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# THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT ALTERITY: DERRIDA AND THEOLOGY

John D. Caputo

Derrida's work is often mistakenly criticized as a kind of linguistic subjective idealism which traps us inside a chain of linguistic signifiers, unable to do anything but play vainly with linguistic strings. In fact, Derrida's thought is through and through a philosophy of "alterity," of openness to the other, which provides a rich and vigorous catalyst for religious thought. After demonstrating the wrongheadedness of the subjectivist reading of Derrida, I go on to show the richness of this philosophy of alterity for theology: first, in terms of the negative theology, where alterity refers to God as the absolutely Other; and then in terms of ethics of alterity, in which it is shown that, like Levinasian ethics, deconstruction is a philosophy of responsibility for the singularity of the other. I conclude with a note on Jesus as a master of alterity.

## *Misunderstanding Derrida*

"Postmodern" thinking, if it means anything at all, means a philosophy of "alterity," a relentless attentiveness and sensitivity to the "other."<sup>1</sup> Postmodernism stands for a kind of hyper-sensitivity to many "others": the other person, other species, "man's" other, the other of the West, of Europe, of Being, of the "classic," of philosophy, of reason, etc. (The list goes on.) This approach has produced numerous, sometimes brilliant and sometimes merely eccentric results, a vast body of unorthodox and provocative approaches to madness, illness, criminality psychoanalysis, architecture, the university, literary, historical and legal interpretation, the history of philosophy, and philosophy itself.

But the philosophy of alterity provides an equally fertile and suggestive opening for religious reflection, which is something that I hope to show here is especially true of the work of Jacques Derrida. Unfortunately, the significance of Derrida's work has been obscured by a particularly perverse misunderstanding of deconstruction, one which, to anyone who has taken the considerable trouble required to gain familiarity with his texts, seems quite ironic (if not amusing). For the notion has gained currency that deconstruction traps us inside the "chain of signifiers," in a kind of linguistic-subjective idealism, unable to do anything but play vainly with linguistic strings. That, were it true, would be an odd result for a philosophy of alterity, a very unkind



fate to visit upon a philosophy whose every effort is bent upon turning toward the other. Were that true, Derrida's work would surely be of no use for understanding Christian faith and tradition, since it would make nonsense out of the interpretation of classical texts and the articulation of shared beliefs. I hope to show that the unique strength of deconstruction lies in exactly the opposite tendency of this misunderstanding, in the special skills it has cultivated in awakening us to the demands made by the other, and that this has interesting and provocative implications for theological reflection. Deconstruction is a rich and vigorous catalyst for religious thought, but that point is largely lost in the midst of the ill-conceived and panicky reactions it provokes.

This misunderstanding of deconstruction, which even supposes that the very idea of "misunderstanding deconstruction" is undermined by deconstruction, is often the result of too hastily construing the texts of a difficult, elusive and playful author whose project is far more affirmative—deconstruction *is* affirmation<sup>2</sup>—than it sometimes sounds to more traditional ears. But this distortion of Derrida is not without political significance, for it is frequently attached to a reactionary political agenda which vigorously opposes the efforts of women, homosexuals, and ethnic minorities to have their voices heard.<sup>3</sup> Yet these are the very voices of alterity—the "call of the other"—in which deconstructive analyses take an interest.

After briefly indicating how this misunderstanding is to be set aside, I turn to the profit that deconstruction holds for theological reflection, which is, I hope to show, to lend a hand in announcing the good news of alterity. While there are numerous issues in terms of which this point could be developed I have chosen to address but two here: the questions of God and of religious ethics.

### *The Other of Language*

Derrida's justly famous, but unjustly notorious, declaration, "There is nothing outside the text" (*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*),<sup>4</sup> has been widely interpreted as a denial of reference, as if Derrida thinks there *is* nothing other than words and texts. That, were it construed as a metaphysical claim, would constitute a sort of linguistic Berkeleyianism, incoherent on its face (texts are after all material objects), with which Derrida has nothing in common. Alternatively, and somewhat less madly, Derrida is taken to advocate a vague subjectivistic scepticism, according to which signifiers are seen as leading only to other signifiers, leaving in doubt the character of anything outside of signifiers, anything real or really other, and leaving us in a cloud of confusion, undecidability, and inaction. One way to see the error here—and I apologize for the dogmatic tone—is to see that it conflates the "hors" of "*hors-texte*" with the "other of language," the referent (*ens significatum*). For while there is

nothing for Derrida which escapes the constraints of textuality, it is no less true that everything that Derrida has written has had in mind the other of language, the alterity by which language is claimed:<sup>5</sup>

There have been several misinterpretations of what I and other deconstructionists are trying to do. It is totally false to suggest that deconstruction is a suspension of reference. Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the 'other' of language. I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the 'other' and the 'other of language'. Every week I receive critical commentaries and studies on deconstruction which operate on the assumption that what they call 'post-structuralism' amounts to saying that there is nothing beyond language, that we are submerged in words—and *other stupidities* [my emphasis] of that sort. Certainly, deconstruction tries to show that the question of reference is much more complex and problematic than traditional theories supposed. It even asks whether our term 'reference' is entirely adequate for designating the 'other'. The other, which is beyond language and which summons language, is perhaps not a 'referent' in the normal sense which linguists have attached to this term. But to distance oneself thus from the habitual structure, to challenge or complicate our common assumptions about it, does not amount to saying that there is *nothing* beyond language.

