About three decades ago, Alasdair MacIntyre declared contemporary moral discourse hopelessly burdened by the task of expressing disagreement, while at the same time unable to coherently describe moral practice. Indeed, he encouraged us to imagine the scenario of an unfortunate catastrophe that led to the destruction of our scientific tradition (books, laboratories, instruments, etc). Furthermore, the practice science was also prohibited. After awhile, however, there were brave efforts to reconstruct the fragments of the scientific tradition that survived. Drawing an analogy between the attempts to reconstruct our basic scientific theories in the aftermath of such an unfortunate catastrophe and our moral theorizing today, MacIntyre declared moral language fatally plagued with incommensurability. In other words, moral discourse is a labyrinth of fragments of once coherent moral frameworks that have been uprooted from their interpretative contexts. MacIntyre infers a vital lesson from this exercise:

The hypothesis which I wish to advance is that in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I described. What we posse, if this view is true, are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality.  

The relevance of MacIntyre to this following essay is that he was offering a diagnosis of moral philosophy as practiced in the English speaking world; he was not another irrational French poststructuralist philosopher out to dethrone morality. But there is an even more urgent message that we can extract from MacIntyre’s view. MacIntyre was also questioning the inadequate state of our historicist consciousness, which is to say that, by emphasizing the merits of decontextualizing, we have succeeded in rendering moral discourse unintelligible. I want to argue that a similar historical blindness has led many to misread the contemporary moral scene.

This polemical essay will focus on the question of ethics through a critical philosophical study of emotivism and deconstruction. Many thinkers have charged that deconstruction courts moral relativism, skepticism and nihilism to

the extent that deconstruction identifies ethics as a prime candidate of corrosive
critique. Consequently, deconstruction, as described by these critics, is ethically
impaired. Against this ill-conceived view, I will be arguing the case for
deconstruction as being ethically engaged. Poststructuralism’s uncompromising
engagement in ethics is representative of the thinking of such philosophers as
Levinas, Derrida and Lyotard, to name but a few. Indeed, this turn to ethics
emerges from directing philosophical reflection on the importance of
responsibility for the other. On the other hand, I will demonstrate the accuracy
of leveling charges of ethical relativism and nihilism against the emotivism of
Ayer, for it is Ayer who is the philosophical enemy of ethics due to his
enthusiastic defense of logical positivism, which rendered ethics cognitively
defunct. My strategy in this essay is as follows: in section one, I will offer a
critical discussion of Ayer’s logical positivism and its implications for ethical
discourse; section two will focus on the encounter between analytic ethics and
poststructuralism; section three will provide a discussion of the relationship
between deconstruction and ethics; section four offers an examination of
Derrida’s conception of deconstruction as ethics and, finally, section five will
focus on Lyotard’s poststructuralist ethics.

I: Ayer’s Logical Positivism and Ethics

Let us first briefly examine some of the main elements of logical positivism or
logical empiricism as advanced by A. J. Ayer. Logical positivism, within
philosophy, presents itself primarily as a method of philosophical analysis, as
well as being content neutral. To the extent that it declares itself
methodologically committed, logical positivism seeks a methodological
reconstruction of philosophy through the utilization of advanced formal logical
analysis characteristic of the symbolic logic pioneered by Frege and Russell. Any
issue falling outside of the scope of logical analysis, as determined by the
methods of symbolic logic, is to be declared philosophically illegitimate. The
obvious implication is that logical positivism segregates the philosophical
respectable, from what is philosophically corrosive.

Since I will be using Ayer as the paradigmatic logical empiricist, a
discussion of his views is in order. We can start by acknowledging that Ayer
suggests his principle of verification as the method for determining the truth-
value of a legitimate proposition. A proposition, according to Ayer, is an
assertion that has an objective truth-value. Ayer acknowledges two kinds of
legitimate propositions, that is, propositions that make legitimate truth claims:
(1) propositions that are true by definition or that depend upon propositions that
are true by definition; and (2) propositions that are empirically verifiable,
meaning that experience will either confirm or disconfirm the propositions in
question. The first category of propositions are called analytic, they are true by
definition, meaning that their truth can be determined merely by an analysis of
the meaning of the terms in the statement. In ordinary language, the statement,
“All bachelors are males” is an example. There are also analytic propositions
whose truth depend upon the conventions of a logical system, as in the
mathematical statement, “Triangles have three sides”. Notice here that the
deciding factors in classifying these statements as analytic is the method of
determining their meaning or truth.

