all acknowledge that there can never be a word or a concept to represent this silent play. We must also acknowledge that this play cannot simply be exposed, for „one can expose only that which at a certain moment can become *present*“ (ibid., p. 5). And finally we must acknowledge that there is nowhere to begin, „for what is put into question is precisely the quest

for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure“ (DERRIDA 1982, p. 6). All this, and more, is acknowledged in the new „word“ or „concept“ – „which is neither a word nor a concept“ (ibid., p. 7) but a „neographism“ (ibid., p. 13) – of *différance*.⁹

The reason why DERRIDA introduces that „what is written as *différance*“ (ibid., p. 11) is not difficult to grasp. For although „the play of difference“ is identified as the condition for the possibility of all conceptuality, we should not make the mistake to think that we have finally found the real origin of conceptuality, that, in other words, this play is a playful but nonetheless transcendental signified. Strictly speaking, there is only one way to avoid this mistake, which is by acknowledging that the differences that constitute the play of difference „are themselves *effects*“ (ibid.). As DERRIDA argues:

What is written as *différance*, then, will be the playing movement that „produces“ – by means of something that is not simply an activity – these differences, these effects of difference. This does not mean that the *différance* that produces differences is somehow before them, in a simple and unmodified – indifferent – present. *Différance* is the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences. Thus, the name „origin“ no longer suits. (DERRIDA 1982, p. 11)

3.5 Deconstruction and the other

DERRIDA’s „attack“ on Western metaphysics might seem to be a highly technical enterprise, a discussion among philosophers with no other issue at stake than the future of Western philosophy itself. While there is some truth in such an evaluation, there is definitely more at stake than just this. What is crucial to acknowledge, is that DERRIDA’s attack on the metaphysical tradition is aimed at dismantling our preconceived understanding of identity as self-sufficient presence, in order to expose us to the challenge of hitherto concealed, excluded and suppressed otherness; an otherness which has been ignored in order to preserve the very illusion of identity as self-sufficient presence. DERRIDA’s writing reveals that the otherness which is excluded and suppressed in order to maintain the myth of a pure and uncontaminated original presence, is actually constitutive for that which presents itself as pure, self-sufficient, self-present, and therefore as totally different from this otherness. What the deconstruction of logocentrism reveals, is – to put it in a nutshell (see CAPUTO 1997a) – that „identity *presupposes* alterity“ (DERRIDA 1984, p. 117).

Although we might say, like DERRIDA, that the deconstruction of logocentrism is a search for „the other of language“ (ibid., p. 123), deconstruction is not exclusively or primarily concerned with a linguistic problematic. The question of alterity is first and foremost the question of the concrete other, of „the other, which is beyond language“ (ibid., p. 123). It is for precisely this reason, that we can say that deconstruction is not a negative but rather an *affirmative* „philosophy“, that it is not a nihilistic „enclosure in nothingness“, but rather „an openness towards the other“ (ibid., p. 124).

At this point it becomes clear how closely DERRIDA’s writing is connected to the writing of Emmanuel LEVINAS, whose work stands out as an unprecedented attempt in twentieth century philosophy to articulate what it means to do justice to the other as what the other is, namely: other.¹⁰ The central insight of LEVINAS’s writing, is that Western philosophy has been unable to recognize the alterity of the other because it understands the relation between man and world primarily as an *epistemological* relation, a relation where an isolated, self-present mind or ego attempts to get accurate knowledge of the external world. LEVINAS refers to this gesture of Western philosophy, in which the ego or subject

is the origin of all knowledge and meaning, as *egology*. The main consequence of this epistemological preoccupation, is that the other can only appear as an object of knowledge. For something to be (or become) an object of knowledge, it has to be conceptualized, which means that it has to be identified as an instance of some general concept. But if the other is always thought as an instance of something more general and as a result of the ego's act of conceptualization, it can never appear in its „radical alterity“, it can never appear as „absolutely-other“, as unique and irreducible *singular*; it can never appear as what it is, namely: *other* (see LEVINAS 1979).

