The term “deconstruction” decisively enters philosophical discourse in 1967, with the publication of three books by Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*, Of Grammatology, and *Voice and Phenomenon*. Indeed, “deconstruction” is virtually synonymous with Derrida’s name. Nevertheless, the event of Derridean deconstruction developed out of the phenomenological tradition. On the one hand, as is often noted, Derrida appropriated the term from Heidegger’s idea, in *Being and Time*, of a “destruction” of the history of Western ontology (Heidegger 2010, 19–25 [§6]), that is, a dismantling of the historical concepts of being in order to lay bare the fundamental experience from which these concepts originated (PSY2, 2). On the other, and less often noted, Derrida took constant inspiration from Husserl’s idea of the epoché (Husserl 2012, 59–60 [§32]), that is, from the universal suspension of the belief in a world having existence independent from experience (see, e.g., SM, 59). Both Heidegger’s historical destruction and Husserl’s universal suspension amounted to critical practices in regard to accepted beliefs and sedimented concepts. Likewise, Derridean deconstruction criticizes structures, concepts, and beliefs that seem self-evident. In this regard, deconstructive critique is classical (or traditional, Kantian), aiming to demonstrate the limited validity of concepts and beliefs, even their falsity, aiming, in other words, to dispel the illusions they have generated. In general, deconstructive critique targets the illusion of presence, that is, the idea that being is simply present and available before our eyes. For Derrida, the idea of presence implies self-givenness, simplicity, purity, identity, and stasis. Therefore, deconstruction aims to demonstrate that presence is never given as such, never simple, never pure, never self-identical, and never static; it is always given as something other, complex, impure, differentiated, and generated.
Deconstruction, however, is more than a critical endeavor. It aims at positive effects, as we shall see. Although the effects it wants to bring about take a variety of forms, most basically, deconstruction aims to lead us to an experience. Again, resembling Husserl’s epoché and Heidegger’s destruction, Derrida’s deconstruction leads us to the experience of time. Or, more precisely, it aims for an experience of what lies prior to the division of time and space. What lies prior to the division of time and space is also prior to presence. Indeed, deconstruction aims at an experience of what generates presence. Since it generates presence, what this experience tries to reach cannot itself be present; it must be – necessarily, structurally, and not accidentally – non-present. The non-present source of presence, for Derrida, is a process of differentiation that never either completely separates or finally unifies phases of time or dimensions of space. Early in his career, Derrida coined the word “différance” to refer to this “ultra-transcendental” experience of differentiation (VP, 13 and 58). The ending, spelt with an “a,” gives “difference” (a word used to refer to actual differences already generated) an active sense of differing that never stops and therefore always delays the achievement of identity. Although “différance” is probably the most famous of all Derrida’s invented terms, later, based on the context into which his deconstruction intervened, he invents or gives new senses to words like “undecidability”; “pharmakon”; “khôra”; “specter”; “justice”; “democracy”; “hospitality”; and, most importantly, “anachronism.” Below, we shall present in particular the experience of anachronism. No matter what the context however, all of these words refer to the experience of life, and, if, thanks to deconstruction, we reach this experience, we undergo a change in the way we live. Therefore – this was Derrida’s constant hope – deconstruction should always have an ethical or political effect on us.

1. Three Definitions of Deconstruction

First Definition: In 1967, when Derrida introduced the term “deconstruction,” he did not define it in a formal way. However, as his career developed, he presented three precise definitions. The first definition appears in the interview “Positions.” At the time of this interview, 1971, Derrida’s deconstructions seemed always to target texts and ideas found in the Western metaphysical tradition, which Derrida (somewhat infamously) had dubbed “the metaphysics of presence” (VP, 53). In “Positions,” Derrida states that the deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence consists in two phases. The first phase, which is critical, attacks the classical oppositions that structure metaphysics, oppositions such as inside and outside, same and other, and identity and difference. These oppositions, Derrida states, are subordinating; they are violent hierarchies. The first phase of deconstruction “reverses” the hierarchies. In order to reverse, Derrida focuses on the presuppositions of the superior term’s authority. Under scrutiny, it turns out that the superior term presupposes traits found in the subordinate term. At this point in his career, Derrida targets primarily the
metaphysical conception of language. In general, in its conception of language, metaphysics privileges speech (as we see, for example, in Plato’s *Phaedrus*). Metaphysics privileges speech because communication seems to function better when the speaker is present animating his or her words. Written language (books, texts, scripts, or diagrams and traces) seems then to be derivative from spoken language since written language repeats spoken language and consequently, as a repetition, writing does not communicate as well as speech. In fact, metaphysics believes that the primary trait of speech is spontaneity, while that of writing is repeatability. Yet, as Derrida has demonstrated several times, both speech and writing, in order to function, in order to communicate at all (either well or badly), must make use of formal characteristics or traits, either phonic forms and orthographic forms, forms that must be repeatable. Therefore, language must be conceived fundamentally in terms of repeatability, the very characteristic that seemed to define writing alone. In other words, both speech and writing share the trait of repeatability.