The second class of philosophically legitimate statements is empirical
statements or observational statements. We recall that analytic statements are
necessarily true. However, empirical statements are contingently true or false,
and, unlike analytical statements, we determine the truth-value of an empirical
statement through observation. If someone says, “The coffee is hot,” we can
determine the true value of this statement by measuring the temperature of the
coffee through some reliable process. In the case of historical statement we can
determine whether the statement is true or false by consulting historical records.

Again, Ayer claims that the only meaningful statements are analytic
statements (true by definition) and empirical statements (confirm by sense
experience). If a statement is neither analytic nor empirical, then it is
meaningless, for we cannot determine its truth-value either by analysis or
through observation. Let us now examine the implications of Ayer’s position for
morality.

Ayer’s criterion of meaningfully yields the following results when applied
to moral statements. We start with the assumption that in order for a moral
statement to be meaningful, it must be either (1) capable of empirical verification,
or (2) it must be true by definition. Moral statements, Ayer maintains, are
neither (1) capable of empirical verification, nor (2) true by definition.
Consequently, moral evaluations, according to Ayer, being neither factual
judgments nor analytic, are cognitively meaningless. Clearly moral statements
are not analytic. The statement (1) “2+2=4” does not share an identical logical
structure with the statement (2) “It is wrong to steal my neighbor’s bicycle.” To
deny (1) is contradictory whereas as (2) can be denied without contradiction. In
denying that moral statements are factual judgments, Ayer is essentially saying
that moral statements are not cognitively meaningful but, rather, are
noncognitive. Furthermore, he denies the view that moral statements are
descriptive of certain kind of facts. For to say that moral statements are
cognitively meaningful entails that we can reason about moral facts. Having
declared moral statements meaningless, Ayer charges that moral propositions
are not genuine. There is a certain conception of morality that emerges from
Ayer’s position. This moral theory is called emotivism. Moral judgments,
according to emotivism, serve purposes that permanently disqualify them from
performing any meaningful cognitive function. They can only: (1) express
feelings and (2) function as commands to other people. The emotivist claim that
a moral judgment is an expression of feeling and not a statement that is literally
true or false can be illustrated as follow:
“X is good” means “Hurrah for X!”
“X is bad” means “Boo on X”.

Ayer, in viewing moral evaluations as emotive and prescriptive, maintains that “They are unverifiable for the same reason as a cry of pain or a word of command is unverifiable—because they do not express genuine propositions.”

Finally, Ayer, while ensnared in the orgasmic rupture of his “ethics” of proper philosophical analysis, further clarifies the emotive component of ethical statements. Ayer distinguishes between (1) expressing an emotion and (2) asserting an emotion, which is a distinction between emotivism and subjectivism. According to emotivism, we express our feelings whereas, according to subjectivism, we report our feelings. To express an emotion is a noncognitive act precisely because there is no factual claim being made and hence the sentence has no truth-value. To assert an emotion, however, is a cognitive act because this act is the reporting a fact about oneself. For example, if Mark says, “I feel cold”, Mark is making a report about his feelings. If Mark is indeed cold, then Mark is saying something that is true, namely that he does feel cold.

Ayer concludes that moral judgments are merely expressions of feelings, not assertions of feelings; in other words, they are hopelessly subjective. And, furthermore, since moral statements are expressions of feelings, they are neither factual assertions nor reports of feelings. According to Ayer:

The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content…. If I say to someone ‘you acted wrongly in stealing that money’, I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said ‘you stole that money’. In adding that this action is wrong I am simply envincing my moral disapproval of it.