For LEVINAS this means that if we want to recognize the other in its alterity, we must reverse the philosophical order and take the encounter with the absolutely-other as our point of departure and not any *metaphysical* determination of being. It is for precisely this reason that LEVINAS argues that ethics is „first philosophy“. This reversal, as DERRIDA argues in his essay on the thought of LEVINAS (see DERRIDA 1978, pp. 79-153), implies that we cannot say – but also do not have to wonder – *what* this encounter is.

There is no way to conceptualize this encounter: it is made possible by the other, the unforeseeable „resistant to all categories.“ Concepts suppose an anticipation, a horizon within which alterity is amortized as soon as it is announced precisely because it has let itself be foreseen. The infinitely-other cannot be bound by a concept, cannot be thought on the basis of a horizon; for a horizon is always a horizon of the same, the elementary unity within which eruptions and surprises are always welcomed by understanding and recognized. (DERRIDA 1978, p. 95)

It is because of this, that DERRIDA argues that the affirmative character of deconstruction is not merely *positive*, i.e., not merely an affirmation of what already exists. Deconstruction is an affirmation of what is *wholly other (tout autre)*, of what is unforeseeable from the present, and what is beyond the horizon of the same. It is an affirmation of an other that is always to come, as an event which „as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations and so forth“ (DERRIDA 1992a, p. 27). More than simple being an openness towards the other, deconstruction is an openness towards the unforeseeable incoming (*l'invention*; invention) of the other (see CAPUTO 1997a, p. 42).

Yet, and here there appears a decisive difference between DERRIDA and LEVINAS, DERRIDA raises the question whether LEVINAS can consistently hold that the only way to do justice to the alterity of the other is by resisting any conceptualization. DERRIDA denies that this can be done. „One could neither speak, nor have any sense of the totally other“, he argues, „if there was not a *phenomenon* of the totally other, or evidence of the totally other as such“ (DERRIDA 1978, p. 123). He refers to this necessity as *transcendental violence* (see DERRIDA 1978, pp. 118-133). This is violence, because it *presents* the non-representable other (as other). It is transcendental because this representation is the very condition of possibility of any encounter with the other.

LEVINAS definitely wants to escape this predicament (see BENNINGTON 1993, p. 311). DERRIDA, in a by now familiar gesture, not only shows that LEVINAS' writing about the absolutely-other is already a betrayal of this desire (see DERRIDA 1978, p. 151). Even more crucial is the fact, that DERRIDA, not only denies *along with* LEVINAS the pure, uncontaminated originality of the ego as self-presence, but also – and this time *against* LEVINAS – the pure, uncontaminated originality of the (presence of the) other.

4 Deconstruction *is* justice

In the preceding two sections I have crossed deconstruction in two different ways. If something can be concluded from these crossings, it is that deconstruction cannot be presented as a position (and in that sense it is not „a“ philosophy). It has to be understood as an occurrence – or even more precise: it has to be understood in its occurrence. What is at stake in the occurrence of deconstruction, is the attempt to bring into view the impossibility to articulate a self-sufficient, self-present center from which everything can be mastered, controlled and totalized. What the occurrence of deconstruction reveals, in other words, is that identity presupposes alterity. It reveals, that every inside has a constitutive outside which is not merely external but always in a sense already inhabits the inside, so that self-sufficiency or self-presence can only be brought about by an act of exclusion. What gives deconstruction its motive and drive is precisely the concern for, or more specifically, the wish to do justice to, that which is excluded. Here we can already begin to appreciate why DERRIDA claims that deconstruction *is* justice (DERRIDA 1992a, p. 15).