And again:<sup>6</sup>

This misinterpretation is not just a simplification; it is symptomatic of certain political and institutional interests—interests which must also be deconstructed in their turn. I totally refuse the label of nihilism which has been ascribed to me and my American colleagues. Deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness, but an openness towards the other.

Deconstruction means to complicate reference, not to deny it; it insists that there is no reference without difference, no reference (*il n'y a pas*) outside of a textual chain (*hors-texte*). It argues that the range of reference of a term is set by its place within a systemic code, that its reference is both made possible and limited by the space that it occupies within a linguistic system (difference). Deconstruction wants to trouble the expression "reference" as an excessively subjectivistic term which overestimates the *ego cogito* of the speaking subject while underestimating the power of the linguistic system within which the speaker operates.<sup>7</sup> This delimitation of reference is motivated not by subjectivism or scepticism but by a kind of hypersensitivity to otherness, by a profound vigilance about the other of language. Derrida is constantly alerting us to the constructedness of what we call the "reality" of the "extra-linguistic," and he is relentlessly, systematically, let us say, Socratically suspicious of the prestige of the ruling discourse, of the system of exclusions that is put in place when a language claims to be the language of

reality itself, when a language is taken to be what being itself would say were it given a tongue.

This can be seen from the special attention Derrida has paid to the problem of the proper name.<sup>8</sup> For the reference of a proper name is the singularity of an unrepeatable individual, that being whose being is incommunicable, and this by means of the coded, repeatable, commonly shared signifiers of a spoken or written discourse. A truly or absolutely proper name would be a unique, unrepeatable, idiosyncratic mark or sound that would be unrecognizable by the members of any linguistic community. If a name were truly proper, it would not be a true name; if it were a recognizable name, it would not be truly proper. Derrida's work here, as elsewhere, is to explore the limits of our most common notions and to keep a Socratic watch over the elusiveness both of the singularity which slips through the grids of discourse and of discourse itself. He puts us on warning about the claims of language to lay hold to the things themselves. Every claim to the "things themselves" is a claim made within and by means of the resources of a certain language which has its own limits and within the framework of a complex set of contextual presuppositions which can never be saturated. There are no things themselves outside these textual and contextual limits, no naked contact with being which somehow shakes loose of the coded system which makes notions like the "things themselves" possible to begin with and which enables speakers to refer to them. But all this is said not in order to throw the speaker into confusion or to lock the speaker up in a linguistic prison, but out of a hypersensitivity to the other of language. This "other" is neither reducible to language and strings of linguistic signifiers nor is it something which can shake loose from language as if it fell full blown and wholly constituted from the sky.

Deconstruction is a work of delimitation, of understanding the limits under which we labor, a "new Enlightenment"<sup>9</sup> which raises our level of vigilance about what calls itself reference or subjectivity or objectivity. Similar analyses could be undertaken about the deconstruction of "truth," "tradition," "ethics," etc. The impetus and the point of all such work is never destructive, never aimed at simply levelling or razing these structures. The point of deconstruction is to loosen and unlock structures, to let the shock of alterity set them in motion, to allow them to function more freely and inventively, to produce new forms. Deconstruction gives old texts new readings, old traditions new twists; it urges that regularizing structures and normalizing institutions—everything from literature to democracy—function more freely, more open-endedly, by exposing them to the trauma of something unexpected, something to come, to the *alter* which remains ever on the margins of texts and traditions, which eludes and elicits our discourse, which shakes and solicits our institutions. Deconstruction warns against letting a discourse or a discursive tradition close over or shut down, for that can only have the

effect of silencing and excluding. I do not mean to suggest that deconstruction is the doing of a cunning and powerful subjective deconstructive agent. Rather, in a deconstructive analysis, one lets it be seen that the system in question lacks the cohesiveness and closure to which it lays claim, that it is not what it says it is. But by letting this out, one points to something there, in these systems, which struggles to twist free of the system. The watchword of deconstruction, one of them at least, is the open-ended call *viens!*, come, let something new come.<sup>10</sup>

Seen thus, deconstruction is not the sworn enemy of faith or religious institutions, although it can cause a lot of well deserved trouble to a faith or an institution that has frozen over into immobility. Deconstruction is, as I hope to show, a way to approach faith, one which lets faith say *viens!*, lets it function more ad-ventfully, with an enhanced sense of advent and event, gladdened by the good news of alterity by which we are always and already summoned.

### *The Otherness of God*

The other is never simply inside or outside language. The other is never conceivable or referable except by means of the resources of linguistic difference, yet it is never reducible to a string of signifiers. The other is a being of marginality, on the margins of language, occupying the point of contact where language opens up to things and where things break in upon and break open language. Derrida has put this argument about "marginality" to work on many levels: on that of the "things themselves" of Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenologies, and also on that of the "absolutely other" (*autrui*) of Emmanuel Levinas which is or wants to be beyond being and phenomenality, to be more radically transcendent than the Being or the phenomena of phenomenology. Derrida has also made the argument from marginality, the argument of the inside/outside, in his recurrent discussions of negative theology. He shows a persistent interest in "apophatic discourse," a discourse which by denying and negating affirms the God beyond being and language. The God of negative theology who inhabits the desert of silence beyond thought and word is an unavoidable matter of concern for Derrida.

