

Derrida's Passion for the (Im)Possible and the Future of Thinking

MICHAEL ROLAND F. HERNANDEZ
ATENEO DE NAGA UNIVERSITY
a_look_at_the_bright_side@yahoo.com

Abstract

In this paper, I claim that Derrida's discourse on the "impossible" inaugurates a thinking of faith and justice separated from the limitations of the metaphysics of presence. Where thinking is brought to the limits of reason and knowledge, it encounters the impossible as the "that-which-cannot-be-thought" and the attempt to reach the impossible through faith is what we can describe as the future of thinking, i.e., a thinking defined by the coming of the impossible which, qua future, brings us face-to-face with its mystery. Confronted by this mystery, the human being can only respond in faith as a demand of justice. In what follows, we will first articulate the possibility of the impossible as the culminating point of Derrida's deconstruction and the call to responsibility that it evokes. Second, we will establish the relation between the call of the impossible and the human subject's faith-response to this call. Third, we will relate this faith-response to the effective transformation of thinking into love and forgiveness as modes of faithful engagement with the call of the impossible to come.

Keywords: Derrida, Heidegger, metaphysics of presence, thinking, *lovence*

Derrida's Discourse on the "Impossible"

Of the many themes *deconstructed* in Jacques Derrida's manifold writings, the talk of the "impossible" seems to occupy the most problematic albeit privileged space from which a holistic understanding of Derrida's project can be glimpsed. This is because the discussion of the impossible has always been hinged upon the difficult if not entirely obscure and absurd language in which Derrida carries out his deconstruction. By understanding the crucial role of the "impossible" in the attempt to make any sense of out of Derrida's work as a whole, it is possible to identify that singular and privileged space from which the deconstruction of ethics, politics, and religion can take place. Derrida's discourses on ethics, politics, and religion have always tended to converge towards the "impossible" as

their common meeting point and on this account, have always *appeared* in the form of highly indeterminate and problematic, if not entirely obscure and absurd discourses. Within Derrida's intention, the "impossible" has always been thought in terms of that which is "unthinkable," "unnameable," or "unpresentable." It is "that which exceeds" the reign or the authority of thought, language, and the metaphysics of presence. For this reason, the impossible can only be approached by a certain kind of faith which, having the impossible as its object, defies the usual logic of the possible based on reason. The possibility of faith is thus opened up in that space ruptured by the "impossible" itself. In this privileged space, the impossible announces itself as that-which-is-to-come to rupture the self-complacency of the present. As that-which-is-to-come, the impossible comes in a manner relative to a horizon of transcendence which comes to us *from* and *as* the future [*avenir*]. Coming *from* the future and *as* the future, the impossible only reveals or realizes itself as the incoming or the invention of the "other." For Derrida, this coincidence of the coming of the impossible with invention of the other is structurally identified with the future coming of justice that can only be addressed in faith. Faith has for its object the impossible and this structural relation is what makes faith as a movement into the future. Faith then only becomes faith in as much as leads us into the future, i.e., towards that future of a justice to come.

In this paper, I claim that Derrida's discourse on the "impossible" inaugurates a thinking of faith and justice separated from the limitations of the metaphysics of presence. Where thinking is brought to the limits of reason and knowledge, it encounters the impossible as the "that-which-cannot-be-thought" and the attempt to reach the impossible through faith is what we can describe as the future of thinking, i.e., a thinking defined by the coming of the impossible which, qua future, brings us face-to-face with its mystery. Confronted by this mystery, the human being can only respond in faith as a demand of justice. In what follows, we will first articulate the possibility of the impossible as the culminating point of Derrida's deconstruction and the call to responsibility that it evokes. Second, we will establish the relation between the call of the impossible and the human subject's faith-response to this call. Third, we will relate this faith-response to the effective transformation of thinking into love and forgiveness as modes of faithful engagement with the call of the impossible to come.

Opening Up the Closure of Totality

The closure of presence occasioned by the traditional understanding of metaphysics constitutes the central object against which Derrida carries out his deconstruction.¹ Following Martin Heidegger's questioning of

¹In his *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999), Simon Critchley engaged himself with an extensive discussion *Suri* | Vol. 2 No. 1 | 2013

temporalization in *Being and Time*² as the “transcendental horizon of the question of being [*Sein*] that must be freed from the traditional metaphysical determination of the present or the now;”³ this closure means that metaphysics has always thought beings (or entities) [*Seiendes*] through the prioritization of presence, i.e., in terms of what is present—being [*Sein*]. This being [*Sein*] is conceived as the ground which gives beings their being, i.e., that which makes them “eks-sist” in order to stand out of nothing. Being [*Sein*] is what brings beings (or entities) to come into presence, i.e., into presencing. Metaphysics in this case, which Heidegger equates with philosophy, has found its culmination in Nietzsche’s metaphysics of the “will-to-power” that insisted on the primacy of the subject and the determination of beings as presence to this subject.⁴ Such determination of presence in terms of the subject’s will-to-power eventually resulted to it (i.e., will-to-power) being constituted as a determination of being [*Sein*] itself to the effect that being’s fundamental striving has been transformed into the desire for control of everything that *is* under the domination of man.⁵ Such metaphysics of the will-to-power represents the culmination of the thinking that seeks to transform the whole realm of beings into the ordered totality of “standing-reserve”⁶ where every being [*Seiend*] is accounted for in terms of what he calls as “machination” [*Machenschaft*]⁷ and in his later writings as “enframing” [*Gestell*].⁸ This presencing of beings [*Seiendes*] before self-consciousness and its will-to-power so that they can be ordered, arranged, and made readily available for utility represents the defining feature of that “completed metaphysics that can be stringently

