

a theory of the university

a deconstructive approach

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Abstract

It is a truism that the university is a cultural institution. It is where things - and theories underlying those things - are learned, where the principles and generalities regarding fields of study are disseminated, where the heights of learning are scaled from the simple to the complex. Insofar as it produces academicians, and graduates, the university is the bridge for the transition from being a student to being a professional, if one sticks to conventional terminology. More importantly, insofar as its task is not merely to enumerate data but to span the breadth of disciplines and link them to produce coherent accounts and systems within and across the various fields of study, the university can be understood as a bridge, as an institution with a linking function - to link the stages of the lives of those that attend it; and to link the theories of its disciplines to one another. This framework of understanding the academe, that is, the university as a bridge, is based on a more fundamental discussion - and fundamental in more ways than one - of a ground. Bridges are not grounds, they are themselves built on foundations; bridges are transition places, much like the ground floor of any building is built upon an underlying ground. To talk of bridges is to talk of structure, foundation, the space which it spans, and ultimately why it is built there.

Keywords

Jacques Derrida, university education, deconstruction, bridges



Introduction

It is a truism that the university is a cultural institution. It is where things – and theories underlying those things – are learned, where the principles and generalities regarding fields of study are disseminated, where the heights of learning are scaled from the simple to the complex. Insofar as it produces academicians, and graduates, the university is the bridge for the transition from being a student to being a professional, if one sticks to conventional terminology. More importantly, insofar as its task is not merely to enumerate data but to span the breadth of disciplines and link them to produce coherent accounts and systems within and across the various fields of study, the university can be understood as a bridge, as an institution with a linking function – to link the stages of the lives of those that attend it; and to link the theories of its disciplines to one another. This framework of understanding the academe, that is, the university as a bridge, is based on a more fundamental discussion – and fundamental in more ways than one – of a ground. Bridges are not grounds, they are themselves built on foundations; bridges are transition places, much like the ground floor of any building is built upon an underlying ground. To talk of bridges is to talk of structure, foundation, the space which it spans, and ultimately why it is built there.

Following this metaphor, the university needs a ground upon which its reason for being needs to be built, for its linking function to be realized. The specific philosophy of the university (*i.e.*, its mission-vision, objective) – and more importantly, philosophy as a discipline, provides such a ground. It is particularly in the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) where a discussion of the latter is done. For Derrida, a more fundamental aspect of the university is a *theory* of the university. Therefore, a deconstructive analysis of the value of both the university and of philosophy takes place in each other's realms. This is mirrored in, and justified by, the process within deconstruction itself – the process of realizing the porousness of borders regarding function and identity, in this case, that of the university and of philosophy, *i.e.*, the philosophy of the university and philosophy in the university. In other words, philosophy is that which grounds the university – for the former provides the latter its ends; and, by reciprocal implication, the university is the space and agency which grants philosophy the proliferation of the various perspectives it disseminates, always opening it to horizons where it reaches quite beyond its own ground. What is thus established within this deconstructive approach to the value of both is a permanent impermanence, an understanding of the linking functions of both philosophy and the university as stretching over an abyss, a non-ground, where the university and its philosophy must reside, in order to fulfill themselves as bridges. This is precisely where the relevance of deconstruction lies.

A discussion of philosophy and of the university and the place of one in the other deserves a lengthier, more nuanced presentation in terms of the history and the development of both than this paper is equipped to handle. As such, the paper will focus on giving a fundamental, deconstructive approach to the reciprocal value of philosophy and the university, in the most general terms. To begin,

Beware of the abysses and the gorges, but also of the bridges and the barriers. Beware of what opens the university to the outside and the bottomless, but also of what, closing it in on itself would create only an illusion of closure, would make the university available to any sort of interest, or else render it perfectly useless. Beware of ends; but what would a university be without ends?¹

In a move that lands us uncomfortably in the realm of paradoxes, Derrida shows that both the university and philosophy, insofar as they are systems, are beset by the same desire: the desire for complete self-enclosure. By the same movement, and characteristic of Derrida and any deconstruction, he denies the possibility of the enclosure of either, and again uncomfortably exposes us to another aporia, an undecidability, a function and place that characterizes both but resists defining either in any final terms, with ample warning of the dangers that lie within, the possibility of their self-enclosure and without, the possibility of their groundlessness.