Derrida was first drawn into a discussion of negative theology because deconstruction has been at times "accused of—rather than being congratulated for"<sup>11</sup>—being itself a negative theology. According to Derrida, *différance*, which is the organizing motif of his work, is neither a word (it is at best a word mutilated by a misspelling) nor a concept (the content signified by a word), nor an entity, nor any kind of a phenomenon which makes an appearance. That makes *différance* sound and look a little like YHWH or the *deus absconditus*, like an occulted and hidden deep ground of being and knowing and appearance. Now while it is true that *différance* tends to provoke

a certain apophatic discourse, and true too that it tends to borrow certain rhetorical devices from negative theology, such an objection (or confusion) can be more or less directly dispatched.

However negative negative theology is or intends to be, however much it wants to negate and say that God is not this and not that, even to the point of saying that God is not Being, however much it prays God to rid us of God, negative theology is still making a positive point. The negation, says Derrida, is a *dénégation*, a denial which de-negates or un-negates itself, a denial which by denying names of God affirms the unnameable God; a denial which by denial effects the return of the denied.<sup>12</sup> This is illustrated in a classic way by Meister Eckhart, the great Dominican preacher and Rhineland mystic who inherited the tradition of neoplatonic negative theology:

When I said that God was not being and was above being, I did not thereby contest his being, but on the contrary attributed to him a *more elevated being*.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, to deny that God is Being is by denying to affirm that God is a super-essential being, a *hyperousios*,<sup>14</sup> a hyperbeing beyond being, being-otherwise because otherwise-than-being. The negation of God's being is at the same time a denegation. Moreover this radically negative discourse is a promise of deferred presence and intuition, for by suspending words and concepts, by purifying itself of creatures, the soul clears away the obstacles that impede the unity of soul with God.

But *différance* is something different. For if *différance* is not a word or a concept, if *différance* is something quite unnameable, that is because it is the grammatical, semantic, and grammatological space in which names and concepts are generated, a generative matrix whose effects are words or concepts. Neither active nor passive, *différance* is not itself some sort of superessential being, but the space between or the discernible difference that separates "run" and "gun," or "laufen" and "kaufen," as opposed to their positive content. *Différance* thus enables these signifiers to function significantly; it constitutes their signifying operation. *Différance* is not (only) one of its own effects, rather "[t]his unnameable is the play which makes possible nominal effects, the relatively unitary and atomic structures that are called names...",<sup>15</sup> including even the textual practice which constitutes negative theology. *Différance* is not a name but the condition of possibility of names, the generating matrix of names. Of course, that is only true the first few times Derrida used it; after that, *différance* settles into Derrida's vocabulary and becomes (by use) one of his most famous names, which is why it was necessary for Derrida to move on. Neither name nor concept, neither entity nor super-entity, *différance* is rather a certain transcendental or quasi-transcendental condition of possibility (and impossibility) of speaking of entities.

But over and above this purely negative difference between deconstruction and negative theology, that one is not to be confused with the other, Derrida has taken a positive interest in negative theology as a “textual practice,”<sup>16</sup> in the protocol of apophatic discourse, which has its own rules and rhetoric. Derrida comes back again and again to negative theology; he does not know how to avoid speaking of it. That is because, in my view, the discourse of negative theology is paradigmatic of discourse itself as it is conceived in deconstruction. Language for Derrida is always promising but never quite making good on its promises. It is not that *die Sprache spricht*, language speaks, but rather *die Sprache verspricht*, language promises, to follow de Man’s paraphrase of Heidegger. Language promises to deliver the things themselves, being in itself, undistorted *Ansichsein*, pure reference without difference, perfect and unimpeded intentionality. But that is a promise it cannot keep. The thing itself, *die Sache selbst*, *la même chose*, always slips away, is always already deferred as well as referred, dif-ferred as well as referred, always delivered under the constraints of a system of differences by which it is framed and figured. Whatever we say of God is not true, the apophatic theologian teaches us, and something like that is true of everything for Derrida: whatever we say is not true, i.e., not true in some encompassing way that escapes the constraints of *différance*. That is the situation of language itself for Derrida, whether the referent is God or a perceptible object.

Or else, language promises not to say a thing, to keep quiet about the thing itself, not to say a thing, to observe perfect silence about what is absolutely unnameable—God, e.g. But it is too late; negative theology has already been speaking and making promises. It has in fact cultivated an abundant, rich and complex discourse, among the most memorable and beautiful discourses the West has known. The notion of the naked Godhead, and of the desert union of the naked soul with the naked Godhead, is caught up in the chain of memorable metaphors and soaring images which flow from the pens of the great mystical poets and mystic-preachers. Such notions as these, of the silent union of the soul with God, of the wordless desert, of living “without why,” of the still point of *Seelengrund* and *Gottesgrund*, of abyss united with abyss in a timeless, spaceless, motionless now: those beautiful images belong to the most soaring discourses the West has known, to the great classics of Western spiritual literature. Quite literally. These great spiritual masters, these masters of desert silence and wordlessness, do not know how to keep quiet. They do not know how to avoid speaking of the great secret about which they say—again and again—that we must all keep quiet.

