Derrida and the Problem of Ethics*

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Abstract
An increasing number of literary critics and theorists have come to investigate Derri-
da’s contribution to ethics in recent years. This trend both challenges an earlier tendency
to attack Derrida for being ethically irrelevant and complicates the discussion of the
relationship between deconstruction and ethics. In response to the on-going debates over
the ethical significance of Derrida’s works, this paper attempts to trace the relationship
between Levinas and Derrida with regard to the thinking or problematizing of ethics:
while Levinas foregrounds ethics as “first philosophy,” seeing the ethical relation as a
fundamental openness to the other that precedes subjective being, Derrida—seeing de-
constructive “reading” as an opening out of the text (of “writing”)—is aware of the
danger (and perhaps impossibility) of clearly “naming” that which is “ethics” (or “ethic-
al”), as well as the need to be open to its “possibilities.” My contention then is that, if
Levinas’s ethics involves moving beyond the totality of being to the infinity of otherness,
deconstruction is simultaneously ethical and non-ethical, exceeding incessantly the
boundary of the ethical.

Keywords
Derrida, Levinas, ethics, deconstruction, reading and writing,
the ethical relation, responsibility, intersubjective violence

Ever since his landmark 1966 speech “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse
of the Human Sciences” had an everlasting impact on the humanities, Derrida has been
continuously challenged to explain the ethical significance of his writings. This concern
with the problem of ethics in Derrida’s works has been further complicated by the
recent surge of interest in ethics among many literary analysts and critics. Within this
maelstrom, Derrida’s followers and critics alike have engaged in impassioned
arguments over the so-called “ethical turn” in Derrida’s career as a “philosopher.”

No matter whether such a turn does in fact exist, these arguments over Derrida and

* The paper was funded by a grant from National Science Council of Taiwan (NSC89-2411-H259005).
the ethical nature of his works have not only pushed readers to read Derrida’s works in an ethical light, but also caused many to associate his name with larger ethical questions. This tendency to relate Derrida and his works to the ethical obliges us to ask whether Derrida’s discourse, or deconstruction, possess ethical value, and how we can appraise deconstruction from an ethical standpoint. In considering these two questions, should we not also ask whether ethics is the proper domain for us to think of deconstruction? Or, to push this even a step further, isn’t the ethical, itself, susceptible to deconstruction? These questions have directed the trajectory of my discussion of Derrida in this paper. The first part of this paper centers in a reading of “Passions: ‘An Oblique Offering’,” itself a text engaging with an “ethical response” to the ethical demand. Levinas is brought into discussion in the second part of this paper for the significant trace he has left in Derrida’s problematization of ethics. After revealing the similarity and/or differences between Derrida’s deconstructive reading as a gesture of hospitality and Levinas’s “ethical relation,” this paper moves on to the Nietzschean problematic of power relations to look at the issue in a broader context.

I. Passions: “An Oblique Offering”

In “Passions” Derrida expresses his view of the ethical challenge put to him in a very explicit way:

One can today, in many different places, attend to or participate in a congenial and disturbing task: restoring morality and, especially, reassuring those who had serious reasons for being troubled by this topic. Some souls believe themselves to have found in Deconstruction [“la” Deconstruction]—as if there were one, and only one—a modern form of immorality, of amorality, or of irresponsibility (etc.: a discourse too well known; I do not need to continue), while others, more serious, in less of a hurry, better disposed toward so-called Deconstruction, today claim the opposite; they discern encouraging signs and in increasing numbers (at times, I must admit, in some of my texts) which would testify to a permanent, extreme, direct, or oblique, in any event, increasingly intense attention, to those things which one could identify under the fine names of “ethics,” “mora-
ility,” “responsibility,” “subject,” etc. Before reverting to no-responding, it would be necessary to declare in the most direct way that if one had the sense of duty and of responsibility, it would compel breaking with both these moralisms, with these two restorations of morality, including, therefore, the remoralization of deconstruction, which naturally seems more attractive than that to which it is rightly opposed, but which at each moment risks reassuring itself in order to reassure the other and to promote the consensus of a new dogmatic slumber. And it is so that one not be in too much of a hurry to say that it is in the name of a higher responsibility and a more intractable [intractable] moral exigency that one declares one’s distaste, uneven as it may be, for both moralisms. Undoubtedly, it is always following the affirmation of a certain excess, that one can suspect the well-known immorality, indeed the denigrating hypocrisy of moralisms. But nothing allows one to assert that the best names or the most suitable figures for this affirmation are ethics, morality, politics, responsibility, or the subject. (15-16)

What Derrida has “declare(d) in the most direct way” is a sort of avoidance of, or even aversion to the names or figures of the ethical. While he rejects the charge of being “immoral,” he also wouldn’t accept the claim that his work is increasingly attentive to ethically related issues. He further objects to interpretations of his refusal to “moralize” deconstruction which take this refusal to be based on “a higher responsibility,” a position some of his defenders take.

It is interesting that Derrida’s “Passions” was originally staged, or contextualized, as an invited response to a collection of essays on his work; these eleven critical essays were to be published with Derrida’s “response” as *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, edited by David Wood. This pre-text was a singularly appropriate one for Derrida’s reflections on the problems of response, responsibility and duty, all of which are key concepts pertaining to the domain of the ethical. But here he did not “respond” normally, by commenting on or answering questions raised by the critical essays. Instead, he inscribed the “condition” of this work into his text to problematize the task he had been assigned, that of an “academic response,” by disturbing the norms prescribed for it. In other words, Derrida took this as an opportunity to “respond” to his critics by demonstrating, performing, and playing around the margins of the dilemma of a “response” in which the writing subject has always already been “caught,” thus
making it actually impossible to freely “respond.” And, as one can evince from Derri-da’s “Passions,” this particular case of responsibility has become, to a certain extent, emblematic of the very problem of the ethical.

