

Possibilities of the Impossible

Derrida's Idea of Justice and Negative Theology

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Before I begin my talk, properly speaking, I want to make a few preliminary remarks, or confessions, in view of giving an explanation of what is happening here — as I stand here in front of you, at this Inter-Nordic conference and speak under this heading <Philosophy and Religion>. The whole idea of my participating in this conference, as a representative of the University of Iceland, came about very quickly, and when I received an e-mail from the conference secretary, Jonna Bornemark, asking me for the title of my paper *immediately*, I was taken by complete surprise. Why? Well, because up to that moment, I had no idea that I would be giving a paper here. But there it was, and I did not have much time to think. However, it was clear to me right away that the topic would have to have something to do with my main philosophical preoccupation these days, which is also the topic of my doctoral thesis which I hope to complete this year: namely, Jacques Derrida's <philosophy> and his remarks about the place of the idea of *justice* inside this <philosophy>.

But what of the heading <philosophy and religion>, then — what should I make of that? Up to the moment when I received the fateful e-mail, I had been trying hard to separate the more explicitly *political* of Derrida's texts from the rest, and to focus my attention exclusively on the former; the object of my thesis is, after all, to extract some kind of *political thought*, or, which may be the same <thing>, a <thinking of the political>, from Derrida's notoriously difficult and substantial works. During this sifting-through, one of my most important rules of thumb had been to leave out questions of religion, of faith, of God, in Derrida's thought — questions to

which he has, nevertheless, devoted a lot of attention in numerous texts. After all, *one has to draw the line, one has to stop somewhere*. But now I was faced with the unavoidable necessity of giving a paper in Sweden where I would have to address, in one way or another, the relation of Derrida's <philosophy> to what is called <religion>.

Which throws us back to the urgent question of the title. Staring at the blank e-mail message created by pressing <reply> to the message from Jonna Bornemark, I was seized by a very insistent idea. I would have to deal with the question of negative theology. Why? Where did *that* come from? I did not know at the time. Of all the religious concepts or themes I had seen associated with Jacques Derrida, negative theology was probably the one that I had the *least* knowledge or understanding of. I can't say that I did not have a clue — because I did. For example, I was well aware that the literature on the issue of <Derrida and negative theology> is substantial and growing, and I knew that Derrida himself had even found it necessary to address the question of his relation to negative theology.

So that would be my topic, then; and once the topic had imposed itself on me in this way, the title materialized on the screen — and off went the e-mail to Jonna. Luckily for me, however, I have gradually come to realize, during my work on this lecture, that there is an intricate link between the topic of my ongoing thesis research — which we might summarize as <Derrida's idea of justice> — and his thought of religion in general and the way that he deals with the issue of negative theology in particular.

I will now, in a moment, start to present to you some of my discoveries in this regard. In the process, I will hopefully be able to offer you some insight into a number of aspects of Derrida's 'philosophy' — which, to be on the safe side and in accordance with what is now an established tradition, we should probably call by the name 'deconstruction'. Has deconstruction anything to do with negative theology? And has negative theology anything to do with Derrida's thinking of the political? And how does all this relate to that paradoxical heading, «Possibilities of the Impossible»? This is what I hope to be able to clear up in the next forty minutes or so, eventually by reference to Derrida's idea of justice.

More specifically, I will first give an indication of what this 'thing' called 'negative theology' is; second, I will present some characteristics and common traits of Derrida's peculiar 'concepts', especially the 'concept' of *différance* as well as the very concept of *deconstruction itself*; third, we will take a look at the way that Derrida *himself* addresses the question of the relation of his thought to negative theology; and lastly, we will try to establish in what way the whole issue of 'deconstruction and negative theology' can throw a light on Derrida's recent remarks about the place of justice inside his thought.

I

What is negative theology?¹ Well, a general response could be that the term has been used for many centuries, especially or exclusively within the Christian tradition, to qualify a depiction of God as 'something' that is 'without being' or 'beyond being', something that is, in other words, absolutely transcendent and unknowable: beyond words, for example, in such a way that absolutely nothing can justly be said about God ('him', or 'her', or 'it' — or 'X'!?) — everything one would be tempted to say about God is by definition inadequate. Thus, negative

theology is, evidently, caught in apparently endless paradoxes right from the start. It is not even certain that we can so much as say the name of God — by calling God 'God' (instead of, for example, 'Gud', 'Dieu', 'Allah', etc.), are we not thereby reducing him to an inferior level which he has nothing to do with?

