Deconstruction After All

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For Stephen and Christine

Deconstruction After All:
Reflections and Conversations

CHRISTOPHER NORRIS

Edited by

David Jonathan Y. Bayot

De La Salle University Publishing House
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Deconstruction After All:
Reflections and Conversations

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Cultural Studies: Theory, Politics and Practice, ed. Paul Bowman (London: Pluto Press), 76-98. The interview was conducted in Cardiff on 28 March 2002.

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My largest debt is of course to Christopher Norris—his close collaboration on the book's content and design enabled the book to metamorphose from possibility to reality. It's the editor's great pleasure to work with such a "model intellectual" and I would say of him as he did of Baruch Spinoza: "a highly intelligent, single-minded and utterly committed thinker … [who has] lived a life of exemplary virtue … [and who is] never angry." I'm also grateful to all the interviewers of Norris in this volume, since without their dedicated labors, this book would definitely have been impossible. I would like to acknowledge particularly the following interlocutors who have given the editor their word

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Lastly, I would like to dedicate my own small part in the book's preparation to three persons:

To *Isagani R. Cruz* on the occasion of his seventieth birthday. Cruz it was who first introduced me to Christopher Norris via a loan of Deconstruction: Theory and Practice (second edition; 1987), and that was in 1988 when I was a young undergraduate. I hope that in hindsight, Cruz, an avowed Philippine critic, sees no cause for regret in the loan.

To *Daphne Chloe* and *Lance Evan Bayot* who could be thinking of deconstruction in another way. At age five and three, they find it cool to press randomly on the computer keyboard

and see letters being typed out, one catching up on the other as if in a play. I have yet to know exactly at what point have these kids already figured out an equal if not greater cause of joy: that is, to put all the inscriptions they've come up with and subject them all "under erasure" first by turning their gaze to the cursor and then start backspacing.

David Jonathan Y. Bayot
Manila, Philippines
April 2015

Introduction

David Jonathan Y. Bayot

In preparing to write the introduction to this volume of (mainly) interviews which Christopher Norris has given over the years, I have in many instances found myself amused by the memory of a story I read about the eminent Russian pianist, Emil Gilels. After a recital in the mid-west of the United States, Gilels found himself in the company of an enthusiastic young man who came to the pianist for an autograph. He chatted a bit with Gilels and later on asked an "extraordinary" question, memorable enough for Gilels to keep recounting the incident for many years to come. The young man said: "Mr. Gilels, you've been really friendly. Can I ask you something? I've heard *both* pronunciations, but which is correct? Is it Schu*mann* or Schu*bert*?

While initially I thought it quite unlikely that this hilarious incident should have any relevance to my work on Norris's polemical discussion of Deconstruction, I soon realized that my muse of memory had a point after all in recalling to my mind the Schubert / Schumann story while preparing for this book. There was this one occasion while I was at work on it when I felt the need to keep my mind momentarily off the texts of Norris as well as those standard con-texts of his deconstructive discourse which I was cross-referencing: excellent works by Derek Attridge, Catherine Belsey, J. Hillis Miller, and Julian Wolfreys, among

others. That was when I found myself craving a different sort of nourishment, one quite distinct from the richly flavored scholarly diet I had relished so far. I decided to go *out there* and search for other possible ways of packaging deconstruction that might actually be helpful to my presentation of Norris's case. I went to Google and typed "deconstruction." I was astonished to find included in the list of sites that came up, an onscreen selection of appealing images of colorful salads presented in a counter of boxes classified under "deconstructed salad"!

I was intrigued enough to click and read on, and before I knew it, I was in the forum section of a culinary site where I guess I was in good company: chefs—professional and amateur—were as lost as I was in the culinary maze of possible meanings for that serving of "deconstructed salad." Like me, the chef suddenly found the familiar course distinctly defamiliarizing, even off-putting, after the qualifier-dressing messed up the dish (and the tradition of its preparation as well). I would conjecture that we—chefs and critics alike—share the same apprehension that we might have to face the eventual possibility of a cooked salad if this uncertainty of "deconstruction" or "deconstructed" meaning persists. After quite a number of exchanges among themselves, explaining, figuring out, and probing further into this course (or discourse, as some "fashionable" language-oriented critics would say) of "deconstructed salad," the chef who first posed the question came back and made a "final" comment and did so not without a hint of exasperation: "When I posted the original question, I was feeling rather inadequate for not knowing what this term was supposed to mean. Now, I've decided it's merely pretentious 'chef-speak,' invented to elevate the dish to a (higher?) level than it actually needs or even ought to have." And what struck me was the response to the comment which actually named the likely culprit behind all these confusions and messy spills: literary criticism(!), my own main professional affiliation for two decades. The responder said: "not just chef-speak—it's used in every field, usually pretentiously. I believe (not sure) that *it originates in literary criticism, and is usually incomprehensible*" (my emphasis).

If only I were "techie" enough to post a comment then, I thought, I would have jumped in, joined the discussion, and "enlightened" them on what deconstruction (or deconstructed or deconstructive or deconstructivist) should mean (though I still wouldn't have thought myself capable of mixing it with salad). In hindsight, I was lucky as I was saved then by my ignorance, especially since that ignorance would turn out to involve more than just certain aspects of technology! It was at this shaky stage of knowledge-ignorance about deconstruction—especially as made to define something concrete—that I was cued to turn back to the project. At this point, the first chapter of this book—a discussion between Jacques Derrida and Christopher Norris on the subject of "deconstructivist architecture"—rang a bell as it echoes the chef's observation that "it's used in every field" and "it originates in literary criticism"! The piece is a spirited exchange between two intellectuals whose identities are inextricable from deconstruction. The first of them coined the term "deconstruction" in the sixties and singlehandedly made it the currency in which immense volumes of intellectual as well as extra-intellectual trade (involving even the culinary art) have been carried out since the late twentieth century. And the other man is one of the first Derrida scholars to write a popular *and* scholarly book in the early eighties to introduce the English-speaking world to deconstruction in philosophy and literary studies. That book, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* has turned out to be a bestseller and has been translated into Japanese, Hebrew, Korean, Serbo-Croat, Arabic, and Chinese. And I would add that, since the book's first release in 1982, Norris has been the only one among the large company of Derrida scholars whose considerable number of books make up an oeuvre that, in musical terms, might be called the Derrida Variations.

In this conversation-discussion which comprises the first chapter of the book, Norris asks Derrida firstly if there *is* or *could be* such a thing as "deconstructivist art" or "deconstructivist architecture," and secondly, if the qualifier "deconstructivist" actually means and names a style of art and architecture, rather

than a perspective or a way of looking at art and architecture? To the surprise and maybe to the dismay of many, Derrida replies: "Well, I don't know… I must say, when I first met—I won't say 'deconstructivist architecture'—but the deconstructivist discourse on architecture, I was rather puzzled and suspicious. I thought at first that perhaps this was an analogy, a displaced discourse, and something more analogical than rigorous." Derrida proceeds to a scrupulous discussion of what he intended deconstruction to mean and what the term might be saying about the subject / object that it is qualifying. Derrida concludes the conversation with words that, in the spirit of paradox, convey a *certain* sense of uncertainty, warning against reductive gestures of framing (or typecasting) the deconstructive brand with the consequence of undermining its radical potential and ensuring its eventual demise. He says: "I'm reluctant to say that Deconstruction is Modern or Post-Modern. But I should also be reluctant to say that it's not Modern or that it's anti-Modern or anti-Post-Modern. I wouldn't want to say what is Deconstructive (if there is such a thing), [if it] is specifically Modern or Post-Modern. So we have to be very careful with the use of these epithets."

In that interview, Derrida underscores the necessary exercise of care in making sense of deconstruction by reiterating many times in the conversation that the term is a signifier, a signature where the signified is, if one insists on having *one*, "a very complicated gesture", as well as "a multiplicity of gestures."

Over the years, it has been with a heightened, auto-critical sense of care that Norris has proceeded to undertake his polemical project of making sense of this complicated gesture of deconstruction. Norris is ever mindful of deconstruction's situation and reiteration in a host of contexts alongside Derrida's many texts (and yet more texts from his commentators, friends, and foes) where the term has been made—with intentions ranging from great display of enthusiasm to downright indifference or hostility—to qualify a smorgasbord of objects (inclusive even of salad), and warrant an all-embracing disposition towards a range of matters, from the commonplace all the way to highly specialized intellectual terrains.

The ubiquity of deconstruction in terms of its coverage and its representation in both academic and mass media certainly fosters a sense of deconstruction as a popular hero who champions the cause of Everyone. It is a sense or non-sense (that is, as absence or abrogation of sense) which has been made to pertain to acts of deconstructing (and with matching image) all walls of meanings and senses that define, limit, value, and discipline. Within that capacious terrain—definitions, limitations, valuations, and regulations are viewed with suspicion and are eventually rendered as utterly pointless in a reality that is constituted by social *constructs* or texts, that is, where "reality" and any notion of it are themselves constructs and texts to be de-constructed. After all, isn't the all-purpose line that fuels such claims a dictum by no less than the arch-deconstructionist, Derrida himself—that "there is nothing outside the text" (as the popular version goes)?

Norris certainly has no quarrel with the notion that this world is to a large extent a social formation and that *many*—though by no means *all*—matters of this reality are social constructs and can be reckoned in metaphorical terms as texts to be challenged and revised. There is no doubt that such a "textual" understanding of the world and the radical edges of it has taken the course of dissident history—not consolidated teleology—to break down walls that are viciously exclusionary and brutally oppressive; walls put up on grounds of class, race, and gender as well as professions of specialization (in a broad sense of the term). History would surely be a convincing witness to how the "-isms" and movements empowered by such textual understanding—feminism, queer criticism, Marxism, post-colonialism, cultural materialism—have made the world a fairer place to inhabit, both within and beyond the academic field (and even the line dividing them could be construed as a construct). But for Norris, a real problem arises when, in the context of such textual (or some would say discursive) understanding of the world, one begins to blur distinctions and in fact to see "distinction" as in essence and practice a pervasive mechanism of oppression; where judgment (here taken as an act of bad faith) is considered, quite simply, as an unfair gesture of declaring one's superiority over

others, that is, without rational basis. What is worrisome, for Norris, is when such blurring or dismantling of boundaries and parameters is attributed to or equated with deconstruction and more specifically with Jacques Derrida. For Norris, those cases of mistaken attribution are not to be taken lightly as nothing more than matters of misrepresentation, since they surely dissipate the ethos and defuse the ethical force of deconstruction. In other words, reiteration of those received ideas can make the deconstructive projects exemplified by Derrida himself look, in the eyes of both academics and non-academics, just like so much confetti.

In the context of blurring boundaries, Norris invites his readers to listen closely to a range of erroneous notions that they most likely would have heard of, subscribed to (albeit perhaps unwittingly), and ascribed to deconstruction: (1) where history is a fictive construct and there is no historical truth; (2) where knowledge—even scientific knowledge—is ascertained only within a paradigm, and is devoid of any kind of epistemic or truth-telling privilege (since a paradigm shift is bound to occur anyway); (3) where alterity or otherness is privileged as absolute, so that to engage or debate its terms is construed as an act of violence; (4) where truths are always no more than products of socio-cultural values and ideological state apparatuses; (5) where disciplinary boundaries are dissolved and interdisciplinarity canonized as an egalitarian gesture of levelling everything down to text or exclusively a matter of textual construction; (6) where since reality is always already a description by and within language, the world must then be ultimately dependent on the way one chooses to describe it, mostly as a matter of coming up with new metaphors (since scientific truths are taken to be essentially metaphors); and (7) where the subject-object distinction is in fact a construct for there is no object without a subject and the subject, in so far as it is socially constructed, is but a product and effect of the social order, thus impotent to enact dissidence.

And in this hyperreality of crisscrossing and con-fusions of spaces and temporality, where contemporaneity is unduly privileged at the expense of historicity in a specific and non-

reductive sense, Norris pulls absolutely no argumentative punches. Thus he cites in this book case after case of such uncritical blurring. He names the oftentimes unobtrusive culprits behind the scenes, takes them—be they personalities or constellations of concepts—roundly to task, and conducts his polemics in terms that are lucid and coherent enough for readers to follow the logic and overall conception of deconstruction that he seeks to foreground.

In this book, readers will find Norris's vigorous polemics with Hayden White, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Fran—ois Lyotard, Thomas Kuhn, Emmanuel Levinas, Pierre Bourdieu, Richard Rorty, and Stanley Fish. And alongside his uncompromising critiques emerge passages of committed close and careful reading of Jacques Derrida's texts, as he cites and reiterates Derrida's philosophical contexts in the works of Immanuel Kant, Gaston Bachelard, and Georges Canguilhem, as well as in the fields of epistemology and philosophy of science.

The book also offers a coda of essays on two eminent critics. These personal accounts—one on his mentor, the late Frank Kermode and the other on his comrade in the long march against relativism, Terry Eagleton—are included in the volume to give Norris's foregrounded sense of Derrida's deconstruction another round and ground of Derridean re-iterations. It was Kermode who first opened up Norris's early habitation in the traditional Eng Lit world to the new and invigorating currents of French theory (including deconstruction), and that was in a postgraduate seminar at University College, London in the 1970s. Kermode's presence, as readers are bound to see, explains the trajectory of Norris's career in two ways. One the one hand, he serves as a model for Norris's lifelong disposition of openness to Theory in a deconstructive sense where the critic-theorist has manifested a penchant for opening up the literary (as likewise the philosophical) tradition to a probe of that tradition's very "conditions of possibility." On the other hand, Kermode represents to Norris the same deconstructive *habitus* (as Thomas Aquinas would term it), but this time, directed to its radical offshoot in the project of deconstruction itself.

While the Kermode account reveals the mentor's as well as Norris's eventual disenchantment with Theory, at least as the latter has been appropriated to enact trenchant though reckless acts of dogmatic diminution against literature and the discipline of responsible reading, the other essay extols a figure who is a paragon of optimism for Norris—the critical and auto-critical presence of Terry Eagleton. It is a presence marked by radical and committed political interventions in cultural criticism and literary theory, to name (in very general terms) two key areas of Norris's deconstructive attention.

Eagleton would not call himself a deconstructionist, and Norris's Marxism is less prominent in his academic work although he is strongly committed to it as a matter of activist politics. All the same it is clear that Norris feels an affinity with Eagleton brought about by a shared sense of deconstruction's radical potential, epitomized in Derrida's words: "Deconstruction is or should be an affirmation linked to promises, to involvement, to responsibility." It's an affirmation linked, especially for Norris, to "making sense,"—an act that takes to heart Derrida's remark about deconstruction, that it "is not easy, and it is never done in or through a single gesture. It takes a long time and involves some very complicated gestures. It is always unfinished, heterogeneous, and I think there is no such thing as a 'pure' Deconstruction or a deconstructive project that is finished or completed" (see the first chapter).

It is with this unfinished and heterogeneous sense of deconstruction—a sense of deconstruction's "nonsense," distinctive as one perpetual auto-critical "nonidentity"—that Norris stages his polemics with critical events of non-sense that threaten to imperil deconstruction and the latter's project of affirmation and commitment to promises, involvement, and responsibility as a human gesture.

It is at this point in my account of deconstruction as a *human* gesture, rather than a particular or indeed universal entity, that I feel the need to say a few words about the relevance and significance of this book's publication in the Philippines (with a Philippine editor). What I've said so far might seem to suggest

that this is a topic somehow "foreign" to my national and ethnic affiliation as a Filipino and, more specifically, as a Chinese-Filipino or a Chinese born and bred in the Philippines. In fact, my birth and residence in the Philippines, as someone who is, racially speaking, a foreigner in a country with a history distinctly marked by more than four hundred years of colonization might make my participation in this volume look decidedly incongruous and, in fact, ridiculous to some national colleagues. The empiricism of some of them would suggest that my gesture of editing this book is a culpable act of indifference to my own community. It would then stand condemned as a project that ignores, marginalizes, or totally derails the crucial issue of national, ethnic, or socio-cultural formation.

Before I concede the possibility of construing the book in this way, thereby lending credence to such an empiricist understanding of its apolitical and ethnically disengaged character, I think that perhaps a brief prefatory polemic—a polemic-clip, so to speak—may help to clear the theoretical ground and enable readers to stage a deconstruction of their own empiricism. Better: it may then initiate their shift to an alternative ground where geography and origin are signatures of originality, autonomy, and destiny.

While this book revolves around a plot of so-called Western origin and is filled with non-Filipino characters, I would say that it is, in a very significant sense, a Philippine book *and* a book about deconstruction and related issues *at one and the same time*. And by calling it a Philippine book, I'm surely not just referring to its place of publication. More than that, I believe that this volume on deconstruction, although it doesn't have anything to say very directly about post-colonialism or the nation, nevertheless foregrounds many critical issues that "Philippine Studies" cannot afford to ignore. The Philippine Studies I have in mind pertains to a number of related referents, most of which might be subsumed under headings provided by the interdisciplinary field of studies current here in the country since the 1970s. Otherwise—though again without veering back and forth between the particular and the universal – it can be taken as referring to a range of subjects

that pertain to the Philippines, or in general as an ethos of critical, scholarly, and intellectual enquiry.

Readers may, at this point, allow themselves to be reminded of the manifestations of critical blur-speak cited a few paragraphs back and then, from that vantage-point, take heed of the implication of such speech-acts for work carried on within the frame of the Philippine nation. I believe that the dialogues about deconstruction contained in this volume do (and should) bear insistently on pertinent questions that national and post-colonial critical discourses cannot afford to ignore. And given the contextual limit of my own disciplinary terrain, that is, Philippine literature (or inevitably, by extension, Philippine culture), I find the following questions worth posing: (1) Should the category of the "Philippine" in, say, Philippine culture necessarily be construed as a univocal term possessing an inviolable referent—a term sufficiently basic or essential to warrant a high-ground rejection of the so-called inessential? (2) Should terms with national affiliation, say "Philippine literature", automatically insulate such a body of texts from the dynamics of engagement with international discussions of literature and aesthetics—that is, on grounds that the latter fora are non-national? (3) Should national categorization be relentlessly reasserted and canonized as a term of *difference* (or distinction), and thus be taken as a signature of privilege? (4) Should the sociological contextualization and explication of Philippine cultural entities or texts—say the poetics of a particular body or practice of literature written in a specific Philippine language and aesthetic tradition—exempt these texts from being interrogated from outside the specific context, given the presumption that such local context is an absolute ground of reference? (5) Should the national / local context be, for the sake of "grounding", conceived univocally, that is to say, fixated as an indissoluble unit of Self and Identity? (6) Should the prevalent interdisciplinary approach to Philippine Studies persist without fearing the eventuality of a facile bleaching out of the specific configurations of individual fields comprising the discipline?