of the problem of closure in Derrida (see 59-97). In this context, closure comes to signify both a spatial and a temporal sense. Spatially, it has to do with the determination of physical limits within a given finite geography by the establishing of walls or frontiers so as to determine an “area of enclosed space” (ibid., 61-2). Temporally, closure is “always associated with the process or activity of completion” of a given process or state of affairs. In either sense, closure is involved in an economy of circumscription that delimits not only the inside of the closure but also the outside of the closure (ibid., 63).

² See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [*Sein und Zeit*], trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 22 ff.

³ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 139. The book is henceforth cited as SP.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” in *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), section XII, 95. Henceforth OM.

⁵ See Martin Heidegger, “The Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans., intro. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 96-7; See also Lovitt, “Introduction,” op. cit., xxx-xxxi.

⁶ See Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” in *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 339. Henceforth QCT.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 88-9. Henceforth CP.

⁸ See Heidegger, QCT, 323-9.

called ‘technology.’”⁹ Such completed metaphysics, which relies on a specific understanding of presence before the subject as will-to-power, culminates in the reign of the Gigantic [*Das Riesenhafte*] when machination no longer encounters any boundary and beings are rendered solely on terms of their *quantitative* calculability and make-ability.¹⁰

In this vein, Derrida’s deconstruction of totality is basically an attempt to “translate and adapt” to Derrida’s own ends the Heideggerian project of “*Destruktion* (de-struction, or non-negative de-structuring) and *Abbau* (demolition or better, dismantling)”¹¹ so as to effect the questioning of the fundamental concept of presence within ontology or Western metaphysics.¹² How does Derrida accomplish this?

In his early works during the 1960s, Derrida set out to accomplish the deconstruction of presence by strategically considering it within the context of the problem of writing in language. Accordingly, writing i.e., the act of transcribing spoken words into written signs, is traditionally thought within a given system of presence that privileges the priority of spoken word [*phone*] over written language [*gramme*].¹³ This means that being closer to the presence of the subject than writing, speech is able to express and communicate the ideality of meaning with less ambiguity. Such phonocentrism is, in turn, grounded on the *logocentric* view that meaning is more adequately accessible in reference to the self-presence of the author considered as the subject of discourse.¹⁴ The presence of the author is the ground for the intelligibility and communicability of meaning within a given text and is enough to clarify any ambiguity that might arise resulting from the use of language. This reference of meaning to the presence of the subject as conditioning authority, or to a “transcendental signified”¹⁵ (such as *Logos*, Idea, God, Absolute Spirit, etc.), is what Derrida ultimately refers to as the “metaphysics of presence.” For him, the whole western philosophical tradition is characterized by such metaphysics of presence which views being [*Sein*] and all meaning as having always been determined by and reduced to “presence.”¹⁶

⁹ Heidegger, OM, 93.

¹⁰ Heidegger, CP, 61.

¹¹ Critchley, *Ethics of Deconstruction*, 27. In Heidegger’s 1962 lecture *Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), Critchley notes that *Abbau* is presented as a synonym for *Destruktion*, understood as “the progressive removal of the concealing layers that have covered over the first Greek sending of Being as presence (*Anwesenheit*)” (ibid.).

¹² Jacques Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” in *Derrida and Difference*, ed. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1.

¹³ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 7-10. Henceforth OG.

¹⁴ See *ibid.*, 10-15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, 18-24.

Such determination of being [*Sein*] by and reduction of all meaning into presence within the tradition of the metaphysics of presence results to the effective "closure of presence" within an epoch that has witnessed the inscriptions of distinct articulations of difference as conceived by five thinkers.¹⁷ Here, the closure of presence means that metaphysics has given rise to an order or system that effectively privileges presence over absence, being-present over being-nothing, the actual over the possible, such that all meaning and authority has to be reduced to and decided in relation to the sovereign present-subject. Closure serves in this sense as the structural delimitation that organizes a given field towards its completion into a closed finite totality. For Derrida, however, such closure of the totality as a system of presence is continually breached and exceeded by that which is delimited *as* the outside of closure. Within philosophy and science, the system of finite totality is continually breached by a "movement of infinitization" and exceeded by "undecidable elements" whose truths cannot be demonstrated nor refuted within those given systems of totality.¹⁸ The "structural impossibility of closure" is thus eventually underlined by the relation of what is delimited inside the closure [*cloture*] to what has been delimited outside [as the *outré-cloture*].¹⁹ Philosophy in this context, defined in relation to an "infinite opening to the truth,"²⁰ i.e., to an infinite idea in the Kantian sense as *telos* of reason, becomes an "infinite opening beyond the closure."²¹

In this vein, Derrida traces the closure of presence to the closure of totality that has always been identified with western metaphysics. Following Heidegger again, he sees that metaphysics "remains [to be] a closure of the totality."²² Here, however, his conception of closure no longer simply designates the idea of a finite totality; he also already poses the added dimension of closure as "the problem of the relations between belonging and the breakthrough."²³ In this regard, this conception of closure within metaphysics happens within the double bind of both belonging to a given structural system, i.e., philosophy or metaphysics, and of the impossibility of remaining solely within the limits of such system. In his landmark essay on Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida illustrates this problem of closure by describing the double bind in which Levinas finds himself in

¹⁷ Derrida, SP, 131. Thus Derrida mentions Nietzsche, Saussure, Freud, Levinas, and Heidegger.