The sharing of traits points to a necessary structure, more precisely, to a process at the base of the hierarchy itself. So, deconstruction, in this first definition, has a second phase that aims at marking the basic process that made the hierarchical opposition possible in the first place. The basic process is what we just called “repeatability,” but it is also what we called at the beginning “differentiation.” That we already have two contradictory names for the basic process indicates that the process is paradoxical or aporetical. It produces the oppositions and hierarchies with which metaphysics works, but, being their source, it cannot be named by the terms of these oppositions and hierarchies. Indeed, the process is so basic, so fundamental – again it is “ultra-transcendental” – that it cannot be named properly or adequately; all names selected to designate it will have been determined by the very oppositions and hierarchies that the structure conditioned or generated. Nevertheless, we must speak of it. To do that, we must make use of what Derrida calls “paleonyms,” that is, old names inherited from these oppositions and hierarchies (POS, 95). In his reuse of these names, Derrida aims “at the emergence of a new ‘concept,’” a concept that no longer lets itself, and has never let itself be included in the previous regime” (POS, 42). As we noted above, early in his career, the 1960s, we find Derrida’s famous concept of *différance*: in the same period of this thinking, however, in his engagement with the problem of language, he also coins “supplementarity,” “writing,” and “trace.” All of these new concepts are defined in terms of an irreducible relation that is contradictory, a contradiction, Derrida argues, that cannot be resolved. Irresolvable, these new concepts are undecidable – undecidable, as we just mentioned and as we shall develop more fully in the next section, between repetition and event, between universality and singularity. If we can experience the undecidability, then we are on the verge of exiting the terrain of metaphysics.

**Second Definition:** The first definition of deconstruction as two phases gives way to the refinement we find in the “Force of Law” almost 20 years later (1989–1990). While the first definition suggests a sort of political endeavor – a transformative
experience that makes us escape from a regime of thinking – the second definition is explicitly ethical or political. In “Force of Law,” Derrida says that deconstruction is practiced in two styles. These “two styles” do not correspond to the “two phases” in the earlier definition of deconstruction. On the one hand, there is the genealogical style of deconstruction, which recalls the history of a concept or a theme. Earlier in his career, Derrida had laid out, for example, the history of the concept of writing. But now, later in his career, he is more interested in the history of justice, democracy, and hospitality. On the other hand, there is the more formalistic or structural style of deconstruction, which examines ahistorical paradoxes or aporias. In “Force of Law,” Derrida lays out three aporias, although they all seem to be variants of one, an aporia concerning the unstable relation between law (the French term is “droit,” which also means “right”) and justice. Let us examine the three aporias presented in “Force of Law.”

Derrida calls the first aporia, “the epoché of the rule” (FL, 22–23). Here we see, quite explicitly, Husserl’s influence on Derrida. The aporia consists of the following contradiction. In order to be just, a judge must follow a rule; otherwise, everyone would say that his or her judgment is arbitrary. Yet, if a judge merely follows a rule, everyone would also say that his or her decision was merely right (droit) and not really just. In other words, for a decision to be just, not only must a judge follow a rule but also he or she must “re-institute” it in a new judgment. Thus a decision aiming at justice is both regulated and unregulated. The law must be both conserved and destroyed (or suspended). Each case is other, each decision is different and requires an absolutely unique interpretation which no existing coded rule can or ought to guarantee. If a judge programmatically follows a code, he or she is a “calculating machine.” Strict calculation or strict arbitrariness, one or the other is unjust, but they are both involved; thus, in the present, we cannot say that a judgment, a decision is just, purely just. For Derrida, the “re-institution” of the law in a unique decision is a kind of violence since it does not conform perfectly to the instituted codes; the law is always, according to Derrida, founded in violence. This violent decision brings us to the second aporia.