The negative conception of God that saturates negative theology is traditionally (at least in the *philosophical* tradition!) traced back to Plato and his well-known definition of the Good as 'beyond being' («*epekeina tês ousias*», *Republic* 509B). This idea was then taken up, and radicalized, by the neo-Platonists and has kept recurring through the centuries, for example in the writings of Christian theologians such as the so-called Pseudo-Dionysius (the Areopagite, c. AD 500), John Scottus Eriugena (c. 810–880), Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1327?) and Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464). Most recently, negative theology has found a representative in the French philosopher/theologian Jean-Luc Marion, who is the author of a number of books and articles that are all marked by a very strong conception of God as beyond, or without, being. As he writes in his introduction to his first major work, which is called, precisely, *God Without Being*: «I am attempting to bring out the absolute freedom of God with regard to all determinations, including, first of all, the basic condition that renders all other conditions possible and even necessary — for us, humans — the fact of Being».²

Now let us briefly remark that the principles of negative theology seem simple and unambiguous enough, even if they are at the same time very delimitative; and, further, it would seem that once the follower of negative theology

¹ The ensuing general discussion of negative theology is largely based on *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 15, ed. Mircea Eliade. Macmillan, New York 1987, pp. 252–254.

² Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, translated by Thomas A. Carlson. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1991, p. xx. — One might add that according to Marion, God does not primarily *be*; rather, *love*, understood as Christian 'love of one's neighbour', *agapè*, is God's 'basic mode'. We should note, perhaps, that Marion has on a number of occasions criticized Derrida's handling of the question of negative theology, and Derrida has not failed to respond (notably in a very friendly and civilised way).

has discovered, established and accepted these principles, he (or she) is faced with two alternatives. (1) *Either* he accepts his own logic of negativity without, precisely, a word, doing his best from that moment on to say *nothing*, or, more precisely, to say *nothing about God*, who, nevertheless, is the very sun around which his existence revolves; the negative theologian thus condemns himself to a secret, to an existence in submission to the secret, so to speak, a secret which he is never to reveal to anyone and will remain forever his own, private secret; (2) *or* he attempts to make the secret public, to share it with others, to let those who wander the earth in ignorance see the light, and his manner of doing this will necessarily be that of attempting to formulate a discourse that would say the unsayable, to speak of that of which it is impossible to speak.

In any case, it would seem quite clear that the practitioner of negative theology dedicates himself to a *way of life* which is characterized by constant denials or negations of whatever may come to be presented as an attribute of God or a manifestation of God. This way of the negative theologian (or of the <practitioner of negative theology>) is ultimately oriented towards achieving a complete and eternal unity with God — a unity that Dionysius refers to under the name of «superessential darkness», whereas Nicholas of Cusa speaks of a «learned ignorance». The process of achieving this unity, this way of life dedicated to negating everything that is affirmed of God, is what the tradition calls, in a word, the *via negativa*: getting to know God, who is unknowable, by negating all we claim to know about him.

II

What does negative theology, then, have to do with Jacques Derrida's thinking? Well, that story goes back to 1968 at least. That year, Derrida presented his essay «La différance» to the French Society of Philosophy — an essay that is, as the name indicates, a presentation of the term <différance> which no doubt will go down in history as one of Derrida's major inventions. Maybe some of you are already familiar with this term, but in any case it would seem appro-

priate to try and give an idea of what he means by it — which is, in fact, not all that easy! In his book *Of Grammatology*, Derrida describes *différance* as the «unnameable movement of *différence-itself*».³ In other words, and no doubt much too simplistically, we might say, thus, that if we ask <what is it that accounts for the fact that *there is* difference, that there is a difference — for example, between A and B, between this chair and the next chair, between this moment and the next, between presence and absence, between the sensible and the intelligible, being and becoming, Being and beings, etc. etc.?> — or, even more concisely, <what makes the difference?>, <what makes a difference?> — then the answer would be <la différance>.

As you may have noticed, the examples that I have just given are not only spatial but also temporal; not only the difference between one chair and the next chair, but also the difference between «one moment and the next» has its roots in *différance*. In fact, Derrida justifies his choice of the word by simple reference to the two senses of the French verb *différer* (or the Latin *differre*): namely, on the one hand, the *temporal* sense of postponing, deferring to a <later date>; and, on the other hand, there is also the *spatial* sense of being non-identical, being other, etc.⁴ The word «différance» is formed in a very straightforward way as a derivative form of the verb *différer*; the suffix *-ance* (with an <a>) serves to indicate a middle voice, much in the same

³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1994, p. 93; Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*. Minuit, Paris 1967, p. 142.