While these questions would no doubt resist any easy answers, I nevertheless hope that my framing of them—as my

way of contextualizing this discussion about deconstruction and of concluding this preface—will go at least some way toward establishing useful and productive terms for readers' subsequent engagement with issues raised in the following interviews. I trust that they will find it useful and stimulating, whether their primary aim is to acquire a more detailed and dynamic knowledge of deconstruction, a better understanding of the many claims and counter-claims that have swirled around it, or the way that deconstructive strategies may work both to promote and to problematize certain Philippine modes of national or ethnic self-identification. These outcomes will all be beneficial so long as in the end (or in one of the ends) there lies a significant yield of (as Derrida puts it in "Et Cetera") "an attention paid to the irreducible plurality of signatures and an ethico-juridical as well as political vigilance to the effects of hegemony of one language over another, between one language and the other."

1

Jacques Derrida on Deconstruction and Art

Conversation with Christopher Norris

Of circumstantial detail it is perhaps enough to record that this interview was conducted at Derrida's home near Paris during a two-hour session in March 1998. He had wanted to attend the Tate Symposium and participate in a panel discussion with Bernard Tschumi, Peter Eisenman, Charles Jencks, and others. In the event, he was unable to make the trip and instead arranged with Symposium organizer Andreas Papadakis to do a video interview, screened as part of the Symposium proceedings. There was no time to submit questions or do much in the way of advance planning, but as it turned out, this was no problem: the interview covered all the main points I had hoped to raise, along with various related topics. Derrida kindly agreed to speak in English, which helped a great deal when it came to the screening and subsequent audience discussion. In editing the transcript, I have slightly expanded some of my questions to improve continuity and to offer some signposts or contextual cues for readers unfamiliar with Derrida's work. I have taken this opportunity to reconstruct one or two passages where the meaning wasn't altogether clear,

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but I have kept editorial intrusions to a minimum and trust that those who have seen the taped interview will judge this a faithful presentation of its content.

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In so far as one can define, explain, or summarize the Deconstructionist project, one's account might go very briefly as follows. Deconstruction locates certain crucial oppositions or binary structures of meaning and value that constitute the discourse of "Western metaphysics." These include (among many others) the distinctions between form and content, nature and culture, thought and perception, essence and accident, mind and body, theory and practice, male and female, concept and metaphor, speech and writing, etc. A Deconstructive reading then goes on to show how these terms are inscribed within a systematic structure of hierarchical privilege, such that one of each pair will always appear to occupy the sovereign or governing position. The aim is then to demonstrate—by way of close reading—how this system is undone, so to speak, from within; how the second or subordinate term in each pair has an equal (maybe a prior) claim to be treated as a *condition of possibility* for the entire system. Thus, writing is regularly marginalized, denounced, or put in its place—a strictly secondary, "supplementary" place—by a long line of thinkers in the Western tradition, from Plato and Aristotle to Rousseau, Husserl, Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, and the latter-day structuralist sciences of man. But just as often—as Derrida shows in *Of Grammatology*—writing resurfaces to assert its claim as the repressed other of this whole logocentric tradition, the "wandering outcast," scapegoat, or exile whose offstage role is a precondition of the system. And this curious "logic of supplementarity" operates whenever thinking is motivated by a certain constitutive need to exclude or deny that which makes it possible from the outset.

Now it is not hard to see how such a Deconstructive reading might affect the discourse of current (Post-Modern) architectural thought. Thus, Peter Eisenman suggests that "the traditional

opposition between structure and decoration, abstraction and figuration, figure and ground, form and function could be dissolved. Architecture could begin an exploration of the 'between' within these categories." And Derrida has likewise written of an architectural "supplementarity," a movement of *différance* between and within concepts that would open up hitherto unthought-of inventive possibilities. The interview has a good deal to say about this in relation to Derrida's collaborative venture with Eisenman and Tschumi. His book *The Truth in Painting* also has essays on Valeri, Adami, and Titus-Carmel. In their work—as in Derrida's recent texts—one can make out the signs of a close and reciprocal exchange between Deconstruction and a certain problematics of writing and graphic representation. But critics have also applied the term *Deconstruction* to other artists like Duchamp, Jasper Johns, and Francis Bacon. Derrida himself makes mention of Magritte in the context of "citationality" and the deconstruction of mimetic illusion through effects of juxtaposed image and text. And again there is his essay "Restitutions" raising the question of painterly "truth" by way of Meyer Schapiro's quarrel with Heidegger over the true significance of Van Gogh's *Old Shoes With Laces*, the question—seemingly so vital to each of them—as to who really owned those shoes.

So the interview asks what relation might exist between these various forms of deconstructive activity: that is to say—for want of better terms—"creative" Deconstruction on the one hand and diagnostic or critical commentary on the other. To pose the question like this is of course to fall back into the kind of value-laden binary thinking that Deconstruction sets out to challenge. But it is equally mistaken to believe that, having once seen through their delusory appearance, one can finally come out on the far side of all such "metaphysical" categories. What is required is a vigilant awareness of the way that they inhabit all our thinking about art, about criticism, philosophy, and the human sciences, while also giving rise to problematic tensions within and between those disciplines.

In *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida writes, "We must sharpen the points, the blades or the edges of a certain *chiasmus*." This

figure—the trope of crossing or exchanged attributes—is one that plays an important role in his reading of Kant and the "parergonal" discourse that frames Kant's thinking on questions of aesthetic judgment. It is also important to Eisenman, this and other tropes (like catachresis) that push beyond the bounds of reason or representation by radicalising language in its figural aspect. Thus Eisenman: "the way to catachresis is not to suppress metaphor but to find the catachresis repressed in metaphor, and the way to another architecture is not to suppress the Classical but in fact to cut in…to surgically open up the Classical and the Modern to find what is repressed." This interview may be read as an improvised commentary on the way that Deconstruction has opened up such questions for philosophy and the visual arts alike.

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CHRISTOPHER NORRIS: *Perhaps I could start by asking a perhaps rather naive question: can there be such a thing as "Deconstructivist art" or indeed "Deconstructivist architecture"? That is to say, do these terms refer to a given style, project, or body of work? Or do they not rather signify a certain way of looking at various works and projects, a perception that would break with (or at least seek to challenge) established ideas of form, value, and aesthetic representation?*

JACQUES DERRIDA: Well, I don't know…I must say, when I first met, I won't say "Deconstructive architecture," but the Deconstructive discourse on architecture, I was rather puzzled and suspicious. I thought at first that perhaps this was an analogy, a displaced discourse, and something more analogical than rigorous. And then—as I have explained somewhere—then I realised that on the contrary, the most efficient way of putting Deconstruction to work was by going through art and architecture. As you know, Deconstruction is not simply a matter of discourse or a matter of displacing the semantic content of the discourse, its conceptual structure or whatever. Deconstruction goes *through* certain social and political structures, meeting with

resistance and displacing institutions as it does so. I think that in these forms of art, and in any architecture, to deconstruct traditional sanctions—theoretical, philosophical, cultural—effectively, you have to displace…I would say "solid" structures, not only in the sense of material structures, but "solid" in the sense of cultural, pedagogical, political, economic structures. And all the concepts which are, let us say, the target (if I may use this term) of Deconstruction, such as theology, the subordination of the sensible to the intelligible and so forth—these concepts are effectively displaced in order for them to become "Deconstructive architecture." That's why I am more and more interested in it, despite the fact that I am technically incompetent.

NORRIS: *Could you say a little more about your work with Bernard Tschumi and Peter Eisenman, and some of the collaborative projects underway in Paris at the moment?*

DERRIDA: Well, what I could do is just a narration of the way things happened. Once, I had a phone call from Bernard Tschumi, who I didn't know at the time, except by reputation. Tschumi told me, "Some architects today are interested in your work and would you be interested in working with some of them, or one of them, on a project in La Villette?" As you know, Tschumi is responsible for all the architecture at La Villette. Of course I was surprised, but my answer was "Why not?" And so I had my first encounter with Tschumi and Eisenman. Then I met Eisenman many times in New York. We worked together, we coordinated everything in discussion, and now there is a book which is soon to be published on these collaborations. My proposal was that we start with a text that I had recently written on Plato's *Timaeus* because it had to do with space, with Deconstruction, so to speak, "in the universe." It also had to do with a problem I was interested in and that concerned, let us say, the *economic* determination of the way we usually read Plato. This strategic level was extremely important for me. So I gave this text to Peter Eisenman, and in his own way, he started a project that was correlated with but at the same time independent of my text. That was true collaboration—

not "using" the other's work, not just illustrating or selecting from it…and so there is a kind of discrepancy or, I would say, a productive dialogue between the concerns, the styles, the persons too. And so, after about eighteen months' or two years' work, the project is now ready to be "constructed," you might say…to be realized…

NORRIS: *So it would be wrong to see this as a new "turn" in your thinking, a sudden recognition of connections, affinities, or common points of interest between Deconstruction and the visual arts? In fact, there are many passages in your earlier writing—and I am thinking here of texts like* Force and Significance *or* Genesis and Structure*—where the argument turns on certain crucial (let us say) metaphors of an architectural provenance. The context here was your joint reading of the structuralist and phenomenological projects—more specifically of Saussure and Husserl—as two equally rigorous but finally incompatible reflections on the character of language and meaning. Thus, you write, "the relief and design of structures appears more clearly when content, which is the living energy of meaning, is neutralized. Somewhat like the architecture of an uninhabited or deserted city, reduced to its skeleton by some catastrophe of nature or art. A city no longer inhabited, not simply left behind, but haunted by meaning and culture." And of course these architectural figures and analogies occur more often in your later writings on Kant and the tradition of Classical aesthetics (for instance, "The Parergon" in* The Truth in Painting*). Thus, for Kant,* architectonic *is defined as the "art of systems," that which articulates the various orders of truth claim and ensures their proper (hierarchical) relationship one with another. So in a sense, one could argue that your work has always been crucially concerned with "architectural" models and metaphors. Do you perceive a clear continuity there, or am I just imagining all this?*

DERRIDA: No, not at all. But I would like to say something about the concept of analogy or metaphor you rightly used a moment a go. Of course there is a lot of architectural metaphor, not only in my texts but in the whole philosophical tradition.

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And Deconstruction—the word *Deconstruction*—sounds very much like a metaphor, an architectural metaphor. But I think that it's more complex than that, since the word appeared or was underlined in a certain situation where structuralism was dominant on the scene. So Deconstruction shared certain motifs with the structuralist project while at the same time attacking that project…

But Deconstruction doesn't mean that we have to stay within those architectural metaphors. It doesn't mean, for example, that we have to destroy something which is built—physically built or culturally built or theoretically built—just in order to reveal a naked ground on which something new could be built. Deconstruction is perhaps a way of questioning this architectural model itself—the architectural model which is generally a question, even within philosophy the metaphor of foundations, of superstructures, what Kant calls "architectonic," etc., as well as the concept of the *arche*…So Deconstruction means also the putting into question of architecture in philosophy and perhaps architecture itself.

When I discovered what we now call "Deconstructive architecture," I was interested in the fact that these architects were in fact deconstructing the essentials of tradition and were criticizing everything that subordinated architecture to something else—the value of, let's say, usefulness or beauty or living—"*habite*"—etc.—not in order to build something else that would be useless or ugly or uninhabitable, but to free architecture from all those external finalities, extraneous goals. And not in order to reconstitute some pure and original architecture—on the contrary, just to put architecture in communication with other media, other arts, to *contaminate* architecture…And notice that in my way of dealing with Deconstruction, I suspect the *concept* of the metaphor itself, in so far as it involves a complicated network of philosophemes, a network that would always lead us back at some point into architecture…

NORRIS: *Yes, this is a topic you raise in your* Fifty-Two Aphorisms for a Forward. *There, you explicitly disown the idea*

that Deconstruction is in any sense an "architectural metaphor," a figure that would serve obliquely to name or to specify some ongoing project in the field of building and design. And this for the reason, as you say, that it is "no longer possible to make use of the concept of metaphor." But might we not say with equal force (as you did some years ago in "White Mythology") that there is no possibility of doing without some residual "concept of metaphor": that if indeed all concepts come down to metaphors—as Nietzsche argued—then it is also the case that we possess only concepts of metaphor, ideas that have always already been worked over by the discourse of philosophic reason, from Aristotle on? I take this argument as one more example of the firm insistence, on your part that "Deconstruction" is not be treated as a break with "Western metaphysics," a leap outside the logocentric tradition that thinks to land on some alternative, radically different ground. Is it not this acceptance of the need to work patiently within and against the structures of inherited thought that has chiefly distinguished Deconstruction from other, less exacting and rigorous forms of Post-Modern thought? I ask this question—as you may now have guessed—in the hope that you will be drawn into offering some account of what specifically sets Deconstruction apart from the broader Post-Modern project.

DERRIDA: As you know, I never use the word *post*, the prefix *post-*, and I have many reasons for this. One of those reasons is that this use of the prefix implies a periodization or an epochalization, which is highly problematic for me. Then again, the word *post* implies that something is highly finished—that we can get rid of what went *before* Deconstruction, and I don't think anything of the sort. For instance, to go back to the first point of your question, I don't believe that the opposition between concept and metaphor can ever be erased. I have never suggested that all concepts were simply metaphors or that we couldn't make sense of that distinction, because in fact at the end of that essay ("White Mythology"), I deconstruct this argument also, and I say that we need, for scientific reasons and many reasons, to keep this distinction at work. So this is a very complicated gesture.

Now as for architecture, I think that *Deconstruction* comes about—let us carry on using this word to save time—when you have deconstructed some architectural philosophy, some architectural assumptions—for instance, the hegemony of the aesthetic, of beauty, the hegemony of usefulness, of functionality, of living, of dwelling. But then, you have to *reinscribe* these motifs within the work. You can't (or you shouldn't) simply dismiss those values of dwelling, functionality, beauty, and so on. You have to construct, so to speak, a new space and a new form, to shape a new way of building in which those motifs or values are reinscribed, having meanwhile lost their external hegemony. The inventiveness of powerful architects consists I think in this reinscription, the economy of this reinscription, which involves also some respect for tradition, for memory. Deconstruction is not simply forgetting the past. What has dominated theology or architecture or anything else is still there, in some way, and the inscriptions, then, let's say, *archive* of these deconstructed structures, the archive should be as readable as possible, as legible as we can make it. That is the way I try to write or to teach. And I think the same is true, to some extent, in architecture.

NORRIS: *You have stressed your suspicion of "post-" movements in philosophy and art, whether Post-Modernist, Post-Structuralist, or post-humanist (as in your early essay "The Ends of Man"). And this for the reason—as I take it—that all steps beyond in the name of this or that radical new way of thinking are liable to find themselves unwittingly reinscribed within the terms of that same oppositional order of thought which they hope thereby to escape. Do you not see a risk of something similar happening with current attempts to break with the so-called Modernist paradigm and its associated structure of concepts and values? Thus Peter Eisenman: "For architecture to enter a post-Hegelian condition, it must move away from the rigidity and value-structure of these dialectical oppositions" (i.e., figure and ground, ornament and structure, form and function, etc.). Or would it perhaps be true to say—as some like Gregory Ulmer have claimed—that things have moved on during the past decade or so from "Deconstruction" as*

a species of meticulous textual critique to "applied grammatology" as a practice of creative reinscription that goes beyond such basic, preliminary work? Would this be borne out by what you have recently achieved in your collaborative enterprise with artists like Eisenman and Tschumi, or would you perhaps consider this a wrong understanding, a false opposition?

DERRIDA: I wouldn't say "false" opposition. It is an opposition which, I would say, is pertinent for some forms of appropriation in so far as it amounts to a critical method within texts, within literary texts or even philosophical texts. But I insisted from the beginning that Deconstruction was not *simply* a method, was not a critique, or not simply critical. The concept of critique or criticism is deconstructive somewhere…It is not negative—it was linked from the beginning with affirmation, with the "yes," an affirmation which is not a "position" in the Hegelian sense. So the move which is described by Greg Ulmer is not so much a move *in* Deconstruction. It is a move we can identify in some places—I wouldn't say "in" my work, from that point of view at least. And of course the variety of fields, of disciplines, of texts, of publishers—this variety was necessary from the outset, philosophical and literary texts and painting and now architecture and some others too, legal texts and many other things.

So I think it is important, this way of opening up the boundaries, and mainly the academic boundaries between texts and disciplines, and when I say academic boundaries, I'm thinking not only of the humanistic disciplines and philosophy but also of architecture—the teaching of architecture. This crossing, this going through the boundaries of disciplines, is one of the main—not just stratagems but *necessities* of Deconstruction. The grafting of one art on to another, the contamination of codes, the dissemination of contexts are sometimes "methods" or "stratagems" of Deconstruction, but most importantly, they are moments of what we call history. And that is why I don't think Deconstruction belongs to an epoch or a period, even a modern one.

I don't think Deconstruction is something specifically modern. There are some "modern" features of what we identify as Deconstruction in some academic contexts, but what makes Deconstruction *unavoidable* has been at work a long time, even with Plato or Descartes. So we have to distinguish between, let us say, some phenomena which are not the entirety of Deconstruction and which give rise to methods, to teaching, to thematic treatment, and something more hidden, more persistent, less amenable to system or method which makes this thematic Deconstruction possible in discourse and in teaching and the arts.

Norris: *Isn't it a problem that the term* Modernism *(let alone* Post-Modernism*) means such very different things for philosophers on the one hand and literary critics or art historians on the other? And doesn't Deconstruction need to adopt a somewhat different stance with regard to these two phenomena? I am thinking here of your recent essays on Kant, on the "Principle of Reason," and on the Enlightenment tradition in general. There, you make it plain that we cannot simply break with that tradition, that any criticism must come (so to speak) from inside and avail itself of the concepts and categories of enlightened critique while questioning their claims to ultimate truth. And I think this places some considerable distance between your own thinking and the kinds of project pursued by (for instance) Lyotard or Baudrillard. Whereas the Post-Modern "turn" in literature, art, and cultural theory has a different set of historical coordinates and a different relation to issues of truth, reason, and ideological critique. Haven't these distinctions become rather blurred in recent debate?*

DERRIDA: I wouldn't want to call Deconstruction a critique of modernity. But neither is it "modern" or in any sense a glorification of modernity. It is very premature to venture these generalizations, these concepts of period. I would say that I just don't know what these categories mean, except that of course I can tell more or less what other people mean them to signify… But for me, they are not rigorous concepts. Nor is Deconstruction

a unitary *concept*, although it is often deployed in that way, a usage that I find very disconcerting…Sometimes I prefer to say deconstructions in the plural, just to be careful about the heterogeneity and the multiplicity, the necessary multiplicity of gestures, of fields, of styles. Since it is not a system, not a method, it cannot be homogenized. Since it takes the singularity of every context into account, Deconstruction is different from one context to another. So I should certainly want to reject the idea that "Deconstruction" denotes any theory, method, or univocal concept. Nevertheless, it must denote *something*, something that can at least be recognized in its working or its effects…

Of course this doesn't mean that Deconstruction *is* that "something" or that you can find Deconstruction everywhere. So, on the one hand, we have to define some working notion, some regulative concept of Deconstruction. But it is very difficult to gather this in a simple formula. I know that the enemies of Deconstruction say, "Well, since you cannot offer a definition, then it must be an obscure concept and you must be an obscurantist thinker." To which I would respond that Deconstruction is first and foremost a suspicion directed against that kind of thinking—"what is…?" "what is the essence of…?" and so on.

