
Johan de Jong: The Movement of Showing: Indirect Method, Critique, and Responsibility in Derrida, Hegel, and Heidegger

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Johan de Jong's *The Movement of Showing* opens with the observation that “Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida consistently characterize their thought in terms of a development, movement, or pathway, rather than in terms of positions, propositions, or conclusions” (xix). In other words, they do not stake out a definite position that they defend against all comers; rather, they call attention to the movement that carries us beyond each apparently fixed position that a work might seem to present. Indeed, not only do they not aim to delineate a fixed, complete, and fully consistent position, they regard such a delineation as impossible, so noting that they fail to accomplish it does not suffice as a criticism of them. Readers, or would-be readers, of Derrida in particular often stop here, dismissing his work as so much nonsensical relativism. De Jong instead asks how we are to understand this movement that resists any fixed position and how we might critique it without taking it for a failed attempt to establish a fixed position. These questions, which de Jong addresses in an admirably nuanced fashion that makes this book well worth reading, ultimately point us to questions about justice and responsibility.

Thus we as readers find ourselves confronted with the question of what it means to read de Jong's text responsibly. How do we engage with the impossibility of reducing it to a single determinate position about the three philosophers – G.W.F. Hegel, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida – with which it primarily deals? For what is

here called a “movement” must exceed de Jong’s stated positions as it exceeds theirs. Asking “how such a discourse of movement can be understood and criticized,” he maintains that “answering this question does not, as some may think, itself require indirectness, textual extravagance, or a poeticization of philosophical method (even though these cannot in principle be excluded from the realm of philosophical efficacy)” (xxii). What, though, does it mean to say that answering a question does or does not require indirectness? “Indirectness” is the word de Jong has chosen to name the “undercutting gesture” by which “Derrida’s claims and conclusions are invariably repeated, reversed, retracted, contradicted, visibly erased, or otherwise implicitly or explicitly complicated” according to the movement that cannot be contained within any fully determined position (xxii). Yet if indeed thought itself cannot be thus contained – if any position that one might suppose to be fully determined in fact always already undercuts itself – then it is less a matter of indirectness being required than of indirectness being impossible to avoid, at least in implicit form, no matter how hard one tries. De Jong’s style does differ considerably from Derrida’s; readers who regard Derrida’s style, or styles, as obfuscatory should not be able to make the same complaint about de Jong’s, and if they read *The Movement of Showing* they ought, moreover, to come away with a better understanding of why Derrida wrote as he did. That said, de Jong implicitly recognizes that indirectness is also at work in his own book when he writes that “the very term ‘indirect’ is itself also not the adequate, definite, final or right word for what is investigated here” (xxii). I will return, at the conclusion of this review, to the question of indirectness in de Jong’s text. For the moment, let us note that the impossibility of finding any “adequate, definite, final or right word” will be a recurring theme throughout, and it is one that we must bear in mind when reading any text, whether a book by Derrida, *The Movement of Showing*, or, for that matter, this review. At the same time, we cannot escape words, however inadequate and indefinite they may be, nor should we desire to – and the joint impossibility and undesirability of such an escape will prove central to ethical responsibility.

Part I, “Sources of Derrida’s Indirectness,” examines, with remarkable nuance and precision, Derrida’s manner of writing. In chapter 1, De Jong begins by arguing that, contrary to what some commentators have supposed on the basis of certain of Derrida’s more direct assertions, Derrida does not and cannot offer a theory of language. Readers of *Of Grammatology* at times make the mistake of deriving a

theory of language from it, which they then attribute to Derrida, according to which speech, traditionally considered superior to writing because of its immediacy, is in fact just as mediated as writing and should therefore be understood as arche-writing, or writing in a more general sense of the term. Derrida's point, however, is that this theory is already in Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure's intentions to the contrary notwithstanding. Taking it as Derrida's theory fails to understand that there can be no definitive theory of language. Arche-writing is not writing understood more broadly, as if we could fully understand language once we worked out the proper definition of "writing"; rather, it marks the impossibility of attaining some ideal meaning that would be unmediated and fully present. Derrida does not offer a theory, explains de Jong, but seeks rather to show the movement that reveals the limits of all theories, even as they try to present themselves as complete.

