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Destruktion/Deconstruction

> "If the question of Being is to have its own history made transparent, then this hardened tradition must be loosened up, and the concealment which it has brought about must be dissolved. We understand this task as one in which by taking *the question of Being as our clue*, we are to *destroy* the traditional content of ancient ontology until we arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being – the ways which have guided us ever since."

> […Diese Aufgabe verstehen wir als die *am Leitfaden der Seinsfrage* sich vollziehende *Destruktion* des überlieferten Bestandes der antiken Ontologie auf die ursprünglichen Erfahrungen…]

Being and Time has it that the "hardened tradition" of the "history of ontology" is to be made subject to a "destruction" which would return us to the "original experiences" which at the outset allowed the nature of Being to come forth.

In the context of an unprecedented appropriation of the word *deconstruction* – now set to work as unambiguous signifier in all fields of culture from architecture (= wacky) to politics (=new New Labour) – this paper will interrogate the extent to which *deconstruction* was never anything other than Heidegger's *Destruktion*. Does the deployment of Derrida's word intend to return us to "those primordial experiences"? To what extent is the "de" of deconstruction a negative prefix? Is deconstruction a radical questioning of *Destruktion*?

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Paper

To begin: is Derrida's work of deconstruction anything other than Heidegger's *Destruktion* of metaphysics? In giving myself this simple question to address I had hoped – felt assured – that something other than a simple answer would be, if not necessary, then at least possible. But my bias and prejudice was clear to me from the outset of this paper. Heidegger's *Destruktion* is introduced and delimited in section 6 of *Being and Time*, thus

> If the question of Being is to have its own history made transparent, then this hardened tradition must be loosened up, and the concealment which it has brought about must be dissolved. We understand this task as one in which by taking *the question of Being as our clue*, we are to *destroy* the traditional content of ancient ontology until we arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being – the ways which have guided us ever since (p44, H22)

The MacQuarrie/Robinson translation leaves us with the word *destroy*; the original German reads, somewhat more strongly:

> Diese Aufgabe verstehen wir als die an Leitfaden der Seinsfrage sich vollziehende Destruktion des ueberlieferten [not "Traditionel"] Bestandes den antiken Ontologie auf die urspruenglichen Erfahrungen

If, for Derrida, it has from the earliest investigations of the problem of genesis in Husserl's phenomenology been a question of doubting any claim to something like "primordial experiences" ("*urspruengliche Erfahrungen*"), then surely – my prejudice goes – at the very first glance one would be suspicious of any attempt to say, in respect of this issue, "this *is* that": deconstruction *is Destruktion*. Put this way, the question seems all the more certain: both deconstruction and *Destruktion* have as their avowed aim the calling into question of the hardened-up tradition of metaphysics, and the predetermination of the nature of things as "present", that is, a questioning of the privileging of the form of statement "this *is* that". But the same logic applies in reverse, and cats at least some doubt on the issue, since it would be equally problematic to state simply that deconstruction *is not Destruktion*. Hence, despite my bias, and despite a fear that the question could be answered simply in the affirmative (thus terminating the discussion), it remains necessary to elaborate, to go further than the logic of "this is that" or "this is not that".

It is, of course, Derrida's essay *Ousia and Gramme – A Note on a Note of Being and Time* which addresses perhaps most thoroughly this issue. According to the essay, in questioning the meaning of Being, it is the vulgar concept of time which *Sein und Zeit* had to "shake" in order to effect the *Destruktion* of ontology. The interpretation of Being dependent on *ousia*, presence, the present, is to be destroyed by Heidegger's endeavours, this being necessary in order to free up the tradition of thought and return us to primary experiences where an authentic rethinking can occur. This rethinking of presence is a rethinking or a disavowal of the "vulgar concept of time" as a series of instances of "now", each present to themselves or interpreted as the simple non-present. Derrida does not question the necessity of this questioning of time, but wishes to extend the discussion according to a second motif, which he introduces thus:

> [We wish] To indicate, from afar and in a still quite undecided way, a direction not opened by Heidegger's meditations [in the note to *Being and Time* being analysed, and in *Being and Time* as a whole]; the hidden passageway that makes the problem of presence communicate with the problem of the *written trace*.

