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# DECONSTRUCTION AS ETHICS WITHOUT RESULT

## *on derridean resultlessness, urgency, and attunement in contrast to arendt, sextus, and kierkegaard*

## I introduction

Wherein lies the ethical value of thinking? For Hannah Arendt, what makes this question so complex is what she calls the "resultless" character of thinking. "Thinking as such," she writes,

> does society little good, much less than the thirst for knowledge in which it is used as an instrument for other purposes. It does not create values, it will not find out, once and for all, what "the good" is, and it does not confirm but rather dissolves accepted rules of conduct. (Arendt, "Thinking" 445)

This is what leads Arendt to ask her question about the value of thinking: "How can anything relevant for the world we live in arise out of so resultless an enterprise?" (426). In "Force of Law," Jacques Derrida points to something analogous in deconstruction, when he writes that: "[the] suffering of deconstruction, what makes it suffer and what makes suffer those who suffer from it, is perhaps the absence of rules, of norms, and definitive criteria to distinguish in an unequivocal manner between law and justice" (231). Insofar as Derrida's writings seem to destabilize rather than produce such rules, norms, and criteria, deconstruction can be said to be peculiarly *without result*, whether result here means providing an answer, claim, conclusion, rule, criterion, legitimation, proof, judgement, etc. The term "resultless" does not mean that this thinking is without its effects or value. It also does not mean that no claims or conclusions relevant to ethics can be found in Derrida's texts. The point is that it belongs most intimately to deconstruction that those claims never constitute the text's final intention, and that their status as unequivocal results is invariably undercut through a diverse array of textual maneuvers and strategies. How could the ethical value be qualified of deconstruction if we approach it as a "resultless" thinking,[1] in the Arendtian sense of consistently refusing to provide any kind of "reassuring response"? And (how) can it defend itself against that most pressing objection: that urgency demands results?

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Deconstruction is neither oriented by specific results it would seek or deliver, nor by specific presuppositions or principles it would defend. Nor can its movement of destabilization itself be construed as ethical superiority. For this reason, Derrida always preferred terms like affirmation, exigency, anxiety, commitment, engagement, or promise to characterize deconstruction, even if – or precisely because – it must ultimately remain silent in the face of the question: commitment to *what*? In this paper, I will try to approach the ethical value of deconstruction's peculiar resultlessness by way of contrast. In section II, I will characterize the structure of deconstruction's resultlessness, and its reconceptualization of the very notion of urgency, to those of Arendt, Socrates, and the skeptics. In section III, I show how deconstruction's performative character – qualified as a threefold "anxiety" about its results – precludes any meta-justification that would find ethical reassurance or "good conscience" in the movement of destabilization itself. Finally, in section IV, I ask to what extent deconstruction's ethical commitment can be characterized as a (fundamental) attunement, by contrasting its specific anxiety to Kierkegaard's resistance to righteousness and good conscience.

## II the asymmetrical structure of deconstructive resultlessness: its contrast with arendt, socrates, and sextus, and its relation to urgency

When Arendt designated thinking as "resultless," she did so because, from the perspective of action, thinking first of all "interrupts all doing" ("Thinking" 423). To think is to put in question what was taken for granted, bringing action to a standstill. In a life that is fundamentally a *vita activa*, thinking occurs as something "unnatural." Thinking puts one "out of order" in the Heideggerian sense: it is neither "stumbled into" as something "in the familiar order of the everyday," nor are there "requirements or even regulations" that would demand it, nor is it directed towards "the satisfaction of dominant needs" or to the common "sphere urgent concern" (Heidegger, *Introduction* 14). Most importantly, since the interruptive character of thinking is its capacity to "unfreeze" thoughts and concepts or to put them in question, thinking is for Arendt peculiarly "self-destructive" in the following sense ("Thinking" 425, 431, 433): "thinking inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil, in short on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics" (434). There is no result of thinking that cannot be undone by thinking itself. For this reason, Arendt can also claim that "thinking itself is dangerous, but nihilism is not its product" (435): although thinking is dangerous as the capacity to undo any result it generates, the real nihilism would consist precisely in the desire for a thought that could not be undone. For Arendt, true nihilism is the desire for a thought that ends further thinking. For all these reasons, the question of the relation between thought and ethics became for Arendt: "How can anything relevant for the world we live in arise out of so resultless an enterprise?" (426).

What Arendt calls the "self-destructive" character of thinking is embodied perhaps most exemplarily by skepticism. It seems that skepticism is the form of thought par excellence for which "the business of thinking is," in the words of Arendt, "like the veil of Penelope: it undoes every morning what it had finished the night before" ("Thinking" 425). But Derridean undecidability is not structured like skeptical equipollence, nor is it guided by the skeptics' ethical concern for tranquility [ἀταραξια].

Skepticism's resultlessness has a specific structure. Following Sextus Empiricus, it consists in the "suspension of judgment" that follows on the insight into the "equipollence" in "opposed objects and accounts" (4). This suspension is animated by an ethical concern through and through, insofar as its ultimate motivation is a specific idea of the good life. Tranquility is presented by Sextus as the non-instrumental "aim" of skepticism (10). Because:

> [men] of talent, troubled by the anomaly in things and puzzled as to which of them they should rather assent to, came to investigate what in things is true and what false, thinking that by deciding these issues they would become tranquil. (5–6)

By contrast, the skeptics discovered that "tranquillity in matters of opinion" did not follow from establishing an outcome, claim, or decision, but that it followed "fortuitously" when they "suspended judgement" (10). This brings Sextus to his highly condensed definition of skepticism, namely as an "ability" to "set out oppositions among things," which causes "equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts," which in turn leads first to "suspension of judgement" [ἐποχη], and afterwards to "tranquility" (4).