¹⁸ See Jacques Derrida, "Genesis and Structure," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 162. This book is henceforth cited as WD.

¹⁹ Critchley, *Ethics of Deconstruction*, 63.

²⁰ Derrida, WD, 160.

²¹ Critchley, *Ethics of Deconstruction*, 64-5.

²² Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in WD, 142.

²³ *Ibid.*, 110.

the project of creating or finding the ethical rupture within the ontological and phenomenological tradition. In order to accomplish the rupture or the interruption of the philosophical tradition, Levinas must renounce the language of presence within which it was inscribed. But he can only effect such a rupture or interruption “by employing the very resources of the tradition that he wishes to overcome: i.e., the language of metaphysics (even an ethical metaphysics) and the discourse of ethics itself.”²⁴

Such experience of the double bind in which Levinas finds himself, i.e., between belonging to tradition and the attempt to achieve a breakthrough beyond the same tradition, leads us to the idea that the closure of presence implies the structural impossibility of remaining solely and going beyond the metaphysical tradition. Such impossibility leads us, in turn, to a situation of undecidability,²⁵ i.e., a situation where Levinas’ ethical project is radically compromised. Such moments of undecidability are what Derrida refers to as *aporias*. *Aporias* are experiences which bring us to the limits of finite human knowing and allow us to recognize what is structurally beyond the possibility of metaphysical thinking. It is an experience of encountering an *impasse* in thinking on account of a threshold that one cannot conceptually cross. Here, one encounters a moment of impossibility/impassibility since thinking is confronted by the possibility of being in a place where “there is no longer any problem,” in a threshold where conceptual representation of objects no longer holds.²⁶ Nevertheless, such impossibility/impassibility, while it amazes us and paralyzes our thinking, is something that calls us to respond.²⁷ To encounter an *aporia* in an impossible crossing, of going beyond the threshold of what cannot be crossed, is to find oneself as called forth by a duty, a command or “a demand to which we are captive.”²⁸

For Derrida, there is a way out of the undecidability or the moment of *aporia* occasioned by the problem of closure and thus, the possibility of restoring Levinas’ original ethical project. This way out of the *impasse* is occasioned structurally first, by the relation of what is delimited within closure to “that which exceeds” the closure of the totality of presence;

²⁴ Critchley, *Ethics of Deconstruction*, 69.

²⁵ A situation of undecidability is an endless, open-ended or indeterminable moment when one is at a loss about what to say or uncertain about the truth regarding which of several ways one must go. Here, one comes to a point of indecision because one’s knowledge of the situation tends towards opposite inclinations and the usual logic of cause and effect, premises and conclusion is suspended. One simply cannot proceed and is hence undecided because one’s knowledge is inadequate as basis for action.

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 12.

²⁷ See Agustin Martin Rodriguez, “Rethinking What Comes to Presence: What Heidegger Saw and the To Come” (Manila: COMIUCAP World Congress, 2008), 8-9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

second, by the call that comes from the “other” that exceeds the totality; and third, by the response of the person who is called forth through a faith that goes beyond the metaphysics of presence and opens oneself towards the future. This openness towards the future is the defining gesture out of the closure of presence and is expressed in one’s willingness to respond in faith, and as a matter of justice, to the call of duty that comes from the other to come [*à venir*]. To get out of the undecidability of the closure is to move towards the future that recognizes the opening provided by the excess of the other closure which comes to us through the “trace” of the other. Such trace is underlined by the economy of *différance* of which, hitherto, we have differed and deferred the discussion. Here, the theme of trace as *différance*, or of *différance* as trace, is what “constitutes the possibility of an exit beyond the closure of metaphysics.”²⁹ The trace is what transgresses the closure and “indicates a way out of it”³⁰ leaving “scars” of that irreducible alterity or exteriority that continuously disturbs the closure of totality.³¹

***Différance* and the Deconstruction of Presence**

On this account, Derrida’s deconstruction of presence takes place as a reading of the metaphysical tradition as a *logocentric* text which exposes itself to its own flaws as a result of an alterity which the text is unable to reduce or expel.³² This alterity or exteriority is what exceeds the closure of the totality of presence and creates the fissures which open up the logocentric text to regions of meaning no longer contained within the system ordained by presence, but one already determined as an effect of *différance*. In his famous eponymous essay, Derrida declares that the thought of *différance* is what inscribes presence always and already as “a determination and effect within a system no longer that of presence but of *différance*.”³³ As such, the privilege accorded to self-consciousness as self-presence of the subject that effects the onto-theological determination of being can no longer hold as the self-complacent *arche* of metaphysical thought. Within the system of *différance*, the traditional metaphysical opposition between activity and passivity, cause and effect, indetermination and determination is no longer allowed and consequently, all that is conceived on the basis of this metaphysics of presence, such as the metaphysical language of being, subject, substance, and even the idea of consciousness as self-presence.³⁴

The deconstruction of presence determined and effected by *différance* thus displaces presence within a system in which it becomes “historically

²⁹ Derrida, MP, 172.

