

Deconstruction, Destruktion, and Dialogue

Jeff Mitscherling

Preview

While Derrida's critique of Heidegger has received some attention over the past few decades, the difference between Derrida's conception of "deconstruction" and the hermeneutic conception of Destruktion has never been clearly described. It is this difference that Gadamer called to our attention in his essay, "Destruktion und Dekonstruktion," and which I would like briefly to clarify in this paper by contrasting Gadamer's hermeneutic Destruktion to Derrida's deconstruction. As I shall explain, this difference accounts for the disagreement between the two thinkers regarding the possibility of engaging in a dialogue with a text. After its initial task of "deconstruction," hermeneutic Destruktion, as Gadamer describes it, has the further task of reviving the issues raised by the text in such a way as to render the text a partner in discussion. It is this dialogue with the text that, according to Gadamer, Derrida's deconstruction disallows.

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While Derrida's critique of Heidegger has received some attention over the past few decades,¹ the difference between Derrida's conception of "deconstruction" and the hermeneutic conception of *Destruktion* has never been clearly described.² It is this difference that Gadamer called to our attention in his essay, "Destruktion und Dekonstruktion,"³ and which I would like briefly to clarify in this paper by contrasting Gadamer's hermeneutic *Destruktion* to Derrida's deconstruction.⁴ As I shall explain, this difference accounts for the disagreement

¹ One of the earliest comparisons of Derrida and Heidegger was offered by Richard Rorty in his "Derrida on Language, Being, and Abnormal Philosophy," *The Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1977): 673-681 (esp. 676-678). More recent major contributions include: John D. Caputo, "From the Primordality of Absence to the Absence of Primordality"; Thomas Sheehan, "Derrida and Heidegger," and "Heidegger and Derrida Redux: A Close Reading," in *Hermeneutics & Deconstruction*, eds. Hugh Silverman and Don Ihde (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985); Jeff Mitscherling, "Prophets and Promises," *Symposium*, vol. 5 (2001): 155-182.

² Heidegger employs the term *Destruktion* in the title of §6 of *Sein und Zeit* ("Die Aufgabe einer Destruktion der Geschichte der Ontologie"). In their translation of *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), Macquarrie & Robinson render this as "The Task of Destroying the History of Ontology." Joan Stambaugh, in collaboration with J. Glenn Gray and David Farrell Krell, translate it as: "The task of a de-struction of the history of ontology" (in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* [New York: Harper & Row, 1977], 64.) The latter add this note: "Heidegger's word *Destruktion* does not mean 'destruction' in the usual sense—which the German word *Zerstörung* expresses. The hyphenation serves to keep the negative connotations of the English word at a distance and to bring out the neutral, ultimately con-structive, sense of the original."

³ In Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 2, *Hermeneutik II* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1986), 361-372. A translation of Gadamer's paper, along with the entire exchange that took place between Gadamer and Derrida at the colloquium on "Text and Interpretation" in Paris in 1981, as well as a number of commentaries on the exchange, is included in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane Michelfelder and Richard Palmer (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).

⁴ I do not attempt here to provide accurately detailed expositions, but to concentrate instead on specific points of contention in order to bring into focus the nature of the disagreement between Gadamer and Derrida. My presentation of Derridean deconstruction is especially skeletal. Not unlike hermeneutic *Destruktion*, it is not to be regarded as any sort of method or tool of interpretation or criticism. (This is how it continues to be viewed by many literary critics engaged in contemporary 'American deconstruction.' For more on this, see John Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.) Rather, Derridean deconstruction is a particular manner of *reading* the text. Initially, it demands that the reader attend to far more than

between the two thinkers regarding the possibility of engaging in a dialogue with a text. After its initial task of “deconstruction,” hermeneutic *Destruktion*, as Gadamer describes it, has the further task of reviving the issues raised by the text in such a way as to render the text a partner in discussion. It is this dialogue with the text that, according to Gadamer, Derrida’s deconstruction disallows.