Does deconstruction's engagement with aporia relate to such an ability? Does deconstruction entail suspension? In his published works, Derrida never engaged in a systematic discussion of skeptical philosophy.[2] In "Force of Law," he explicitly distinguishes deconstruction from skepticism, but he does so rather loosely, by lumping together terms like skepticism, relativism, and nihilism. In part, this is a symptom of the polemical context in which the question of the ethics of deconstruction first arose; a context in which, for many, deconstruction was precisely an attempt to everywhere "set out oppositions among things." Therefore, in Derrida's text, the form of skepticism in question arises out of a specific interpretation of the statements that it "is necessary to put justice and force together" (by Pascal) and that authority has an at best "mystical foundation." For Derrida, the "conventional interpretation" that would see in these statements a "sort of pessimistic, relativistic and empiricist skepticism," would hold the rather superficial view that laws are simply unfounded, unjustified or unjust; or that nothing is ultimately legitimate, or that the right of the strongest is all there is ("Force of Law" 239). Against this interpretation, Derrida presents a reading of these statements (and with that an account of deconstruction's distinction from skepticism through its engagement with justice) that grants them their due but pushes them beyond the horizon of skepticism.

But the point in "Force of Law" would be misconstrued if we see in it nothing more than a juxtaposition of deconstruction as positive or affirmative against skepticism as something negative or destructive. Their relation is not simply oppositional, if only because deconstruction does not reinstate the certainty that the skeptic denies. This is reflected not only in Derrida's insistent preoccupation throughout the text with its performative status as "address" (which I focus on in section III), but "Force of Law" also brings this out through a fine-grained distinction. To the "oscillation between two unequal decisions," Derrida contrasts the undecidability of deconstruction as taking place "in the interval that separates the undeconstructibility of justice from the deconstructibility of law" ("Force of Law" 243).

The movements that led Derrida to his distinction are well known. Justice is impossible when reduced purely to law, yet justice is equally impossible without law. Justice requires instantiation through laws to guarantee calculability (the alternative would be a mystical foundation in a "conventionalist" sense; a skepticism or relativism), and yet no system of laws can ever exhaustively represent justice. Justice is only possible in the form of a double and contradictory demand: the demand of the instantiation in, as well as the excess with respect to, law. The "interval" separating the undeconstructibility of justice from the deconstructibility of law is therefore no synthesis but is "undecidable," in the sense that justice "demands that one calculate with the incalculable" (Derrida, "Force of Law" 244). It is the aporetic experience of this double and contradictory demand that constitutes the experience of justice: "aporetic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary, of Justice, that is to say of moments in which the decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule" (244). Although I am following the model of "Force of Law" here, which focuses on the relation of justice to law and of decision to calculation, one could show that Derrida's treatment of related notions like hospitality,

responsibility, or forgiveness is structured analogously.[3]

The structure of Derridean undecidability therefore differs from the skeptical inability to come to judgement that is based on equipollence. Nor is it Arendtian "unfreezing" of thoughts or the ability of thinking to undo any result it produces. These models of resultlessness are based on symmetry. They are akin to the model of the Hegelian tragic conflict, in which two opposite choices offer themselves with precisely equal rationality (if this rationality were not equal, there would be no tragedy and no real decision, the choice would have already been made). It is the same equipollence that leads the skeptic to suspension or Socrates to aporia. What binds these models is that they are symmetrical: they are models of equipollence; of the inability to decide in the face of two symmetrically equal counter-arguments.

Although in a certain sense the aporetic Socratic dialogues amount to nothing, this clearly does not mean they are without value. This is because we understand that their value does not lie in their positive results but in the manner and style of Socrates' movement through the respective positions. This movement is a consistent attempt to meet a demand, and its model is the *search*. It characterizes Socrates' search for truth as well as the definition of the skeptics as being forever "still searching." This search is structured symmetrically: a movement that is ever-renewed, of positing and retracting, of claiming and refuting, of argument and counter-argument. But Derridean undecidability consists in the asymmetrical demand that decisions must exceed the rule-application to which they are nevertheless bound. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida refers to this as the undecidable distinction "between two disadjustments": "How to distinguish between two disadjustments, between the disjuncture of the unjust and the one that opens up the infinite asymmetry of the relation to the other, that is to say, the place for justice?" (26).

That the disproportion between these two "disadjustments" is not itself symmetrical (and therefore not a wavering indecision in the face of equipollence) can be obscured by Derrida's own ubiquitous terminology of the "double bind." This is not a symmetrical double bind in which possibility and impossibility equally cancel each other out. It is the situation in which one bind consigns all decisions unavoidably to calculation (because "one *must*" calculate, both "de facto and de jure"; "justice *commands* calculation" (Derrida, "Force of Law" 257)),[4] and a very different kind of bind – the injunction or demand of justice – that requires that the decision exceed calculation.