Derrida first shows that this academic activity is in effect a kind of “ceremony.” Like a ceremony this event has brought together eleven contributors of critical essays on Derrida, and these “participants” are required to conform to pre-established rules and protocols. As with any Critical Reader we have a name, in this case “Derrida,” under which a collection of writings has been (as)signed and which has become the object to be analyzed and the “subject matter” to be discussed. We also have several (critical) readers who read these writings signed by Derrida objectively, analytically, at a “critical” distance. But as participants in this ritual ceremony Derrida and the contributors have certain pre-assigned roles to play. Derrida, as the “subject” of study, the subject of the writings which are the subject matter of this Reader, is assigned the role of “author”—suggesting that he is “responsible” for all his writings and that they form a coherent “system.” On the other hand, the contributors are designated the task of analyzing these writings and paying their respective “tributes” to the author. Both Derrida, a participant and the focus of the ceremony, and the critics, spectators of the ceremony, are required to analyze, evaluate, and understand the rules in order to be able to comply with the larger system and make it work.

The ritualistic aspect of this academic activity becomes still clearer when Derrida brings into play the “suggested” title of his response, “An Oblique Offering.” Drawing on the religious implications of the word “offering,” Derrida associates the academic scene with the scene of the Last Supper: he compares the author to the sacrificial victim, offering his textual body for consumption, and the critical readers to the apostles who, while consuming the textual body, pay tribute through faithful readings of the “Gospel.” It is indeed a ritual, even a mystical one. The question is: To whom does this “oblique offering” belong? Does it belong to Derrida, who offers the textual body as a sacrifice to be consumed, or does it belong to the contributors who bring forth their tributes in the form of faithful readings?

In this ceremony, then, the contributors to a book gathered together like Christ’s disciples at the Last Supper to offer up their thoughts on the master’s writings—his “body and blood” already broken and spilled for them. However, it is not possible for us, the readers of the Critical Reader, to decide on the status of these several offerings (readings of Derrida), any more than we (or they) can decide on the status of Derrida’s own (“original”) offering(s). With their respective interests, agendas, academic posi-
tions and specializations, national and sexual allegiances, these contributors offer up their tributes on the assumption that they have the freedom and right to *intervene* in the “system” of Derrida’s writing. This freedom of intervention has breached the apparent focus of the book (the *Critical Reader*), which can only be relatively determined. And having been relatively determined, what is still *indeterminate* allows for multiple desires, strategies, purposes and thematizations to run through it. This book can no longer be something objective and systematic; nor can the (critical) readers themselves be “free subjects” since they are inevitably bound by the rules of the ceremony. Still, with so many “subjects” involved, the *Critical Reader* as objective and totalized “book” is torn apart.

It is in response to this sort of rupture that Derrida raises the question of responsibility. What he tries to show in his “Passions” is that the multiple layers of textuality subsumed under a single name can never really be congruent with the actual performance of this ceremony, this event. The texts collected in the book entitled *Derrida: A Critical Reader* can never really “return” (“respond”) to the supposed “author,” Derrida. This is not really a “subject” after all but a mere “name” and, as Derrida says:

> [...] that which bears, has borne, will bear your name seems sufficiently free, powerful, creative, and autonomous to live alone and radically to do without you and your name. What returns to your name, to the secret of your name, is the ability to disappear *in your name*. (13)

Who, then, is to be held responsible for these critiques, each of which has its singular life, its own destiny, even though all are dedicated to the name of Derrida?

In this particular case a decision was reached to invite Derrida to respond to the various evaluations, analyses, critiques, interventions of his readers in the *Critical Reader* and, beyond them, to the larger academic circle that has been “intervening” in

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1 Congruent with the challenge to the authorial function and the structure of the name are Derrida’s experiments on writing in *Glas*. Derrida proclaims in an interview that he is not fully responsible for the ruses and calculations in the text, and that this text can only be of interest if one is assured that the “I” is no longer aware of what is “my” business. What Derrida is driving at by “the relinquishing of the responsibility for control and mastery,” as Rodolphe Gasché has astutely pointed out, “is testimony to a desire to open writing to unforeseeable effects, in other words, to the Other. It is a function of a responsibility for the Other—for managing in writing a place for the Other, saying yes to the call or demand of the Other, inviting a response.” This of course suggests Levinas. And this maneuver is motivated by “a search for the absolute, more precisely the structural, limits of calculation as well as of the calculating subject.” See Gasché’s *Inventions of Difference*, 230. For Derrida’s comments on *Glas* referred to here, see “Ja, ou le faux-bond” in *Point de suspension* (See Points...).
his texts for years. And this was an invitation to which Derrida responded in the affirmative—perhaps, in this context of academic protocols and ceremonious rules of politeness and friendship among colleagues, he had not choice but to agree. Did his acceptance come even, then, from his own “sense of duty”? Perhaps, but Derrida is after all, by laying bare the “discourse” of the ceremony, exploding the presumption of academic readers that the “author” is responsible for his texts and thus obliged to “answer for” them, in effect asking what finally constitutes “duty” and “responsibility.”