³⁰ Ibid., 12.

³¹ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 57.

³² Ibid., 77.

³³ Derrida, SP, 147.

³⁴ Ibid., 142.

constituted,” together with language or any system of reference in general, “as a fabric of differences.”³⁵ Once presence has been displaced through *différance*, it now becomes possible to conceive of that which is beyond presence. By considering *différance* as trace, Derrida thinks that it is now possible to perform the required transgression of presence without returning back to the delimitation occasioned by the metaphysical closure of presence. In order to effect this transgression, the present must be conceived as constituted by a differential network of traces. Accordingly, the present is constituted by the trace through the movement which allows the present to constitute itself as such by relating itself to what it is not, to what is absolutely it is not, i.e., with both the past and the future not even considered as a modified present. In this movement of temporal constitution, the present must also be able to separate itself from what it is not and to establish itself as a space that can be separated from other spaces in a movement of spacing. Such process of spatial differentiation, however, does not only separate the present as space from other spaces but more importantly divides the present in itself—the present also divides itself within itself—since it is only through this division of the present that it can constitute itself as space.³⁶ Such process, whereby the present dynamically divides and constitutes itself, is what Derrida doubly calls as *spacing-temporalizing*: “time’s becoming spatial or space’s becoming temporal.”³⁷ In this spatio-temporal interval, the movement of *différance* as both spacing and temporalizing becomes conjoined in the *deconstructive* constitution of the present. On this account, the present becomes an effect of differences and consequently, a product of the play or movement of *différance* which serves as the ground or source of differences.³⁸ The present thus becomes an effect of *différance* thought both as spacing and temporalizing: spacing as regards the differences and temporalizing with regard to the deferral of presence.

Within the context of the problem of sign and writing, the constitution of the present as primordial and irreducibly nonsimple by the movement of *différance* results to the effective neutralization of the active voice within the language context-system. To neutralize the active voice is to emphasize the character of *différance* as being “undecided” between what is active and passive. “[W]hat is designated by *différance* is neither simply active nor simply passive” but announces “something like a middle voice;” “an operation which is not an operation” which cannot simply be reduced to the action of a subject or to the passion of an object acted upon.³⁹ Such

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See *ibid.*, 141-2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

neutralization of the active voice is, in effect, the fundamental deferral of presence.

In this context, presence is always to be conceived as a product of *différance*. There can be no presence or self-presence as a kind of silent and intuitive self-consciousness before speech or its signs. Rather, presence is always something fundamentally differed and deferred by *différance* within the language-system. Such deferral of presence affects the whole economy of the sign in terms of its ideal and material aspects, the signified and the signifier, respectively. Accordingly, the signified is the concept while the signifier refers to either the spoken or the written "image." Now, since the essential function of the sign is that of being "put in place of the thing itself,"⁴⁰ the sign in order to be a sign, must of necessity involve itself in the continual and endless deferral of the presence of the thing of which it is a sign. The problem of signification in this case is concerned with how the sign can announce the present in terms of its absence by taking its place in the realm of possible signification. In the realm of signification, where the sign receives it being from the very movement that makes it differ from other signs, the same movement of signs is what fundamentally "defers the moment of encountering the thing itself" so that we can "lay hold of it, consume or expand it, touch it, see it, [or] have a present intuition of it."⁴¹ It is only on the basis of this deferral of presence, of this *différance* of temporalizing that a sign can be conceived as such. A sign "is conceivable only *on the basis* of the presence that it defers and *in view* of the deferred presence one intends to reappropriate."⁴²

Such classical understanding of the concept of the sign in terms of presence, even if deferred, precludes *différance* from being understood in terms of the sign. *Différance* is what primordially effects the deferral of presence and hence, remains to be a movement beyond presence. As such, *différance* becomes a questioning of the traditional limits of language and a system of thought that has always constrained us by privileging the authority of presence in the onto-theological determination of being and its categories [*ousia*]. In order to free the sign from the constraining effects of presence, Derrida draws upon Saussure's account of the *arbitrary* and *differential* character of the sign so as to ground the claim that "the system of signs is constituted by the differences between the terms, and not by their fullness." Here, signification only becomes possible by virtue of "the network of oppositions that distinguish them and relate them to one another" and not by "the compact force of their cores."⁴³

This application of the principle of difference as the condition for signification results to a view of language described as a "system of

⁴⁰ Ibid., 138.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 139.

differences without positive terms.” Following Saussure, Derrida claims that the signified concept “is never present in itself, in an adequate presence that would refer only to itself.”⁴⁴ “[E]very concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed” in a linguistic chain or system “within which it refers to another and to other concepts, by the systematic play of differences.” This play of differences is not “simply a concept, but the possibility of conceptuality, of the conceptual system and process in general.” This is the reason why Derrida claims that *différance* is “neither a word nor a concept.” It “is not what we represent to ourselves as the calm and present self-referential unity of a concept and sound.”⁴⁵

