

Dialogue Disrupted: Derrida, Gadamer and the Ethics of Discussion

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Abstract

This essay gives an account of the exchanges between Jacques Derrida and Hans-Georg Gadamer at the Goethe Institute in Paris in April 1981. Many commentators perceive of this encounter as an "improbable debate," citing Derrida's marginalization, or, in deconstructive terms, deconcentration of Gadamer's opening text as the main reason for its "improbability." An analysis of the questions that Derrida poses concerning "communication" as an axiom from which we derive decidable truth brings us to the central feature of this discussion: How does one engage the "other" in conversation in the light of the problems pertaining to meaningful communication? The essay suggests that the first round of exchanges between Derrida and Gadamer is a good example of the violence that is prevalent (and perhaps inevitable) in all academic discussions. Finally a more "ethical" approach to discussion, based on Derrida's postulation of a "friendship," is suggested. It challenges the hermeneutic search for consensus, whereby the "other" is contracted into fraternity, but cannot eliminate elements of violence completely.

Introduction: Improbable Dialogue

Is it certain that to the word *communication* corresponds a concept that is unique, rigorously controllable, and transmittable: in a word, communicable?

(Derrida 1988a: 1)

In April 1981, Jacques Derrida and Hans-Georg Gadamer were presented with the opportunity "to engage the other in dialogue and to debate face-to-face" (Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 2). This event is documented in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter (op cit)*¹. Gadamer's main contribution is called *Text and Interpretation* (21-51). Derrida responds to this with *Three Questions to Hans-Georg Gadamer* (52-54)². Derrida's main contribution is entitled *Interpreting Signatures (Nietzsche/Heidegger): Two Questions*. In this text he does not mention the name of Gadamer once. Several commentaries are also supplied in the book. Most of them

1 Some of the texts collected here also appeared elsewhere. We will use the collection of Michelfelder & Palmer as our central point of reference.

2 In reality Derrida puts forward fifteen questions to Gadamer in the space of no more than two pages.

seem to think that the “debate” between Derrida and Gadamer never really took place, that a “genuine debate” did not unfold, that it was a “non-dialogue” or an “improbable encounter” (45). According to these commentators, Derrida’s unwillingness to adhere to the preconditions of dialogue, as explicated by Gadamer in *Text and Interpretation*, and of course in *Truth and Method* (1975), is the main reason for the “improbability” of the encounter. In this regard, Derrida is accused of wilfully undermining and marginalizing Gadamer’s text in order to ensure a hermeneutic failure.³

It is necessary to question from the outset the possibility of any “encounter” between deconstruction and ‘hermeneutics’.⁴ According to Derrida (1988a), hermeneutic interpretation is based on the mistaken assumption that thought, as representation, precedes and governs communication. Derivative of this belief are the equally mistaken presuppositions of the simplicity of the origin, the logical sequence of all tracing, homogeneous analyses and the adherence to the authority of the category of “communication” (4). These notions are indicative of the pursuit of dialogues that will bring forth consensus; in Derrida’s words, “the horizon of an intelligibility and truth that is meaningful, such that ultimately general agreement may, in principle, be attained” (2).

It would be absurd to deny the existence of the “encounter” as such, but one could see that Derrida would have some reservations about the aim of the symposium, namely to provide an opportunity for “‘hermeneutics’ and ‘deconstruction’: two terms that name two bodies of thought, two sets of texts, which today bear the signatures ‘Gadamer’ and ‘Derrida’” to engage [each] other in dialogue” (Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 1-2). One of these reservations is the notion of a confrontation “in the sense of a face-to-face clash, declared, involving two identifiable interlocutors or adversaries, two ‘discourses’ that would be identical with themselves and localizable” (Derrida 1988a: 35). For Derrida, deconstruction has no essential characteristics, the meaning of which can be determined univocally. He argues that deconstruction “does not exist somewhere, pure, proper, self-identical, outside of its inscriptions in conflictual and differentiated contexts, it is only what it does and what is done with it, there where it takes place.” (141) In other words, there are many deconstructions, and deconstructions are always subjected to more deconstructions. Since “deconstruction” is at any given moment never merely the sum total of a set of characteristics – the “meaning” of

3 A few years before this encounter, John Searle levelled a similar charge against Derrida with reference to the latter’s response to JL Austin’s *How to Do Things With Words*. (This encounter is documented in Derrida 1988a). In *Reiterating The Differences: A Reply to Derrida*, Searle (1977) argues that Derrida had “misunderstood and misstated Austin’s position at several points – and thus the confrontation [between Derrida and Austin] never quite takes place” (198). In *Limited Inc.*, Derrida (1988a) contends that by arguing against the existence of a confrontation between them, Searle has already committed himself to the existence of that “encounter.” If there had been no encounter – a “non-encounter” – there would be no thing that needed to be argued against or rejected. According to Derrida, Searle’s suggestion that the encounter never *quite* (note: not never) took place, “opens the space for the very thing that should not, should never have taken place; thus I [Derrida] get my foot in the door” (Derrida 1988a: 36). In order for Searle to instigate an attack against Derrida’s reading of Austin, some form of confrontation had to have taken place. By insisting that a confrontation has not taken place, Searle is in effect producing an encounter.

4 It is possible to interpret hermeneutics and ‘deconstruction’ in such a way that one emphasises the *similarities* between them, or rather, that one could come to similar conclusions using either as a point of departure (see e.g. Caputo 1987). In this paper we wish to show that, at least as far as Derrida and Gadamer themselves are concerned, and with specific reference to their encounter in 1981, there are fundamental differences in their strategies of interpretation.

“deconstruction” is perpetually shifting – there cannot be a single, unalterable definition of deconstruction. Derrida of course also problematizes the relationship between a text and its author. Judging from Derrida's (1988a: 30-31) discussion of “the truth of copyright and the copyright of truth,” one may anticipate that there would be serious problems involved in attributing *a whole philosophical tradition* to one author.⁵ When Derrida argues against attributing deconstruction, which is really many different styles of reading that could be described as “deconstructive,” to a single author, he is not merely being humble about his contribution to deconstruction. By suggesting that deconstruction in the singular cannot be appropriated by one signatory, that deconstruction is plural, Derrida argues for the impossibility of a clear opposition between the two discourses of “deconstruction” and “hermeneutics.”