In “Destruktion und Dekonstruktion,” Gadamer suggests that Derrida’s failure to recognize the positive contribution of hermeneutic *Destruktion* has rendered dialogue between him and Derrida difficult, if not impossible. As he writes in the concluding sentence of his paper, anyone who forces deconstruction on him and insists on *Differenz* remains at the beginning of a dialogue—he has not yet achieved its goal; namely, immersion in the dialogue and achievement of understanding: “Whoever wants me to take deconstruction to heart and insists on difference stands at the beginning of a conversation, not at its end” (*Wer mir Dekonstruktion ans Herz legt und auf Differenz besteht, steht am Anfang eines Gespräches, nicht an seinem Ziele*).⁵ Gadamer’s choice of words here deserves comment. The German term that properly translates our “difference” is *Unterschied*. While *Differenz* is also commonly translated as “difference,” in the technical philosophical German vocabulary it has a connotation different (*verschieden*) from that of *Unterschied*. When, for example, Hegel uses the term in the title of his work, *Differenz des Fichte’schen und Schelling’schen Systems* (Jena, 1801), he is not suggesting that there is a radical difference between the two systems, but rather that they *diverge* from one another, that they *veer apart* from one another as they proceed in two different directions from their starting point in a common ground of authentic speculation. Besides its technical philosophical sense, *Differenz* also has the colloquial meaning of “disagreement” or “misunderstanding.” Thus, when Gadamer here uses *Differenz*, he is suggesting that Derrida and he, while in one sense sharing a common ground, have pulled away from one another, and that disagreement has been the result. As I shall explain in what follows, this common ground is to be located at the level of the critical task of an initial deconstruction.

Gadamer claims that deconstruction and *Destruktion* were the only two ways left open, after Heidegger, in which to carry on the latter’s attempt to free ourselves from the “language of metaphysics.” But Derrida’s deconstruction and hermeneutic *Destruktion* differ in one very important respect. While they share the task of bringing to light the “background texture” of the implicit claims, metaphysical and otherwise, from which particular philosophical terms derive their meanings, Derrida emphasizes that what we discover in a text by means of critical deconstruction is not polysemy, a manifold of separate and consistent

the ‘text’ alone. One must pay attention to the ‘margins’ of the text, the images, metaphors, metaphorical origins of concepts, modes of argumentation, peculiarities of phraseology, and so on, which are generally ignored by interpreters, perhaps because there can exist no clearly formulated ‘method’ in accordance with which to approach the text in this way. As I point out in what follows, deconstruction shares this rigorous attentiveness with hermeneutic *Destruktion*.

⁵ Gadamer, “Destruktion und Dekonstruktion,” 372.

meanings, but *dissémination*, the scattering of meanings that often conflict with one another, and that are more often than not ambiguous when not downright obscure. Derrida and Gadamer agree that the meaning of the text is separate from the text itself—this is an instance of what Derrida calls *différance*. But while Derrida’s deconstruction holds such ‘distance’ to be insuperable, *Destruktion*, on the other hand, denies that this is so. *Destruktion* tries to reawaken the meanings that the terms were intended to suggest as they were employed in living dialogue, the ‘origin’ from which they first derived their significance. The attempt is to appreciate the manner in which certain terms were employed in the effort to point to the meaning that lay beyond them. Thus, whereas Derrida’s deconstruction reveals to us the obscurity, ambiguity and conflict that lies in and among the terms employed in a text, Gadamer’s *Destruktion* searches for the meaning that the use of such terms—in their obscurity, ambiguity and conflict—was trying to point toward.

This difference in the goals of the two approaches corresponds to a further point of contention between Derrida and Gadamer. Derrida asserts that the spoken word has, throughout the history of Western thought, enjoyed a higher status than the written word, for both the speaker and the listener are seen to be ‘present’ to what is spoken, and the desired achievement of understanding has traditionally been held to depend upon this presence, this ‘self-presentation’ of the (spoken) meaning. The written word has thus come to be regarded as a mere “sign” of the spoken, and as “distanced” from that original act of speaking in which the meaning originally “presented” itself to the speaker and the hearer. One result of Derrida’s criticism of this logocentric tendency of thought, along with the prejudice of the metaphysics of presence that underlies it, is the re-evaluation of the status of the spoken word. Since the speaker and the hearer never overcome the distance that separates them (another instance of *différance*)—since, that is, *différance* remains at the heart of their supposed identity in presence—the spoken word is stripped of its pretence of presence and revealed as no less distant than the written, as in fact more distant than the written. We might say, then, that for Derrida the spoken word is but a form of the written. For Gadamer, however, the situation is quite different: By means of *Destruktion*, the living significance of the written word is reawakened—it can literally ‘speak’ to us. Thus, for Gadamer, the written word is, at least potentially, a form of the spoken. The claim here is not only that a word derives its meaning from its context. Derrida would agree with this, at least with regard to the larger ‘metaphysical fabric’ of which the word forms a part—a fabric which, for Derrida, was never very tightly woven to begin with, and thus cannot be regarded as a self-identical and identifiable ‘origin’ to which we might return in our efforts at interpretation. But Gadamer makes the further claim that this context must be brought back to life by recognizing it as the dialogical give and take of question and answer, for only in such living dialogue does any word first gain its meaning and significance. As Gadamer’s notion of dialogue is essentially Socratic, it might be helpful to clarify this notion by contrasting Derrida and

Gadamer with reference to the Greeks.

