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What's Old in Derrida?

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1

Revolutions often retain more characteristics of the pre-revolutionary state than their makers like to admit. Characterizing the pre-revolutionary state as bad (otherwise there would have been no need for revolution), and wishing to accentuate the greatness of their doings, revolutionaries like to stress the differences between the previous state of affairs and the new one, and prefer to see the similarities as few and insignificant. They are frequently wrong.¹

I take this to be true of political, religious, scientific, and philosophical revolutions. Of course, I cannot even start here to substantiate this claim as regards any of these fields. However, I shall try to do so as regards one revolution in philosophy, the postmodernist one, and in that movement as regards one philosopher—Jacques Derrida. Postmodernists like to believe that Derrida's thought forms a very sharp break with tradition. 'When they discuss how his work relates to previous philosophers' they mainly emphasize his criticism of the Western tradition.' In their accounts of his theory they usually emphasize the ways in which he differs from traditional philosophy, such as his defiance of the ideals of certainty and intersubjectivity; the renunciation of meta-narratives; his tendency to decompose distinctions; the rejection of foundationalism; and his playfulness. Thus, the important similarities between Derrida and the Western tradition are frequently ignored. The feeling one gets from the literature is that, to use Christopher Norris's words, postmodernist texts are 'like nothing else in modern philosophy, and indeed represent a challenge to the whole tradition and self-understanding of that discipline.'²

I argue that the characteristics common to Derrida and to the tradition are more numerous and central than is usually recognized. By this I hope to present a more balanced picture of

¹ See, e.g., Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, revised edition (London: Routledge, 1991), chaps. 1–3. Hugh J. Silverman, (ed.), *Derrida and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 1989). Rudolph Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986). Mark C. Taylor, (ed.), *Deconstruction in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

² *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, 18.

Derrida's postmodernist thought, and show that he is more traditional, and Western, than is usually thought.³

2

One characteristic shared by Derrida and older philosophies is the intuitive, even if sometimes implicit, employment of the categories of appearance and reality. The intuition is that behind the appearance there is something deep which moves it, and which it takes a special effort to see. The appearance, the 'what is on the face of it', is both the product of the principle that works behind the appearance and a veil that is an obstacle to seeing this principle. Seeing through the appearance of things may require not only a special effort, but also training and expertise.

The intuition already appears in premodernists such as Democritus, who speaks about atoms, in Heraclitus, who takes opposites to move everything, Plato, who suggests Ideas as the principle of reality behind a movable world, and in the medieval philosophers who take God to move everything in the universe. This intuition is also part of modernity, where e.g. physics and chemistry probe into the hidden mechanics of the world. Both premodernists and modernists have very little respect for the way things look. They take what is easy to see to be superficial—i.e. misleading. In order to understand the 'real' nature of things a much greater effort must be made to discover what lies 'behind' the appearance.

This intuition appears also in Derrida who, for example, in *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference* shows how a deeper look behind the texts of Saussure, Rousseau, Freud or Descartes reveals that they are steeped in dichotomies, one of whose terms is traditionally preferred to the other. This constitutes the powerful—but hitherto implicit—logocentric tendency. Likewise, in *Positions* a more probing look shows that signifiers and signifieds do not have an independent meaning (and as such, it is argued, should not be seen as distinct), and in *Margins of Philosophy* Aristotle and other philosophers are seen to use metaphors in

³ Although Derrida never explicitly says that his alternative is not Western, he implies so in continuously associating the West with the logocentrism which he deconstructs. See, e.g., *Positions* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 19; *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), 41; 'Le puits et la pyramide', in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972; hereafter: *Marges*), 119–123; 'Les fins de l'homme', in *Marges*, 161. 'Racism's Last Word', trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 290–99.

their very discussions of the nature of metaphors and non-metaphors.⁴ For Derrida too, then, appearances are deceptive, and behind what looks innocent and true there is something more complicated and problematic. For him too it takes a special effort to expose reality, and a special training in methodological subtleties is required before one can see it. Derrida too tries to detect the principle behind the phenomena which makes them what they are, a principle not very different from the essence of things in traditional systems.