The aporia therefore does not only consist in a shortcoming with respect to an excessive demand, but in the demand of justice itself to negotiate both the need to calculate as well as the need to exceed it. That calculation cannot and ought not to be avoided can be generalized into the central Derridean idea of *irreducible complicity*.[5] If there is a deconstructive ethics, it is an ethics of complicity. This complicity works two ways: deconstruction is complicit, on the one hand, because it neither can nor seeks to avoid calculation, thereby implicating itself in the very calculative procedures (including those of "common concern" and "dominant need") that the demands of justice must exceed. And, conversely, deconstruction is complicit because, on the other hand, by stressing the excess of justice with respect to all calculation, it gives justice over to an openness that can always be (perversely or otherwise) reappropriated, structurally holding open the possibility of the bad, even of the worst (what comes "can be evil" (Derrida and Ferraris 56)).

This thought of complicity leaves a certain type of reader hopeless: if complicity is unavoidable then one is never in the right, if one is never in the right then one is always in the wrong, there is no end to the destabilizing effects of deconstruction: it inspires a sense of being stuck with no way out. I will return to the relation of deconstruction to this attunement or mood (of hopelessness, the anxious discouragement of feeling trapped with no way out), but one answer to this type of reader is that this complicity does not disable action or decision, but arises within and as a demand of

action and decision itself. This complicity is only debilitating so long as ethics is the desire for a specific kind of purity, for the reassurance of being able to draw a distinction or find a principle that would justify or guarantee being in the right, or for a distinction of right from wrong that would be without contamination. The alternative to such debilitation is not its opposite, namely normalization, the return to status quo, the "avoidance of paralysis" (Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism* 41). Instead, for Derrida, the place of ethics would be between this simple paralysis of being caught with no way out, and the simple lack of paralysis of normalization; it would lie in the "experience" that paradoxically goes through both (as such, it would be an "ethics beyond ethics" (36)). When Derrida famously states in the wake of Kierkegaard that a decision is a "moment of madness," this means neither debilitation nor normalization but the requirement of passing "through" the "test and the ordeal of the undecidable" ("Force of Law" 253). Thus, rather than models of hesitation (even if Derrida himself is fond of the term), postponement or suspension of judgement *before* a double demand, Derrida conversely identifies the impossible as a condition for the *possibility* of all decisions. Just like justice depends on calculable law without ever being fulfilled through it, so every decision requires that one goes *through* the application of a rule that nevertheless can never exhaust the decision (otherwise it would be mere calculation, the outcome would be predetermined and no decision would have taken place).

This is where Derrida is both different from, as well as perhaps closest to, Arendt's model. The difference lies in a new conception of urgency. Following Heidegger, Arendt could sharply distinguish the resultlessness of thinking from the ability to address what is urgent only because the urgent was conceived as the sphere of (contingent) "dominant needs" and "common concern." Although deconstruction also does not seek to simply satisfy such needs (which is clear both from the strategic complexities of Derrida's texts, as well as from his insistence on the central importance of what is deemed marginal), it does not seek to purify itself from these concerns either. Elsewhere, Derrida stresses that he "never held against calculation that condescending reticence of 'Heideggerian' haughtiness" ("'Eating Well'" 272–73). What holds for calculation holds for the sphere of dominant needs as well. Derrida recognizes in Heidegger's attempt to distinguish thinking from both calculation and common concern a latent "desire for rigorous non-contamination," a desire for purity that constitutes the metaphysical gesture par excellence (*Of Spirit* 10). This leads Derrida to a new conception of the urgent. Rather than common concern or dominant need, the urgent is the injunction to decide in the midst of a structural lack of sufficient conditions, criteria, or rules. It is the injunction, not to avoid calculation, nor to hesitate before the equal necessities of calculation and the incalculable, but precisely the injunction to "calculate with the incalculable."

And it is here that Derrida perhaps comes closest to Arendt. Ultimately, her answer to the ethical significance of resultless thinking is that it "liberates judgement" (Arendt, "Thinking" 446): true judgement is only possible in the absence of given criteria, and these criteria are first dismantled by the destructive force of thinking, which enables one to put in question the validity of the rules under which one lives. Even if Arendt's Kantian model of reflective judgement is different from Derrida's Kierkegaardian model of the madness of decision, one can still see the parallel in the notion of responsibility. For Arendt, responsibility is precisely *assumed* in the *absence* of given criteria, and is *abdicated* in the good conscience of having done one's established duty.[6] Likewise, Derrida describes the injunction to decide in the face of an excessive demand amidst a lack of sufficient criteria. With that, the urgent is no longer whatever is a dominant need. Urgency concerns the structural *overburdening* of all decisions: that a decision "cannot wait" for "the infinite information and the unlimited knowledge of conditions, rules, or hypothetical imperatives that could justify it" (Derrida, "Force of Law"

255). As we will see, one of Derrida's descriptions for deconstruction's ethical commitment is an *exigency*, that is, a movement, a being driven, being drawn out or drawn forth in a state of urgency or in relation to a need, demand, or requirement. This demand is always double and asymmetrical. It is both the urgency that "one must" calculate, which decisively distinguishes deconstruction's urgency from the Heideggerian model, as well as the urgency that calculation will never be enough, thus the urgency of knowing one will never be able to satisfactorily respond and that justice, responsibility, hospitality always excessively call for more. This excessive quality is why Derrida distinguishes justice from an ideal or Kantian regulative idea. Reassurance (the fulfilment not only of the dominant need but of the excessive need in all decisions) is not even imaginable as something to be expected. In Derrida's words: justice has no "horizon of expectation" ("Force of Law" 256).