On this account, it is clear to us how *différance* makes signification possible. Signification and the constitution of the present happen through differences. But these differences are themselves “produced” by *différance*, being “differed” and “deferred” in the process. However, the fundamental deferral of presence in the movement of signification as determined by *différance* results to the problematic deferral of meaning. Having been produced by *différance*, the endless and continuous reference of the differed/deferred signifiers to other signifiers eventually results to the indefinite deferral of meaning. This way, the problem of signification transforms itself into the problematization of meaning: the deferral of presence translates itself into a continuously and endlessly deferred meaning as something that never arrives. As such, one is merely inscribed within the play of signifiers in a given language-system that does not eventually give the meaning, the signified, the concept. Here, it might be claimed that if there is a problem to which the movement of *différance* in Derrida’s deconstruction of western metaphysics leads, it is the problem of meaning that can never arrive and be given because it is lost and trapped within the differential web of language. How, then, do we think through this?

Tracing a Way Out of Presence

Derrida offers a way out of this difficulty by claiming towards the end of this long and very difficult essay that the deferral of presence occasioned by *différance* must be thought as holding “us in a relation with *what exceeds* (though we necessarily fail to recognize this) the alternative of presence or absence.”⁴⁶

This relation to “what exceeds” is what Derrida recognizes as the relation to that “radical alterity” (e.g., Freud’s unconscious and Levinas’ absolute alterity) which is not only removed from every possible mode of presence but more importantly, is characterized by “delayed, irreducible

⁴⁴Ibid., 140.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid. Italics supplied.

after effects." Here, the "what exceeds" is that which is "taken away in every process of presentation,"⁴⁷ and is thus removed from the grasp of conceptual or representational thought. To insist in the thought of *différance* as beyond presence is to consider it beyond the order of the conceptual since it is precisely the possibility of conceptuality as such. As such, the thought of *différance* is to be beyond thought, in order for it to think that which cannot be thought. *Différance* brings us to the order that is beyond conceptuality so as to bring us face-to-face with the question of "how does one think the unthinkable?"⁴⁸ Here, *différance* effects the deconstructive loosening of our logic and logocentric thinking in order to bring us back again to the experience of *aporia*, as a kind of impasse or stumbling block that challenges our thinking to go beyond the conceptual or representational thinking of metaphysics or philosophy.

Ultimately, Derrida claims that *différance* must be conceived beyond language and beyond thought. Conceived without a name, we must affirm it in the Nietzschean sense of laughter and dance. Only in such affirmation of *différance* as play that we can finally move towards that sense of Heideggerian *hope* which gives us the possibility of looking towards the future. This hope lies in a thinking that goes beyond presence because it de-constructs the closure of the totality of presence. Such thinking may be called post-metaphysical or post-onto-theological since it opens us to what lies beyond ordinary comprehension or knowledge. In Heidegger, such thinking releases us "toward things" [*Die Gellaßenheit zu den Dingen*] and "opens us to mystery" of what comes beyond presence.⁴⁹ It is only when we dare to think in the manner of *différance* that we can hope to subvert the domination brought about by the closure of the totality as it is effected in and by modern technology. This "differential thinking," i.e., thinking in or through *différance*, is what enables man achieve a letting-be that readies him to be claimed by be-ing so that it can say the truth of be-ing.⁵⁰ It is only in this kind of thinking beyond presence, a thinking that opens itself to the future of a mystery that man can hope to be given over and claimed by the enowning [*Ereignis*].

⁴⁷ Ibid., 152.

⁴⁸ See Rodriguez, "Rethinking What Comes to Presence," 1.

⁴⁹ Martin Heidegger, "Memorial Address," in *Discourse on Thinking: A Translation of Gelassenheit*, trans. John Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 54-5.

⁵⁰ See Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 193-242; 194. The word "be-ing" refers to "Being" [*Sein*] that is no longer thought of metaphysically, hence [*Seyn*]. See Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly, "Translator's Foreword," in CP, xxii.

“That Which Exceeds”

Thus far, the thought of *différance* has opened up an avenue for the thinking of “that which exceeds” presence, thought, and language. That which exceeds beyond presence, however, comes relative to the horizon of presence which it opens up. It comes to create an opening within the closure of presence in order to shake the edifice and disturb the self-complacency of the logocentric systems of presence that grounds systems of mastery and authority. As such, that which exceeds comes to call us to respond not in a *present* manner or in a *present* moment but to a beyond that shakes this present; it comes to call us to respond to a beyond-present, i.e., a future to come. This call to respond is a demand to be responsible to a future to come and necessitates an answer that fulfills the conditions of responsibility as a matter of justice.