One of Derrida’s key points here is what he calls the “double act” of the invitation:

An invitation leaves one free, otherwise it becomes constraint. It should never imply: you are obliged to come, you have to come, it is necessary. But the invitation must be pressing, not indifferent. It should never imply: you are free not to come and if you don’t come, never mind, it doesn’t matter. Without the pressure of some desire—which at once says “come” and leaves, nevertheless, the other his absolute freedom—the invitation immediately withdraws and becomes unwelcoming. It must therefore split and redouble itself at the same time, at once leave free and take hostage: double act, redoubled act. (14)

As an invitation inherently contains both freedom and pressure, one cannot simply respond out of duty, or in conformity to duty, although one is necessarily pressured by the invitation. To respond out of duty or in conformity to duty is a sort of programmed response, which Derrida says is “too easy” (16): it would inevitably cause the “dogmatic slumber” against which he warns. Thus Derrida challenges Kant’s claim that an inner sense of duty, a natural respect for the higher moral laws, is the ground of morality. While Kant then posits higher moral laws that govern human ethical life

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2 In this connection Derrida also points out that it was David Wood, the chief editor, who came up with the title for his response and asked Derrida to write/make an “oblique offering.” Since this title inevitably participated in shaping the configuration of the written response, David Wood also bears (Derrida points out) part of the “responsibility.” As this case exemplifies, writings are not simply a subject’s (author’s) autonomous achievement, although we tend to thematize them with titles as if these “names” could categorize them into discrete systems of thought.

3 This formulation could be seen, for example, in the following passage quoted from Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*: “The concept of duty, therefore, requires of the action objective accord with the law but requires of the maxim of the action subjective respect for the law, as the sole way of determining the will by the law. And on this rests the distinction between consciousness of having acted in conformity with duty and from duty, that is, respect for the law, the first of which (legality) is possible even if the
and demand respect, Derrida problematizes the essence of the moral laws:

What is the ethnicity of ethics? The morality of morality? What is responsibility? What is the “What is?” in this case? etc. These questions are always urgent. In a certain way they must remain urgent and unanswered, at any rate without a general and rule-governed response, without a response other than that which is linked specifically each time, to the occurrence of a decision without rules and without will in the course of a new test of the undecidable. (16-17)

What was stressed here is the possibility of choice in the face of the undecidable. “Between” the double act of invitation that presses while also allowing for freedom arises the prospect of inventive decisions which are not made by following rules (as with the “general and rule-governed response”) but by interacting with the event each time differently. As such, the ethnicity of ethics, the morality of morality, and the “what is” are always urgent questions that must be answered each time and in each place again and again, and there is no escape from this challenge. Derrida’s “response” in this case to this Critical Reader and his critical readers in general is thus a sort of venture, which he refers to as a performance, an “inventive decision.” Derrida does not “respond” to the general demand that he defend his own ethical or political position. Rather, he ponders the dilemma he faces in receiving the “invitation”: the difficulties he encounters in both responding and non-responding.

For those who are (still) determined to read Derrida in an ethical light, it is clear that he must respond to this urgent question of the “ethical value” of deconstruction. But we already know, from his discussion in “Passions” of “response” as indeterminate or open-ended ceremony, that he will have no choice but to forestall his response to such a question. How could he presume to be the “judge” of this any more than he could “judge” the essays written on him for the Critical Reader, the absolute “author” who is capable of passing judgment on how his writings should be read and thus passing judgment on these critical essays, with their various (“subjective”) strategies, allegiances, trajectories of thinking? As writing is always excessive of its “intention,” and reading is always a differential supplement to the text of which the “originary” inclinations alone have been the determining grounds of the will, whereas the second (morality), moral worth, must be placed solely in this: that the action takes place from duty, that is, for the sake of the law alone” (69).
meaning is always already inscribed in the logic of supplement, the “subject” of writing is in fact subjected to his/her own writing, and each reading is involved within a different contextualization. It is therefore impossible to meet the ritualistic demand that commits the “subject” of writing to answer and be responsible for “his” works by responding to critics—and also impossible to meet the demands of that other (arguably even more insidious) ritual which requires that he explain why deconstruction can or cannot be “ethical.” If deconstruction unsettles the metaphysical ground of self-present meaning and truth then it also unsettles the ground of “ethical” meaning and truth.

Nevertheless, though he argues that response is not possible or at least must be deferred, Derrida is also not given the luxury of resorting to nonresponse. Not responding to his “critics,” after all, shows no more respect than “responding” to them (and especially when he has been “invited” to respond). Not responding after all could be considered endless postponement, and thus “irresponsibility.” Thus on the one hand Derrida is showing us that there is no response without its limitations, no responsibility taken or duty performed without some sacrifice being made, some form of “justice” being questioned. Yet at the same time, a carefully weighed “nonresponse” also brings about its own, perhaps even greater risk of not doing justice—to the persons asking or writing about him and their texts, to the questions asked of him, to the question of the “ethicity of ethics” itself. One is left in a dilemma, a stalemate, caught between a necessarily false “responsibility” and a nonresponse that inevitably implies “an inadmissible ingratitude and a culpable indifference” (21).

“Passions: ‘An Oblique Response’” might therefore be said to have “doubly engaged”—and thus also “disengaged”—itself in responding to the invitation to respond to Derrida’s critical readers by reflecting on the impossibility of responding and responsibility, by responding by not responding. Its only “response” is one that delineates the impossibility of a responsible response. But this strategy is not merely a “passive” one. For this demonstration of the dilemma, being Derrida’s inventive decision upon the imposed duty, underscores the problem in asking for a “philosopher’s” apology. Moreover, Derrida has turned the heated demand for an “ethics of deconstruction” back on itself and shown that this demand itself is a dogmatic and therefore violent one, a form of “violence to writing.”