⁴ Cf. Jacques Derrida, «La différance», *Marges — de la philosophie*. Minuit, Paris 1972, p. 8. — The third sense would be that of «the delay or lateness that means that meaning is always anticipated or else reestablished after the event: [...] this third sense forbids us from thinking of language as identically present to itself in any synchronic <present>, [and] has therefore already introduced diachrony into synchrony [...]» (Geoffrey Bennington, «Derridabase», in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1993, pp. 71–73; Geoffrey Bennington, «Derridabase», in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*. Seuil, Paris 1991, pp. 71–72).

way that the French noun *«résonance»* (quite simply, *«resonance»*) is derived from the verb *«résonner»* which means *«to resonate»*. These *«nouns in the middle voice»*, then, *«différance»* and *«résonance»*, are, therefore, neither active nor passive — or, perhaps, *both* active and passive: a little bit of both.⁵

In any case, the reason why I am invoking these grammatical complexities related to the concept of *différance* is that during the discussion after his presentation of the paper on this term, Derrida was directly confronted with the *«accusation»*, as some commentators (and Derrida himself) put it, of his thought being *«merely»* a negative theology. The possibility of such a relation had, in fact, already been explicitly stated by Derrida himself in the early stages of his lecture, where he warns his reader (or his audience) that

the detours, locutions, and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology.⁶

Derrida then immediately proceeds, almost as if to illustrate his point, to a description of what he calls *la différance* in very negative terms:

[...] *différance* is not, does not exist, is not a present-being (*on*) in any form; and [later on] we will be led to delineate also everything *that it is not*, that is, *everything*; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent.⁷

The similarities between these formulations and those of negative theology are unmistakable; to repeat, Derrida is saying that *«différance is not»* and *«everything that [différance] is not»* equals *«everything»*. And if we keep in mind Derrida's own insinuation of the parallels between his

mode of thinking and the procedures of negative theology (that we have just quoted), it is no wonder that a certain comparison of Derrida's thought and negative theology went on to haunt him through the decades — and, in fact, Derrida did nothing, to say the least, to fend off such phantoms or to put them down. Instead, he kept adding to his arsenal of *«negative» «concepts»* — which weren't even *«concepts»* properly speaking — terms, words, figures of speech that had a lot of things in common, but primary among those common characteristics was the fact that one could say very little *positive* about them. A few examples of these terms would be the *trace* and the *supplement*, both of which figure prominently in Derrida's early major work, *Of Grammatology*; Derrida's general idea of *writing* would also belong here, as well as rather more *«particular»* or *«context-specific»* textual phenomena such as the *pharmakon*, which Derrida locates in Plato's *Phaedrus*,⁸ and the *parergon*, which he discovers in Kant,⁹ the list could go on for some time, but let it suffice to name the remark, the margin, the undecidable, the parasitical, and finally what he calls iterability.¹⁰ The first word and archetype in the series is undoubtedly the term that we started with: *différance*. But what would be the last word? Perhaps it would be *deconstruction* itself, for, after all, that term apparently shares some of the *«essential»* properties of the other elements of the series, as we shall now see.

What is deconstruction for Derrida? He gives a fairly concise idea of this in a short paper called *«Letter to a Japanese friend»* — an excerpt from a personal letter of advice regarding the question of how to translate the term *«deconstruction»* into Japanese. Derrida is concerned that the Japanese translation of the term

⁸ See Jacques Derrida, *«La pharmacie de Platon»*, *La dissémination*. Seuil, Paris 1972.

⁹ See Jacques Derrida, *«Parergon»*, *La vérité en peinture*. Aubier-Flammarion, Paris 1978.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Bennington's list of such terms, which he characterizes by the way that they *«suspend, exceed, or precede [the] question «what is ...»»*, runs as follows: writing, literature, woman, appropriation, *Aufhebung*, the sign, the date, the *«yes»*, and, finally, art. Geoffrey Bennington, *«Derridabase»*, p. 77; p. 78.