Another reservation one suspects Derrida may have is the (Gadamerian) suggestion that a “genuine” dialogue depends on the “sincerity” of the partners to unravel “the truth.” In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1975: 330) asserts that to conduct a conversation means to allow oneself to be conducted by the object to which the partners in the conversation are directed. A “genuine” dialogue has as its main objective a sincere attempt by each partner to unravel the “truth” with regard to the subject matter. Gadamer suggests that one should enter a conversation with the aim of gaining insight into a particular subject matter, not merely to confirm one's own notions about it. Our knowledge is finite and fallible since our historical context and prejudices bound us. It is therefore necessary to recognise the need to go beyond our present understanding of the subject-matter (Healy 1996: 165) and “stay open to the possible truth of other views” (Warnke 1987: 100).

The first question that jumps to mind, in this respect, concerns the *degree* of sincerity on the part of the dialogue partners. What will guarantee that a “genuine” dialogue is taking place? Must both partners be equally sincere, and how would one go about measuring this? What if the truth claims of one of the dialogue partners are based on a mistaken belief or delusion? Does a partner's self-deceit nullify his sincere attempt at engaging in dialogue? Moreover, in Gadamer's account, dialogue partners say what they mean, and can therefore be understood if there is a “sincere” attempt by both to grasp what the other is saying. Gadamer's appeal to the “truth” of speech acts takes the sincerity of the interlocutors to speak without equivocation, whether by design or self-deceit, for granted. Derrida, however, argues that since meaning is the result of a process of differentiation, there is always a “surplus” of meaning, which is not determined by the intention of the speaker/writer⁶. There is no objective decision procedure

5 In his *Reiterating The Differences: A Reply to Derrida*, Searle (1977) places the following above the title: “Copyright © 1977 by John R. Searle”. Derrida (1988a: 30-31) argues that Searle's seal of copyright is superfluous if what he says is so obviously true. Such a kind of truth would then be obvious to everyone and thus “everyone will be able, will in advance *have been able*, to reproduce what he says” and thus, “Searle's seal is stolen in advance”. What is more, how can the reader be absolutely sure that Searle himself is actually the author of *Reiterating The Differences: A Reply to Derrida*? This is not guaranteed by the copyright. Although Searle appears to take sole ownership of the text, he acknowledges his indebtedness to a certain D Searle and H Dreyfus “for discussion of these matters” (31). The fact that JR Searle owes a debt to D Searle and H Dreyfus concerning this discussion, prompts Derrida to suggest that the “true” copyright ought to belong ... to a Searle who is divided, multiplied, conjugated, shared” (31). One cannot “own” a philosophical tradition.

6 This, of course, does not imply that *any* meaning is possible, just that the limits of meaning are not carried within the text itself.

to delimit the exact or final meaning. It follows from this "undecidability" that one's understanding of what the other is saying is never complete. This lack of pure understanding subverts any attempts at unravelling *the truth*, and no amount of "sincerity" will ever guarantee a "genuine" dialogue.

If both partners are adamant about the truth claims of their respective positions on a particular subject matter, it is possible to feign sincerity in valuing the other's position as an equal contributor to "the truth." Relating to this point, Gadamer has argued that hermeneutic understanding does not preclude disagreement, as long as the dialogue partners agree to disagree (Warnke 1987: 102-103). The problematic aspect of this position is that it boils down to a way of appeasing others in order to hold on to one's own point of view. Such an attitude does not bring the partners closer to a supposed "truth," but serves a political purpose, namely to protect and reinforce their original positions. Thus, Gadamer's reverence for "sincere" participation in a dialogue overlooks the underlying power relations that characterise our "encounters" between each other. Our truth claims are never devoid of some underlying interest or value that we adhere to. It follows that when one appeals to some point of view, it is to the exclusion of some other point(s) of view.

Derrida would question Gadamer's attempt to merge different points of view into decidable meaning, since this fusion presupposes the stable unity of a text. According to Derrida, every new interpretation causes a break and a restructuring of the text. In other words, there is no single correct way of interpreting a text that withstands other, different readings. Every different reading has the potential of a different meaning and, therefore, another truth⁷. In the Gadamerian dialogue, respect for the other's capacity to contribute to the meaning of the text does not include a strong enough recognition of the "otherness" of the other, whereas this recognition would be the precondition of any Derridean "dialogue."

The central question that becomes apparent from this analysis of the first round of exchanges between Derrida and Gadamer relates to how one engages the "other" in discussion in the light of the problems pertaining to "meaningful communication." After investigating the "failed encounter," attention will be paid to the (Derridean) notion of an "ethic of discussion" which may lead to an alternative mode of engaging in philosophical dialogue, a mode which attempts to acknowledge otherness.

The "Encounter"

The proceedings at the 1981 encounter is started off by Gadamer. He provides an historical account of the development of hermeneutics, and then turns his attention to Derrida's claim that it is Nietzsche, not Heidegger, who was more radical in his attempts to free philosophy of logocentrism and metaphysical concepts such as "being" and "truth." Gadamer echoes the Heideggerian position that Nietzsche not only fails in overcoming metaphysics, but is himself a metaphysical thinker. While defending his own hermeneutic project, Gadamer also defends Heidegger up to the moment when the latter turns to "quasipoetical language in order to escape the language of metaphysics," which Gadamer views as a mistake (in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 23, 24).

7 Not any truth. Derrida insists that his position is not a relativist one. See the *Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion to Limited Inc.*, henceforth referred to as *Afterword* (Derrida 1988a: 111-160, specifically 126-128).

Gadamer's point of departure in *Text and Interpretation* is that man is blessed with the unique ability to understand. Since we share the capacity to understand, the universal claim of hermeneutics is "beyond any doubt" and the hermeneutic standpoint is "the standpoint of every reader" (Gadamer in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 21, 31). How this understanding takes place is modelled on the act of conversation. The fact that we engage with others in dialogue frees us from our own bias and puts the narrowness of our own truth claims at risk. By encountering alternative perspectives in dialogue with others, our own understanding, as well as that of the other, is relieved of the prejudice inherent in our truth claims. In this endeavour to find meaning, the encounter with others will therefore lead to a better and mutual understanding. Gadamer contends, however, that understanding will not be attained unless a fundamental precondition is realised, namely the *good will* of the partners in dialogue to try to understand one another (33). Thus, dialogue partners must take some critical distance from their own prejudice to really "hear" what the other has to say.