The complexity of deconstruction lies in what I propose to call the problem of reflexivity of deconstruction, i.e., the fact that its conclusions constantly subvert its assertions. How, for example, is it possible not to totalize the non-totalizable? How not to conceptualize the unconceptualizable? How not to speak? But rather than simply evading these aporias – which has been the common strategy of Western philosophy, placing itself outside of the scene of representation – deconstruction faces them head on and tries to make its strength out of it. This is clearly revealed in DERRIDA’s articulation of the ethical and political horizon of deconstruction.

In his chapter in *Deconstruction and the possibility of justice* (DERRIDA 1992a) DERRIDA confesses that ethical and political issues have not occupied a prominent place in most of his writings. He acknowledges that „there are no doubt many reasons why the majority of texts hastily identified as „deconstructionist“ ... seem, I do say *seem*, not to foreground the theme of justice (as theme, precisely), or the theme of ethics and politics“ (DERRIDA 1992a, p. 7).

Yet, so he continues, it was normal, foreseeable, and desirable that studies of deconstructive style should culminate in this problematic. In fact, deconstruction has done nothing but address this problematic, if only „obliquely“, since „one cannot speak *directly* about justice, thematize or objectivize justice, say ‚this is just‘ and even less ‚I am just‘“ (DERRIDA 1992a, p. 10). That is to say, one cannot do all this „without immediately betraying justice“ (ibid.). Why is this so?

The clue to DERRIDA’s answer lies in the contention that justice is always directed towards the other. Justice, DERRIDA argues, is „the relation to the other“. Saying, therefore, that something is just, or that one is just, is a betrayal of the very idea of justice to the extent to which it forecloses the possibility for the other to decide whether justice has indeed been rendered. If justice is a concern for the other as other, for the otherness of the other, for an otherness that, by definition, we can neither foresee nor totalize; if justice, in short, always addresses itself to the singularity¹¹ of the other (DERRIDA 1992a, p. 20), we are obliged – in the very name of justice – to keep the unforeseen possibility of the incoming of the other, the surprise of the „invention“ of the other open (see DERRIDA 1989). This means, that the very possibility of justice is sustained by its impossibility. For this reason, DERRIDA argues that justice is „an experience of the impossible“, where – and this is crucial – the impossible is not that which is not possible, but rather that which cannot be foreseen as a possibility (DERRIDA 1992a, p. 16).

The implications of this insight are not restricted to the determination of whether a situation or a person is just, but extend to the very definition of justice itself. Here again we can say that it is for the very sake of justice as a concern for the otherness of the other, that we can never decide once and for all – i.e., for all possible and impossible others – what justice is. Justice, therefore, is not a principle or a criterion (as this would mean that we would know right now what justice is), nor an ideal (as this would mean that we would now be able to describe the future situation of justice), not even a regulative ideal (which would still imply a description of what justice is, although with the implication that the ideal is not expected to be ever present in some future). It belongs to the very „structure“ of justice that it never can be present and therefore never will be present. It is by necessity, as DERRIDA would say, a justice to come, which means that it is *always* to come (DERRIDA 1992a, p. 27).

The impossibility of justice is not to be understood as „a“ deconstruction of justice. To understand why this is so, we need to observe DERRIDA's distinction between justice and the law (*droit, loi*). By the law DERRIDA means the positive structures that make up judicial systems, in virtue of which actions are said to be legal, legitimate, or properly authorized. The law is „essentially *deconstructible*“ because the law is constructed in the first place (see DERRIDA 1992a, pp. 14-15). The fact that the law is deconstructible „is not bad news“ (ibid., p. 14). „We may even see in this a stroke of luck for politics, for all historical progress“ (ibid.), because it opens up the possibility to *improve* the law.

(The) law as such can be deconstructed and has to be deconstructed. That is the condition of historicity, revolution, morals, ethics, and progress. But justice is not the law. Justice is what gives us the impulse, the drive, or the movement to improve the law, that is, to deconstruct the law. Without a call for justice we would not have any interest in deconstructing the law. (DERRIDA 1997, p. 16)

Deconstruction, in short, is aimed at the improvement of the law in the name of that which has no name, namely justice.