The university, as stated, is foremost an institution. Moreover, it is an institution "ruled by an Idea in the Kantian sense, the idea of a totality of the teachable."² Briefly, it is based on the rule of reason, as projecting towards an infinite progress. As an institution, it is built on memory, as well as vision for the future.³ As such, its ends, its vision, is pedagogical practice, geared towards the dissemination of truth and knowledge. As a pedagogical institution, it is the site of the formation of human beings and of values. The "totality of the teachable" reaches into the very heart of the institution of the university itself, that is, it speaks of the philosophy underpinning the foundation of the university. Hence the question, "What would a university be without ends?"

This question is as relevant – if not more – to us as it has been since the modern conception of the organization of the university. It is in this question that the university, and philosophy, coincide, and Derrida argues, "A university is always a construction of

¹ Jacques Derrida, "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils," *Diacritics* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1983), 19.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

³ Jacques Derrida, *Ethics, Institutions, and the Right to Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Peter Pericles Trifonas (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 72.

philosophy."⁴ The foundation of the university requires philosophical reflection and reflexivity:

Just as the university needs to be founded, erected, instituted on solid terrain, it needs to appeal to philosophy in order to found itself – to establish itself on a firm footing. It needs a theory of the university.⁵

Philosophy is that which provides the ground for the foundation of an institution. More specifically, in an academic institution like the university,

Philosophy has a responsibility to straddle the various intellectual concerns within the university *and* to provide an overarching view of them. Philosophy has a responsibility to provide a set of views on literature, the arts, science, the individual, the society... [I]t also has its reasons for looking in on the university, for its concerns about the well-being of the university with all its fields and domains.⁶

This straddling and overarching are the functions and place of philosophy in the university – functions that cannot be reduced to utilitarian ends. By extension, if the university is to be relevant, it must breach the space between the memory of its foundation and the ends to which it is geared. The university's reflexivity occurs in the realm of its own institution, which is philosophical to its very foundation.

As such, it is no less relevant to note the warning placed before the question. "Beware of ends." Relevant, and uncomfortable. This notwithstanding, it is in deconstruction that we find relevance to the theorizing of the university, for several reasons.

Deconstruction is always concerned with systems, and their systematicity. It accounts for the ongoing mutations and mutability of institutions, as they are grounded on a logic that seeks to overthrow or expatriate that which is necessary for their foundation and function. Properly qualified, deconstruction therefore can be understood as an *arche-system* that resists a final systematizing, inasmuch as it exposes systems and institutions to the limit of their very foundation and grounding, which is implicative of necessary alterity. To put it in more specific terms, in relation to the relevance of a philosophy of the university, first:

⁴ Ibid., 73.

⁵ Hugh J. Silverman, "Philosophy Has Its Reasons..." *The Texts of Jacques Derrida: Deconstruction and Philosophy*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 28.

⁶ Ibid., 31.

Deconstruction, in questioning the ground of institutions and the reason of their institutionality, engages the real-world effects produced by the performative force of epistemological discourses, and their responsibility as instances of founding and therefore of foundation.⁷

The university is charged with the philosophical task of looking at its own effects, and causes for those effects – as well as justifying the desirability of both. It does not only produce academicians whose works only affect books, journals and more often than not other academicians, but it produces citizens of societies, whose actions – political, economic, social, human – have consequences that reach farther than books or journals, although the values and principles these actions stem from are from books and journals.

Second, following an address to the UNESCO in the early 1990's, where Derrida observes that philosophy is suffering from the pragmatism of most funding agencies⁸ and hence is deeply reflective of the society as becoming more profit-oriented,

Against the tide of transforming universities into instruments of economic and political propaganda, the deconstructive task of the university, as Derrida would remind us, is to provide open alternatives to profiteering schemes in the educational system and in the social structure. The university must practice self-criticism in order for it to transform itself into a new domain of free discursive and active space.⁹

This is perhaps one of the “ends” that the Derrida asks of us to be wary of: the enclosure of the university as defined for producing nothing more than marketable individuals. There is the susceptibility of the university to such a closure. Also, the increasing technocratic and technological advancements of our age have made the university a cosmopolitical structure, which is another form of closure, bound by *centrism*s of every kind.¹⁰ The university can, upon this closure, be susceptible to the “ruses of end-orienting reason, the paths by which apparently disinterested research can find itself indirectly reappropriated, reinvested, by programs of all sorts.”¹¹ It is one thing to aim for graduates with real economic prospects after a romp through the stage, and quite

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Ethics*, 67.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and interviews, 1971-2001*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 230.