Readers of Derrida who recognize that neither he nor anyone else can offer a complete and consistent theory of language often interpret him as an opponent of metaphysics, but de Jong shows in chapter 2 that this interpretation also fails. There is no way out of metaphysics, and Derrida does not propose to offer one. Seeking to overcome metaphysics is itself metaphysical, for any attempt to get outside metaphysics already depends on metaphysics to define itself. What is more, the history of metaphysics is the history of this attempted overcoming. Questioning metaphysics is not, therefore, a matter of opposition, and this questioning even calls itself into question precisely because any attempt to think metaphysics necessarily occurs within the language of metaphysics. That theories are limited in no way entails that we can step outside or overcome their limits.

Having demonstrated the problems with certain popular interpretations of Derrida's texts – that he offers a theory of language and that he calls for the overcoming of metaphysics – de Jong asks, in chapter 3, whether Derrida can be justified. If Derrida argues that all positions are incomplete and undo themselves, then pointing to omissions or inconsistencies in his work hardly serves to refute him, but it is equally unclear what grounds one might find to justify a work that disclaims the very attempt to produce a complete and consistent position – and de Jong insists that Derrida's would-be defenders must recognize the latter point just as much as the former. It is not that Derrida makes a virtue of mere contradiction, as if one ought to embrace inconsistency itself as final and definitive. But de Jong emphasizes that

“Derrida cannot be completely safeguarded against the accusations from which his works must nevertheless be tirelessly distinguished” (76). Derrida is not the mere relativist that he has often been accused of being, and yet “the risk of assimilation and supposed misreading is not an extrinsic one, but intrinsic to the operation of deconstruction” (78). There is a real sense, therefore, in which Derrida cannot be justified – which is not to say that his work can be dissociated from justice (a point to which de Jong will return). De Jong warns us against the “reassurance mechanism” that consists in saying, “Never mind [Derrida’s] critics; they clearly haven’t read the texts” (78). The point is apt, but I suggest that one might ask the critics whether they have read their own texts. For a more careful reading might show them that misreading and reading can never be neatly separated; nor, for that matter, can writing and what one might call miswriting. As deconstruction operates within any text, it is not only Derrida’s texts that cannot be safeguarded from any possibility of misreading – and this point is one that merits greater emphasis than de Jong gives it in this chapter. He rightly points out what he calls the vulnerability of Derrida’s texts, at the risk of suggesting that Derrida’s texts are unusually vulnerable. Still, Part I is an excellent reading of Derrida, and since reading and misreading cannot be disentangled, there is no way to exclude every possible misinterpretation. De Jong’s argument that Derrida does not call us to overcome metaphysics, as if going beyond metaphysics were possible, is a particularly valuable contribution to the literature.

De Jong now turns to Hegel in Part II and then to Heidegger in Parts III and IV. Since Derrida cannot be outside the metaphysical tradition, his relation to Hegel and Heidegger cannot consist, as it has often been thought to do, in rejecting them as still too metaphysical. This reexamination of Hegel and Heidegger thus follows from the analysis in Part I, and it shows that they are rather less different from Derrida than they are generally imagined to be – without, however, assimilating them into a single position. All three thinkers reveal the limits of any thought that seeks to establish a fixed position, while they also recognize that we cannot step outside or beyond the limits of thought itself.

Part II, “Movement and Opposition,” begins with the argument, in chapter 4, that for Hegel as for Derrida, philosophical questioning cannot itself be detached from its object. Indeed, de Jong writes that “Hegel is the first philosopher to explicitly locate the aforementioned entanglement right at the heart of the philosophical enterprise”

(85). It is for this reason that philosophy cannot arrive at a conclusive end to its investigations: philosophy is always investigating itself. Hegelian dialectic is often interpreted to mean that philosophy will progressively free itself from its own limits and reach Absolute Knowing, a final position in which alterity is no more, and Derrida's own readings of Hegel have fueled this misconception. Through a consideration of the development of Hegel's thought, de Jong shows that Hegel does not propose that philosophy's movement can or should be brought to a halt. Precisely because the absolute is not the cessation of movement, "Hegel's 'absolute' idealism must be interpreted as an affirmation of the limits of reflection" (121): reflection does not transcend its limits but is carried along within them, and it is within its limits that it finds itself haunted by the alterity that can never be made fully present.

