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Challenging Deconstruction: A Look at Persons, Texts and Hermeneutics

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Introduction

For many people, it seems that the most difficult problem with deconstruction as a theory of literary criticism is not how to do it, nor even how to offer some alternative to its radical proposals, but to understand its motive – why deconstruct a text in the first place? Deconstructionist critics make a deliberate attempt to re-read texts, to avoid whatever apparent and clear meanings there may be, and to ignore dominant themes and motifs. Instead they try to uncover those bits of the text which one would normally ignore, pass over or take for granted.[1] Rhetorical elements, hidden metaphors, insignificant fringes of any text, indeed, the 'things that are not', are to be identified, and then the whole text is to be inverted so that when it is re-read, these things become the dominant themes and strands of meaning. Each deconstructive reading thus becomes a 'palimpsest'[2] of previous readings, a deliberate reversal of the obvious and clear interpretation of it. In Derrida's words: 'The task is to dismantle the metaphysical and the rhetorical structures which are at work in the text, not in order to reject them, but in order to re-inscribe them in another way.'[3]

But what purpose is there in that? The idea may be comprehensible in itself, but what value is there in appearing to denude the text of any meaning? If deconstruction seems strange and unsettling, it is hardly surprising, for Derrida is challenging something that for most of us is so fundamental that we simply take it for granted. In his opinion, deconstruction is nothing less than an attempt to subvert the whole tradition of Western metaphysics. In this article we shall try to uncover the heart of Derrida's critique and make some constructive suggestions in response to it.

Metaphysics and Notions of Being

The Aristotelian notion of 'being' is fundamental to the Western

1 See D Wood ed *Derrida: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell 1992) p 158

2 For the use of this term, see J Derrida *Of Grammatology* G Chakrovorty trans (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1976) p lxxxv.

3 Derrida p lxxv

metaphysical tradition, as is the law of contradiction, which can be stated as follows: 'It is impossible for one and the same predicative determination to be simultaneously both attributed and not attributed to the same object, and in the same respect.'

This formulation contains a truth claim about the nature of being, which is that if something is the case then it cannot not be the case at the same time. In other words, what we predicate of an object relates to its nature and its reality; it is not simply our perception or a label we put on it.[4] In his *Being and Time* Martin Heidegger challenged this basic assumption by insisting that a distinction be made between perception and reality. These he labelled 'being' (*Sein*) and 'existents' (*Seiende*), which are the predications we put on the former. The *Seiende*, he suggests, are not the objects themselves but only 'what can be established in statements about these objects; the totality of states of affairs'.[5] According to Heidegger, it is therefore a mistake to assume that the words we use in predication of an object are the object itself.

The first step towards what eventually became Heidegger's existentialist philosophy of being was taken as far back as the early seventeenth century. Then it was argued that true being (ie being that is congruent with reality) could only be predicated of an object by a subject which was contemplating it with a clear and perfect perception. Descartes' '*cogito ergo sum*' was an attempt to locate this perfect perception of the self within the self. According to him, pure thought enabled a person to be both subject and object simultaneously, which demonstrated his own true being or existence. In the Cartesian system, a person's pure thought is the reflection which enables that person to see his reflection in the mirror.

Heidegger, however, maintained that such a reflexive approach was impossible, because a mirror reflection is never totally accurate; it is always a distortion of the actual being. Thus there is a distinction to be made between being itself and our perception of it, which is the reflection that constitutes the *Seiende*. In Heidegger's view, the problem with Western ontology was that it interpreted being as if being made direct contact with what was real, as if there were a real presence behind our predications about things.

Derrida follows this line of thought and develops it with reference to linguistics. Building on the semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure, he accepts that our perception of the world is filtered through a series of signs (words,

4 M Frank in D Wood ed *Derrida: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell 1992) p 226
5 Wood p 220

labels, propositions) which shape our mental images.[6] The meaning of a sign is identified by contrasting it with everything the sign is not. Thus, for example, the meaning of sign A is not B, C, D or whatever. In other words, the meaning of A is determined by the nature of the difference between it and B, C, D etc.