So the resultlessness of deconstruction is structured differently than Arendtian "self-destruction" or skeptical uncertainty. At this point, it may be tempting to locate deconstruction's ethical value in precisely such reconceptualizations (of responsibility, justice, decision, etc.), and to locate the value of deconstruction in the destabilization itself. But Derrida always resisted such "good conscience," instead characterizing deconstruction in terms of an inevitable and structurally necessary "anguish" or "anxiety" [*angoisse*] ("Force of Law" 249). If not by its results, could then the ethical character of deconstruction be better understood through this suspense and this anxiety? But there are many ways to be anxious, and the structure of deconstructive anxiety is specific. How can it be qualified?

## III the threefold anxiety of deconstruction

When Derrida writes of deconstruction's anxiety (or about its "suffering" or its "trembling"), he is designating neither an affect nor a phenomenologically revelatory disposition of the Heideggerian type, but rather the relation of deconstruction to its own articulations. This anxiety can be qualified as a threefold risk or danger – to what deconstruction unavoidably risks sliding into, given the absence of reassurance through protective results or ethical justification. Rather than the Arendtian danger of thinking, which consisted in the perpetually "self-destructive" capacity to undo any result it generates, deconstruction's relation to danger can be conceived as an asymmetrical, threefold risk. It concerns three directions that deconstruction's anxiety always goes out to; three intertwined but different risks that deconstruction can never fail to run, and against which it can never safeguard itself.

(1) Firstly, there is the aforementioned risk or danger that its lack of assurance and justification causes deconstruction to relapse into a "conventional" nihilism, relativism, skepticism, or even dogmatism. This is the risk that deconstruction is *not critical enough*. Deconstruction can never safeguard itself against this danger, because:

> Abandoned to itself, the incalculable and giving [*donatrice*] idea of justice is always very close to the bad, even to the worst for it can always be reappropriated by the most perverse calculation. It is always possible [...] An absolute assurance against this risk can only saturate or suture the opening of the call to justice, a call that is always wounded. (Derrida, "Force of Law" 257)

Much earlier, in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida already reflected on this "law of resemblance" between the "ultra-transcendental" and the "precritical": the only way to distinguish them is through a certain pathway [*parcours*]: "That pathway must leave a track in the text. Without that track, abandoned to the simple content of its conclusions, the ultra-transcendental text will so closely resemble the precritical text as to be indistinguishable from it" (61). There, Derrida was referring to the irreducible complicity of deconstruction; the necessity to employ

the very concepts one puts in question. There is thus, at the propositional level, a certain point of indistinguishability[7] between deconstruction's being without justification or result on the one hand, and the lack of justification of a "precritical" skepticism or dogmatism on the other. Deconstruction can never distinguish itself on a merely propositional level, "abandoned to the simple content of its conclusions." All it has to distinguish itself from skepticism is the pathway that leaves its track through the text: its erasures and its specific performativity. This vulnerability deconstruction shares with justice itself, which "can always be reappropriated."

(2) The second danger is the danger of the desire to decisively overcome the first danger, of relapsing into reassurance by considering deconstruction itself (the activity of destabilizing, the critical activity of pointing out the lack of origin or justification) to be ethically superior. This is *the danger of ethical certainty, of "good conscience," of reassurance*, which Derrida connects explicitly to the performative structure of address of the deconstructive text: "good conscience as subjective certainty is incompatible with the absolute risk that every promise, every engagement, and every responsible decision – if there are such – must run" (*Aporias* 19). Derrida elaborates on this point in "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering'": the "remoralization of deconstruction […] at each moment risks reassuring itself in order to reassure the other and to promote the consensus of a new dogmatic slumber" (15). What is to be avoided above all is to consider deconstruction itself as the successful adherence to a "higher" responsibility or a "more intractable moral exigency." Even giving "ammunition to the officials of anti-deconstruction" might well be

> preferable to the constitution of a consensual euphoria or, worse, a community of complacent deconstructionists, reassured and reconciled with the world in ethical certainty, good conscience, satisfaction of service rendered, and the consciousness of duty accomplished (or, more heroically still, yet to be accomplished). (17)

(3) Finally, for Derrida, this excessive demand produces a "regular disorientation" in deconstruction, an irreducible aspect of "wandering." Deconstruction finds "its movement or its motivation […] in this always unsatisfied appeal, beyond the given determinations of what we call […] justice" (Derrida, "Force of Law" 249). This entails an inherent avowal of risk or danger in the sense of a movement that can no longer count on familiar guaranteeing structures and "already identifiable zones." Derrida has stressed this point in many ways, ever since he showed the irreducibility of the "orphaned" character of writing in *Of Grammatology*, and hence deconstruction's necessarily proceeding "like a wandering thought," in the "form of empiricism and of errancy" (162). It is why he designates deconstruction elsewhere as a "strategy without finality": "for this is what I hold and what in turn holds me in its grip, the aleatory strategy of someone who admits that he does not know where he is going" (Derrida, "Time of a Thesis" 50). This is also the "interval of spacing in which transformations, even juridicopolitical revolutions, take place" (Derrida, "Force of Law" 249). But the promise of transformation is always an "anguishing moment of suspense," because who can know where it will lead?

Deconstruction's specific resultlessness lies in the anxiety of the exposure to this threefold risk, not in the twofold or symmetrical "self-destructive" ability to undo the results it produces. The first risk is often too hastily dismissed by adherents of deconstruction as the result of careless reading. Though to an extent true, this ignores deconstruction's structural vulnerability to its own misreadings, but especially risks running into the second risk.