Derrida’s deliberate choice to distance deconstruction from the ethical seems even more significant when we consider his long-time dialogue with his early teacher Levinas, that “philosopher of the other” known for his rethinking of the problem of the
This dialogue begins early with Derrida’s “Violence and Metaphysics,” where he performs a sort of deconstructive reading of Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity.* From then on, we find traces of thinking crossing over/in/through both writers’ works, including the “concept” of trace itself, despite the fact that while Levinas devoted himself to rethinking “the ethical” Derrida is determined not to “name” it. What does this simultaneous proximity to and distance from Levinas tell us about Derrida’s position on the ethical? Here I will move to Levinas’s project of re-defining ethics before coming back to a further exploration of Derrida’s perspective.

II. In the Trace of Levinas’s Ethical Relation

In contrast to Derrida’s refusal to define his work as being a part of any ethical project whatsoever, Levinas’s philosophical endeavor evolves around a re-definition of the ethical that challenges the traditional prioritization of ontology in the discipline of philosophy. For Levinas, the ethical should no longer be thought of as subordinated to ontology. This traditional hierarchical configuration is based on the presumption of the presence of the knowing being, which comes to be both the grounds for and the condition of the establishment of ethical relations. But ethical relations, Levinas argues, are actually prior to the self-realization or self-consciousness of the knowing being; in other words, the “being” of the self/subject/consciousness comes into presence only secondarily, but the ethical relation with “the other” is always already there. Thus for Levinas ethics should replace ontology as “first philosophy.”

This argument is clearly summarized in “Ethics as First Philosophy” through a critical reflection on the phenomenological legacy passed down from Husserl. According to Levinas, Husserl has pushed the idea of the knowing being, established as

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4 "Violence and Metaphysics" is collected in *Writing and Difference,* one of Derrida’s grounding works, written even before he coined the term “deconstruction.” This “deconstructive” reading of Levinas has somehow determined the initial reception of Levinas’s work in the English-speaking world—an understanding mainly based on *Totality and Infinity* as a book “criticized” by Derrida. However, reading Derrida’s reading as a “critique” would be to miss the point. As Bernasconi and Critchley have pointed out in their introduction to *Re-Reading Levinas,* Levinas’s and Derrida’s entanglements in each other’s texts beginning with “Violence and Metaphysics” results from a complex, continuing mutual assimilation that “should not be reduced to a question of influence” (xiii). This is also the position I shall take in investigating the relationship between the two thinkers.

5 For a discussion of Derrida’s appropriation of the “concept” of trace, see Bernasconi’s “The Trace of Levinas in Derrida.”
the *cogito* at the beginning of the modern age by Descartes, to the point where the knowing being and known objects are inseparably pre-senting and pre-sented in the structure of intentionality. The *cogito* or consciousness is always “consciousness of something,” and this known object, by the same token, is “known” only in terms of the intending consciousness’s experience. In this formulation, knowledge is an act of consciousness that grasps and represents the object through the “Transcendental Reduction,” which brackets out (suspends) all presumptions about an object in order to approach it “directly”—as if the aim and will of the object corresponded with the intentionality of consciousness. For Levinas:

This Transcendental Reduction suspends all independence in the world other than that of consciousness itself, and causes the world to be rediscovered as *noema*. As a result, it leads—or ought to lead—to full self-consciousness affirming itself as absolute being, and confirming itself as an *I* that, through all possible ‘differences’, is identified as master of its own nature as well as of the universe and able to illuminate the darkest recesses of resistance to its powers. (*The Levinas Reader* 79)

To challenge this formulation of consciousness, which is rooted in the Platonic and Cartesian tradition that presupposes a knowing being and prioritizes ontology, Levinas points out that the other aspect of “consciousness” has thus far been neglected. This aspect of consciousness does not have any attribute. It is in a kind of absolute passivity that has nothing to do with the will, with intentionality or sovereignty, all the attributes that have been assigned to an “I” established as the “master of its own nature as well as of the universe.” This is the quality of simple duration, similar to that which happens during the aging process: there is no act but merely an implicit content passively passing through time without the intervention of the “I.”

This aspect of consciousness as passivity is described as the *mauvaise conscience* against the *bonne conscience*, where the latter is the firmly self-knowing, intentional consciousness. While the *bonne conscience* can happily and affirmatively assert the “I” as that which is capable of free contemplation in happy solitude, the *mauvaise conscience* is that which has always been ignored by the consciousness but nonetheless

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6 We can trace the influence of Bergson’s pure *duree* here but more specifically that of the early Heidegger’s thoroughly temporal interpretation of *Dasein*. (Both Levinas and his student Derrida were much influenced by Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, a book dedicated to Husserl).
has continually existed since long before the consciousness established itself as the “sovereign individual,” the “subject,” the “I.” Levinas’s re-cognition of the mauvaise conscience aims at shattering the complacency of the bonne conscience and putting its legitimacy in question: Since the legitimacy of the bonne conscience as “full self-consciousness affirming itself as absolute being” is now in question, can one still assert one’s sovereign individual existence?