NORRIS: *Could we perhaps take that point a bit further? Some theorists of the Post-Modern (Charles Jencks among them) have rejected what they see as the negative, even "nihilist" implications of the Deconstruction movement in contemporary art. According to Jencks, "Architecture is essentially constructive. It builds up structures, depends on joint endeavors of mutual confidence, the combination of foresight, goodwill and investment—all of which Deconstruction undermines, if not totally destroys." I thought you might like to comment on this and similar responses, especially in view of current debates—taken up in the American and British press—about the "politics of Deconstruction" and its supposed nihilist leanings. I'm sure you would say that they have been misunderstood.*

DERRIDA: Absolutely, absolutely…There has been much criticism, many objections that we find in the newspapers, in the bad newspapers…Which doesn't just mean that the people who write such things are jealous. Often, they are academics who don't read that many texts in which not only I but many people insist on the fact that Deconstruction is *not* negative, is not nihilistic. Of course, it goes through the experience and questioning of what nihilism is. Of course, of course. And who knows what nihilism is or isn't? Even the people who object don't raise the question, "What is nihilism?" Nevertheless, Deconstruction is or should be an affirmation linked to promises, to involvement, to responsibility. As you know, it has become more and more concerned with these concepts—even Classical concepts—of responsibility, affirmation, and commitment…So when people say it's negative, nihilistic, and so forth, either they don't read or they are arguing in bad faith. But this can and should be analyzed…

NORRIS: *In the* Aphorisms*, you refer to an "ageless contract" that has always existed between architecture and a certain idea of dwelling or habitation. And of course, this points toward Heidegger and a whole thematics of building, dwelling, and poetic thinking. You also remark—in a slightly different but related context—that "there is no inhabitable place for the aphorism," that is to say, no place within the kind of large-scale conceptual edifice that philosophy has traditionally taken for its home. Thus, "the aphorism is neither a house, nor a temple, nor a school, nor a parliament, nor an agora, nor a tomb. Neither a pyramid nor, above all, a stadium. What else?" Could I ask you to pursue this particular line of thought in whatever direction you wish and perhaps suggest also what connections it might have with your latest writings on Heidegger?*

DERRIDA: Ah, that's a very difficult question…

NORRIS: *Yes, I'm sorry…*

DERRIDA: No, no, not at all. Difficult questions are necessary. The fact that architecture has always been interpreted as dwelling, or the element of dwelling—dwelling for human beings or dwelling for the gods—the place where gods or people are present or gathering or living or so on. Of course this is a very profound and strong interpretation, but one which first submits architecture, what we call architecture or the art of building, to a value which can be questioned. In Heidegger, such values are linked with the question of building, with the theme of, let's say, keeping, conserving, watching over, etc. And I was interested in questioning those assumptions in Heidegger, asking what this might amount to, an architecture that wouldn't be simply subordinated to those values of habitation, dwelling, sheltering the presence of gods and human beings. Would it be possible? Would it still be an architecture? I think that what people like Eisenman and Tschumi have shown me—people who call themselves Deconstructivist architects—is that this is indeed possible, not possible as a *fact*, a matter of simple demonstration, because of course you can always perceive their architecture as again giving place to a dwelling, sheltering, etc., because the question I am asking now is not only the question of what they build but of how we interpret what they build. Of course, we can interpret in a very traditional way—viewing this as simply a "modern" transformation of the same old kinds of architecture. So Deconstruction is not simply an activity or commitment on the part of the architect; it is also on the part of the people who read, who look at these buildings, who enter the space, who move in the space, who experience the space in a different way. From this point of view, I think that the architectural experience (let's call it that, rather than talking about "buildings" as such)…what they offer is precisely the chance of experiencing the possibility of these inventions of a different architecture, one that wouldn't be, so to speak, "Heideggerian"…

NORRIS: *The Aphorisms have a good deal to say about the International College of Philosophy and its work in promoting inter-disciplinary exchange. They also make a point of not talking*

about "projects" in this or that field, as if the work undertaken could be staked out in advance or in accordance with some governing scheme or teleology. Thus, you write, in Aphorism 36, *"To say that it does not have a project does not amount to denouncing its empiricism or its adventurism. In the same way an architecture without a project is engaged perhaps in a more thoughtful, more inventive, more propitious work…"*

Could you say something more about the kinds of new and productive thinking that have emerged from this bringing together of people from hitherto separated disciplines? Just what goes on when you "exchange ideas"—to put it very crudely—with artists like Eisenman or Bernard Tschumi, an enterprise without clear-cut aims and ambitions, without some teleological goal?

DERRIDA: I was referring to the French meaning of the word *project* in the code of architecture. I don't know whether it has the same meaning in English. A project is something which is prior to the work, which has its own economy, a governing role which can then be applied and developed…And you have the same kind of relation between the project, or the concept, and its carrying out in practice as between, say, the transcendental signified and its incarnation in the body, in writing, etc. So there is a critical reflection on this concept of the "project" going on among a number of French architects. When I say there is no project in the College, I don't mean to say that we start without any idea of where we're going but that the relation between the project and the experience, the act, has no Classical or philosophical equivalent. For instance, the College could be seen from one aspect as having the character of a new foundation. And of course a "foundation" is something with strong philosophical, as well as architectural, links. It has its building, its forms, its shape, its place…But in fact, within this College, we ask questions—sometimes, not always, in a deconstructive way—about what grounding means, what hierarchy means, in terms not only of academic authority but also in terms of the pedagogical scenography, the organization of the classroom, the way we appoint people, elect people, the way the hierarchies are stabilized or destabilized, and so forth. And all

these things have their architectural models. So since our model was not in the Western university as it is organized now or the philosophy that lies behind this modern university (or modern Western university), we had to invent also the symbolic and physical architecture of this new community without referring to any previous given model.

Of course, all the time we have to negotiate, we have to compromise with previous given models—that's the political strategy, and I think that architects also have to negotiate with norms and practical constraints and so on. Nevertheless, these tactics are oriented toward something that would be new or that would bring about a real alteration in the old structure. And I think that from the beginning, we had, my friends and I, this certainty that first it was something new—something new to be built in the architectural sense, new commitments, a new space, a new field of knowledge…But also, more specifically, the sense that we *had to* work with architects, that the teaching and experience of architecture would be an important aspect of our work at the College. So, even though my collaboration with Eisenman and Tschumi was not officially a part of the program, it had to do with the College and indeed gave rise to various conferences, meetings, and communications…events that led on to a close involvement between philosophers and architects. The one for which I wrote my *Aphorisms* was an example of it.

NORRIS: *You have talked about the relationship between "modernity" in art, architecture, philosophy, etc., and a certain idea of the modern university, one that took hold in Germany a couple of centuries back and which still exerts a great influence on the way we think about disciplines, subject areas, questions of intellectual competence, and so forth. And this would perhaps take us back to what you said previously about Kant's "architectonic," his doctrine of the faculties, that which enforces a proper separation of realms between pure and practical reason, theoretical understanding, aesthetic judgment, and their various modalities or powers… To some extent, your work in the International College is a way of deconstructing those relations, showing how they give rise to*

endless litigation or boundary disputes, often played out in very practical terms as a matter of institutional politics…

DERRIDA: Oh yes, I agree with your definition of what is going on. Deconstructing not only theoretically, not only giving signals of the process at work, but trying to deconstruct in a practical fashion, that is, to set up and build new structures implying this work of Deconstruction. It's not easy, and it is never done in or through a single gesture. It takes a long time and involves some very complicated gestures. It is always unfinished, heterogeneous, and I think there is no such thing as a "pure" Deconstruction or a deconstructive project that is finished or completed.

NORRIS: *Isn't there a risk that Deconstruction might become mixed up with that strain of Post-Modern or neo-pragmatist thought which says that philosophy is just a "kind of writing," on a level with poetry, criticism, or the "cultural conversation of mankind"? That these distinctions are merely "rhetorical" or imposed by an obsolete enlightenment doctrine of the faculties, so that we had best get rid of them and abandon any notion of philosophy as having its own special interests, distinctive truth claims, conceptual history, or whatever? Do you see that as a constant risk?*

DERRIDA: There are many risks, and this is one of them. Sometimes, it is an interesting risk; sometimes, it opens doors and spaces in the fields which are trying to protect themselves from Deconstruction. But once the door is open, then you have to make things more specific, and I would say, following your suggestion, that no indeed, philosophy is not *simply* a "kind of writing"; philosophy has a very rigorous specificity which has to be respected, and it is a very hard discipline with its own requirements, its own autonomy, so that you cannot simply mix philosophy with literature, with painting, with architecture. There is a point you can recognize, some opening of the various contexts (including the philosophical context) that makes Deconstruction possible. But it still requires a rigorous approach, one that would situate this opening in a strict way, that would organize, so to

speak, this contamination or this grafting without losing sight of those specific requirements. So I am very suspicious—and this is not just a matter of idiosyncrasy or a matter of training—I am very suspicious of the over-easy mixing of discourses to which your question referred. On the contrary, Deconstruction pays the greatest attention to multiplicity, to heterogeneity, to these sharp and irreducible differences. If we don't want to homogenize everything, then we have to respect the specificity of discourses, especially that of philosophical discourse.

NORRIS: *There is one particular essay of yours which I think may help to focus some of these questions. It is called "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adapted in Philosophy," a title that you borrow (or cite) verbatim from Kant, and it strikes me that there are two very different things going on throughout this text. In fact, it is often hard to know whether you are writing, as it were, "in your own voice" or whether the passage in question is* sous rature *or to be read as if placed within quotation marks. Sometimes, you write of the need to maintain "Enlightenment" values, to preserve what you call the "lucid vigil" of Enlightenment, critique, and truth. In this sense, the essay appears to side with Kant against the adepts, the mystagogues, the fake illuminati, those who would claim an immediate or self-resent access to truth by virtue of their own "inner light," without submitting their claims to the democratic parliament of the faculties. Elsewhere, you adopt your own version of the "apocalyptic tone"—a series of injunctions, apostrophes, speech acts, or performatives of various kinds—as if to defend the right of these characters not to go along with Kant's rules for the proper, self-regulating conduct of philosophic discourse. It does seem to me a profoundly ambivalent essay. On the one hand, it is establishing a distance—even an antagonism—between Deconstruction and the discourse of Enlightenment critique. On the other, it is saying that the Kantian project is somehow indispensable, that it is bound up with the very destiny of thought in our time, that we cannot simply break with it as certain Post-Modernist thinkers would wish—or have I misread your essay in some fairly basic way?*

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DERRIDA: No, no, you read it very well. I agree with everything you said. It is a very, very ambivalent essay. I tried—as I often do—to achieve and say many things at once. Of course, I am "in favor" of the Enlightenment; I think we shouldn't simply leave it behind us, so I want to keep this tradition alive. But at the same time, I know that there are certain historical forms of Enlightenment, certain things in this tradition that we need to criticize or deconstruct. So it is sometimes in the name of, let us say, a *new* Enlightenment that I deconstruct a given Enlightenment. And this requires some very complex strategies, requires that we should let many voices speak…There is nothing monological, no monologue—that's why the responsibility for Deconstruction is never individual or a matter of the single, self-privileged authorial voice. It is always a multiplicity of voices, of gestures…And you can take this as a rule: that each time Deconstruction speaks through a single voice, it's wrong, it is not "Deconstruction" any more. So in this particular essay, as you rightly said a moment a go, not only do I let many voices speak at the same time, but the problem is precisely that multiplicity of voices, that variety of tones, within the *same* utterance or indeed the same word or syllable, and so on. So that's the question. That's one of the questions.

But of course today the political, ideological consequences of the Enlightenment are still very much with us—and very much in need of questioning. So a "new" enlightenment, to be sure, which may mean Deconstruction in its most active or intensive form, and not what we inherited in the name of *Aufklärung*, critique, *siècle des lumières*, and so forth. And as you know, these are already very different things. So we have to remember this.

NORRIS: *I suppose I'm looking for some kind of equivalence between what we call "Modernism" in philosophy, let's say Kantian philosophy, and the term Modernism as conventionally applied in architecture and the visual arts. You might compare the attitude that Deconstructivist architects take toward Modernism—not simply one of rejection or supersession, but a critical attitude directed toward that particular form of Modernist critique…*

DERRIDA: Of course. That's why I'm reluctant to say that Deconstruction is Modern or Post-Modern. But I should also be reluctant to say that it's not Modern or that it's anti-Modern or anti-Post-Modern. I wouldn't want to say that what is Deconstructive, if there is such a thing, is specifically Modern or Post-Modern. So we have to be very careful with the use of these epithets.

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Between Deconstruction and Postmodernism: Points of Intervention

Interview With Tetsuji Yamamoto

Tetsuji Yamamoto: *You have written many books during the past twenty years. I'm very interested in your thinking about deconstruction and postmodernism. What exactly is postmodernism? What is the relation between modernity and the so-called postmodern condition?*

Christopher Norris: Well, I think you have to make some fairly basic distinctions to begin with. Often, they're very difficult to make because this term, *postmodernism*, is very broad and covers a great range of movements, ideas, philosophical beliefs, social trends, artistic styles, cultural forms of life, and so forth. In the arts alone, one would have to distinguish between the meanings it has acquired or the ways that it has been applied in the various fields of literature, music, film, architecture, and the visual arts in general. Still, there is an even more basic distinction which may provide a useful starting point. On the one hand, there is postmodernism as a broad cultural phenomenon, a worldview, an ethos, a lifestyle, or something like that which can scarcely be defined but can perhaps be characterized—in rough and ready

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terms—by pointing to its various manifestations in "the way we live now." On the other, there is postmodernism as a movement of thought which issues in certain statements, propositions, or theories concerning the postmodern "condition" and how we arrived at it. This movement of thought involves many issues that are basically philosophical in character, issues of epistemology, language, interpretation theory, ethics, aesthetics, politics, historical understanding, and so on. For the most part, it works out as a highly skeptical, at times ultranominalist theory such as one finds, for instance, in Baudrillard's notions of postmodern "hyperreality"—where the "real" is just a figment of media simulation—or in Lyotard's ideas about the end of Enlightenment, the end of meta-narratives, the end of all those old Enlightenment-style legitimizing grounds and principles.

I think that this variety of postmodernism is in many ways the more interesting but also more dubious and questionable. Up to a point, I would agree with Fredric Jameson when he argues that one can't just reject or deplore postmodernism in the broad (ill-defined) sense of that term because there's simply too much of it around. That is, we would be behaving like poor old King Canute, who hoped to make the tide go back while it was lapping around his feet, or rising up to his ears….But one can, I think, criticize and reject certain aspects of postmodernism in its other, more specific or articulate form because these thinkers do at least offer arguments, propositions, readings of history, and even philosophical theses of a sort, although often these are based on a very limited and partial understanding. So that is the kind of postmodernism I have mainly been talking about in my recent books. [*What's Wrong with Postmodernism*, 1990; *Uncritical Theory*, 1992; *The Truth About Postmodernism*, 1993]

Yamamoto: *So, firstly, I want to ask a question about your reasons for engaging with postmodernist ideas about history and historical discourse. For example, in Japan, postmodernists are accused of abandoning all standards of historical truth, objectivity, responsible scholarship, and so forth. These critics say it is a very free, self-indulgent, irresponsible way of thinking, but I don't think*

so. So please explain why it is so important, in your view, to criticize postmodernism on these grounds.

Norris: Yes, let's look at it from that angle to begin with. I think there's a fashionable doctrine, a postmodernist doctrine about history, which goes roughly as follows. History is a fictive construct; it is a selective, partial, ideologically determined, or inflected view of the past. There is no historical truth, so some postmodernists would say. There are always different, competing, and incommensurable claims about every significant historical event. This is the approach that, say, Lyotard would adopt, along with postmodern skeptical historiographers such as Hayden White. Of course, this thinking has a range of sources, some of them recent—for example, post-structuralist—while others go a lot further back. It comes partly out of Nietzsche's writings on history, a kind of strong revisionist historiography, what Nietzsche calls *wirkliche Geschichte*, "effective" or "operative" history writing. It derives partly from a certain, very partial, and in fact (I think) thoroughly mistaken reading of Derrida, that is, the idea that the world and all its contents, including historical events, are constructed in or through language and discourse. It also derives partly from Foucault, or post-structuralist readings of Foucault. But, in general, it reflects a currently very widespread attitude of postmodernist skepticism towards history. I think this is very dangerous. Of those aspects of post-modernism I would want to resist, this is the one that most urgently needs resisting for the obvious reason that it opens the way to all manner of "revisionist" distortions or suppressions of historical fact. The worst example, of course, is the revisionist approach that seeks to play down or to relativize what happened in Nazi Germany during the years of the Holocaust. But there are many other aspects and periods of history that are fiercely contested at the moment, both in British political life and elsewhere…in Europe and elsewhere. I think this particular kind of postmodern skepticism about historical truth is a very damaging, a morally corrosive, and, ultimately, a very cynical thing.

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So what I'm doing nowadays—one of the things—is some work on philosophy of history, trying to provide a realist basis for historical discourse, pointing out the differences between fictional narrative and historical narrative, a whole range of different criteria that apply to historical narrative, criteria of causality, agency, temporal sequence, explanatory structure, narrative logic, and so on. One reads books of history in a very different way from works of fiction, and this is not just a matter of localized or short-term cultural convention. So it seems to me that this is one aspect of postmodernism that needs to be contested. Perhaps we can return to this topic later on and develop the argument in a bit more detail. My other main interest at the moment is in philosophy of science because I think that many of these issues are posed most squarely and unavoidably when we think about the physical sciences. So, in brief, I'm defending an outlook of critical realism as applied to various fields of research, among them philosophy and history of science, and historiography in general.

Yamamoto: *You write about the "end of philosophy." What do you mean by that?*

Norris: It's not a phrase that I would normally use, or not in the sense that perhaps you understand by it. I use it in the subtitle of one of my books (*What's Wrong With Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy*), but that is a kind of pun, really, or a way of countering facile arguments that philosophy has somehow come to an end, run out of ideas, exhausted its potential, or whatever. What I really meant was "end' not so much in that sense; rather, in the sense of aim, purpose, objective, direction, or something to be striven for….But there's certainly a lot of talk, fashionable talk, about the end of philosophy, and what it usually means, let's say, to philosophers like Richard Rorty is the end of a certain way of doing philosophy that was premised on notions of truth, method, conceptual adequacy, and a whole range of other things: a priori concepts, primordial intuitions, sense-data, transcendental arguments, truth-at-the-end-of-enquiry, and

so forth. Rorty would say that that philosophy of that sort has come to an end because, quite simply, it's no longer possible to believe in such things. He would agree with many postmodernist thinkers that those ideas are just not available to us, and we can't maintain them in good faith or with a clear intellectual conscience. I disagree with that. I think it's premature—absurd in a way—to talk about the end of philosophy, partly because the same people who regularly announce the end of philosophy are still doing philosophy. Rorty still writes about philosophers, you know. He writes constantly about the great philosophers of the Western tradition, as well as about technical issues in recent philosophical semantics, epistemology, and philosophy of mind. So for Rorty to say that philosophy has come to an end is just a bit premature, or so it strikes me.