In classical structuralist theory, the identity of any sign (eg A) can be defined only if all the other signs which differ from it can be known and remain in a stable configuration. To demonstrate this, the model of a crystal lattice is used. At low temperatures the fluid becomes a crystal structure and each part of it can be identified by its location in relation to the others. The comparison is clear. If language is fluid, the lattice is not stable, and such 'closure' or fixing of meaning is impossible in the case of any one sign. Reflecting on the differences between B, C, D etc shows not the presence of A, but its absence. Derrida uses this semiotic structure of difference which establishes meaning as an illustration of how all signs are in effect absences – literally 'non-presences'.

It follows that ontologically there is nothing beyond the world of the sign, the 'text-world'. In the quest for self-knowledge, which in Derrida's view relies on the mirror reflection, there is strictly speaking no 'self' to be known. There is no real author behind the text, nor does it make any contact with reality. The world is conceived as an infinite number of sign-substitutions. Hence Derrida's famous dictum: '*Il n'y a pas de* hors texte.'[7]

Deconstruction

In such a text world truth claims are inevitably a lie. Deconstruction assumes a fundamentally anti-realist epistemology; if there is an independent 'real' such as the world, or God, then we have no access to it which could be called knowledge. Metaphysics in the Aristotelian sense is fundamentally mistaken. Philosophical discourse may claim to make genuinely true predications of real objects, to access 'presence', but in fact it is mere difference, or absence. Philosophical discourse, far from being the pure form of reason and truth which it claims to be, is nothing but the piling up of metaphors, rhetoric and figures of speech, each of which refers to a previous 'empty sign'. Eventually we get to the point where we forget that we are writing only rhetoric and imagine that what we are doing is true reasoning. As Derrida explains: 'The metaphor is no longer noticed, and it is taken for the proper meaning. A double effacement. Philosophy would be this process of metaphorization which gets carried away within and of itself. Constitutionally, philosophical culture will always have been

6 J Derrida *Of Grammatology* G Chakrovorty trans (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1976) p 11

7 Derrida p 159: 'There is no *outside the text.*'

an obliterating one.'[8]

Here we have both the logic and the moral impulse behind deconstruction, which wants to expose the lie and then reverse the rhetorical elements in the discourse of philosophy, to uncover the metaphors and the hidden, but powerful, elements of the text. In this way philosophy is exposed as the sham that it is – mere rhetoric, masquerading as truth.

Derrida's assumption of the emptiness of presence has contributed to the emerging postmodern consciousness that personhood has no centre, because the postmodern way of thinking can find no stable signs as predicates of man. Thus it is that human identity is fluid and unstable; it can be constructed by whatever the immediate context of signs and relationships may be. In the words of Kenneth Gergen: 'Since there is no essential me, I can be whatever I construct myself to be.'[9]

This is in sharp contrast to the Cartesian assumption, which sees persons as beings who shape their environment more than they are shaped by it. Persons can justify knowledge of their own existence within themselves because they are subjects who predicate themselves as thinking beings.

Some Responses

Given Derrida's assessment that philosophy is hardly possible at all, one might well ask where to go next. Some philosophers offer weak and insipid answers to this question,[10] while others undertake to challenge Derrida's central tenet, which is that we are locked inside a text world and have no access to reality.

But M Frank is surely right when he locates the fulcrum of Derrida's thought in his understanding of self-knowledge based on the model of reflection.[11] It is precisely here, suggests Frank, that Derrida puts his foot wrong. Both Descartes and Derrida assume that self-knowledge can come only from a subject's perception of an object. They differ in that for Descartes it is the purity of his thought which enables him to stand outside himself and look in, whereas for Derrida the fluidity of linguistic signs is such that they cannot represent the actual being they are trying to describe. Hence Derrida is led to interpret ontology in terms of *différence*, not presence.