Levinas discusses the way in which this “interstices of Being” interrupts our self-complacent solipsism in relation to the sense of irony implicit in our common quest for “the meaning of life.” Although the act of embarking on this quest already affirms our “being” as active world-explorer, it also “suggests that the absolute ego, already endowed with meaning by its vital, psychic and social forces, or its transcendental sovereignty, then returned to its mauvaise conscience” (ibid. 81). In other words, if the “active consciousness” were “enough,” were “all there is,” then why the anxiety (Heidegger), why the constant sense of meaningless and/or boredom, the need to find (a) meaning? This is the “irony” of subjective consciousness, the precarious situation of the “I”: as a contingent production of “its vital, psychic and social forces,” the “I” is never an absolute presence and has been incessantly suffering from the need to establish its own meaning. The mauvaise conscience then intermittently erupts the bonne conscience that has emerged out of its passive duration. Levinas’s formulation of the mauvaise conscience stresses the questionable “right” of the doubtful “good consciousness” to be in the world. Being unable to confirm its existence in the first place, the “I” is bound to put forward the question about its being (Heidegger’s Seinsfrage, the “question of being”), to question and also to be questioned. In other words, our active consciousness’s “place” in the world is in need of clarification and justification by language: “One has to speak, to say I, to be in the first person, precisely to be me (moi). But, from that point, in affirming this me being, one has to respond to one’s right to be” (82).

Based on this understanding of the “me being” Levinas makes his key argument that ethics is “first philosophy.” As the “me” being must be affirmed by responding in language, it is actually defined and confined by its responsibility (as in “response,” “responsiveness” to the question, the “call”) to/for beings other than “me.” Therefore, it is clear that the “I” is not the proper domain in or from which to begin the philosophical inquiry into our existence; “the first and final question” should be posed by the mauvaise conscience that has not yet been secured in its right to be, its place in the world; that is, the question should be posed by/through/in terms of the more radical
possibility in/of the mauvaise conscience, its more radical openness to the other, that grounds and makes possible the “I”’s own response to the other.

Therefore, prior to the ontological quest to understand (our) Being we have the inquiry into the (our) relation to the other, the “ethical” relation, since the problematic “I” as such is obliged to respond to the question of “my” right to be; as this “ethical” relation is what constitutes my existence, it is “my” responsibility to respond. Levinas presents this existential condition poignantly:

My being-in-the world or my “place in the sun,” my being at home, have there not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing? Pascal’s “my place in the sun” marks the beginning of the image of the usurpation of the whole earth. A fear for all the violence and murder my existing might generate, in spite of its conscious and intentional innocence. It is the fear of occupying someone else’s place with the Da of my Dasein; it is the inability to occupy a place, a profound utopia. (82)

The self must respond to the other with “a fear for all the violence and murder my existing might generate” as if this sort of (fearful) response were my first duty, and this “ethical” relation is what constitutes my existence. Thus, in Levinas’s formulation, the meaning of ethics is explored as a duty and responsibility to the other which is ascribed to the “I” before everything else, even the subject’s identity. This priority of duty precludes other systems of morality that are based on concepts of freedom, rational will, or happiness as fulfillment of virtue. Morality is that which is always “welcome to the other” without any questions being asked. And a moral life is one that keeps emptying itself towards the other in an endless responsiveness or responsibility.

There are at least two important shifts involved here. First, our subjective being is conceived as being structured by its inevitably obligated relation to the other, which is, in Levinas’s sense, the ethical relation per se. Secondly, following the de-

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7 Kafka was not the only exiled Jew influenced by the radical Protestant Kierkegaard; we also see Kierkegaard’s influence on Levinas here. But whereas in Fear and Trembling God’s call to Abraham to sacrifice his own son Isaac (the call of the absolute Other) is seen as a fearful leap of faith beyond the universality of ethics to a higher particularity and “infinite inwardness,” Levinas moves beyond notions of ethical law in terms of “totality” toward ethics as “infinite openness” to the Other.
-prioritization of ontology, ethics can no longer be approached in terms of prescribing norms (as in the Platonic and Aristotelian “Good”), since this approach requires an ontological determination of the actual content of morality and justice. Instead, the ethical is always conceived as the “face-to-face” relation that is uniquely established each time an encounter occurs. As the status of the “I” could never be assured, and “my” being could only be determined and redefined by its existential relation to the other, ethics cannot be established in a prescriptive sense. The ethical is the “locus” that allows for the possibility of the infinite, provided that existence is constitutive of “my” engagement with the other always in a unique way. This replacing of the notion of (ontological) “totality” by that of (ethical) “infinity” (infinite openness to the other) rules out the conception of ethics as a set of institutionalized precepts that require “my” obedience. According to Levinas’s definition, the ethical is rather an opening to the other, a welcoming with no conditions, a relation with the other to be established “inventively” each time.

This term “inventively” recalls our discussion of Derrida. It should be clear that Levinas’s “ethical relation” can be tied to Derrida’s notion of responsive responsibility in “Passions: ‘An Oblique Offering’.” After all, it is precisely the idea of an ethical relationship, understood as being established inventively and singularly each time, that governs Derrida’s reflections on the problem of responsibility. One can even argue that Derrida’s “Passions” enacts a Levinasian ethical relationship—the face-to-face relation to the other. For Derrida would not simply conform to the dictates of duty; rather, he would inventively establish a relation to those critical demands in each singular instance or “case.”