Another tendency in earlier thought which also exists in Derrida is the striving for reform. Both in the Middle Ages and in the modern era there was a feeling that the present is unsatisfactory, and that specific measures should be taken in order to create a better future. It is the duty of the select few who understand this to take these measures; they have an obligation to mend the world. Part of doing so involves convincing as many people as possible of the truth and importance of their cause.

This drive to reform the present was very strong in Christian thought. It was expressed in calls for religious reform, messianic drives, asceticism and missionary work. Modernism too has been dissatisfied with the present and permeated by the wish to reform it. There was a feeling, to quote from Bacon's preface to *The Great Instauration*, 'that the state of knowledge is not prosperous nor greatly advancing; and that a way must be opened for the human understanding entirely different from any hitherto known'.⁵ Modernists have also been willing to do 'missionary work' in order to convince people of their vision, which included efficiency, rationality, precise knowledge, freedom from physical discomfort and disregard for prejudices.

Needless to say there is a strong reformatory drive in Derrida's teachings as well. His whole philosophy is basically a call to change, rather drastically, the way we write, think and conceptualize. It is for this reason that he tries to make us aware of the tacit logocentrism ingrained in our culture—so that being conscious of it we shall be able to resist it. And it is for this reason that he describes, in *Of Grammatology* and in 'Plato's Pharmacy', how the pre-Socratics, Plato and Aristotle gave philosophy a metaphysical direction, thus showing us that things could have been different. In place of logocentric thinking and writing he offers us examples of the deconstructive modes of these activities. He too has a mis-

⁴ *Positions*, 28–30. 'La mythologie blanche', in Marges, 301.

⁵ Francis Bacon, 'The Great Instauration', in *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, John M. Robertson (ed.) (London: Routledge, 1905), 243.

sion—bringing about a better future free of the logocentric *malaise*—and he too preaches in its name.

Another characteristic common to Derrida and to previous philosophies and ideologies is the interest in universalism. It is apparent in the missionary drive in Christianity, or in Wieland's dictum that 'only the true cosmopolitan can be a good citizen',⁶ or in the conviction that science and rationality are good for all cultures and will eventually prevail everywhere. In view of the strong pluralistic, if not anarchistic, element in Derrida's teachings, it may seem odd to claim that he too is a universalist. Since, as he says in *Spurs/Eperons*, 'the text will remain indefinitely open, cryptic, and parodying',⁷ there is a plethora of ways in which even a single person, and *a fortiori* different people, can deconstruct it. However, Derrida thinks that logocentrism is always bad, thereby implying that it should nowhere be retained and that deconstructive, non-logocentric views should be adopted by everyone. Thus, pluralism is accepted for Derrida only *within* the deconstructive framework. Like other theories his, too, is permeated with the wish to purify the world of other, unworthy theories, and to convert all non-believers to the right creed.

Another intuition common both to modernist and pre-modernist thought and to Derrida is the belief in the close relation between knowledge and virtue, i.e. that changes in people's ontological and epistemological views can lead to moral and political transformations. This belief already appears in Plato and Aristotle, and continues in the Middle Ages. In modernist culture there has also been a strong opposite trend; in the writings of Descartes, Locke, Hume and Kant epistemological and ontological issues are determined only by epistemological and ontological considerations, and not by religious, moral or aesthetic ones. The two areas of discourse are clearly distinguished from each other. Nevertheless, modernists too hoped that their new theories would, to quote Hume, 'not be inferior in certainty, and will be much superior in utility to any other of human comprehension'.⁸ Rational thought would find technological innovations that will overcome hunger, disease and poverty. Rational people will break

⁶ Christoph Martin Wieland, *Gespräche unter vier Augen*, in *Sämmtliche Werke*, J. G. Gruber, (ed.), 50 vols. (Leipzig: Göschen, 1824–77), XLII, 127–8.

⁷ *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles/Eperons: Les styles de Nietzsche*, bilingual edition, trans. Barbara Harlow, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), 137.

⁸ *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Selby-Bigge, (ed.) (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), xxiii.

away from their prejudices, become free, and find the best means to make themselves happy. Moreover, when reason—which is universal—will prevail there will be fewer wars.