That is because, for Derrida, over and above any promise that I make or even that language makes, there is the promise by which the I is promised over to language, the promise that is “older than I am,” the promise that “has seized the I,” which delivers me over to language, a *zoon* promised to *logos*.<sup>17</sup>

That promise, that archi-promise, puts Derrida at odds with those who think that ontology, the *logos* about being, is an “idolatry,” a kind of paganism which turns the absolute transcendence of God, God’s absolute alterity, into a graven image. That is the view of Levinas. Such a view is also shared by the great negative theologians who, like Levinas, seek a “God without Being,” to use the wonderful expression of Jean-Luc Marion, a God beyond and above Being.<sup>18</sup> Levinas demands an absolutely altruistic approach to the absolutely other. He thinks that the Heideggerian concept of Being or of the preunderstanding of Being blocks the otherness of the other, anticipatorily diminishing the absolute alterity with which the other shocks us. Taken in its radical alterity, the other is not being or a mode of being, something immanent in the world of understanding, but an excess beyond being, a radical transcendence, a movement beyond (*au déla*), something coming from on high, over and beyond (*meta*) being (*physis*). What Levinas says of the other person (*l’autrui*), and by extension of God, Marion holds quite explicitly of God. God is without Being (*Dieu sans l’être*) because God is beyond Being, because God is love, not Being. If God is without being, and if being belongs together with thought and language, then God inhabits the desert place staked out by negative theology, the place of the *alogos*, untainted and uncompromised by word or thought. The “ontological difference” of Heidegger and the *différance* of Derrida are antecedent horizons that compromise the absolute transcendence of God and constitute for Marion a higher or “second” idolatry, higher than worshiping graven images, to be sure, or the constructs of metaphysical theology, but no less able to insinuate the idolatrous presence of traces and images into the absolute emptiness of the Godhead beyond God.

Given what he has to say about marginality, Derrida does not think that it is possible to inhabit an absolutely desert place in which neither words nor concepts grow. The argument that Derrida mounted against Levinas in “Violence and Metaphysics,”<sup>19</sup> that the archi-violence of language, the incisions of discourse, are unavoidable, that an absolutely inviolate alterity is a dream, applies *a fortiori* to Marion and negative theology. By taking a stand with “being,” with the unavoidability of the discourse of being, Derrida lines himself up not only with Heidegger but also with Thomas Aquinas,<sup>20</sup> who is sharply criticized by Marion for his interpretation of the Pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>21</sup> For Derrida does not think we can elude the horizon of Being and language. Like Aquinas, Derrida takes the God beyond being of the Christian mystical tradition as the superessential being of the *via eminentioriae*. Commenting on the *Book of Causes*, Thomas says “the first cause is beyond being (*supra ens*) inasmuch as he is infinite *esse* itself.”<sup>22</sup> The first cause is not a finite *ens* but the plenitude and perfection of *esse subsistens*, which is what Eckhart called the *puritas essendi*. The horizontality of being is inescapable for Heidegger, Aquinas—and Derrida.

Derrida thinks that the secret that negative theology wants to keep, the absolutely secret namelessness of God, is de-negated, i.e., unnegated and divulged, as a secret by negative theology, as the secret that negative theology harbors, indeed as the secret that defines and constitutes negative theology. Keeping a secret is an operation of *différance*. The *deus absconditus* is the secret that negative theology promises to keep, and the promise of negative theology to avoid saying a thing is what *constitutes* negative theology; it is what makes negative theology to be what it is, allowing its distinctive discourse, its protocols and tropes, to take shape. Of God, negative theology promises not to say a thing. That is what negative theology *is*. But by then it is already too late. It has already taken place<sup>23</sup> because promising is a mode of *différance*, a discursive function, a performative speech act. For negative theology is a discourse whose object is the secret, a discourse that constitutes its object as the secret, as the nameless, dark, unutterable, unthinkable desert of the Godhead beyond God. Were negative theology to grow silent, were it to be struck dumb, were it to be silenced by the Vatican (as it sometimes is), then the secret would be lost; the secret that there is a secret, would go unnoticed. It is necessary to say again and again that there is a secret. It is necessary to spread the word, to let the word go forth, that of God we cannot say a thing. This was the mission of Meister Eckhart, e.g., who preached this word widely. Meister Eckhart, O.P.: Order of Preachers and of praisers and preachers, the author of the boldest and most beautiful sermons Christianity has known, and a veritable founder of the German vernacular. Do not say a thing, for whatever you say about God is not true: That is what Meister Eckhart says. But it is always too late. "Language has started without us, in us and and before us.... Indeed it must have been possible to speak in order to allow the question 'how to avoid speaking?' to arise."<sup>24</sup>

As the space in which things get said, *différance* is the space of negative theology, the space in which the fine things that Meister Eckhart says take shape. *Différance* is indeed beyond being, not because it is like the Platonic and neoplatonic *agathon* but rather because it is like Plato's *chora*, like a kind of archi-matrix or primal place in which words and things are figured and reconfigured, in which speaking and writing take place.<sup>25</sup>