Ayer’s position entails some very dramatic consequences. Since moral statements are expressions of feelings, Ayer claims that genuine moral disagreements are impossible precisely because real disputes, namely factual ones, involve asserting facts. Since moral statements do not assert facts, it follows that in uttering a moral statement, one is not making a normative claim nor making a descriptive claim but merely expressing one’s feelings. Hence, there can be no moral disputes between individuals because, in making moral statements, they are merely expressing different feelings and factual disagreement is impossible in this context since we are not dealing with any factual dispute.

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Clearly the preceding brief account of Ayer’s position renders ethics philosophically suspect and practically impossible. Indeed, since the propositions of ethics are neither analytic nor empirical, then, on Ayer’s view, we should simply eliminate ethical discourse from our culture. Although not a substantive philosophical point, it bears noting that Ayer, instead of being denounced as a moral nihilist, was hailed by a generation of philosophers as a philosophical hero, for armed with the precise weapon of logic, Ayer single-handedly slaughtered the bogus monster of ethics. Of course, since Ayer, many analytical philosophers have actively sought a philosophical rehabilitation of ethics. I turn now to briefly examine Todd May’s courageous efforts to achieve two goals: (1) explain why recent projects in analytical ethics have been unsuccessful, and (2) provide a theoretical grounding for a poststructuralist approach to ethics.

II: Analytic Ethics and Poststructuralism

Most recently there has been an effort by Todd May to involve poststructuralist moral theorizing with Anglo-American analytic moral philosophy. May’s hybrid project is to articulate a conception of moral practice, judgment and discourse that can provide poststructuralist ethics with a non-transcendent grounding or rather a holistic defense, hence freeing poststructuralist ethics from charges of moral nihilism, relativism and anarchy. May maintains that there is an admirable perspective at the core of poststructuralist ethics that deserves defending. In identifying poststructuralist thinkers such as Deleuze, Lyotard and Foucault as ethical thinkers, he maintains that they are committed to the principle of antirepresentationalism. Indeed, they oppose moral theorizing in the traditional sense of erecting morality on absolute principles, and they execute this task by invoking antirepresentationalism, the principle that “representing others to themselves—either in who they are in what they want—ought, as much as possible, to be avoided.”

The main task that must to be accomplished in order to render the poststructuralist conception of ethics philosophically acceptable, according to May, is a demonstration “That the discursive practice of morality is historically situated and subject to some of the same political forces as other discursive practices, and yet that it can nevertheless command—at least in its broad outlines—our assent.”

In order to adequately defend the poststructuralist’s take on ethics, May presents a distinction between morality and the aesthetics of living. It is the aesthetics of living that poststructuralist thinkers substitute in place of traditional

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moral theorizing. According to the perspective of the aesthetics of living, “People’s lives can be seen as artistic creations. They may attract or repel us in any number of ways: by their contrasts or their unified composition, by their extremities or their balance, by their depth or their spontaneity, by their complexity or their simplicity.”

In aestheticizing ethics, poststructuralist thinkers, May contends, conceive the aesthetics of living as being consistent with human creative freedom, for it can accommodate differences in styles of existing instead of rigidly condemning styles of existence that allegedly violate universal moral principles of right and wrong. So the real challenge, according to May, is to save poststructuralists from themselves by proving a conception of moral discourse that preserves its normative force without “having to cast anchor in some transcendent ground.”

As previously stated, May inserts himself within the center of analytic moral theorizing to develop his non-transcendental grounding of moral discourse and practice. He first critically engages recent articulations of moral realism. The core goal of moral realism is to assimilate moral practice to scientific practice, which, in turn, entails modeling moral discourse on scientific discourse. This strategy steadfastly maintains that moral discourse is ontologically irreducible. Using science as his model, in roughly the same way as earlier positivists like Ayer, Richard Boyd’s position is that moral discourse, like scientific discourse, is explanatorily efficacious. Explanatory efficacy is a matter of being in a causal relation with the world. Consequently, the explanatory efficacy of moral discourse commits one to the positing of moral entities, and these entities require that we adopt realism regarding them. Boyd’s argument is as follows: “explanatory efficacy is evidence for a causal relation between word and sentence, and second, moral discourse possesses explanatory efficacy and thus should be thought to possess that same causal relation.”

