deconstruction and Ethics: An (ir)Responsibility

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“deconstruction and Ethics”; the conjunction here might raise a couple of questions for readers unfamiliar with Derrida’s work. Does the “and” convey an essential connection between the two words on either side, and thus perhaps suggest that deconstruction is ethical or can be read ethically? Or, does the “and” convey an antithesis between the two words, suggesting that deconstruction is in opposition to ethics, and is therefore unethical or nihilistic? Predominantly, in the historical reception of the ethical in Derrida’s work scholars have argued that either deconstruction is ethical (or can be read ethically), or it is unethical or nihilistic. But as we will see, Derrida’s work is not so black and white. To suggest that Derrida’s work is either ethical or unethical (in the metaphysical sense) is to miss the point of deconstruction. To oppose the ethical to the unethical would be to perpetuate what Derrida deconstructs: the binary oppositions by which metaphysics is characterised. This chapter will briefly outline this historical reception before arguing that deconstruction entails a paradoxical move; one that enables a simultaneous challenge to, without rejection of, the binary choice-making and decision-taking that has been characteristic of metaphysical ethics. The chapter will conclude with an explanation of the positive nature of this paradox in and through Derrida’s discussion of responsibility and irresponsibility. To ease us into an understanding of this paradoxical move let us begin with a discussion of the role ethics plays as a metaphysical concept.

1. Ethics: a metaphysical concept

Ethics is an abstract noun and therefore is not generally spelt with a capital ‘E’, as it is in the title of this chapter. However, the capital in this instance attempts to convey visually the important role that nouns play in the construction of Western metaphysics, as well as the prominence of metaphysical ethics in Western culture. Since Plato and Aristotle,
metaphysics has been taken up in many forms and defined or critiqued in various ways according to the multiple philosophical topics that it encompasses: from immortality, God (theology); Being (ontology); reality (cosmology); beings (philosophical anthropology); morality and truth (ethics), and so on. Attempts have been made to define metaphysics. Aristotle called it the ‘science’ of “primary principles and causes” (Aristotle 1998: 982b, 9). Immanuel Kant conceived of metaphysics as a rational investigation of the principle of reason (Kant 1934: 28), while Martin Heidegger claimed that metaphysics is an “inquiry beyond or over beings, which aims to recover them as such and as a whole for our grasp” (Heidegger 1993: 106). More recent philosophers and defenders of metaphysics argue that it concerns itself with “the fundamental structure of reality as a whole” (Lowe 2002: 2–3). Not to ignore their specificities, underpinning these varying definitions is a common account of metaphysics as that which grounds the questions of God, Being, reality, morality, ethics, truth, and so on, in absolute and fundamental principles.

Nouns (as well as binary oppositions) are one means by which to construct the fundamental grounds or principles, and this construction works in the following way: because nouns are things, places, people, abstract ideas, animals and objects, they are generally locatable in space and time. Being locatable, in turn, means that our perceptions of space and time are formulated on the teleology of “cause and effect,” meaning that time is not only perceived and experienced to move in linear fashion: past, present, future, but also enables a sense of self, and of others and objects, ideas, things, places (i.e. nouns) as unified and stable across time and space (universality). This experience of unity and stability is what Derrida calls the “presence of the present.” To define it another way, the ‘presence of the present’ is the located-ness; ‘now’-ness; or the ‘presence’ of some ‘thing’ in the present moment of time and thought. Given that nouns, which characterise metaphysics, encapsulate the ‘presence of the present’, and given that ethics is a noun, then ethics is a metaphysical principle through and through.

However, there is more than one form of metaphysical ethics, indeed there are varying accounts: from Contract, Christian, Deontological, Utilitarianism to Feminist ethics, but what they all have in common, or what makes them all metaphysical, is that they all focus on regulating behaviour by prescribing a set of universal principles (Diprose 1994: 18). To be able to have a common focus relies on the common assumption “that individuals are present as self-transparent, isolated, rational minds and that embodied differences between individuals are inconsequential” (Diprose 1994: 18), and “that the individual comes prior to relations with others” (Diprose 1994: 102). To be ethical, then, requires that the
subject be present to itself, that is, not only self-conscious, but as a consequence also rational, and thus autonomous. Derrida’s work challenges these assumptions.

Even though the ethical has been a concern of Derrida’s from his earliest works, such as Of Grammatology and “Violence and Metaphysics,” he has not explicitly discussed “ethics” (as a metaphysical concept) in any sustained form. Rather he has taken a different approach by implicitly raising the problem of metaphysical ethics in and through his deconstructive treatment of concepts such as “responsibility”, “justice” and “law,” and “hospitality”, in books and essays such as the Gift of Death, Of Hospitality, Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas, Politics of Friendship, “Violence and Metaphysics”, and “Force of Law”. Through these deconstructive “treatments” Derrida is able to avoid offering an ethical principle or model to live by, or to regulate behaviour. He does not provide us with an ethical treatise or philosophy, because to do so would be to perpetuate what ethics is, and what deconstruction is not: a metaphysical concept.