Heidegger's analysis of the vulgar concept of time, recounted through those of Hegel and Aristotle, is replayed by Derrida. Time, traditionally, is that *within which* events occur and *within which* beings "are produced". First time, the framework, the "container"; *then* events, beings etc, thought here on the basis of a (perhaps Platonic) productive logic. The note to *Being and Time* which is the topic of Derrida's paper, which he reproduces in full, emphasises that Hegel's prioritising of the "now" leaves him in the thrall of the ordinary concept of time, and that this concept derives point-by-point from the "physics" of Aristotle.

In calling this tradition into question, Derrida states that Heidegger is involved in "an enormous task". As he says, (p38 in English translation in *Margins*):

> how can one think *Being and Time otherwise* than on the basis of the present, in the form of the present, to wit a certain *now in general* from which no *experience*, by definition, can ever depart*?*

The word *experience* is given emphasis here by Derrida; if the *Destruktion* of metaphysics is to return us to *primordial experiences*, then is this not simply to refold us into the *now*? Is not the very concept of *experience* only capable of being thought from out of the vulgar concept of time?

Except that Derrida's analysis insists retaining or reading in Heidegger's work at this point something more subtle:

> For Heidegger, it is not a question of proposing that we think otherwise [than on the basis of the present] if this means to think *some other thing*. Rather, it is thinking that which could *not* have been, *nor* thought, *otherwise*. [The impossibility of thinking otherwise.....]

It is this strange, at once formal and perhaps experiential structure, which interests Derrida here. [For does he not speak elsewhere and quite often of the *experience* of the impossible?] This structure is perhaps the "hidden passageway" which he has already referred to in respect of Heidegger's text.

The argument runs:

- metaphysics thinks Being on the basis of presence, that is, on the basis of the vulgar concept of time
- in order to free up this tradition, it would be necessary to think *otherwise* than on the basis of presence
- it is necessary, says Heidegger, to return to our *primordial experiences* in doing this
- the very experience of an experience, and its concept, is dependent on the concept, pre-supposition or privileging of *presence*; that is)according to Derrida) the very definition of "experience" – that which comes to us, or has done, or will come, as something present to us in a definite, present, moment in time
- thus, we are caught in a logical circle. How should we "escape"? According to the explicit words of Heidegger, there remain one or two legitimate ploys in the circumstance:
  - at the outset of *Being and Time*, the task of interrogating Being is deemed to be the primary characteristic of that being which we, the inquirers, are ourselves – namely, Dasein. "Thus, to work out the question of Being, we must make an entity – the inquirer – transparent in its being." There appears to be "manifest circularity" in this exercise, a logical *aporia*: but, for Heidegger, that *aporia* is cancelled out by an appeal *away from* formal questions of logic *towards* the "factical" (faktisch) situation of Dasein always already having a pre-supposition about Being (however unthematised) at its disposal.
  - in respect of the hermeneutic circle of interpretation described in section 32 of *Being and Time*, the circular fore-structure of understanding is not vicious in operation, nor is it to be seen as an imperfection; rather, it is "the most primordial kind of knowing", and our task is to ensure a correct way of entry into the circle of interpretation
- however, for Derrida's Heidegger, the answer to the above–stated logical *aporia* (namely, that to question presence we must return to primordial experiences; but "experience" can only be thought and only occur on the basis of presence itself) lies neither in the "facticity" of Dasein's Being; *nor* is it a question of how we enter into this particular circle (whether or not we might think of it as an hermeneutical one). What Derrida says that Heidegger is doing in this long note to *Being and Time* – even if Heidegger is not saying himself that he is doing it – is to show us that we cannot actually think in any other way than on the basis of presence. In other words, in the very activity of our having run through this "logical *aporia*", we have *done* something; something *has occurred*; an *event* has happened. Assuming we were reading (that is, allowing the text to have an effect), we have acted something out, something with the formal structure of a circle; and this acting out has shown us, not another way of thinking, but rather has demonstrated to us, in an *experience*, that we cannot think experience in any other way than on the basis of presence. We have thus experienced the "impossibility of the otherwise", as Derrida puts it. And experiencing this impossibility is not nothing, it is not trivial.