⁵ Cf. Derrida, *«La différance»*, p. 9.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *«Différance»*, *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1982, p. 6; Derrida, *«La différance»*, p. 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*

should avoid certain significations or connotations, «if possible».¹¹ Therefore he writes at the beginning of the letter: «The question would be therefore what deconstruction is not, or rather *ought* not to be».¹² Derrida then goes on to evoke the traditional meaning of the term — for the fact is that the verb «*déconstruire*» and the noun «*déconstruction*» existed in the French language before Derrida «reinvented» them. The meaning of these terms comes down to something like what is called «disassembling» in English, as when one disassembles a machine in order to facilitate its transport, in view of assembling it again upon arrival.

The reason why Derrida came to choose this word for what he was trying to put into effect in his *Grammatology* is, apparently, two-fold: first, Derrida wanted to maintain a link to what Heidegger called *Destruktion* and what Husserl called *Abbau*, namely a thoroughgoing reconsideration of the history of metaphysics as a whole; the direct translation of Heidegger's term, «destruction», would, according to Derrida, have had far too negative connotations since what he was trying to do was precisely *not* altogether negative. Secondly, Derrida relates his choice of the word «deconstruction» to his response, or reaction, to structuralism which was more or less predominant in the French intellectual landscape at the time: there is an *active* part in the word «deconstruction» that relates specifically to «structure» and insinuates that the idea is to *do something with it*.¹³

Once he has got these references to the traditional meaning of the term out of the way, Derrida proceeds to his explicit discussion of what deconstruction is *not*. First of all, it is neither an *analysis* nor a *critique*.¹⁴ It is not an analysis because it does not tend towards a simple ele-

ment or an indissoluble origin; and it is not a critique because the very notion that underlies all critique, designated by the Greek verb *krinein* or the noun *krisis*, meaning «decision, choice, judgement, discernment»,¹⁵ is itself one of the main objects of deconstruction.

No more is it a *method*, «[e]specially if the technical and procedural significations of that word are stressed».¹⁶ Deconstruction cannot be a mere procedure or a blind application of an established technique. Further, deconstruction is neither an *act* nor an *operation*; there is no individual or collective subject that would be the «agent» of deconstruction. While deconstruction is necessarily active in some sense, there is also something irreducibly passive in it, as expressed by the impersonal form «*ça se déconstruit*», «it deconstructs (itself)» or «*c'est en déconstruction*», «it is in deconstruction» (in the same way that we say (in English — and in most other languages if I am not mistaken) «it rains»).¹⁷

So, the bottom line is that «deconstruction is neither this nor that», or, as Derrida puts it towards the end of his letter:

What deconstruction is not? everything of course!
What is deconstruction? nothing of course!¹⁸

There we have it, then, from the horse's mouth, as it were: Derrida's thought, deconstruction as it is called, is *nothing*. (Of course it is nothing!) More precisely, or conversely, *everything* is «what deconstruction is not». And at this stage a certain very simple, and possibly simplistic, question cannot fail to impose itself: *why*, then, deconstruction? What is deconstruction — what is Derrida — on about, then? We know that he hasn't failed to speak — or, more precisely, to write. But has he all along been *writing nothing* or *writing about nothing*?

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, «Letter to a Japanese Friend», translated by David Wood and Andrew Benjamin, in Peggy Kamuf (ed.), *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York 1991, p. 270; Jacques Derrida, «Lettre à un ami japonais», *Psyché: Invention de l'autre*. Galilée, Paris 1987, p. 387.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 270; p. 387.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 270-273; pp. 388-390.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 273; p. 390.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 273; p. 390.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 273 (translation altered); p. 390.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 273-274; p. 391.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 275; p. 392.

III

Let us now move to an exposition of the way in which Derrida addresses the question of negative theology. In 1986, he finally decided to tackle this issue directly and at length — at a conference in Jerusalem under the heading «Absence and negativity» in a lecture entitled «How to avoid speaking: Denials».

At the very beginning of this lecture, Derrida describes the choice of his topic in terms of a *duty* which he relates to the fact of the conference taking place in Jerusalem. When he received the invitation to speak in Jerusalem under this heading, «Absence and negativity», Derrida seems to have thought that «this was it», that now he could no longer avoid speaking to, and about, the issue of negative theology. Hence, in part, the title of his lecture, which, as he gives us to understand, he had to conjure up at short notice, in any case before he had had the time to start thinking about the lecture *itself*.

