

UNIVERSALITY AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

UNIVERSALIDADE E DESCONSTRUÇÃO DE IDENTIDADE

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This paper argues that the critique of identitarian thinking to be found in the works of Derrida and Levinas entails, contrary to their frequent portrayal as relativists, a form of universalism. Universality is reconceived as the transcendence of identity as such rather than as an ultimate identity that subsumes all others. Derridean deconstruction is shown to involve a critique of a homogenizing ethnocentrism, whether in the form of a particularistic closed identity or an imperialistic universalization of a particular identity. It is claimed that deconstruction is a quasi-transcendental critique that reveals the disjunctive non-identity within any identity. This makes possible the ethical relation as an opening of identity to the other, which is the singularity of the other person, not another culture or identity. Levinas claims that such an opening is the basis of universality, universality understood in terms of practical ethical relations rather than in terms of ideality. The singularity of the other takes the form of a disjuncture in any given identity. The deconstructive opening up of identity makes possible the unconditionality of an ethical imperative that goes beyond all particular determinate situations and contexts.

Key words: universality, identity, relativism, Derrida, Levinas

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Introduction

The critique of the notion of identity by philosophers of difference, particularly Levinas and Derrida, has been commonly interpreted as entailing the rejection of the homogenizing rationality of the West. In this reading, the Enlightenment ideal of universal Reason is identified with the domestication and incorporation of all otherness into the enclosure of the familiar. The idea of Reason is a universalization of the particular cultural ideals of the West. This kind of false universalism, the universalization of something particular, is the cornerstone of cultural imperialism.

The aim here is to argue that the deconstructive critique of identity is not only a valuable weapon against imperialistic false universalism, but can actually provide the basis for a genuine universalism. This is universality not as the assimilation of all otherness into an all-encompassing totalizing identity, but as a disjuncture and an opening within any particular identity. Here universality is recast as the transcendence of particularity made possible by the disparity of identity to itself. Cultural relativism assumes any culture to be a self-identical whole, whereas a deconstructive universalism would demonstrate that there is no wholly unified culture, since every culture is to a certain extent riven with irreducible and irreconcilable differences. Universality emerges as this transcendental non-identity.

Deconstructing Ethnocentrism

Philosophies of difference have generally been pitched against the universalizing pretensions of Western culture and philosophy, so it would initially appear to be counter-intuitive to interpret them as entailing a new form of universalism. Both Levinas and Derrida criticize traditional Western ontology's identitarian mode of thinking for reducing the other to the same, for repressing the otherness of the other through appropriating and assimilating the other in the form of a reflection and a sample of the same, of the familiar and recognizable. A Derridean deconstructive critique of an identity, of the closed totality of an ideological configuration, aims to reveal the particular strategies of exclusion necessary to the constitution of such an identity. Just as a particular concept is defined by what it is not, which sets off a chain of referrals that can never be arrested in a purely positive meaning, a textual configuration of a particular horizon of meaningfulness works to establish its constitutive limits by excluding or marginalizing certain elements. A national or social group identity is similarly established through

acts of exclusion and marginalization. A deconstructive unraveling of the structuring of identity reveals not only the process of marginalization but also that the marginalized elements are in reality central to the constituted identity, a reality that is hidden and suppressed in the self-presentation of the identity in question.

Derrida uses the term 'supplementarity', among others, to refer to this differentiating process of the constitution and de-constitution of identity. The 'supplement' is an element that takes the form of an inessential addition to something, external to and excluded from its proper nature, which turns out to be integral and essential to what it is excluded from. The term is first used in Derrida's deconstruction of Rousseau's distinction between speech and writing (Derrida 1976). Rousseau puts forward writing as a mere supplementary addition to speech that corrupts the fullness and purity of meaning to be found in the voice, but, upon analysis, his text describes the features of speech in terms of mediated articulation, the very feature of writing that had distinguished it from speech. Thus the features of writing are not a mere external addition to language as speech, but turn out to be essential to speech itself. The logic of supplementarity can be seen at work in the constitution of political identities. Anna Marie Smith provides a historical example of this when she argues that the nationalist ideology at work in a certain imperial power regarded the colonies as merely external appendages to the national identity, whereas in fact colonization and the colonized played an essential role in the constitution of that very national identity as 'an imaginary national space which transcended class and regional differences.' (Smith 1994: 73) The colonies were extrinsic appendages that were intrinsic to the constitution of the national identity of the colonizer.