    There is produced, in the thought of the impossibility of the otherwise, in this *not otherwise*, a certain difference, a certain trembling, a certain decentring that is not the position of an other centre (p38)

This "other passageway" is hidden in the text of *Being and Time*, or in the note to it , because Heidegger tends to avoid its explicit statement.   Rather, Derrida's argument goes, we are carried through this passageway by the experience of reading the text itself. It presents us with an impossibility, or we experience that impossibility, and this performance is not nothing; it has an effect.

What this means is that Heidegger's explicit task of the *Destruktion* of metaphysics remains, in a way, *too* explicit. In its appeal to *primordiality,* primordial experience, primordial "sources" (as he has it elsewhere), which will – he claims – free us from the tradition, it gets caught up in the metaphysical language it claims to attempt to overcome. As Derrida has it in *Ends of Man* (also in *Margins*), there are two types of strategic bet that can be placed, two wagers that can be made, two positings that we can give ourselves in respect of a questioning of philosophy, metaphysics, onto-theology. You can:

a) attempt an exit or a deconstruction of metaphysics without changing terrain
b) change terrain, in discontinuous fashion; announce the revolution in thought and move onto a different location

If Derrida states that Heidegger's wager is usually, "mainly", for the former option of working within the terrain, then he acknowledges immediately the paradox of the latter apparently more risky strategy, namely that even on the simple level of language one will straight-away collapse back into the terrain one was hoping to leave, since the "practice of language reinstates the new terrain on the oldest ground", inevitably.

But none-the-less, Derrida's point remains, that Heidegger's wager tends to be for the former, for the existing terrain of metaphysics. Hence, despite the former's respecting of the hidden passageway in Heidegger, he goes on in *Ousia and Gramme* to take to pieces the central task of *Being and Time* – namely the search for the *meaning* of Being. And this on a number of fronts:

- in note 11, Derrida questions Heidegger's notion of the "fallen temporality" of Dasein; is not this distinction between "proper" and "improper", between "authentic" and "inauthentic" and between the originary and the nonoriginary itself a "tributary" of the vulgar concept of time?
- in discussing time, does Heidegger not repeat Zeno's *aporia* without dealing with it, ie without, in Derrida's terms, *deconstructing* it?
- does Bataille not "give us to think" that it is not only time, commonly understood, which is vulgar? "Meaning" itself is also marked by vulgarity. Meaning is always thought on the basis of presence, and this is true even for an investigation of the "meaning of Being"; how can it then hope to escape the metaphysics it wishes to shake or *Destrukt*?

We are wavering back and forth here, with Derrida, as to the status of *Destruktion*. It is possible to believe that in *Ousia and Gramme* it remains undecided? If that essay is carrying out a deconstruction, then whether or not this operates according to the logic of a Heideggerian *Destruktion* seems to be decided first one way and then the other. But what interests Derrida, and what interests deconstruction, is the fact of this movement. This movement is explicated first with an example (that of time, and its relationship to the linear inscription in space – the *gramme* - in Aristotle's *Physics*) and then as structural law.

Briefly, the argument runs:
- after an intricate discussion of the question of the "at the same time" (*hama*) and the numbered number of time in the *Physics*, Derrida states that the "graphic linear representation of time is simultaneously required *and* excluded by Aristotle". It is excluded by virtue of the fact the Aristotle rejects the idea that the "now" is to time what a "point" is to a line. Trying to use a "multiplicity of immobilities", such as points, to create a series, "does not give time", according to Aristotle
- however, the *gramme*, the *linear inscription*, is not rejected by Aristotle *as such* according to Derrida – it is rejected merely in its representation as a series of points. And yet a point, says Aristotle, in distinction to the line, is never present and takes its existence only from a line.
- thus, we can distinguish between time and a line thought of as a series of now-points; but this means to think of time on the basis of a *completed* line, one fully present (rather than made up of a series of points)
- thus, as critique of the thinking of time on the basis of presence, on the basis of the point-like nature of the "now", ends up doing the opposite of what it thought it

would do; namely it at once empties out the presence of the "now" *and* posits the line, the *gramme*, as present as soon as this is used to explicate the nature of time. Thus Aristotle, and with him the whole of metaphysics, comes back to:

"Time is that which is thought on the basis of Being as presence, and if something is to be thought beyond the determination of Being as presence, it cannot...still... be called *time*"

Thus:

"to criticise the manipulation of any one of these concepts [time, ousia, parousia, gramme] from within the system *always amounts to going round in circles*; to reconstituting, according to another configuration, the *same* system"

The formal law is the law of the circle – it is, Derrida claims, an *a priori* law which states that every text of metaphysics carried within itself *both* the metaphysical concepts *and* the means to criticise them; eg both the vulgar concept of time and the means to criticise it. This "must be thought of as a *formal rule* for anyone wishing *to read* the texts of the history of metaphysics".

Derrida concludes *Ousia and Gramme* with three suggestions:

1) that there is no "vulgar concept of time", simply because metaphysics, as the structure within which both "concept" and "time" take their position, cannot be gotten around: there can be *no other* concept of time
2) that in asking this question, we are remaining *within* Heidegger's thought, since then question of "primordial temporality" *interrupts Being and Time*, it does not close it. Derrida has it that *even if* Heidegger does not question the "efficacy of the "destruction"" achieved by the analytic of Dasein, he had, with the suspension of *Being and Time*, to "go at it otherwise"
3) finally, that if there is something to be thought beyond *presence*, then this cannot be thought of as simply absence, ie on the basis of presence. It would be beyond the dyad absence/presence, and is thought of here as a trace which is nether perceptible nor imperceptible within the text; rather, it is erased in the text, this erasure thought actively, so that "the trace is produced as its own erasure".

Thus, the ontological difference between Being and beings, *as* forgotten in the text of metaphysics, "(is)(itself) trace", since difference is not absence and not presence. And, at the same time, this erasure of difference and the trace has occurred "*in* the metaphysical text", which means that presence is *not* what "a trace refers back to", but rather the opposite: presence is "the trace of the trace", even thought there is no "trace *itself*", no proper trace, according to a formal law which relates somehow to the *experience of the impossible* in circular fashion: when that which is not present (the trace) is itself traced, then the effect is presence.

In other words, and to return briefly to the essay *Ends of Man (Margins* page 134), what is at issue here is a *reduction of meaning* towards structure and system. Meaning, presence, is to be decided on the basis of a formal structure which itself has no meaning; that is, on the formal la of the trace of the trace, of difference/differance.

Whatever we and Derrida can say of Heidegger's *Destruktion*, it is the explicit acknowledgment of this formal structure, this *a priori* law, which distinguishes Derrida's deconstruction. Derrida argues for a kind of performative effectiveness of Heidegger's text: the performative of the experience of the impossibility of a thinking otherwise: the performative of the termination of the project of *Being and Time* and its opening towards what Derrida calls "other horizons". But deconstruction has to be acknowledged as that thought which recognises something unspoken *within* the *destruktion* back to primordial experiences and which comprises a formal law associated with or implicit in these performatives.

And because the notion of this law has a movement to it which is en abym ("the trace of the trace") this enables deconstruction, in the end, to avoid in particular the movement which Derrida makes note of at several points in Ousia and Gramme, namely the movement of falling, the reference to the "fallen temporality" of Dasein, and the structure associated with the

opposition of "proper" to "improper", "authentic" to "inauthentic" and so forth. This avoidance is the avoidance of what Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche had already called - in Nietzsche and Philosophy – nihilism. That is, that nihilism which consists in giving the finite world the character of the fallen, of valuing it essentially below some prior or superior state. This avoidance – so far as I know entirely consistent in Derrida's work – is what enables him to invoke legitimately at the end of Ends of Man the Nietzschian laugh, the dance, the affirmative "yes, yes",

That is why, to pick up very briefly on a later paper of Derrida's, it is possible for him for claim that deconstruction is justice (hence that justice, unlike the law which has to have a clear delimitation of proper/improper, cannot be deconstructed); and the reason why, to the postscript of that piece, he can conclude that in his consideration of justice

it is the thought of the difference between... [Heideggerian Destruktion]... on the one hand and a deconstructive affirmation on the other that has guided... this reading

[Ends]