Having made these confessions, Derrida goes on to raise the question of the unity or coherence of the «concept» of negative theology. Is there such a «thing» as «one negative theology, the negative theology?», he asks.¹⁹ There is an essential evasiveness at work here; as Derrida remarks, «for essential reasons one is never certain of being able to attribute to anyone a project of negative theology *as such*».²⁰ For these reasons, it clearly becomes difficult to speak of negative theology *as if* one knew exactly what it is — and what it is *not*. Nevertheless, Derrida proposes a «provisional hypothesis» as to the essence of negative theology, and then proceeds to offer a fairly unreserved acknowledgement of a certain affinity between his writing and negative theology. «The family resemblance of negative theology», he writes, will no doubt be recognized «in every discourse that seems to return in a regular and insistent manner to [the]

rhetoric of negative determination», or, in other words, to a discourse dominated by formulas of the type «X is neither this nor that». As examples of such an X, Derrida names a number of concepts which, as he puts it, are «close and [...] familiar» to him, namely: «text, writing, the trace, différance, the hymen, the supplement, the pharmakon, the parergon, etc».²¹

In this manner, then, we find Derrida once more drawing attention to the way that his «concepts» invite a comparison with the procedures of negative theology. He then goes on to formulate three «criticisms» (or accusations, or charges) of negative theology — criticisms which he refers to as the «automatic, ritualistic, and «doxic» exercise of the suspicion brought against everything that resembles negative theology».²² Here's the first charge:

You prefer to deny; you affirm nothing; you are fundamentally a nihilist, or even an obscurantist; neither knowledge nor even the science of theology will progress in this way.²³

And the second one is as follows:

You are abusing a simple technique; all you have to do is repeat: «X is no more this than that», «X seems to exceed all discourse or predication», and so on. This comes down to speaking in order to say nothing. You speak only for the sake of speaking, in order to experiment with speech.²⁴

With regard to this second criticism, Derrida remarks that it «already appears more interesting and more lucid than the first»,²⁵ especially in view of the fact that «speaking in order to say *nothing* is not the same as not speaking. Above all, it is not the same as speaking to no one».²⁶

The third criticism is, in Derrida's words, «less evident but no doubt [even!] more interesting» than the first two. What it boils down to is,

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, «How to avoid speaking: Denials», translated by Ken Frieden, in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds.), *Derrida and Negative Theology*. SUNY Press, Albany 1992, p. 73; Jacques Derrida, «Comment ne pas parler: Dénégations», *Psyché: Invention de l'autre*. Galilée, Paris 1987, p. 535.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74; pp. 535-536.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74; p. 536.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 75; p. 537.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 75 (translation altered); p. 537.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75 (translation altered); p. 537.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 75; p. 537.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76 (translation altered); p. 538.

quite simply, the possibility of regarding *any* negation as an invocation of the name of God:

Every time I say: X is neither this nor that, neither the contrary of this nor that, neither the simple neutralization of this nor that with which it *has nothing in common*, [...] I would start to speak of God, under this name or another. [...] God's name would suit everything that may not be broached, approached, or designated, except in an indirect and negative manner. Every negative sentence would already be haunted by God or by the name of God [...].²⁷

In this way, then, God would emerge as «the truth of all negativity», or, in other words, ««God» would name *that without which* one would not know how to account for any negativity: grammatical or logical negation, illness, evil, and finally neurosis [...].²⁸

Now it is quite clear that these three criticisms of negative theology described by Derrida can — and *should* — ultimately be read as representative of the «traditional» critique of Derrida's own theorizing. With reference to the third accusation, that of any negative discourse being implicitly theological through and through, he writes that

[...] those who would like to consider «deconstruction» a symptom of modern or postmodern nihilism could indeed, if they wished, recognize in it the last testimony — not to say the martyrdom — of faith in the present *fin de siècle*.²⁹

Deconstruction as the relentless negative discourse of «postmodernity» would thus be revealed as being, in the final reckoning, nothing but the «last sigh of faith»; in its very iconoclastic and disrespectful attitude towards everything, including God, deconstruction would be the end of religion, or, in other words, it would be the most *truly* religious manifestation of the death, not only of God but of religion in general. In this manner, then, deconstruction would be at the same time «more religious than religion» and

«no more religion»: in one word, deconstruction would be *hyperreligious*, given the essential ambiguity of the prefix *hyper-*, which means «both beyond and more», as Derrida points out.³⁰ But does Derrida approve of such an interpretation of deconstruction and the «state of the world» «in the present *fin de siècle*»? Well, he seems at least to *allow* for such a reading, for, as he writes, it «will always be possible». *Possible*, yes, but is it «necessary» or «true»? Derrida does not close that question there and then; rather, he opens it up even further and writes: «Who could prohibit it [*viz.*, this interpretation]? In the name of what?»³¹