But if Derrida emphasizes that negative theology is further testimony to the unavoidability of language, to the encompassing character of *différance*, he also emphasizes the *responsiveness* of this discourse to alterity, for this discourse is always traced by the other by which it is summoned and to whom it directs itself in a prayer. The *Confessions* of St. Augustine, the *Divine Names* of Dionysius, the sermons of Meister Eckhart, all are begun, ended, and punctuated with prayers to God who is the beginning and the end of these discourses, their cause and their content. Even though it tries to "deprive itself of meaning or of an object," apophatic discourse "takes place," and in

just such a way that this very lack of an object, this very being-beyond-being is exactly what beckons it. This beckoning call is the “call of the other” which always precedes, elicits and solicits speech. Even the most utterly negative discourse “preserves a trace of the other. A trace of an event older than it...”<sup>26</sup> When Meister Eckhart says that God is neither this nor that, when he tries to eradicate God from speech, that eradicating, apophatic speech is a trace of what it is trying to deny. For Meister Eckhart or Dionysius, the power to speak well of God, “even if, in order to speak *rightly* or *truly*, it is necessary to avoid speaking entirely,” is “a gift and an effect of God.” God is both the origin and the reference of apophatic discourse, which is the trace of its absent origin:<sup>27</sup>

This is what God’s name always names, before or beyond other names: the trace of the singular event that will have rendered speech possible even before it turns itself back toward—in order to respond to—this first or last reference. That is why apophatic discourse must also open with a prayer that recognizes, assigns or assures its destination: the Other as Referent of a *legein* which is none other than its cause.

This “singular event” is always presupposed and has always already taken place. This event is “at least, the ‘already there’ of a phrase, the trace of a phrase,”<sup>28</sup> a trace that wants to be absolutely singular, which is impossible, for its singularity is effaced just in virtue of its being repeatable, coded speech. So it is a trace that effaces itself, that reduces itself to ashes, to the ashes of negative theology.

We stand always already under the call of the other, always already in the trace of the other, which in the case of negative theology is the God of whom we cannot speak. So it is only because language is always already going on in us that we are led to ask how not to speak. It is necessary for us to speak, we who stand under a “language before language,” for we are always already addressed by the other, always already provoked and solicited (which means both asked and shaken), always already asked to be responsive, responding, responsible before this address. We are the beings promised and delivered over to *legein*, the ones who ask, too late, how not to speak, for whom, sometimes, not speaking is the best way, the only way, to speak well.

Negative theology de-negates: in being as utterly negative as possible it bears constant witness (*martyr*), like a good martyr, to what it negates; negative theology is an unmistakable trace of what it negates. It keeps divulging (denegating) the secret of the secret, the secret that it has a secret of which it cannot speak, a secret situated on the very margins of language and silence. But that secret marks apophatic discourse, leaving its trace, and is traced out in its discourse. Were it not for negative theology, the secret would be lost; it would disappear without a trace; there would be no witness or martyrs.

*Différance* is a certain archi-trace, a trace neither in the sense of a secon-

dary effect of a transcendent cause, like tracks left in the snow, nor in the sense of the active cause of its object, like the tracings of the brush which produce the portrait. Neither active nor passive, between active and passive, in the middle voice, on the margins or threshold, *différance* is the condition in which and under which the call of the other is inscribed and encoded, recalled and recorded, formed and figured, thought and articulated, written and spoken. In virtue of *différance* language is always going on, before us and without us, enabling us both to hear and to respond, to be addressed and to address, to call and recall and be recalled. Apophatic discourse is one of the things going on in *différance*, in the de-negating mode, in the mode of bearing witness to what it denies, for it cannot say a thing. Apophatic discourse is the most important way we have found not to speak of God.

When Derrida says that this is what theology calls God, that in negative theology alterity goes under the name of God, he is saying that there is of course nothing about deconstruction that allows us to determine, affirmatively or negatively, just what it is that solicits the response of the apophatic discourse, whether it is something infinite or finite, divine or mundane. It makes no difference whether the trace is the trace of something infinite or finite, whether the other is God, as in theology, or something in the world. For what is said here applies to the trace "in general," the distinction between the finite and the infinite, the "space" or the difference between them, being itself a matter of *différance*. It is the role of deconstruction to insist that discourse is always already the discourse of the other, solicited, awakened, drawn out of itself, by the other of language; that language is the mark or the trace of the other, in the double sense, the active/passive sense, of both marking off and being marked, of tracing and being traced, by the other of language. Without the trace of the other the other disappears without a trace; without the trace of the other, alterity itself would slip out of view. But there is nothing about deconstruction that settles the debate about the referent of apophatic discourse, nothing that affirms or falsifies the claims of faith; nothing that confirms or denies the claims of physiological reductionists who see there only the marvelous promptings not of the Spirit but of certain neurotransmitters. That is the age old dispute between belief and unbelief.

Deconstruction comes equipped with a kind of armed neutrality:<sup>29</sup> as a certain quasi-transcendental condition of possibility and impossibility, *différance* neither includes nor excludes the positive existence of any particular entity. It simply sets forth the conditions—the archi-condition—under which existential claims are made, while raising our level of vigilance about these claims, arming us with a heightened sense of suspicion about the constructedness of our discourse, including the constructedness of the discourse which claims to transcend discourse. The result is to leave faith in fear and trembling; but then that is a very religious result, and one of the oldest conditions of faith.