The fact that justice is not a criterion or a principle means that it is not something that we can have knowledge about and that we only need to apply. The law is applicable. We can see that we act in agreement with norms, with the law. But, so DERRIDA argues, to speak of justice is not a matter of knowledge, of theoretical judgement.

Justice, if it has to do with the other ... is always incalculable. (...) Once you relate to the other as the other, then something incalculable comes on the scene, something which cannot be reduced to the law or to the history of legal structures. This is what gives deconstruction its movement (DERRIDA 1997, pp. 17-18).

The claim that justice is not a criterion, that it has no ground, so that at the basis of all our decisions lies a radical *undecidability* which cannot be closed off by our decisions or judgements, but which „continues to inhabit the decision“ (DERRIDA 1996, p. 87), could be read as the contention that in the end, and despite all that it claims, deconstruction *is* destructive and relativistic. But this of course only holds, when we assume that ethics and politics can only exist on some firm ground.

Against such a foundationalist point of view DERRIDA argues that ethics and politics only *begin* when this undecidability, which makes the decision at the very same time „necessary and impossible“, is acknowledged. For him, therefore, deconstruction is a „hyper-politicization“ (DERRIDA 1996, p. 85; cf. BIESTA 1995). DERRIDA acknowledges that this is an aporia – but „we must not hide it from ourselves“ (DERRIDA 1992b, p. 41).

I will even venture to say that ethics, politics, and responsibility, *if there are any*, will only ever have begun with the experience and experiment of the aporia. When the path is clear and given, when a certain knowledge opens up the way in advance, the decision is already made, it might as well be said that there is none to make; irresponsibly, and in good conscience, one simply applies or implements a program. (...) It makes of action the applied consequence, the simple application of a knowledge or know-how. It makes of ethics and politics a technology. No longer of the order of practical reason or decision, it begins to be irresponsible. (ibid., pp. 41, 45)

Perhaps, DERRIDA adds, one never escapes the program. But in that case „one must acknowledge this and stop talking with authority about moral or political responsibility“ (ibid., p. 41). This means, therefore, that „the condition of possibility of this thing called responsibility is a certain *experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible: the testing of the aporia* from which one may invent the only *possible invention, the impossible invention*“ (ibid.).

It is from here that I want to make my final remarks about deconstruction, justice, recognition and the question of education.

5 Just education, to begin with

The first thing to be acknowledged, is that the relationship between deconstruction and education is not an accidental one. In so far as education is more than just a technical enterprise, in so far as the meaning of education exceeds enculturation and socialization, in so far, then, as education is more than mere preparation and domestication, it is precisely concerned with otherness, precisely concerned with the impossible possibility of the invention of the other. After all, the newborn child is not a mere repetition of what already exists. The newborn child, the „newcomer“; as Hannah ARENDT reminds us, „possesses the capacity of beginning something anew“ (ARENDT 1958, p. 9) and it is education „where we decide whether we love our children enough not ... to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us“ (ARENDT 1968, p. 196).

Education, so we could say, *is* the experience of the singularity of the other. This claim can be understood in strictly moral terms, i.e., as the contention that educators have an obligation to do justice to the child. Yet the very fact that education can never be merely technique that only has to be applied for the very reason that the other is always the limit of our efforts to education, already reveals that education always has to reckon with the invention, the in-coming of the other (see, e.g., DONALD 1992, MASSCHELEIN/WIMMER 1996, BIESTA 1997, BIESTA in press). How, then, can education be just?

One way to approach this question is through the idea of transcendental violence. Of course we could argue that the only way to justice to the other, to the singularity of the other, is by leaving the other alone. It is not difficult to see that this neglect would make the other unidentifiable and unrecognizable. This would definitely block the invention of the other, and would therefore be utterly unjust as the other would not be recognized. For education to be just, therefore, some form of recognition must take place.