Derrida calls the second “the ghost of the undecidable” (FL, 24–26). A decision begins with the initiative to read, to interpret, and even to calculate. But, to make such a decision, one must first of all experience undecidability. Indeed, in “Force of Law,” Derrida makes the concept of undecidability more precise than he had in the first definition of deconstruction. The undecidable, for Derrida, is not the mere oscillation between two contradictory significations. Instead, one must experience that the case, being unique and singular, does not fit the established codes and therefore a decision about it seems to be impossible. It is the experience of what, although foreign to the calculable and the rules, is still obligated. We are obligated – this is a duty – to give ourselves up to the impossible decision, while taking account of rules and law. As Derrida says, “A decision that did not go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would only be the programmable application
or unfolding of a calculable process” (FL, 24). And once the ordeal is past, “if this ever happens,” as Derrida says (FL, 24), then the decision has again followed or given itself a rule and is no longer presently just. Justice therefore is always to come in the future, it is never present. There is apparently no moment during which a decision could be called presently and fully just. Either it has not followed a rule, and hence it is unjust; or if it did follow a rule, it was calculated and again unjust since it did not respect the singularity of the case. This relentless injustice is why the ordeal of the undecidable is never past. It keeps coming back like a “phantom,” which “deconstructs from the inside every assurance of presence, and thus every criteriology that would assure us of the justice of the decision” (FL, 24–25). Even though justice is impossible and therefore always to come in or from the future, justice is not, for Derrida, a Kantian ideal, which brings us to the third aporia.

The third is called “the urgency that obstructs the horizon of knowledge” (FL, 26–28). Derrida stresses the Greek etymology of the word “horizon”: “As its Greek name suggests, a horizon is both the opening and limit that defines an infinite progress or a period of waiting.” Justice, however, even though it is un-presentable, does not wait. A just decision is always required immediately. It cannot furnish itself with unlimited knowledge. The moment of decision itself remains a finite moment of urgency and precipitation. The instant of decision is then the moment of madness, acting in the night of non-knowledge and non-rule. Once again we have a moment of irruptive violence. This urgency is why justice has no horizon of expectation (either regulative or messianic). Justice remains an event yet to come. Perhaps one must always say “can-be” (the French word for “perhaps” is “peut-être,” which literally means “can be”) for justice. This ability for justice aims however towards what is impossible, which brings us to the third definition of deconstruction.

**Third Definition:** The third definition can be found in an essay from 2000 called “Et Cetera.” Here Derrida in fact presents the most general definition of deconstruction:

> Each time that I say “deconstruction and X (regardless of the concept or the theme),” this is the prelude to a very singular division that turns this X into, or rather makes appear in this X, an impossibility that becomes its proper and sole possibility, with the result that between the X as possible and the “same” X as impossible, there is nothing but a relation of homonymy, a relation for which we have to provide an account. . . . For example, here referring myself to demonstrations I have already attempted . . . gift, hospitality, death itself (and therefore so many other things) can be possible only as impossible, as the im-possible, that is, unconditionally. (EC, 300, my emphasis)

As we stated at the beginning, deconstruction aims to show that presence is never given as such, never simple, never pure, never self-identical, and never static. Now we can see that the “never” in this formula in fact refers to a kind of powerless-ness. It is impossible for me to make presence ever be completely and finally present. More importantly, thanks to deconstruction, I experience that justice, democracy,
hospitality – all of these so-called “values” – cannot be achieved. If I have truly entered into the experience, then I do not undergo paralysis. I experience an obligation – always divided, contradictory, impossible – that I must attempt to fulfill, that I must follow. Let us look at this obligatory experience more closely.

2. Anachronism: Life as Powerlessness and Power

From the beginning of his career to the end, Derrida always states that what he is most interested in is life (VP, 9; A, 49). For Derrida, life must be studied, not from the side of the living being, but from the side of experience, the experience of being alive. Fundamentally, the experience of being alive is what Derrida calls “auto-affection” (VP, 60–74). Auto-affection refers to self-experience, but it is not the experience opened up by a deliberate act of reflection through which an object called the self is given in a representation. Below reflection and as its origin is the basic experience of my own body, of my own thoughts. Derrida is especially interested in the experience of thinking, which, since Plato in the *Theaetetus* (189e–190a), has been defined as interior monologue. The experience we are now going to examine is the experience of interior monologue. In Derrida, interior monologue is always the object of a deconstruction.