⁹ Jeffrey M Centeno, “The Right to Philosophy and the Challenge of Globalization,” a lecture delivered at the University of the Philippines-Baguio, 22 September 2006.

¹⁰ See Derrida, *Ethics*. This book is centered around the Kantian idea of philosophy within the university, juxtaposed with the concerns of Euro- and anti- centrism.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 25.

another to define the university by nothing else but the economic success of its alumnae. It is one thing to aim for graduates with political understanding, and quite another to define the university by nothing more than one political agenda. From the other end, it is one thing to aim for graduates with open minds, but quite another to see those open minds spout principles willy-nilly, without discrimination, all with equal weight. Put like this, it becomes clear why the university can be open to stagnation as much as it is to bottomlessness.

Inasmuch as the university is the site for both theory and action, for discourse and activity, and following deconstruction as that which accounts for the contaminatedness of the university with other realms such as economics and politics, the call for self-criticism is as relevant as ever. This is precisely why a deconstructive approach to the university is uncomfortable: it calls on an unceasing reflexivity that spans both the learning space and the time of institutionalization of this space. It makes the university confront its own reasons for being, in terms of what it allows itself to mutate into, considering the social forces that are inextricably bound to it.

This does not undermine the necessity of institutions, as Derrida himself proclaims:

We need philosophical institutions to guarantee the tradition, the transmitting of skills, to learn to read traditional writings which are not immediately accessible; so institutions are necessary.¹²

However, a question of relevance still remains: what, in this widely global age, is the university as an institution? Bennington, in an attempt to present institutions using Derrida's deconstruction as framework, deserves a lengthy citation:

If deconstruction had a goal or a regulating idea, it would be: that something come about, that something happen, that there be some event: an "institution" ruled according to this Idea (which is not really one, not depending at all on a projection to infinity) ought in some sense to make a void welcome to this event. Such an institution would have to be, on the one hand, autonomous enough to recognize the fundamental alterity that... makes possible and impossible the foundation of an institution in general (autonomous enough to recognize the impossibility of autonomy, then), but, on the other hand, sensitive enough to the event of this alterity to undo itself and reconstitute itself at a very rapid rhythm... In this sense, responsibility is neither on the side of pure truth nor subject to the governmental or technocratic powers that demand that thought submit to the

¹² Jacques Derrida, "Jacques Derrida" in *French Philosophers in Conversation: Levinas, Schneider, Serres, Irigaray, le Doeuff, Derrida*, trans. Raoul Mortley (London: Routledge, 1991), 106-107.

demands of efficiency and utility, but is stretched by, and toward, the coming of the event. In this sense the institution would not be an ivory tower or a tower of Babel, but would allow for dissemination. . . .¹³

That is, the university has always already been open to alterity, and this openness to alterity (that is, to concerns not wholly centered around discursive ones) is itself the reason for its relevance, instability and hence, uncomfotability. The deconstructive approach to the theory of the university forces it, by a reflexive turning "inward," to look on its alterity – where its relevance as an institution lies – and situate itself upon a ground which is not properly, simply, a ground.

If there cannot be a pure concept of the university, if there cannot be a pure and purely rational concept of the university on the inside of the university, it is simply because the university is *founded*. An event of the foundation cannot be simply understood within the logic of that which it founds. Whence the necessity, for a deconstruction, not to abandon the terrain of the University at the very moment at which it is taking responsibility for its most powerful foundations. Whence the necessity not to abandon the terrain to empiricism and therefore to whatever force comes along.¹⁴

As such, the university needs a ground upon which to build itself, and this ground is its philosophy. However, this ground – and grounding – is necessarily an unstable ground, for it to fulfill itself as such, for the dissemination of truth and knowledge to be possible. That is, the philosophy of the university is always oriented towards its "outside" within the movement of its inward reflexivity, in its self-criticism – its criticism of the ideals it holds, or has held, its criticism of its ends as seen in its graduates and academicians. It is deconstruction that accounts for the university's founding, and the alterity escaping this fact, this event, of the foundation. The grounding therefore of the university more likely resembles a bridge than a stable, simple, comfortable ground – and hence the perennial relevance of a theory of the university.