This modernist and pre-modernist intuition exists also in Derrida's teachings. True, he too does not openly use arguments pertaining to the moral and political spheres when he presents his views. Nevertheless, as Richard Bernstein has shown, Derrida does take his teachings to have positive moral implications such as pluralism and respect towards the other, and is partly motivated by them in presenting his views.⁹

Derrida's moral intuitions are traditional. They are largely influenced by the Christian intuition that those who suffer, who are poor and weak, are good and should be helped. This is expressed in the New Testament in sayings such as 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth' or 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven', and 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God'.¹⁰ It is apparent in the life of Jesus, the highest point of which was his suffering on the cross. The notion persisted throughout the Middle Ages in the ideals of asceticism and martyrdom, as well as in the preaching of compassion and charity. It is also conspicuous in many folk stories where the physically weaker characters (e.g. the youngest prince in search of the golden apple, the defenceless and threatened Snow-white) are good, whereas the physically stronger characters are frequently the bad ones.

The intuition abides in modernism where, as Charles Taylor has shown, one of the driving forces of the new instrumentalism is the wish to help the poor.¹¹ Science and the new rationality are understood as what will diminish suffering and will bring more happiness and comfort even to those who otherwise could not enjoy it. This Christian intuition is similarly apparent in the steady ascendance of the ideal of political equality and political freedom, i.e. a state where there are no privileged and unprivileged, deprived and preferred. It is also present in the ideal of a universalist methodology, which excludes the idea of an epistemological underclass.

This Christian intuition also exists strongly in Derrida. The

⁹ See Richard Bernstein, 'Serious Play: The Ethical-Political Horizon of Jacques Derrida', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 1 (1987): 93–117.

¹⁰ Matthew 5, 5; 19, 24.

¹¹ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 104.

deconstruction of hierarchical dichotomies, where one term is traditionally preferred to the other,¹² may remind one of the folk-tales mentioned above. Indeed when he discusses graphocentrism, he describes it as having been made into an outcast, sent to a leper colony, and outlawed.¹³ If we understand deconstruction as a story, Derrida is the good hero who, with his new weapon of deconstruction, forces historically chauvinistic phonocentrism to yield some of its power to traditionally discriminated against and humiliated graphocentrism. At the happy ending of the story, in which we are invited to take part, discrimination will cease and justice will prevail. Graphocentrism in this context almost seems like a Dreyfus sent to Devil-Island, and Derrida as an Emile Zola who brings him back. Note also that the aim of deconstruction is not to constitute a new state of 'tyranny' or 'injustice'. Derrida does not aim to make the term that was previously 'underprivileged' in the hierarchy 'privileged', and the previously 'privileged' term 'underprivileged'. This would merely replace an old hierarchical dichotomy by a new one, and inequality would persist.¹⁴ His vision is one where there are no inequalities. He is deconstructing the very hierarchical structure, suggesting an alternative which is altogether new and non-hierarchical.

Other characteristics of the relation between logocentrism and deconstruction are also reminiscent of traditional Christian intuitions about good and evil. There is something subversive, almost cunning in logocentrism, which can appear in the very efforts made to reduce it. Emphasizing not the typical, central and essential but the atypical, marginal and accidental can itself make them with time typical, central and essential. Thus, logocentrism can appear in covert ways, and deconstruction itself can become logocentric. Likewise, in the Christian tradition the devil, starting with his efforts to tempt Jesus, works in covert ways.¹⁵ Pride, for Thomas Aquinas the most serious sin from which all others spring (and, indeed, the one which, like logocentrism, is associated with inequality and strife), can persist in the very acts adopted to eliminate it. Aquinas thinks that pride is the most difficult sin to abstain from since many people are proud of their very humility.¹⁶ Again, just as in the Christian ethos conceding to evil can facilitate getting along in the material, practical world, so in Derrida's philosophy accepting logocentrism can make it easier to function

¹² See, e.g., *Positions* 56–7.

¹³ *De la grammatologie*, 62, 64.

¹⁴ *De la grammatologie*, 65–86.

¹⁵ Matthew 4.

