

Thinking the Ethical Relation: The Implications of Deconstruction for Feminist Political Theory

Stella Gaon

My purpose in this discussion is to show, in broadly drawn strokes, how I understand the “politics” of deconstruction, particularly with regard to Thomas McCarthy's objection that Derrida's “metapolitical, philosophical reflection” cannot by “itself produce relevant political insights,” and therefore does not “obviate the need for entering into empirical, normative, and critical debates at the level of politics” (McCarthy, 1991: 114-15).

I begin with the claim that an adequate notion of ethical-political “responsibility” entails the following pre-suppositions: that moral claims and decisions always necessitate a moment or an ethical ground that philosophy itself is essentially unable to address, that this moment is fundamentally bound up with subjectivity and that, consequently, an element of uncertainty is essential and foundational to the ethical sphere itself. I then argue that such an understanding of “responsibility” is not at all congruent with the theories of Richard Rorty or of Jurgen Habermas. In other words, for reasons I can only sketch in these brief remarks, I suggest that it would be misguided to reduce my own view of radical contingency to the ways in

which contingency is taken up by either Habermas or Rorty.

In the last section of the paper, I propose that the view I outline at the start does connect directly — if somewhat abstractly — with Jacques Derrida's project. Specifically, I propose that it is on precisely the level of “responsibility” that the deconstructive work of Derrida is an important contribution to radical social theories such as feminism. I conclude with the suggestion that deconstruction is a “critical theory” — but that, unlike that of the Frankfurt school, it is one which works at the metapolitical level of the ethics of ethics.

This paper therefore offers a rough sketch, or an outline, of what an analysis of Derridean thought would entail vis-à-vis the project of feminist social and political theory.

In what I would characterize as a hasty, widely-shared, and unfortunate dismissal of deconstruction, critical theorist Thomas McCarthy argues that Derrida's “metapolitical, philosophical reflection” cannot “itself produce relevant political insights,” and therefore does not “obviate the need for entering into empirical, normative, and critical debates at the level of politics” (McCarthy, 1991: 114-15).¹ Though she is somewhat more sympathetic to Derrida's project, Mary Poovey goes even further. She calls deconstruction, “a master strategy” whose “dismantling gaze” is turned on everything but itself (Poovey, 1988: 61). And, in yet another context, Paul Smith charges Derrida with “irresponsibility” insofar as Smith interprets deconstruction as a subjectless process that is completely and deterministically given over to the forces of language and which therefore forecloses any possibility of resistance on the part of the agent (Smith, 1988: esp. 51).

In the first place, I think a characterization of deconstruction as a social theory which ‘lacks’ any semblance of a reconstructive moment — because it is said to leave no place for the critically resisting “agent” — rests on a series of contestable assumptions.

a) that Derrida does posit a homogenously and

- totally determined subject,
 b) that such a philosophy is (therefore) necessarily nihilistic, and
 c) that poststructural/postmodern theory therefore provides poor ground for an emancipatory politics.

Such a critique is based on a more general assumption that deconstruction is only another deterministic structuralism. It follows, therefore, that all that Derrida's work *can* be, is social theory which *fails*.

In this paper, I will try to show why such readings sacrifice the profundity and importance of Derrida's work — particularly with regard to its ethical-political implications for social theory. But in order to explain how I understand the "politics" of deconstruction, and why the interpretations I have cited are inadequate, I will begin by saying something about what I think the term "responsibility" means. I will then describe the distinction I am making between my understanding of fallibility and contingency, and the ways in which those ideas are taken up by Richard Rorty and Jürgen Habermas. In the last section of the paper, I will argue that the deconstructive work of Jacques Derrida can be seen as an important contribution to feminist and other political theories.

With regard to responsibility, my own belief is this: that every moral claim or moral choice *always involves a moment — one which I might characterize as an ethical ground — before, behind, or beneath it, that philosophy itself (of whichever variety) is essentially unable to address*. Significantly, I am not pointing to the problematic of the relationship between the academy and political action (that is, the theory/practice question). I am not trying to ascertain the extent to which philosophical works are or are not read and applied out there in the world.

Rather, I am thinking, in part, of Charles Taylor's insight that one of the things being a "self" entails, is the ability — at least in principle — to locate oneself on a moral horizon. It is to be able to say that certain things matter to us. Thus, for Taylor (as I read him), insofar as we are 'selves' at all we are always already situated morally to some extent (Taylor,

1989). So it is not as though we begin, politically *or* philosophically, from nowhere and then determine, in a more or less rigorous way, where we are going to start.