For Derrida, the thinking of the unthinkable and the unnameable through the opening effected by *différance* is an attempt not only to rethink what is the “unthought” of the whole Western philosophical tradition; rather, it is to point towards that which philosophy is unable to say as “that-which-cannot-be-thought.” Here, what is in question is not an “other” which can eventually be assimilated by philosophy but a “radical alterity” which cannot become and can never be philosophy’s “other” since it is that within which philosophy itself becomes inscribed. This “other” as “radical alterity” is “that which exceeds” both thought and philosophy and comes to “rupture” the closure of totality or to “interrupt” the order of the Same. This other, as Levinas has shown, is what calls us to infinite responsibility and demands that we treat it with justice.⁵¹ In that space cleared up by the “irruption” of the other,⁵² it becomes possible to articulate the primacy of the interhuman relationship which is “an irreducible structure upon which all the other structures rest.”⁵³ Ultimately, this primacy refers to the priority of the ethical as that which disrupts logocentric metaphysics or ontology so as to fundamentally ground ethics as “first philosophy.”⁵⁴

In this way, the opening beyond presence occasioned by *différance* creates the space where the possibility of ethics, and hence, also of politics and religion, becomes inscribed. Here, in this space beyond presence (hence non-space), ethics becomes possible as an answer to the call of the other towards infinite responsibility. But since this responsibility is before

⁵¹ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 79 ff. Henceforth TI.

⁵² Derrida, WD, 151.

⁵³ Levinas, TI, 79.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 304. Our discussion of the Levinasian problematic only goes as far as to consider only the opening in which the space for the possibility of ethics is ruptured (or solicited) by the “other.” We will not go into the intricate problem of presence that Derrida’s critique of Levinas in “Violence and Metaphysics” brings up.

an "other" situated in a future to come [*à venir*], this ethical responsibility is not *in* the present but a responsible movement towards the future, as a kind of waiting for the other. The other is to come, Derrida insists, but it comes in a manner beyond our comprehension, i.e., beyond the thought and language of being and presence. In this way, to move towards the future is to wait for the other to come in the language of "absence" and hence, in an impossible manner. To move towards the future is to wait for something to come as an impossibility; an impossibility that makes deconstruction a desire for the impossible, that makes it a search, a dream, a sigh for "something to come but does not come."⁵⁵ This identification of that which exceeds in terms of the category of the unthinkable, unnameable, and the impossible is why we can characterize deconstruction as an impossible exercise. Since the impossible can only be approached by a certain kind of faith, the transposition of the ethical relation into the category of the impossible is what also opens up the proper space for the possibility of faith where we can address the coming of the other. *Différance* is therefore what leads us to faith.⁵⁶

Faith and *Différance*

The above conclusion makes clear to us the connection between deconstruction and the possibility of faith. Deconstruction is what opens us to faith and this connection goes right into the heart of Derrida's whole ethico-religio-political project. If the impossible is that which moves deconstruction towards the "ethical rupture" or interruption of the present and this impossible can only be properly approached by faith, then ethics is always and already from the start, underlined by the language of the "religious." Ethics for Derrida is already religion,⁵⁷ and this identification also extends to the realm of politics.⁵⁸ As such, this consideration of deconstructive faith constitutes the central determination for characterizing deconstruction as a passion for the impossible. If deconstruction is a passion for the impossible, this is so only because it is a certain kind of faith, which, setting itself against rational knowledge, becomes a certain

⁵⁵ See John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 1-26. Henceforth PT.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁷ See Jacques Derrida, "Tout Autre est Tout Autre," in *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 83-4. Henceforth GD.

⁵⁸ See *ibid.* Derrida also hints at this conclusion when he says that "the return of the religious, whether fundamentalist or not, (...) [is what] overdetermines all questions of nation, State, international law, human rights, etc...." (Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf [New York: Routledge, 1994], 167; henceforth SM).

62 | kind of nonknowledge which Derrida calls as a certain “blindness,”⁵⁹ or as “the passion of non-knowing.”⁶⁰

In order to understand this “faith in the impossible,” it is necessary for us to clarify the structural relation between faith and *différance*. First, *différance* is what leads us to faith. This is possible because *différance* is what opens up the closure of presence for the emergence of the “trace of the impossible.”⁶¹ But in passing through the detour of *différance*, faith subjects itself to the effects of the difference and deferral of presence and meaning. As such, faith becomes possible only as a differed and deferred response: being differed, it is a response that never attains full realization in the present, never static but always moving in a continuous play towards the realization of its object; as deferred, faith becomes a search for the impossible that will never be present, but itself is subject to *différance*. To speak then of faith as subject to the effects of *différance* is to speak of a certain *différance* of faith. Such *différance* of faith is what makes faith structurally as a dynamic movement into the future. Faith is a movement that is not present, i.e., is not contained in the present because its object is the impossible situated in a future to come. Faith is thus that which carries us into the future, providing us with hope towards the future, beyond what we see through knowledge. And since what is beyond knowledge is not possible, that which serves as the object of faith is the impossible.

This brings us to the second point of clarification about “faith in the impossible.” What calls us to faith is the “impossible,” which as the impossible, is structurally located beyond presence as “that which exceeds.”⁶² By being called by the impossible and responding to it, our faith takes the form of an impossible response. The impossibility of faith is due to its having the impossible as its object. Now, since the impossible is that which is unthinkable, unnameable and unrepresentable, it is beyond the realm of thought, language and presence. This makes faith as a response that is beyond knowledge, a kind of non-knowing that enables us to move with passion into the future. Faith is therefore something that impassions us towards the realization of the impossible in a future to come. Faith in the impossible is therefore faith in a future to come when the impossible will come in a manner beyond the limitations of the determinations of presence.