¹⁶ *Summa Theologiae* II ii qu. 162 art. 5–8.

and cope in the everyday, practical world, and being deconstructive may have a pragmatic price.

Another characteristic which Derrida shares with many philosophies is that they almost invariably remain in an ivory tower. Notwithstanding their wish of becoming widely accepted by the general public and thus of becoming part of the general culture, philosophies usually remain discussed only within a very small circle. This characteristic seems to affect Derrida's philosophy even more radically than others. Its terms, subtle distinctions and technique are understood only by a very small minority, mostly concentrated around academia. For the general public the Derridaen message is at best opaque, but more frequently utterly nonsensical.

The failure of Derrida's and others' theories to descend from the 'ivory tower' deserves a more elaborate discussion than can be devoted to it here. One reason may have to do with the fact that most people are not interested in philosophical theories. Another is that keeping a theory inaccessible can have emotional, social and economic advantages for those of the 'inner circle'. Acquaintance with the theory, especially when it is difficult, can become a status symbol and a source of pride. When the theory is deemed worthy those acquainted with it are respected, and sometimes consulted and asked to instruct—for which they frequently also receive material recompense. There are many historical examples of efforts to keep theories esoteric. The Pythagoreans and the Egyptian priesthood took pains to keep their knowledge secret. So did the Jewish and Christian experts in Cabala. The Catholic Church held the sacred texts public, but the ability to interpret them was reserved for the clerics. Making knowledge somewhat remote by keeping it hard to understand may have also been one of the motivations for the complicated nature of Scholastic thought. And it may also be one of the motivations for the unnecessarily subtle and difficult presentation of some other theories, including Derrida's.

3

Up to now we have focused on characteristics common to Derrida and to other philosophies, modernist and pre-modernist alike. However, some features of Derrida's teachings are especially characteristic of modernism. One such is the emphasis on methodology and procedures. Bacon's whole *New Organon* revolves around the question of the best procedures for thinking. Descartes dedicates a whole essay, his *Discourse on Method*, to the question of the right

method. Likewise, the dispute between rationalists and empiricists over innate ideas was inspired by questions about the correct procedures to use in philosophizing. In the view of all these the right method is a *sine qua non* for overcoming the problems that infest previous philosophies. The emphasis on methodology is also central to Derrida. In fact, his whole teaching can be seen as a suggestion of a new methodology, deconstruction, even as a course of instruction on the procedures that can be used for trying to turn reason against itself.

The emphasis on method is related to another feature characteristic of modernist theories: their point of departure is epistemic. Deliberation of epistemological issues is taken to be a pre-requisite for the future determination of ontological problems. One needs only to glance through the titles of the important texts of the modernists—such as Spinoza's *Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding*, Locke's *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Leibniz's *New Essays concerning Human Understanding*, Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* or Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*—to see how central epistemological issues were for them. This is also true of Derrida's work which basically revolves around the question of the right way to analyse texts. Although his discussion does have an ontological import (as do all epistemological discussions), this import is primarily the derivative of epistemological deliberations.

Modernist philosophy also tends to disregard common sense and to be aversive towards prejudice. Being critical, it examines everything, and is frequently more sensitive to the weaknesses than to the strengths of what it checks. In principle, nothing is sacred to the modernist, who is ready to examine views again and again to see whether they still fit the criteria for acceptability. This characteristic, of course, is related to the previous ones; committed to proving their views by a set of procedures which they take to be the vehicle of truth, the modernists cannot accept a belief just because it is commonly held. They decide on its status by evaluating it with the same procedures that they use to evaluate any other, and treat any view that has not gone through these procedures as suspect. Identifying beliefs not sufficiently backed by justification procedures and rejecting them from the body of knowledge is almost seen as 'purifying' it. Thus Descartes starts his *Meditations* by asserting that all his convictions could be false, and hence rejects them as unreliable. Only after having done this does he carefully admit into the system those propositions that answer his tests for certainty. Other modernists also seek to identify and question our most basic presuppositions. Locke dismisses the concept

of substance, Berkeley rejects matter, and Kant holds that we never see the world as it 'really' is. The modernist should be, to quote Hume's admiring characterization of Newton, 'Cautious in admitting no principles but such as were founded on experiment, but resolute to adopt every such principle, however new or unusual'.¹⁷ And Hume recommends that we should ask ourselves concerning any book '*Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames.*'¹⁸

