

Commentary

Brief Comment on Gregory Nixon's Hollows of Experience: Derrida

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ABSTRACT

My congratulations to Gregory Nixon for a very thorough and sophisticated essay, and my apologies for the rather hasty attempt to provide a hopefully relevant comment, for which opportunity I am grateful.

Key Words: hollow, experience, Derrida.

Nixon (2010) gives many of Derrida's ideas important consideration. One of Derrida's most important ideas relates to instability in language, where he starts with Heidegger's concept of '*sous rature*' to emphasize the fact that words often cannot adequately stand for that which they reference, that is, they are inadequate to make an exact reference or representation. The word sends us on a long chase for meaning.

Heidegger's concept of '*sous rature*' ('under erasure') also emphasized extracting meaning from oppositions. A word gets erased but is left visible, i.e., as if crossed out, and one wrestles with the difference in the meaning of its presence and absence. Deconstruction goes further, more Heraclitian, in emphasizing the process of extracting meaning by transcending the apparent opposition. This is part of the process of Derrida's concept of *deconstruction*, which Taylor characterizes thusly:

"The guiding insight of deconstruction is that every structure—be it literary, psychological, social, economic, political or religious—that organizes our experience is constituted and maintained through acts of exclusion. In the process of creating something, something else inevitably gets left out.

"These exclusive structures can become repressive—and that repression comes with consequences. In a manner reminiscent of Freud, Mr. Derrida insists that what is repressed does not disappear but always returns to unsettle every construction, no matter how secure it seems. As an Algerian Jew writing in France during the postwar years in the wake of totalitarianism on the right (fascism) as well as the left (Stalinism), Mr. Derrida understood all too well the danger of beliefs and ideologies that divide the world into diametrical opposites: right or left, red or blue, good or evil, for us or against us. He showed how these repressive structures, which grew directly out of the Western intellectual and cultural tradition, threatened to return with devastating consequences. By struggling to find ways to overcome patterns that exclude the differences that make life worth living, he developed a vision that is consistently ethical." (Taylor, 2004)

Surap's characterization:

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"The method of deconstruction is connected to what Derrida calls the 'metaphysics of presence'. It is Derrida's contention that Husserl, along with almost all other philosophers, relies on the assumption of an immediately available area of certainty. The origin and foundation of most philosophers' theories is presence. In Husserl's case the search for the form of pure expression is at the same time a search for that which is immediately present; thus implicitly, by being present in an unmediated way and present to itself, it is undeniably certain.

"Derrida, however, denies the possibility of this presence and in so doing removes the ground from which philosophers have in general proceeded. By denying presence, Derrida is denying that there is a present in the sense of a single definable moment which is 'now'. For most people, it the present is the province of the known. We may be unsure of what took place in the past, of what may take place in the future, or of what is taking place elsewhere, but we rely on our knowledge of the present, the here and now -- the present perceptual world as we are experiencing it. By challenging access to the present Derrida poses a threat to both positivism and phenomenology." Surap, 1993, p. 35).

And, from Poster:

"[Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard claim] that the quest for certain truth and the claim of having attained it are the greater dangers. The logocentric philosophical tradition, with its strong assertions about truth, is complicit, for them, in the disasters and abominations of the twentieth-century Western history. On this difficult, even tragic issue of the relation of politics to truth, poststructuralists in general strive for a cosmopolitan position that makes every effort to recognize differences, even uncomfortable or disagreeable ones, and for a theory of truth that is wary of patriarchal and ethnocentric tendencies that hide behind a defense of reason as certain, closed, totalized. Above all, poststructuralists want to avoid forms of political oppression that are legitimized by resorts to reason, as this kind of legitimation has been, in their view, one of the paradoxical and lamentable developments of recent history." (Poster, 1989, p. 16).