### *The Ethics of the Other*

Fear and trembling not only beset the faith of postmodernism but also its ethics, where the philosophy of alterity has no less interesting implications for philosophy and theology. Indeed I would say the very point of this philosophical movement is made clear only when one looks to its ethical—and ethico-political—upshot.<sup>30</sup> Instead of seeking basic principles, universalizable laws, or general criteria for judgment, Derrida's attention is turned toward "singularity" and difference. The singular is not the particular which is subsumed under the universal by the operations of judgment, but the idiosyncratic, the idiomatic, the unique and unrepeatable individual or individual situation in which ethical action must be taken. The most familiar antecedent for the direction taken by Derrida is Kierkegaard, whose famous treatment of the story of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* was focused on the unique and nonuniversalizable situation in which Abraham was caught up by the incomprehensible command he received from God. If the singularity of this situation was of the essence of the category of the "religious" for Kierkegaard, then Derrida has in fact taken up a characteristically religious (as opposed to an aestheticizing) direction. Derrida points to the time of the Kierkegaardian "moment"—a philosophical category Kierkegaard derived from the *New Testament* notion of the *kairos*—as the time of ethics, the time of undecidability in which the ethical decision must be made. Like Kierkegaard, Derrida also thematizes the fragment, the idiosyncratic singularities which cannot be assimilated without remainder into and by the "System."<sup>31</sup>

The difference that separates Derrida from Kierkegaard is that Derrida's interests do not turn quite so much on the existential subject which must decide in fear and trembling as on the "other," on the singularity of the other one whose claims are visited upon the subject. Thus if Derrida does not seek the universal principles which secure the "legitimacy" of "moral claims," that is because he thinks rather of the subject which is always already "laid claim to" by the "other" who, to put it in the language of Levinas, come to us from "on high."<sup>32</sup> He is focused not on the "autonomy" of the ethical "agent" but rather on a profound and thorough-going "heteronomy," which means the rule of the other, in virtue of which the other comes to the subject and makes it freedom and autonomy questionable. The rule of the other gives the rule to the philosophy of alterity; it sets its standards, gives it its bearings, but in just such a way as to lead this philosophical—or quasi-philosophical—thinking up to its limits, to the limits or margins of singularity, alterity and heteronomy. These are the "margins of philosophy," the limit situations which philosophy has always resisted, evaded or struggled to master. Rather than resisting them, deconstruction lets itself be defined by them, settling into these unsettling, dark interstices where traditional philosophical reflection

has felt least at home, inhabiting the margins between the universality of language and the silence of singularity.

In a recent paper, first delivered at a conference on deconstruction and law, Derrida gave his most striking and provocative formulation of the ethical—and legal and political—implication of deconstruction, by arguing that, far from being reduced to silence by the question of justice, deconstruction “is justice,” that it is defined and constituted by its attachment to justice. The “law,” he says, is deconstructible. That is because laws are a function of *différance*, i.e., they are written, historical, contingent, positive, constructs, effects of *écriture* in the Derridian sense. Laws are sometimes just but they are also sometimes unjust. Conforming to law sometimes means only mere legality whereas the demands of justice are often served only by opposing the law and even spending time in jail. Laws mean to be just and justice needs good laws in order to be rendered, but there is always a gap, a structural difference, between justice and the law. For while the law is always deconstructible—and if it were not, then the law would be not only an ass but a monster and a tyrant—“[j]ustice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible.”<sup>33</sup>

The undeconstructibility of justice does not refer to a Kantian Idea, to a Platonic *eidōs* or *agathon*, to the eternity of God or some noumenal being in itself, but to the radical singularity of the other to whom justice is owed. The singularity of the other is a structural limit towards which deconstruction is always straining, and this is almost perfectly exemplified in the ethical situation. A good law is a law without proper names, without rigged definite descriptions.<sup>34</sup> But justice is owed to the singularities which bear proper names. A perfect set of laws would be like a perfect map; it would end up being the same size as the region of which it is supposed to be the map. That would undo it as a map or a set of laws. A perfect set of laws is impossible,<sup>35</sup> not only practically but theoretically. The point of deconstruction is to inhabit the structural gap between justice and the law—or between language and the other of language—and to sensitize the law to the singularities to which the law is structurally blind, which the law excludes, omits, dismisses, disregards, forgets, silences, injures. Such singularities and alterities, which can never assume the force of the law, are what gives deconstruction its force. They drive, solicit and appeal to deconstruction analyses to keep the law open, pliable, revisable, flexible, self-correcting, i.e., to keep it oriented towards justice, which has to do with singularities.