Peter Railton also defends a form moral realism inspired by scientific practice. Whereas Boyd supports that irreducibility of moral discourse, Railton favors a naturalistic reduction of moral terms for, on his view, moral terms describe natural phenomena to the extent that they contribute to an explanation of the world. Again, Railton’s moral realism is motivated by his belief that moral realism “allows us to explain natural phenomena by natural means, if we recognize that those natural means also include such entities as the good for someone or some community.”

May locates a basic fault common to projects of moral realism. They share a common view of language, namely, the requirement that word-world relation must be articulated in terms of revealing something about the nature of truth. May offers a conception of the truth of moral claims that is not dependent upon

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moral assertions corresponding to the world. His position is that “Moral discourse is anchored nowhere but in itself, which is to say that it is without anchor…. To engage in moral discourse is to be engaged by a practice that, though interacting with other practices to form a web of life, remains always irreducible to them.” It is this nontranscendent view of moral practice that partially exonerates poststructuralist thinkers from degrading charges of nihilism and relativism.

As mentioned earlier, May identifies the core of the poststructuralist’s position as the principle of antirepresentationalism. This principle states that: “People ought not, other things being equal, to engage in practices whose effect, among others, is the representation or commendation of certain intentional lives as either intrinsically superior or intrinsically inferior to others…. Rather, it supports the idea that such representing or commending is a morally bad thing and that one should not in general engage in practices to promote it.”

Since May shares the perspective of the poststructuralist and since he also wants, unlike them, to articulate a respectable philosophical defense for the principle of antirepresentation, May endorses multivalue consequentialism. He prefers consequentialism to a virtue-based morality or a rights-based morality because they tend to appeal to the idea of some intentional lives as being intrinsically better than others. To the extent that consequentialism takes effects into consideration in moral deliberation, then it is more compatible with the principle of antirepresentationalism, which favors openness to different kinds of lives, while opposing the idea that certain intentional lives are intrinsically better than others. Briefly stated, instead of reducing consequentialism to maximizing only one good, a position that would render it vulnerable to charges of conflicting with some of our basic moral intuitions, May defines “a moral value as a good to which people ought to have access.” Armed with this conception of moral value, May concludes that a multivalue consequentialism, since it embraces more than one value, would most likely affirm a multiplicity of values. The result, then, would be the possibility for there being more goods to which people can have access, and hence a wider range of different kinds and styles of life.

Finally, May connects his multivalue consequentialism to the aesthetics of living. Here he draws an analogy between art and human lives. Just as “art allows us to see the world in ways we would not have otherwise; or perhaps it allows us to see different worlds in what we call ‘the’ world[,] certain lives … do that also.” There are three implications for approaching our lives in aesthetic terms and not moral ones.

The first implication is freedom from the bondage of morality, specifically, the freedom from attempts to model our lives on the basis of rigid moral rules

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12 May, The Moral Theory of Poststructuralism, pp. 139-140.
and principles that prescribe necessary duties and inescapable obligations. We must free ourselves from the desire to reduce our lives to morality, viewing ourselves merely as subjects of the right, the good or the virtuous, once we appreciate that morality cannot bear the burden of telling us how we should live.

The second freedom to be gained from following the aesthetic of living perspective is the freedom to create ourselves. Instead of viewing ourselves as placed under the jurisdiction of absolute laws or waiting to fulfill a predetermined essence, from an aesthetic point of view, to the extent that “we see [our] lives as objects to be constructed rather than as cogs in a machine whose function is already given[,] [w]e may think of ourselves as a canvas to be filled or a score to be written.”

Finally, the third freedom resulting from the aesthetics of living is the freedom of community construction. This freedom is particularly refreshing, for it offers us the opportunity to remake the world such that we bring into being a beloved community that affirms the improvisational imperative of our collective creative agency. So far I have discussed poststructuralism in general terms. At this time I will examine the ethical force of poststructuralism by pursuing a more detailed examination of a few poststructuralist thinkers.