Whether language has instability or not, in Western history, is a discussion that goes back to the Greek Cosmologists. Xenophanes tried "to reconcile the antithetical interpretations of nature, first as an array of ever changing things [the Heraclitian view], and second as an infinite never changing substance [the Parmedian/Platonic view]." (Sahakian, *History of Philosophy*, p. 6). Philosophy has been debating this issue ever since. The cosmological debate was soon reflected in the concern for language (rhetoric), social action, and everyday and political relevance, exemplified by Protagoras.

Nixon discusses the aspect of binaries in Derrida's thought, and here are some additional ideas on binaries that reinforce his:

"In my view, this is the real significance of the metaphors of the cyborg and cyberspace — not only did they embody the lived experience of information technology, but they also offered a means of reconceptualising that experience in potentially non-hierarchical and non-binary terms." (Wolmark, p. 3).

To which I have commented:

“Postmodern literature, despite its great diversity, has a major theme of establishing the process of discourse, rather than dominating ideologies, as a means for providing a continuing flow of society toward equal opportunity and freedom from tyranny and discrimination. Wolmark’s (1999) commentary, which sets the theme of her book, seems to place science fiction literature as sharing some communality with this postmodern discourse. (This is cryptically buried in her terms, ‘non-hierarchical and non-binary’.)

“I think Wolmark inherits this usage of the terms non-hierarchical and non-binary from French feminist, philosopher, playwright, and poet Hélène Cixous (Cixous& Clement, 1986). For Cixous, as for Jacques Derrida, oppositions (binaries) can be dangerous, a source of oppression. For those of us involved (and many who are not so involved) in dynamical systems theory (see Schulberg in Richards, 2007), we have a great deal of admiration for the Heraclitian model of oppositions as creating a process that produces a new dynamic of greater complexity (an attractor—a pattern of activity created by mutually interactive agents) that surpasses each component of the binary.

“At the same time, we have to understand that the dynamical process may produce maladaptive or harmful cultural attractors, as well as desirable ones. This can happen especially when the relative strength of the influence of each part of the binary is asymmetrical. ‘A’ clearly dominates ‘B.’ This is the meaning of her term, ‘hierarchical’. A healthy social process should minimize the asymmetry of the binary to produce possibilities beneficial to all participants in the binary opposition. It is probably no coincidence that creative thought also goes beyond polarities and favors the complex thinker who can tolerate ambiguity (Montuori, Combs, & Richards, 2004).” (Abraham, 2007, pp. 248-9.)

I am concerned with emancipation, the program of critical theory, poststructuralism, philosophical hermeneutics, postcolonialism, and neopragmatism, whose ideas are syntonically with those of Gregory Nixon, as well as Mikael Bakhtin’s ideas of dialogue, heteroglossia, polyphony, and unfinalizability.

“Russian philosopher and semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of “dialogue” emphasized the power of discourse to increase understanding of multiple perspectives and create myriad possibilities. Bakhtin held that relationships and connections exist among all living beings, and that dialogue creates a new understanding of a situation that demands change. In his influential works, Bakhtin provided a linguistic methodology to define the dialogue, its nature and meaning.” (Maranhão, 1990, p. 51.)

“Dialogic relations have a specific nature: They can be reduced neither to the purely logical (even if dialectical) nor to the purely linguistic (compositional-syntactic). They are possible only between complete utterances of various speaking subjects... Where there is no word and no language, there can be no dialogic relations; they cannot exist among objects or logical quantities (concepts, judgments, and so forth). Dialogic relations presuppose a language, but they do not reside within the system of language. They are impossible among elements of a language”. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 117.)

Since my concern is with emancipation, and the role of instability in empowering cultural change, I do not mean to imply that all social and cultural bifurcations end up with improved social conditions. Cultural dynamics often involve institutions, which tend to resist change, and that something needs to unstabilize them for progress, and that this is a never-ending process. The more oppressive and conservative a culture, the more unbearable it becomes, and it thereby seeds the roots of either its own destruction or its retrenchment. Social philosophies give us a more mature metaperspective which guide the discourse. Moreover, these perspectives should be founded not upon ideologies and fixed interpretations of nature, humans, and society, but on discourse and the tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty.

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