8 J Derrida *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1982) p 211

9 Quoted in J R Middleton and B J Walsh *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (London: SPCK 1995) p 53

10 Eg Christopher Norris in D Wood ed *Derrida: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell 1992) p 67

11 M Frank in D Wood ed *Derrida: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell 1992) pp 230-32

But as Frank points out, there is a basic flaw in this shared model of self-reflexive knowledge – it fails to account for the phenomenon it claims to be using. But before we dismiss Derrida in favour of an intuitive model of self-knowledge, it is worth listening to him a little more closely, because his thought contains what is potentially a most fruitful insight. This is that being as subject is not primarily about understanding the objective world outside the self, but about giving the self to be known by the world. For Derrida, to be is to give, to be understood, to be interpreted, to be shaped. This is in direct contrast to a Cartesian account of being, in which to be is to know, to understand, to comprehend etc. Rather than simply return to an Enlightenment ontology, we shall get further in our thinking by considering what the Bible has to say about personhood and comparing it with Derrida's insight at this point.

Persons in the Trinity

Since the time of Augustine, theologians in the Latin tradition have conceived of the unity of God as being located in the common essence of the three Persons of the Trinity, each of which is ομοούσιος (consubstantial) with the others. At least since the time of the Reformation, this tradition has also insisted that each of the Persons is God-in-himself (αὐτόθεος). To accept anything less than this would be seen as a form of unitarianism, according to which the Son and the Holy Spirit must inevitably be inferior to the Father and derived in some way from his divine being (οὐσία). This perception of the Trinity is sharply opposed to Heidegger's notion of being because, according to him, the self has no centre of its own. Rather it is constructed by the states and relations which unite and differentiate it from other objects and persons. James Brown wrote of Heidegger's position as follows: 'It (the self) is not so much *is* as *has been* and *now is not*, and *will be* what it *now is not*. It is somehow a possibility poised between two nothingnesses. Instead of being a closed circle round a central point, it is a room with all the windows and doors open to all the winds and sunshine it can catch.'[12]

The eternity of the Persons of the Trinity speaks emphatically of their continuity, faithfulness and ongoing existence. God's self-ascription ('I am who I am'), which includes the future idea 'I will be who I will be', clearly rejects Heidegger's 'I am not, but I have been and will be'. The personhood of God is not a possibility realized by context, but reality which makes context possible.

Yet we are also called to affirm that when they are in relationship with each other, the three Persons of the Trinity are not three gods working together, but a single Godhead manifested in Trinity. In other words, the

12 J Brown *Subject and Object in Modern Theology* (London: SCM 1953) p 91

three Persons form a single being, but this being is in no way greater than any one of the Persons in himself. As Gerald Bray puts it: '...[God's] unity is compelled by the spiritual love which binds the three Persons together in the coinherence of one God. Because of this it is impossible to slip into any form of tritheism or to suppose, as Sabellius had done, that God could separate into his component parts. Neither of these things could happen without automatically bringing God's existence to an end.'[13]

Cappadocian Trinitarian theology stands in contrast to that of the Latin tradition, because it locates God's unity in the relationships between the Persons and not in some underlying divine essence.[14] It was suspect for many centuries because of its insistence on the primacy of the Father, which appeared to give it a certain Arian tinge, but in recent years it has been revived and explored afresh by a number of leading theologians.

One of them, Bishop John Zizioulas, argues the Cappadocian case over against the ontology of the Augustinian tradition. He argues that it was the pagan Greek concept that only universal, unchanging things could be absolutes which led Augustine to the view that God's nature lay in his essence and not in the Persons of the Trinity. Zizioulas offers an alternative view in which he grounds ontology not in the universal, but in the particular – in the divine Persons, rather than in the essence.[15] Zizioulas argues that absolute ontology can be expressed only as 'is', in contradistinction to 'is not'. This means, for example, that the personhood of the Son can be expressed only by saying that he is the Son, and not the Father or the Holy Spirit. Identity is therefore rooted in particularity, and specifically in the sense of 'otherness' which this gives. He goes on to say: 'Both in the case of God and of man, the identity of a person is recognized and posited clearly and unequivocally, but this is only so in and through relationship, and not through an objective ontology in which their identity would be isolated, posited and described in itself.'[16]

In this way of thinking, the particular Persons are considered to be ontologically ultimate because the relationship between them is permanent and unbreakable. God's identity as Trinity is rooted in the fact that he is 'love'. The mutual relationship of the three Persons in love constitutes the being of the Godhead. Unlike the Cartesian notion of being, this divine being is not self-referential. The Persons of the Trinity do not exist in a way that each could say 'I think therefore I am'. Their being is not

13 G Bray *The Doctrine of God* (Leicester: IVP) p 204

14 For a clear and thorough account of Cappadocian Trinitarianism see C LaCugna *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (New York: Harper Collins 1991).