I would complicate this thought on three bases. First, not only can my personal identity or "who-I-am" change over time, but my location within a moral horizon can also shift. Thus, while one's location is generally more or less stable, it is not absolutely fixed. Indeed, it strikes me that a shift of one's moral horizon is an essential part of a shift of one's personal identity. For example, a radical change in my religious or political beliefs can have this effect on the question of "who-I-am," and vice-versa.

Second (but perhaps most importantly), while I may authorize my position on a moral horizon in any number of ways — for example, by god's will, by a law of nature or a law of logic, by being a "human," or "rational," or "spiritual" being, or by an astrological chart etc. — it seems to me that there is no transcendental way of grounding my most fundamental beliefs. They evolve as part and parcel of who each of us is in particular personal and cultural contexts. Significantly, however, *this does not mean that we should not have fundamental beliefs*, or that they are of lesser import if they cannot be definitively (transcendentally) authorized. On the contrary, responsible behaviour means to me precisely that which I stand behind — it does not mean those principles I attribute to someone or something else. But whether we hold to our own beliefs or not, whether those beliefs are widely shared or idiosyncratic, and whatever standards of responsibility we accept, an element of uncertainty is essential and foundational to those beliefs or to that acceptance. Thus, among my own presuppositions — my own understanding of "who-I-am" — is the insistence that we are accountable to ourselves in terms of whatever code we honour and to one another, and that we cannot ultimately — definitively, or irrefutably — justify why we believe what we do.

In the third place, insofar as my location within a moral horizon is intrinsic to who "I" am, it is not entirely knowable, even in principle. In other words, it follows for me that if

there is something to Taylor's point that one's moral location² is part of what constitutes subjectivity, then there will always be an 'excess' which necessarily escapes cognizance. This for two reasons. The first is that, insofar as the "I" that is located on a moral horizon is the same "I" that would be cognizant of that location, the project of total knowledge is necessarily unaccomplishable. This point does not problematize the adequacy of thought *per se*, so much as it raises the problem of infinite regress that is entailed by self-referentiality (i.e., I would have to know myself, knowing myself, knowing myself [*ad infinitum*], knowing my moral location).

The second reason is that the question of self-knowledge brings with it the question of the unconscious. It seems to me that in light of twentieth century psychoanalysis, the unconscious is a necessary feature of subjectivity and that, therefore, there can be no "self" without it. On this view, whether we call it the "unconscious" or "desire," the unknown cannot, *by definition*, be fully encapsulated by the known.

Not only is what "matters" to me neither absolutely fixed, nor transcendently authorized, but I cannot hope to *fully* complete the project of knowing my position on a moral horizon. This is because of the self-referentiality that such a project would entail and because consciousness cannot subsume or eliminate the unconscious. Nonetheless, I would maintain — because this is my own normative *a priori* — that I am obligated to try to know where I stand and why I stand there. Moreover, regardless of the extent of my self-awareness, I am still responsible for those positions I do take. In other words, I am always accountable *vis-à-vis* the way in which I am positioned on a moral horizon.

Now the kind of radical fallibility that I am proposing here may seem to resonate to some extent with that of Richard Rorty, or, in other ways, with that of Jurgen Habermas. While I cannot address either of these thinkers in any detail, I will briefly try to distinguish my own view. Most significantly, it strikes me that Rorty draws very different

conclusions than I do from the premise that I have called the foundational uncertainty of one's moral positioning. He begins by saying that, because the "ideal citizen" understands that "one's language, one's conscience, one's morality, and one's highest hopes [are] contingent products," he or she does not try to ground normative claims in a universalist notion of human "selfhood" (Rorty, 1989: 61). Similarly, Rorty proposes that "For liberal ironists, there is no answer to the question 'Why not be cruel?' — no noncircular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible" (Rorty, 1989: xv).

On the basis of these claims, Rorty asserts that openmindedness should be fostered, not because "truth will prevail," but for its own sake. He says that "A liberal society is one which is content to call 'true' whatever the upshot of such [free and open] encounters turns out to be" (Rorty, 1989: 52). However, for Rorty there can still be such a thing as moral progress, and it can be measured on the basis of an increase in human solidarity (Rorty, 1989: 192).³

I will make two comments in response. First, what I find most significant is that his formulation occludes the dimension of responsibility altogether. In other words, given his emphasis on contingency, the moral goal of "solidarity" can *only* be understood as a temporary, pragmatic good — one that is not anchored in responsibility as such. For if "solidarity" is to be understood as a substantive principle, Rorty would have to answer his own charge that such a principle cannot be grounded. In this sense, he begs the question of responsibility. On the other hand, if "solidarity" is not to be understood in a substantive way, then Rorty has effectively eliminated the basis for moral action.