This is not to say that either deconstruction is ethical, or that deconstruction opposes itself, and can be opposed, to ethics, and is therefore unethical or nihilistic. It is neither ethical nor unethical because deconstruction is not, as Derrida argues, a “method, critique, analysis, act or operation” (LJ: 4). To oppose the ethical to the unethical would be to perpetuate the binary opposition on which metaphysics has been founded. This is why deconstruction in this chapter is spelt with a lower-case ‘d’: so as to attempt to avoid turning deconstruction into a proper noun with all the attendant problems this would entail. In other words, deconstruction is not a ‘thing’; it is not a noun, which would characterise it as having an essential nature.

Deconstruction therefore is hard to define because there is not just ‘one’ deconstruction, unchanging and metaphysical: instead as Derrida tells us there are only “deconstructions in the plural” (Derrida in Papadakis 1989: 73), that is, deconstruction is “irreducibly plural” (FL: 56), because it ‘is different from one context to another’ and “takes the singularity of every context into account” (Derrida in Papadakis 1989: 73). For Derrida, then, “[d]econstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organisation of a subject, or even of modernity. It deconstructs it-self. It can be deconstructed” (LJ: 4). For Derrida, this means:

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them in a certain way, because one always inhabits, and all the more
when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work.

(OG: 24)

Given Derrida’s description here, the implications of deconstruction for, and on, ethics, is revealing. If deconstruction as an “irreducible plurality” inhabits structures (metaphysical, philosophical, etc.), then those structures are constantly in the process of deconstructing themselves, and thus consequently their structure is constructed by something “other”: by a non-structure (which is not the opposite to structure as in de-struction, but can be defined as an alterity, heteronomy, or otherness). That is, metaphysics is not a pure presence referring to a pure foundation or origin, but contains or is traced through with something else: an alterity and “otherness” that disrupts presence and metaphysical foundations and determinations. Deconstruction reveals that structures are enabled by, or come into being because of, non-structures (alterity, otherness, heteronomy).

Likewise, ethics is constructed by the non-ethical, and thus contains an otherness that interrupts its presence. Thus, ethics deconstructs itself. In other words, as Derrida explains, there is a ‘non-ethical opening of ethics’ (OG: 140), meaning that ethics is ethics only because there is the non-ethical. Again, like non-structure, the non-ethical does not mean the opposite to ethics, rather the non-ethical can be characterised as an otherness that is incalculable, unanticipated and irreducible (by this I do not mean the ‘other’ is completely unknown, if it was it would not be recognisable) (Anderson 2012). But this also means that even though the non-ethical is not the opposite of the ethical, it does contain the possibility of bringing a violence and destruction that can be done to me or you, precisely because we cannot anticipate or calculate the other and what it may bring to us or how it may respond (AEL: 111–12; Bennington 2000: 43).

2. Critiques of deconstruction

It is because Derrida formulates ethics as constructed in and through non-ethics, that many critics of deconstruction have argued that the relation between deconstruction and ethics is a negative one. The general critique goes like this: because deconstruction reveals ethics to be contingent on something ‘other’ than metaphysical foundations, truths, and
categorical imperatives, then truth and meaning become contingent and contextualised to the point that moral action, meaning and interpretation become so indeterminate that what results is the denial and hence destruction of authority, institutions, structures or meaning for its own sake (nihilism). Critics, then, argue that deconstruction is not morally or ethically productive and positive, and is therefore nihilistic and indeterminate. Furthermore, critics have argued that because deconstruction is irreducibly plural, it ends up aestheticising and contextualising language and action through dissolution of the ethical and rational force of meaning and communication. Although recent scholars have critiqued Derrida for similar reasons, two famous and influential examples of this critique in a sustained form is found in Jürgen Habermas’ *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987), and in John Searle’s paper “Reiterating the Differences” (1977), the latter is a response to Derrida’s paper “Signature Event Context” (1977), to which Derrida, in turn, responds in book length form in *Limited Inc* (1997).

3. An ethical turn

If deconstruction isn’t a “method, critique, analysis, act or operation” (LJ: 4), and therefore does not and cannot offer an ethical theory, precisely because it inhabits metaphysical structures from within so that structure itself is revealed to be constructed in and through non-structure, then how exactly is ethics deconstructed? That is, how does deconstruction interrupt the tradition of ethics if deconstruction isn’t a metaphysical structure? Given this, is it possible to read deconstruction as ethical? In response to the critique of deconstruction as nihilistic and unethical, in the late 1980s and through the 1990s a number of scholars came to the defence of Derrida’s deconstruction, arguing that deconstruction could be read as ethical. This period marked what has been termed an “ethical turn” in the Anglo-American reception of Derrida’s work (this ‘ethical turn’, however, is not marked in the work of Derrida, where, as mentioned earlier, the ethical has been a concern of Derrida’s since his very first books).