15 C Schwöbel and C Gunton edd *Persons Divine and Human* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1991) p 39

16 Schwöbel and Gunton p 46

independent of relationships; the being of one of the Persons cannot even be expressed without reference to his relationship to the other two. It would therefore appear that the being of each one of the divine Persons is in fact an invitation to know and be known by the other two. The being of each Person is an act of self-disclosure which by its very nature initiates a relationship with the other Persons. Within the Godhead therefore to be is to be known by others.

Knowing and Being

This brief reflection suggests that knowing and being are intimately related within the Godhead. Each Person is fully God in himself, and yet in relationship with the other two Persons his being is transformed so that together the three Persons constitute a God-in-relationship. In the Godhead, the act of knowing is not simply informative; it is also transformative, because when it interacts with being that being is transformed.

The different concepts of being may be depicted in terms of an equilateral triangle, with each of the Persons at one of the points. A Cartesian account of knowing and being would look only at each of the Persons in himself, ignoring the relationships between them. In other words, the lines between the points of the triangle are not really important. But if the points are not seen in relation to each other, they lose all coherence, and there is no triangle left – the whole is merely the sum of the parts, with no shape of its own. Derrida, on the other hand, would look only at the lines and miss out the points. To him, the existence of the Persons would depend entirely on their relationships. But the truth is that the lines require fixed points for definition, and when those points are removed they become meaningless. A Trinitarian model of knowing and being takes both the points (Persons) and the lines (relations) seriously. Each affects the other and neither can be seen or understood in isolation. Conceived in this way, reality embraces both the entities of the Persons and their relationships with each other.

From Epistemology to Hermeneutics

It has been said that, after Derrida, epistemology has been reduced to hermeneutics, whereas in the past philosophers were more interested in establishing a basis for human knowledge. Since Derrida maintains that knowing is something that is done to you, the only enquiry left to make concerns the interpretation of the linguistic context as it reaches you. Of course, this context is not reality itself but merely one set of shifting signs. Hermeneutics is therefore mere description, not interpretation.

In my opinion we do not need to restrict epistemology to mere description. I have tried to argue that persons and texts both contain presence and make contact with reality, but that this presence is that of an

active giver rather than of a passive knower. The epistemological enterprise is really about two active givers who offer themselves to each other in order to be known, and therefore to know as well. This is a fundamentally relational epistemology because it interprets knowing on the basis of a right relationship established between the knower and the thing known. Being is interpreted first as the offering of oneself to be known by the world. This is interpreted by others in the world, whose own being is also given in response to the self-gift of the initial subject. The relational space which is thus established by being in the world interprets and shapes each of the subjects, with the result that the epistemological act of mutual knowing becomes the ontological act of being. Persons are constantly offering themselves to the world to be known, and in doing so are interpreted and transformed by ontologically invasive relationships.

In this scheme, being is to be interpreted not as isolation, nor as construction, but as 'participation'. In the Cartesian model, being did not involve participation; the subject was merely the autonomous, individual interpreting of other objects. Thus, hermeneutics is coming to know things as they are; it is the quest for objectivity. As far as Derrida is concerned, there is no self to engage in participation. Being is not so much participation as construction in which the ever-shifting, ephemeral palimpsests of each contextual interpretation are laid one on top of the other. Hermeneutics is therefore the deconstruction of these layers of interpretation, which in the end exposes the absence of any underlying being. But in a relational scheme, being is the way in which we participate in the world, and this way constitutes our relationship to the world.