In short, the epistemological uncertainty, on which Rorty and I agree, seems to lead Rorty to the conclusion that there can be no "responsibility as such" — that if any moral goal is to be posited, it can only be one which is measurably or calculably worthwhile in contingent, practical contexts. This differs from my own view, insofar as I would want to maintain that I am responsible and accountable for my deeds,

my utterances and my beliefs, despite my uncertainty. Such a responsibility does not hinge on a certainty that is rationally based or pragmatically determined. Furthermore, it is my contention that responsibility is characteristically undeterminable in any kind of a definitive way. That is the nature of moral belief. Rorty's shift from the terrain of absolute certainty to pragmatic contingency and fallibility, merely sidesteps what I see as the central issue.

Second, as an *a priori* principle of value, "solidarity" is thin at best as it does not speak at all to the particular, everyday moral situations in which we find ourselves. And, at worst, Rorty's elaboration of "solidarity" is quite contentious. He characterizes it as follows:

[S]olidarity is not thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings. Rather, it is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation — the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of "us" (Rorty, 1989: 192).

Very briefly, my objection to Rorty's proposal that we turn "them" into "us" through "imaginative identification" hinges on the problem that this leaves one with no ground on which to treat difference ethically. Although I would agree that at the macro level of gross injustice, pain and humiliation are issues most in need of redress, I do not believe that it is always the case that we can be morally indifferent to difference. On the contrary, if, as Rorty and I both assume, there is "no noncircular theoretical backup" for fundamental moral beliefs, then morally-charged situations will most often arise when it is precisely the difference *between* moral presuppositions that is at stake. I find inadequate, therefore, an ethical perspective such as Rorty's, which fails to take into account that which cannot be assimilated, without reduction, into a pluralistic notion of "us."

The so-called 'postmetaphysics' of Habermas are of a different order. Following Kant, Habermas's concept of

morality leaves aside questions of the good life, and is narrowed to "problems of right or just action" (Habermas, 1990: 196). As I understand it, Habermas's major modification of Kantian ethics is to shift from monological to dialogical modes of determining validity claims. Thus, instead of being able to determine by myself the validity of a normative claim, Habermas insists that such a determination can only occur through uncoerced exchange with others. However, we can be guided by the values of 'reciprocity' and 'symmetry,' because, unlike metaphysical values, these more or less inhere in any linguistic exchange. In this sense, the "ideal speech situation" is merely a formalization of practices in which we already engage.

Unlike Rorty, Habermas does not *posit* a moral good, so much as he discovers one in the context of intersubjective speech situations. However, Habermas can make no more of a substantive claim than can Rorty. Indeed, when he follows the logic of his own deontological formalism, he reaches this conclusion:

Since the concept of morality is limited, the self-perception of moral theory should be correspondingly modest. It is incumbent on moral theory to explain and ground the moral point of view. What moral *theory* [his emphasis] can do and should be trusted to do is to clarify the universal core of our moral intuitions and thereby to refute value scepticism. *What it cannot do is make any kind of substantive contribution* [my emphasis] (Habermas, 1990: 211).

As I said, it is not my intention to enter into a careful analysis of Habermas's position; my purpose is only to distinguish Rorty's and Habermas's formulations from my own. With regard to Habermas, I will note only that the values of reciprocity and symmetry — as is the case with Rorty's "solidarity" — are based on an implicit assumption of sameness that is ultimately incapable of doing justice to asymmetry or difference. Thus what Habermas characterizes as "the" moral point of view is intrinsically flawed. Moreover, while Habermas does not sidestep the issue of the

potential substantiality of moral theory — as the passage cited above indicates — he concludes that philosophy has nothing to say on the matter of ethics beyond the narrow margins in which moral theory should be confined. Therefore what I see as paramount, the moral uncertainty that is intrinsic to responsibility, is once more pushed outside the framework of the discussion.

I began by saying that moral claims and choices always entail a moment or an ethical ground that philosophy itself is essentially unable to address, that this moment is fundamentally bound up with subjectivity, and that this is the level on which I am most compelled by the work of Jacques Derrida. For reasons I have tried to sketch, I do not think that my claim can be assimilated into either Rorty's or Habermas's work (although there is an obvious overlap in terms of a more or less comparable notion of contingency). I do think, though, that it connects directly — if somewhat abstractly — with what Derrida is trying to do. I will now try to spell this out a little more clearly.