Gadamer favours the immediacy of conversation over engaging in dialogue with written texts, since the former makes "proper understanding" possible through the "give-and-take" of discussion. Partners in conversation have the opportunity to clarify or defend their intended meanings on the basis of some or other response (34). The relationship between text and reader is analogous to the relationship between partners in conversation. Understanding a text entails an overcoming of what is "alienating" or *other* in a text so that the "horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader is dissolved" (41). Thus, like different standpoints of dialogue partners, the separate perspectives of a text and interpreter must merge to achieve the process of understanding.

Since Derrida argues against the hermeneutic compulsion to find a "final truth," Gadamer's remarks could trigger an account of "the deep connection, existing between the hermeneutic search for meaning and the project of metaphysics" (Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 3). However, true to form, Derrida focuses neither exclusively nor primarily on what appears to be central or paramount, but on that which appears "marginal." In this specific encounter, he responds by way of a "decentration" (Derrida: 1988a, 44) of Gadamer's text. Indeed, out of a thirty page apology for the "universality" of hermeneutics, Derrida chooses one line – "Both partners must have the good will to try to understand each other" (Gadamer in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 33). This "must" is used to uncover the metaphysical presuppositions embedded in Gadamer's dialogic model of understanding.⁸

One could say that there is something patronising in the way that Gadamer presents his "dialogue partner," and the reader, with a lesson on the workings and merit of hermeneutics. No wonder then that Derrida asks in his first paragraph of his first response

⁸ At this point it is important to note the importance of Derrida's *Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion to Limited Inc* for this discussion. Richard Kearney goes so far as to suggest that Derrida's *Afterword* is either a contradiction of the position he assumes in the Derrida-Gadamer encounter, to wit, "a philosophy of 'dialogue' is impossible," or a substantial revision of this view to make it compatible with "an ethic of discussion" (Kearney 1993: 7). It should be noted that at no point during the Derrida-Gadamer confrontation does Derrida explicitly deny the possibility of a philosophy of dialogue. In the *Afterword* Derrida predominantly refers to the altercation with Searle, but it is also "an invitation to decipher the rules, the conventions, the uses which dominate the academic space and the intellectual institutions in which we debate, with others but also with ourselves" (1988a: 112). Since these conventions of debating "contain" and thus also betray all sorts of violence" (112) – and the suggestion of violence in the Derrida-Gadamer debate has already been noted – Derrida's exposition on violence in aca-

whether “anything was taking place here other than improbable debates” (in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 52). Ironically, Gadamer would later concur with this sentiment, though for different reasons. For Gadamer, the dialogue between himself and Derrida is unsuccessful because Derrida refuses to understand him. In fact, Derrida refuses to understand Gadamer in the way that he wants to be understood, which is his (Gadamer's) own way. What is really happening here can be gleaned from examining the three questions Derrida poses to Gadamer in more detail.

Question 1

“How could anyone not be tempted to acknowledge how extremely evident this axiom is?” asks Derrida (52) with reference to Gadamer's appeal to good will (and his absolute commitment to the desire for consensus in understanding). Derrida is of course invoking one of the most familiar “truths” of ethics, namely the Kantian claim that only the good *will* determines what is good. Specifically then, the first of his “three questions” to Gadamer is: “Doesn't this unconditional axiom nevertheless presuppose that the *will* is the form of that unconditionality, its last resort, its ultimate determination?” (52). Derrida is suggesting that by making “good will” the precondition to understanding – “its very necessity” – Gadamer is reverting to “the metaphysics of the will” (53).

Simon (in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 168) points out that it does not make sense to speak of a “good will” to understand the other since the use of the concept of “will” presupposes a given, in his words, “a will as something common to all, so that one already knows, without one's interpretation, what ‘will’ is.” Derrida questions Gadamer's assumption of a *universal* will to understand, which is based on the *individual* subject's determination to “will” understanding. The notion of individual autonomy is, as Shusterman (in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 216) notes, essential to the Kantian, and indeed the whole Enlightenment tradition, a tradition “that Gadamer's theme of traditional authority and solidarity is meant to oppose.” Gadamer should therefore be quite concerned about this question.

Gadamer's counter-argument rests on the assumption that Derrida's reading of the good will to understanding deliberately undermines his own idea of “good will” in order to avoid any consensus between them. Gadamer thus argues that his idea of “good will” is related to what Plato called “*eumeneis elenchoi*,” that is, a desire not to prove that one is right by identifying the weaknesses of what the other has to say, but rather to strengthen the other's point of view (55). As Forget (in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 132) suggests, Gadamer does not perceive of “good will” as having any essential ties to ethics “or any sort of voluntarism.” Instead, Gadamer's reference to “good will” is “nothing more than an observation” (Gadamer in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 55) from which Derrida glimpses a decline into the language of metaphysics. Gadamer insists that he “will make an effort [to understand Derrida's criticism], as anyone would do who wants to understand another person or wants to be understood by another” (55). Furthermore, he “cannot believe that Derrida would actually disagree with

democratic discussions is also relevant to this debate. It is in the *Afterword* that Derrida tries to “reduce just a little the violence and the ambiguity” (113) of these encounters, including his own. The analysis of the “violence” committed by Derrida in his encounter with Gadamer will therefore also be informed by this more “straightforward” form of discussion” (114) on the philosophical, ethical and political axiomatics of academic discussion (113) in order to give a stronger rationale for Derrida's first response to Gadamer.

me about [what I mean by good will to understanding],” since “whoever opens his mouth wants to be understood; otherwise, one would neither speak nor write.” (55)