Derrida too seems to share the modernist anti-prejudicial ethos. He too is very critical and eager to identify the most intuitive and self-understood prejudices we have and then to question them. There seems to be nothing in Western culture too basic or self-evident for him not to challenge. When he points out the traditional preference for the essential and central over the accidental and marginal he is identifying and challenging some of the oldest, most common and most deeply embedded convictions of our culture. 'Un-common-sensicality' has become one of the trademarks of his theory. It exists, for example, in his associating the German Ich ('I') with the Hebrew *lsh* (man) because they sound the same (to him),¹⁹ in his connecting the A in *différance* with a pyramid,²⁰ or in the whole structure of his *Glas*: each page of this book contains two uneven columns of text, one about Hegel and the other about Jean Genet, sometimes seeming to relate to each other, at other times to be completely disconnected.²¹

Connected with the modernist distrust of common sense and prejudice is the aversion to authority and tradition. The medieval reverence for the authority of Aristotle, the Gospels or the Church is not only not accepted by the Modernists, but actively opposed. Instead, the ideals of ethical and intellectual autonomy are esteemed. Previous generations are believed not to have understood the world as correctly and fully as we do. Their traditional views, still accepted because of habit and prejudice, are taken to hamper the progress of humanity to better knowledge. Tradition, then, has to be overcome. Thus Kant, for example, explains in his *What is Enlightenment?* that humanity failed to reach maturity

¹⁷ David Hume, *A History of England*, 6 vols. (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remen and Haffelfinger, 1876), VI, 374.

¹⁸ Hume's emphasis. *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding*, Selby-Bigge, (ed.), 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1902), 165.

¹⁹ *La vérité en peinture*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), 189.

²⁰ *Marges*, 4.

²¹ *Glas* (Paris: Galilée, 1974).

until the age of Enlightenment not because previous generations lacked intelligence, but because they did not *dare* to apply it, did not have the courage to use their intelligence without another's guidance. Hence his dictum '*Sapere aude!* Dare to know! Have the courage to use your own intelligence!'.²² One can sense in Kant's use of the words 'dare' and 'have courage' his feeling that previous generations are an obstacle to humanity's progress. Of course, the modernists were also partly sympathetic towards the classical tradition, in which they saw an ally in their war against medievalism. Hume, for example, admired the Stoics, no doubt because he agreed with their atomism, materialism and moral philosophy. However, his respect for the ancient authorities with whom he agrees is matched by his disrespect for those with whom he does not. Moreover, like Locke, Kant and others he does not use or accept arguments from tradition. His and other modernists' project is to correct what they think tradition has got wrong.

In this respect, too, Derrida participates in the modernist ethos. He too is antagonistic towards authority, even to the point of delight in iconoclasm. He too thinks that previous generations were wrong and that not much can be learned from them (if they should be studied it is mainly for identifying the mistakes they incurred in the form of dichotomic biases and logocentric prejudices). He, too, feels that tradition has to be overcome since it blocks the way for the new views he proposes. And he too believes that his method enables him to do better than tradition did. The view that his teachings form a radical break with tradition is one of the things that make Derrida so much part of it.

Note that the modernist ethos does not merely lack respect for tradition; it also positively values innovation. Thus, part of the modernist spirit is to be 'modern', in the non-technical sense of the term. Innovating becomes a value in itself. Repeating the known, even if it is true, becomes less enticing than making your own contribution to scholarship. Related to these is the high regard for originality and for a revolutionary intellectual spirit. Success in demolishing an old world view and introducing a new scheme in its place is taken to be worthy over and above saying a true thing. This sentiment can be recognized in Kant's proud description of his theory as a 'Copernican Revolution', choosing Copernicus' revolution for this dignified comparison because of its radicality.