Traditional ethical and political philosophies of Western thought represent rational attempts to systematize and encapsulate moral values. In the so-called “postmetaphysical” or post-enlightenment world, however, it is recognized that “the good” cannot be absolutized — except, perhaps, at the most general of levels — because most representations of any kind of “truth” are contingent in a variety of ways (historically, culturally, racially, in respect of gender, etc). Thus the epistemological “crisis” of postmodernity, when taken seriously (and of course not everyone finds such a characterization persuasive) has led some intellectuals to the conclusion that if rational truth is contestable, then the values which are founded upon it are only relative. In other words, the common objection to postmodernism is that the very basis for moral choice seems to have been annihilated. Instead of broaching this objection directly, Rorty's project is to shift the discussion away from the question of relativity (or value scepticism) altogether, while Habermas's goal is to counter it by grounding moral universals in the mundane of everyday language practices.

In contrast, I have proposed that moral fundamentals are characteristically undeterminable, and that the (perhaps paradoxical) nature of ethical responsibility is that it entails an unwavering acknowledgement of this point. In terms of my argument here, what is most important is that when one speaks of an ethical system in terms of its *own* ideology — an implicit assumption of sameness, for example, or an exclusion of uncertainty from the moral realm — one speaks at the level of the ethics of ethics. Analogously, it is to address the ‘politics’ of the unavoidable idealization that is intrinsic to language itself. It is this kind of a metatheoretical *concern* which, in my view, runs through the entirety of Derrida's work.

Richard Bernstein, for instance, has remarked that, “Derrida's ethical-political horizon is ‘a point of departure’ for virtually everything he has written” (Bernstein, 1992: 187 [his emphasis]). Thus, in a passage of *Limited Inc*, rightly noted by Bernstein (1992: 214) for its profound implication in what has come to be called the “politics of deconstruction,” Derrida remarks:

In accordance with what is only ostensibly a paradox, *this particular* undecidable opens the field of decision or of decidability. It calls for decision in the order of ethical-political responsibility. It is even its necessary condition. A decision can only come into being in a space that exceeds the calculable program that would destroy all responsibility by transforming it into a programmable effect of determinate causes. There can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable. Even if a decision seems to take only a second and not to be preceded by any deliberation, it is structured by this experience and experiment of the undecidable (Derrida, 1988a: 116 [his emphasis]).

As this passage demonstrates — and I share Bernstein's reading — it is not so much that Derrida has *an* ethics, as it is that his thought is ethical.

This is to say that if, as Rorty asserts, “there is no noncircular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible,” this does not mean that I will not still call torture

(for example) morally reprehensible. However, it does mean that whether I make this call now, when I am confronted with a particular instance of such cruelty, or whether I am philosophically-inclined and have made this call (abstractly) a long time ago, I must have — at some point — decided this undecidable for myself. I must have traversed “the field of decision or of decidability” — at least insofar as I want to claim that it is my call, my belief, my judgement. For as I indicated earlier, I think responsibility always entails an element of the unknown and the undecidable; such a moment is what I called the “ethical ground of decision that philosophy itself is essentially unable to address.” Similarly, if, for Derrida, “There can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable,” then it would seem that he is making the same kind of assumption with which I begin.

Second, it is not possible to act on the basis of the belief that “cruelty is horrible” without, at the same time, positing an alternative way of treating people, and without assuming an alternative ground on which to do so. In other words, while I might think to myself, abstractly, that torture is bad, this thought alone is not enough if I want to engage in political work in order to end it. I must also be able to make a normative claim which contests the grounds on which the torture or the cruelty is enacted. Thus, in response to what I see as (for instance) the unreasonable, disrespectful, undignified, inhuman, or cruel treatment of a particular group of people, I will want to claim that they (or ‘we’) deserve treatment based on reason, on respect, on dignity, on humanitarianism or on compassion (and vice-versa).

I do not think that anything in Derrida’s work implies that deconstruction “[obviates] the need for entering into empirical, normative, and critical debates” about these claims, as McCarthy and others have charged (McCarthy, 1991: 114-15). What “metapolitical, philosophical *reflection*” [my emphasis] can do, and “should be expected to do” (to coin Habermas’s formulation) is to *supplement* those debates with the additional and complicating insight that when I make one claim I necessarily close off others, that every claim will

involve some degree of undecidability, and that there is *no* normative claim which does not work by way of this logic. One might say, in this sense, that deconstruction is a “critical theory” — but that, unlike that of the Frankfurt school, it is one which works at the metapolitical level of the ethics of ethics. In other words, Derrida urges us to take responsibility (in my sense of the term) for all of the ‘marginal’ ramifications of our thought, and not to limit our understanding by reducing it to the meaning we have *metaphysically* determined as ‘central’. This is the sense in which I assert that Derrida’s thought is ethical.