Here is evidence that Gadamer invokes a notion of understanding based on consensus. The fact that Derrida *disagrees* with him is perceived by Gadamer as unwillingness to *understand* him. Gadamer believes, however, that Derrida tacitly agrees to some consensus between them since he directs his questions directly to Gadamer, thus assuming that Gadamer is willing to understand him (55). In this vein, Kearney (1993: 6) charges Derrida with “a will to overpower Gadamer through deliberate misunderstanding.” Forget (135) echoes this sentiment when he suggests that Derrida's insistence that there are no “true” readings of a text, that misunderstanding in discourse is unavoidable, belies the fact that he too wants to be read and understood. Derrida's response to this kind of argument can be found in the *Afterword*. Here Derrida (1988a: 146) criticises the “use and abuse” of the argument that, since the deconstructionist is “supposed not to believe in truth, stability, or the unity of meaning, in intention or ‘meaning-to-say’ ” he has no grounds upon which to demand that his own text should be interpreted correctly. If Derrida did not want to be read or understood, there would indeed be no need to write, or sign his texts. More pertinently, if Derrida only believed in the inevitable presence of misunderstanding, on what grounds could he charge someone, for example, Searle, that he has misread or misunderstood him? Derrida writes that *Limited Inc* was concerned with analysing “the brutality with which, beneath an often quite manifest exterior, Searle had read me, or rather avoided reading me and trying to understand” (113). This citation, although not referred to by Kearney, would serve as a disclaimer to the possibility of only misunderstanding. Derrida is not “misunderstanding” Gadamer in some way that can be corrected. He is making a stand against the implicit assumptions in Gadamer's text. He wants to make them explicit and oppose them. No consensus is possible on this level.

Derrida does, however, caution that language and interpretation are problematic; otherwise, there would be no reason to *discuss* anything. In fact, language is more than problematic, “which is to say, perhaps of an order other than problematicity” (120). The possibility of a misinterpretation can therefore not be dismissed. Derrida adds: “That we may or may not be in agreement on this subject attests by itself to this more than problematic problematicity” (120).

He does, however, reject the possibility of a *pure* misunderstanding. Evidence of this is to be found in the following example:

Whatever the disagreements between Searle and myself may have been, for instance, no one doubted that I had understood at least the English grammar and vocabulary of his sentences. Without that no debate would have begun. Which does not amount to saying that all possibility of misunderstandings on my part is excluded a priori, but that they would have to be, one can hope at least, of another order. (146)

This “other order” is in Derridean terms a way of arresting “misunderstanding” by the workings of *différance*: misunderstanding is always already possible but never totally inevitable or “pure.” Furthermore, Derrida suggests the importance of a ‘minimal consensus’. He writes: “[No] research is possible in a community (for example, academic) without the prior search for [a] minimal consensus and without discussion around this minimal consensus.” This “minimal consensus” is of an order that will be determined

by a particular context, for instance, "this or that national culture, in the university or outside the university, in school or elsewhere, on television, in the press, or in a specialised colloquium" since Derrida does not believe in the "possibility of an absolute determination of the 'minimal'" (145). Unlike Gadamer, Derrida believes that the "norms of minimal intelligibility" are not absolute and ahistorical, but merely "more stable than others" (147). Crucially, Derrida points out that there is a "right track" and better way to interpreting a text (146). To be on the right track does not signify a reading that is beyond all equivocation, but instead refers to "interpretations [that] are probabilistically dominant and conventionally acknowledged to grant access to what [the writer] thought he meant and to what readers for the most part thought they could understand." (144) Derrida's insistence on the possibility of a right track challenges the definition of "deconstruction" as the path to relativism and indeterminism, which he argues "is *false* (that's right: false, not true) and feeble; it supposes a bad (that's right: bad, not good) and feeble reading of numerous texts, first of all mine, which therefore must finally be read or reread" (146).

What is the difference between a bad reading and a misunderstanding? The possibility of a "bad reading" would also suggest the possibility of a "good reading." Does Derrida claim that a "bad reading" is a reading that does not correspond with what his text intends, for if this is the case, then his detractors would question his argument in favour of "undecidability." In this regard, they would align Derrida's insistence on a "good reading" with the Gadamerian notion that "reading and understanding mean that what is announced is led back to its original authenticity" (Gadamer in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 35).

What Derrida actually argues against is the hermeneutist search for the hidden "truth" of texts. The argument for undecidability does not imply that meaning is indeterminate. Undecidability implies that meaning can never be *complete*. This makes positions of totalisation, fulfilment and plenitude impossible to maintain (116). Meaning is never purely undecidable. In fact, Derrida would argue against either complete undecidability, or complete decidability. Undecidability hinges on the "*determinate* oscillation between possibilities" (148), in other words, the truth is "undecidable" because there are distinct and also limited possibilities of meaning that compete among each other from which one makes a limited choice. When one interprets, one risks these finite and determinate possibilities. He asserts that when he "puts radically into question" such notions as "truth," "reference" and "stable contexts of interpretation," he is not contesting that there *is* and that there *should be* truth, reference and stable contexts of interpretation. In the matter of the "stability" of an interpretative context, Derrida points to the "essence" (does this not suggest something intrinsic, true or stable?) of stability, which is "always provisional and finite" (150). In other words, there is no absolute stability; in fact, stability is by definition always destabilizable.

The meaning an interpreter attaches to his/her reading of the text is based on a choice between finite possibilities, and thus also on exclusion. However, who or what determines whether something is "validly" a possible meaning? Derrida writes that the possibilities are "highly *determined* in strictly *defined* situations" (148). To this end, an interpreter must understand, write and even translate the text of the author, must know the body of the author's work as well as possible, including all the contexts that determine it, be they the literary, philosophical and rhetorical traditions, the history of the author's language, society, history, etc. (144). A "good reading" remains "true" to

the context of a text – Derrida is adamant that the interpretative experience should not take the form of a relativism where one can say “just anything at all” (145). Bell (1995: 382) points to the fact that the logic of remaining true to the text implies what Derrida calls “protocols of reading” that will function as guard-rails to prevent any reading whatsoever from being advanced. Derrida does not tell us what these protocols are, he confesses that he has not yet found any protocols that satisfy him (Bell 1995: 382, Schrift 1990: 118). Now if these protocols of reading, which are to judge whether a reading is a good reading or a bad reading, cannot be defined, we are “left wondering whether any ‘*determinate oscillation*’ will do” (Bell: 382). Furthermore, will these “protocols” or standards of reading remain the same, or would they also be “structured” by the movements of *différance*? In the case of the latter scenario, such protocols of reading could hardly function as standard criteria, since they would be as transformational as reading itself. Any suggestion of the same protocols of reading performing a general, evaluative function invokes connotations of a mutuality between texts, which belies Derrida's suggestion, with reference to his “second” question to Gadamer, of a radical break and an overall re-structuring of the context. If Derrida had to address this ostensible dilemma, his response would reflect his deconstructionist approach to principles, which will be discussed in the following section.