The upshot of deconstruction is that the purity of identity is a myth and that each identity is always already contaminated by otherness in its very constitution. Universality is a target of the deconstruction of identity insofar as it is a manifestation of an overarching identity, which itself, as with less expansive forms of identity, involves constitutive acts of exclusion which are hidden through its self-presentation as all-inclusive. Such pseudo-universality is the imperialistic false universalization of a particular identity.

For Derrida, the texts constituting what he calls the history of Western metaphysics harbour false claims to an all-encompassing universality. In his essay 'White Mythology' he suggests that the idea of Reason is a universalization of the particular mythology and cultural ideals of the West (Derrida 1982: 213). Derrida often explicitly relates Western metaphysics to cultural

imperialism and ethnocentrism, for example, on the opening page of his programmatic 1967 *magnum opus* *Of Grammatology*, where his project of a sustained deconstruction of logocentrism is framed in terms of a critical reaction to what he describes as ‘the most original and powerful ethnocentrism, in the process of imposing itself on the world’ (Derrida 1976: 3).

The type of universality that is the target of the deconstructive critique of identity, the universality that is a reduction of all otherness to a typology of the same, takes the form of what Derrida calls ‘exemplarity’. In the logic of exemplarity the other is identified as an example, an exemplar, a model, a type, a version of the self or its constitutive specular opposite. In this way the other is domesticated and its radical otherness, its alterity, is neutralized. This remains the case whether the *exemplum* is the original model to be duplicated or the duplicate itself. In his 1992 essay ‘The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe’, exemplarity as the universalization of the particular is described as an inevitable feature of the self-affirmation of any identity. He writes:

The value of universality... must be linked to the value of *exemplarity* that inscribes the universal in the proper body of a singularity, of an idiom or a culture, whether this singularity be individual, social, national, state, federal, confederal or not. Whether it takes a national form or not, a refined, hospitable or aggressively xenophobic form or not, the self-affirmation of an identity always claims to be responding to the call or assignation of the universal. ... No cultural identity presents itself as the opaque body of an untranslatable idiom, but always, on the contrary, as the irreplaceable *inscription* of the universal in the singular, the *unique testimony* to the human essence and to what is proper to man. (Derrida 1992: 72-73)

Thus a transcendental condition of a cultural identity presenting itself is that it also universalize itself. For example, a nationalism that explicitly opposes itself to universality, however particularistic or relativistic it may wish to be, will justify itself with reference to the need for all humans to follow traditions that give them a sense of communal belonging, a strong and binding sense of identity. The other side of the same coin would be a humanist internationalism that explicitly embraces universality, but which in reality affirms as a universal value the features of a particular cultural identity. What unites these two seemingly opposed and exclusive ideologies is that they are both embroiled in an identitarian thinking in which the other is reduced to the same.

Josef Teboho Ansong suggests that these two contrasting cases of the logic of exemplarity can themselves be exemplified with reference to the

work of two political thinkers, Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama (Ansorge 2007), who affirm Western identity from a particularistic and a universalistic perspective respectively. Huntington, in his book *The Clash of Civilizations*, claims that the post-Cold War world consists of a number of civilizations, such as 'Western' or 'Islamic', whose values are often incompatible with each other. He directly argues that the West should strive to protect and conserve its identity rather than affirm universal principles. He writes that westerners should 'accept their civilization as unique not universal and unite to renew and preserve it against challenges from non-Western societies' (Huntington 1997: 21). Members of Western societies are exemplars of a certain determinate identity and others are exemplars of other identities that the West defines itself against. Fukuyama, in his book *The End of History*, claims that Western society, with its liberal democracy bestowing rights on all people, represents a universal *telos* or an ultimate goal that is latent in all human societies. Here the other is represented as an exemplar of the Westerner, but at a different stage in universal history, as an example of what Westerners once were. Both contrasting forms of western self-affirmation reduce the other to an exemplar in a typology that ultimately amounts to a universalizing projection of Western identity itself.

Derridean deconstruction submits to critique the identitarian thinking through which the West sees the world in its own image. An enclosed identity may take a parochial or an imperialistic form, but it is always characterized by an antipathy to unassimilated otherness or difference. Derrida occasionally refers to this state as 'narcissism', the love of that which is the same. Deconstruction opposes all forms of determinate universality, characterizing them as narcissistic projections and totalizations. It thus seems at one level to entail a kind of anti-universalist relativism. This would not be the kind of relativism implied by Huntington's call for the affirmation of civilizational uniqueness or any nationalistic particularism. If a relativism were to be extrapolated from the deconstruction of identity it would be one that enabled an understanding of other cultures in their own terms and not in terms supplied by Western culture. The use of deconstruction in postcolonial theory stems from such an interpretation.