Of the three inalienable risks, the second danger of ethical certainty, reassurance, or good conscience enjoys a certain privilege. How can that privilege be characterized?

One way to answer this question is to start from the third risk. That an element of wandering or errancy belongs irreducibly to deconstruction, makes clear that it cannot be consistently conceived as a form of desire or search in an instrumental sense, that is, where seeking is conceived as an *instrument for finding*, whether this be the search for answers, solutions, criteria, meaning, decisions, understanding, insight, the truth, the good, etc. For reasons of space, I must here forego a discussion of the many ways in which throughout the history of philosophy this instrumental model of the search has been problematized, and how these attempts relate to deconstruction. But I will pursue one line of thought that follows from such an enquiry: what animated the Socratic search for truth? The classical answer to this question is well known. This search is said, at least by Plato and Aristotle, to be animated by *wonder*.[8] If the ethical commitment of deconstruction is not determinable through its results or its principles, neither by what precedes it nor by what follows from it, could it be that deconstruction's ethical commitment, and its distinction from other forms of resultless thought (Socratic, skeptical, Heideggerian, Arendtian) is better determinable as a kind of *attunement*? Could that be what justifies its apparent sense that of all the risks, the risk of reassurance and good conscience always seems the *greater* risk? Is the irreducible (threefold) anxiety of deconstruction the fundamental attunement or *Grundstimmung* of deconstruction? Or is deconstruction still oriented by wonder?

## IV is there a fundamental attunement of deconstruction? the displacement of wonder and the resistance to good conscience

Any consideration of skepticism that is worth its salt has always had to take attunement into account. Not just in the sense that the ancient skeptic strove to extinguish anxiety in tranquility. For many, the skeptical injunction (whether ancient or modern) to doubt everything is the archetype of the triviality of philosophy. It arouses a sense of futility: philosophy can easily appear at its most useless to life in its questioning of self-evident truths. Arendt still touches on this when she stresses the interruptive and unnatural character of thinking for active life. For others, to the contrary, the same injunction to doubt everything is philosophy at its most vital, at the heart of the battle against dogma, common sense, or status quo that underlies all critique and meaningful change. And finally, as Kierkegaard has shown, universal doubt can also bring life to a complete standstill as the opposite of trivial indifference: existential despair.[9] Thus, what appears to be the same skeptical adage on the propositional level (that "everything should be doubted" or that "everything is uncertain") in fact exists as this spectrum that runs through triviality, profundity, and crippling anxiety.[10] Rather than from their content, the differences constituting this spectrum seem to follow from the attunement that accompanies such propositions.

Is there a *Grundstimmung* of deconstruction that would account for its ethical engagement, commitment, or exigency? As far as I am aware, this question has been explicitly posited once before, namely by Rodolphe Gasché in his "Thinking, without Wonder" (353). His suggestion is twofold. On the one hand, something of wonder still figures in deconstruction as the experience of what "imposes itself upon us in an unconditional manner," but such imposition is not tied to a particular or identifiable affect. Thus, secondly, Gasché rightly points out that for Derrida such thinking "can no longer be said to have a single origin; it no longer begins with bare wonder alone" and "insofar as it responds to the event, its origins are plural." Such that, in the end: "the wonder that causes thinking would thus be nothing less than an awareness of being overtaken by the resources of that in which one is caught" (362). But Gasché also adds that such overtaking is "a shock still

more violent than that of wonder," insofar as it implies an inevitable risk of not just occasioning thought, but also of threatening to distinguish it (358). This latter point is in line with what we identified as the first of the three structural risks of deconstruction.

As especially deconstruction's third risk attested to, Gasché is right to insist that the idea of a *fundamental* attunement is not in line with deconstruction's consistent insistence on the plurality of origins, its necessary relation to empiricism, to wandering, its regular disorientation. If whatever animates deconstruction is determinable as affect or pathos (and Gasché is right that this could be neither experience nor sentiment[11]), such an affect could not be single. Could deconstruction then perhaps be aligned with the philosophical tradition that attempts to *displace* wonder as the fundamental attunement of philosophy?

In what remains, I will try to explicate this question with an emphasis on the risk that Gasché does not explicitly address, the privileged second risk of good conscience. Does deconstruction's anxiety about the reassurance of good conscience displace wonder as the attunement of thinking? For the attempts at such a displacement, I am thinking, once again, of Hannah Arendt; and of Martin Heidegger, to whom we owe the concept of *Grundstimmung* as it is employed here; but I think above all of Kierkegaard, who inspired both.[12]

By invoking Kierkegaard, I do not intend to re-open the debates on the deconstruction of Christianity, nor on the relation between deconstruction and religion or ("radical") atheism. Derrida's relation to Kierkegaard is highly complex: deconstruction is fundamentally not an existentialism in any conventional sense, and yet Derrida admits that "it is Kierkegaard to whom I have been most faithful" (and note that Derrida describes his allegiance to existentialism in terms of "pathos" and "commitment" (Derrida and Ferraris 40)). I invoke Kierkegaard here only to point out a crucial difference between Kierkegaard and Derrida, at a point where the two might seem almost indistinguishable. This point is their shared resistance to "good conscience" as what is somehow the worst, as what is to be resisted above all. What can a revaluation of the fundamental attunement of thinking teach us about the ethical attunement for which good conscience is the greatest danger?