Yamamoto: *Some people regard both Derrida and Foucault as postmodernist thinkers. Some people treat the ideas of Derrida and Foucault as pretty much the same. But I think they are completely different, even antithetical. For you, what are the main points of difference between Derrida and Foucault?*

Norris: There are several important differences, I would say. One is that Foucault is primarily a social historian, or an historian of ideas, or of cultures and civilizations—in any case a very difficult thinker to classify. His main interests are in history even if he problematizes the notion of history. He writes about historical periods, changes, cultural mutations, and so forth. Derrida is primarily a philosopher, I think. Now he might well want to demur at this point and would certainly not be altogether comfortable with this description, but I think all the same that his chief interests are in philosophy, and that his arguments are often philosophical through and through. Not just in the sense that he writes about philosophical texts, about Plato and Aristotle, Descartes, Kant and Hegel, about Nietzsche, Husserl and Levinas, as well as J. L. Austin, but in the sense that his reading of those texts is a reading deeply informed by his knowledge of philosophy and also that the form of his argument

is most often distinctively philosophical. It's a form of argument that you find in philosophers from Plato to Kant, especially in Kant. It's a variety of transcendental argument, of argument from the a priori conditions of possibility for various kinds of knowledge or experience. Thus, Derrida typically asks questions like "What is the condition of possibility for distinguishing, let us say, speech from writing, or concept from metaphor, or expressive from indicative signs (in his reading of Husserl), or nature from culture in the texts of Rousseau?" And these are specifically *philosophical* questions about truth, logic, language, and representation; a different approach to these issues, certainly, one that discovers all sorts of hitherto unnoticed complication, but still very much a philosophical approach. Indeed, it seems to me that Derrida is a very good *analytic* philosopher, not (of course) in the narrow sense of *analytic* which means post-1920 Anglo-American philosophy, but analytic in the sense that he is a very good, careful, rigorous, intelligent, and critical reader of texts.

Let me try to focus more precisely on your question. I suppose the first place one should go in order to clarify the differences between Foucault and Derrida is what Derrida actually says about Foucault in his essay "Cogito and the History of Madness." Derrida is once again asking transcendental questions, questions that have to do with the condition of possibility for raising this issue about madness and how madness was constituted in or through the discourse of reason. He thinks that Foucault has evaded these crucial questions and thus fallen into a naive way of treating this and other episodes in the history of thought. And of course, Foucault was very angry about that essay of Derrida. He dismissed it as a neat little piece of pedagogy, a means of fixing attention on "the text" and thus distracting students from the real sociohistorical and cultural issues. He thought Derrida was being super subtle at his (Foucault's) expense. In fact, Derrida was raising some important philosophical questions about the very possibility of doing the kind of work that Foucault wanted to do, even if, to Foucault, those questions seemed tedious or trivial. However, I think they are crucial questions and go to the

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heart of Foucault's strictly impossible claim to be writing a book not just *about* madness but *in the very language and authentic voice of madness*. So I think their interests are quite distinct and cannot be lumped together under this or that handy label—"post-structuralist," "postmodernist," or whatever. Too often, they're both seen as representatives of a certain generation of French intellectuals, you know, as if there were no significant difference between their two bodies of work. This seems to me just a result of lazy reading.

Yamamoto: *In the case of Foucault's Madness and Civilization, Derrida cannot understand the "practical discourse," or discursive practices*—practiques discursives—*in the field of nonrationality. For Derrida, there is difference only at the level of "the trace" quite apart from the lives, practices, or interests of human beings. And yet, of course, philosophy itself cannot exist without the existence of human beings. Therefore, its object is (or should be) the practices of human beings. For me, it seems that Derrida does not have genuine philosophical depth. In this sense, he is very superficial, don't you think?*

Norris: I don't think so. Of course, it's always dangerous to put words into somebody else's mouth, but I would guess that Derrida would respond to your question by making a number of points. Firstly, he accepts—and he has said this elsewhere—he accepts that Foucault has done a great amount of useful, very valuable work, valuable not only in the sense of uncovering episodes of cultural history that had not been studied, but valuable in the sense of opening people's minds to aspects of repression and marginalization, in particular, the marginalization of sexual minorities, so-called sexual deviants, and other oppressed or persecuted groups. I am sure Derrida would be the first to acknowledge that Foucault has done some immensely valuable work. But then, Derrida would also of course want to say that there is a place for the kind of analysis that he, Derrida, is doing. Perhaps I am putting words into Derrida's mouth, but I think he would also point out that Foucault is caught in a logical double-

bind, a kind of performative contradiction. That is, Foucault is arguing with great eloquence that history has been falsified, that things have been written out of history, that the record has been distorted, that whole episodes (like the Great Confinement) and whole histories of human suffering have been written out of the official record. So he's aiming to put that record straight. He's aiming to fill in details that have been systematically excluded or suppressed or simply left out. So, on the one hand, Foucault has a kind of moral or ethico-political crusade which takes as its condition the possibility of retrieving certain truths, truths which have so far not found a place in the received historical view. On the other hand, when he writes in a more speculative, Nietzsche-inspired way, then he says there is no truth. Everything is a product of vested interests, of power/knowledge differentials; history is always a "history of the present" with no appeal open to historical truths that are not just discursive constructs or a kind of backward projection out of our own present-day interests and concerns.

I think there is a real contradiction there, and it is one of the contradictions that Derrida points out in his essay on Foucault. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault claims to write from the position of madness. He is claiming to speak in the very language, the very accent and idiom of madness, and yet, of course he is writing a book on the subject, constructing a carefully argued, highly detailed, copiously annotated scholarly work, documenting various episodes, the Great Confinement among them. So Foucault, when it comes to his serious historical work, is in fact behaving very much like a traditional scholar. He assumes that there *is* some truth out there, some truth—or rather, some range of particular truths—concerning historical events. All this painstaking historical research has to be documented. One has to provide adequate evidence; one has to present the case in a rational, consecutive, adequately argued way. And yet, when he goes into Nietzschean gear, when he starts to theorize in a skeptical fashion about this whole business of historical understanding, then he doesn't want to be associated with any of those traditional values.

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So there is, as I say, a kind of inbuilt contradiction between Foucault's actual practice and his theoretical commitments, his Nietzschean-skeptical commitments. And I think that Derrida's essay on Foucault, on Descartes and the Great Confinement, and so forth is concerned (among other things) to bring out just that tension in his work. It is not at all a trivial piece of argument if you think about the context, the time when it was written, about R.D. Laing, the anti-psychiatry movement, and Foucault's relation to all that, at least as perceived at the time….So no, I don't think that Derrida's approach is narrow or over-technical or trivial. I think he's doing one of the things that philosophers and critical theorists ought to do, that is, pointing out contradictions, anomalies, non sequiturs, and contradictory entailments. And these points are not confined to the ultraspecialized domain of philosophical analysis and critique. You know, it's important to get straight about the kinds of issue that Derrida raises. One of the useful things that philosophers do—and not only analytic philosophers—is to point out just that kind of inconsistency between precept and practice.

Then again, there's another aspect of Derrida's more recent activity: his involvement with the campaign or pressure-group GREPH, his work on the teaching of philosophy at *lyçée* and university levels. He has in fact worked hard in a collaborative way to protect the place of philosophy within the French educational system. That, again, is a kind of practical involvement. Compared with Foucault, I suppose, it seems rather specialized and professional, but it's still very important. I wish we in Britain had a lot more provision for teaching philosophy in schools. I think they should stop teaching religious education and teach philosophy instead, and this for all sorts of reasons having to do with multiculturalism and the positive good of allowing children to think for themselves and not have religion forced upon them by teachers who often don't believe what they're required to teach….Again, this is something we might come back to later on. So, I think we should envy the French for the high profile that philosophy has in their educational system. And I think Derrida has done a good deal to protect and preserve or to actively

promote the role of philosophy in schools. What I mean by all this is that Derrida is not, as you seemed to suggest, an ivory-tower intellectual who thinks that there is "nothing outside the text."

Yamamoto: *In Britain or Europe, what kind of significance does deconstruction have? That is, does it have significance in real, concrete, social, or political terms? What is its importance in Britain or Europe?*

Norris: In Britain? In Europe? In France, more specifically? I think you would need to distinguish between the reception-history of deconstruction in different countries, at different times, in different cultural and sociopolitical contexts. Let us at least for now identify deconstruction with Derrida's work because that work has had such a huge influence on the way that deconstruction has been received and understood. In Europe, deconstruction hasn't enjoyed anything like the massive institutional success that it has in the United States. It seems to me that in France, Derrida is regarded as a significant, interesting thinker but not as a "star" philosopher. At least, so I gather; he doesn't rate in the top-ten league of star intellectuals. In Germany, his work is viewed most often through the lens of Habermas's critique, which is very unfortunate because Habermas too often misreads Derrida. Habermas is an important thinker and right on many important issues, but he is not always a good reader of texts, and he simply has not read enough Derrida, hasn't read him with sufficient care. So, in Germany, Derrida's work is regarded with great suspicion, even though there are some philosophers—Manfred Frank preeminent among them—who take him seriously and read him with care despite sharing something of that general suspicion. In Britain, deconstruction is taught and discussed, and you can buy lots of handbooks about it—mine among them—and there are course options in most universities, but it's almost always taught in departments of English literature or cultural theory rather than in departments of philosophy. Philosophers mostly view it as a rather strange, exotic, and rather dubious French import. At

least, that is the dominant attitude. So, if you read the mainstream British philosophical journals like *Mind* or *Philosophy*, they—the editors, contributors, book reviewers, and so forth—mostly regard deconstruction as just a species of latter-day Nietzschean irrationalism with a little post-structuralism or postmodernism mixed in. In other words, they haven't read it, or they haven't understood it, and in any case they certainly don't like what little they have read.

In North America, you have a rather different situation. Deconstruction was taken up by literary theorists, taken up almost overnight with enormous enthusiasm after a well-known conference at Johns Hopkins University in 1966. It was for a long time either ignored or fiercely rejected by the philosophical establishment. There was a famous exchange between Derrida and the speech-act theorist John Searle which depressingly exemplifies that. Now, just recently, the signs are more encouraging. Philosophers such as Hilary Putnam, Stanley Cavell, Joseph Margolis, even some analytic philosophers, even some logicians, as a matter of fact, are beginning to take Derrida seriously and actually to read him rather than just read about him. Of course, they don't always agree with what he says, but at least, they are taking issue with his arguments and not just throwing out offhand, ill-informed, malicious remarks which are then picked up by the press and endlessly recycled. So, one finds a few recent articles about, say, Derrida's "logic of supplementarity," comparing it with other kinds of modal, many-valued, or "deviant" logic. There are now these signs of a serious interest in Derrida's work amongst philosophers, whereas, until the last couple of years, the interest was mainly in departments of English or comparative literature. And it does seem to me that many of those people—the "literary" types—misunderstood Derrida. I mean, like the philosophers but for different reasons, they simply didn't read him carefully enough or didn't read enough of his work. So, they read, for instance, fashionable essays like "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"—which was in fact the text of that 1966 Johns Hopkins lecture that started the whole thing off—and they picked out certain highly quotable passages

whose gist seemed to be that "all reading is misreading," "all interpretation is misinterpretation," "all concepts are sublimated metaphors," etc., etc. They didn't read the more difficult essays in *Writing and Difference*, or in *Margins of Philosophy*, or his really important early work on Husserl, apart from the one famous essay "Differance," which was often quoted piecemeal with little sense of its place in Derrida's ongoing philosophical project. So, his work was subject to a range of highly selective cultural appropriations and also, I think, a variety of distorted readings or *deformations professionelles*.

Yamamoto: *What do you mean by "misreading" and "misunderstanding" as applied to Derrida's texts or—as you argue in your book* The Truth About Postmodernism*—as applied to recent interpretations of Kant?*

Norris: It's a very strange thing, but it struck me when writing that book that there had been a tremendous proliferation of commentaries on Kant, most of them on the Third *Critique*, the *Critique of Judgement.* There was an almost obsessive focus on Kant's treatment of the sublime, partly influenced, I think, by Heidegger's reading in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. Heidegger's point, very briefly, is that there are large problems left unresolved in the First *Critique*, especially in the "Transcendental Aesthetic," and that these are only taken up and given a fuller (if still problematical) treatment in the later work. Pierre Bourdieu has an interesting argument in his book *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*: that you can categorize readers of Kant's First *Critique* politically almost on a left-to-right scale according to whether they concentrate on the Transcendental Analytic or the Transcendental Aesthetic. Heidegger very definitely goes for the Transcendental Aesthetic and all those famously obscure passages about the power of productive imagination as an "art buried in the depths of the soul." This produces, or so at least Bourdieu would say, a highly mystified, obscurantist, and politically very dubious reading.

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Anyway, I was interested in this fixation on the sublime, especially among postmodernist or Heidegger-influenced commentators. Lyotard constantly reverts to this topic, for instance, in *The Postmodern Condition* and *The Differend* but also in his more recent (and I think much better) book, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*. And I think this intense, almost obsessive interest in the Kantian sublime goes along with a number of other ideas that constitute what might rather grandly be called "the politics of postmodernism." The idea that, for instance, historical events cannot be conceptualized or adequately narrated or understood because they evoke all manner of different, conflicting, incommensurable interpretations. The sublime comes in as a reminder of this, an emphasis on everything that is nonrepresentable, that can't be brought under adequate concepts or worked up into a consistent, intelligible, fully convincing narrative. So, what I'm saying in that chapter ("Kant Disfigured") is that there is a wider context, not only a philosophical but also a social, political, and ethical context for these current postmodernist readings of Kant. Actually, I think they are mis<u></u>readings of Kant. To be sure, you can derive some of those ideas from the Third *Critique*, from the sections on the sublime, but they should find their place within Kant's system as a whole, I think, as just one component part of that system, perhaps a problematical part. But in many of these postmodern readings, they are almost the only thing that's talked about, the only topic that holds any interest in an otherwise boringly old-fashioned discourse about reason, truth, or other such Enlightenment values. So there's a kind of distorting overemphasis on the Third *Critique* and on these passages concerning the sublime in particular. What I'm trying to do really is interpret the so-called postmodern condition through the critical lens, if you like, of these various readings (or symptomatic misreadings) of Kant.

Yamamoto: *Your studies cover a very wide field, from philosophy of science to deconstruction, from literary theory to issues in epistemology and philosophical semantics. You have written quite a lot about Paul de Man, including a book published almost a*

decade ago. Why do you think de Man is so important?

Norris: Well, de Man seemed to me—still seems to me, as a matter of fact—a very interesting but also a deeply disturbing thinker. His texts have a certain rigor and tenacity but are often oversubtle—that's not quite the word—often hard-driven and counter-intuitive to the point of downright perversity. Since writing that book, I have had many doubts about de Man, not only on account of his now-notorious war-time writings—which are something to worry about, goodness knows—but it seems to me now that some of his readings, especially his readings of philosophers, Kant and Hegel among them, are based on some very dubious interpretations, even blatant misreadings of particular passages. Yet, de Man has a strange, fascinating, complex, troublesome kind of intelligence, and there are passages in his work—even in his texts on Kant, as a matter of fact—which are unmatched among more conventional commentaries for their acuity and subtlety of grasp. So, when I was writing that book, for a couple of years at least, I was in a curious state of indecision, alternately fascinated and repelled by de Man's readings of various texts. And I wrote it mainly to try and sort out in my own mind just what it was that de Man was saying, in particular about Kant and Hegel, but also in the extraordinary late essay on Pascal which I still don't really understand—but then, neither does anyone else, judging by the silence about it among the more recent commentators.

It seemed to me at the time that if there was what you might call a "literary" reading of philosophic texts, I mean a close rhetorical reading in the deconstructive manner, then it could go in either of two directions: in Derrida's direction or de Man's. And de Man's is in many ways the more problematic. At least, my experience of reading Derrida—whether on Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Husserl, Austin, or whomever—is that although he makes the whole business of reading much more complicated, in the end, their texts come out richer, more complex and interesting or engaging, even if riven with internal stresses and strains. They come out actually enhanced. You know, you go back to reading Kant from reading Derrida with a renewed appreciation of the

complexity and the subtlety of Kant's thinking. With de Man, you come away from his essays on Kant—or, for that matter, his essays on Rousseau, Hegel, or the English Romantic poets—with a sense that their entire project has been somehow laid waste. Nietzsche is the only thinker who survives this process pretty much unscathed, and that is because Nietzsche was a proto-deconstructor who anticipated every (or almost every) move that de Man is liable to make. You know, de Man has a kind of relentlessly skeptical, corrosive intelligence that sets out to ruin whatever it touches on. I think, in many ways, he's a deeply disturbing and even a rather repellent thinker, but I don't think this is only or mainly a reaction to the discovery of his war-time writings. Of course, it is impossible to ignore them now. But even if they had never come to light, there is still something about his writings, especially the late essays in *Allegories of Reading* and the posthumously published volume *Aesthetic Ideology*, that is and should be felt as a shock to all our normal—which is not say merely naive or deluded—beliefs and expectations. At the end of a de Man reading, if you're even halfway convinced by what he has to say, then nothing is left intact. There's no continuity, no development, no dialectical progress, no conceptual unity, no possibility of making sense.

So, I found myself fretting about all this—I suppose that is the best way of putting it—and thought I would try to make sense of de Man despite and against his own efforts to obstruct that process. I'm not at all sure I succeeded in that book, but I went to a conference on de Man just about a month ago, after four or five years when I had read very little about him—when in fact I had avoided reading about him for some of these reasons—and it struck me that things haven't really moved on very much. You know, there were some young de Man scholars there who knew his works very well, but they still seemed to be puzzled by all the same things.

Yamamoto: *Perhaps we could move on to a very different topic. The world is transforming very rapidly, undergoing a process of radical change such as we have seldom—if ever—witnessed before.*

So, probably the order of epistemology will be changed, or it will go beyond epistemology as we know it in the late twentieth century. What are the implications for your own work on deconstruction, postmodernism, philosophy of science, and the other topics we have discussed?

Norris: That is a complicated question! Well, I suppose my approach to those issues would be through philosophy of science, partly because that's what I'm most interested in at the moment and partly because I think that if we're going to raise issues of epistemology, then they are best, most fruitfully raised in connection with the physical sciences. I think one might get some useful bearings for thinking about changes in epistemology from the French critical-rationalist tradition in philosophy of science whose best-known representatives are Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem. Their thinking had a marked influence on Derrida, especially in his essay "White Mythology," which cites many passages from Bachelard's work on metaphor and its role in the discourse of the physical sciences. But Bachelard is important for another reason. He wants to retain the critical edge of the rationalist tradition without any kind of foundationalist appeal, whether to "clear and distinct ideas," as in Descartes, or to a priori intuitions and concepts, as in Kant, or other such ultimate grounds of knowledge. Modern science had long been engaged in a struggle to break the hold of these ideas, as for instance through the discovery of non-Euclidean geometries, or with the advent of new post-Einsteinian conceptions of space and time, or as a result of developments in fields like quantum mechanics. So, Bachelard proposes his theory of "applied rationalism," *le rationalisme appliqué*, by which he means that one must have certain standards of conceptual clarity and rigor even if those standards cannot be grounded in a realm of privileged epistemic access to truths that are somehow known a priori or self-evident to reason. One must have at least a working grasp of the criteria that enable us to distinguish valid from invalid theories, or scientifically fruitful from redundant hypotheses, or progressive and developing from retrograde and obsolete scientific research programs. But

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these criteria are always liable to change and sometimes—as in periods of revolutionary upheaval—may change very quickly and drastically.