Arguably, what characterised this ‘ethical turn’ were scholars predominantly drawing on Derrida’s engagement with, and therefore reading Derrida almost exclusively through, Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics. To summarise Levinas’ ethical position briefly: Levinas defines his ethics as a ‘calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other … The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics’ (Levinas 1996: 43). For Levinas, this ethics precedes and displaces the traditional understanding of metaphysical ethics. In other
words, as Derrida articulates it, Levinas wants to rectify the Greeks’ disregard of the other precisely by seeking the other in ‘the ethical relationship’, which as “a nonviolent relationship ... to the Other, ... [is] capable of opening the space of transcendence and of liberating metaphysics” (WD: 83). That is, Levinas calls upon ethics (defined as the moment when the other puts the same, the ego, into question) to liberate us from Greek metaphysics (WD: 83), which continues to permeate philosophy and culture to the present day. However, for Derrida, Levinas cannot possibly succeed in achieving the nonviolent “opening toward the beyond of philosophical discourse” while he continues to use the language of metaphysics (WD: 110). The only way Levinas can do this is by using what he rejects: the philosophical language inherited from the Greek logos.

As a consequence of his engagement with Levinas, many scholars defending Derrida against the attack of nihilism understood Derrida’s notion of the “other” (as difference) through Levinas’ ethics of the other. From this, two predominant views ensued: on the one hand, there were those scholars, such as Simon Critchley (1992, rpt 1999) and Drucilla Cornell (1992), that not only made an attempt to reduce Derrida’s deconstruction to Levinas’ ethics, but in the process also assimilated Derrida’s notion of the other to Levinas’ ‘nonviolent relationship to … the Other’ (WD: 83). On the other hand, there were a number of scholars (for instance, Geoffrey Bennington and Robert Bernasconi, among others), who recognised the importance of Levinas and his ethics for Derrida’s thinking, while at the same time, also acknowledging Derrida’s radicalisation of Levinas’s ethics of the other. One of the differences between Levinas and Derrida that becomes apparent in and through the latter’s radicalisation, is that for Derrida ethics is always already violent, and thus the other, as mentioned earlier, potentially brings the worst: violence and destruction to me or you (WD: 111–12).

Derrida, then, is not entirely assimilable to Levinas’ ethical position, as some scholars argue.2 A greater sense of his difference from Levinas can be found in Derrida’s discussion of responsibility in the Gift of Death, which we will turn to shortly. It is in and through this discussion that we may begin to understand that despite the challenge deconstruction poses for metaphysical ethics, deconstruction does not set itself up as an alternative ethical system or theory, in fact, “there is ... no philosophy and no philosophy of philosophy that could be called deconstruction and that would deduce from itself a ‘moral component’”. And yet, Derrida claims that this does not mean that deconstructive experience is not a responsibility, even an ethico-political responsibility, or does not exercise or deploy any responsibility in itself. By questioning philosophy about
its treatment of ethics, politics, the concept of responsibility, deconstruction orders itself I will not say on a still higher concept of responsibility ... but on an exigency, which I believe is more inflexible [intractable], of response and responsibility. Without this exigency, in my view no ethico-political question has any chance of being opened up or awakened today.

(ON: 364)

It is because deconstruction is able to pose questions to ethics, politics, responsibility, and so on, that not only does deconstruction “deploy” responsibility “in itself”, but it is possible to derive from deconstruction a new understanding of ethical acts, as the following section will now elucidate.

4. (Ir)responsibility

As mentioned in the opening paragraph of this chapter, deconstruction entails a paradoxical move; one that enables a simultaneous challenge to, without rejection of, the binary choice-making and decision-taking characteristic of metaphysical ethics and responsibility. This paradox is most evident in Derrida’s book the Gift of Death. In this book Derrida argues that morality and ethics are paradoxically constituted by the “irresponsible”. However, this general ethical paradox is elucidated in and through the individual paradox with which Abraham, in the biblical story, is confronted: God commands Abraham to sacrifice on Mount Moriah, as a burnt offering, his son Isaac (Genesis 22: 1–19). Abraham is faced with a harrowing choice or decision: he has either to fulfil his responsibility towards the singular, in this case God, or to obey the general ethical laws of his society, and fulfil his responsibility towards all others (Isaac, Sarah, his friends, family and community). And by singular or singularity Derrida is referring not just to God, but to that which is irreducible, unrepeatable, heterogeneous and idiosyncratic (another person or event, for instance). Abraham decides to keep his responsibility to God (the absolute singular and unique other) and sacrifice Isaac, but in the process he inevitably betrays and disobeys the universal general laws/ethical principles of his society and culture, that is, his duty to all others known (family) and unknown (larger community).