Kierkegaard's displacement of wonder as the fundamental attunement of philosophy takes place in a remarkable text from 1845, the first of three "discourses on imagined occasions," entitled "On the Occasion of a Confession." The title is to be read carefully: the text does not describe, explain, or justify confession as religious practice, but is a meditation on the *occasion* of a confession. That the occasion is imagined, radicalizes the specific resultlessness that is peculiar to Kierkegaard's discourses, namely their powerless "superfluity" and their being entirely "without authority."[13] The discourses on imagined occasions are "entirely unsolicited and thus in [their] deficiency entirely unjustified" and "entirely without the support of the circumstances and thus without assistance in its full development" (Kierkegaard, "On the Occasion" 9). The discourse in question is specifically a meditation on the kind of *thinking* involved in confession, in the sense of a type of relation to truth. It concerns the question what constitutes the search for truth, and all seeking is attuned by having its "promise" as well as its "toil and its spiritual trial" (9). But confession concerns a seeking of a kind that is both different from, as well as a dialectical reversal of, the ways in which the search for truth has manifested itself throughout the history of Western philosophy according to Kierkegaard. What are these modalities of thinking as searching?

Kierkegaard chooses his starting point in the familiar claim that philosophy starts in wonder. Initially, wonder manifests itself as a search for the truth as something external, an unknown highest good. Finding this would end the search. As long as it cannot contribute to fulfilling its desire, such searching is a wishing that expresses itself as worship. As such, it is attuned by wonder as a mixture of "fear and blessedness" (Kierkegaard, "On the Occasion" 18): the blessed hope for what might be attained, and the fear that it might not. In the

attempt to exert some measure of control over this search, thinking becomes utilitarian. In taking itself to be able to contribute something to the search, wishing becomes striving. In striving, its immediacy is "broken" as striving becomes the method or instrument that mediates the relation to the truth (20). Finally, disenchantment sets in when thinking no longer contributes *something* but takes itself to be able to contribute *everything* to the search: "So the wonder was gone; it is gone" (22). At this point of indistinguishability between the completion and the exhaustion of the search, beginning "all over again," thinking is now attuned as despair.

Like Heidegger and Arendt after him, Kierkegaard does not hold that thinking simply does *not* originate in wonder, but rather that the wonder involved in confession no longer coincides with Greek *thaumazein*, nor with the modern fundamental attunement of universal doubt.[14] For Kierkegaard, it is within modern disenchantment, where the wonder is gone, that the "true wonder" emerges, the kind of wonder that "came into existence when […] that first wonder was consumed in despair" ("On the Occasion" 23). It consists in the anxiety that *the search itself* now shows itself to always have been errancy. Instead of acquiring something external, searching now becomes a "transformation of the seeker." This is the moment where "everything is reversed": "this, then, is how a person goes backward!" (27). In contrast to the search that ventures outward, what was sought is now "presumed given." But this provides no reassurance: the transformation is that the seeker now comes to know themselves as the one who wandered in search for what was given all along; as the one who is actively losing the truth that was always already given; as the place where truth was given yet lost. Now the discourse stands "at the beginning," at the true beginning that no longer consists in wonder: "The condition of the soul when it comprehends this is fear and trembling in the guilty one; the passion is sorrow after recollection; the love is repentance in the prodigal" (27).

Throughout all its steps, Kierkegaard's text is marked by a strong resistance to reassurance. To will one's own justification is always diversion and delusion: "With the help of distraction one becomes less guilty, perhaps even justified. But what lamentable justification!" (Kierkegaard, "On the Occasion" 12). The search for truth, or rather seeking as such, is displaced as the fundamental model for thought, insofar as seeking is a linear movement towards the reassurance of a result, an answer; the misunderstanding that "finding God" would be the redemptive telos that would extinguish the "fear and blessedness" of wonder. Hereby, wonder is displaced as the fundamental attunement of thinking because the seeking it inaugurates (the unrest that seeks reassurance, the question that wants an answer) is shown to be the errancy itself. As David Kangas has argued, Kierkegaard breaks with the (Augustinian) model of confession, which "inscribes" confession "in the context of desire," as the seeking of the "restless heart," the tireless longing for "that elusive thing that would bring it to rest" (Kangas 83).[15] In this way, the mode of thinking at issue in the discourse on confession not only breaks entirely with the model of desire, but serves to show the limits of what he calls the "project structure," the drivenness of thinking by a "lack" or any "[orientation] of existence around a […] first principle or final end-goal" (5), in other words any approach that is aimed at results in the Arendtian sense. Derrida, too, has frequently tried to show how, in its resultlessness, deconstruction cannot be characterized in terms of a project.[16]

Kierkegaard's resistance to reassurance comes out best not so much in what the discourse says, but in the status of the discourse itself, which is expressed in the motto that Kierkegaard attached to all his upbuilding discourses: that they are fundamentally "without authority" ("On the Occasion" 16). They do not seek to reassure by claiming or providing a justification. In the absence of such justification, confession is not a doing, not a productive activity, but a "deconstituting" or a "going backwards" (Kangas 93).[17] This is where the

resistance to reassurance repeatedly turns against the risk of "good conscience": "when it is a matter of your own accounting, then you certainly would do wrong to forgive yourself the least little thing, because one's own righteousness is even worse than one's own blackest private guilt" (Kierkegaard, "On the Occasion" 12). And: the "purest of heart is precisely the one most willing to comprehend his own guilt most deeply" (15).