Before we turn to Derrida's next “question,” two important implications that emerge from this discussion of Derrida's first question to Gadamer should be noted. Firstly, Gadamer's presupposition of a common understanding boils down to a will to power and as such serves as a “means of making one's own understanding prevail” (Simon in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 165). In other words, Gadamer's notion of the will to understand the other dismisses the “otherness” of the other. As his “other,” Derrida will only show “good will” towards Gadamer if he understands him in the same way that Gadamer understands *himself*. Judging from Derrida's response he does not presuppose such “good will.” The challenge of acknowledging otherness while at the same time trying to understand will be the feature of Derrida's third question. The second key aspect of the first question to Gadamer is an important Derridean assumption: the context of a text determines to a large degree the possibilities of meanings. The next section looks at the matter of context.

Question 2

In his second critical question Derrida highlights the issue of the context of interpretation. Derrida (Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 53) asks: “What to do about good will – the condition for consensus even in disagreement – if one wants to integrate a psychoanalytic hermeneutics into a general hermeneutics?” According to him, Gadamer assumes that “good will” in psychoanalysis entails merely a continual enlargement of the context of interpretation, whereas for Derrida this would involve a discontinuous re-structuring of the context.

Gadamer (in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 56) claims that he has not been understood if it is supposed that he wants to integrate a psychoanalytic hermeneutics into a general hermeneutics, since he, too, considers this “as a breach, a *rupture*, and not another method for understanding the same thing.” Shusterman's (217) rejoinder is significant: if understanding is always dependent on a changing context, as Gadamer now claims, how must his reader reconcile this with the idea, inspired by the concept of “good will,” that people in different contexts share the same understanding? Certainly, Derrida's question highlights a valid concern, especially if one takes into account

Gadamer's notion of a "fusion of horizons."⁹ What is the basis of the possibility of a fusion of horizons? Shusterman points out that such a possibility is ensured by the fact that different horizons are already implicitly joined, and thus not fully distinct, in what Gadamer has called "the depths of tradition" (217).¹⁰

Culler (1994: 153) indicates that "[the] appeal to consensus and convention – truth as what is validated by our accepted methods of validation – works to treat the norm as foundation – [and] norms are produced by acts of exclusion." In Derrida's (1988a: 146) own "definition" of deconstruction, the deconstructionist never contests or destroys the value of truth, but only reinscribes these values "in more powerful, larger, more stratified texts" (146) in order to take into account the limits of objective science and theory, which is inevitably based on a series of exclusions of possible borderline cases that seriously undermine determinacy (118).

The practice of exclusion highlights two important features with regards to the meaning generated in communication. Firstly, since language is for Derrida an open system (Cilliers 1998a: 43), the distinction between "inside" and "outside" is problematic. In order to be recognisable as such, a system (for instance, a language system) must be bounded in some way. We frame a system by describing it in a certain way (Cilliers 2001: 140, 141), which signifies a meta-level that is, in the case of a language system, not characteristic of language itself. Hence, the boundary is not a natural thing and not something that can be described objectively. This brings us to the second feature of the practice of exclusion, namely that it involves a *choice*. Culler (120) writes that exclusion as a strategic part of the theorist's endeavour to account for meaning, entails specifying the necessary features of the context, the nature of the words, persons, and circumstances required. In this regard, Derrida (1988a: 136) argues that there is always something "political" in communication: "[One] cannot do anything, least of all speak, without determining (in a manner that is not only theoretical, but practical and performative) a context." Any meaning derived from the text is for Derrida context-bound. When Derrida argues that no meaning can be determined out of context, when he writes "there is nothing outside the text," it does not, as Kearney (1993: 3) argues, amount to "textual solipsism." When Derrida refers to "text" he is not exclusively referring to written works. Derrida (1988a: 148) proposes that "text" implies all referents, or structures that are symbolised by a word like "real," "historical," "ideological," "socio-institutional," "ideal," etc. Derrida does not mean that these

9 In *Text and Interpretation*, Gadamer (in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 41) writes: "When the interpreter overcomes what is alienating in the text – it is an entering into the communication in such a way that the tension between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader are dissolved. I have called this a 'fusion of horizons'. The separated horizons, like different standpoints, merge with each other." In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1975: 330) asserts that the art of conversation requires that one does not try to out-argue the other person, but that one really considers the weight of the other's opinion. Each participant takes cognisance of the strengths and weaknesses of their own as well as others views. Thus, the final position will be one that all participants will agree upon as being closer to the "truth" than any of the initial positions (Warnke 1987: 101). The culmination of a genuine conversation is a unified position, a shared understanding of the subject matter. Gadamer postulates the phrase "fusion of horizons" to describe the relationship between partners (e.g. reader and author) in conversation "in which something is expressed that is not only mine or my authors but common" (Warnke 1987: 350).

10 There is some ambiguity about Gadamer's position on the fusion of horizons. Shusterman's reading tends towards a strong understanding of "fusion." Gadamer himself sometimes insists on keeping the tension between different horizons alive (see e.g. Gadamer 1975: 273). We feel that the general tenor of his writing has a nostalgia for convergence.

referents are reserved to or disclaimed by or circumscribed in a book. What it does mean, however, is that these referents are talked about within an "interpretative experience." When one, for instance, refers to that which is invoked by the referent "ideology," it is traced from a structure in which it is differentiated from other referents such as "semantic," "historical," "symbolic," etc. Thus "meaning" is not inherent to the text; it does not exist *in* a text as something static and decidable. This is not to suggest that there is *no* meaning in a text. The meaning one gleans from a text is the choice one makes between numbers of different referents, each invoking a different interpretation. Derrida argues that such an interpretation assumes meaning only insofar as it is a "movement of differential referring" (148), in other words, meaning that is difference, deferral and also the act of differing. Meaning is not extra-textual, it is contextual, in other words, meaning is only derived from a particular context. Another way of formulating this important notion is that meaning is a local phenomenon that is valid in a particular frame of time and space (Cilliers 1998a: 124). A context is, however, never saturated with meaning since it changes with every other interpretative experience. Context itself, then, must not be understood as pure, given, fixed, etc. In the same way that meaning is only meaning-as-difference, there is always already a context, though that context can never claim a totality.

