Différance as Temporization and Its Problems

Eddo Evink

To cite this article: Eddo Evink (2020): Différance as Temporization and Its Problems, International Journal of Philosophical Studies, DOI: 10.1080/09672559.2020.1766885

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2020.1766885
**Différance as Temporization and Its Problems**

Eddo Evink

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands; Faculty of Humanities, Open Universiteit

**ABSTRACT**

Derrida’s philosophy is usually known as a form of critique of metaphysics. This article, however, argues that Derrida’s deconstructions do not only dismantle metaphysics from within, but also remain in themselves thoroughly, and problematically, metaphysical. Its goal is to determine exactly where the metaphysical features of Derrida’s work can be found. The article starts with an analysis of Derrida’s understanding of metaphysics, as well as its deconstruction, by explaining the working of différance, mainly focusing on its temporality. Further, it will demonstrate how in the temporization or deferral of différance a metaphysical desire for purity remains effective. In readings of several texts, the mutual interdependence of metaphysics and deconstruction will be sketched. Then the ethical side of deconstruction will be highlighted, both in Derrida’s early work as well as in the slightly different elaboration of différance in the later ethical notions like justice, the gift and the messianic. This results in a distinction of three versions of différance. Finally, a critical discussion of the metaphysical side of deconstruction will be followed by a comparison of different readings of deconstruction and différance.

**KEYWORDS** Derrida; deconstruction; temporality; metaphysics; différance; justice

Derrida’s work is usually presented as a critique of metaphysics. Although he refuses any determination of deconstruction, including its equation with critique (Derrida 1985a) he often underscores the critical scope of deconstruction (Derrida 1994, 96–117). Whether or not labeled as critique, it is clear that ‘the deconstruction of metaphysics’, problematizing and dismantling a metaphysical way of thinking, is a recurrent and consistent theme in his entire oeuvre. This article argues that Derrida’s projects of deconstruction do not only dismantle metaphysics from within, but also remain in themselves thoroughly, and problematically, metaphysical. I shall first analyze Derrida’s understanding of metaphysics, and then how his work deconstructs metaphysics, by explaining the working of différance, mainly focusing on its temporality. Further, I shall demonstrate how in the temporization or deferral of différance a metaphysical desire for purity remains effective. In
readings of several texts, the mutual interdependence of metaphysics and deconstruction will be sketched. Then the ethical side of deconstruction will be highlighted, both in Derrida’s early work as well as in the slightly different elaboration of différance in the later ethical notions like justice, the gift and the messianic. This results in three distinct versions of différance. Finally, a critical discussion of the metaphysical side of deconstruction will be followed by a comparison of different readings of deconstruction and différance.

**Metaphysics**

What is metaphysics, according to Derrida? Although he claims, in his later work, that he had never described the history of metaphysics as a homogeneous unity, in his early publications one can find many passages with quite clear descriptions, portraying metaphysics as a thinking that determines being as presence. The matrix of the history of metaphysics, Derrida writes,

...is the determination of Being as presence in all senses of this word. It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence – eidos, archè, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject) aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth. (Derrida 1978a, 353; cf., 1974, 12)

Metaphysics is a manner of thought that builds systems as constructions of reality, based on the alleged presence of these fundamental principles.

If such a presence cannot be ascertained within a metaphysical system, then it needs to be presupposed as a promise of a future fulfilment of presence. This is the strategy that the young Derrida finds in Husserl’s notion of horizon. Husserl’s effort to find a justification of scientific knowledge needs a regulative idea of science, of a linguistic community and of humanity in general, that must provide the necessary background for an intersubjective understanding that is also open for new research results and theories. The receptivity for new theoretical knowledge in fact presupposes a normative idea of a ‘mature, normal’ mankind that is able to think, read and speak. Husserl’s idea of horizon functions as such a normative regulative idea, as ...

...a primordial knowledge concerning the totality of possible historical experiences. Horizon is the always-already-there of a future which keeps the indetermination of its infinite openness intact. [...] It is at once the unity and the incompletion for [...] experience – the anticipated unity in every incompleteness. (Derrida 1978b, 117)

This strategy is characteristic for Derrida’s view of metaphysics and even of philosophy as such. Philosophy tries to control the objects of its analyses and
its own limits by a unity and totality of presence that includes its own incompletion. In the opening text of *Margins of Philosophy*, ‘Tympan’, Derrida describes philosophy as the attempt ‘... to interiorize every limit as being and as being its own proper.’ (Derrida 1982, xix) Philosophical reflection encircles and surrounds its objects, trying to grasp and enclose them. In the end it does not make much difference ‘... whether it is a question, finally, of Heidegger’s hermeneutical circle or of Hegel’s onto-theological circle.’ (Derrida 1982, xx) The interiorizing and encircling movements of philosophy result in the unity and totality of constructions that are meant to secure the presence of its objects.

The style and rhetoric of ‘Tympan’ may suggest that Derrida criticizes this philosophical strategy as a violent and totalizing movement, that needs to be interrupted and destroyed by a critical reading strategy. Such a critique, however, is called naïve (Derrida 1982, xxii). The relation between philosophy and its derangements by deconstruction is in fact more complex.