How are these formulations to be distinguished from the following words, spoken by Derrida in an interview (but he makes the point in many places[18]) about the ethics of deconstruction:

> we are never at peace with this. No-one could or should ever know or be quietly reassured about their decisions. When someone says "I have taken my responsibility, I have made a good decision," one maybe sure that it's wrong. There is no possible good conscience, or at least good conscience shouldn't be possible, about a decision and about ethics. I don't say this in order to cultivate bad conscience, or depression, or the irreducible feeling of guilt that belongs to the concept of decision. One should not be sure that a decision has been made, and even less that it has been a good decision. That's the fate of a decision, if there is such a thing.[19] ("On Responsibility" 20–21)

I do not invoke Kierkegaard to postulate an identity between his works and deconstruction. On the contrary: it seems to me that the "irreducible feeling of guilt" is not an adequate designation of what constitutes the attunement of deconstruction, if there is such a thing. Instead, I invoke Kierkegaard here to attempt to qualify, by way of contrast, the Derridean resistance to good conscience. But in what sense do they differ? If Kierkegaardian fear and trembling, sorrow and repentance are not what attunes deconstruction (a perspective with which one can disagree[20]), then wherein lies the distinction if for Derrida complicity is irreducible, justice ever excessive, and one is never in the right?

Hasty attempts suggest themselves but turn out to be problematic just as quickly. Kierkegaard's texts may seem to some, for example, to be more moralizing; or more emphatically religious; or rooted in an existential concern for salvation that Derrida's are not; or concerned with the solitude of a self that in stillness would be present to itself in a way that for Derrida would be eminently deconstructible. But to such attempts, even if they touch on a core of truth, one could reply, respectively: that both Derrida and Kierkegaard perform a suspension of the ethical in the conventional sense; that whether and in what sense Kierkegaard's texts are religious and Derrida's are not, is precisely a point of contention (compare the discussions on Derrida's "radical atheism" or "deconstruction of Christianity"); that Kierkegaardian salvation does not lie in a simple redemption from guilt; and, finally, that Kierkegaard always conceived the self as what relates to itself only in relation to another: "The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another" (*Sickness unto Death* 13–14). So where does that leave us? Perhaps with the following three questions.

(1) Kierkegaard comprehends guilt only in a stillness or inwardness that is sharply distinguished from everything worldly. This worldliness is akin to the "urgency" or hubbub of Heidegger's "dominant needs and common concern." For Kierkegaard, this is always the sphere of noise, of distraction, of comparison, of misunderstanding. Even if Kierkegaard stresses that "the great thing is neither to be in the solitude nor to be in the confusion" ("On the Occasion" 16), is there not perhaps, in this distinction of stillness or inwardness from everything worldly, something like what Derrida calls a desire for purity or non-contamination? Is that desire not still active in the way in which Kierkegaard's discourse, in its displacement of wonder as the beginning of philosophy, still brings thought back (as will Heidegger in his wake) to an "other beginning," that is, to the original

simplicity and stillness of confession? What characterizes this simplicity is for Kierkegaard always *earnestness*. This simplicity is there where "it was over with jesting and delusion and diversion" (Kierkegaard, "On the Occasion" 26). Is it imaginable from the perspective of deconstruction that jesting, delusion, and diversion would ever be over?

(2) We have seen that, for deconstruction, one must speak and one must calculate. Deconstruction's double bind only arises as a commitment to and engagement in the world and in language, at the very least as an operation in and on text. If one must calculate and if one must speak, with all the complicities this entails, then this "must" is not the fateful necessity of a fall into sin that is lamented in sorrow. They are demands by justice and responsibility themselves. When Derrida stresses that he does not emphasize the impossibility of good conscience in order to cultivate bad conscience, could perhaps this difference be construed as the difference between guilt and complicity? After all, to be complicit is always to be complicit *with*. To be *com*-plicit implies the duplicity of being folded in with (*complicare*).[21] To be complicit does not simply mean to be guilty, in the sense of failing to measure up to a singular demand. Irreducible complicity means the demand to partake in what is also demanded to be insufficient. If guilt is the awareness of shortcoming before a single injunction, complicity is the disproportion with respect to this double injunction: that one must calculate and yet that calculation must be exceeded.

(3) The business of ethics cannot be restricted to the business of trying to be in the right. But the lack of good conscience does not leave only bad conscience. It is possible that with this insight we have still not arrived at a satisfactory distinction of the attunement of deconstruction from Kierkegaardian sorrow, for whom, after all, the very thought of always being in the wrong before God was precisely "upbuilding"! But what is perhaps clear from our consideration of the irreducible threefold risk of deconstruction, is that different attunements typically accompany them. To the first risk of appearing to be nothing more than a destructive discourse, Derrida often defiantly opposes deconstruction's *affirmative* character, its commitment or engagement, even if all it has to distinguish itself from a mere skepticism or relativism is its always vulnerable textual strategy. The second risk of good conscience is what deconstruction is always most consistently *anxious* about. And the third risk constitutes the *joy* of deconstruction. This is the promise of an always radically open future. It is really the delight of deconstruction, its sense of liberation. It is why deconstructive "responsibility" can never be reduced to the burdensome quality that Nietzsche called the "spirit of gravity" (153). It manifests itself not only in the thought of a democracy-to-come, the promise of which is never without its risk or severity, but at least as much in the lightness with which Derrida takes the sliding and overflowing character of language into account to furnish his texts with the infinite resources of always surprising connections and connotations. Even if nothing can guarantee that who or what will come is not the worst, this could be said to constitute, to borrow a formulation that Kangas reserved for Kierkegaard, the dilation that creates "room to breathe, the very breath of affirmation" beyond "cramped attunement" of the "the project-structure and the all-ravenous effort at knowledge, technique and manipulation," that is: beyond the sphere of the (desire or search for the) result (Kangas x).