The particular predilection that deconstruction shows for singularity, and the resistance it has to a thematics of autonomy and universality and to cultivating universalizable rationalization procedures, are, I believe, to be attributed to the fact that at a crucial point deconstruction has recourse to a Jewish rather than a Greek paradigm. In my view, deconstruction does not

have a Greek but a Jewish law in mind. It does not seek a philosophical conception of justice but a more biblical justice. This is to be explained not because there is anything devout about Derrida—the point of view of his work as an author is not religious—but because the strains of biblical religion have made their way into his work by way of his considerable interest in the work of Levinas. In Levinas, we witness the strange occurrence of an almost prophetic voice raised up among the postmoderns, of a modern day Amos crying out for justice in the muted terms of a certain phenomenology of ethical obligation, a phenomenology which is neither Husserlian nor Heideggerian, which is even in a sense not quite phenomenological. From the very start—from his earliest criticism of Husserl for treating the “other” as the transcendental analogue of the ego, Levinas has been convinced that philosophy cannot absorb the shock of genuine alterity. The sights of philosophy are incorrigibly set—to use Levinas’ idiom—on being and phenomenality, while the other person comes to us from beyond being and beyond appearance, as a kind of moral infinity that bursts asunder the finite horizons of philosophical categories. As the most important of the European thinkers of this century to philosophize explicitly out of an experience of the Holocaust, Levinas insists on the irreducible alterity and unencompassable infinity of the other person, from whose face issues the categorical command “thou shalt not kill.” Levinas’ is a philosophy of the impossibility of murder, of the other whose claim on us is unavoidable. The other, Levinas says, is emblematically “the widow, the orphan and the stranger” of *Exodus 22:21*, the one who is laid low, the helpless one who calls out for help, the outcast who abridges and lays claim to our freedom and agency, who elicits and solicits our responsibility.

Levinas’ unmistakably biblical, even Yahwistic, philosophy of alterity has been a central motif and an important impulse for Derrida’s deconstruction, one whose centrality we are just really beginning to appreciate. Levinas does not constitute an *ad hoc* addition to Derrida’s repertoire, a source to which Derrida beats a hasty retreat when pressed about the ethics of deconstruction. Levinas is an essential and an original impulse of deconstruction, one of the primary sources of the experience of alterity from which the philosophy of *différance* first took its bearings.<sup>36</sup> Although Derrida is not a religious writer and does not, as far as I know, hold any religious views, his thought seems to me in no small part driven by a kind of biblical sensitivity, let us say a hyperbolic sensitivity or hypersensitivity, to the demands of the other, to the claims laid upon us by the different one, of the one who is left out or cast out, who lacks a voice or a hearing, a standing or stature.

This is I think a rather more biblical than Greek and philosophical way to think about ethics. If we try to think philosophically about the sort of “ethics” contained in the *New Testament* we find a systematic valorization of the “different,” not the same; of the other, not the self; of the singular, not the

universal. The interest of the *New Testament* is in the leper and the lame, the Samaritan and the prodigal son, the prostitute and the sinner. The kingdom of God is vested in what St. Paul called the *me onta* of the world (*I Cor.* 1:28), those who are not so much “beyond being” as beneath being, less than being, the things which are not, which lack what the world, and what philosophy which belongs to the world, calls being. The scandal of Jesus lies in the preferential option he shows for these *me onta*, for the humble, the impure, the outcast, and in his willingness to set aside the rule of law and a law of rules in order to heal on the sabbath or to sit down to dinner with the ritually impure. One can hardly imagine a more characteristic story in the *New Testament* than that of the man with the withered hand who is brought before Jesus by the Pharisees to see if Jesus would break the laws of the sabbath by healing the man’s hand (*Mark* 3:1-6). From a deconstructive point of view, the law of the sabbath is deconstructible, but justice, which is not deconstructible, demands that the man’s hand be healed. The man with the withered calls to us from beyond the law, from beneath the law, and calls for justice. For the law was made for the singularity, not the singularity for the law.

#### *Conclusion: Toward a Christian Deconstruction*

If deconstruction is a philosophy of alterity, if it has nothing to do with the caricature of philosophical tricksters playing with words, then it has important bearings upon the self-understanding of Christian faith. It helps, as I have only indicated here, to cultivate a nuanced sense both of the alterity of God and of the impossibility of treating God as absolutely other; and it refocuses Christian ethics on the ethics of the other, the lame and the leper, the widow, the orphan and the stranger. However, many other implications remain to be explored. Deconstruction can also play an important role in delimiting the institutional power that Christianity has accumulated and in sensitizing Christianity to the victims of that power, to women and the Jews, e.g., to its almost structural anti-Semitism, anti-feminism and Eurocentrism. Deconstruction can awaken Christianity to the deeply historical and textual character of the sacred scriptures themselves and to the contingency of dogmatic formulations that have evolved in the tradition. It can give a renewed appreciation of the multiplicity of the Christian tradition, of the voices that are silenced *in* and *by* the tradition, producing thereby the illusion of “the” tradition. Christian tradition is many traditions, many forgotten and suppressed voices which need to be heard. Deconstruction can sensitize Christianity to the other of Christianity, not only to the other Christianities within Christianity which it silences, but also to the equiprimordiality of religious experiences outside of the Christian confessions.

The deconstruction of Christianity eventuates in a Christian deconstruction. That is not a destruction of Christianity but a radical pluralizing and opening

up of the many Christianities that are possible. Christian deconstruction would represent not a destructive diluting of Christianity but rather the most rigorous loyalty to the oldest Christian example of all, to the One Who did not hesitate to deconstruct the law of the sabbath in name of divine justice, or to sit down to dinner with sinners and the outcast. A Christian deconstruction would not amount to a negative destruction of Christian faith and tradition but to the most radical allegiance to a certain *rabboni* who was, to the scandal of all, a teacher of alterity, who to everyone's consternation kept spreading the good news about alterity. *Usque ad mortem*.