I think there is some interesting work to be done in comparing this French critical-rationalist tradition with developments in recent Anglo-American philosophy and history of science. Take for instance Thomas Kuhn's well-known ideas about scientific paradigm change, about the incommensurability of different paradigms, about the underdetermination of theory by evidence and the theory-laden character of observation statements. These ideas have a skeptical-relativist character which explains their appeal to the "strong" sociologists of knowledge, those who make a full-scale program of denying that the physical sciences possess any kind of epistemic, cognitive, or truth-telling privilege. So, you have that school of thought on the one hand and on the other the critical-rationalist tradition—thinkers like Bachelard and Canguilhem—which holds the line against out-and-out cultural relativism by seeking to explain just *how and why* such paradigm changes occur. Now it is interesting that Foucault, the early Foucault was very much influenced by Canguilhem—I am talking here about works like *Les mots et les choses* and *L'Archéologie du savoir*. In fact, Canguilhem was Foucault's teacher, his thesis supervisor. And I think that what happens—if you trace this history back—is that it begins with Bachelard's notion of "epistemological breaks" (*coupures epistémologiques*), decisive ruptures or mutations in the history of thought that mark the shift from one paradigm to another. These occur most often through a gradual, then quickening buildup of problems, contradictions, theoretical conflicts, or anomalous experimental findings. What happens with Foucault, I think, is that he takes over this idea of epistemological breaks but he empties it of any epistemological or conceptual-explanatory force. These things in effect just happen. They constitute massive, seismic shifts in the whole previously existing order of truth, thought language, discourse, or representation. And they simply occur from time to time for no assignable or intelligible reason. What you find in Bachelard, on the contrary, is a genuinely critical epistemology

which strives to make sense of these paradigm shifts in a way that is attempted neither by Foucault nor by Kuhn and his cultural-relativist disciples. So, in answer to your question, I think that this particular tradition in French philosophy of science is one that needs, well, not so much reviving—since there are still people working within it—but one needs to specify its relationship to later developments in French intellectual culture.

It is worth remembering also that Althusser was at one time very much influenced by Bachelard's work. His reading of Marx starts out from the idea of an epistemological break, namely the crucial point of transition between the early—humanist, Hegelian, or "pre-Marxist"—texts to the stage when Marx was able to conceive an adequate "scientific" theory concerning material forces and relations of production, base and superstructure, modes of ideological interpellation, etc. But the great problem for Althusser was that he had somehow to reconcile the two conflicting aspects of his theory: on the one hand, a conceptualist—even idealist—approach to issues of knowledge and truth and, on the other, his commitment to a materialist ontology for the natural and human sciences. I think—and other commentators have likewise thought—that he never really manages to explain how those two things could be related. So, when the tide of post-structuralist fashion turned against Althusserian Marxism, it opened the way to Foucault's idea that everything is constructed in or through discourse, whether modes of cultural knowledge production or their various notionally "real-world" objects of knowledge. Althusser tried to maintain this distinction—in keeping with his Marxist-materialist principles—but his theory became impossibly complex and tortuous. So, one of the things that I'm doing at the moment, one of the things I'm writing about, is precisely that alternative tradition in French philosophy of science, tracing it down to Derrida, who I think preserves its epistemo-critical impetus, especially in his earlier, more analytic work. And I also track the various stages by which it became weakened into a form of cultural-relativist or social-constructivist thinking.

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Yamamoto: *Western thinking is sometimes criticized for imposing a sharp dichotomy between subject and object. But Foucault talks about the subject's disappearance, of its having been produced as a mere epiphenomenon of language, and its imminent demise "like a face drawn in sand at the ocean's edge." Do you find anything useful or productive in these ideas of Foucault?*

Norris: Well, as I have said, I have my doubts generally about Foucault's approach to these questions *via* a theory of discourse, a theory of the subject, its desires, its truth claims, its ethical values, its ambient social "reality," etc., as somehow produced in and through discourse. I want to say at least that they're not entirely constructed in discourse, at least not in Foucault's massively generalized and somewhat undertheorized sense of that term. Part of the problem with this word, *discourse*, is that it is used in so many different incompatible senses. It is sometimes used by linguists to denote any item or instance of language use longer than a sentence, that is, any piece of language that goes beyond the limits of grammatical analysis and involves wider (contextual or pragmatic) considerations. Then, there is the other sense of the term as used in present-day linguistics, that is, Benveniste's idea of "discourse" as that aspect of language that involves some reference to the time or place of utterance, deictics such as *here*, *now*, *yesterday*, or some reference to the speaker and his or her present interlocutor: personal pronouns like *I* and *you*. Then again, in Foucault and his disciples, *discourse* very often takes on such a hugely extended range of meaning that it can signify things like "body of knowledge," "Weltanschauung," "ideology," "professional code," "cultural way of life," "habit of thought," "scientific belief system," "dominant structure of assumptions," or whatever. At this point, the term is just too vague and ill-defined to be of much use.

Let me come at your question from a slightly different angle, one that relates more directly to Foucault's later work. I think the great problem with Foucault, I mean with the later "ethical" Foucault, is that he tries to rethink the very nature of ethics but does so on the basis of a kind of radical individualism. I mean, he

certainly makes allowance for the other and for demands placed upon us in our various possible kinds of relationship with the other. All the same, his idea of an ethical life or a life well lived is a curious mixture, I think—a kind of Marcus Aurelius–style stoicism along with a Baudelairean notion of private-aesthetic self-fashioning. Take for instance Foucault's late text, "What Is Enlightenment?" which of course borrows its title from Kant's famous essay setting out the project and the animating values of enlightened critical thought. "Sapere aude!"—"dare to think for yourself!"—that is the great motto of Kant's essay: don't take anything on trust; trust only to your own powers of rational thought and critical reflection. This applies just as much to matters of scientific understanding as to matters of politics, of ethical conduct, or religious belief. I think that one of the strangest, most perverse among recent misreadings of Kant is Foucault's misreading, which here takes the form of a kind of wordplay or extended pun on the meanings of *modernism* and *modernity*. So, when he writes about Kant and modernity, he makes it appear what Kant meant by ethics—or what ethics has come to mean after Kant—is a kind of aesthetic self-fashioning, an unending process of self-transformation; so that Kant becomes strangely transfigured into Baudelaire, a kind of dandyish *flaneur*, seeking out constant new metamorphoses or novel lifestyles….Maybe I am simplifying the argument somewhat, but it really is a very strange reading and utterly remote from what Kant had to say about the ethical life. Again, there is a very marked shift toward the aesthetic, something one also finds in Lyotard and in other postmodernist thinkers.

All the same, I think that Foucault is really wrestling with those problems in his late work. There are some rueful, almost plaintive passages in the essays and interviews of his last years where Foucault says, "If only I had read Kant earlier or more carefully," "If only I had read Adorno and the Frankfurt School, then I might have thought differently about issues of selfhood, autonomy, ethics, political responsibility, and so forth." We should take these passages seriously, I think, and not just treat them as some kind of mock humility on Foucault's part, an

attempt to disarm criticism by self-directed irony. Foucault had this regular habit of boxing himself into a corner by adopting extreme positions. He went through various successive phases, a stage of what you might call structuralism or post-structuralism where everything was language, discourse, or representation, then a phase of Nietzsche-inspired antinomian thinking, a strong-revisionist phase. But in each case, he gets into difficulties by not allowing himself enough conceptual room to develop more substantive notions of selfhood, of personhood, if you like. If we think in terms of persons, rather than subjects, then we are likely to come up with more adequate conceptions of what the ethical life might be, that is to say, what is involved in the complex dialectic of needs, desires, interests, rights, mutual understandings and misunderstandings, reciprocal obligations, and so forth, which make up the ethical life. Part of the problem with Foucault and post-structuralism is that they think always in terms of the subject, not the person. And this idea of the subject, the very word *subject*, carries along with it a certain inbuilt paradox, a contradictory structure or logic that tends to produce sharply paradoxical implications. Subjectivity is the locus of freedom but also the place of subjection, a "position" constructed in or by language, by discourse, cultural codes, conventions, formative structures, or whatever. I think that what one needs is not so much a notion of the subject which leads into all these problems but a more developed concept of the person, one that holds quite different implications with regard to such matters as autonomy, freedom, equality before the law, rights, obligations, and so on. I think this is a much more substantive and viable conception than the idea of the subject that one finds in a lot of post-structuralist and postmodernist theorizing.

So, these are some of the problems with Foucault, in my view at least. You are getting a lot of my own opinions here, probably mixed up with a lot of prejudices, but I suppose that is one purpose of this interview! It's a very Cartesian fixation; all the problems with Descartes's appeal to the cogito as an anchor point for knowledge and truth become sharpened and intensified when you start thinking of the subject as a position within language.

Hence, Lacan's rewriting of Descartes in a series of riddling paradoxical formulae. You know the sort of thing: instead of saying "cogito ergo sum," he says, "'cogito ergo sum' ubi cogito, ibi nonsum"—"where I think, 'I think, therefore I am," that is just where I am not." In other words, it is just when the subject thinks to establish its own existence through an act of lucid, transparent self-knowledge that it becomes merely a plaything of the unconscious, of language itself—in Lacan's view—as coextensive with the unconscious. And so you run into all these typical post-structuralist and postmodernist puzzles and paradoxes. I don't know how far, if at all, that answers your original question. In fact, to be honest, I have forgotten what the question was!

Yamamoto: *Well, in that case, let us change topics for a while! Perhaps we could discuss some more general questions about history and politics, recent history in particular. How might it be possible to overcome the violence and brutality of human history? What are we to make of the nihilist strain in certain post-Nietzschean and maybe Heideggerian movements of thought? What has been the chief significance of philosophy during the twentieth century? What might be the chief problems and challenges of philosophy in the twenty-first century?*

Norris: Well, these are very large questions again, so let me try to take them more or less in order. It would be absurd for me to claim that if everyone had a philosophical education, then we wouldn't any longer have genocidal wars or brutalities or interethnic violence because there's simply just too much evidence that some of the people who have perpetrated such things have been in fact very well educated, have been well versed in the great texts of Western philosophy, and so forth. On the other hand, I would want to say that philosophy does address issues that are extremely relevant in that context. It may sometimes address them at what seems at very abstract, a very generalized level. But take, for instance, the current debates going on between postmodernists and well, modernists, if you like, defenders of the enlightenment, let's say, about the Holocaust and its place in historical memory.

The postmodernist view—what you find in Lyotard and in a sociologist-historian like Zygmunt Bauman—is that the Holocaust was in some sense a product of the Enlightenment, an outcome of its narrowly formal, instrumental, bureaucratic, and hence in the end inhuman values of rationality, system, and method. So, this was the savage irony of Enlightenment thought: that it was somehow transformed—inevitably so, these thinkers maintain—from a philosophy of human emancipation into a disguised justification for mass murder on a systematic scale.

Adorno and Horkheimer argue a similar, if more nuanced and historically informed, case in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Defenders of the enlightenment would say, conversely, that this was a massive perversion of instrumental reason, a distortion brought about by its detachment from the values of enlightened reflective and critical thought. This in turn gave rise to a series of reactive anti-Enlightenment irrationalist philosophies like that of Nietzsche and the present-day postmodernists. Thus, for Habermas, the Enlightenment has by no means been discredited, or its values shown up as just a pretext for barbarism. On the contrary, it offers the best (indeed the only) available resources for reflecting on this dreadful history and striving to prevent its reenactment through further such catastrophic lapses or regressions. So, you have one camp saying, 'Enlightenment led directly to the Holocaust," and you have the other group saying, "No, it was the betrayal of Enlightenment ideals and the distortion of Enlightenment values and beliefs that led to the Holocaust." This is the position that Lukacs takes in his book *The Destruction of Reason*, a book that is very often dismissed—by postmodernists especially—as a piece of party-line communist hackwork but which in fact has some highly perceptive things to say. These issues seem to me absolutely crucial—they have to do with one's whole conception of human reason, the scope and limits of human understanding. So, this would be one case, I think, where philosophy is not a just kind of remote, abstract, ivory-tower occupation.

Let's take another example: current discussions of otherness, alterity, heterogeneity, and so forth. These themes are all

prominent in critical and cultural theory at the moment, partly—I would guess—through a loose extrapolation from Saussure's theory of language as constituted by "differences without positive terms." But more recently, they have taken an ethical turn through the influence of Emmanuel Levinas, the great French-speaking Jewish-Lithuanian philosopher and thinker of radical difference who died in 1996. According to Levinas, Western philosophy since its ancient Greek inception has been premised on the idea of epistemology as the most basic, indispensable, foundational enterprise. On the contrary, he argues, it is ethics and the ethical relationship to the other that should properly be viewed as first philosophy, as that which precedes—or which ought to precede—all other modes of philosophical enquiry. No doubt this is true, and importantly true, in a certain sense. It's more important that we treat other people well, that we learn to see things from their point of view and respect their various kinds of "otherness" or "difference," than that we should come up with some new—and most likely short-lived—argument in epistemology or philosophy of science. But I think there is something wrong—fundamentally wrong, you might say—with Levinas's notion of radical alterity, absolute otherness, the idea that you are ethically bound to treat other people as so different, so strange, so unknowable from your own point of view that you cannot begin to imagine yourself in their situation or imagine them in yours….I think this is a dubious—even a potentially dangerous—idea because if taken to the limit it means that we couldn't make a start in understanding other people's meanings, motives, interests, principles, conflicts of priority, claims upon our sympathy, and so forth. They would become so opaque—so utterly remote, inscrutable, or alien from our point of view—that we could have no reason for granting them even a basic claim to shared humanity or to treatment on civilized moral and political terms. In fact, they would become little more than objects in the field of our perceptual experience, objects intelligible only from an external (non–subject-related) perspective, like items in the physical or natural world. And this is of course the very reverse of an ethical relation to the other.

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This all goes back to what I was saying earlier about the need for a more substantive conception of personhood, rather than the somewhat strained and wiredrawn antinomies of recent post-structuralist and postmodernist thought. So, again, in response to your question, we can't hope that giving people an education in philosophy will make them better people, prevent them from behaving badly or even atrociously in certain situations. But we can perhaps claim that a bit more clarity about certain deep philosophical issues might be one means, albeit indirect, of helping to prevent such things.

Yamamoto: *Isn't there a certain violence built into traditional forms of Western epistemology, that is to say, those premised on the distinction between knowing subject and object known? Isn't such thinking always liable to produce a violent or coercive relation, whether between humankind and nature or one human being and another? So, should we not seek an alternative epistemology, maybe a "post-epistemology", one that rejects this dualist conception of subject and object? It's a very important matter, I think.*

Norris: I can see your point. One of the ways in which we can be brought to treat other people with sympathy and tolerance, to appreciate their problems or enter imaginatively into their experience, is through acknowledging that they, like us, are physically embodied beings in a material world who encounter certain limits to their freedom, certain constraints upon their possible range of choices or decisions in any given context. Thus, they may be materially or socially deprived, or perhaps physically injured, or prevented from fulfilling their best life chances by the brute obstruction of material factors, by real-world circumstance, by illness. I think that, to this extent, you have to maintain some sense of the distinction between subject and object because otherwise you won't sufficiently acknowledge the material pressures and forces and restrictions that so often bear on upon the exercise of human freewill, autonomy, and selfhood. And we understand this "from the inside," so to speak, through a knowledge of how it affects our own lives and experiences, even

if we are differently—perhaps less adversely—placed than some other people.

Anti-realists and cultural relativists very often don't take sufficient account of all this. They tend to underestimate, sometimes to ignore, the fact of these restrictions on the human freedom to "redescribe" or "reinterpret" reality in accordance with our heart's desire. It is the idea you find in a philosopher like Richard Rorty: that since reality is always under some description or other—since we have no access to the world except *via* our various language games, conceptual schemes, scientific paradigms, and so on—therefore it follows that the way things are is ultimately dependent on the way we choose to describe them. In which case, we should always be trying to come up with new descriptions, new sorts of "metaphor we can live by," so as to move the conversation along and not get stuck with some boring old paradigm of truth, reality, scientific method, or whatever. I have written quite a lot just recently about the confusions (as I see them) that result from this way of thinking in philosophy of science, so perhaps we could return to that topic in a moment. But my immediate point is that anti-realism of this sort also gives rise to ethical confusions, since it greatly exaggerates the extent of our freedom to remake the world or transform reality in accordance with our own hopes and wishes. When Rorty talks in this strong-descriptivist or strong-revisionist way, it sometimes reminds me of American Christian Science, of Mary Baker Eddy and the whole, rather crazy idea that by hoping or praying hard enough you can change just about anything about your own or other people's lives. It is a mixed-up idea in philosophical terms and also, I think, one that can do moral harm by persuading people to believe—or blaming them for their failure to believe—in this ultimate power of mind over matter, this capacity to change the world by thinking or talking differently about it. Consider the case of someone with a terminal, that is, medically untreatable illness, being told—as sometimes happens—that it's somehow their own fault for not feeling more positively about it, or not having sufficient faith in some alternative, maybe spiritualist cure. So here again there is work for philosophy to do—quite

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important work, I'd say—in trying to preserve a realistic sense of the powers and the limits of our human capacity to change things for the better.

As I say, these issues are posed most squarely by current debates in epistemology and philosophy of science. There is a widespread drift toward various forms of anti-realism, influenced by philosophers like Thomas Kuhn and also by the "strong program" in sociology of knowledge. This is the idea that what counts as scientific truth or reality must always be a product of sociocultural values, conventions, ideological vested interests, and so forth. In which case—so the argument runs—we should apply a strict principle of parity as between "true" and "false" scientific theories or those that are held—from our present-day standpoint—to have contributed importantly to the growth of scientific knowledge and those that are held to have got things wrong and which have therefore been marginalized or ignored on the standard progressivist view. Again, I have written at length about this—criticizing the strong sociological approach—in my recent book *Against Relativism*. But anti-realism also has other sources within contemporary science, especially in the field of quantum mechanics, and it is here that I would like to take up your point about the subject/object dualism. For there are people in various disciplines nowadays—philosophers, sociologists, cultural theorists, postmodern gurus like Lyotard—who take it pretty much for granted that this dualism has finally broken down because quantum physics has shown that the act of observation always affects, disturbs, or somehow influences the object observed. Indeed, some would say, it is only through the act of measurement that we bring about the so-called collapse of the wave packet, that is to say, the point at which the wave function assumes some determinate value or where it shows up as *either* a wave *or* a particle, according to the kind of measurement we make or the particular experimental arrangement. So, it looks as if there is no longer any room, in the wake of these quantum-mechanical discoveries, for that old epistemological notion of an objective "reality" that exists quite apart from our state of knowledge concerning it.