By now the exasperated hermeneut will point to the only "thing" (but what is 'it'?) that seems to escape this endless play of *différance*, namely *différance* itself. To borrow Simon's (in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 132) phrase, can one glimpse an "entire metaphysical machinery" behind this position of *différance*? Derrida claims that *différance* "is' in itself nothing outside of different determinations" (1988a: 149). In other words, one cannot think of *différance* as some or other stable "position." *Différance* is the finite to-and-fro between determined and different possibilities of meaning or action within strictly defined situations, the interpretation of which results in our decisions, and hence choices of action or meaning. Therefore, while *différance* "never comes to a full stop anywhere, absolutely" and thus cannot be neatly pinned into a definition, it "is" neither negativity nor nothingness, as indeterminacy would be (149). Instead, *différance* structures (for lack of a better - what? word? does "word" not presuppose some "thing" that "is"?) the "play" between possibilities to such an extent that meaning is never purely undecidable.

This does not mean that one cannot take the stability of interpretative contexts into account. A "good reading" submits to a stability that is "true" in a temporary and limited (i.e. not eternal and absolute) manner, which takes into account the norms of the context, its historicity and its referents, be it ethical, political, institutional, etc. According to Derrida, a "deconstructive" way of thinking context "is neither a philosophical position nor a critique of finite contexts, which it analyses without claiming any absolute overview" (137). Thinking deconstructively about context is in itself contextual. Since the context of interpretation does not make any claims to any "truth" outside of that context, an interpretative context cannot simply be merged with another context without taking the historicity out of it, thus rendering it a universal truth.

Does this mean that different interpretative contexts have nothing to say to each other? Does the "unstable stability" of contexts preclude, or as Kearney (1993: 5) suggests, undermine, the possibility of agreement or consensus? Another way of expressing this concern is with reference to the nostalgia for a unifying metanarrative (Cilliers 1998a: 114-115), which perceives of the absence of an external check on any dis-

course as leading to fragmentation, anarchy and meaninglessness. According to this view, if knowledge cannot be grounded objectively, each discourse will become independent of all others, leading to the closure and isolation of discursive communities. To this Derrida would answer, as he does in *The Principle of Reason: The University In The Eyes Of Its Pupils*: "What is meant by community and institution must be rethought" (Derrida 1983: 16). In this text Derrida proposes a "community of thought" that would raise new questions in order to understand an institution's history as well as the specific norms, the fundamental axiomatics, rhetoric, rites and procedures that constitute that institution (15-16). These new modes of questioning, Derrida explains, are also "a new relation to language and traditions, a new *affirmation*, and new ways of taking responsibility." (15) The new responsibilities are described in terms of a double gesture: they must at once keep alive the memory of tradition and make an opening toward the future (16-17).

Two important aspects of Derrida's notion of responsibility should be noted. Firstly, we need to take into account the notion of a "double gesture." The "encounter" between Derrida and Gadamer is not between two prominent, distinct philosophical traditions, it is about the status of the metaphysical tradition, something of which deconstruction is a part but, simultaneously also its other. Although deconstruction uses the language of metaphysics, its otherness is signified by its subversion of that tradition. Thus, the deconstructionist writes two languages simultaneously, one affirmative, the other subversive. By accepting the danger of trying to overcome metaphysics, the deconstructionist has freed herself to unsettle the traditional binary oppositions, the "dead metaphors" that function as unchallenged truths and demonstrate the power relations produced by, and the limits of language *within*, that tradition.¹¹ Secondly, Derrida's interpretation of the flow of time in a system differs from traditional interpretations that favour the present. The notion of *différance* reminds us that not only the past but also the future, whatever this may be, has to be considered when we try to establish meaning. We have to take responsibility for the unknowable future. However, we cannot simply fall back on universal principles. This would deny the complexity of the world. Conversely, we can also not *allow* everything. This would be an evasion of our responsibility. Derrida (1983: 17) explains that the responsibility that he is trying to situate, here with regards to a university system, still places him "*within* the university, along with its memory and tradition, the imperative of professional rigour and competence." Derrida takes principles seriously. It can be argued that Derrida's approach to principles is such that we treat them *as if* they are universal rules, but we need to re-motivate the legitimacy of these rules every time we use them (Cilliers 1998: 139).

The central problematic of Derrida's "second question" is a challenge to the hermeneutic postulation of a fusion of horizons. At stake is the implication of Derrida's contention that there is no "definitive" context, namely, a new reading of a text cannot merely be incorporated within an already "existing" context. This point is one of the

11 By way of example, Derrida (1988a: 38) writes about his response to JL Austins *How to Do Things With Words* that he considers himself to be "in many respects quite close to Austin, both interested and indebted to his problematic," and then, crucially, he adds: "when I do raise questions or objections, it is always at points where I recognise in Austin's theory presuppositions which are most tenacious and the most central suppositions of the *continental* metaphysical tradition." Derrida maintains that deconstructions do not attempt to overcome the metaphysical tradition, since that which tries to escape metaphysics is already implicit within it, that to try to undo metaphysics is to embed oneself firmly within that tradition.

main differences between Derrida and Gadamer: the latter is still too concerned with a fusion of perspectives to realise a radical "break" in the context, whereas Derrida perceives of an-other reading as a restructuring of the context. Different referents would "structure" the text differently – a continuing process that cannot be completed.

Bearing in mind Derrida's rejection of decision-making based only on calculation, one can assume that the protocols of reading (mentioned in the previous section) would not be abstract rules that one blindly adheres to. On what grounds does one employ a particular set of "quasi-protocols" in order to establish whether or not something, for instance, a specific interpretation of a text, is good? The answer to this question points once again to the possibility of a minimal consensus, which is a key aspect of Derrida's "third" question.