III: The Origins of Deconstruction as Ethics

It is important to note that we should not attribute to poststructuralist thinkers the common conception of ethics that we find in Kant and other philosophers. Indeed, it is not too much of an exaggeration to claim that with his notion of the teleological suspension of the ethical, Kierkegaard anticipated the origins of the poststructuralist’s approach to ethics. Mark Dooley insightfully summarizes the relevance of Kierkegaard’s view to poststructuralist ethics in his text *The Politics of Exodus: Søren Kierkegaard and the Ethics of Responsibility*. Dooley interprets Kierkegaard’s idea of the suspension of the ethical as an attempt by Kierkegaard to avoid the dogmatism, rigidity and unimaginative closure characteristic of universalistic conceptions of ethics. Dooley writes:

> The aim of the teleological suspension of the ethical is to reinforce the fact that our ethical codes are ineluctably open to revision, since they are the formulations of existing individuals who are always in the process of becoming, forever subject to the vagaries of time and contingency. This does not imply, however, that everything is up for grabs or that our most hallowed and hoary values are rendered worthless. The fundamental objective of Kierkegaard’s teleological suspension is neither to raze everything to the ground nor to let chaos ravage the land; rather, it is a means by which both laws of the state and those fundamental ethical principles that govern our actions are sufficiently loosened up so as to prevent them from

becoming dogmatic, rigid, and insensitive to those whose welfare they are supposed to guarantee and safeguard.\textsuperscript{14}

Although Kierkegaard is not the main focus of this essay, I want to continue this brief commentary on his relation to poststructuralist ethics. His suspension of the ethical is certainly not meant to endorse irresponsibility and immorality. Rather, the attempt is to radically rethink ethics by situating ethics within the temporal flow of existence and not in the static formalism of a transcendent realm. As Dooley states:

\[ \text{[B]y emphasizing existence, becoming, and contingency, or by taking time seriously, he shows that genuine responsibility requires us to keep both the law and our dominant ethical codes open to revision so as to serve the interests of existing individuals and not the reverse. In other words, suspending the ethical is for Kierkegaard a matter of privileging the needs of singularity above those of the universal, of making the universal responsible to the singular. As such, the ‘suspension’ amounts, not to a leveling of the ethical, but to its teleological reconfiguration.}\textsuperscript{15}

Finally, Kierkegaard’s reframing of ethics, as Dooley argues, is decidedly consistent with poststructuralists’ ethical thinking to the extent that Kierkegaard favors an ethics of responsibility, namely, “an obligation to the singular other that overrides one’s obligation to the universality of the law. In other words, responsibility for Kierkegaard and Derrida amounts to a response to the other whose singularity is not guaranteed by the prevailing orthodoxy.”\textsuperscript{16} As I turn to examine detailed examples of poststructuralist ethics, it will become obvious that the emphasis on responsibility and otherness illuminate poststructuralist ethics.

Deconstruction is a philosophy of the other, an ethics that emerges from Levinas’s repudiation of totalizing philosophies that exclude the other, all in the name of some present sameness. Simon Critchley insightfully captures the theoretical thrust of Levinas’s novel conception of ethics. Critchley writes that, “[E]thics is first and foremost a respect for the concrete particularity of the other person in his or her singularity…. Ethics begins as a relation with a singular, other person who calls me into question and then and only then calls me to the universal discourse of reason and justice. Politics begins with ethics.”\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, Derrida maintains that “[t]he Levinas who most interested me at the outset was the philosopher working in phenomenology and posing the question of the ‘other’ to phenomenology.”\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Dooly, \textit{The Politics of Exodus}, p. xix.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Mark Dooley, \textit{The Politics of Exodus}, p. xx.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Jacques Derrida, “Deconstruction and the Other,” in Richard Kearney (ed) \textit{Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers}, p. 108.
\end{itemize}
Levinas reads the history of Western philosophy as an extended ontology, a project of comprehending the being of what is or “beings”. To this end, this project became one of translating the other to the same, devouring the other, liquidating the other, transcribing all cases of otherness into sameness. Rodolphe Gasché offers a crisp description of this phenomenon: “Western philosophy is in essence the attempt to domesticate Otherness, since what we understand by thought is nothing but such a project […]”

