

# DERRIDA AND EDUCATION: DECONSTRUCTION AND THE RIGHT TO PHILOSOPHY

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For more than two decades, from the 1970s through the 1990s, Jacques Derrida engaged in concrete, practical endeavors to assess the standing of philosophy as both an academic discipline and a subject of study in the French educational system. His work resulted in proposals not just to preserve but to expand dramatically the teaching and learning of philosophy throughout France's educational institutions. Critics of deconstruction might hasten to characterize these activities as a clueless leap into the practical from the rather abstractly theoretical realm of "textual" deconstruction to which they could be at best only loosely related; or to trivialize such activities as arbitrarily undertaken, stemming from a begrudging recognition that even a deconstructionist has to *do something* in this world, after all. In this paper, however, I will argue for the claim that Derrida's long-running, active, specific, and productive concern about the fate of philosophy in the humanities and in French education was a direct and necessary corollary of the very methods or processes of deconstruction. My argument will proceed by quickly summarizing Derrida's views about deconstruction's relation to justice as well as to politics in the form of the notorious "democracy to come," then showing how for Derrida education generally and the teaching and study of philosophy specifically are essentially implicated in this relationship. I conclude with some remarks concerning the question of what "philosophy" means, on a deconstructive account, and concerning the crucial relevance of Derrida's insights about the teaching of philosophy in the French educational system to the world and to the United States in particular.

Deconstruction is profoundly—indeed, essentially—connected to justice and to the political. To see how this is true, it is necessary first to gain a clearer understanding of the contours of justice. Derrida discusses justice in several important texts, one of the earliest and most prominent being "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" his deconstructive analysis of Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence." Here Derrida takes care to distinguish what he calls justice from the mere application

or enforcement of laws. It is not a question, as *Specters of Marx* later emphasizes, of “calculative or distributive justice.”<sup>1</sup> Derrida shows that a deconstructive operation reveals a paradox at the very heart of legality: a legal order always comes into being through a kind of force. What can or does make law law—that is, what defines legality as such—is not and cannot be internal to a particular legal order itself. The effect is “a structure in which law is essentially deconstructible,” since any instance of a legal system logically succeeds the moment of forcible decision that establishes it.<sup>2</sup> For Derrida, however, this is not “bad news” at all but rather actually a “stroke of luck,” because in addition to ensuring the perpetual possibility of deconstruction it also enables us to recognize the relationship of justice (*justesse*), as the undecidability of the action of deploying force in the founding of law, to deconstruction: “Justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible. No more than deconstruction itself, if such a thing exists. Deconstruction is justice.”<sup>3</sup>

Insofar as it is “not deconstructible,” however, justice—and the deconstruction that Derrida identifies with it in “Force of Law”—is paradoxical, fragile, and unstable. This is perhaps best understood by recourse to the term “autoimmunity,” which Derrida uses to characterize the nature of true democracy. Autoimmunity refers to democracy’s inherent capacity to be corrupted through its dogged allowance of all views and opinions, including those that are anti-democratic. It is sick with and in itself; when anti-democratic forces arise and become powerful, bringing democracy to an end, it effectively kills itself. In other words, as Derrida writes in *Rogues*, “Democracy has always been suicidal.”<sup>4</sup> Dissent makes it healthy and indeed democracy needs dissent to remain healthy, but it can just as well and just as quickly die from it as remain healthy. This may sound unattractive; for Derrida, however, autoimmunity is not “an absolute ill or evil,” and it would be wrongheaded to imagine democracy could be relieved or cured of its autoimmune condition: autoimmunity “enables an exposure to the other, to *what* and to *who* comes—which means that it must remain incalculable. Without autoimmunity, with absolute immunity, nothing would ever happen or arrive; we would no longer wait, await, or expect, no longer expect one another, or expect any event.”<sup>5</sup>

The last link in the chain between deconstruction, justice, and democracy (to come) is thus another transitive or equals sign: justice is democracy. Radical justice carries with it at all times the potential to collapse into a legal order which would obscure its origin, its moment of instituting force or decision, and which would attempt to make itself into an other-less totality. Democracy, likewise, essentially harbors within it the possibility of turning into its antithesis *by a democratic act*. It cannot foreclose this prospect except on pain, also, of destroying itself. This is why Derrida favors the suggestive but easily misunderstood phrase “democracy to come”: democracy is perpetually “to come” not because in some utopian future a happy democracy will finally arrive and “be here,” nor because any really existing democratic order will only approximate a regulative ideal of a “perfect” democracy that will remain to come, but because democracy can only be what it is if it does not seek to eliminate what threatens its very (precarious) existence. It is always exposed—and, as history seems to show, often succumbs as an eventuality—to the risk of committing suicide.