Derrida does not simply reject metaphysical notions like presence and logos, because philosophical thought cannot do without them: ‘Of course, it is not a question of “rejecting” these notions; they are necessary and, at least at present, nothing is conceivable for us without them.’ (Derrida 1974, 13) Nor does he try to oppose them with different concepts, since such a strategy would be easily absorbed by the dialectical and encircling movements of philosophy. He is looking for an alterity that deranges this encircling movement itself (Derrida 1982, xxiv).

**Deconstruction and Différance**

Deconstruction performs the disassembling of philosophical constructions. The principle, foundation or center of these constructions can only appear as already inscribed in the structures that they were supposed to found, thereby losing their foundational function and pure presence. Husserl’s ‘Living Present’, e.g. the self-presence of transcendental consciousness, is inscribed in the linguistic and temporal traces that it claims to be independent of; these traces are supplements that are more original than their origin (Derrida 1973; Lawlor 2002, 166–208). Comparably, God can only appear as inscribed in the history he has created, and is, therefore, mortal (Derrida 1978a, 115–116; Gasché 1994). What was presented as a structure of reality is unmasked as an inevitably unstable construction. In other words, these constructed schemes are the results of a metaphysical desire for absolute presence that can never be accomplished, since every construction and calculation of this presence will always appear to be in deconstruction.

Deconstruction demonstrates the working of *différance*, the movement of references that build a structure of interdependent relations, while at the same time disordering this same structure. The disordering is caused by
a spacing of differences that cannot be taken together in one unity of presence, as well as by a temporization that endlessly defers pure presence, replacing it by a future that remains to come. The derailing moves of différance can be traced in texts and in semiotic structures, but also in worldly structures as they are analyzed in phenomenology. Différance is thus a strange quasi-concept, combining the tensions of difference and deferment, spacing and temporization, activity and passivity, verb and noun, never to be unified in one determinate concept.

In this article I shall focus on différance as temporization, as a movement of deferment and postponement, in Derrida’s words: ‘… the action of putting off until later, of taking into account, of taking account of time and of the forces of an operation that implies an economical calculation, a detour, a delay, a relay, a reserve, a representation … ’ (Derrida 1982, 8). The working of différance can be detected in language and in semiotic structures. Their references operate within a system of structures in such a manner that they destabilize the structures from the start. The temporization of différance is, on the one hand, the orientation towards an ultimate presence, and, on the other hand, the inevitable failure to reach this presence, because the reference to this presence will remain a deferral:

Différer in this sense is to temporize, to take recourse, consciously or unconsciously, in the temporal and temporizing mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfillment of ‘desire’ or ‘will,’ and equally effects this suspension in a mode that annuls or tempers its own effect. (Derrida 1982, 8, my italics)

What is suspended here? The accomplishment or fulfillment of a desire or will, in such a way that the effect is annulled, that is, in such a way that the fulfillment will never be reached.

Derrida describes this effect of différance more precisely in a later – and often quoted – passage in ‘Différance’, that first of all shows how hard it is to understand and to think this quasi-concept:

How are we to think simultaneously, on the one hand, différance as the economic detour which, in the element of the same, always aims at coming back to the pleasure or the presence that have been deferred by (conscious or unconscious) calculation, and, on the other hand, différance as the relation to an impossible presence, as expenditure without reserve, as the irreparable loss of presence, the irreversible usage of energy, that is, as the death instinct, and as relation to the entirely other that apparently interrupts every economy? It is evident – and this is the evident itself – that the economical and the non-economical, the same and the entirely other, etc., cannot be thought together. (Derrida 1982, 19, translation slightly changed)

This description gives us a double movement, two movements that go against each other, that need to be thought together but cannot be thought together as well. The first movement is the surrounding movement of
philosophy, a calculative detour that promises presence. The second movement interrupts the first one by derailing its movements of detour, by contaminating its presence and thus by deferring the aimed presence endlessly. This results in an irreparable loss of presence, relating its object to an entirely other. The postponement of \textit{différence} is thus pictured as the impossible combination of two extremes: postponement as a philosophical regulative idea that tries to guarantee pure presence, and the interruption of this idea by the ‘\textit{tout autre}’, which makes presence impossible and the deferral infinite.

In other passages, \textit{différence} is discussed in the terminology of transcendental conditions, combining the two competing movements as condition of possibility and condition of impossibility. \textit{Différence} is thus a quasi-transcendental movement of unstable references that makes the aim of metaphysics both possible and impossible. It is a quasi-transcendental condition of (im)possibility of metaphysics. To be more precise, \textit{différence} makes any thinking and any reference possible, but it makes at the same time the ultimate presence of what is referred to, impossible. What is thus made impossible, is not truth or meaning, but only absolute truth, absolute meaning or absolute presence, i.e. eternal truth, a final determination of meaning and self-sufficient pure presence. As Derrida states himself: \textit{différence}, like dehiscence and iterability, ‘… limits what it makes possible, while rendering its rigor and purity impossible.’ (Derrida 1988, 59; my italics) Geoffrey Bennington describes this very adequately: ‘We have seen that in Derrida what makes possible immediately makes impossible the purity of the phenomenon made possible.’ (Bennington 1993, 277, my italics)

Again, what is suspended by \textit{différence}? In order to be precise, we need to distinguish two sides of this suspension. On the one hand, linguistic and semiotic references do have a meaning and truth that can be found, but they are always temporary and contextual. The movements of reference do not halt and cannot be fixed, but can always find new possible outcomes in different contexts. In other words, meaning is not impossible, but necessarily contextual and finite. On the other hand, a definite meaning or full presence can never be found, they are infinitely postponed and made impossible. What is really suspended, therefore, is the fulfillment of a metaphysical desire, the accomplishment of absolute presence that the metaphysical way of thinking tries to establish or claims to be established.