What, though, of Derrida's own readings of Hegel, in which Derrida seems to regard Hegel as an opponent of alterity and himself as an opponent of Hegel? De Jong turns to this question in chapter 5 and argues, without denying the differences between the two philosophers, that Derrida's relation to Hegel is not, and cannot be, one of simple opposition. In any case, opposition is never simple, since the sides of a dichotomy are necessarily dependent on each other to the very extent that they are defined by their opposition. What is more, Derrida offers multiple readings of Hegel – or, to put it another way, the name "Hegel" does not stand for the same figure every time it appears in his texts. At times, as for instance in "Tympan," it does stand for a figure who seeks to eliminate the risk posed by negativity or alterity – but "Tympan" is less a supposedly definitive reading of Hegel and more an attempt "to stage a confrontation of philosophy with that in which the philosopher would not recognize himself, not so foreign to philosophy as to leave it undisturbed, and not so close to philosophy as to do no more than repeat it" (134). It is, in short, an attempt to call attention to philosophy's limits so that it will not mistake itself for the final, complete answer. Derrida's target is not Hegel but a complacent Hegelianism that believes that all that is worthwhile is, or at least can be, subjected to its comprehension. Reading "Hors livres, préfaces" in Derrida's *Dissemination*, de Jong finds that Derrida first describes the Hegel of Hegelianism before coming to the Hegel who is a thinker of movement and of difference – a Hegel who is not Derrida but in whom Derrida finds a "point of departure" (149) that is not simply the basis for opposition. Or, as de Jong puts it, "Derrida needs Hegel's 'speculative dialectics' as a point of contrast, but he is aware that Hegel cannot be reduced to those terms. [...] The more radical [*sic*]

Derrida presents himself as moving beyond Hegel, the more emphatically his allegiance to Hegel is reaffirmed” (151). Derrida needs Hegel because of how Hegel can be read and misread: the thinker of movement who has been misinterpreted as a thinker of overly definitive absolutism is a fitting interlocutor for another writer who, precisely because he is also a thinker of movement, is profoundly concerned with questions of interpretation, questions of reading, misreading, and the complex interplay thereof. Indeed, one should not suppose that reading and misreading are independent and readily distinguishable – a point implicit in de Jong’s insistence on the impossibility of safeguarding Derrida from misreadings.

Part III, “Heidegger: The Preservation of Concealment,” reads Heidegger’s *Being and Time* and *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)* in order to explore the theme of indirectness in Heidegger. In chapter 6, considering Heidegger’s criticisms of the language of *Being and Time*, de Jong argues that the problem was not that the language of *Being and Time* failed by remaining too much within metaphysics, nor can the *Kehre* be understood as a turn to looking for a language that would adequately say being. Rather, the language of *Being and Time* was, in Heidegger’s later view, insufficiently attentive to the inevitability of a certain failure, and Heidegger came to seek “a language that would take into account, recognize, and preserve a certain necessary failure-to-say with respect to (the question of) being” (156). This language would still be metaphysical since the overcoming of metaphysics is itself metaphysical, but it would strive to reveal the very impossibility of finding a location outside metaphysics from which to philosophize. Already in *Being and Time* questioning is no straightforward matter, however: that *Dasein* questions being from within being is crucial to the book – an obvious point in itself, but what has been neglected is that the middle and late Heidegger’s works, including those written post-*Kehre*, therefore represent not a break with his early thought but a deepening of themes and problems that were in play from the start.

Chapter 7 pursues this analysis via a reading of the *Contributions*. De Jong emphasizes that the forgetfulness of being is neither a problem that can be solved nor an error that can be fixed. Heidegger’s goal is not and cannot be to overcome this forgetfulness but is “to recognize and preserve that forgetfulness as such, or interpret it originally” (200). Indeed, overcoming the forgetfulness, as though it could be left behind, would amount to forgetting it again. What is essential is that we strive

not to forget the forgetfulness, that we strive to recognize the limits of thought – which is precisely not stepping beyond them as if they could become negligible. This recognition, moreover, is a movement that never becomes a completed process.