Through this biblical story Derrida is able to demonstrate that in acting irresponsibly, in the traditional sense, towards all others (the laws and ethics of his society) Abraham is being responsible towards God, towards the singular. Derrida calls this responsibility towards the singular other or event, “absolute responsibility” (as opposed to a general or metaphysical notion of responsibility). Derrida further describes
“absolute responsibility” as that which is extraordinary, as something that remains “inconceivable” and “unthinkable’, precisely because it involves the other in its “uniqueness, absolute singularity, hence non-substitution, nonrepetition, silence and secrecy” (GD: 61), while general responsibility (or the universality of ethics and the law) is so precisely because it requires substitution, repetition, and thus applicability and commensurability to all others.

Given this, absolute responsibility “is not a responsibility, at least it is not general responsibility or responsibility in general,” “it must therefore be irresponsible in order to be absolutely responsible” (GD: 61). In other words, to be responsible to an/the other, one has to be irresponsible to all others (ethics). Importantly what this further suggests is that the irresponsible is not in opposition or antithesis to ethics and responsibility (just as non-structures and the non-ethical are not in opposition to metaphysical structures and ethics, respectively). Rather, ethics and responsibility are constituted by irresponsibility. Derrida captures these paradoxes of responsibility in a famous passage from the Gift of Death:

There are also others, an infinite number of them, the innumerable generality of others to whom I should be bound by the same responsibility, a general and universal responsibility (what Kierkegaard calls the ethical order). I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others. Every other (one) is every (bit) other [tout autre est tout autre], every one else is completely or wholly other. ... As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others.

(GD: 68)

For Derrida, then, the paradox is that there are two equal, because absolutely imperative, duties: one to the singularity of any ‘one’ or other, and one to the duty of being responsible to “every Other” (the general, and thus the law). The fact that Derrida argues that there are two equal and imperative duties suggests that deconstruction is not about rejecting universal or metaphysical ethics. Rather what Derrida demonstrates is that the two equal and imperative duties to which we are required to respond, produce a tension: a paradox and aporia not resolved by a simple decision or choice between the two, but rather an aporia that exposes the undecidability within, and the inherent violence.
of, every choice or decision. This undecidability constitutes responsibility as exigency. In other words, it is this aporia that Derrida calls “ethics as ‘irresponsibilization’”, because it is “an insoluble and paradoxical contradiction between responsibility in general and absolute responsibility” (GD: 61).

5. Conclusion

It is through this notion of “irresponsibilization” that deconstruction reveals the potential violence of every ethical decision. In the paradoxical contradiction between ‘responsibility in general and absolute responsibility’ – that is, in the two equal, because absolutely imperative, duties – we have to decide, and in deciding (no matter how uncertain, ambiguous or undecidable that decision is) we either do violence to all others, or to a singular other, or to both at the same time. For Derrida we are all situated in an “economy of violence”, and that means that there is never a non-violent ethics or responsibility, as Levinas would want (WD: 313, n.21). It is here that Derrida is profoundly unassimilable to Levinas’s ethics. And yet it is in and through his engagement with Levinas’ notion of ethics defined as a “calling into question” of me by the other, that enables Derrida to deconstruct, via his notions of “absolute responsibility” and “irresponsibilization”, a metaphysical ethics that prioritises the subject over the other. This is not to say that Derrida or deconstruction rejects metaphysical ethics, and it does not mean that decision and response cannot be made or require no thought at all. Rather, decision and response cannot be ultimately calculated in advance and thus prefabricated (and thus prescriptive, universal and applicable over time and across all contexts). Having to decide, then, means having to account, or to be absolutely responsible, for how and to whom we respond, in a way that a prescriptive ethics does not enable.

It is in this way that deconstruction is absolutely affirmative in that it not only opens the way for the other – as an irreducible difference to come – but consequently allows for a more nuanced ethical, or rather “absolutely responsible” relationship with difference, with the other, itself. In Derrida’s words, deconstruction is “the yes of the other, no less than the yes to the other” (AEL: 35).

Notes

1 While the urgency of combining political and philosophical forces against the ‘West’s’ war with Iraq in 2002 led to a rapprochement between Derrida and Habermas (see Habermas and Derrida 2003), it does not occlude the real and
significant philosophical differences between them, nor the criticism’s Habermas made of Derrida in the 1980s.