The question that needs to be raised here, is: why is the deferment of \textit{différence} a deferment of pure presence? Is this desire for purity a necessary trait of all references, of all intentionality, of all the movements of \textit{différence}? I shall come back to this question several times. First we need to take a closer look at the relations between metaphysics, \textit{différence} and deconstruction.

On the one hand, metaphysics presupposes the working of \textit{différence}, as its condition of (im)possibility. Derrida sometimes describes the metaphysical
manner of thought as a reaction to *différance*, as an effort to dominate and control its effects (Derrida 1982, xix). This effort, however, cannot but fail, because metaphysics is always in deconstruction. But *différance*, in its turn, cannot be well understood from a metaphysical perspective. It is not an origin, it is not a concept, it is presupposed in a way that metaphysics cannot grasp (Derrida 1974, 65).

On the other hand, do deconstruction and *différance* also presuppose metaphysics? Deconstructions are processes of dismantling that can only be understood as at work within metaphysical constructions. They presuppose the constructions that they need to deconstruct, otherwise they would not have anything to dismantle. Doing so, deconstruction demonstrates the effects of *différance*. Does *différance* also presuppose metaphysics as a way of thinking and writing? At least, *différance* can only be traced and discussed by way of its movements and effects in texts and in semiotic and worldly structures. Since it has no metaphysical presence, it cannot be said to ‘be’. Therefore Derrida crosses the word ‘is’ to show *différance*’s non-being (Derrida 1982, 6). In other words, *différance* itself, as far as it can be described as such, can only work and appear in contexts. To put this in a problematic metaphysical language: *différance* is essentially contextual, and therefore it ’is’ not and has no essence. Accordingly, when it is traced in metaphysical texts, i.e. texts that develop a metaphysical construction of reality, *différance* presupposes a metaphysical way of thought and metaphysical language.

But how, then, does *différance* work in everyday life, in everyday language, or in other non-metaphysical language, like, e.g. literature? Does *différance* in all its occurrences presuppose metaphysics? If it can be traced in all linguistic and semiotic structures, as well as in the world as a phenomenological structure of references, then *différance* cannot be said to necessarily presuppose metaphysics, a metaphysical way of thought or metaphysical language. *Différance* does its work of spacing and temporizing in all contexts, not only in metaphysical texts.

This, however, makes the other question that I just mentioned, even more pressing: why does Derrida describe the deferment of *différance* as a deferment of *pure* presence? Is this orientation to purity inherent in metaphysics and therefore also an inevitable element of *différance* as it works within metaphysics, but not necessarily a trait of *différance* as such? Or is it always a necessary trait of *différance* in all its effects and does *différance* always provoke a metaphysical desire of pure presence?

**All-or-Nothing-Logic**

A detailed discussion of this distinction is given by Derrida in terms of intentionality, in his answers to questions that were posed to him on the
occasion of his debate with John Searle. In *Limited Inc*, Gerald Graff asks if Derrida does not set up an all or nothing choice between pure self-presence and the ‘complete freeplay’ of language, taking ideal purity as a goal of language that will never be fulfilled. ‘Is there not a danger here’, Graff asks, ‘of keeping certain linguistic superstitions alive in order to legitimate the project of calling them into question?’ (Derrida 1988, 115) Derrida replies that he does not at all create such an opposition between pure presences and ‘complete freeplay’ – a bad translation of the French *jeu* – and that he, on the contrary, emphasizes the inevitable impurity of language. However, his answer seems to get very close to the position that Graff ascribes to him.

In this discussion it becomes clear again that Derrida does not reject metaphysics or logocentrism. He underscores the necessity of abstraction and idealization for systematic scientific and philosophical language. No conceptualization without the urge for purity. An intention – one of the issues in his discussion with Searle was the performative language of a promise – does not necessarily need to be geared towards ideal purity, but the conceptualization of intentionality, determining the essence of intentions, is indeed directed at purity (Derrida 1988, 128). Concept formation is both rigorous and pure, or it is nothing at all. Conceptualization is thus a matter of all or nothing: ‘Every concept that lays claim to any rigor whatsoever implies the alternative of “all or nothing”. […] It is impossible or illegitimate to form a *philosophical concept* outside this logic of all or nothing.’ (Derrida 1988, 116–117)

In addition, Derrida states that he does not oppose anything to this binary logic, but adds a complication from within:

> To this oppositional logic, which is necessarily, legitimately, a logic of ‘all or nothing’ and without which the distinction and the limits of a concept would have no chance, I oppose nothing, […]; rather I add a supplementary complication that calls for other concepts, for other thoughts beyond the concept […], another ‘logic’ that accounts for the impossibility of concluding such a ‘general theory’. (Derrida 1988, 117)

Thus, Derrida does not state an opposition between pure presence and the play of language, but he does show their inner connection as an inevitable tension. In fact, he affirms metaphysical desire as part of a necessary binary ‘all-or-nothing-logic’ and then deconstructs it from within. According to Derrida, this ‘all-or-nothing-logic’ is not kept alive by him, but it is itself immortal, while at the same time being disrupted from within, and thus constantly carrying death within it. The immortality of the ‘all-or-nothing-logic’ is provoked by an ‘indestructible desire or need’, that cannot be reduced to the language in which it operates. This immortal desire is of another order, it is of the order of the alterity that continuously brings up concept formation as well as evades it (Derrida 1988, 116).
If we compare this text, the ‘Afterword’ in *Limited Inc*, published in 1988, to the earlier lecture ‘Différance’, published in 1972, a distinction can be found in the characterization of metaphysical presence and *différance*. In ‘Différance’ Derrida mentions the death drive as a variant of the second movement of *différance*, the movement that interrupts the calculation of deferral. In the ‘Afterword’ Derrida relates death to presence: pure presence would mean pure death. The second movement of interruption therefore also prevents metaphysics from reaching its own death. Philosophical conceptualization is intent on a completeness that both guides and threatens it, because, as Derrida writes: ‘Is not the “pure realization of self-presence” itself also death?’ (Derrida 1988, 116). Therefore, in order for metaphysics to remain what it is and to function as metaphysics, it needs to be problematized and disassembled by an alterity from within. Due to the facilitating and disrupting effects of *différance*, metaphysics continues forever, as immortal, while failing and dying all the time. It is this tension between conceptualization and otherness that Derrida attempts to think with his quasi-concepts of *différance* and iterability (Derrida 1988, 129–130).

In short, according to Derrida, he does not create an opposition between a rigorous metaphysical logic and its impossibility due to the play of language, rather he shows their inner connection; nor does he have a choice with respect to this rigorous logic of ‘all-or-nothing’, because rigorous binary logic and its deconstruction are inevitable features of all conceptual language.

However, is this ‘all-or-nothing-logic’ really so inevitable as it is presented by Derrida, or is it a choice after all? Let us first look at a nuance that Derrida adds here. The desire for purity in this ‘all-or-nothing-logic’ is not necessarily at work in every intention, Derrida writes, but it is part of conceptual rigor:

> It is not accurate therefore to suggest that anyone who uses the word ‘intentionality’ ‘invests intention with the longing for metaphysical plenitude.’ Nor did I ever say so. Nevertheless, if one wishes to speak rigorously of an intentional structure one should take into account, with or without ‘longing,’ the telos of plenitude that constitutes it. (Derrida 1988, 121)

But where lies the difference, then, between the intentionality of everyday language use and rigorous philosophical conceptualization? This distinction is also elaborated by Derrida in his discussion with Searle. This discussion concerns, among other issues, the intentionality of speech acts. Common speech acts, e.g. a promise or the opening of a meeting, are also characterized by the contextual movements of *différance*, that function as conditions of possibility and impossibility, though not in the same way as in concept formation. Like all language use, the functioning of speech acts is dependent on its contexts. It is always possible that a promise will be broken. It is always possible that a phrase like ‘I open this meeting’ is cited in a different context,
e.g. a joke, a theatre play or as an example in a philosophical article. Such possibilities are a structural necessity, in the sense that they can never be completely excluded. Necessarily, then, these possibilities, as possibilities, are inevitable.

Derrida is not always consistent in his formulations. In the following quote he describes intentions as structurally uncertain, here in terms of *iterability*, in the same formulations as he uses for the uncertainty of scientific and philosophical concepts, as if all intentions never completely reach their goal of pure presence:

...the fact that intention or attention, directed towards something iterable which in turn determines it as being iterable, will strive or tend in vain to actualize or fulfill itself, for it cannot, by virtue of its very structure, ever achieve this goal. In no case will it be fulfilled, actualized, totally present to its object and to itself. It is divided and deported in advance, by its iterability, towards others, removed [écartée] in advance from itself. This re-move makes its movement possible. Which is another way of saying that if this remove is its condition of possibility, it is not an eventuality, something that befalls it here and there, by accident. Intention is a priori (at once) différente: differing and deferring, in its inception. (Derrida 1988, 56, my italics)

One page further, this passage is clarified in the sense that actualization of an intention is not impossible, but structurally and necessarily marked by the possibility of failure:

Once again, to be precise: what is at stake here is an analysis that can account for structural possibilities. Once it is possible for X to function under certain conditions (for instance, a mark in the absence or partial absence of intention), the possibility of a certain non-presence or of a certain non-actuality pertains to the structure of the functioning under consideration, and pertains to it necessarily. (Derrida 1988, 57)