The project in question is the reduction of plurality to unity, the reduction of alterity to sameness, and the mastery of the other. While denouncing the imperialist ontological tendencies of traditional philosophy, Levinas declares that “ethics is first philosophy.” In announcing ethics as first philosophy, rather than ontology, Levinas intends to situate ethics as a radical questioning of the priority of the ego, of the knowing subject, and of self-consciousness. Levinas alternatively calls these things the ‘same’. And he defines the ‘same’ in the following way:

We call it ‘the same’ because in representation the I precisely loses its opposition to its object; the opposition fades, bringing out the identity of the I despite the multiplicity of objects, that is, precisely the unalterable character of the I. To remain the same is to represent to oneself.

If ontological pursuits foster the recoiling of the self into the self while at the same time facilitating a forgetting, even a suppression, of the other, Levinas directly connects ethics to the other. He defines ethics as follows: “We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics.” In another context, Levinas states “For me, the term ethics always signifies the fact of the encounter, of the relation of myself with the Other….” We should immediately note that neither Levinas nor Derrida are constructing a normative theory of ethics, namely, the normative theory of right and wrong as was traditionally identified as the task of ethical philosophy. Rather, Levinas is pursuing a phenomenology of ethical experience. The possibility of ethics, for Levinas, is not dependent upon establishing absolute principles. Rather, ethics is the phenomenon of an individual being called into question in the presence of the face of the other. Ethics names a non-totalizable relation with the other such that the singularity of the other places in question the ego or consciousness. In addition to framing ethics as a putting into question of the ego, we can also describe ethics as a critique. Simon Critchley states that “Ethics, for Levinas, is also critique; it is critical […] of liberty, spontaneity, and the cognitive empire of the ego that seeks to reduce all otherness to itself. The ethical is therefore the location of a point of alterity, or what Levinas also calls ‘exteriority’, that cannot be reduced to the Same.”

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21 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 126.
insight of ethics for Levinas is the relation with the other. But a relation not premised upon the colonization of the other by the same. Levinas tells us that ethics is a “preconceptual experience of a provocation by the other.” He alternatively recites his conception of ethics as a relation to the other in the language of the face. Ethics is a matter of relating to the face of the other. “In the language of transcendental philosophy”, according to Critchley, “the face is the condition of the possibility for ethics.”

IV. Derrida and Deconstruction as Ethics

In saying that deconstruction is ethics, we are saying that Derrida embraces the Levinasian idea that ethics is a relation to the other. And within the context of Derrida’s thinking, deconstruction as ethics means a concern not only for the other as a person but also for the other of language, the other readings of texts and the other of tradition, etc. Derrida enthusiastically endorses the phenomenological grounding of the opening to the other as ethics. In this regard, Derrida has no interest in following the traditional conception of ethics as the establishment of universal principles. Here, Derrida is not advocating a naïve relativism, nor is he denouncing the possibility of ethics. Rather, he is pursuing a radically different conception of ethics. Ethical obligation, he maintains, is prior to the establishing of formal procedures of universalization. He states that, “The respect for the singularity or the call of the other is unable to belong to the domain of ethics, to the conventionally and traditionally determined domain of ethics.”

Furthermore, ethics is not dependent upon the prior contractual arrangements emergent from established intersubjective regimes of morality, politics, and law. Within the space of deconstruction, ethics, according to Derrida, functions in a quasi-transcendental manner because ethics is the “singular responsibility without which there would be no morality, law or politics.”

Derrida’s understanding of ethics is certainly consistent with his efforts to escape the oppressive tendencies of the metaphysics of presence. The other, who is the focus of one’s unconditional ethical responsibility, should not be domesticated within the domain of the same. The other must remain irreducible to the conceptuality of the same. Neither is it possible for the other to be rendered as identical with me such that I can replace the other and the other can replace me. The structure of the I/other relation, as Derrida maintains, is a relation without relation; there simply is no possibility of ethical substitution. Derrida writes, “The structure of my relation to the other is of a ‘relation without relation.’ It is a relation in which the other remains absolutely transcendent. I cannot read the other. I cannot know that other from the

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inside and so on.”