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## NOTES

1. Lyotard's more familiar characterization of it as an "incredulity toward metanarratives" is also very useful; see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984), pp. xxiv, 37ff.

2. Jacques Derrida, "A Number of Yes," translated by Brian Holmes, *Qui Parle* 2 (1988), pp. 120-33.

3. See Derrida's response to the uninformed attack on him by William Bennett, then Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, in "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils," translated by Catherine Porter and Edward Morris, *Diacritics* 13 (1983), pp. 3-20.

4. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 158.

5. Richard Kearney, *Dialogue with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 123-24. For a good account of reference in Derrida, see Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), especially pp. 280-82.

6. Kearney, p. 124.

7. By the same token, deconstruction does not claim that the speaking "subject" is an unreal fiction. As Derrida says, "To deconstruct the subject does not mean to deny its existence. There are subjects, 'operations' or 'effects' (*effets*) of subjectivity. This is an incontrovertible fact. To acknowledge this does not mean, however, that the subject is what it *says* it is. The subject is not some meta-linguistic substance or identity, some pure *cogito* of self-presence; it is always inscribed in language. My work does not, therefore, destroy the subject; it simply tries to resituate it" (Kearney, p. 125). The "deconstruction" of the subject shows that the subject lacks the sovereignty, the autonomy, the pure spontaneity and authorial authority by which it wants to be defined. The subject is always already caught in the grips of wider systems that antedate and surround it. The time of the subject is a past that has never been present. The subject is all along antedated by and lives under the constant influence of systems that are older and deeper than it: by

unconscious and preconscious forces, by systems of social and political power, by bodily forces, by the linguistic system in which we are always and already immersed. These forces at once limit the subject, delimiting the scope of its beliefs and practices, while also making it possible. Derrida's efforts are always bent towards minimizing the effects of regularizing subjectivity and maximizing the possibilities of alterity, of inventing new forms of subjectivity.

8. The proper name is a central concern of *Glas*, translated by Richard Rand and John Leavey (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1986).

9. Derrida, "The Principle of Reason," p. 19.

10. The thematics of *viens* is present throughout Derrida's writings, but see "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy," translated by John Leavey, in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, edited by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 61-67.

11. Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," translated by Ken Frieden, in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p. 74.

12. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," p. 95. I have developed Derrida's argument against this confusion in John D. Caputo, "Mysticism and Transgression: Derrida and Meister Eckhart," *Continental Philosophy II* (1989), pp. 24-39.

13. *Meister Eckhart: Deutsche Predigte und Traktate*, edited by Josef Quint (München: Carl Hanser, 1965), p. 196: 25-28; Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," p. 78. For a commentary and a fuller development of Meister Eckhart's views, see John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987), ch. 3.

14. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," p. 77.

15. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 26-27.

16. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," p. 74.

17. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," p. 84.

18. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," p. 90; Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Without God*, translated by Thomas Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); for a commentary on Marion's book from the point of view of Derrida, see John D. Caputo, "How to Avoid Speaking of God: The Violence of Natural Theology," in *The Prospects for Natural Theology*, edited by Eugene Long (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), pp.128-50.

19. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Differences*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 79-153.

20. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," p. 102.

21. Marion, *God Without Being*, pp. 73-83.

22. Thomas Aquinas, *In de causis*. 1. 6, n. 175. For a commentary, see John D. Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), p. 131.

23. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," p. 97.

24. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," p. 99.

25. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," pp. 103-8.

26. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," pp. 97. Derrida is here invoking a very Levinasian theme: that the subject is constituted by a primordial responsiveness to and responsibility for the other, who is older, higher, more excellent, and prior to the subject and the subject's freedom. By insisting that negative theology is a prayer, not just a predication, Derrida is also, like Levinas, displacing the primacy of the *what?* and taking up the privilege of the *who speaks?* See Levinas, *Other than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonus Lingis (The Hague: Martin Nijhoff, 1984), pp. 03-20 for a general sketch of the argument.

27. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," p. 98.

28. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," p. 98.

29. See Caputo, "Mysticism and Transgression," pp. 25-29.

30. I have explored the ethical implications of deconstruction in detail in my *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

31. These are the thematics of *Glas*.

32. A great deal of what I am saying here about ethics and Derrida also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to Lyotard.

33. Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" translated by Mary Quaintance, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, edited by Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfeld, David Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 03-67; see pp. 14-15. For a commentary on this article, see my "Hyperbolic Justice: Deconstruction, Myth and Politics," *Research in Phenomenology* 21 (1991), pp. 03-20.

34. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 131.

35. Notice the pattern: a perfect law is not a law; a perfect proper name is not a name. Derrida systematically explores such limit situations.

36. In 1968, in "*Différance*," in discussing the historical sources of his notion of *différance*, Derrida singles out de Saussure, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Freud, and Levinas, who together form a network that "traverses our 'era' as the delimitation of the ontology of presence" (*Writing and Difference*, p. 21).