Derrida's opponents, real or imaginary, find their voice again later on in the lecture, where Derrida introduces them as «those who still denounce «deconstruction» [...] as a bastardized resurgence of negative theology» and adds that these people «are also those who readily suspect those they call the «deconstructionists» of forming a sect, a brotherhood, an esoteric corporation, or more vulgarly, a clique, a gang, or [...] a «mafia».»³² Another triad of «charges» follows. Here's a brief summary of them:

1. Those people, adepts of negative theology or of deconstruction (the difference matters little to the accusers), must indeed have a secret.³³
2. But since this secret obviously cannot be determined and is nothing, as these people themselves recognize, they have no secret.³⁴
3. If you know how to question them, they will finish by admitting: «The secret is that there is no secret, but there are at least two ways of thinking or proving this proposition», and so on. Experts in the art of evasion, they know better how to negate or deny than how to say anything.³⁵

Let us retain this image for a while: that of the adepts of deconstruction gathered around their

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76; p. 538.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77; p. 538.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77; p. 539.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 90; p. 552.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 77; p. 539.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 88; p. 551.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 88; p. 551.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89; p. 551.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 89; p. 551.

secret — which is no secret, and we know it. Do they know *our* secret — do they know that we know? I am afraid they do — or, at the very least, and as we have seen, Derrida does.

IV

What, then, of Derrida's relation to negative theology? What have we been doing so far? Well, we have, apparently, made a strong case for considering Derrida's thinking as being, to say the least, *very closely related* to negative theology. The strength of our case rests among other things, and not least, on *Derrida's own* explicit admissions with regard to the affinity of his thinking with negative theology. But just *how close* is the relation? And what sort of relation is it?

Let us go back to the beginning — that is, to the 1968 lecture on *différance*, in which we saw Derrida describing this <concept without concept> by means of a series of negations. As it turns out, I have to admit, we should have read a little further. Immediately after the declaration to the effect that *différance* «has neither existence nor essence» and that it «derives from no category of being, whether present or absent», Derrida adds:

And yet those aspects of *différance* which are thereby delineated are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies, which are always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being.³⁶

Let us make this a little clearer. *Différance*, Derrida says, is not a theological concept, «not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies», because it is not a «superessentiality»; indeed, Derrida resembles the negative theologian when he proclaims that *différance* *does not exist*, but, apparently, he parts company with negative theology by going *one step further*

down the *via negativa* insofar as he also refuses to attribute a «superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being» to his term (or his terms). Derrida returns to this point in «How to avoid speaking», where he declares that «*différance*, the *trace*, and so on» do not arise «from Being, from presence or from the presence of the present, nor even from absence, *and even less from some hyperessentiality*».³⁷

Thus, what it comes down to would seem to be the following: in spite of its simple and recurrent slogan of <God beyond or without being>, negative theology always seems to attribute to God *some* kind of being when all is said and done — for, after all, if God *is* beyond being (in the sense of <beyond essence and existence>), then, surely, he *is* in some sense — even if not in the same way that <ordinary> beings are (or exist). At issue here is, for example, the very fine line separating negative theology from atheism. It would seem that in order to escape charges of atheism, the negative theologian would have to accept that, after all and in spite of everything, God *is* — *in some (higher) sense*, or, in other words, that God is, precisely, an hyperessentiality rather than a <non-being>. Faced with the question <is there a God?>, the negative theologian would *surely* reply <yes, there is a God>.³⁸ In addition, the negative theologian will surely continue to adhere, no matter what, to his *dream* of finally arriving at his destination; but in doing so, he quite simply separates himself from Derrida.³⁹

³⁷ Derrida, «How to avoid speaking», p. 79; p. 542 (emphasis added on the last six words).

³⁸ Thus, we find Jean-Luc Marion writing in his preface to the English edition of *God Without Being* (while reflecting on the way the book was received when it was originally published in France some nine years earlier, in 1982): «The whole book suffered from the inevitable and assumed equivocation of its title: was it insinuating that the God <without being> is not, or does not exist? Let me repeat now the answer I gave then: no, definitely not. God is, exists, and that is the least of things. At issue here is not the possibility of God's attaining Being, but, quite the opposite, the possibility of Being's attaining to God» (Marion, *God Without Being*, pp. xix-xx).