In short, in conceptual language the temporalization of différence means that the aim of conceptualization, i.e. full presence, is impossible. In other language and in other intentions the temporalization of différence means that the aim of the intention is not per se impossible, but it may be impossible, meaning that its impossibility is as a structural possibility, necessarily implied. In his discussion with Searle, Derrida emphasizes that this structural possibility needs to be taken seriously in the conceptualization and philosophical understanding of intentionality. Possible failures are not just exceptions of a general rule or standard that excludes them (this is how Searle prefers to define the intentions of speech acts), but, due to the incalculable working of différence, they are a necessary part of the conceptual analysis of intentions. Both explanations of différence are loosely taken together in the short passage that I cited above: it ‘... limits what it makes possible, while rendering its rigor and purity impossible.’ (Derrida 1988, 59, my italics)
Again, what is suspended by the temporization of diffèreance? Are the movements of diffèreance aiming at pure presence, while also interrupting this orientation? Or are they relating networks of contextuality, necessarily implying the possibility of loss and absence? And what, in this regard, is a choice, and what is a necessity? In general, intentions, according to Derrida, may be fulfilled, but they necessarily run the risk of not being fulfilled. The intentions of philosophy, however, are driven by an immortal and indestructible desire and need to follow an all-or-nothing-logic, looking for pure presence. Within philosophy, diffèreance is driven by this immortal desire, while also invoking the necessary impossibility of pure presence. For Derrida, there seems to be no choice here, but only necessity (Derrida 1985c, 115–116).

It thus seems that diffèreance and metaphysics are closely intertwined in Derrida’s work. Philosophy is necessarily metaphysical and diffèreance deranges its quest for pure presence. This still calls for critical questions: Can this telos of complete fulfilment and pure presence be justified, instead of taken for granted? And does Derrida really distinguish between the diffèreance within philosophy and the diffèreance as it works in other intentions – or is this distinction one that also needs to be deconstructed? Before I answer these questions, let us take a closer look to another aspect of diffèreance, its normative side, including its effects in ethics and politics.

Ethicity

The temporization of diffèreance has an ethical side as well. This idea is stated by Derrida in one of his earliest texts, even before he had developed the terminology of diffèreance. In the opening lines of ‘Violence and Metaphysics’, Derrida discusses the status of philosophy after the death of the philosophia perennis, which may perhaps also be called the alleged end of metaphysics, a situation that is first of all determined by questions, not questions within philosophy but about philosophy. He calls this situation a ‘community of the question’ or ‘discipline of the question’, that hides within it ‘an unbreachable responsibility.’ The questioning of philosophy has an ethical side, for in the discipline of this community, ‘… an injunction is announced: the question must be maintained. As a question.’ The first task for philosophy consists in leaving fundamental questions open. Answers can only be temporary, pure presence has become impossible. The infinite postponement of answers thus has an ethical side: ‘If this commandment has an ethical meaning, it is not in that it belongs to the domain of the ethical, but in that it ultimately authorizes every ethical law in general.’ (Derrida 1978a, 80) This is what Derrida later calls the domain of ethicity.

The ethical task of philosophy is guarded by diffèreance, because diffèreance precludes pure presence and definite answers. The openness of philosophy is
thus guaranteed by *différence* in movements that are later articulated by Derrida as *invention de l’autre*, invention of the other (Derrida 2007). Ethical laws and rules presuppose this openness, that in itself cannot be grasped by a concept: ‘There is therefore neither law nor commandment which does not confirm and enclose – that is, does not dissimulate by presupposing it – the possibility of the question.’ (Derrida 1978a, 80)

**Justice**

The ethical side of deconstruction has become more visible in Derrida’s later work. One of the important texts in this respect is *Force of Law* (Derrida 1992a), where Derrida discusses the relation between law (*droit*) and justice. There is no metaphysical foundation for laws, every actual foundation – e.g. in a constitution – always has a beginning of historical and political force and violence. On the one hand, ethics and legal systems need rules, laws and juridical procedures, although they are never definitive, fixed or above discussion. The rules and laws aim for justice, but complete justice will never be reached. The rules and procedures need to be justified themselves, but there are no ultimate criteria to judge them. The ‘law of the laws’ (*la loi des lois*) is that there is no criterion (Derrida 1985b, 94). We have to strive for justice, but we cannot definitely know what justice is (Derrida 1985b, 107). On the other hand, therefore, ethics is also more than just following a rule, it needs the indeterminacy of justice. Laws aim for justice, but justice is infinitely postponed. Ethical and juridical decisions are thus always characterized by an aporia between legal systems and incalculable justice:

Law (*droit*) is not justice. Law is the element of calculation, and it is just that there be law, but justice is incalculable, it requires us to calculate with the incalculable; and aporetic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary, of justice, that is to say of moments in which the decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule. (Derrida 1992a, 16)

We aim for justice, but it can never be ensured. There can be no justice without the experience of an aporia, without the experience of the impossible. There may be a right decision, but, in Derrida’s view, that takes place as a good application of law, it cannot be called justice.