Quasi-transcendental Non-identity

However, understanding a culture in its own terms presumes that the culture in question has a unified and closed identity. Deconstruction applies to

the constitution of identity as such, not just to the particular identity of the West. It is effectively a transcendental critique of identity. Rodolphe Gasché argues that Derrida is a kind of transcendental philosopher, because he establishes the conditions of possibility for the constitution of identity (Gasché 1986). Derridean deconstruction is 'quasi-transcendental', to use a term Derrida himself employs (Derrida 1986: 151-162), because the conditions of possibility of the constitution of identity are at the same time the conditions of its impossibility. The acts of exclusion that form an identity suppress an otherness that is essential to that identity, an otherness which prevents the identity from being fully identical to itself. Thus there is no pure qualitative identity, every such identity is always already contaminated by otherness at its core. However much an identity might present itself as coherent and unified it in any case essentially contains what definitively it is not.

Gasché's interpretation of Derridean deconstruction as a kind of transcendental philosophy is controversial and has been contested by Geoffrey Bennington, among others. Bennington claims that Derrida is not a transcendental philosopher, because he writes texts that explicitly present themselves as singular events of writing (Bennington). The mode of presentation at work in these texts does not involve the systematic setting up of a transcendental schemata, but usually evinces an idiosyncratic discussion or analysis of a particular issue or text. The purpose of such an approach is to attend to the singularity of each case and avoid subsuming it under an ossified structure that applies to all cases. This is despite the fact that as soon as a singular something is talked about it inevitably enters into the universalizing logic of exemplarity. For example, the term 'supplementarity', taken from an analysis of a particular text by Rousseau, becomes one of the terms used to describe an aspect of the constitution of identity in general, a condition of possibility and impossible of identity formation, what Gasché calls a quasi-transcendental 'infrastructure' (Gasché 1986: 208). Whatever is decided regarding the relationship between the singular and the quasi-transcendental aspects of the deconstructive procedure, any qualitative identity submitted to deconstruction will be revealed to be, in its own unique way, incomplete and self-contradictory.

Judith Butler criticizes the quasi-transcendental interpretation of the lack within identity as spuriously ahistorical and thus as politically debilitating (Butler 2000: 12-13). Her specific target is Laclau's use of Lacan's notion of the "bar" that prevents the subject from being fully identical to itself, but her criticism applies equally to the quasi-transcendental version

of the deconstruction of identity. She essentially argues that a theory that postulates incoherence and incompleteness as transcendently (de-)constitutive of identity ends up being a merely descriptive portrayal that leaves any given identitarian structure intact and thus has no political or ethical significance. As an alternative, Butler puts forward a theory of translatability, which owes much to Derrida's own notion of iterability, through which a closed identity can be transcended in a transformative iteration of its elements in other contexts (Butler 2000: 14). This would enable a deconstructive intervention into the formation and transformation of identities that would be ethico-political in that it would attend to the particular historical circumstances in question and not merely depict a universal form under which those circumstances could be subsumed. However, it could be argued that such transformations and interventions are only made possible by a transcendental lack within identity as such, by the fact that no identity can be fully enclosed within itself and fully coherent to itself. Furthermore, the transcendental disparity of identity to itself is not ethically and politically irrelevant; it has substantive implications. It at least entails that no justificatory reference in political discourse can be legitimately made to a cultural or social identity understood as if it is a fully self-identical coherent whole, and that attention should always be paid to the non-identical elements within a supposed identity.

The Opening of Identity to the Other

For Levinas, the transcendence of identity is not only ethically relevant; it is the ethical itself. Levinas's phenomenological critique of identity is one of the principal sources of Derridean deconstruction and his concern with 'the other' has also made him a key point of reference for postcolonial and multiculturalist theory. His notions of 'totality' and 'the Same' refer to a qualitative identity through which everything is experienced as in some way a reflection of the self, or the ideal self of a cultural identity, and through which the other is objectified in the image of this self. He describes such a totality as 'egological' (Levinas 2006: 74), a term that serves as a counterpart to Derrida's notion of an appropriative narcissism. What Levinas terms the 'thematization' of the other is the domestication of the other into an objectified typology of the same through which the other loses its otherness. An encounter with the other as other, as a non-objectified living expressive being and not as a reflection of the same, involves a breach of the confines

of totality in the form of an irruptive dislocation. For Levinas, the archetype of such an encounter is the face-to-face relation, because it is the face of the other that 'undoes the form it presents' (Levinas 1969: 66); the objectified form of the face comes alive when its expressive mannerisms betoken an unthematizable, non-objectifiable, non-classifiable, and non-phenomenalizable radical singularity, unassimilable to any identity or totality.