I think there are some deep conceptual confusions about all this. One thing I'm trying to do in my recent work is defend a causal-realist account of quantum physics, partly because there is so much vague and ill-informed talk on this topic among cultural theorists, all of it effectively prejudging the issue in favor of a "strong" anti-realist approach. What is often forgotten is the fact that there exists a very cogent, well-argued, consistent interpretation of quantum mechanics—David Bohm's "hidden variables" interpretation—which fits all the evidence, matches all the formal requirements, and predicts all the right values and measurements but which nonetheless preserves a realist ontology without all the massive conceptual problems entailed by the standard Copenhagen theory. What is remarkable, really, is that the Copenhagen theory has become almost a dogma or an unexamined article of faith among most philosophers writing on the topic and most quantum physicists—rather few of them, actually—who worry about these issues in the conceptual foundations of quantum mechanics. And this despite the fact that the orthodox Copenhagen account—as expounded by Bohr and Heisenberg—is full of quite extraordinary puzzles, paradoxes, counter-intuitive implications, and so forth. There is a recent book by James T. Cushing, *Quantum Mechanics: Historical Contingency and the Copenhagen Hegemony*, which argues this case very well.

So, returning to your question, yes, there is a sense in which we need to rethink the subject/object dichotomy and the way that it has structured so many of our basic epistemological concepts and categories. Some of this rethinking has no doubt been prompted by the emergence of quantum mechanics as a hugely successful—that is, predictively accurate—scientific theory but also, at the same time, one with deeply puzzling and perhaps incomprehensible aspects or features. Still, I think it is a principle worth hanging onto that mysteries in science are there to be solved and that they are much more likely to be a product of our present state of relative ignorance rather than something intrinsic to the very nature of quantum "reality." Einstein and Schrödinger were two scientists who shared this view that the

orthodox interpretation of quantum mechanics must be in some way "incomplete" since it gave rise to such strictly unthinkable problems and paradoxes. So, I feel that I am in good company, here at least! By the way, this was the whole point about the famous thought experiment with "Schrödinger's cat": that the poor animal just *couldn't* be thought of as somehow existing in a "superposed" dead-and-alive or neither-dead-nor-alive state until the box was opened and its fate determined by a human or at any rate sentient observer. Schrödinger's intention with this gruesome little fable was to prove by a kind of reductio ad absurdum that the standard account must be incomplete since it offered no means of drawing a line—a definite or nonarbitrary line—between events at the microphysical level where everything was a matter of probabilities given by the quantum wave function and events in the macrophysical domain where cats could be dead or alive but surely not be both at once.

So, it is something of an irony that so many people have drawn just the opposite conclusion from it, that is, the idea that this somehow "proves" the nonexistence of physical reality as we know it. At least, that is the kind of wild interpretation that tends to turn up in popularizing accounts. So, I think you could say—I would want to say—that quantum mechanics creates complications for the idea of a rigid dualism between subject and object, mind and nature, or knower and known. But it doesn't entail a complete shift to the idea that *everything* is a product of interpretation or that the world only exists insofar as there are human beings around to observe it. You do find a version of this argument not only in the popularizing books but also in the writings of some eminent physicists. But at this point, the realist will of course respond—in a sturdily commonsensical way—that the universe existed and carried on exerting its various causal powers for eons before there were sentient life-forms capable of collapsing the wave packet or performing any other such function. At any rate, the burden of proof in this matter seems to rest squarely with the anti-realist.

All the same, I would agree with you that we have no choice but to abandon certain kinds of hard-line objectivism in

epistemology and philosophy of science. I think there are just too many recent developments which call that doctrine into question. I mean, developments in molecular biology and genetics, the manufacture of synthetic proteins, for instance, which would not exist were it not for human scientific and technological intervention. Or again, the production of new elements which don't exist in a natural state, only when produced through by collisions in high-energy particle accelerators. So, obviously, there are certain kinds of human interaction with the physical world that create new objects, new materials, new physical realia. Nevertheless, once they *do* exist, then they display certain features, affinities, causal dispositions, microstructural attributes, and so on, which in turn become subject to further investigation and research. So, the fact that we have created them of course doesn't mean that they lack determinate properties or that we are free to describe or explain them however we like. I think this is a crucial point to make against the current anti-realists. But in general terms, I agree with you. That is, I agree that epistemology has to respond to these developments in the physical sciences. Otherwise, it would have little purpose or relevance, at least as applied to issues of real-world scientific understanding. Still, it has to keep hold of the idea—the basic realist conviction—that reality is *not* just a construct out of our various language games, descriptive schemes, conceptual frameworks, or whatever.

Yamamoto: *I wonder if we could talk a bit more about Foucault, especially his treatment of the will-to-truth and what might be called the predicative structure of willing. These are not forms of subjectivity or of judgment in the usual—say, Kantian—sense of that term. Subjects make certain judgments, judgments that involve, or that usually involve, certain acts of consciousness, of reflective self-awareness. But Foucault had something very different in mind when he spoke of the "will-to-truth," a predicative function that would somehow not go by way of the thinking, judging, self-conscious subject.*

Norris: This is the late Foucault you're talking about?

Yamamoto: *No, I think it was there from his earliest works, from* Madness and Civilization*, through* The Order of Things *and* The Archaeology of Knowledge*, to his later writings on the history of sexuality, where it becomes even more prominent. "Predication" in this sense occurs, for example, even in the simple declarative statement "I walk." But it doesn't have the kind of predicative structure that we associate with subject-centered philosophies, philosophies of consciousness and judgment in the tradition descending, say, from Descartes to Kant and thence to Husserl. "I," the first-person subject-position, doesn't have a will or express any kind of conscious, deliberate, willing activity. "Walk" has a will. "Walk" is where the predication occurs and the subject can only catch up, as it were, with the effects of this predicative structure.*

Norris: I find this all very difficult to grasp although I know the passages in Foucault that you're referring to. Probably you could trace some of these ideas back to Fichte, the post-Kantian idealist philosopher. Fichte claims to radicalize Kant by drawing out the full implications of Kant's critical philosophy, his doctrine of transcendental idealism. Thus, where Kant argues that knowledge is possible only through the given forms of human understanding—through intuitions of space and time, through various a priori concepts and categories—Fichte takes this argument one stage further. He rejects Kant's notion of a noumenal reality outside or beyond the phenomenal realm, the realm where intuitions are brought under concepts, thus enabling us to gain knowledge of the world. But of course there is a great problem with this, namely, that any knowledge thus acquired must always be relative to—or constituted by—the structures and modalities of human cognitive grasp.

Kant thought that this wasn't really such a problem since the structures in question were universal, a priori, transcendentally valid and hence not open to any kind of skeptical doubt. But it was soon pointed out by thinkers after Kant—by Schopenhauer, Hegel, and Nietzsche, for instance, albeit for very different reasons—that this doctrine could easily be pushed in a far more skeptical direction. Indeed, one could argue that modern anti-

realism begins with Kant, with the turn toward a framework-relativist approach that attempts to hold the line against skepticism but which ultimately fails in that attempt….Anyway, Fichte had the idea of cutting right through this knot of problems by treating the subject—the Ego, in his terminology—as a world-creating or world-constituting power that brought everything into existence through its own self-conscious activities and powers. For Fichte, the Ego is radically constitutive, achieving all this through an act of "positing" which perhaps comes close to what you have described as Foucault's idea of "predication," since it concerns the elementary structure or logic of the mind-world relation and has little or nothing to do with consciousness or reflective judgment or even with Kant's "transcendental unity of apperception." And it's only after that, after the Ego has posited the world, that it then goes on to posit the distinction between self and world, or self and other. I don't know if Foucault ever read Fichte, or at what precise stage in the development of his thought. He read a lot of things, and it was often much later that he came to acknowledge any "influence," as for instance with his early reading of Heidegger. Quite possibly he read Fichte at some point, but I wouldn't want to base any large claims on this possibility.

Yamamoto: *The Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro had some interesting things to say about the predicative will of place. "Place" has a will; place has a predicative will, so human beings understand the will of place in order to construct a right way of thinking and acting. Human beings have created a certain way of life in their particular place according to this conception.*

Norris: This would be a sort of genius loci, a tutelary spirit of place? Well, yes, there are passages in his late essays and interviews where Foucault talks about geography, about political geography, about the fact that history is often thought of in political terms, whereas geography is often regarded as a discipline which has more to do with nature, with the long-term processes and cycles of nature, rather than with relatively short-term social and

political developments. I am not at all sure that this is what you meant! But certainly, Foucault had a strong sense of the *situated* character of intellectual work and political or ethical projects, his own work and projects included. It was a part of his desire to break with the idea of the "universal intellectual," the thinker who claims to speak with authority on all matters and from no particular sociocultural location.

Yamamoto: *As for your own work, what are you doing now?*

Norris: Well, I published three books during 1997, as a matter of fact. There's one entitled *Resources of Realism* which is mainly about philosophy of language, philosophical semantics, the theory of meaning from a logico-semantic point of view. What I'm doing there basically is arguing the case for a theory of communication based on the analysis of complex propositional attitudes. It's a rather dry, analytic sort of book. But it does have a chapter suggesting that the literary critic William Empson has some very useful and original insights to offer in that context. He wrote a wonderful book called *The Structure of Complex Words* which has been read by almost no philosophers—and very few literary theorists—so I do quite a lot of flag-waving for Empson. I also talk about Quine, Davidson, Putnam, and what I see as the most important developments (as well as some of the wrong turns or blind alleys) in recent analytic or "post-analytic" philosophy.

Then, there's my book *New Idols of the Cave: On the Limits of Anti-Realism* which takes its title from Francis Bacon, who was attacking the kinds of entrenched prejudice (metaphysical dogmas, irrational beliefs, fixed habits of mind, and so forth) which obstructed the progress of scientific enquiry. It develops some of the arguments concerning epistemology and philosophy of science that we have touched on more briefly in the course of this interview. Lastly, there is a book called *Against Relativism: Philosophy of Science, Deconstruction and Critical theory*. This is partly an attempt to rescue deconstruction from various distortions and misunderstandings, for instance, the idea that deconstruction is irrational, that it denies the existence of a world

"outside the text," that it amounts to just a form of irresponsible textualist "freeplay," etc., etc. But the book also has chapters on Thomas Kuhn, on Bas van Fraassen's "constructive-empiricist" philosophy of science, on Richard Rorty, on realist *versus* anti-realist interpretations of quantum mechanics, and on the history of aerodynamics, which I take as a kind of practical test case for some of these theoretical issues. Aerodynamics is one branch of science unaffected by the puzzles and paradoxes of quantum theory, for which I think we ought to be grateful whenever we travel by air!

"Against relativism" also means "Against the Strong Programme in Sociology of Knowledge," since this is perhaps the most influential form of cultural-relativist thinking in current debates about the philosophy and history of science. So, the book includes a couple of chapters which criticize the strong-sociological approach on various grounds. As you'll have gathered by now, I believe that this approach leads to leads to a harmful kind of generalized skepticism, not only with regard to scientific truth but also as concerns the very possibility of understanding other scientific ideas, other cultures, other histories, periods, or conceptions of science. So, I think that relativism in its extreme form, in its strong-sociological form, can often end up by doing exactly the opposite of what it sets out to do. It aims to be tolerant, open-minded, liberal, and pluralist, admitting the widest possible range of beliefs, worldviews, or scientific theories and refusing to judge them by the parochial standards of our own particular time and place. But this often leads on to the idea that there's a radical incommensurability between them—what Lyotard calls a narrative "differend," a lack of any shared criteria—and therefore, that we can't even claim to understand other worldviews or belief systems different from ours. Thus, for instance, it might be argued that there is a different, distinctively "Eastern" way of thinking about science which we Westerners cannot comprehend since it comes out of an entire history and range of cultural life-forms which cannot be translated into the language and concepts of Western techno-science. It seems to me that this kind of relativist outlook—"dogmatic relativism," you

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might paradoxically call it—can do great damage by cutting off lines of communication across and between cultures. I think there are some strong arguments against it, partly on philosophical or logico-semantic grounds—the sort of case I argue in *Resources of Realism*—and partly by appealing to the detailed evidence of cross-cultural communication and exchange in the physical sciences and elsewhere.

So, my book puts the case for a realist, a causal-realist, and critical-realist philosophy of science, in company with people like Rom Harré, Roy Bhaskar, and the American philosopher, Wesley Salmon. But it also has two chapters on Derrida, specifically on Derrida's essays "The Supplement of Copula" and "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy." These essays have been badly misunderstood, or rather, they've been read with a different agenda in mind by various, mainly North American, literary critics and cultural theorists. Thus, Derrida is often interpreted as saying, "all concepts are metaphors," "everything is a textual construct," "truth is just a product of rhetorical definition," and other crudely simplified slogans of that sort. In which case, of course, there could be no possibility of theorizing or explicating metaphor, of explaining its role in scientific theories, along with the role of analogies or models as a means toward better understanding. But if you read "White Mythology" with a bit more care, then you will see that this is not at all what Derrida is saying. On the contrary, he engages closely with a whole series of texts—from Aristotle to Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem—which have sought to account for specific advances in knowledge through the progressive elaboration and critique of scientific metaphor. To be sure, there is a sense in which science and philosophy can't do without certain basic, constitutive, grounding, or "fundamental" metaphors, figures of thought which are so pervasive that they resist any attempt to explicate their meaning in "purely" conceptual or nonmetaphorical terms. Derrida brings this out very well through his reading of Aristotle, Bachelard, and others. But he is still very far from rejecting the idea that some metaphors—not others—are capable of producing advances in scientific knowledge and, moreover, that it is possible

to offer some account—some structural or phenomenological account—of just what is involved in this process. So, I'm arguing that Derrida has been misconstrued by many Anglo-American commentators and that his work has strong affinities with that French critical-rationalist tradition of thought descending from Bachelard and Canguilhem.

My next book—or maybe the next-but-one—will be on history, on issues in historiography and the interpretation of historical texts. This is still very much at the planning stage, but the ideas are beginning to shape up. One thing I want to do is clarify the distinction between fictive narrative discourse and historical narrative discourse. I think that distinction has become very blurred in writers like Barthes and Hayden White. Perhaps you know Barthes's early essay "The Discourse of History," which I first read almost twenty-five years ago and found very exciting at the time, even—as I thought—intellectually and politically liberating. Now I think it's not so liberating—indeed, just the reverse. Actually, I think that it opens the way to a politically dangerous and ethically disabling kind of wholesale "textualist" relativism. So, this book will again be putting the case for critical realism but now in the context of historiography.

Yamamoto: *So, please explain what the difference between historical discourse and fictional discourse is. We talked about this a short while ago, but you said you would like to develop the point…*

Norris: I think they involve different kinds of explanatory logic, different forms of narrative emplotment, different structures of representation, different modes of temporal and spatial ordering, different criteria for what counts as an adequate, convincing, intelligible version of events. Thus, for instance, one of the features common to historical discourse and scientific discourse is that they both involve causal claims that are counterfactual supporting, that is to say, which take the form had event *x* not happened, then neither would event *y* have occurred; thus, *x* must have been a necessary, if not a sufficient, causal condition for *y*.

This kind of reasoning may not always be explicit, but it plays an extremely important role in scientific and historical research. Then, there are other differences. Fictional narrative discourse has a whole range of special freedoms, among them chronological or temporal freedoms. It can use all kinds of distinctive fictional devices—repetition, flashback, prolepsis or anticipation of future events, compressed or expanded time scales, parallel but nonsynchronous streams of consciousness, and so on—which mark it off clearly from historical discourse. It can put you inside characters' minds, fictive characters' minds. It has a whole range of different narrative styles—"direct," "indirect," "free indirect," and so forth—for representing characters' thoughts. In other words, it can exploit possibilities, fictive or creative possibilities, which are not there in historical discourse. Or rather, if you do come across them in a piece of historical writing, then you know that you're reading a rather special kind of history that is partly fictive, that makes use of fictional devices and techniques. It is a kind of hybrid form, such as one finds in Simon Schama, for instance—especially his book *Dead Certainties*—and in other avant-garde or experimentally minded historians.

So, what I'm saying is that there are various constraints—causal, chronological, or modal constraints, and others having to do with matters of motive or agency, of "who did what," in what kinds of circumstance, and with what kinds of short- or long-range consequence—which impose certain limits on the narration of historical events. And then, there's a whole range of different possibilities that apply in the case of fictional texts. Of course, these genres may sometimes be deliberately mixed up. I mean, there are novels that incorporate large chunks of historical information, from early examples such as Fielding's *Tom Jones* to a novel like *War and Peace*. Nowadays, there are many examples: Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, all those other novels that are perhaps best described by Linda's Hutcheon's capacious term *postmodern historiographic metafiction*, or something like that. But I think you can tell the difference even within a single text. You're aware when you are crossing over, so to speak, from the

historical passages to the fictive passages, or from portions of the narrative that claim historical warrant to portions that make no such claim and which exploit the different kinds of fictional license that I have talked about already.

It is the same with historians like Simon Schama who sometimes incorporate fictive episodes or who fill out gaps and missing details in the historical record by improvising or imagining what happened. This distinction is basic to the whole enterprise of history writing. It goes right back to the Greek historian Thucydides, back to the very origins of historical discourse as a particular discipline or exercise of critical thought, one that involves—among other things—the appeal to evidence, the idea of documentary warrant, the sifting of relevant source materials, the sorting out of historical truth from myth, legend, or fiction. Thucydides is quite aware of all that. It seems to me that this whole postmodernist assault on the notion of historical truth is actually a kind of cultural regression, a large-scale failure of intellectual and moral nerve. You know, it's almost pushing us back to a stage before the very beginnings of critical historiography. So, it is important to address these issues not just from a narrowly academic, theoretical point of view but also as a matter of some urgency in the context of present-day political debate. You know, there are various people nowadays who want to rewrite history for all kinds of reasons, sometimes perhaps well-meaning but more often with unspoken, usually right-wing ideological motives. So, it does seem important to defend the values of historical discourse as a truth-seeking, critical enterprise. Anyway, that's what I'm doing at the moment, and it feels important to me!

Yamamoto: *So, for you, the French tradition of historiography is an important source of ideas and arguments?*

Norris: Oh yes, very much so, and also the tradition of French theoretical debate on the character and status of historical discourse: Marc Bloch, Paul Veyne, and other writers. Also, for that matter, some of Foucault's works. I mean, Foucault

sometimes has some very useful observations on historical method, but often they're mixed in with some extremely skeptical and, I think, actively misleading ideas.

Yamamoto: *I wonder how much this all has to do with your particular life history, your social and cultural background. You were born in England?*

Norris: Born, raised, and schooled in England, but I have lived here in Wales for almost twenty years, so I feel that I am Welsh by adoption or by elective affinity.