Question 3

The third question continues the critique of Gadamer's claim that the underlying structure of understanding ("Verstehen") is a "good will," leading to the possibility of consensus. Derrida (in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 53) asks whether "the precondition for *Verstehen*, far from being the continuity of *rapport* [what Gadamer would call consensus or mutual understanding], is not rather the interruption of *rapport*, a certain *rapport* of interruption, the suspending of all mediation." Derrida's question is a criticism of Gadamer's assumption that when partners in dialogue show the good will to understand one another, it becomes possible to remove the "otherness" of the other and achieve mutual understanding. The "other" cannot be understood in any other way than from the would-be understander's own perspective.

In a footnote at the end of *The Politics of Friendship*, Derrida (1988b: 644) writes: "Friendship, the relation without dependence, without episode and yet into which enters all the simplicity of life, passes by way of the recognition of the common strangeness that does not allow us to speak of our friends, but only to speak to them ..." From this citation, it is evident that Derrida would perceive the Gadamerian pursuit of overcoming the other's otherness as a form of violence that has its roots in a metaphysical tradition that emphasises universality over differentiation, or consensus over alterity. According to Derrida, the encounter with the other is always already marked by asymmetry inasmuch as the will to understand the other is suffused with a will to power. This will to power is evident in the gesture of receiving the other from one's own perspective, thus rendering the understanding of the other an exercise in *self-interest*, in changing the other to produce a "same" that coincides with one's own interest. While Gadamer concedes that we encounter one another with prejudice, he nevertheless postulates the possibility of a commensurability brought on by mutual agreement.

Caputo (in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 263) perceives of a deconstruction that would eye with suspicion a position that purchases "deep truths by deep violence," by repressing that which disturbs the unity of a system of truth, i.e. those who trouble the guardians of truth with their "otherness." When Gadamer suggests at the beginning of his encounter with Derrida that the universal claim of hermeneutics is beyond all doubt, he has, Derrida (in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 54) claims, already dismissed "quite a different way of thinking about texts." Gadamer (in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 57) rejoins that there is an implicit consensus between hermeneutics and deconstruction since Derrida poses questions to him and must therefore presume that Gadamer would understand them. Gadamer's argument is what Kearney describes as the

charge of obscurantism. In dialogue, writes Kearney (1993: 4), "One must seek to say what one means to the other and to try to understand what the other means to say." This would require, as Derrida himself points out in an already mentioned citation, at least a minimal commitment to consensus, and the minimum requirement being that "an ethical other must first have addressed the subject in a language that the subject can hear and (at least minimally) understand" (Kearney 1993: 4). It is interesting to note two different emphases in Derrida's use of the term "obscurantism."

Firstly, in his text on the *raison d'être* of the university, Derrida (1983: 15) suggests that nihilism and obscurantism lie in wait "when on occasion great professors or representatives of prestigious institutions lose all sense of proportion and control; on such occasions they forget the principles that they claim to defend in their work and suddenly begin to heap insults ..." ¹² It must be noted that Derrida himself has at times treated his critics in a "violent" manner. In the altercation that followed his paper, *Racism's Last Word* (Derrida 1985), it can be argued that Derrida treats his critics unfairly. He makes no effort to hide his resentment and often employs a condescending and even insulting tone. ¹³ Another example is Derrida's (1988a: 113) own admission in the *Afterword* that his writing with regards to his altercation with Searle "was not devoid of aggressivity." Derrida's first response to Gadamer has a distinct ironic tone, which is contrary to his call for a "straightforward" discussion in the *Afterword*. Moreover, Derrida (in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 54) himself admits to the "elliptical" form of his response. It is in the *Afterword* that Derrida (1988a:112) asserts that the "violence, political or otherwise, at work in academic discussions or in intellectual discussions generally, must be acknowledged." However, he denies advocating or allowing this violence; instead, he pleads that "we try to recognise and analyse it as best we can in its various forms: obvious or disguised, institutional or individual, literal or metaphoric, candid or hypocritical, in good or guilty conscience" (112).

Secondly, in the *Afterword*, Derrida (119) focuses more on the element of equivocation associated with obscurantism. He writes:

One shouldn't complicate things for the pleasure of complicating, but one should also never simply pretend to be sure of such simplicity where there is none. If things were simple, word would have gotten around, as you say in English. There you have one of my mottos, one quite appropriate for what I take to be the spirit of the type of 'enlightenment' granted our time. Those who wish to simplify at all costs and who raise a hue and cry about obscurity because they do not recognise the unclarity of the old *Aufklärung* are in my eyes dangerous dogmatists and tedious obscurantists. No less dangerous (for instance, in politics) are those who wish to purify at all costs.

His meaning is clear: for the sake of clarity and the possibility of understanding, it is necessary to strive to write as unambiguously as possible, without detracting from the complexities that sometimes characterise one's subject matter. In comparison, Gadamer's confidence in mutual agreement and some form of eventual consensus seriously underestimates the complexities that are always already part of the interpretative experience. Regardless of the evidence that Derrida himself has not always treated his interlocutors in a responsible way, his "three questions" to Gadamer have demonstrated

¹² See, for instance, footnotes nine and 11 of the *Afterword* (Derrida 1988a: 156-157).

¹³ For a detailed discussion of this text and the responses to it, see Cilliers (1998b).

that the latter's concept of "good will," which forms the basis of *Verstehen* could never pass as a "mere observation." The fact that good will is not "axiomatic" seriously questions the validity of Gadamer's claim to the universality of hermeneutics.

Towards An Ethic of Discussion

Everywhere, in particular in the United States and in Europe, the self-declared philosophers, theoreticians, and ideologists of communication, dialogue, and consensus, of univocity and transparency, those who claim ceaselessly to reinstate the classical ethics of proof, discussion, and exchange, are most often those who excuse themselves from attentively reading and listening to the other, who demonstrate precipitation and dogmatism, and who no longer respect the elementary rules of philology and of interpretation, confounding science and chatter as though they had not the slightest taste for communication or rather as though they are afraid of it ...