To *any* identity. It should be clear from this exposition that the Levinasian opening to the other is not an opening to another identity, to another culture, despite the misappropriation of the Levinasian other by cultural theorists. It is an opening to that which eludes *all* identity and identification, what Derrida terms 'radical singularity'. The radically singular and unique cannot be grasped by language and conceptuality, nor can it be presented as a phenomenon, without losing its very singularity, because words, concepts, and representations are the tools of totality in that they universalize the singular into a typology. The singularity in question here is the irreducible uniqueness of personhood, irreducible to any qualities or attributes that would form a categorizable identity. Derrida describes this in terms of the irreducibility of the 'singular "who"' to the 'general "what"' (Derrida 1994: 169). Qualitative identity is a whatness that when attributed to a person involves an objectification of that person. The identity over time of personhood is a non-qualitative merely numerical identity, a singularity or haecceity, which should not be confused with any qualitative identity, such as social, national, or sexual identity. Personhood is qualitatively indeterminate, which makes possible the self-determinability of a free being. This non-phenomenality of singular personhood recalls the Kantian noumenal subject of free moral action, which cannot be phenomenalized without ceasing to be what it is, a subject. For Kant, such a phenomenalization would be an objectification of the subject into the realm of unfree natural mechanical causality. Levinasian totality is a phenomenal realm, what Derrida calls the enclosure of presence, through which the singular other can only be encountered in the form of an unassimilable event that ruptures and dislocates the present totality. The singular other takes the form of a disruption of the unity and coherence of a qualitative identity.

The other is transcendent to any totality, identity, or configuration of phenomenality. What is commonly called "a culture" is a set of phenomenal representations through which the other is presented, but to which the life of the other is not reducible. A different culture is not the other, but is the medium of the other's presentation. This medium is a phenomenal form that amounts to an objectification of the other, a 'thematization' that treats the

other as an object of analysis or discussion and not as the living face that is engaged with in an intersubjective communicative act, an act which would be the only way of encountering the other as other. Levinas writes: 'Form... alienates the exteriority of the other.' (Levinas 1969: 66) The presentation of the other as a representative of a cultural formation alienates or objectifies the other, reducing its otherness to a recognizable type and forestalling any communicative encounter with the other in its radical otherness, its transcendent exteriority to any phenomenal totality or identity. The ethical relation, the relation to the other, is an interpersonal and not an inter-cultural relation.

Despite the emphasis on the singularity of the other, Levinas argues that the communicative encounter in the face-to-face relation provides the basis for a genuine universality; not universality as the ultimate totality, but as the breach of totality and the transcendence of all identity. Language establishes universality not as the ideality of concepts, but as the 'passage from the individual to the general [that] offers things which are mine to the Other' (Levinas 1969: 76). Here universality is an act rather than a state, a communicative act through which identity is exposed to otherness. The commonality that Levinas is here advocating he describes as a 'Multiplicity... posited in... the impossibility of conjoining the I and the non-I in a whole.' (Levinas 1969: 221) This Levinasian universality is not an overarching identitarian totality, but is each time a singular breach of any restricted and exclusionary identity.

Singularity versus Identity

The separability of singularity from identity makes possible human self-determination. The essential indeterminacy of the singular subject means that it is not bound to the given characteristics of a qualitative identity. Derrida refers approvingly to 'irreducible singularities, infinitely different and thereby indifferent to particular difference, to the raging quest for identity' (Derrida 2005: 106). The ferocity of this statement indicates a disapproval of the effects of normative identification on the freedom and uniqueness of living human beings (singularities) and an advocacy of personal (singular) resistance to it. When not restricted to a fixed and given identity imposed from outside, the subject can enter a ceaseless process of identification and re-identification. In his book *Monolingualism of the Other* Derrida advocates a politics that emphasizes the free process of identification rather than the conservation of a given identity (Derrida 1998: 28).

At this point it could be objected that the valorization of singularity as against collective forms of identification is effectively a resort to liberal individualism, an ethnocentric Western cultural ideal imposing itself on the world. However, the ideal of the self-sufficient materially ambitious individual is just as much a case of singularity-suppressing identitarianism as traditional collectivism. The perceived self-realization of the narcissistic competitive individual depends on social recognition, a recognition which amounts to the singularity of the individual being domesticated into a typological exemplar of a Western cultural ego-ideal, an ego-ideal which functions as the model of subjectivity most suited to a particular stage in the development of the capitalist mode of production. The singularity of concern in the ethical relation is always other to any identification, including identification as a self-sufficient individual, and can only be encountered through a disjuncture that immanently opens identity to the non-identical.