Part IV, “Of Derrida’s Heideggers,” shows that Derrida’s relation to Heidegger, like his relation to Hegel, is not simply a matter of opposition. In Derrida’s texts, the name “Heidegger” is no more univocal than the name “Hegel.” Chapter 8 explores this complex relation through a reading of Derrida’s *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles*. The key point is that Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche risks closing off the meaning of Nietzsche’s texts by arriving at some result that is then taken as definitive and final, yet Heidegger’s texts cannot themselves be closed off by interpreting them once and for all as the refusal of indirectness and undecidability. And as de Jong observes, “[Derrida] does not make a simple choice between these two Heideggers. The virtue of that undecidability lies in its potential to open the texts of these thinkers and resist reducing them to the content of an unequivocal thesis” (240). This remark also has worthwhile implications for the question of what it might mean to critique Derrida, though de Jong does not make them wholly explicit: that Derrida cannot be reduced to a purveyor of definite theses means that there are multiple Derridas, and a fruitful critique – fruitful in that it would recognize the limits of thought without seeking to go past them – would then be one that draws out this multiplicity rather than presenting a univocal Derrida who is assigned the role of opponent.

Chapter 9, turns, finally, to the question of responsibility. Here the question of critique or justification gives way to the question of justice. De Jong notes that “in the debate about the ‘ethics of deconstruction,’ interpretations have tended to work within a Levinasian framework, which understands ethics primarily with reference to the ‘other.’ That is quite right, but there is a risk if the other is confused with the external” (242). It is worth explicitly noting what is implicit here: that the other in Levinas is not a matter of externality, as alterity would then be one pole of the externality-internality dichotomy and so would fall within totality. In any case, de Jong’s analysis, which emphasizes complicity and proceeds through a reading of Derrida’s *Of Spirit*, is excellent. De Jong recognizes the indirectness of Derrida’s texts as a gesture of responsibility. What might appear as an irresponsible refusal to be associated with any position, and hence as a withdrawal from potential criticisms, is an attempt to grapple responsibly with the failure of any position – yet it is a

responsibility that can never escape its own complicity with those failures. Heidegger's own complicity has struck many as uniquely grave, and de Jong notes that Derrida does regard Heidegger's use of the term *Geist*, in his 1933 rectorial address, as complicit with Nazism. It does not follow, however, that we can purify our own thought by rejecting Heidegger; Derrida himself cautions us against such an attempt to achieve purity. For Heidegger's complicity with Nazism took place, writes de Jong, "by way of a mechanism or a 'program' of complicity and reaffirmation that Derrida himself does not claim to be able to escape. The program itself consists in the very attempt to escape, the thought that one can exceed racism or biologism by elevating oneself above it to a position of reassuring legitimacy" (251). More broadly, the quest for absolute purity cannot be untangled from a drive to declare oneself innocent – that is, not complicit in anything or, to put it another way, not responsible. But "the 'fact' that not all forms of complicity are equivalent" (252) does not mean we can avoid complicity, that we can overcome or go beyond it. We are responsible in advance, inescapably responsible, unable to establish a position that would justify us, free us from complicity, and let us relax in the security of non-responsibility. De Jong's emphasis on complicity ties back to his earlier argument that Derrida's texts cannot be made safe from misreading. By resisting the opposition between Derrida's critics and his defenders, de Jong resists the temptation to safeguard thought, thereby reminding us of our limits. It is because we will never be able to present the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, as the saying goes, that we are complicit – which is a call not to despair but to the responsibility that, as de Jong's *The Movement of Showing* skillfully reminds us, we cannot evade.

An afterword begins by addressing the question of indirectness in de Jong's own text, and here he proves a less skillful reader than he did when interpreting Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida – though his failings are instructive and perhaps unsurprising, given that we cannot escape complicity with the attempt to arrest the movement of showing to arrive at some fixed position. De Jong asks "why, if [he] ha[s] been successful, [his] own exposition will not have displayed the implicit or explicit self-complication that has been [his] theme" (264). One response, which he admits is "facile," is that "[he] ha[s] set out to do nothing more than to provide a commentary, and to provide a way of reading that goes against certain ideas about how to interpret the work of Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida. [...] There is no reason why that reading could not be explicated unequivocally" (264). Granted, he himself