I think that there is no justice without that experience, however impossible it may be, of aporia. Justice is an experience of the impossible. A will, a desire, a demand for justice whose structure wouldn’t be an experience of aporia would have no chance to be what it is, namely, a call for justice. Every time that something comes to pass or turns out well, every time that we placidly apply a good rule to a particular case, to a correctly subsumed example, according to a determinant judgment, we can be sure that law (*droit*) may find itself accounted for, but certainly not justice. (Derrida 1992a, 16)
Justice can never find the status or situation of presence: ‘There is never a moment that we can say in the present that a decision is just […]’, or that someone is a just man – even less, “I am just”. Instead of “just”, we could say legal or legitimate […]. Justice will never be present, it is the experience of absolute alterity, an impossibility and an aporia, and therefore unpresentable (Derrida 1992a, 27).

Derrida distinguishes three examples or appearances of this aporia: a just decision is at the same time regulated and without regulation, it needs to go through the ideal of the undecidable and it needs to interrupt the deliberation of its rational justification. The last aporia demonstrates that justice is urgent, it needs to be done here and now, it cannot wait, and therefore it should not be thought as an horizon of expectation but as interruption of any expectation. In consequence, justice is infinitely deferred, not as a future presence, but as what remains to come (Derrida 1992a, 27).

In this manner Derrida discusses justice on the level of ethicity, the quasi-transcendental conditions of ethics and politics. The aporia’s of ethicity have strong effects on the level of ethics and politics. According to Derrida, taking a decision is more than following a rule, that would the calculable carrying out of a program. A free and responsible decision needs to account for the rules and procedures as well, which implies going through the undecidibility of an aporia. This is a consequence of the ‘law of the law’, that there is no ultimate criterion to judge or to legitimate laws, rules and procedures. The justification of such a criterion would be a metaphysical foundation that necessarily would find itself in deconstruction. A moral decision would require at the same time the application and interruption of moral laws. As a consequence, the aporia of a moral decision involves the hubris of an over-duty (sur-devoir) that transgresses every determinate duty and rule and makes it impossible to make a just decision (Derrida 1993, 16).

In this approach of ethics, moral responsibility becomes an impossible and unlimited task. My responsibility for the singular other cannot be framed in general moral systems, because the other interrupts any general rule or practice. Moral responsibility and decisions demand rules and their interruption, demand both ethics and the sacrifice of ethics.

A decision can only come into being in a space that exceeds the calculable program that would destroy all responsibility by transforming it into a programmable effect of determinate causes. There can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable. (Derrida 1988, 116)

In consequence, moral decisions and moral responsibility withdraw from any attempt to a theoretical determination (Derrida 1992b, 10, 1993, 20, 1995, 40–41). This in itself already extreme view on moral decisions and moral responsibility gets even more complicated by Derrida’s conviction that
'tout autre est tout autre', that every other (one) is every (bit) other (Derrida 1995, 77–88). A preference of one other above another other can in no way be justified, according to Derrida. My responsibility for God, for my neighbor, for my child or for my cat needs to but cannot be sufficiently weighed against each other. Paradoxically, Derrida’s philosophy of difference seems to lead him to an indifference between many others. Ethics and morality seem to be become extremely complicated because of their différential conditions of (im)possibility.

**Deconstruction, Différence and Justice**

In terms of deconstruction, this means that the texts and institutions of law (droit) can be deconstructed and have to be deconstructed, but justice is indeterminable and cannot be deconstructed. Derrida even writes that it is the difference between law and justice that makes deconstruction possible:

(1) The deconstructibility of law (droit) […] makes deconstruction possible.
(2) The undeconstructibility of justice also makes deconstruction possible, indeed is inseparable from it. (3) The result: deconstruction takes place in the interval that separates the undeconstructibility of justice from the deconstructibility of droit. (Derrida 1992a, 15)

Deconstruction thus finds itself between the two poles of law and justice (Derrida 1992a, 22). Derrida makes things more complicated by writing several contradictory passages: ‘Deconstruction is justice’ (Derrida 1992a, 15); ‘This kind of justice […] is the very movement of deconstruction at work in law and the history of law,’ (Derrida 1992a, 25) and ‘Justice is not the same as deconstruction.’ (Derrida 1997, 27) This can best be understood in such a way that deconstruction dismantles legal texts and procedures in order to create space for an uncalculated event of justice. Deconstruction as ‘invention of the other’ is also an ‘invention of justice’, which means that there can be no justice without deconstruction, but also that justice can never be ensured.

We can recognize the structure of différence in this idea of justice, although it has slightly changed. Ethical rules and juridical laws aim for justice, justice is infinitely postponed, but it also needs to be thought as an interruption of this postponement. In the movements of différence, justice – ‘if such a thing exists,’ Derrida adds (Derrida 1992a, 15) – cannot wait, it needs to be realized here and now, but it also infinitely remains to come.

However, différence cannot adequately be articulated as the condition of possibility and impossibility of justice. In Derrida’s approach, justice is not the aim of a metaphysical circular enclosure, it is not a future present, but it rests entirely on the side of the impossible. Différence makes legitimate decisions possible, while in its same movements the goal of the legal order
and its developments, i.e. justice, remains impossible, remains to come. Justice is only made possible, but will never be actually realized, in the dismantling and opening of legal systems.

