

An alternative history: what if Derrida had just been accepted into analytic philosophy?

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. What if, instead of a scandal, Jacques Derrida had been accepted by the community of analytic philosophers? My prediction is that little-known philosophers would make points like some which I have made: counterexamples to his claims. There is a different reaction to the question which I consider though, according to which these skills do not just transfer from topic to topic and would not be “activated” by Derrida’s philosophy.

Draft version: Version 1 (6th December 2022)

There was a famous scandal involving Jacques Derrida and the awarding of a degree by the University of Cambridge, with various philosophers in the analytic tradition protesting. But what if Derrida had just been accepted into analytic philosophy instead?

What I imagine is that various claims of his would be disputed by little-known philosophers, in ways which are not already in the secondary literature. This is the disreputable John Searle presenting a claim Derrida emphasizes:

As Derrida is aware, any linguistic element written or spoken, indeed any rule-governed element in any system of representation at all must be repeatable, otherwise the rules would have no scope of application. (1977: 199)

In response, I offered the example of a peculiar situation in which the sign of dissent for a specific individual is suicide: “If you want to dissent to this proposal raise your hand, except Jones. Jones, if you want to indicate dissent to this proposal, you have to commit suicide.” (Edward 2022a) Analytic philosophers will find counterexamples to his claims, like this attempt

of mine. (Apologies for the recycling. I suppose Derrideans would regard such counterexamples as vulgar and lacking appreciation of the depth of Derrida's thought.)

This is Sarah Richmond presenting another claim:

According to Derrida, Western thought, from at least Plato onwards, has repeatedly propagated a false hierarchy, placing speech above writing.

Philosophers have regarded writing with suspicion, as a dangerous repository of thought, in which the speaker's intentions are likely to be betrayed. (1996: 39)

I drew attention to how a utilitarian philosophy would sometimes favour writing, for spreading information to lots of people or making learning easier (Edward 2022b). If Derrida were accepted, I suppose there would be more counterexamples to this claim of his.

Now someone might have a different response to the question of what would have happened, which is perhaps even a rejection of it. "A camera can be used to photograph one thing or another or a third thing, etc., but the skills of the average analytic philosopher are not like that. They do not just work from topic to topic. You cannot give them Derrida, or even Derrida with these expositions by others, and ask for responses. The skills just do not activate for Derrida. (Why is that? Various explanations!) Instead you will get a disgust reaction and corresponding expressions of disgust. And dismissals as well." I don't know if that is true or not. But I believe various analytic philosophers would not have problems coming up with points like mine above.

References

Edward, T.R. 2022a. Must a sign be repeatable? Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWMAS>

Edward, T.R. 2022b. Utilitarianism versus the privileging of speech. *IJRDO Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research* 8 (11): 12.

Richmond, S. 1996. Derrida and Analytical Philosophy: Speech Acts and their Force. *European Journal of Philosophy* 4 (1): 38-62.

Searle, J.R. 1977. Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida. *Glyph* 2: 198-208.