In this vein, faith as a response to the demand of the impossible becomes a surrender, which is not really different from one’s experience of being in love. For Derrida, what is faith in the impossible if not this:

⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 12. Henceforth MB.

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Cinders*, trans. Ned Lukacher (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 75.

⁶¹ See Derrida, SP, 154-6.

⁶² See *ibid.*, 152.

love itself, that is, this infinite renunciation which somehow *surrenders to the impossible* [*se rend à l'impossible*]? To surrender to the other, and this is the impossible, would amount to giving oneself over in going toward the other, to coming toward the other but without crossing the threshold, and to respecting, to loving even the invisibility that keeps the other inaccessible. (...) [A] love without jealousy that would allow the other to be...⁶³

Faith therefore is not some abstract and objectless believing in something because we do not have knowledge of it. Rather it is a singular response aimed at the other, which, though invisible (since we cannot see it through knowledge), remains “no matter what other.”⁶⁴ Faith is faith because it is a singular response to the irreducible singularity of the other, which as such, is something to be respected, “never assimilated to the same,” nor “subsumed under the universal.”⁶⁵ This way, faith as a singular response enables us to save the name of God, i.e., to let God remain as the singular other.

The deprivation should remain at work (thus give up the work) for the (loved) other to remain the other. The other is God, or no matter whom, more precisely, no matter what singularity, as soon as any other is totally other [*tout autre est tout autre*].⁶⁶

In this way, faith as singular response essentially constitutes an answer to that order of ethics that demands “respect for absolute singularity, and not only that of the generality or of the repetition of the same.”⁶⁷ Thus, we see in the movement of faith a passage from the subjection to the “wholly and infinite other” towards the sphere of ethical responsibility. Faith is respect for singularity and hence, it is responsibility. But in passing

⁶³ Derrida, ON, 74.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Caputo, PT, 52.

⁶⁶ Derrida, “Whom to Give To,” in ON, 74. Here, caution must be taken in the interpretation of the just cited passage. Derrida does not identity the “impossible other” as God but only stresses the character of singularity that defines the other. God is an “other” but not every other is God. Derrida notes that Levinas is at pains “to distinguish between the infinite alterity of God and the ‘same’ infinite alterity of every human, or of the other in general” in order to separate the concept of the ethical from that of the religious (see Derrida, GD, 84). Whether Levinas succeeds in this or not, like Kierkegaard before him, is still problematic according to Derrida.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

through this detour of singular and absolute responsibility, Derrida is able to identify the absolute other with the name of God.⁶⁸ God as absolutely singular is ultimately the *tout autre*, the wholly other, to which we are bound “by an absolute, unconditional obligation, by an incomparable, nonnegotiable duty.”⁶⁹ This way, we see how religion as responsibility becomes the basis for ethics. Derrida explains:

Religion is responsibility or it is nothing at all. Its history derives its sense entirely from the idea of a *passage* to responsibility. Such a passage involves traversing or enduring the test by means of which the ethical conscience will be delivered of the demonic, the mystagogic and the enthusiastic, of the initiatory and the esoteric. In the authentic sense of the word, religion comes into being the moment that experience of responsibility extracts itself from that form of secrecy called demonic mystery.⁷⁰

The advent of responsibility constitutes that founding moment when religion and ethics are founded by an act of faith. Thus, faith in the impossible other is basically a response that grounds an “ought,” an answer to the call of the other in justice. In this case, ethics can never ground the “ought” since it is divorced from the possibility of absolute responsibility that is based on the singularity of the other. Ethics is concerned with the general or what is universal and it is only religion, hence faith, that can enable us to address the demand for justice by the singularity of the wholly other which is ultimately the singularity of God.⁷¹ Faith is thus a response that moves us towards justice. It is this movement of responsibility towards justice that ultimately defines what faith is all about. Justice is *that toward which faith* leads to and its realization is the guarantee of the authenticity of one’s faith. This clarification constitutes the last step in the explanation of “faith in the impossible” but one that finally bridges the passage from religion towards ethics and politics.

Faith towards Justice

Thus far, we have intimated towards the understanding of faith within the proper sphere of religion. Faith is contrasted against knowledge because it is a certain form of nonknowing, a kind of blindness, or as the passion of unknowing. Because of this structural separation from

⁶⁸ Ibid., 66.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 67.

⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Secrets of European Responsibility,” in GD, 2-3.

⁷¹ Ibid., 60-1.

knowledge, faith is seen as a blind movement, *a la Abraham*, that has for its object the impossible as unthinkable or beyond knowledge.⁷² Now, since the impossible must be addressed in justice, i.e., with respect for its singularity, faith becomes a movement towards the future realization of justice. Justice is the “that toward which” faith leads to and as such, is *structurally* related to this justice as its future, i.e., as its future realization which is eventually “impossible.” In this case, faith in the impossible therefore means that it is a faith towards justice; a movement towards the future of an impossible justice to come.