Moreover, the “ethics” of reading developed early in Of Grammatology also exemplifies the Levinasian version of ethical relations. In Of Grammatology, the “meaning” of a text is shown to be not self-present, not a reference in simultaneity with and conveyed by the sign. It is never stable, and thus can never be tracked down as some sort of ultimate truth. It is such an opening that allows for “reading”: without this opening, there is no possibility of “reading” since in this case everything would be fixed, frozen in the text. For Derrida, then, reading is by definition a response that responds to the text’s opening, an opening which calls for readings yet to come. A responsible reading should not be confined by the goal of unearthing the supposed intention of the authorial subject, but should instead take it as its responsibility to open
up the otherness of the text.8 Reading is thus proposed as the locus where/in which the reading subject explores a relation to the other, that is, a possibility of the ethical in Levinas’s sense, a “welcome” to the other by responding with(in) language.

This clear connection between Derrida and Levinas has often been taken as a point of departure for the consideration of Derrida’s ethical import. Levinas has dislocated the traditional configuration of ethics as a branch of philosophy and radically reoriented the “ethical question.” Seen through Levinas’s work, Derrida’s subversion of the metaphysics of Being is regarded as a discourse moving towards a sort of higher ethics shared by many thinkers of the 20th century. In other words, Derrida has been an ethical thinker all along, and his works have in a sense pushed ethics to a higher level of (self-) reflection. Therefore, by tracing the long-term “textual relationship” between the two thinkers with its complex pattern of mutual influence, many have found the project of treating Derrida as an ethical thinker to be extremely promising.9

Given all of this, the significance of Derrida’s refusal to respond to the ethical demand, to accept the reception of his work as ethical, appears even more intriguing. Appropriating or assimilating Levinas’s renewed discussion of the ethical, Derrida converts Levinas’s ethical philosophy into a problem of textuality. To oversimplify things, the “horizon” of ethics that Levinas establishes to replace ontology is not Derrida’s notion or trope, even though Derrida’s work in many ways echoes, explicated, and disseminates Levinas’s “ethical relation.” Derrida refuses to be defined by the term (name, adjective) “ethical” even while preserving in some sense the originary ethical relation. This Derridean stance therefore brings us to the sort of aporia (impassable point) that will always confront our deeply rooted habit of seeking understanding through conceptual dualism or dichotomy. Following Derrida’s trajectory, we have seen that ethical relations are enacted in the zone of the non-ethical, which is not neces-

8 Derrida’s passage on as well as beyond Rousseau’s writing succinctly delineates his revolutionary view of reading and writing in Of Grammatology: “[…] the writer writes in a language and in a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them only by letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system. And the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses. This relationship is not a certain quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness or of force, but a signifying structure that critical reading should produce” (158).

9 For example, in their introduction to Re-Reading Levinas Bernasconi and Critchley state: “It is hoped that ‘Wholly Otherwise’ will raise the vital issue of the ethics of deconstructive reading and prepare the way for the consideration of Derrida as an ethical thinker, understood in the particular sense Levinas gives to the word ‘ethics’” (xiv). Another example is Peter Baker’s Deconstruction and the Ethical Turn, where he argues for a “shared or allied project centered on ethics” among Derrida, Lacan, Levinas, Kristeva, and Foucault, seminal “poststructuralist” thinkers of the 20th century.
sarily the anti-ethical. And Levinas’s resort to seeing ethics as first philosophy as a means of subverting the metaphysics of Being would still lend itself to a deconstructive reading inasmuch as it still relies upon the hierarchical division of ethics and ontology. Although Levinas’s works have arguably deconstructed the traditional discipline of ethics, his reversal must not be allowed to be taken as a doctrine or dogma.

Derrida once said that the difference between Levinas and himself is that Levinas is still willing to claim to be a philosopher. Levinas works in the tradition and discipline of philosophy, and his establishment of ethics as first philosophy means radically re-envisioning ethics, seeing it no longer as a set of prescriptive norms or even as a (philosophical) “discipline.” This mutation in the conceptualization of ethics has been one trace, among others, at work in the development of Derrida’s own trajectory of thinking. But while Levinas resorts to a philosophical mode of writing and causes turmoil in our “thinking of ethics” by and within it, Derrida would vigilantly call attention, in his “anti-philosophical” writing, to the dangerously binding force of ethics. This difference already predicts the diversion of their paths, despite their obvious similarity.10

While Levinas has made ethics (the) first philosophy, bringing the ethical question into turmoil, Derrida will continuously stress the possible deviance inherent in any text, including Levinas’s, and possibly by his “reading of the other” will continually interrupt the renewed discussion of ethics, pointing to what he calls the “secret.” The secret, as Derrida elliptically suggests in “Passions,” resists being grasped by any interpretive mechanism. “There is the secret.” No discourse can ever really “reveal” it, because it is not something to be revealed, but rather a no-thing that promises something to come. “There is the secret,” always, in the on-going world of events, and it will keep slipping through the fingers of the ethical, even in the Levinasian sense.11

10 But I do not see Levinas’s writing as “failing” to move away from “philosophical discourse” in comparison to Derrida’s, any more than I see Derrida’s as “failing” to address ethics directly. We simply have differences in intonation and trajectory dictated by different “systems of writing.” Derrida recalls that Levinas once said: “You know, one often speaks of ethics to describe what I do, but what really interests me in the end is not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the holiness of the holy.” Here we see the influence of Kierkegaard and Kafka and the interest, shared with Kafka, Jabès and Derrida, in negative theology, mystical Judaism and the Kabbala. See Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas, 4.