It will be clear from the foregoing pages, however, that such a recognition can never be merely positive, that it can never be a recognition of something that already exists. The very act of recognition, so we could say, is at the very same time necessary and violent, it is at the very same time that which makes justice possible and that which, for being vio-

lent, also carries an element of injustice with it. In this sense the conclusion can only be that the possibility of just education is always sustained by its impossibility.

DERRIDA makes a similar point about ethical decisions. While ethical decisions are impossible, they can, for the very reason of their being ethical decisions, not wait. This „aporia of urgency“ (DERRIDA 1992a, p. 26) means that the instance of decision is a „madness“ (ibid.). One *has* to decide, but a just decision is impossible. And yet, it is this very mad impossibility which only makes justice possible. How can we give a place to this madness? Perhaps, as EDGOOSE (1998) suggests, it is enough – or at least something – if we are attentive to the *hesitation* that inhabits our decisions. Justice could perhaps come from the „failure of fluency“, that is, from „ethical hesitation“ (ibid.). Just education has to be on the outlook for the impossible invention of the other. The other, DERRIDA writes, „is not the possible.“ The other is „precisely what is not invented“ (DERRIDA 1989, pp. 59-60). This means, that „deconstructive inventiveness can consist only in opening, in uncloseting, destabilizing foreclusionary structures so as to allow for the passage toward the other“ (ibid.). But one does not make the other come, one lets it come by *preparing* for its coming. We must, therefore, „prepare for the incalculable“ (CAPUTO 1997b, p. 76). Hesitation – attentiveness to hesitation – could perhaps open up just enough space for the impossible invention of the other, for the impossible possibility of just education.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was read at the seminar on Civic Education, Civil Society and Citizenship at the Institute for Educational Research of the University of Oslo. I would like to thank Lars LØVLIE, Joseph DUNNE, Nel NODDINGS, Helgard MAHRDT and the participants to the seminar for their challenging comments and suggestions. Preparation for this paper was partly supported by a Spencer Postdoctoral Fellowship from the Spencer Foundation and the National Academy of Education, USA.
- 2 „I use this word for the sake of a rapid convenience, though it is a word I have never liked and one whose fortune has disagreeably surprised me“ (DERRIDA 1983, p. 44), „however, as time passes, and when I see so many people trying to get rid of this word, I ask myself whether there is not perhaps something in it“ (DERRIDA 1996, p. 85).
- 3 In an interview, DERRIDA defines the „central question“ of his writing as follows: „from what site or non-site (non-lieu) philosophy [can] as such appear to itself as other than itself, so that it can interrogate and reflect upon itself in an original manner“ (DERRIDA 1984, p. 108).
- 4 FRASER (see 1995) gives an interesting analysis of the interactions between socioeconomic and cultural injustice, and the accompanying redistribution-recognition dilemma.
- 5 In this and the following section I draw on my forthcoming chapter on DERRIDA and education in Poststructuralism and Educational Discourse, edited by J. MARSHALL (Durban in preparation).
- 6 „It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence – *eidōs, archē, telos, energeia, ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *alētheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth“ (DERRIDA 1978, pp. 279-280).
- 7 „All metaphysicians, from PLATO to ROUSSEAU, DESCARTES to HUSSERL, have proceeded 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.“ (DERRIDA 1988, p. 93).
- 8 Although we should immediately add that this is not writing in the traditional, logocentric understanding of the word. DERRIDA calls it ‚arche-writing‘ (DERRIDA 1976, p. 56) and refers to the science of this writing as ‚Grammatology‘ (DERRIDA 1976).

- 9 In French the difference between ‚différence‘ and ‚différance‘ is inaudible, which implies that this neographism is itself already a subversion of phonocentrism.
- 10 DERRIDA contends that he is prepared to agree with everything LEVINAS says, and that the differences between them are of a biographical and not of a philosophical nature (see DERRIDA 1986, pp. 74-75).
- 11 The singular is that which can not be subsumed under the universal.

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