Despite the fact that he acknowledges his indebtedness to Nietzsche and Heidegger, Derrida, in denying any positive role to *Destruction*—that is, by restricting himself to deconstruction and not taking the further step of *Destruction*—maintains that the chief function of any such analysis, or ‘laying bare,’ of the metaphysical presuppositions of the language of a written text consists in what we might call a ‘negative’ achievement: Deconstruction entails analyzing a text and bringing into clear focus such features of the text as its logical and conceptual difficulties and the operative metaphysical presuppositions of its language, and it lets the actual encounter with the text end with that.⁶ A similar intention is to be discerned in the Megarian school’s development of the Sophistic *technē* of “eristic.”⁷ Employing this *technē*, the Megarian Sophists in effect attempted to ‘deconstruct’ various philosophical doctrines current in their day, pointing out what appeared to be, following their eristic line of reasoning, insuperable logical, epistemological, and metaphysical difficulties lying at the heart of these doctrines. One of their most famous epistemological puzzles, the Liar Paradox, still receives attention today, and it suggests the sort of negative, skeptical result the practice of their eristic was intended to bring about. The goal was to ‘deconstruct,’ to reveal logical and conceptual difficulties and let the investigation rest with that.⁸ There was no

⁶ I do not intend to imply that this is the *only* task of Derrida’s deconstruction. For Derrida, as for Gadamer, the rigorous reading of a text is but the starting point for further inquiry. However, Derrida’s deconstruction leaves behind the text itself precisely at the point at which Gadamer’s *Destruction* first acknowledges it as a partner in dialogue. For the purpose of making the following contrast as sharp as possible, I have concentrated here only on deconstruction’s ‘negative goal’ of tearing apart the fabric of the text. This is also the feature of Derrida’s deconstruction that Gadamer focuses on in “Destruction und Dekonstruktion.” Again, that this achievement of deconstruction yields ‘positive’ results is not being denied here. What is being denied is that such results include engaging in dialogue with the text. As I point out in what follows, to reach the state of *aporia* is, in effect, a positive achievement in itself, for thus do we attain the self-critical stance necessary for subsequent inquiry. Yet, if I have correctly understood Gadamer’s reading of Derrida, the claim is that deconstruction wants to preclude the possibility of further dialogue with the text itself. Indeed, deconstruction, on this account, frustrates further dialogue.

⁷ As Christopher Norris points out in his *Derrida* (London: Fontana Press, 1987), 20-21: “There is a widespread notion—among philosophers especially—that Derrida is some kind of mischievous latter-day sophist bent upon reducing every discipline of thought to a species of rhetorical play.” I hasten to note that my comparison of Derrida with the Sophists is not intended as derogatory. I wish only to call attention to a similarity between their ‘eristic’ procedures. As Norris also observes, “Deconstruction is the vigilant seeking-out of those ‘aporias,’ blindspots or moments of self-contradiction where a text involuntarily betrays the tension between rhetoric and logic, between what it manifestly *means to say* and what it is nonetheless *constrained to mean*.” Ibid, 19. The attention to *aporia* here is the crucial point.