The fact that “militant and interminable political critique” serves to “translate”

democracy to come underscores a major theme of *Rogues*, the hubris of the majority of the world's nation-states in describing themselves as democratic; it also signals the immense importance of education to deconstruction-as-justice-as-democracy. Critique takes place: "It is at work today; it is what's *coming*, what's *happening*. It *is* and it *makes* history through the anxiety-provoking turmoil we are currently undergoing."<sup>6</sup> However, this is not an assurance of its continued strength. Indeed no ultimate guarantee of immunity from violent and suppressing forces can be given, but critique can persist in its fragile yet resilient existence. In 1989, roughly in the middle of his long involvement in matters concerning education, Derrida says, "A certain democratization is under way, it is woefully inadequate, but if the conditions and the *givens* of this process are not taken into account ... then it will be blocked or caused to fail."<sup>7</sup> To the extent that this democratization—however perpetually inadequate—does proceed, then, it is due to the provision of a space for radical questioning. Derrida claims that this space is accorded in the Humanities departments of what he calls the "unconditional" university. This is an intriguing yet paradoxical claim that now needs some elucidation.

Derrida develops the concept of unconditionality in "The University Without Condition." For the university to be unconditional means, on one hand, that it remains absolutely independent of "economic goals and interests of all sorts," which place conditions on other institutions.<sup>8</sup> It has to have freedom, literally "an *unconditional* freedom to question and to assert, or even, going still further, the right to say publicly...the principal right to say everything."<sup>9</sup> Exercising this right does not mean being respected or appreciated; far from it. The consequence of this aspect of unconditionality, according to Derrida, is that the university ends up opposing itself "to a great number of powers, for example, to state powers ... to economic powers ... to the powers of the media, ideological, religious and cultural powers, and so forth—in short, to all the powers that limit democracy to come."<sup>10</sup> And its opposition provokes retaliation. "Unconditional" then also means, on the other hand and simultaneously, aporetically, that the university is incredibly vulnerable: "I also say 'without condition' to let one hear the connotation of 'without power' and 'without defense.' Because it is absolutely independent, the university is also an exposed, tendered citadel, to be taken, often destined to capitulate without condition, to surrender unconditionally."<sup>11</sup> In a way similar to the democracy to come, "This university without condition does not, *in fact*, exist, as we know only too well. Nevertheless, in principle and in conformity with its declared vocation, its professed essence, it should remain an ultimate place of critical resistance."<sup>12</sup>

Hence the university is effectively the site of autoimmunity in the pedagogical domain. *Rogues*, one of whose key themes is autoimmunity, also makes the connection between unconditionality and deconstruction in declaring that the latter, "if something of the sort exists, would remain above all, in my view, an unconditional rationalism that never renounces—and precisely in the name of the Enlightenment to come, in the space to be opened up of a democracy to come—the possibility of suspending in an argued, deliberated, rational fashion, all conditions, hypotheses, conventions, and presuppositions, and of criticizing unconditionally all conditionalities, including those that still found the critical idea."<sup>13</sup> "The University Without Condition" further specifies that the university is in a sense the locus of this possibility, and the departments of

humanities in particular the sites of the “originary and privileged place of *presentation*, of manifestation, of safekeeping” of the principle of unconditionality, which is to say of the practice of radical critique. Derrida is emphatic on this point: “deconstruction (and I am not at all embarrassed to say so and even to claim) has its privileged place in the university and in the Humanities as the place of irredentist resistance.”<sup>14</sup>

The role of the teaching, learning, and study of philosophy is the final component of the connection stretching from deconstruction through justice and democracy to education. Derrida insists often on the “right” to philosophy, indeed even titling the impressive collection of his texts on education *Right to Philosophy (Du Droit à la Philosophie)*. The semantic range of the phrase is surprising: of/on the right to (do or have) philosophy, of the right (proper) to philosophy, from right (or even “justice”) to philosophy, speaking about right *to* philosophy, going right to philosophy, right *at* philosophy, and so on. A key dimension of the right to philosophy is the deconstructive determination of *whose* right it is. In “The Right to Philosophy from a Cosmopolitical Point of View,” Derrida draws the thread through: “it seems to me impossible to dissociate the motif of *the right to philosophy-from-the-cosmopolitical-point-of-view* from the motif of a *democracy to come*. . . . I do not believe that the right to philosophy . . . is dissociable from a movement of effective democratization.”<sup>15</sup> Philosophy rightfully belongs to everyone. Far from being confined to an isolated scholastic discipline, it

must be everywhere, is everywhere—not only in the university, but on the radio, within the speeches of the politicians, and so on and so forth. It is everywhere. It is everywhere in the academy. There is philosophy at work in literature, in physics, and so on and so forth. Nevertheless, in addition to that, we should have a specialized training, professional training, for philosophy. Otherwise . . . philosophy everywhere could become a terrible dogmatic weapon. So that’s a paradox in the topology of its discipline.<sup>16</sup>

And in its academic locale philosophy is an indicator of sorts: “questions concerning the teaching of philosophy are inseparable from those concerning teaching and research in all disciplines at all levels. And they are indissociable from the great question of *democracy to come*.”<sup>17</sup> “All levels” means it is not just legitimate but imperative to prevent the erosion of philosophical course work from secondary school, for example, and to seek to expand it there.