When I engage in interior monologue, when, in short, I think – it seems as though I hear myself speak at the very moment I speak. It seems as though my interior voice is not required to pass outside of myself, as though it is not required to traverse any space, not even the space of my body. So, my interior monologue seems to be immediate, immediately present, and not to involve anyone else. Interior monologue seems therefore to be different from the experience of me speaking to another and different from the experience of me looking at myself in the mirror, where my vision has to pass through, at the least, the portals of my eyes. It is important to hear the “seems” in the preceding sentences. We are now going to deconstruct the appearances in order to expose the essential structure, or, more precisely, the essential process below what is apparent or believed. So, the problem with the belief that interior monologue (in a word, thought) is different from other experiences of auto-affection is twofold. On the one hand, the experience of hearing oneself speak is temporal (like all experience). The “timing” of interior monologue means that the present moment involves a past moment, which has elapsed and which has been retained. It is an irreducible or essential necessity that the present moment comes after, a little later; it is always involved in a process of mediation. The problem therefore with the belief that interior monologue happens immediately (as if there were no mediation involved) is that the hearing of myself is never immediately present in the moment when I speak. The speaking fades into the past, time passes between the speaking and the hearing so that the hearing of myself in the present comes a moment later. There is a delay between the hearing and the speaking. This conclusion means that my interior
monologue, in fact, resembles my experience of the mirror image in which my vision must traverse a distance that differentiates me into seer and seen. This distance and delay are the truth of the experience. Due to this delay and distance – we are in an experience that is prior to the division of time and space – it is impossible for me to hear myself immediately.

But there is a further implication. The distance or delay in time turns my speaking in the present moment into something coming second. Temporalization implies that the present is not an origin all alone; it is compounded with a past so that my speaking in the present moment is no longer *sui generis*. Therefore it must be seen as a kind of response to the past. The fact that my speaking is a response to the past leads to the other problem with the belief that interior monologue is my own. Beside the irreducible delay involved in the experience of auto-affection, there is the problem of the voice. In order to hear myself speak at this very moment, I must make use of the same phonemes as I use in communication (even if this monologue is not vocalized externally through my mouth). It is an irreducible or essential necessity that the silent words I form contain repeatable traits (as we mentioned above in the first definition of deconstruction). This irreducible necessity means that, when I speak to myself, I speak with the sounds of others. In other words, it means that I find in myself other voices, which come from the past: the many voices are in me. I cannot – here we must speak of powerlessness – hear myself speak all alone. Others’ voices contaminate the hearing of myself speaking. Just as my present moment is never immediate, my interior monologue is never simply my own.

The experience that we have just described is what Derrida calls “anachronism” (AP, 81). The term “anachronism” means that things never happen at the right time, never come on time; in short, time is “out of joint,” as Derrida quotes Hamlet (SM, 17–19). The description above disclosed a formal structure at work in the process, a structure consisting of two “out of joint” or irreconcilable elements. On the one hand, there is always a present moment, a kind of event, a singularization. Each thought I have, as I speak it, has a kind of novelty to it. On the other, however, the singularity of the thought is connected back to some other thoughts in the past. As the description shows, each thought is necessarily composed of traits already used in the past. These two elements of repetition (or universality) and singularity (or difference) are irreducibly connected to one another but without unification. The necessary inseparable disunity of event and repetition implies that there is no simple beginning of time, no origin; no matter how far we go back into the past, what appears as an origin is always the repetition of something prior. Likewise, the necessary inseparability of event and repetition implies that there can be no simple end of time, no apocalypse; no matter how far we go out into the future, what appears as an end is always the anticipation of something later. As Derrida says, the origin is always “origin-heterogeneous” (OS, 107–108). Although he never says this explicitly, we must add that for Derrida, the end, likewise, is always “end-heterogeneous.” It is perhaps harder to understand the idea of “end-heterogeneous” than the idea of
“origin-heterogeneous.” It seems easier for us to imagine the past extending indefinitely, while it seems difficult for us to imagine the world continuing without end. Yet, contesting the image of a complete apocalypse, Derrida in fact seems to assert that the world – or something – will continue indefinitely. This is what he seems to have in mind. Let us imagine an end of the world. Let us even say the obliteration of the world. However we would think of that devastation, as an explosion, extinction, or cataclysm, no matter how destructive or catastrophic, it would leave behind something residual. We cannot imagine destruction without something left over. Whatever this leftover might be, however we would think of this residual something, as energy, micro-particles, dense matter, space, gases, light, micro-organisms, it would necessarily continue. It would necessarily continue to have some sort of effects, and thus it would continue to have a future, something coming. “End-heterogeneous” means that it is necessarily the case that something else or other is always still to come from or in the future. This claim about the necessity of a “to come” (the French word for “future” is literally “to come”: “a-venir”) is the foundation for all of Derrida’s discussions of messianism late in his career. For Derrida however, unlike the well-known messianisms, the messiah or event that is always to come is not necessarily good or evil. Strictly, we do not and cannot know what event is coming since the future remains ultimately hidden, just as we are unable strictly to experience our own death (since if we did, we would not be dead). With this impossibility (recall the third definition of deconstruction), we have returned to the powerlessness indicated by the auto-affection of hearing oneself speak.