³⁶ Derrida, «Différance», p. 6.

But Derrida also has another objection to negative theology, namely that it

belongs to the predicative [...] space of discourse, to its strictly propositional form, and privileges not only the indestructible unity of the word but also the authority of the name — such axioms as a «deconstruction» must start by reconsidering.⁴⁰

In Derridean terms, this second complaint would seem to amount to the claim that the language of negative theology is, when all is said and done, still onto-theological — whereas Derrida's «non-concepts» are specifically, and essentially, «built to resist» any appropriation by onto-theology (or by strictly predicative discourse). But that does not mean that they are capable of neutralizing the risk of such an appropriation once and for all; rather, this risk is constant and recurring, and the resistance against it is an enduring task. Thus, Derrida writes:

[...] the onto-theological reappropriation is always possible — and doubtless *inevitable* insofar as one speaks, precisely, in the element of onto-theological logic and grammar.

But he then goes on to add an important qualification: «If the movement of this reappropriation appears in fact irrepressible, its ultimate failure is no less necessary». There is, thus, a double necessity at work here. First of all, the «movement of [...] reappropriation» is «inevitable» and «irrepressible», but all the while «its ultimate failure is [...] necessary». Why is it necessary? What is the sense of this second necessity? Well, it is quite clear from Derrida's text that this necessity is to be understood in the double sense of «it *should* happen» and «it *will* happen». In other words, and in very Derridean terms, this necessity is *at the same time an injunction and a promise*: a promise of the ulti-

mate failure of onto-theological reappropriation *and* an injunction, a directive or an order, to us, the *us* of the «here and now», to do our best to insure that this reappropriation will not ultimately succeed. However, the *question* — the question *shared* by deconstruction and negative theology, namely the question of onto-theological reappropriation — remains, as Derrida admits:

[...] I concede that this question remains at the heart of a thinking of difference [...]. It remains as a question, and this is why I keep returning to it.⁴¹

This question is precisely the reason why Derrida — *and* the negative theologian — keep speaking, or writing, in face of the unavoidable failure of their speech, or writing. But in doing so, their work is not entirely useless — far from it, in fact; for their work is a continuing contribution to the ultimate (and *ongoing*) failure of onto-theology — which, among other things, can be understood as the project of an over-arching, closed and ultimate explanation of reality, a final and exclusive understanding of God.

Thus, to summarize a little, we seem to have arrived at the point where the difference between Derrida's thinking and negative theology has been established and isolated: it all comes down to a certain relatively harmless *theoretical* disagreement about the hyperessential: should one dream of achieving its «higher» mode of being or not? Should one speak (or write) as if it was *possible* to achieve this *impossible* unity with the divine? This would be the difference between Derrida and the negative theologian, then — but, surely, this difference does not amount to very much *in practice*: the difference, we are tempted to say, is hardly any — if it's there, then at least it is nothing to speak of.

In their insatiable penchant for nothingness, negativity and denial, Derrida and the negative theologian thus seem to join hands and form a closed (but tiny) circle; their secret is there for all to see, and there really is not any; we, who stand outside, with our feet firmly on the ground,

³⁹ Cf. Derrida's remark to the effect that he has always been uneasy with regard to «the promise of [God's] presence given to intuition and vision» (Derrida, «How to avoid speaking», p. 79; p. 542). This promise, or this «possibility», must surely be essential to negative theology.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77; p. 540.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 79 (translation altered); p. 542.

realize that they are only dancing — around nothing. Nothing good will come of this, we may think, and hopefully nothing bad. Are we justified in that belief? Perhaps not, as I will now attempt to show.

V

Three years after the presentation of the paper «How to avoid speaking» in Jerusalem, Derrida gave a lecture in New York at a conference on the topic «Deconstruction and the possibility of justice». This lecture, which was later published as a book entitled *Force de loi* («Force of law»), marks the beginning of a certain explicit engagement of Derrida's with regard to political concepts such as the idea of justice and its relation to law and judicial systems.