The foregoing elaboration of a necessary relation between deconstruction and its justice and democratic politics on one hand, and education and philosophy on the other, shows that Derrida’s sustained interventions in educational practices in France were grounded in and inseparable from deconstructive operations. His prolonged engagements in educational transformation began with the Research Group on the Teaching of Philosophy (*Groupe de Recherches sur l’Enseignement Philosophique*, or Greph). The group formed in 1974–1975 after the Ministry of Education issued a report announcing reductions in the number of teaching positions via the CAPES (*Certificat d’aptitude professionnelle d’enseignement secondaire*, “certificate of professional aptitude in secondary education”) and the *agrégation*, national exams that qualify takers to teach, as civil servants of France, in secondary schools and universities. Greph

denounced this “de facto destruction of the teaching of philosophy” and continued to resist when in June 1975 the Haby proposal—named after then-educational minister René Haby—sought to restrict even further the teaching of philosophy in secondary schools.<sup>18</sup> Grephe called for, and Derrida played a prominent role in, the 1979 Estates General of Philosophy, where over 1,200 teachers and scholars of philosophy and other subjects, as well as non-academics, convened to share their concern about the fate of philosophy in the French educational system. With François Mitterand’s election in 1981, the Haby reform was abandoned and the promise was made to stop the decline and even expand the teaching of philosophy in schools (the latter never came to pass). In 1983, working on a committee under the Minister of Research, Derrida saw through the founding of the *Collège International de Philosophie*, whose “mission is to provide a place for research, particularly in philosophy, that existing institutions either forbid or marginalize” and which thus “does not require the kind of teaching or research accreditation demanded by other institutions.”<sup>19</sup> After serving as the *Collège*’s first director, he remained invested in the vitality of the newly fledged institution. And in 1988 Derrida sat, at the request of Pierre Bourdieu and François Gros, on the committee on Philosophy and Epistemology, whose 1989 report again proposed expanding the teaching of philosophy throughout secondary schools. According to Derrida, this was an opportunity “to form a study group and to make proposals: in complete freedom, without being committed to respect the wishes of anyone in power, reciprocity in this regard being also rigorously the case;” perhaps unsurprisingly, then, “the government did not choose to follow our advice.”<sup>20</sup>

It should thus be clear that these different investigations, proposals, and acts—not to mention the voluminous writings, lectures, interviews, and other texts relating to them—owed both their thorough specificity and the spiritedly critical energy that underwrote them to Derrida’s deconstructionist convictions. He did not merely “happen” to pursue them. In a wider sense, then, there is reason to have confidence that the foregoing discussion should go some distance in putting to rest hostilities based on simple distortions or misperceptions of deconstruction: for example, that it is utterly nonsensical, unwittingly vague or deliberately slippery and evasive, an apolitical or anti-practical textual aestheticism, a thoroughgoing relativism that undermines any and all truth claims and renders everything and everyone helpless, etc.<sup>21</sup> As Derrida astutely notes, “There’s nothing new about this: each time a philosopher, ensconced in his or her philosophical niche, doesn’t understand another philosopher, another philosophical language, other premises, other rules or other logical or theoretical procedures, other discursive or pedagogical setups, each time s/he wants to attack them or remove their legitimacy, s/he simply says: this is no longer philosophy.”<sup>22</sup> Deconstruction is “other” to certain sorts of philosophy in this sense, but this does not mean it simply and crudely seeks to erase these or to bury past philosophers. So, for example, the question of what, out of the entire history of philosophy, should make it into a single class or even a whole course of study in philosophy, which still naturally must have definite temporal limits, is not easily answerable. Yet for Derrida this is only a symptom of the general condition. Apparent certainty about the canon has always been no more than that: apparent. So it is in one sense a question of “the transformation, the deformation of the corpus” of the history of philosophy, but only insofar as a certain delusion might

mistake a limb for the entire body; at the same time Derrida can say that “canons ... should be protected at any price.”<sup>23</sup> He continues:

And even if you want to deconstruct philosophy or if you want to think of the limits of philosophy, of the special kind of limits of philosophy, you have not only to philosophize in a general and a historical way but to be trained in the history of philosophy and to go on learning and teaching philosophy. That is why I am true to philosophy.<sup>24</sup>

It might be said that this both is and is not philosophy. For Derrida, however, “The question of knowing what can be called ‘philosophy’ has always been *the very question* of philosophy, its heart, its origin, its life-principle.... I will always find it hard to understand of a question *about philosophy* that it is simply *non-philosophical*.”<sup>25</sup> In light of the tentative, “woefully inadequate” democratization Derrida claims is underway in the contemporary world, the question of what philosophy is—what counts as philosophy—becomes a universal one.