These characteristics are also typical, of course, of Derrida. He, too, is 'modern' in the non-technical sense of the word. He too

²² 'Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?' in *Werke*, Ernst Cassirer *et al.*, (eds), 11 vols. (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1912–1922), IV, 169.

introduces a revolution and seems to celebrate his own innovativeness and originality. Deconstruction always discusses the marginal, and when that marginal becomes central through the discussion, deconstruction immediately moves to something else which is marginal. Thus it is characterized by an unceasing movement towards the different. It always looks for the unexpected and surprising, perpetually exchanging the old for the new.

Another feature of the modernist ethos is its individualism. It is true that the procedures for reaching true conclusions are taken to be universal, and all rational agents are expected to hold, at the end of the inquiry, the same beliefs. Nevertheless, their reasoning processes should be performed individually. Although one can consult others and learn from them while reasoning, the final decision whether to accept a certain conclusion should be one's own. Typically, Descartes can perform his *cogito* only for himself, proving with it only his own existence, and not that of anyone else. Other people who want to prove their existence have to perform the *cogito* alone, each for himself or herself. Likewise, for Kant each moral agent should be autonomous, legislating the moral law independently for himself. Accepting other people's views would be accepting arguments from authority, from tradition, or from common consent which, according to the modernist ethos, should not be done.

This modernist characteristic is retained in Derrida's teachings, where each person not only can, but also should, deconstruct for him or herself. Since Derrida's deconstructive procedures are more lax than typical modernist ones, and he lays no stress on reaching common conclusions, the place for individualism in his theory is even greater.

A distinctive mark of the modern era is the conviction that we cannot know reality itself.²³ Whereas the medievals commonly thought that we can and do have contact with reality or at least with parts of it, modernists frequently think we are in touch only with its representations. Descartes thinks we know only our ideas, or mental images, thus needing procedures that would verify their correspondence to the things in the world. Locke thinks—concerning secondary qualities—that we sense only our sensations that we know only secondary qualities—i.e. that we sense only our sensations. Some other modernists do claim that we know reality, but define it as what conventionally has been seen as only its representation. Thus Berkeley, like Locke and Hume, thinks we can

²³ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Meaning of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), chaps. 8, 9.

know only our perceptions, but takes them to be reality itself. Similarly, Kant distinguishes between the thing in itself and the phenomenal world and says that, never being able to know the former, we should take the latter as reality.

This tendency towards what may be called representationalism is typical also of Derrida, who famously claims that ‘there is nothing outside the text’.²⁴ Not distinguishing between sign and signified, what he writes does not refer to things external to text or language, but only to text and language themselves.

Modernism is also Anthropocentric. Whereas medieval philosophy is theocentric, in modernist systems God fulfils less important philosophical functions, if any. God still plays an important philosophical role in Descartes’, Spinoza’s, Leibniz’s and Berkeley’s philosophies, but much less so in Locke’s, Hume’s and Kant’s, which revolve around the abilities and concerns of human beings. The anthropocentric tendency in modernism is related, of course, to its antagonism to authority and tradition. What is to be accepted as true and moral is to be determined not by God’s holy decrees, but only by human reason.

Taking Derrida’s philosophy to be anthropocentric may seem wrong, since he rejects the concept of the unified human subject.²⁵ Nevertheless, he is anthropocentric in taking human beings to be the final measure for the truth of a belief. Other aspects of Derrida’s anthropocentric tendency are his interest in epistemology rather than ontology, his preoccupation with language and text (which are human artifacts) and not in anything that transcends them, his rejection of any meta-narrative, his disapproval of fixed procedures, and his playfulness.

We have seen a large number of characteristics—some of them important and central—shared by Derrida’s teachings and by philosophies and ideologies preceding him. I do not mean to belittle Derrida’s inventiveness. But it is also important to see the characteristics that Derrida shares with the Western pre-modernist and modernist legacies. These characteristics are no less important than those he does not share. His theory does not mark as sharp and radical a break with tradition as it is sometimes portrayed, and Derrida is very much part of the modernist, Christian, and Western heritage which he so much abhors.²⁶

²⁴ *De la grammatologie* 233.

²⁵ See, e.g., ‘Cogito et histoire de la folie’, in *L’Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967).

²⁶ I am very grateful to Saul Smilansky, Oded Balaban, Gabriel Motzkin, Avraham Mansbach, Mira Reich, and Mor Arazy for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.