Let us now, in conclusion, and very briefly, take a look at some of the major issues of this text. Derrida's inaugural move is to distinguish between justice and law (in the sense of the French *droit*, German *Recht*, Danish *ret*). Thus, he writes: «I want to insist right away on reserving the possibility of a justice [...] that [...] exceeds or contradicts «law» (*droit*)». ⁴² It then emerges that this «idea» of justice, of which Derrida wants to uphold the possibility, stands in an intimate relation to «deconstruction». Indeed, Derrida defines the objective of his lecture as showing «why and how what is now called Deconstruction, while seeming not to «address» the problem of justice, has done nothing but address it, if only *obliquely*, unable to do so directly». ⁴³

Derrida then goes on to describe the difference between law (*droit*) and justice in terms of the fact that law is «founded, constructed on interpretable and transformable textual strata» and that it is, therefore, «essentially decon-

structible» ⁴⁴ whereas «[j]ustice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible». ⁴⁵ These definitions give rise to a new way of describing the *locus* of deconstruction:

[...] deconstruction takes place in the interval that separates the undeconstructibility of justice from the deconstructibility of *droit* [...]. It is possible as an experience of the impossible, there where, even if it does not exist (or does not yet exist, or never does exist), *there is* justice. Wherever one can replace, translate, determine the x of justice, one should say: deconstruction is possible, as impossible [...]. ⁴⁶

In other words: between law (*droit*) and justice, the «deconstructible» and the «undeconstructible», deconstruction finds its place. Wherever justice has been determined objectively, as law, deconstruction is possible as an operation dedicated to the call of (or the call *for*) a justice which does not yet exist. In this manner, then, deconstruction essentially occupies itself with *making the impossible possible*. This endeavour is also what Derrida names the experience of *aporia* (that is, of «something that does not allow passage» ⁴⁷). He writes:

[...] I think that there is no justice without this experience, however impossible it may be, of *aporia*. Justice is an experience of the impossible. ⁴⁸

The structure in which justice is inscribed would thus appear to be in many ways analogous to the general characteristics of Derrida's «non-concepts». Just like *différance*, for example, justice cannot be said to «exist», presently and fully — it disappears as soon as it appears, leaving only a trace of itself in what remains, that is, in the body of the law. But this does not mean that justice is *beyond* reality and temporality, or that its mode of being is entirely and «purely» transcendent and ineffable. Rather, justice participates in

⁴² Jacques Derrida, «Force of law: The «Mystical foundation of authority», translated by Mary Quaintance, in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. Routledge, New York and London 1992, p. 5; Jacques Derrida, *Force de loi: Le «Fondement mystique de l'autorité»*. Galilée, Paris 1994, p. 17.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 10; p. 26.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14; p. 34.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14; p. 35.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15; pp. 35-36.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16; pp. 37-38.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16; p. 38.

our world here and now — on the one hand as law, which is its <concrete> and inadequate manifestation, *and*, on the other hand, as an <infinite idea> that enjoins us to work towards its realization. There is a very strong *desire* for justice inherent in deconstruction, as Derrida proclaims in lively terms:

[...] deconstruction is mad about this kind of justice. Mad about this desire for justice. This kind of justice, which is not law, is the very movement of deconstruction at work in law and the history of law, in political history and history itself [...].⁴⁹

The desire for justice is what compels deconstruction to start meddling in mundane affairs, or, in other words, to descend into the world of decision, calculation, strategy and exchange — the world of politics and ethics. And unlike the God of negative theology, deconstruction — which, as Derrida puts it, «*is*» justice⁵⁰ — is not to be <left alone>, even if this entails a very serious and persistent risk:

Left to itself, the incalculable [...] idea of justice is always very close to the bad, even to the worst for it can always be reappropriated by the most perverse calculation. That is always possible. And so incalculable justice *requires* us to calculate. [...] Not only *must* we calculate, negotiate the

relation between the calculable and the incalculable [...] ; but we *must* take it as far as possible, beyond the place we find ourselves and beyond the already identifiable zones of morality or politics or law, beyond the distinction between national and international, public and private, and so on.⁵¹

This we must — but where does this «*must*», this «*il faut*», come from? What is its place — and why does it take place? Well, Derrida proclaims that it «does not *properly* belong either to justice or law».⁵² What is it then?

My time is up, I am afraid; but let us not regret — or forget — the fact that the question remains.⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 25; p. 56.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 15; p. 35.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 28 (translation altered); pp. 61–62.

⁵² Ibid., p. 28 (italics added in accord with the French text); p. 62.

⁵³ Thanks are due to Sigrún Sigurdardóttir, Davíð Kristinsson, Páll Skúlason and Róbert Haraldsson for their amicable and precious assistance in the preparation of this paper; and to Jayne Svenungsson for her thorough and constructive comments at the NIFF conference at Södertörns högskola.