calls this response “facile,” yet that it should be offered at all indicates the durability of the opposition between a commentary and the work commented upon, with the commentary appearing as merely secondary and derivative. Derrida, let us recall, commented on works by Hegel and Heidegger, and as I noted above, de Jong’s own analysis suggests (though without explicitly saying so) that there are multiple Derridas, as there are multiple Hegels and Heideggers. I do not mean to suggest that all Derridas, Hegels, or Heideggers on whom one might comment are equally valid or fruitful. The Derridas, Hegels, and Heideggers whom one encounters in de Jong’s text are remarkably well interpreted, whereas, to take an extreme example, anyone who attempts to read *Of Grammatology* as a guide to birdwatching is likely to be disappointed. Consider, however, Derrida’s remark in “Des tours de Babel,” concerning translation, that “the original is the first debtor, the first petitioner; it begins by lacking [*manquer*] – and by pleading for [*pleurer après*] translation” (Derrida 2007, 207). The so-called original text never stands on its own but is already a translation, is already separated from itself by its inevitable equivocity. Commentary is not exempt from this condition: it is never “nothing more than [...] commentary.” De Jong’s writing is clear in that it is easy to follow – easier than Derrida’s, Hegel’s, or Heidegger’s often is – but that does not mean it is univocal. Commentary too is separated from itself – and, moreover, it is a way of translating the so-called original. The texts signed by Hegel, Heidegger, or Derrida call out for commentary because they are not summed up in what they say – nor in what any commentary or translation could say. The commentary and the translation plead as well, and they are not safe from misreading. Whether de Jong’s text displays self-complication and whether it does complicate itself are two different questions, and besides, one might well argue that it does display self-complication precisely by calling our attention to our inevitable complicity.

De Jong offers, as a “more principled answer,” the reply that “an awareness of the performative complexity of philosophical texts does not in itself necessitate a specific style” (265). This answer still tends to assume that self-complication must be blatantly visible as such, but de Jong rightly observes that “it is not a matter of *doing away* with representation or opposition, nor with the traditional form of an academic treatise. At issue is precisely an ‘inner excess,’ or how *in* what presents itself as proposition, representation or claim, something more, less, or other than what is ‘posited’ in them is taking place” (265). Indeed. Derrida’s styles are not the

only ones in which worthwhile thinking may occur. And as there are multiple Derridas, there are multiple de Jongs, whom this review certainly does not exhaust, and I recommend that anyone interested in Hegel, Heidegger, Derrida, or questions of indirectness more broadly read *The Movement of Showing* and encounter them for him- or herself. If I have dwelt at some length on the brief and admittedly “facile” response, and if I still reproach the “more principled” response with suggesting, in defense of the book’s clarity, that it is possible to avoid self-complication through the choice of a particular style, it is to highlight a certain complicity with the overly definite and determinate that inevitably accompanies writing. Indirectness cannot, however, simply be opposed to directness, as if one were pure and the other not – a point de Jong does not make explicit but that he could well have. Complicity with the overly definite and determinate is the only way to speak or write at all, and refusing to speak or write out of a desire for purity is an attempt to abdicate responsibility.

Indeed, de Jong in his afterword goes on to observe that “even given the limitations of the propositional form, of representation, and of oppositional determination, it is *in and through* them that we can and in fact do say more, less, or something else than what is merely ‘contained’ in those determinations” (272). Hence the limits of language are not to be regretted, which is a crucial point. Thus de Jong refuses to take “a negative or skeptical view on language as inadequate or as failing,” calling instead for “a *productive* view on propositions and claims such that they might carry or co-implicate more than the content that is ‘contained’ in them” (272, emphasis in original). That a text is “lacking,” to recall the above quotation from “Des tours de Babel,” does not mean that it has failed, as though it would have been better for it to lack nothing so that there was no call for translation’s creativity. Complicity does not put an end to creativity – far from it. Because there is no manual telling us precisely how to live out the responsibility by which we are committed in advance, our responses must be creative ones. One of the virtues of *The Movement of Showing*, though by no means the only one, is that it warns us against considering language—and hence what is expressed through language—a failure because of its limits, and that it points out that language even owes its richness to those very limits. In short, *The Movement of Showing* is a text that rewards attentive reading, and it makes a valuable contribution to the field.

Reference

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