(Derrida 1988a: 156-157)

From our discussion thus far it would be fair to assert that Derrida provides compelling arguments why we should question "communication" as an axiom from which decidable truth emerges. In questioning Gadamer's postulation of "good will" as an unconditional axiom, Derrida challenges the most problematic aspect of *Text and Interpretation*, namely Gadamer's claim to the universality of hermeneutics on the basis of humankind's shared capacity to understand. In opposition, Derrida argues for the undecidability of meaning. His response may create the impression that deconstruction merely emphasises the impossibility of pure understanding and thus the impossibility of 'communication'. At the heart of such an interpretation of deconstruction is a binary logic (impossibility/possibility, communication/non-communication, pure understanding/misunderstanding or no understanding, etc.), which fails to take account of the "workings" of *différance*. Meaning-as-*différance* suggests that meaning is generated all the time, but the process by which it is generated never comes to a halt. Thus, as Derrida (1988a: 1) points out, "one must first of all ask oneself whether or not the word or signifier 'communication' communicates a determinate content, an identifiable meaning, or a describable value." Derrida concedes that the act of articulating the question of what we mean when we say we communicate already anticipates the meaning of the word "communication." This illustrates the "double writing" of Derrida's deconstruction: he uses the language of metaphysics, which constrains him to "predetermine communication as a vehicle, a means of transport or transitional medium of a *meaning*, and moreover of a unified meaning" (1), while simultaneously challenging what we "mean" by – "communication."

Derrida also questions Gadamer's assumption of the universality of hermeneutics resulting from the argument of the good will as "eumeneis elenchoi." That Gadamer does claim a "universality" for hermeneutics can be deduced from his claim that it is a "hermeneutic" tradition that prestructures different understandings in order for them to be united or "fused" into one decidable meaning. He is not quite consistent when he also claims (in Michelfelder & Palmer 1989: 96) that he affirms that "understanding is always understanding-differently" and that what is "dislocated when my word reaches another person, and especially when a text reaches its reader, can never be fixed in a rigid identity." According to Derrida, communication is "cut off, at a certain point,

from its 'original' desire-to-say-what-one means" (1988a: 12); meaning cannot be constrained by context; and "understanding" cannot be attained through the fusion of hermeneutic horizons since these horizons assume the decidability of truth. Thus, Derrida challenges the notion of a dialogue that is understood to be "someone saying something to someone about something" that opens the possibility of agreement (Kearney 1993: 4).

The "third" question challenges Gadamer's postulation of dialogic model of understanding that strives towards consensus, which does not include a strong enough recognition of the "otherness" of the other. When Derrida asks in *The Politics of Friendship* that we respect the "infinite distance" in our movement towards understanding the other (1988b: 644), it is not to be confused with the notion of a "radically other." Derrida's view of the other does not rid the other of its "otherness," nor does it encourage an absolute otherness. This is illustrated by the example that even though Derrida may want to be understood, as Gadamer suggests, and thus not claim absolute otherness, it does not follow that such an understanding entails that Gadamer should necessarily agree with Derrida's understanding. This will amount to the exclusion of difference. In this regard, Caputo (1999: 187) observes that, for Derrida, reading and writing require a certain kind of friendship. However, this friendship that Derrida postulates "must not be weighed down by the baggage of the classical axiomatic of friendship" (187), in other words, conventional notions of friendship in terms of proximity, familiarity, unity and fusion (184). Instead, the friend would be thought of in terms of distance, irreducible alterity and strangeness (184).

Derridean friendship is an alternative to the friendship derived from the "regular time" and "homogenous space" described in the philosophical tradition (190), whereby the "other" is contracted to the same, into fraternity. Caputo argues that the history of friendship, or, for that matter, any history or tradition, is not homogeneous, since it is marked by dominant structures that silence and repress others (195). This corresponds to Derrida's contention that academic discussions are interfused with violence. Derrida (1988a: 118, 139, 155) refers to, for instance, the tendency to criticise a dialogue partner directly or using insults and abusive analogies when interpreting texts instead of citing his work in context, not only as a means of criticising by way of demonstration, but also to underline the extent to which one may agree with him. However, we have shown that the reconstitution of context, which is a precondition of the ethics of discussion, unavoidably implies politics because it involves exclusion. Therefore, Derrida urges an avoidance of furthering one's own interest if the cost of doing so involves making errors, not understanding, reading badly, and not respecting the pragmatic, grammatical, or moral rules (151). In short, Derrida advocates respect for an other's work in its entirety even when particular aspects of that work may be problematized (140).

Caputo suggests that for Derrida friendship is marked by *différance*; therefore, the friend is always already *what is to come*. Thus, Caputo writes that whatever refers to itself as "the friend" in the present is deconstructible (191). The deferral of friendship, the distance that separates one from the "other," does not undermine the relation with the friend but, instead, defines its peculiar nature: Since the friend escapes us in the movement of *différance* we can never enclose the friend within our knowledge; therefore, "we can only speak *to*, but not *about* the friend" (196). This is why Derrida as-

serts that when addressing oneself to one's dialogue partner, one needs to do it in the most direct manner possible (1988a: 114).

The distance that marks one's relationship with the other does not signify our mutual isolation; instead, this space provides the opportunity for communication. Derrida is the first to admit that certain of his writings and deconstructive practices call into question the foundations of, among other things, scientific, philosophical and literary theory. He explains that his style of deconstruction aims at making legible the ostensibly self-evident truths, whether philosophical, ethical or political, that hide beneath the code of academic discussion (113). At the same time he is "for safeguards, for memory – the jealous conservation – of numerous traditions" (141). Since Derrida takes account of traditions he is at once its "less passive, more attentive and more 'deconstructive' heir," and more foreign to it (130). This is why his style of deconstructive writing or double writing "must inevitably partition itself along two sides of a limit and continue (up to a certain point) to respect the rules of that which it deconstructs or of which it exposes the deconstructibility" (152). Therefore, deconstruction ought not to be equated with a rejection of the traditions associated with academic discussion. Instead, Derrida wishes to "not close the discussion, but to give it a fresh start" (154).

What does this "fresh start" entail? Derrida urges us not to reduce interlocution to a comfortable affair between "those in the know," nor to a confrontation between adversaries unwilling to make the effort to suspend their preconceptions. We have to confront the real difficulties involved in dealing with difference. This might mean, as in the case of the discussion with Gadamer, that the flow of the conversation we have become used to, has to be disrupted.

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