The bridge is a linking function. It brings together elements that are different – at least spatially, if not in kind. . . . The bridge is not a stable ground. It is not a place to stay. Rather a bridge is an *on the way* to another place – a transport or a transition, an interruption of location, passing from an old place to a new one.¹⁵

¹³ Geoffrey Bennington, "Derridabase," in *Jacques Derrida* by Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 264-266.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, "The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils," 7; "L'Age de Hegel," *Qui a peur de la philosophie?* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), 106.

¹⁵ Silverman, "Philosophy Has Its Reasons..." 29.

If any institution is only as good as that which grounds it, then the philosophy grounding any university “may well establish its principle of reason at the limits or borders of the university – where the university defines itself as a system of disciplines and practices in relation to one another.”¹⁶ It is within the linking function of the university and the linking function of the philosophy of the university where the concerns for its own being, and becoming, reside. It is in the theory of the university where it is most susceptible to “turn bridges into towers,”¹⁷ or to enclose and submit itself to the demands of that which is outside it – political, economic, social demands. If the university is to be faithful upon its reason for foundation, then its philosophy must account for both the “inside” and the “outside” of the university, while maintaining its function as a place for dissemination. As such, it is in the academe that is the “ultimate place of critical resistance,”¹⁸ in resisting the very closures that at one time or another define the university and make it resistant to significant change. Hence the apposite metaphor of the bridge, for in this deconstructive approach to a theory of the university there will no longer be the simple binaries of “inside” and “outside,” “identity” and alterity.” The university as an institution, in Derrida, is bound with respect to philosophy, and the deconstruction thereof is

a resistance to the conditions and effects of institutionality [which] must maintain and occupy the discursive form an intractable questioning that always already takes place from within the language practices of the institution but at its utmost periphery.¹⁹

It is by straddling the periphery – the limits, the margins, where the philosophy of the university becomes most relevant. It is always already a place of transition, where alterity is encountered, and openness to this alterity revealed. Deconstruction asks that the university remembers this, every single time. However, this confrontation with alterity is not a program launched; it is not a possibility that is grounded on expectation. For the university to be open to its other, its philosophy is that which precisely takes into consideration the impossibility of an event: an encounter with a truly other that is unexpected but affirmed in relation to the function it has set within its porous borders. Its institutionality is its identity, but as an institution with a linking function it should always look to its own aims, and to its outside environs.

Derrida’s challenge to the university is to maintain this *aporia* of being open enough not to exclude its other, and be philosophically founded enough to maintain its

¹⁶ Ibid., 30.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Derrida, *Negotiations*, 204.

¹⁹ Derrida, *Ethics*, 92.

function amidst the encroachment of economic, technocratic, or political agenda. This challenge is uncomfortable enough without its relevance, but seeing that it is relevant, insofar as the university remains inherently connected with the perfectibility – or a less demanding term, betterment – of human individuals, we end with three citations:

[D]econstruction heralds the impossibility of a (re)teaching of the Self to be open to learning from the alterity of the other. That is, the integrity of deconstruction is tied to its original and ordinary aim of raising the spirit of human perfectibility through its vigilance toward ethical terms of what constitutes a just response to difference and otherness, and the infinite responsibility that comes with this unprovoked and selfless affirmation.²⁰

The philosophy of the university is as ubiquitous as the effects that the university bestows upon its community. In its self-criticism, it

allows us to put things in perspective. That is, while it is our social responsibility to excel in our fields of interest, the same social responsibility urges us to see our achievements within the context of human flourishing, *i.e.*, of human dignity.²¹

And as such, echoing the disseminative function of the university,

Everything that concerns the question and the history of truth, in its relation to the question of the human person, of what is proper to the human person, of human rights, of crimes against humanity, and so forth, all of this must in principle find its space of discussion without condition and without presuppositions, its legitimate space of research and reelaboration, in the University.²²

²⁰ Ibid., 99.

²¹ Centeno, "The Right to Philosophy."

²² Derrida, *A Taste for the Secret*, 25.

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