Yamamoto: *For British intellectuals, how relevant is the tradition of Continental philosophy, that is to say, the mainly French and German tradition? And what are the main differences in the British way of doing philosophy?*

Norris: Well, I suppose the native strain of philosophy in Britain is that of empiricism. It's best represented by David Hume, the great eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment thinker. It is a kind of sturdy, commonsensical, yet often very skeptical empiricism. Skeptical in the sense that Hume and many of his followers doubt all sorts of things that most people take for granted. But behind this is a kind of robust common sense, you know, in the sense that it really doesn't matter too much if philosophizing pushes you into all those skeptical doubts—about causality, other minds, the existence of an external world, and so forth—because despite all that you carry on living from day to day and learn to keep the problems for your study time or your hours of speculative leisure. So, Hume spent a part of his life writing and thinking and ending up in all kinds of skeptical corners, and then he would go and play a game of cards with his friends and he'd forget all those tedious skeptical doubts. Then of course he'd be at his desk the next morning and the doubts would all come crowding back! So, yes indeed, there is a distinctive British philosophical tradition, but it tends to come down very often to a kind of homespun empiricism plus an element of robust commonsense and a strong

flavoring of skepticism—skepticism but not cynicism, a sort of fortifying skepticism. At any rate, that is the traditional British style, a style much influenced by Hume.

More recently, I suppose, there's a continuation of something like that in the work of various British philosophers - like the "ordinary language" school after J. L. Austin—who are always trying to coax philosophy down from its abstract "metaphysical" heights, always trying to make it talk in a straightforwardly commonsense way and not get lost in such pointless puzzles and perplexities. This is where you have the idea of Continental philosophy after Kant as an alien, somewhat disreputable tradition, completely given over to that kind of empty metaphysical talk. But then, what we think of as "British" or "Anglo-American" philosophy during the past fifty years has in fact been greatly influenced by continental, especially German, thinkers because of the large-scale Westward migration of philosophers and other intellectuals before the Second World War. These were people—including some members of the Vienna Circle—who had an enormous impact on the development of logical positivism, logical empiricism, and related, chiefly Anglophone schools of thought.

So, what you have really is a mixture, a somewhat unstable, problematical mixture; the empiricist element is still there—the appeal to experience, sense data, observation, and so forth, as in the older British tradition—but also the kind of covering-law or logico-deductivist approach that was joined to it, often with less than convincing results. That approach has now given way—partly, I think, as a result of these problems—to what you might call "post-analytic" philosophy, a movement of thought which is often very skeptical about the possibility of distinguishing empirical from logical truths or observation statements from theoretical statements. The *locus classicus* here—probably the single most influential text in post-war Anglo-American philosophy—is Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." And you can see the effect of this retreat from the precepts of "old-style" analytic philosophy in a book like Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, where he talks about paradigm incommensurability,

about the underdetermination of theory by evidence, the theory-laden character of observation statements, and so on.

So, what happened, I think, is that the failure, or the perceived failure, of logical empiricism produced a sort of vacuum in philosophy of science, and various ideas rushed in to fill that vacuum including Kuhnian paradigm-relativist talk and also—closely related to that—the Strong Programme in Sociology of Knowledge. As I have said, this approach works on the principle that you cannot, or should not, distinguish between successful and unsuccessful scientific theories in point of validity or truth. Even the most powerful, successful, best-supported theory or hypothesis has to be explained sociologically just like an unsuccessful or failed theory. I have already talked about my reasons for rejecting this strong-sociological approach, so I won't say any more on the topic now, except that it seems to have taken hold very largely as a consequence of those problems in mainstream Anglo-American philosophy of science.

Yamamoto: *So what is philosophy?*

Norris: Well, that is another huge question, but I'll try to give you a fairly brief, no doubt personal and opinionated answer. Philosophy is two things. Philosophy is what gets taught in university—or mainly university—philosophy departments. Of course, this would be a narrow and rather evasive definition. Unfortunately, in this country, it's taught almost exclusively in universities and scarcely at all at sixth-form or earlier age levels in the school system. So, a kind of pragmatic definition would be "philosophy is the books that are read and the topics or the thinkers that are regularly taught on university courses in Philosophy." But a better, more useful definition is that philosophy is a matter of careful, reflective, self-aware, critical thinking. I mean, there's a "philosophy" of just about every discipline or subject area. There's philosophy of mathematics, there's philosophy of logic, philosophy of physics, philosophy of biology, philosophy of the social sciences, philosophy of aesthetics, philosophy of literary criticism. Most of these things have their source in ancient Greek

thought; in fact, they go back to Aristotle, most of them. What happens in the history of philosophy is that these disciplines all start off as branches of philosophy, so that physics—for example—is "natural philosophy," as I believe it is still called in some Scottish universities. But then, those branches become self-sufficient—acquire their own methods, research techniques, verification procedures, or whatever—and so they split off and become independent disciplines. The last one to go was psychology which, until round about the end of the nineteenth century, was still a branch of philosophy, philosophy of mind. And then it split off, having developed methods and interests of its own. So, you might say that philosophy is what's left over when the other special disciplines have had their say, or when there are certain questions that have yet to be answered. Thus, in the natural sciences, there might be questions, "metaphysical" questions in the literal sense, issues that cannot be addressed or resolved by any means available to science itself. They would have to do with (say) the status of causal explanations, or the logic of scientific enquiry, or the question—the ontological question—whether certain as-yet unobservable entities which figure in our current best theories should be thought of as actually existing "out there" or merely as useful, instrumental posits that are needed in order for the equations to work out right.

As I have said, quantum physics is a striking example of the way that science may go through phases of prolonged revolutionary "crisis" when there are large issues that remain deeply puzzling and when the line between science and philosophy is not at all easy to draw. Thus, you find scientists such as Einstein, Bohr, and Schrödinger addressing all manner of abstruse "metaphysical" or speculative issues and philosophers producing arguments which attempt to resolve those issues in scientifically acceptable terms. Indeed, it might be said that any future advance toward a better understanding of the quantum paradoxes is likelier to come from philosophers than scientists, since very often the latter tend either to adopt an instrumentalist outlook which ignores the basic ontological problems or to indulge certain wildly speculative notions which help to sell their popularizing

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books or TV series! In the social sciences also, there are issues of interpretation, questions of method and criteria of valid argument which fall within the remit of philosophy since they are not the kind of thing that sociologists can settle by applying their own disciplinary standards or techniques. In ethics, there are of course areas of direct, practical concern—branches of applied ethics—that might not be considered "philosophical," at least on this definition of the term, the one that I am offering here. Still, there are certain very important issues left over: issues concerning, for instance, the relation between fact or value, or the problems with a utilitarian conception of ethical and social good, or the clash between consequentialist and deontological theories of moral obligation.

So, philosophy is really not so much a "discipline" as the place, if you like, where all the big questions left over by the other disciplines once they've done their work are raised and discussed and not, perhaps, resolved but at least to some extent clarified, laid out in a more perspicuous and less confusing way. In other words, it is no criticism of philosophy to say that it rarely if ever comes up with final, definitive solutions. That is just what philosophy is: the place—the university department, if you like, but it should also happen in many other places—where people can think about these issues without the pressure to produce any kind of quick-fix, simplified solution.

It is very striking that in France, when the government threatened to cut back on the amount of money available for philosophical education in schools, there were mass protests. You know, there were marches in the streets of Paris, and people—students, parents, even pupils at *lycée* or high-school level—got extremely upset about these government plans. I must say it is hard to imagine that happening in Britain. Here, philosophy tends to be thought of as a highly specialized, highly "academic" discipline, one that doesn't have much social relevance or hold much interest for any but a small minority of people. So, it is the kind of thing that you might want to study at university, perhaps, if you happen to be inclined that way or if you don't have any other, more "relevant or useful course to take up. There is some

teaching of philosophy at sixth-form level but in very few schools and to very few pupils, since there aren't enough teachers with the necessary training and interest.

This seems to me a regrettable situation. I think that children should be not perhaps "taught" but encouraged to philosophize from an early age. There is—or there should be—no lower age limit on the introduction of broadly philosophical concerns as a part of basic school education. They could make room for it in the timetable by cutting out religious education. This was done in France a long time ago, and for very good reasons, I would say. There's no school-based religious education in France because it's very divisive in any multicultural or multidenominational society. Also it's very questionable, to my mind at least, whether we should fill children's heads with religious ideas. After all, religion is one of the greatest causes of violence, brutality, and suffering in the world. How can you justify the teaching of religious ideas and beliefs when people are using them as a pretext for the worst atrocities, whether in Northern Ireland or Algeria or in parts of India, Pakistan, Israel, the occupied Palestinian territories, Bosnia, the ex-Soviet states…the list could go on and on. We had much better teach philosophy in the schools, or maybe lessons in the history of ideas, including some basic philosophy of science, some basic issues about knowledge and truth, and of course some introduction to ethical issues of the sort that young people might think about. It could also include a bit of comparative religion, though without any doctrinal content, without trying to persuade them of the truth of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or whatever. I think it is very wrong—just the reverse of a good education—to force these beliefs on them at an age when they might be learning to think for themselves.

Yamamoto: *Which philosopher do you like the best?*

Norris: Well, I have a great admiration and affection for Spinoza. I wrote a book about Spinoza once, just after I had finished work on my book about Paul de Man. Then I discovered de Man's

notorious war-time writings—well, I didn't discover them myself but they came to light some weeks before the book went to press—and I thought what a pleasure it would be, by comparison, to write about a philosopher I could admire unreservedly, without qualification. Spinoza seems to me a model philosopher in many respects. He was a highly intelligent, single-minded, and utterly committed thinker but at the same time lived a life of exemplary virtue. You know, he was never angry. Well, on just one occasion, he did become angry, and I think justifiably so, when the mob attacked and murdered his enlightened patron and defender, Johann de Witt. But he himself was attacked, vilified, persecuted, excommunicated, subject to constant slander and abuse at the hands of his religious opponents. He had to put up with some terrible treatment, and yet, he remained calm, composed, good-willed, and forgiving, and this had a lot to do with his basic philosophical convictions. Spinoza was a thoroughgoing determinist, and he thought that, insofar as you came to understand other people and the causes of their action, you could see your way beyond hating or despising them for what they did. At the same time, you could reach a better understanding of your own beliefs, desires, thoughts, and actions and thereby achieve the kind of freedom that results from enhanced self-knowledge.

Of course, there is a basic paradox here, a sharpened version of the freewill-determinism issue that has struck many readers of Spinoza as a deep—maybe unresolvable—problem with his work. But it seems to me that this is a simply inescapable problem and that Spinoza treats it with a rigor and tenacity unmatched in the Western philosophical tradition. What's more, he set out to live his life in accordance with these principles arrived at through reflection on the powers and limits of human understanding. With many philosophers, there's a gap—sometimes a large and discomforting gap—between what they believe in principle and what they actually do in practice, in the conduct of the everyday lives. But Spinoza's life and thought were of a piece; they were cut from the same cloth, if you like. I think he's an admirable figure in so many ways…

Yamamoto: *Are there any books about Spinoza—studies or critical commentaries—which you have found particularly interesting?*

Norris: Well, my own book was partly a study of Spinoza's thought, but it was also a book about Spinoza's recent, mainly French, reception history. I had a couple of weeks during 1988 working in the New York Public Library—a wonderful place, by the way—and thinking about a new book project. I looked up Spinoza for some reason and found that a large number of post-war French philosophers, literary theorists, political thinkers, sociologists, and so on had written books or articles about Spinoza. In the case of Gilles Deleuze, there were two books and numerous references elsewhere. And, of course, Louis Althusser was very much influenced by Spinoza, as his collaborator Etienne Balibar, who coauthored the book *Reading Capital*, was. But not Derrida, as I was rather disappointed to find. Strangely enough, Derrida scarcely mentions Spinoza, though you would expect him to, for all sorts of reasons…Althusser, Balibar, Pierre Macherey, Deleuze, and various other, less-known figures: they all profess a great debt to Spinoza, but they interpret him in different, radically different ways. On the one hand, you have Althusser, Balibar, and Macherey, who read Spinoza as a critical-rationalist thinker, one who effectively anticipates Marx by distinguishing ideology—the realm of lived experience, imagination, "confused ideas"—from the realm of science, theoretical understanding, clear and distinct ideas. Thus, Spinoza's philosophy provides the basis for a "symptomatic" reading of Marx, which separates out the elements of pre-Marxist (Hegelian or humanist) thought from the stage of mature Marxist theory arrived at in the *Grundrisse* and *Das Kapital*. So, this is very much the "rationalist" side of Spinoza's recent French reception history. On the other hand, you have Deleuze's reading of Spinoza which is all about affective forces, desiring production, energy flows, schizo-analysis, the "body-without-organs," and so forth. It's the alternative Spinoza, if you like, a kind of late-60s, countercultural, radical-materialist Spinoza.

What struck me, what really surprised and impressed me, was

that you had these two schools of Spinoza interpretation which were at odds in just about every respect but which could both claim adequate warrant in Spinoza's texts. So, I thought then that Spinoza might make a very interesting subject for that kind of exercise in comparative reception history. Anyway, I found myself "hooked" by Spinoza, then as now. I think you could trace back a lot of my interests and concerns at the moment—a lot of the things we have been talking about here—to my belated encounter with Spinoza's work.

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Truth, Criticism, and the Latitude of the Intellectuals

Interview With Anthony Arnove

Anthony Arnove: *How has* Uncritical Theory *(1992) been received? Have you noticed any particular distinction in readings of the book on either side of the Atlantic? Could you also discuss your intentions in writing the book, which arose in response to the Gulf War and which interrupted your work on* The Truth About Postmodernism *(1993)? What kind of political intervention were you hoping to make?*

Christopher Norris: I really haven't had much of a chance to compare responses to it on either side of the Atlantic in that it's not been very much reviewed in the States, as far as I can see. It may be I've just missed some of the reviews. Generally, in Britain, it's been well received by people on the left, but not the post-structuralist left. I suppose most of the post-structuralists regard it as very regressive, the talk of truth and the ethical position taken in that book—and also its praise for people like Chomsky. So, generally speaking, among my post-structuralist colleagues, it's been met with either silence or a baffled hostility. Otherwise, among the other group of people I move with, people

on the left, the extra-University left, who were involved in the anti-war campaign, it was quite well received, in so far as they take an interest in theoretical matters. So, in a sense, it didn't have an obvious target readership, and the responses have been divided along fairly predictable lines. I suppose it was praised by several reviewers, people of left political sympathies, but people who are very skeptical about recent avant-garde developments in critical theory. But, among the post-structuralists, to be praised by those other people was like the kiss of death. Otherwise, most of the US responses have come in private letters rather than reviews or published comments. They have mostly come from people in the anti-war movement or on the left over here who, generally speaking, I think, enjoyed the book or found themselves sympathetic toward its position.

Arnove: *You conclude the first chapter of* The Truth About Postmodernism *by writing that the theoretical issues you raise "have a relevance…outside and beyond the specialized enclaves of cultural and critical theory. In fact they are within reach of the single most urgent question now confronting left thinkers in Britain and the United States: namely, what remains of the socialist project at a time when distorted consensus values have gone so far toward setting the agenda for . . . 'realistic' political debate" (28). In an earlier text,* What's Wrong With Postmodernism *(1990), you state that "socialism represents the only principled and consistent philosophy that envisages a way beyond these forms of blatant social injustice" (43) and you point to "an alternative way forward, a politics of genuine socialist democracy that rejects both existing models, i.e. communism as a form of state monopoly capitalism and the 'free-world' ideology of unrestrained market forces and possessive individualism" (14). Could you say more about this, specifically with regard to the current status of "the socialist project" and what you take to be the most advantageous possibilities for furthering it?*

Norris: Well, I think I'd stand by all that. I still think that one of the main threats to socialism or to any workable socialist

democracy comes from this particular muddle-headed consensus doctrine that tells us that criticism is fundamentally impossible because, insofar as you understand the norms of a society or its cultural mores, you have to be inside them; and if you're really inside them, you can't criticize them; and if you do criticize them, you're not inside them; and therefore, any principled dissident critique doesn't make sense on the terms of its own background culture—which is a deeply conservative and, I think, deeply confused doctrine, which has various more or less fashionable sources: postmodernism, post-structuralism, Wittgensteinian social philosophy, a number of more or less similar and, I think, conservative ideas. I suppose the most geared up and highly publicized form of this is the "end of history" thesis,[1] the Fukuyama line of thinking. Although I would say that his book[2] is very much more interesting than the articles of his I had read when I wrote about him in the Gulf War book. I think he's still confused about some crucial points, but at least it's more intelligently argued. But what I'd still want to defend, I think, is the line, the continuity, that runs from the Kantian Enlightenment tradition of secular critique down to various present-day positions, including Habermas's discourse ethics. I think there are various problems with Habermas, and I think they come out in particularly obvious form in his exchange with Derrida, where there was much confusion and bafflement on both sides, but I still think it's a project worth defending and refining and criticizing constructively.

But I think post-structuralism and postmodernism go wrong and fall into an uneasy alliance with some of these conservative forms of consensus-based thinking, partly because they reject the idea of truth. It's quite extraordinary that if you do as I do and stomp around the conference circuit talking about truth, frequently you're received as some kind of idiot—or at least people just simply raise their eyebrows and can't believe that you should ever want to defend the notion of truth, as if it were

1 See Fukuyama, "End" and "Reply."
2 Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*

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something inherently oppressive, retrograde, undemocratic, dogmatic, and orthodox. So, what one has to explain patiently is there are different kinds of truth, truth claims, validity claims, and truth conditions in different kinds of discourse. I think where the confusion comes in is that the post-structuralists and the postmodernists equate truth with some kind of revealed religious truth, as if by claiming to speak the truth or to have an interest in truth you were appealing to some vested higher authority or ultimate, privileged, unique access to Truth with a capital T. But, as I try to point out in my Spinoza book,[3] the whole point of the secular Enlightenment critique—using Enlightenment in a very extended historical sense in which Spinoza will count as an Enlightenment thinker, not just the specific historical period of late eighteenth-century Enlightenment—what Spinoza shows, I think, what makes him such an interesting historical figure, is that you need truth, you need truth claims, and a specific differential range of truth claims in order to combat that particular prejudicial, religious or sacred, notion of the truth vested in a sacred text. So, in order to combat Truth with a capital T, you need certain regulative notions of truth, perhaps truth at the end of inquiry—but certainly various kinds of factual, historical, and philosophical truth. And that's why I say in that passage you quoted that these apparently very specialized, academic issues that appear to have no very direct bearing on matters of present-day politics in fact do have an important bearing. A lot of the intellectual, theoretical discourse around questions of truth nowadays is, I think, a displaced version of really important debates in the political forum. So this is not just ivory tower stuff.