Christians, who hold to the existence of objective reality, are tempted to try some kind of more sophisticated hermeneutical approach which can approximate to the objectivity of Descartes or of Kant's 'thing in itself', even if it cannot quite attain them. But if we are to maintain a more Trinitarian approach to epistemology, then I would suggest that a 'post-critical realist epistemology' is what is needed. This epistemology would be grounded on the ontological assumption that being is 'self-gift'. As Alan Torrance puts it: 'Post-critical realism conceives of the world as giving itself to be known. The way in which things are is seen, therefore, as epistemologically invasive, instituting heuristic leaps in our process of understanding.'[17]

Towards a Post-critical, Realist Hermeneutic

Language is the way that we express ourselves in the world; it is by speaking that I make myself known and offer myself to others.[18] It is by

17 *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1996) p 349

18 See G Ebeling *Introduction to the Theological Theory of Language* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1973).

language that God's being is present in the world, for as the Bible says: 'The Word became flesh.' This revelation in the world is God's self-gift to the world (John 3:16). It is a self-gift which invites human participation, because by its very being it establishes a relational space between God as subject and human beings as subjects. The question of the human condition is not whether we can know God, nor even whether we are known by him, but in what sense we are participating in God's being in the world. Jesus' own testimony about knowing him, as recorded by John, is developed along lines which are similar to the hermeneutic of participation.[19] Jesus' ability to speak the truth depends entirely on his relationship to the God of all truth, who is the one who sent him into the world. Knowledge of the will of God in Christ is available only to those people who are willing to participate in his will and be changed by it. The word used in the Bible for such participation is 'faith', and it is therefore faith which is the true basis of all Christian hermeneutics.

Looked at in this way, the text of Scripture is not merely a source of information about God but a transforming power which completely alters the life, the language and the understanding – the very being in effect – of the reader. The language of Scripture transforms and reforms our understanding of reality in such a way that we see the world quite differently. It gives itself to us in a new way and we live in it in a new way as well. We find ourselves inhabiting and encountering a transformed world of language and metaphors which is itself reformed and transformed by the text of Scripture.

At this point, Derrida's insight about texts containing 'presence' is full of potential for developing the notion of Scripture as a transforming, redemptive text. Derrida concludes that no text can be said to have the presence of the author in it, but Scripture is surely the text where above all there is a Presence, not an absence. Scripture is not locked up in some 'text world' but is the living God speaking to his creatures. If 'absence' in the text makes deconstruction legitimate, it surely follows that God's presence in the text will itself be the agent for deconstructing its readers.

There is certainly a good deal to be said in favour of regarding Scripture as a deconstructing agent. It prises open the texts of our lives, it identifies and exposes the deceptive elements in the text that we present of ourselves, it looks to the margins of our lives, the hidden subtexts, the subversive motives and the rhetorical glosses behind which we conceal other ambitions. It locates these texts and then inverts the ones we want to hide, exposing them as the central and dominant ideals in our lives. It re-reads us, uncovering in the process a darker and more sinister element inside us which is normally hidden from public view.

19 See eg John 7:17-18.

But in doing this, Scripture does not leave us empty, as Derrida would have it, with nothing to say. Rather, Scripture deconstructs us only in order to reconstruct us on a new foundation. It offers us the possibility of reintegration. Scripture's power is grounded in an *ontology of presence*, a reality which (unlike Derrida's world of absence) is real and substantial. The text holds out this new language world to us, and invites us to participate in it. Scripture 'takes hold of our language, revising and extending our terminology and conceptualities, and compelling us to use semantically incremental metaphors in such a way that they receive anew *a posteriori* property from the given structure of the world'.[20]

In other words, Scripture offers us new and hitherto unseen metaphors of being, which are the textual expression of how God in Christ would have us participate in the world. It reintegrates our dysfunctional and distorted expressions of ourselves, and our relationships with others. The palimpsests, fakes and deceits of being which make up our sinful nature are transformed, and we are empowered to participate in this world in the right relationship to both God and his creation. The purpose of this, as Alan Torrance puts it, is nothing less than 'that we may be brought by the creative dynamic of the Spirit epistemologically and semantically to indwell the triune life as created human beings, and thereby to participate in the created ways in the Son's eternal communion with the Father'.[21]

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20 A Torrance *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1996) p 349

21 Torrance p 354