

A Note on Derrida

Born into a Jewish family near Algiers in 1930, in what was then French Algeria, Jacques Derrida overcame daunting obstacles before becoming the dominant voice within the crowded field of twentieth-century French philosophy. As a child, he was the victim of harsh anti-semitism which translated into his expulsion from the local French primary school in 1942. Five years later, plagued by adolescent anxieties, he failed the *baccalauréat*. Having later moved to France, he also failed the entrance examination at the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1950 and did not in fact succeed in being admitted to this institution for a further two years. His academic difficulties continued and he subsequently failed the national *concours d'agrégation*. Only in 1956 did Derrida finally qualify as a philosophy teacher. Ever since his first public lecture in 1959, Derrida showed himself to be breathtakingly prolific. Based in Paris where he taught for over forty years (he was director of studies at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales from 1984 to 2004), Derrida remained a constant presence on the international scene (most notably on U.S. campuses). He pursued this relentless pace until a few weeks before his death in 2004. In 1998, the *New York Times* had referred to him as “perhaps the world’s most famous philosopher”. Derrida’s philosophical project must not overshadow his long-standing militant humanism against apartheid, Soviet repression, racism, and sexism. In various institutional capacities, Derrida was also involved in the promotion of philosophical education in France.

“Deconstruction” has come to define the man and his work. A critique challenging philosophical systems from within on the basis of a close reading of dogmatic texts, deconstruction shows that the foundational terms of any system are the product of an exclusive disjunction, that is, a radical choice accompanied by a suppression of the discrepancy. Deeply indebted to Husserlian phenomenology and its Heideggerian “corrective”, Derrida insists on the historicity and the linguisticity of human understanding. He thus claims that a philosophical system cannot rest on some ultimate justification or necessity. While it is made to seem natural, it depends on the predilections of the dogmatist. In this sense, the specter of the repressed haunts the system as its implicit motivation: its traces can be found within the system. Deconstruction diagnoses and exploits the difference between the illusion generated by theories projecting themselves as self-evident and the fact of their idealization by the thinking theorist. The way in which this difference is hidden, the manner in which it is adjourned or deferred has prompted Derrida to coin “*différance*” (possibly the most successful of his countless neologisms) in order to refer to the intertwining of difference (to differ) and deferral (to defer). An illustration of Derrida’s challenging theses is that there has never been perception (the system). Rather, any experience of data is always already structured as intended perception (the

repressed). Deconstruction is thus an act of negotiation wanting to supplement the official discourse in order to do justice to what has been effaced but is inevitably there — the Other of the system (Derrida often acknowledged his indebtedness to Emmanuel Levinas's work on otherness). Though accused of diletantism and obscurantism, Derrida's idiosyncratic work persistently ranged across disciplines and topics always with a view to emancipating systems from dogmatic artifice.