The right to philosophy may thus be a “worldwide political question” that calls for or just is the opening up of a cosmopolitical dimension.<sup>26</sup> This is certainly a prominent motif in Derrida’s 1991 lecture at UNESCO, as well as and more importantly in the structure of the *Collège International de Philosophie* in terms of “the presence of foreigners in the direction and decision-making as well as in the research groups” and other aspects.<sup>27</sup> Even if the right to philosophy does involve pressing beyond the conventional boundaries of nation-state sovereignty, Derrida’s interventions in France can still serve as a vivid and sorely needed example for the United States, where according to philosopher John McCumber, departments of philosophy closed at the rate of one hundred per year between 1992 and 1996,<sup>28</sup> and where virtually any institutional exposure to philosophy occurs at the post-secondary level if it occurs at all. The opportunity to learn a valuable lesson may be squandered, however, unless the discipline takes a deconstructive cue and has occasion to reflect upon itself. Unfortunately, there appears as yet to be but a dim chance of this; according to McCumber, assessing the situation, “The idea that such a thing [as deconstruction] could even be worth doing, let alone that it could have any right to be called philosophy, continues to be foreign to most American philosophers.”<sup>29</sup>

## NOTES

1. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010), 26.

2. Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’” *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (1989-1990): 943.

3. *Ibid.* 943-945. This equation could instantly be flipped: justice is deconstruction. That is to say, justice as the neither-legal-nor-illegal, “undecidable” moment constantly gives itself over to the tendency to become law; however, in its essence (and here it is true that deconstruction is, in a certain sense, essentialist) it is the “weak force” that does not violently impose law. It resists its own proneness to become legality; it tries to hold itself open to what would instantly become an alien other once any legal system were established. It also reasserts itself *as* deconstruction

when there is a legal order.

4. Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 33.

5. Ibid. 152.

6. Ibid. 157.

7. Jacques Derrida, "Once Again from the Top: Of the Right to Philosophy," in *Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 332.

8. Jacques Derrida, "The University Without Condition," in *Without Alibi* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 206.

9. Ibid. 204-205.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid. 206.

12. Ibid. 204.

13. Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 142.

14. Derrida, "The University Without Condition," 207.

15. Jacques Derrida, "Philosophy from a Cosmopolitical Point of View," in *Ethics, Institutions, and the Right to Philosophy* (Oxford, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 13-14.

16. Jacques Derrida, "Roundtable Discussion," in in *Ethics, Institutions, and the Right to Philosophy* (Oxford, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 28.

17. Derrida, "Once Again from the Top," 338.

18. Quoted in Jan Plug, "Translator's Foreword" to Jacques Derrida, *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), x.

19. Plug, "Translator's Foreword," xi.

20. Derrida, "Once Again from the Top," 329.

21. The catalogue of calumny is far more extensive: "Derrida and 'deconstruction'...have been blamed for almost everything. For ruining American departments of philosophy, English, French, comparative literature, for ruining the university itself (provided that they are ruined), for dimming the lights of the Enlightenment, for undermining the law of gravity, for destroying all standards of reading, writing, and reason—and 'rithmetic,' too—and also for Mormon polygamy. Derrida even gets a finger (pointed at him) for the nationalist wars in Central Europe and for Holocaust revisionism, even as he has been accused, if it is possible to be guilty of all these things at once, of an apolitical aestheticism, for being a flower child of the 1960s still being read in the 1990s, a quasi-academic Timothy Leary inviting us to tune in to textuality and drop out of reality. The list goes on. (For Mormon polygamy?)" John Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (Fordham University Press, 1996), 41.

22. Jacques Derrida, "Honoris Causa: 'This is also extremely funny,'" in *Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994*, 411.

23. Jacques Derrida with Geoff Bennington, "On Colleges and Philosophy," in *Postmodernism: ICA Documents IV* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986), 70; Derrida, "The University Without Condition," 208.

24. Derrida, "On Colleges and Philosophy," 68.

25. Derrida, "Honoris Causa," 411-412.

26. Derrida, "Roundtable Discussion," 27.

27. Derrida, "Of a certain Collège International de Philosophie Still to Come," in *Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994*, 113.

28. John McCumber, *Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), p. xx. On page 66 McCumber cites figures from the *Directory of American Philosophers* showing 2,110 philosophy departments listed in 1992 versus 1,723 in 1996.

29. Ibid. 71.