Deconstructive Unconditionality

Thus singularity is radically indeterminate, resistant to any homogenizing identification. In his book *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida suggests that a genuine universality itself could be founded on the very indeterminacy of human beings. He refers approvingly to Kojève's understanding of the humanity of humanity as a pure undetermined form, not to be mistaken for any particular determination, any content. He writes: 'There where man, a certain determined concept of man, is finished, there the pure humanity of man, of the *other man* and of man *as other* begins' (Derrida 1994: 74). Instead of the notion of a determinate human nature or essence, which would be the false universalization of some particular characteristics, Derrida is here putting forward a view of the universal as the undetermined.

This endorsement of a Kojèvean arrival of a post-determinate humanity appears to be an end of history thesis, of a sort. Indeed, Kojève's interpretation of Hegel's notion of the end of history was a major influence on Fukuyama's own end of history thesis. However, whatever the formal or rhetorical resemblance to a teleological culmination, the Derridean thesis is explicitly opposed to the realization of a final 'universal' identity. Derrida criticizes Fukuyama's finality and ultimately closed false universality, advocating instead a perpetual openness to the future, not the future as a future presence, but the future as the opening itself, as a disjuncture within the present. The same argument against closure applies to the identitarian

particularism that is the obverse of pseudo-universalism. When Derrida says that ‘nationalisms... have no future’ (Derrida 1994: 169), he means that the ideological affirmation of national identity supports a narcissistic enclosure that suppresses otherness and the event of the new. The arrival of post-identitarian humanity would be the end of history as teleological closure and the beginning of the future as the opening of identity to otherness.

While the dislocation of the hold that identity has over singularity may appear to be the ultimate deconstructive *telos*, the traditional association of teleology with closure prompts Derrida to prefer the terminology of the “promise” of eschatological opening and transcendence. Whatever the terminology, it is the case that deconstruction harbours within it a non-identitarian normative aim and ideal. For Derrida, the opening up of identity is an opening to the ideal of an unconditional ethical demand. In the ‘Afterword’ to his book *Limited Inc*, Derrida links deconstruction to the unconditionality of Kant’s categorical imperative by arguing that the deconstructive opening up of the closed determinacy of a particular context makes possible the emergence of an injunction that transcends every determinate context – not a context-bound hypothetical imperative, but an unconditional imperative that goes beyond all contexts. He writes that unconditionality is not ‘simply present (existent) elsewhere, outside of all context’, but it ‘announces itself as such only in the opening of context’ (Derrida 1988: 152). Context-transcending universality and unconditionality only emerge as the deconstructive disjuncture within the closed totality of a qualitative identity, or as Simon Critchley puts it, commenting on this passage, ‘the unconditioned... arises as the interruption, or non-closure, of any determinate context’ (Critchley 1999: 40). This unconditioned universality as disjuncture is what Étienne Balibar terms ‘ideal universality’, an ideal that he associates with Derridean deconstruction. Balibar claims that institutions which are set up to establish juridical universality could not exist without a ‘latent reference’ to an ‘ideal universality’ that involves an unconditional demand for equality and liberty (Balibar 2002: 164), for the removal of discrimination and coercion, an ‘all-or-nothing’ demand that ‘cannot be relativized, according to historical or cultural conditions’ (Balibar 2002: 165), but which can only occur in the form of the deconstructive negativity of what he calls an ‘insurrection’ within those conditions. The unconditional categorical imperative, whether formulated in terms of universal equality or the infinite value of each person, requires the deconstruction of determinate identitarian cultural conditions.

Conclusion

As the deconstruction of identity applies to any culture that is a hermetic and unified whole, cultural relativism becomes untenable. A supposed multiculturalism that urged the maintenance of the closed unity and identity of various cultures would need to be supplanted by a genuine multiculturalism that urged the inscription of a cosmopolitan opening to alterity within each cultural formation. What is expressed as the right of people to live according their own cultural norms and values is often in reality the right of a certain group of people within a culture to impose a set of norms and values on another group of people who are designated as being members of the same culture. In contrast, the ethical relation is the exposure of identity to the singularity of the other person, irrespective of her identifications.

Contrary to their common image as cultural relativists, the philosophers of difference provide the starting point for a genuine universalism through their critique of identity. It is a genuine universalism, because it involves the transcendence of all particularity and identity. Identitarian universalism which envisages universality as a totalized supra-identity is false in that its constitutive exclusion of otherness prevents it from being universal. Genuine universality is itself nothing but the disjuncture within identity that exposes it to otherness. This exposure is the ethical relation to the singular that cuts through any cultural formation.

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