If we ask again, what exactly is suspended in this movement of *différence*, then the answer is clear: justice is infinitely postponed. But it also shows that a change has occurred in the thinking of *différence*. In Derrida’s early work, it is the desire for pure presence that is deferred by the referential movements of *différence* and interrupted by the completely other. Now in his later work it is the desire for the *tout autre*, for the completely other, that is endlessly deferred and interrupted. Instead of pure presence, it is now pure justice as an absolute alterity that is the object of desire. The purity of justice is from the start only described in negative terms: justice can only be thought as indeterminable, impossible, incalculable and undeconstructible.

The same *différantial* structure can be found in Derrida’s theme of the messianic. The promise and call for a better future needs to be kept alive by deconstruction. Messianic justice is not a future presence but needs to thought as completely other. The promised and expected Messiah has to remain completely unpredictable and indeterminable. Derrida wants to exclude from this expectation any religious or political privilege. He can only thematize the messianic promise and expectation as an imminence without a horizon of expectation, therefore as an excavation of existing traditions, the messianisms. He makes a strict distinction between these messianisms and the purely formal structure of the messianic that guides and interrupts them (Derrida 1994, 81–82, 210–212). Moreover, Derrida claims that this messianic structure is a universal structure of every utterance (Caputo 1997, 22–23).

This excavation highlights another side of the change in the effects of *différence*. In the early work of Derrida the economic circle of metaphysical philosophy was, on the one hand, problematized as a violent move of enclosure, while, on the other hand, not naïvely rejected but accepted as inevitable. In Derrida’s thinking of the messianic this has changed in an avoidance of any horizon or cyclic gesture: messianic justice must be thought as a pure alterity, without any determination. For Derrida, the slightest beginning of a determination is already suspect.

The same goes for Derrida’s texts on the gift. It is necessary to think the gift and the economic circle together, but also to keep the gift as undetermined as possible, or better, to understand the gift as the impossible: ‘...If the gift is a name for the impossible, we still think it, we name it, we desire it. [...] One can think, desire, and say only the impossible, according to the measureless measure of the impossible.’ (Derrida 1991, 29)

In short, justice, the messianic and the gift must be expected and desired, but must as well remain ‘*tout autre*’, completely other. In this ethical side of his work, Derrida seems to have come very close to Levinas (Derrida 1999;
Critchley (1992). The movements of *différence* bring about infinite deferral, suspending pure justice that needs to be prepared for as an unexpected event. The pure presence of metaphysical desire seems to be replaced by a negative purity of absolutely indeterminable justice. This somewhat different elaboration of *différence* in Derrida’s later work raises the same questions that were mentioned above: why does this suspended justice need to be pure? Is this a choice or a necessity? Let me relate these questions to a summary of the three versions of *différence* that have been discussed above.

**Three Versions of *Différence***

We have found three versions of *différence*:

1. *Différence* related to conceptual reflection in science and philosophy. Derrida recognizes in this respect a necessary all-or-nothing-logic reaching for a pure presence. Due to the movements of *différence* this pure presence is interrupted, thus made impossible and therefore infinitely suspended. The temporization of *différence* is the necessary infinite disruption and postponement of pure presence.

2. *Différence* related to all kinds of intentions that are not per se conceptual. There is no all-or-nothing-logic that looks for pure presence and thereby would make accomplishment of the intention impossible, like in the first version of *différence*. But there necessarily is the structural possibility of failure and non-fulfilment. The temporization of *différence* is the infinite prolonging of its references, since the intention can always be taken up in a new context.

3. *Différence* related to practical and moral intentions and decisions. These decisions aim at justice, which can only be thought as pure alterity, and therefore remain indeterminable. The temporization of *différence* is the necessary infinite expectation and postponement of pure otherness.

There is no version of *différence* that in itself strives for pure presence, but somehow, in all three versions in a different way, the desire for purity is presupposed. The first and third version are strongly geared to purity, either keeping alive the metaphysical urge for pure presence, while deranging it from within, or infinitely opening up constructions in order to make space for an alterity, never pure enough.

The second version is a weaker one, not necessarily aiming at purity, but still described as marked by the necessary possibility of lack of fulfilment. In fact, this mitigated version is only rarely discussed, in *Limited Inc.* only in relation to the stronger all-or-nothing-logic; Derrida also does not always make a clear distinction between the first and second version. Moreover, the
consequences and effects of the second version of *différance*, related to everyday intentions, are very close to, if not the same as, the effects of the philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur: an infinite line of finite references and interpretations. However, Derrida has always taken a strong distance from hermeneutics. He fiercely argues for dissemination instead of polysemy (Derrida 1981, 384–385), stressing difference above coherence. The weaker version of *différance* at least needs to be understood as deranging the alleged metaphysical strategy of the hermeneutic circle that would enclose and control its object of interpretation (Derrida 1979). This is not only the case in reading philosophical texts, but also in interpretations of literature (Derrida 2005). In many of his analyses Derrida draws a distinction between, on the one hand, a determining and calculating approach, which stands for the metaphysical style of the enclosing circle, and, on the other hand, an incalculable and indeterminable interruption of the calculation – not only in strictly philosophical and conceptual texts, but also in the contexts of ethics, politics and literature. This sharp difference between calculation and the incalculable is what unites the first and third version. In short, Derrida’s texts demonstrate a great inclination to favor the strong versions of *différance*, while also the weaker version still seems to be reminiscent of the tension between impossibility and purity.