The ethics of deconstruction as resultless thinking is neither thinkable without the

asymmetrical structure of undecidability, nor without the performative threefold danger of its writings. What drives, calls, or appeals deconstruction to this structure and this performativity? Wonder was typically thought symmetrically: the tension between promise and toil, the "fear and blessedness" of thinking as searching. Does the threefold attunement of affirmative anxious delight displace the fear and blessedness of wonder? Is there a name for this committed, joyous anguish that seems to attune deconstruction's exigency, or is there an even further impulse driving deconstruction to it? Or would this question only bring us back to the "old names," like justice or responsibility, which these attunements were paradoxically meant to clarify in the first place? Would that have been – a result?

## disclosure statement

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## notes

1 To objections to the characterization of deconstruction as a form of "thinking" here, I would refer Derrida's expression of the "thought" of the trace in *Of Grammatology* (93), or to Derrida's distinction of a "deconstructive thinking" that does not belong to "philosophy" (*Who's Afraid of Philosophy?* 13).

2 Derrida possibly engaged with skepticism in the seminar "L'Ironie, le Doute, et la Question" that he taught in 1963–64 at the Sorbonne, but the lecture notes to this course are as yet unpublished. Bob Plant also identifies Derrida's resistance to "good conscience" as the crux of Derrida's relation to skepticism, but does not sufficiently differentiate deconstructive undecidability from skeptical uncertainty (Plant 137ff.). Cf. de Jong 62ff.

3 Very briefly: responsibility is impossible without but must also exceed sacrifice (Derrida, *Gift of Death*) or calculation (Derrida, "Force of Law"); hospitality, like justice, is impossible without but must also exceed the conditionality of law and right (Derrida, *Of Hospitality*); forgiveness is impossible without but must also exceed the economical reciprocality of the (already) "forgivable" (Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism*), etc.

4 Cf. "The surplus of responsibility of which I was just speaking will never authorize any silence" (Derrida, "'Eating Well'" 286).

5 See Derrida, *Of Spirit* 39ff. For a fuller account of the irreducibility of complicity for Derrida, see de Jong, esp. ch. 9.

6 For Arendt's notion of responsibility, see also Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* 27ff.

7 I have elaborated on this "law of resemblance" at de Jong 51ff. See also the Kierkegaardian indistinguishability of the completion and exhaustion of the search, below.

8 Plato, *Theaetetus* 155d and Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 982b.

9 Kierkegaard shows this most forcefully in his unfinished 1842–43 work *Johannes Climacus, or: De Omnibus Dubitandum Est.*

10 Kierkegaard has formalized this thought as the insight that "the subjective existing thinker […] has just as much of the comic as of the pathetic" (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 74). Hence, a pathos "which excludes the comical is therefore a misunderstanding; it is not pathos at all" (76).

11 Cf. Derrida's discussion of "sense" at "Passions" 16ff.

12 See Arendt, *Life of the Mind* 142ff. and Heidegger, *Basic Questions* 131ff.

13 Kierkegaard comments on this special character of the discourses on imagined occasions in his journals at Pap. VI B 128 and Pap. VI B 140: 231ff., according to Pieter Vos' postscript to Kierkegaard, *Opbouwende toespraken* 520.

14 Arendt stresses "horror" as both related to as well as exceeding Greek "admiring" wonder. Heidegger reconceives wonder not to reject it but to inquire after the essence of wonder (*Basic Questions* 143).

15 Roberts very interestingly approaches deconstruction as confession in the Augustinian sense, but remains tied to the symmetrical model of hesitation: "As a double-writing, deconstruction is

philosophy's confession to/of its other, writing both the necessity and the inevitable failure of philosophy" (492).

16 Cf.: "I have never had a 'fundamental project.' And 'deconstructions,' which I prefer to use in its plural form, has probably never named a project, a method, or a system" (Derrida, "Certain 'Madness'" 285). Cf. also the conceptual solidarity of project, problem, projection, and protection (Derrida, *Aporias* 11ff.); the relation between the "direct, frontal *projective*, that is, thetic or thematic" approach (Derrida, "Passions" 11); and the fundamental motif of "-ject" that binds subject, object, project in Derrida, *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres, and Genius* (49ff.).

17 For an approach that centers ethics around such deconstitution, see Wood.

18 Cf.: "guilt is inherent in responsibility because responsibility is always unequal to itself: one is never responsible enough." And: "this guilt is originary, like original sin. Before any fault is determined, I am guilty inasmuch as I am responsible" (Derrida, *Gift of Death* 51).

19 In the passages following this quotation, Derrida explicitly relates a "less traditional" concept of decision to religious repentance and sin.

20 For an interesting approach that does hold "a certain sorrow, a sorrow that is not only endured but also affirmed" to be crucial to deconstruction, see Jowett 80–93. I do not disagree with Jowett but rather attempt to add a perspective by arguing that sorrow is not the only attunement of the resistance to good conscience.

21 I choose the terms "folded in" because of the etymological reference of the complicit to the fold (*pli*). This ties the reading of Derrida to a large register of the fold (complicit, implicit, explicit, complicated) for which I have no space here. A good starting point is Hobson 67ff.

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