To the extent that Derrida grafts deconstruction with ethics, this move implies that the other, from the perspective of deconstruction, anticipates philosophy and is not parasitic on philosophy. Indeed, we recall that, for Levinas, the totalizing and marginalizing practices of philosophy are in conflict with ethics, which is a matter of being in relation with the other. Thus, Derrida announces that “[t]he other precedes philosophy and necessarily invokes and provokes the subject before any genuine questioning can begin. It is in this rapport with the other that affirmation expresses itself.”

Derrida ultimately weaves together ethics and deconstructive practice. When ethics informs deconstruction, deconstruction becomes an intervention, an intervention on behalf, as well as towards, the other. Accordingly, Derrida maintains that a deconstructive “intervention can consist only in opening, uncing, destabilizing foreclosory structures so as to allow for the passage towards the other.” Finally, deconstruction takes on a messianic structure. Deconstruction, Derrida announces, is a response to the call of the other, a responsibility to respond and be responsible for the other. Derrida is precise about what he means by deconstruction in this context. He writes, “deconstruction is, itself, a positive response to an alterity [otherness] which necessarily calls, summons or motivates it. Deconstruction is therefore vocation — a response to a call.” I will now offer one practical example of the political relevance of poststructuralist ethics by briefly discussing Lyotard’s approach to ethics.

V: Lyotard: Ethics and the Differend

I want to briefly review some of the major themes sustaining Lyotard’s ethical poststructuralist perspective. There is undoubtedly an intimate connection between his ethical perspective and his novel conception of postmodernism. Postmodernism, as Lyotard understands it, is a disdain for metanarratives. This rejection of metanarratives is essentially a denunciation of transcendence, specifically the belief in the existence of essences beyond the contingency of a

27 Quoted in Richard Kearney (ed) Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers 1993, p. 28.
29 Derrida, “Deconstruction and the Other,” in Richard Kearney (ed) Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers, p. 118.
particular language game. Lyotard’s antitranscendent thrust is aligned with his rejection of the traditional philosophical positing of an ideal human essence, rationality and morality. In short, he denies that we can provide any plausible grounding for ethics by appealing to Man, Culture or History; similarly, there can not be any justified appeal to standards of reason, law or nature. As he writes:

[T]o the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy. I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, of the creation of wealth .... Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.

Clearly, Lyotard understands postmodernism as a rejection of the possibility of any transcending grounding for truth, knowledge, the self, morality, etc. Here, let us focus on some of the consequences of Lyotard’s view for ethics. If, as Lyotard charges, there is no absolute ideal rationality or morality, and if it is also the case that there is no transcendentally grounded, self-centered subject, then the traditional project to ground ethics in a rational and autonomous rationally-centered subject is misguided. Indeed, to the extent that Lyotard shares Derrida and Saussure’s approach to language as a difference and play without any unifying structure, Lyotard maintains that we must settle for the conception of language as constituted by a proliferation of heterogeneous and incommensurable language games. In this context, Lyotard associates traditional philosophical goals of commensurability, consensus, unity and totality as terror, that is, the appeal to a transcendent foundation and principles to support totalizing conceptions of things that are opposed to difference, otherness, and alterity. The ethical implication of Lyotard’s view is to argue for an openness to difference, to Otherness. Indeed, he urges “us to wage a war on totality; let us be witness to the unrepresentable; let us activate the difference....”32 Instead of unity and homogeneity, Lyotard supports heteronomy and multiplicity.

The radicality of Lyotard’s position is evident in his notion of the differend. He uses this notion to underscore the phenomenon of a victim who cannot be heard, the radical other who is also invisible. He writes, “I would like to call a differend the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and

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32 Jean-Francois Lyotard, _The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge_, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 82.
becomes for that reason a victim…. A case of differend between two parties takes place when the ‘regulation’ of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom.” 33 We should note here that, on Lyotard’s view, ethics cannot be the search for universal principles of conduct nor a study into the nature of the good life; rather, ethics within this new setting, according to Lyotard, entails providing the space for the other to be heard. Again, he writes, “What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them.” 34 This language of “to bear witness” also resonates with Levinas.