**The Problems of the Desire for Purity in Différance**

After this analysis of *différance*, the question emerges again: why is the temporization of *différance* a suspension of *purity*? According to Derrida, conceptual analysis is necessarily part of an all-or-nothing-logic that aims for pure clarity. This is supposed not to be a matter of choice but of necessity. However, that is not as self-evident as it is presented by Derrida.

Scientific and philosophical reflections are performed on several levels of abstraction and generality. It is true that general distinctions on a scientific theoretical level presuppose a larger metaphysical framework, but that does not mean that all conceptual distinctions need to be forced, through constructions of oppositions, into the extreme dilemma of either pure presence or impossibility. All kinds of systems, hypotheses and procedures can be practically useful without claiming to be absolutely true and self-evident. It is very well possible to make a choice to discuss matters on a metaphysical level or on a different level, like scientific research, applied ethics or theoretical interpretation in the humanities, to name just a few examples. It is also possible to relate such reflections to a more profound metaphysical level, but that is not necessary. Of course Derrida was aware of such a distinction, but the logic of *différance* clearly seems to overlook it.

And even if one chooses to discuss things with respect to their first principles and presuppositions, on a metaphysical level, then still an all-or-
nothing logic is not evident at all. Contrary to what Derrida states, not all philosophy can be said to attempt to conquer and enclose its objects, ‘... to interiorize every limit as being and as being its own proper.’ (Derrida 1982, xix) In the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur the contextuality of texts and appearances shows them to be limited by horizons, but not in such a way that these limits are taken as beings or as proper elements of a conceptual system. Here we find a crucial difference between Hegelian dialectics and the hermeneutical circle – and in this respect Derrida seems to be more Hegelian and more metaphysical than Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur.

The contextual embedding of all understanding makes pure presence impossible. There will always be the possibility of a new reference, a new meaning, a new nuance. But by sticking to an all-or-nothing-logic, Derrida keeps the metaphysical desire for pure presence alive, while deconstructing all its appearances as contextual, thus taking the openness of new references for a suspension of ultimate full presence. However, the contexts and horizons of understanding are not our own projections, they are given to us as historical, social and cultural constellations that no one can survey or control. We can try to understand and conceptualize them in theories and worldviews, but these views are themselves contextually embedded as well; they are hypotheses that do not necessarily claim pure presence, that do not interiorize their own limit as a being. Perhaps hermeneutics can offer a more radical critique of the metaphysical tradition than Derrida’s deconstruction.

A binary all-or-nothing-logic is not necessary, following it to the bitter end is a choice. Derrida makes this choice, though often implicitly. As a consequence, he relates the movements of différance to a pure presence, and in his later work to a pure alterity. In deconstructions of explicitly metaphysical constructions, this strategy is powerful and successful, a welcome strategy of interpretation. In Derrida’s quasi-transcendental analysis of the conditions of (im)possibility of ethics and politics, however, deconstruction and différance often are counterproductive, leading the opposite effects of what they seem to desire. By underscoring the absolute indeterminacy of justice, Derrida makes every effort to understand and determine justice impossible. Due to the requirement of purity and thus absolute indeterminability, every effort to make a distinction between justice and injustice becomes suspect. The paradoxical result is that, in being impure, all attempts to make such a distinction, become indifferent. Indifference is thus the undesirable effect of Derrida’s deconstruction of law and ethics (Evink 2009, 2019).

Fortunately, a different reading of deconstruction and différance is possible. That is the weaker version of différance, stressing the inevitable contextuality of all utterances and all phenomena, without the metaphysical urge for purity. In this reading, différance still manifests how radically provisional and temporary all ideas, views and appearances are. It is still
possible to ask for metaphysical foundations, but all metaphysical con-
structions are contextual and temporal because of their embedding in
historical and cultural horizons. These horizons themselves are also
impossible to determine or define for once and for all. It is also possible
to make useful and convincing distinctions in the search for truth and
justice. They do not by definition get stuck in an aporia between pure
presence or pure otherness on the one hand, and calculation or determi-
nation on the other.

The most important and valuable aspects of difféance can all be found in
the weaker version. In the stronger version a metaphysical desire for purity is
still at work that, through a binary logic of ‘all-or-nothing’ gets stuck in
a dilemma between absolute purity and determining calculation, which in
the end runs the severe risk of making everything indifferent. These pro-
blems can be avoided if we choose for the weaker version of difféance and
deconstruction.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

Press.
Blackwell.
Derrida, J. 1973. Speech and Phenomena. Translated by David B. Allison. Evanston:
Northwestern University Press.
Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Derrida, J. 1978a. Writing and Difference. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago:
University of Chicago Press.
by John P. Leavey, jr. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
London and New York: Continuum.
Press.
Derrida, J. 1985b. “Préjugés. Devant la loi.” In La faculté de juger, edited by J. Derrida,