11 To a certain degree this notion of “secret” can be approached in terms of esoteric Judaism (or the Kabbala), Jabès, and Kierkegaard’s notion of the call of God as something “Absurd” that lies fully beyond the domain of “ethical understanding” (See notes 7 and 10). Derrida foregrounds Kierkegaard in the first essay of “The Gift of Death”—where what is at stake is again responsibility but also the pure (never asked for; free) “givenness” of the “gift.” This is set against the background of earlier discussions of Heideggerian “Being” as a pure “destiny” (Schicksal, Geschenk, “being sent, or dispatched”) and pure “gift” (“There is” in German is “es gibt,” “it gives”).
III. Ethical In-Difference and “Intersubjective Violence”

However, to those who share the concern that Derrida eludes or evades pressing worldly affairs, and that his discourse does not effectively deal with “real” problems, this abstract discussion of Derrida in relation to Levinas on the problem of ethics is probably too subtle to “salvage” Derrida from condemnation. No matter how delicately Derrida has presented his argument and no matter what revolutionary potential is contained in it, it is still true that Derrida’s writing does not focus on ethical issues and has no relevance to the solving of social and political questions. This sort of ethical concern is crystallized in a passage from Said’s “Criticism between Culture and System,” which has become the standard or locus classicus for seeing Derrida’s works as being ethically indifferent:

Derrida’s work thus has not been in a position to accommodate descriptive information of the kind giving Western metaphysics and Western culture a more than repetitively allusive meaning. Neither has it been interested in dissolving the ethnocentrism of which on occasion it has spoken with noble clarity. Neither has it demanded from its disciples any binding engagement on matters pertaining to discovery and knowledge, freedom, oppression, or injustice. If everything in a text is always open equally to suspicion and to affirmation, then the differences between one class interest and another, between oppressor and oppressed, one discourse and another, one ideology and another, are virtual in—but never crucial to making decisions about—the finally reconciling element of textuality. (214)

For Saideans it is clear that the revolutionary element in Derrida’s discussion of textuality is, ultimately, merely a textual matter and of no help in addressing the pressing issues of racism, injustice, and oppression, which we conventionally categorize as being ethical questions. Despite Derrida’s acknowledged brilliance in deconstructing the western tradition of metaphysics, for Said his preference for dealing with the “undecidable in a text” is irritatingly “an ascesis of a very inhibiting and
crippling sort.” All in all, the horizon of reading which Derrida has opened up is regarded as lacking real-world efficacy, and unable to satisfy the demand for “interfering,” for seeking the way to solve real ethical problems.12

How shall one respond to this demand for a “positive ethics” as Said calls it? One way to do so is to test Derrida’s work against Said’s positive ethics to evaluate its ethical merits. This is what Peter Baker, among others, does in *Deconstruction and the Ethical Turn* by reading deconstruction as an answer to a higher ethical “demand.” By drawing attention to the working of “writing” in every aspect of human existence, Baker argues that Derrida’s work has awakened and stimulated constant resistance to the “intersubjective violence” hidden in every social practice and institution, every aspect of human existence. For him, Derrida’s work is never merely a matter of textuality, but possesses a transformative power. Thus, by resorting to the pragmatic results that can be derived from the project of deconstruction, many defenders of Derrida have adopted the rationale of Saidean “positive ethics” and sought to reveal a pragmatic efficacy implicit in Derrida’s theorizing.

However, in conforming to the agenda of a positive ethics, this approach to Derrida’s relation to ethics also leads to a double disappointment. On the one hand, Derrida is then reduced to being an ambiguous thinker of ethics who fails to effectively clarify his position and is therefore disappointing to political radicals. On the other hand, this does not take into account the great subtleties in Derrida’s oblique treatment of the ethical and necessarily overlooks the significance of his deliberate avoidance of the “figure of ethics.” Derrida indeed did not “demand[ed] from his disciples any binding engagement on matters pertaining to discovery and knowledge, freedom, oppression, or injustice” as Said accuses him of, and the ethical implications of his work “take effect” slowly and obliquely. Nevertheless, if the lack of an explicit (Derrida would say inevitably dogmatic) “ethical theory” is a “defect” then it is also a vital part of Derrida’s deconstructive thinking, which would after all never content itself with a certain “theory” that gives us the key to the universe, an answer to all problems. Before accusing Derrida of being ethically indifferent, one should also ask whether “positive ethics” is something that can stand independently and self-sufficiently as an absolute value. Is it not such an ethics inevitably (also) a discourse of socio-cultural formations and, ultimately, a product of haphazard conflicts of forces operating in history?

12 Of course, even Levinas and, for that matter, “theoretical ethics” in general (as opposed say to law and politics) could be accused of this.
Said’s urgent quest for an ethics and his anxiety over Derrida’s “indifference” toward ethical pursuits suggest two levels of ethical “guilt” on Derrida’s part. Firstly, Derrida is not as responsible as an intellectual should be in seeking solutions to the world’s injustices. That is to say, that Derrida seldom pays attention to real-world ethical issues makes him ethically irresponsible as an intellectual. Secondly, perhaps more tellingly, Derrida’s work actually presents an obstruction to the pursuit of ethical thought and action. Said believes that, with Derrida’s pervasive working of *textuality*, everything is reduced to the textual problem, as if this were the final “answer” to any worldly matter. Thus in Derrida’s (and/or his disciples’) engagements with the textual problem, all texts (coming from whatever “background”) are treated in the same way, equally open to a “purely” deconstructive reading. This then is a “sheltering of oneself” in a textuality that is unable to confront the real issues seriously since it in effect suspends every discourse, rendering it *undecidable* and *indeterminate*. Indefinitely suspended, deconstructive discourse cannot make a decision, attain knowledge, take action.