The concrete ethical significance of Lyotard’s position emerges from his account of the proliferation of language games. As previously mentioned, Lyotard introduces the notion of the differend—the voice of the other that is silenced, the voice that cannot be heard, that cannot be rendered articulate in the reigning language of the dominant society. Put differently, the differend represents the voice of those marginal others whose difference becomes a sign of the alien and the unknown, a difference lacking any ontological, discursive or political legitimacy within the hegemonic language of Sameness. As Lyotard states:

An injustice would be an injury accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the injury. This is the case if the victim is deprived of life, or of all his liberties, or of the liberty to make public his ideas of opinions, or simply of the right to testify to the injury, or even more simply if the phrasing of the testimony is itself deprived of authority. In all of these cases, to the privation constituted by the injury there is added the impossibility of bringing it to the knowledge of others, and notably to the knowledge of a tribunal. 35

Again, the inescapable ethical thrust and urgency of Lyotard’s view emerges from the silencing of marginal groups that do not share the sedimented consensus of the mainstream. The institutionalization of unifying structures of thought, perceptions and interpretations means that those who are different, those who are opposed to the calcified center of being are prevented from registering concerns and considerations that can be deemed intelligible and legitimate from the perspective of the dominant language game. Here Lyotard, like Derrida and Levinas, seeks to activate an ethics directed to the Other, to difference and not one in the service of consolidating the status quo. As he writes:

35 Jean-Francois Lyotard, “The Differend, the Referent, and the Proper Name,” *Diacritics* 3 (Fall 1984), p. 5.
In the differend, something asks to be put into phrases and suffers from the injustice of not being able to be instantly put into phrases. This is when the human beings who thought they could use language as an instrument of communication learn through a feeling of pain which accompanied silence..., that they are surrounded by language … to recognize that what remains to be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase, and that they must be allowed to institute idioms which may not yet exist.  

The fact that deconstructionist and postmodernist ethics is not grounded on the search for a rational code of behavior or a priori standards of right and wrong would seem to indicate to many that, far from imparting clarity to ethics, deconstruction and postmodernism have failed to offer a plausible alternative to the meaninglessness of ethics announced and celebrated by logical positivism. We recall that it was partly in the name of clarity that logical positivism repudiated ethics. Instead of being quick to denounce deconstruction and postmodernism for being obscurantist and even incomprehensible, we should come to see deconstruction and postmodernism as problematizing the very idea of ethics; on such a view, ethics is not simply a matter of impartially implementing universally valid rational principles. Indeed, in place of such transparent formalism and unimaginative proceduralism of an ethics founded upon abstract principles, a Sameness of autonomy that would have no need for dialogue with the other, deconstruction and postmodernism underscore the incompleteness, the uncertainty and the tragic circumstances of human existence. We cannot justifiably assume that there is going to be a rational resolution for the dilemmas that shake our fragile sense of metaphysical comfort; moral ambiguity and uncertainty is our lot. But the impossibility of the traditional ethical project serves as the possibility of moral courage in witnessing the other.

I want to conclude by underscoring some of the potential benefits of the poststructuralist approach to ethics. The poststructuralist emphasis on nontranscendence is instructive precisely because it calls into question the expectation that the legitimacy and plausibility of our moral values and practices are dependent upon some ultimate and absolute grounding to which we are called to be faithful. This fascination with turning our gaze beyond the contingency of our existence blinds us to the actual concrete reality of our ways of doing things. By shunning transcendence, poststructuralists urge focusing on our practices, on seeking to obtain illuminating and motivationally inspiring understanding of our practices. Furthermore, by shunning transcendence, we also learn to live without the need for grandnarratives, and thereby develop the existential courage not only to claim our values as our own but also the strength and conviction to revise our practices in the face of the unpredictable and inescapable challenges that often disturb the salient normality of our lives.

36 Lyotard, “The Differend, the Referent, and the Proper Name,” p. 7.
Finally, a poststructuralist ethics enables us to correctly understand ethics as the product of intersubjective agreement, whose normative force has more to do with what we expect from each other and what we owe to each other rather than in us having to survive the crushing weight of some external normative force.