From my point of view, none of this means that I cannot or should not make normative claims, or that I should not work toward a vision of social betterment. But taking Derrida’s insights to heart does inspire me to be less righteous or dogmatic about those beliefs I do hold. This is one possible reading, at any rate, of Derrida’s assertion that the character of deconstructionist practices “is not neutral;” “it intervenes” (quoted in McCarthy, 1991: 97).

My response to the objections cited above, then, is this: it seems to me that when Derrida is understood in terms of the interpretation I have been outlining, such objections are displaced altogether. For rather than thinking through an ethical *system* or a “politics” — rather than providing a new, but hopelessly deterministic, ground for political theory — Derrida is addressing the ethical *relation* or “the political” (Fraser, 1984: 137; Bernasconi, 1987: esp. 134-35). In other words, insofar as my discussion has been intended to show that one possible reading of Derrida’s work is that it points toward the development of a critical conscience for social theory rather than towards its displacement, the charge that deconstruction cannot “produce relevant political insights” appears as a nonissue.

In short, I am proposing that the lesson to be learned from Derrida’s deconstruction is not — as some have hastily concluded — that philosophy is intrinsically bankrupt or that conceptual thought should be avoided. What it is, as I see it, is that it is unethical to ignore the exclusions and marginalizations that conceptual thought entails. As Derrida

puts it:

Those who wish to simplify at all costs and who raise a hue and cry about obscurity because they do not recognize the unclarity of their good old *Aufklärung* are in my eyes dangerous dogmatists and tedious obscurantists. No less dangerous (for instance, in politics) are those who wish to purify at all costs (1988a: 119).

It is on precisely this basis that Derrida carefully analyzes, in specific texts, the ways in which what is excluded is actually essential and foundational to what is included — how exclusions are necessary to meaning, rather than contingent ‘accidents’ that are unrelated to the idealizations in which philosophers and social theorists (must) engage.⁴ Thus, in contrast to what has been characterized as philosophical “irresponsibility,” I would submit that deconstruction entails a profound notion of responsibility, and that it is one that is as important for feminist theorists as it is for social theory in general.

Notes

¹ I have adapted McCarthy’s articulation of this point for my own purposes because it is one of the clearest formulations I have found of this oft-repeated objection to deconstruction. In fact, although McCarthy is referring to the “French Derrideans” discussed by Nancy Fraser, he goes on to apply her charge to Derrida himself (McCarthy, 1991: 115).

² I recognize that this is a weak metaphor; to speak of ethics in terms of spaciality or positionality is undoubtedly problematic. Let it suffice to say that what I am most interested in is finding a way to talk about the *how*, or the quality, of seeing-approaching-addressing the world, rather than the *what* — such as the quantity (measure) of distance or perspective.

³ Notably, Rorty seems to be saying that moral progress, which corresponds with “justice,” is *the same as what we call “true”* — which is merely what we all agree on. Thus the “just” and the “true” would seem to be synonymous.

⁴ This point is particularly clear in Derrida’s responses to John Searle in

Limited Inc (Derrida, 1988a). But see also “The Ends of Man” (Derrida 1987).

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Spaces In-Between

Images and Texts by Women in Foreign Places

Ursula Biemann

My presentation might stand out for being less academic than most other titles on today's program. However, by starting with a more practical approach I will give you the unique chance to tune in gently.

The project I'm going to talk about is called *Zwischenräume – Interespacios*, which translates roughly into "Spaces In-between," suggesting a plurality of spaces that can be inhabited and occupied rather than a gap to get stuck in.¹

Zwischenräume was a community project I conducted last year in Zurich. It was conceived and realized in, and for, a different context, but I'm very interested in bringing it to an academic audience.

First and foremost, the spaces in-between — interspaces — *interespacios* — connotes a cultural interstice, i.e. the space that opens up between two cultures at the occasion of cultural displacement i.e. immigration.

In this respect, I wish to say a couple of things about my own situation. As a visual artist, I have centered my research and my art practice on the cultural identity of Latin American women over the past few years. First, I focused on Mexican women on the US border, where I made a film, and later on Hispanic culture in New York barrios, where I used to live for several years. When I returned to Switzerland, I was extremely bored with the local art scene and thought it would be interesting to initiate a project with Latin American women who live in Zurich. No longer did I want to speak *about* women from the Third World in my work, rather, I