On this account, the impossible must be addressed with a radical responsibility that goes beyond mere knowledge. This is the reason why faith is something that cannot be limited to what we see or know. Rather, it demands a certain “structural blindness” in order for it to be called faith. Faith, in order to be faith, is not knowledge. This makes deconstruction as a kind of an indeterminable faith whose essence *par excellence* is that it “can only ever believe in the unbelievable.”⁷³ Faith in the impossible is something that pushes us beyond the present and the sphere of the same towards the attainment of an impossible justice in the future. Deconstruction then is a kind of faith that is always impassioned by a certain justice to come. In what follows, we will see how Derrida's conception of justice is ultimately underlined by his understanding of the “impossible” and for this reason has a necessary structural relation to the future as the non-horizon for the coming of the “messianic,” which, for Derrida, is a universal structure inherent in all experience.

The Impossible and the Future of Thinking

If what lies at the heart of deconstruction therefore has always been a search for the impossible and the impossible is what calls us to faith making us open to the future coming of the holy as the unforeseeable messiah in its absolute alterity, then the impossible is what ultimately defines the future of thinking. By recognizing the limits beyond which reason cannot anymore proceed, the future of thinking lies in the attempt to reach the impossible, from its *present* condition, towards the future where it becomes transformed into faith. How is this possible?

Here, it is instructive to recall the Heideggerian distinction between calculative and meditative thinking.⁷⁴ Calculative thinking is representational thinking and illustrates the essential character of both science and philosophy/metaphysics. It is the kind of thinking that

⁷² Jacques Derrida, *Points . . . Interviews, 1974-94*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, et.al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 147-8.

⁷³ Derrida, SM, 143.

⁷⁴ See Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 46.

dominates and manipulates in the reign of the technological where the world is viewed as mere standing-reserve and the endless calculation of economic possibilities is given the only priority in the reign of the Gigantic.

In contrast, meditative thinking is non-representational and non-conceptual. Here, the fact that it claims to have no object at all provokes man to adopt a serene and welcoming stance to the impossible as “that-which-is-to-come.” This kind of thinking is what we can claim to go beyond presence in our attempt to describe the future of thinking. In the end of philosophy or in the age of that completed metaphysics, where nihilism has insidiously crept to erect its haunted halls, man’s only hope lies in the coming of the impossible in the event of being which can only come from the future. Man can therefore prepare himself only up to a certain extent and he might do everything in his power to receive the impossible; but unless the holy comes in a manner that is beyond all horizon of expectation or foreseeability, man is ultimately powerless to effect his own salvation.

What remains therefore as the future of thinking is the transformation of our patient and meditative open waiting for the impossible into the experience of faith that is beyond the categories and illusions of all our knowledge. This faith which defines the future of thinking is that which eschews all effort to master the coming of the unforeseen impossible. It is therefore a faith which we know nothing about (in the sense of established religions) because it absolutely abandons us to the monstrosity of a future that we cannot in any way control. In the experience of this absolute faith, *a la Abraham*, it becomes possible for the impossible to come in its absolute alterity, without objectification and with infinite respect. Thus, in the spirit of Heidegger’s claim that “Only a God can save us,”⁷⁵ we must recognize that it is only be-ing [*Sein*] itself that can only grant us its [be-ing] own truth. This means that the faith can only be faith when it is given to us from the call coming from the impossible itself, i.e., when the other [God or the messiah] would have come to us beyond the limitations of the totalization of presence.

With a faith that patiently waits for the salvation coming from the unforeseeable and the unknown god, the future of thinking lies in that “effortless effort” or [in Heidegger’s] “willingly renouncing willing”⁷⁶ to receive things as they are in themselves. Thus, it lets us move from that thinking captive to the calculative scheme that treats the world as mere standing-reserve or fuel to the world’s endless machination towards that attitude of openness to the mystery and releasement toward things⁷⁷ that welcome the impossible which is to come.

⁷⁵ Martin Heidegger, “*Der Spiegel Interview*” (May 31 1976), in *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism*, ed. Gunther Neske and Emil Kettering (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 41-66.

⁷⁶ Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, 59.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

By going beyond the hopelessness of a thinking ensnared by the totalitarianism and violence of metaphysics, Derrida has found a way to think the future of thinking by emphasizing that necessity of a faith-response to the impossible good to come in terms of that *just* relationship with the other that is beyond all experience of violence. This experience of non-violence is based on that “irreducible promise” of a justice to come and of “the relation to the other as essentially non-instrumental.”⁷⁸ But just as Derrida’s messianic conception of justice is not utopian—for it is an experience which takes place in the here and now⁷⁹—this dream of a non-violent relation with the other “is not the dream of a beatifically pacific relation,” but an experience possible in what Derrida calls as a “friendship perhaps unthinkable today and unthought within the historical determination of friendship in the West.” He explains that

This is a friendship, what I sometimes call an *aimance*, that excludes violence, a non-appropriative relation to the other that occurs without violence and on the basis of which all violence detaches itself and is determined.⁸⁰

The future of thinking lies in this experience of *aimance* or (in English) *lovence*, i.e., that loving relation to the other that goes beyond the totalitarianism of the self-as-subject. The future of thinking therefore lies in that shattering of the egoism of the self beyond the violence and hegemony of the prestigious power of the present. It is in this future where the thinking of the beyond, of “that which exceeds” as the impossible, finds its fullest expression in the re-inscription of the self’s absolute responsibility for the other in a time when justice will have come, when the other will have been given its rightful place.

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⁷⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism,” in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge, 1996), 83.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

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