⁸ Derrida’s close attention to the manifold meanings of particular words, and his ingenious and provocative plays on ambiguity, invite a further comparison. Windelband observes in his *History of Ancient Philosophy*, trans. H.E. Cushman (Dover, 1956), p. 139): “As was the case with the Sophistic witticisms, these [‘catches,’ e.g., the Liar] were in the main reducible to verbal ambiguities. The lively interest that antiquity had in them was almost wholly pathological.” It is

further attempt to ‘reconstruct,’ or to try to climb out of the pit of aporia into which their analyses led them. It was in large part this negative, skeptical tendency of so many of the Sophists that Socrates was reacting against in his attempt to establish the possibility of knowledge and certainty, specifically with regard to ethical matters. While many of Plato’s early dialogues do indeed end with a statement of aporia—with, that is, a confession of puzzlement and utter bewilderment as to the truth of the matter at hand and the manner in which to escape from this uncomfortable situation—this was nevertheless recognized as a positive achievement in itself, for by dispelling false opinions one was freed from the bondage of blinding, misleading presuppositions and enabled to undertake the quest for truth with an ‘open mind.’ And certainly by the time of the middle dialogues, we find the aporetic moment followed by the constructive moment, i.e., the testing of hypotheses and construction of theories proceeding in accordance with the Platonic *technē* of *dialektikē*. According to Gadamer, Plato’s method of dialectic was an extension of the sort of living philosophical dialogue engaged in by Socrates,⁹ a dialogue that, again, was intended not to end in aporia but to move toward a fuller understanding of the truth of the matter at hand.

Just as Plato’s Socrates stood in relation to the eristically-minded Megarians, so, it might be suggested, does Gadamer stand to Derrida with regard to the possibility of entering into constructive dialogue with a text. Hermeneutic *Destruktion* does not stop with the aporetic result of the deconstruction of a text—it is intended to provide the means by which to achieve a deeper understanding of the vital significance of the issues being raised by the text. And this it does by not only ‘deconstructively’ revealing the logical and conceptual gymnastics and metaphysical presuppositions of the language of the text, but thereby also reviving the living context of the spoken word. On this account, then, the task of deconstruction comprises only one moment in the more comprehensive task of the *Destruktion*, which, in its treatment of a text, has as its further goal the reawakening of the lived context, the lived *Begrifflichkeit* (“conceptuality”) of the language of the text. The goal might indeed be referred to as the rebirth of the life-world of the word, and this goal is realized in the achievement of dialogue. In place of ‘rebirth,’ one might equally well say ‘excavation,’ for just as the efforts of the archaeologist do not cease with the unearthing of foundation walls and potsherds, but entail subsequent reconstruction of the world of an earlier day, so does the task of hermeneutics not end with the dissection of language. It attempts to reawaken the living

perhaps not too far from the mark to label a good deal of postmodernity’s interest in Derrida’s analyses as equally pathological. It seems to be largely inspired by the misunderstanding of Derridean deconstruction as a sort of method of interpretation and criticism (see note 4 above).

⁹ Gadamer writes in his “Dialectic and Sophism in Plato’s Seventh Letter” (in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic*, trans. P. Christopher Smith [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980], 93): “And in my own *Platons dialektische Ethik* I used phenomenological methods to show that the basic determinations reached by the art of dialectic in the Sophist, Statesman, and Philebus do indeed have their root in live, philosophical dialogue.”

context of the linguistic formulation of concepts, and thereby to bring back to life the questions that are really being raised in the text.¹⁰ Achieving this, questions can then be asked of the text—that is, dialogue with the text becomes possible: We can enter into dialogue with the text by formulating questions that we can address to it.

This mention of ‘reawakening’ the living context of the word is intended to refer to Gadamer’s discussion, in “Destruktion und Dekonstruktion,” of the Platonic notion of anamnesis, or “recollection.” Socrates’ ultimate goal, as I stated above, was to attain knowledge of the truth, and he maintained, moreover, that the ‘learning’ of this truth is a matter of recollection. And just as Socrates found it necessary to pursue this positive goal by following ‘whithersoever the argument leads,’ and to do so by engaging in dialogue with others, so too does Gadamer, who regards philosophical thinking as a form of recollection:

The mythical notion of recollection, as Plato evokes it, reveals the unique character of re-cognition, which is the essence of all philosophical cognition. This does not mean, of course, that such re-cognition has to do with facts that one is already familiar with prior to being confronted with them in a philosophical text. Rather, philosophical cognition is re-cognition in the sense in which it is understood as an answer to a question that is first awakened by what the text says. The horizon within which the question formulates itself is revived, and this means that what happens in every question also happens here—namely, that what had been self-evident is now broken wide open.¹¹

According to Gadamer, such recollection is fully realized only in living dialogue, and, as he writes, this recollection is an achievement not only of the individual soul, but “always that of ‘the spirit that would like to unite us’—we, who are a conversation.”¹² This last claim might be understood as a return to a questionable metaphysics, but to do so would be to miss Gadamer’s point.¹³ He is dealing here