However, for this sort of ethical accusation to work, one must be certain of the ground of justice, morality, responsibility. But how can we achieve justice? How can one be moral? What is a responsible action? This takes us back to Plato’s understanding of ethics as the defining of an absolute “Good” (absolute moral standard): ethical action depends on knowing or understanding “what is good” (“what is right,” “what is just”). But we have already seen that Levinas’s redefinition of ethics (and, more ambiguously perhaps, also Derrida’s “treatment” of ethics by “not treating” it) is precisely a move away from the positing of such standards, a move beyond subjectivity and totality to infinite openness (to the other). Said on the other hand seems to assume (not a Platonic absolute but) a commonsensical sense of justice that would be tied to real-world problems and local situations, a passion for changing an unequal society in the context of real events (e.g. the Israel-Palestine conflict). Yet we must wonder: what is this commonsensical sense of “justice,” if not something which ultimately falls back on Platonic ethics (since it cannot be based on “relativism”) and thus is open to the charge of dogmatism, the politics of power?

Nonetheless, this pragmatic attitude—Derrida is ethically “guilty” as long as he does not directly engage ethical issues, but encourages, explicitly or implicitly, a praxis that is “non-interfering”—is typical of those who are appalled by the success that

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13 Though this last is what Derrida would of course never claim.
deconstruction has achieved in the American scene. As Robert Bernasconi puts it at the beginning of an essay on the issue of ethics:14 “[I]t seems that the demand now on everyone’s lips is that Derrida give us an ethics, or at least that he make manifest an ethical significance to deconstruction” (122). This was true even before December 1, 1987, when the wartime journalism of Paul de Man, famous Derridean thinker and literary critic, was republished posthumously: its fragments of Nazi-collaborationist writing ignited fierce attacks on deconstruction for its ethical indifference, if not moral decadence. This event perhaps reflected (and reinforced) a pre-existing collective fear, especially in the United States, of any way of thinking that, wary of self-complacent certainties, remains (radically) skeptical.

Said’s accusation of Derrida could actually be applied to all purely philosophical inquiry. Yet Derrida is especially “vulnerable” inasmuch as his critique of the metaphysics of presence cannot allow itself to hold onto any transcendental signifier, even the name of “ethics,” even ethics in the Levinasian sense. For those devoted to political engagement, this elusiveness is problematic to a “further degree” than the purely theoretical ethics of Levinas, even if the latter also is unable (because not intended) to dictate immediate action. But again: what are the grounds of the demand for a definite principle that could command immediate action, if not ultimately Platonic ones that are themselves vulnerable to a power-based critique? Furthermore, even if we assume an “ideal” ground of justice (not one already “corrupted” by one form of power or another), might not the demand for justice be the product of a false hope, a hopeless desire for certainty, security and peace?

Thus we cannot say that deconstruction is ethically “right” or “wrong.” What it puts in question is precisely this conviction of and desire for a permanent truth, God, ethical ground or system that can be discovered, believed in, followed. The need for moral decisions and concrete actions is also very real, plausible and necessary. But unless we are ready to argue for the “ultimate” validity and purity of moral standards, the human need for such decisions and actions, while necessary to practical life, cannot by itself condemn deconstruction for not sanctifying them.

Afterword

If we recall Derrida’s claim in *Of Grammatology* that his project aims at deconstructing the “general totality” (68), we won’t be surprised by (what may seem) his sensitivity to the increasing critical attention to the “ethical” significance in his work. Derrida is perhaps apprehensive about a perceived “collective fervor” regarding the theme of the ethical. The danger is that having been turned into a totalizing figure, a new transcendental absolute, the *ethic* now so vehemently demanded testifies to a moralizing tendency that turns *doxa* into dogma: all discourses are obliged to dogmatically conform to the language of the ethical, that is, of a still-undefined ethics.

Deconstruction then insists on refusing (bad) faith and making room for invention. Derrida thus engages in an inventive reading of Levinas’s ethical philosophy, which is after all inscribed in (and inevitably bound by) the tradition of metaphysics: this deconstructive reading establishes a relation to the “other” of Levinas’s text, something which while already inside it has not yet been *revealed* in this text. Thus this is not a “critique” of Levinas so much as a supplement to what has not been explicitly stated, whether or not Levinas is aware of it.15 The Derridean insistence here refuses to accept and follow any pre-scribed model, phrase, or discourse, for its “faith” is that no *present* construction could exhaust all possibilities, all “others” that may be still to come. In his seminar on the theme of hospitality Derrida says:

[...] hospitality, the experience, the apprehension, the exercise of impossible hospitality, of hospitality as the possibility of impossibility (to receive another guest whom I am incapable of welcoming, to become capable of that which I am incapable of)—this is the exemplary experience of deconstruction itself, when it is or does what it has to do or to be, that is, the experience of the impossible. Hospitality is the deconstruction of the at-home; deconstruction is hospitality to the other, to the other than oneself, the other than “its other,” to an other who is beyond any “its other.” (“Hospitality,” *Acts of Religion* 364)

**Works Cited**

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15 Reading Derrida’s reading as “critique” is one thing that misses Derrida’s point most greatly. And what Derrida has done actually keeps what Levinas calls the “saying” going, and avoids simply repeating the “said.”


About the Author


[Received November 01 2002; accepted December 21 2002; revised December 27 2002]