Probably influenced by Heidegger’s lectures on Nietzsche (Heidegger 1991), Derrida has always attempted to lead us back to the experience that shows us that we do not have the power that we think we have. In the auto-affection of hearing oneself speak, we encountered this powerlessness when we recognized that other voices always contaminate my own voice. The contamination of voices means, on the one hand, that I am powerless to stop my voice from being a copy, from being repetitious, the same (by means of the fact that I must speak with the traits or phonemes of a language, which in order to function must have some sort of formal universality); on the other hand, even though there is a repetition, I am powerless to stop my voice from being something new, different, other (by means of the fact that when I speak with the same traits of a language, my own voice comes in, as an event, as a singularity). In the experience therefore, I encounter a double powerlessness: I cannot stop repetition; I cannot stop singularization. The double powerlessness is a double necessity, as if in the experience of hearing myself speak, I experience a commandment, a law – a law that, being inseparably divided, I cannot fulfill. I must repeat, and yet I must singularize. However, with this divided law (recall the aporia of undecidability in the second definition of deconstruction), something becomes possible. From powerlessness, we pass to a kind of power. This is life: I am powerless to stop change, alterity, and ultimately the future from coming, but I have the power to let change happen; I am powerless to stop continuity, sameness, and
ultimately the past from coming back, but I have the power to let continuity happen. In other words, if I cannot stop my voice from repeating, from being the same as other voices, then I have the power to let that repetition happen. I can obey the law of repetition: if I cannot stop my voice from singularizing itself, from being my own voice, then I have the power to let that singularization happen. I can obey the law of singularization. The inability to stop, which in fact is the ability to let happen, has one further implication. It implies that I cannot close the borders of my self-experience, so that I am unable to stop myself – unable to stop my country, my democracy, my people – from being hospitable not only to what is the same but also to what is foreign, migrating, vagrant, homeless, and even beastly. This inability means that I am able to let enter, to welcome in, not only all those who are the same as me, but also all those that are other from me. Yes, since I can’t stop them, let them come in. Through the discourse of power, we see that deconstruction, regardless of which one of the three definitions we take up, contains essentially an ethical or political aim.

3. Conclusion: “Who, We?”

Having an essentially ethical or political aim means that deconstruction always criticizes instituted structures (such as the structures of democracy and law in place today). Its criticisms, however, are never done in the name of explicit policies or laws (such as an actual democratic constitution or an actual law). As Derrida says late in his career, “No politics, no ethics, and no law can be, as it were, deduced from this thought [i.e., from deconstructive thought]. To be sure, nothing can be done with it” (ROG, xv). But the lack of deductive politics does not mean that deconstruction has no effect on the way we live and behave. Instead, the aim of deconstruction is essentially political and ethical in the sense of making us question who we are. In one of the first of many engagements with Heidegger, Derrida asked this simple question: “But who, we?” (MP, 136). This “who are we?” is still the primary deconstructive question. No final answer to this question can be found since we cannot stop the sameness of the others and the otherness of the same from crossing our borders. The question remaining unanswerable, remaining necessarily open implies that we ourselves must become other than the enclosed community of man. The question remaining open makes us search for, even desire, a conception of us that is faithful. We must be faithful to the fact that we never know ourselves in presence. We must be faithful to the fact that the border of us is always porous. We must be faithful to all the others – are they friends or enemies? – who dwell within us, who have already gone away and who are still to come. Yet Derrida has shown us we can never be this faithful. This insufficiency is not a cause for pessimism. It shows us that deconstruction remains necessary. There is always a need for deconstruction.
Note


References