¹⁰ It is important to note that “reawakening the living context” of a text has nothing to do with attempting to recapture an author’s intention. Derrida and Gadamer agree that the meaning of a text is by no means confined to whatever the author might have ‘intended.’ Hermeneutic *Destruktion* and Derridean deconstruction equally stress the intentional character of the language of the text itself. The difference between the two lies rather in the emphasis laid by *Destruktion* on the intentionality of the *dialogue engaged in by the reader and the text*. It is this dialogue that Gadamer regards Derridean deconstruction as prohibiting. For a critical discussion of Derrida’s and Gadamer’s attacks on the notion of authorial intention, see Jeff Mitscherling, Tanya DiTommaso, and Aref Nayed, *The Author’s Intention* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 56-59 and 88-97.

¹¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy,” trans. Amstutz and Mitscherling, *International Studies in Philosophy* XVIII, no. 3 (1986): 3. Gadamer acknowledges his indebtedness to Nicolai Hartmann’s analysis of Plato’s notion of *anamnesis*.

¹² Gadamer, in *Dialogue and Deconstruction*, 110.

¹³ A point that he subtly stresses here by alluding to Hölderlin’s line, “*Seit ein Gespräch wir sind* [As we are a conversation].” This allusion serves to demonstrate how, in this passage, he is entering into dialogue with Hölderlin’s text.

with the ontology of the event of understanding and describing for us what actually takes place in our dialogue with another, be the other a person or a written text. His intention is not to offer an account of the metaphysics of subjectivity—he is not, that is to say, telling us wherein our ‘being,’ as individual subjects, resides. He is, however, telling us how a dialogue comes into being as the activity of mutual (and self-) understanding.

It is helpful here to recall Gadamer’s analysis of our experience of the work of art, for what happens in that experience is itself essentially a form of dialogue. The central notion in Gadamer’s analysis is “play.” As he writes in *Truth and Method*:

If, in connection with the experience of art, we speak of play, this refers neither to the attitude nor even to the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor to the freedom of a subjectivity expressed in play, but to the mode of being of the work of art itself. In analysing aesthetic consciousness we recognized that the concept of aesthetic consciousness confronted with an object does not correspond to the real situation.¹⁴

According to Gadamer, the work of art might itself be regarded as the ‘subject’ of the experience of art: It is the work itself that endures throughout our experience of it, while we, the persons engaged in that experience, lose our unique and independent ‘subjectivity.’ This occurs when we enter into ‘play’ with the work. When we do so, we are no longer independent individuals looking at a painting, or reading a novel, or listening to a symphony. The identity of such an enduring subjectivity vanishes, and we find ourselves totally immersed in the world of the work, now defining ourselves in terms of it. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the dance: it exists in and through us as we dance, and we are the dance. There is no longer any ‘subject’ confronting an ‘object’ in this experience—just as the work of art first finds its completion in our experience of it, so do we also achieve a new identity in that experience, an identity we acquire by following the ‘rules’ of the work; that is, the game into which we have entered as players. Essentially the same thing happens in dialogue. The difference between self and other is overcome to the extent that there develops a common ground of discourse, a shared life-world of the word of living dialogue. Thus does Gadamer’s position avoid the problem latent in the prejudice of the “metaphysics of presence” on the one hand and that posed by *différance* on the other.

Derrida and Gadamer do indeed share a common ground—namely, the critical task of deconstructive analysis. But Derrida does not follow Gadamer in taking the further step of hermeneutic *Destruktion*. And the result is *Differenz*: Gadamer and Derrida have followed two separate ways in their respective

¹⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1975), 91.

attempts to achieve the Heideggerian goal of escaping from the unconscious prejudices of the language of metaphysics, and the divergence of their paths has rendered constructive dialogue impossible. In order to engage in a true dialogue, one cannot rest content in a state of *Differenz*; one must be willing to return to the common ground and undertake the inquiry anew, never knowing what the results of the new line of shared inquiry might turn out to be. As Gadamer writes in the concluding two sentences of his “Reply to Derrida’s Remarks”: “One must lose oneself in order to find oneself. I believe I am really not very far from Derrida when I stress that one never knows in advance what it is one will discover.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Reply to Jacques Derrida,” tr. Diane Michelfelder and Richard Palmer, in *Dialogue and Deconstruction*, 55-57, at 57.