Arnove: *In* The Truth About Postmodernism*, you comment that there is no room left in contemporary doxa "for the role that Gramsci attributes to 'critical' intellectuals…thinkers who challenge the dominant ideology from a dissident standpoint identified with interests that are marginalized by the current consensus" (13) or "left intellectuals who still seek to make sense of history from*

3 Norris, *Spinoza and the Origins of Modern Critical Theory*.

a standpoint of class-based Ideologiekritik*" (20). And in* What's Wrong With Postmodernism*, you refer to the "willing abrogation of their critical role on the part of jaded Western intellectuals ready to adopt whatever self-image they can rescue in these present hard times" (43).4 Could you elaborate what you take to be the model of intellectual work that motivates your work? Does the intellectual, as you suggest, have any particular responsibility? Do you make any distinctions, when thinking about your own political practice, between critical intellectual work within the intellectual field and political practice outside the intellectual field?*

Norris: Well, you have to make distinctions. I suppose most left intellectuals are aware, uncomfortably aware, of the gulf, or at least what appears to be the gulf, between what they do, let's say, in the seminar room or when they're writing their books and what they do when they're politically involved elsewhere. I think there has to be some relation; otherwise, you'd be in a state of chronic, schizophrenic dissociation if you felt that your intellectual work was totally unconnected with your political commitments. But there's no neat and tidy connection to be drawn. On the other hand, I think there are some connections to be drawn. I wouldn't want to say that philosophical positions map directly onto political positions because there's too much evidence in the history of philosophy for the fact that philosophers of very similar views on questions of knowledge and mind and language and so forth can reach very different conclusions politically. If you take Bertrand Russell and David Hume, you can go from a radical empiricism, a slightly different form of radical empiricism, but you can go from Hume's version to a conservative notion that, since we have no innate ideas, therefore we have to repose on custom and tradition in order to maintain any kind of civilized existence—hence a conservative philosophy. Whereas Russell can go straight from radical empiricism to a dissident left-liberal attitude. And the same no doubt is true of rationalism.

4 See Wood, *The Retreat from Class*, and Ralph Miliband and Leo Panitch, ed., *The Retreat of the Intellectuals.*

On the other hand, you're talking about role models, and I think Chomsky probably is as good a role model as one can find. That's to say, as someone who has, at least in his earlier work, although he's a little more wary about this now, tried to draw connections between arguments about mind, philosophy, language, language acquisition, the nature of human knowledge and understanding, and the powers and limits of human intelligence—between those concerns and a wider political involvement. I think Chomsky is much more cautious now about drawing those connections, partly for the reason I suggested a moment ago, that he doesn't any longer think there's any one-for-one definitive relation between the two areas. Also because he's always liable to be attacked by people on the right who say, well, Chomsky's entire enterprise, including his linguistics and his cognitive psychology, is simply an extrapolation from his political beliefs—which is an absurd position, of course, but I suppose he has to be careful about it. But I think that's one example: Chomsky's argument for a rationalist philosophy of mind and a high regard for the innate powers of human intelligence. Obviously, when he talks about language acquisition, he's talking about such a very general level of human competence that, again, it is dangerous perhaps to extract a social or political philosophy from that. But, in his earlier work, he was, I think, much keener, much readier to do that.

So, Chomsky seems to me in many ways exemplary. I think there is a connection between what he thinks about the human mind and language and his idea of human obligations and the need, the moral duty almost, for critical intellectuals to engage in a dissident way and a truth-telling way with some of the lies that are peddled by the propagandists. So, he is, I would think, as good a role model as you can find. And I would say also Habermas, in a rather different but equally impressive way. The way Habermas has engaged the right-wing revisionist historians, those who would rewrite Holocaust history, and done so at a daily, polemical level in the newspapers.5 But also, behind that, one can see that Habermas's theory of communicative action provides a

5 See, for example Habermas, *The New Conservatism*.

philosophical basis for saying there's more to history than simply who tells the more interesting story or who has the newspaper backing, consensus support, or whatever. So, I think what you get in Habermas is a worked out—problematic—but a worked out philosophical basis for some of his principled ethical and political stands. So, I'm not saying that these should be treated as tremendous moral heroes, though I think there is a real heroism about Chomsky's position, but they do provide at least one good working model for the relation between the specialized work that intellectuals do in their working hours and the political work they do off campus.

Arnove: *You make repeated reference in the Introduction to* What's Wrong With Postmodernism *to Perry Anderson's thesis in Considerations on Western Marxism that, as you put it, "the level and quality of theoretical work on the left often seems to vary inversely with the fortunes of left-wing politics at large.…a recourse to theory is typically the response of any marginalized fraction of dissident intellectuals, excluded from the mainstream of political life.…discovering all manner of pseudo-radical rhetorics and postures by which to disguise their own deep sense of political failure or defeat" (1) and that "theory has served as an escape-route from pressing political questions and a pretext for avoiding any serious engagement with real-world historical events" (44). Yet, ironically, this political defeatism and theoreticism is somehow seen as more "radical," "subversive," and "political" than traditional forms of collective left politics, such as anti-imperialist struggles. How do you see this relationship between left-wing politics at large and intellectual work playing itself out under the current situation (the "New World Order," the so-called collapse of socialism, the end of history rhetoric now used as the ideological cover for the continuing imperialism of US foreign policy, the opening of Eastern Europe to even further market penetration, the growing interventionism of the United Nations as a front for US imperialist interests, the growing formation of trade zones and blocs institutionalizing new forms of regional control and exploitation, the collapse of the leadership of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and emancipation,*

GATT and IMF market discipline)? What opportunities do you see for practically overcoming the contradictions Anderson points to in, as you describe it, "a period of world history when we can ill afford to indulge such forms of collusive mystification" (45)?

Norris: Well, you've provided the beginnings of an answer in the way you formulated the question. One of the functions of the critical intellectual is to tell the difference between the rhetoric, or the smoke screen of the various ideological justifications, the pseudo-justifications that are offered, and the kinds of realities that mask behind those rhetorical smoke screens. And I take it that's largely what my Gulf War book was supposed to do. There's a great amount of pseudo-radical intellectual posturing not so much on the left as the ex-left, on the disenchanted, post-68 French ex-left specifically, that does amount to an ideological cover or justification for apathy, for lack of concern and involvement. But I think there's no substitute, and here again I think Chomsky is a real point of reference, for the sheer hard work, the sheer slog of uncovering truths and facts and going through the Congressional records or whatever, whatever information sources you have access to, and simply comparing those sources and trying to establish the inaccuracies, the anomalies, discrepancies, contradictions, and lacunae. So, a certain amount of empirical spade work, I think, is necessary and then perhaps the high-level reflection on some of the implications of it. But it is, I think, much easier in the States than in Britain, where we still have this tremendous, sometimes almost impenetrable, smoke screen of the Official Secrets Act. But at least over here you do, in principle, have access to most of the relevant sources without the British Official Secrets Act, which makes it very difficult to do that kind of work. But one of the first, and most important, functions of the critical intellectual is to try to sort out the truth about what happened or is happening. So, you find if you go to listen to Chomsky nowadays, he doesn't want to talk about philosophical issues, even important issues of freedom, democracy, and so forth; he wants to talk about the specific lies that are told, the importance of establishing the facts. But, I'd forgotten that passage you quoted. It was very dyspeptic.…

Well, that was written at a particularly low ebb, I suppose, in British electoral politics. But I think Thatcherism in Britain and Reaganism here were both examples of the power of rhetoric and of the utterly unreal, the most farcically unreal, images put forth by the compliant mass media propaganda machine.

Arnove: *Could you discuss your relationship to the Socialist Worker's Party in England and with other forms of organized political work? On a more theoretical level, how would you situate yourself on questions of the party and collective action in socialist debates? As you point out, the dominant strands in post-structuralist and postmodernist theory, especially following Foucault, have taken up extreme anti-representational, spontaneist, and hyper-individualist stances on questions of political practice, such that ideas of collective, organized resistance are seen as always-already totalitarian or Stalinist. Yet, one seriously questions, on a strategic level, how they ever hope to achieve any political transformation having denounced the bases and forms of collective struggle that have won whatever gains there have been in the struggle for autonomy and which continue to be the only effective form of political opposition. As you quote Terry Eagleton, "there is one place above all where such forms of consciousness may be transformed almost literally overnight, and that is in active political struggle. This is not a Left piety but an empirical fact. When men and women engaged in quite modest, local forms of political resistance find themselves brought by the inner momentum of such conflicts into direct confrontation with the power of the state, it is possible that their political consciousness may be definitively, irreversibly altered."*[6] *Could you discuss your position on the question of party and of organized resistance?*

Norris: Well, Foucault's position on that, I think like a lot of his positions, is really quite extreme and perverse. He forces himself into a corner, I think, or out onto a limb, partly through a very confused theoretical grasp of, I suppose, the nature of autonomous

6 Eagleton, *Ideology* 223–224, cited in Norris, *Uncritical Theory* 190.

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action. I think, like a lot of French intellectuals, he tends to take a very drastically polarized view on every single issue. So, either it's a matter of total absorption into some impersonal, machine-like party or group enterprise or so forth, or it's a matter of absolute, radically autonomous, self-acting will, neither of which obviously is a real option and neither of which can Foucault ever have experienced. It's a slightly absurd, artificial, self-created philosophical puzzle. But I think this is one of the marks, one of the most disabling marks of Foucault's thinking. In many ways, Foucault is a great figure and a worthy model for certain kinds of localized, specific struggle, which is just how he presented his work, in fact. But you do have this great failure to conceive or to conceptualize the relations between group activity and individual agency. I think it comes out in Foucault's later work, where you get this extraordinary rewriting of modernity, the philosophical enterprise of modernity, in terms of nineteenth-century, mainly French, aestheticist poetic postures. So, rather than talking about Kant, as promised, he talks about Baudelaire.

So, I think Foucault was caught on the horns of an artificial dilemma in many ways. And I think part of the reason for that is the massive forgetfulness in recent French intellectual culture of Sartre's work. But Sartre provided, among other things, some very interesting and I think workable ways of conceptualizing the relation between individual, group, and then group and larger social units. It seems to me that this is a matter, as Eagleton would say, of empirical fact: it is true that we find our political identity and purpose, and a sense of a unified purpose, in groups. And they may vary from, well in my case, a choir, the Red Choir in Cardiff, which is a loose, sometimes rather fissile grouping of left-wing socialists and some Welsh nationalists, but Welsh nationalism is not like other kinds of resurgent nationalism: it's a culturalism much more, and especially a movement to save the language. But music is, as far as I'm concerned, one of the most effective local forms of cultural politics. Music has great power to stir and to wake people up and to make them think and get politically involved. But that's one example of what Sartre would have called a group-in-fusion, I think, whereas, he says, most groups-

in-fusion eventually decline into what he calls seriality, an inert structure of relationships. But this is, and Eagleton's right, this is something you can observe, something you can check in a sense for yourself, this sense of involvement with a protest movement or a student movement or perhaps a political party. Although the times are not propitious, at least in Britain, for any sense of larger party involvement, partly because the Labor Party has dumped so many of its commitments and has become such a weak-kneed, pragmatic, unprincipled, go-getting, opportunist party. It's very sad what's happened to the Labor Party. But when you lose that sense of larger collective purpose and identity, then I think you do, to some extent, not so much retreat to but fall back on local groups, more specialized movements.

But one thing's for sure, I think: Foucault does not provide a workable model on that particular issue. This idea of a radical disjunction between the group, which is always something which somehow forces the individual to act in bad faith, and the radical, autonomous, isolated will is an absurd notion, and I think it comes out of his misreading of the Enlightenment. This is another way in which these specialized debates do have a bearing. If you misread Kant to the extent that he does, say, in *The Order of Things*, then Kant becomes a dreadful warning example of what he calls the "transcendental empirical doublet," this unworkable split between "the subject" as locus of autonomous agency and choice and "the subject" as passive nexus of all those systems, discourses, power-knowledge relations, and so forth. Then, if you see Enlightenment itself as a fallacious and self-subverting, misconceived project, as Foucault does there, you're sure to wind up with this really rather dire, bleak view of the prospects for human progress and change. So, I think there's a direct line between the misreading of Kant, which he later actually began to correct or at least to rethink, and his position on collective activity, but I suppose he died too soon to really push that line of thinking through. I argued in *The Truth About Postmodernism* that these misreadings of Kant are barometers, you might say, or symptomatic of what's wrong with a lot of postmodern theorizing. The systematic and insistent overemphasis on the Kantian sublime, which is a mark of a lot

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of recent postmodern theorizing, not only about aesthetics but also about ethics and politics is, I think, another disquieting sign of the intellectual times. And I think it has large and potentially disastrous political consequences.

Arnove: *I am very interested in the attempt to offer a historical and materialist account of the emergence of anti-Enlightenment, anti-Marxist doxa within post-structuralism and postmodernist social theory. You offer quite convincing critiques of the theoretical suppositions and political implications of such positions, but I am not sure you provide a historical analysis of the emergence of these ideas. I am thinking here of the necessity of a sociology of intellectuals, on the model of Pierre Bourdieu or Raymond Williams, which would look at the social determinants that structure intellectual practice; of Marx's important insight in The German Ideology (first published in 1932), quite relevant today, that "It has not occurred to any one of these philosophers to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality, the relation of their criticism to their own material surroundings" (41); of Zygmunt Bauman's claim that "A case can be made that the total disappearance of the issues of politics and domination from the vision implied by the 'interpretive' [model of the intellectual]…has more than an accidental connection with the currently experienced dislocations in the social function of intellectuals, and particularly in their relation to the effective powers that be" (Intimations on Postmodernity 1992: 23); and of Aijaz Ahmad's argument in In Theory that following the rejection of socialism and the adoption of nationalism as the determinate negation of imperialism among radical "first world" intellectuals, soon followed by a disillusioned retreat from nationalism, intellectuals committed to a third-worldist and culturalist model of global capitalism were left without any analytic or political ground to stand on and that it is this "redoubled vacuum…poststructuralism is now to fill" (1994: 34). Beyond gesturing to the intellectual "disenchantment" following May 1968 in France, how would you historicize the developments you critique?*

Norris: Well, it's going to have to be very specific, very localized, empirical, and data based. And I think, there again, in a sense, your question provides the answer that it's seeking. It's not that I've avoided tackling those questions out of some belief that only by living through them, and being specifically a part of the group that one is talking about, can one understand them. I think that's the type of internalist thinking that has skewed a lot of postmodern analysis. We can competently and responsibly talk about other people's experience, I think, without laying down the law or adopting an arrogant attitude. But I do think that in order to do that kind of work you have to do what Bourdieu does, in fact; you have to do a great deal of very specific empirical research on a particular *habitus* or whatever. The nearest I've come to that is studying the post-mid-70s contortions of British intellectual life in response to various waves of French intellectual fashion and also in response to various political setbacks and the continuing, triumphalist progress of the right in Britain. And I think there's a lot of interesting work to be done there.

But again, I suppose, my competence is mainly in philosophy and not so much in sociology, so most of the remarks I have made in that direction have been rather gestural and often very polemical, as in the introductions to the two books on postmodernism. Only in the Gulf War book did I really get down to trying to analyze some of the sources of the defeatism, the retreat from reality, and the mood of complacent acquiescence among intellectuals. But since then, actually, I've received a number of rather sharp and protesting letters from people in America, saying that the anti-war movement was much more active here than I seemed to suggest in the book and that I was relying too much on television sources and newspaper sources for that. And it's true enough: I didn't realize how much was going on through e-mail and various other networks, more or less underground networks, and how many protests there were. And, of course, to that extent, I was a victim of the media, which systematically distorted the coverage and ignored those manifestations of popular protest. So, this is an opportunity actually to make amends and say that, if the book

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goes into a second edition, I shall put in an appendix detailing some of the anti-war activities I've since come to hear about.

The kind of work you're talking about is extremely necessary, but I'm not best placed to offer guidelines.

Arnove: *Following on that question, could you extend this analysis to the theory of the "specific intellectual" elaborated by Foucault and so valorized by subsequent theorists? It is interesting that in "Truth and Power," Foucault essentially avoids any historical or self-reflexive analysis of the category, instead asserting, in typical fashion, that "Some years have now passed since the intellectual was called upon to play this role [the role of the 'universal' left intellectual, no doubt an allusion to Sartre, whom Foucault refuses to name]. A new mode of the 'connection between theory and practice' has been established. Intellectuals have got used to working, not in the modality of the 'universal'…but within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them" (*Power/Knowledge *126). Could you also summarize your own defense of and theory of the category of universality, particularly with regard to the question of the "universal" intellectual? What is the ground or condition of possibility of such gestures to universality?*

Norris: I think Foucault has skewed the issues by taking this all-or-nothing, extreme position. As far as he's concerned, you're quite right, Sartre is the great cautionary figure of the overweening intellectual, the universal intellectual, who claimed to articulate the conscience of his place and time, or at least his class. And to some extent, that's true, and there are certain aspects of Sartre's public career that nowadays seem, not absurd, but seem somewhat dated. But I think that Foucault's position on this comes down to a caricature of Sartre's universalist claims.[7] And again, it's a misunderstanding of—sorry to keep harping back to Kant—but the point is you can be a universal intellectual in some sense

7 See, in particular, Sartre's essays "A Plea for Intellectuals" and "A Friend of the People" (*Between* 226–298).

without claiming to speak from a position of absolute authority and Truth. Universality in the Kantian sense means respecting certain assumed common interests, common human interests, the sensus communis—exactly what Habermas talks about. It is the idea that in every act of political exchange or conversation, or an interview like this, or a political demonstration or an argument, for instance, there is a certain tacit, shared understanding of what would count as agreement, informed agreement, not just de facto consensus agreement of the kind that Rorty or Fish would appeal to, but the idea of enlightened, undistorted exchange and agreement on certain principles in common.

This is the kind of universality that Kant refers to and that Habermas refers to and that is, I think, implicitly appealed to in every context of good-faith dialogical exchange. The whole point of having public debate is precisely to arrive at that kind of understanding. It presupposes a number of values, like undistorted communication, and I would say that, ethically and politically, it implies some kind of socialist agenda. But Foucault, again, has distorted the issue by assuming that any interest in speaking the truth on behalf of other people necessarily implies that one is adopting a high, commanding position, above and beyond their purview, and treating them simply as passive recipients of this superior knowledge, which he rightly regards as being an offensive position, but then, Sartre never really adopted it, despite his occasional rhetoric and high public visibility. So, I think it's possible to defend some notion of the universal intellectual without falling into that self-deceiving posture of arrogance, and I think Habermas is a good example of that. It's what we do implicitly whenever we, for instance, write a letter to the newspaper or whenever we presume to fill other people in on things they didn't know already, and it doesn't involve the arrogance that Foucault is so afraid of.

Arnove: *Kate Soper claims in* On Human Needs *that every social theory has, if not an explicit, an implicit theory of human nature and human needs. In light of this claim, I am interested in your argument in* The Truth About Postmodernism *that "if indeed*

it is the case that consensus values go 'all the way down,' then there is simply no conceiving how resistance comes about, or how anyone could effectively challenge those values from a standpoint of argued and principled dissent" (54). You also question "how far it is possible to envisage an ethics*—in any meaningful sense of that term—which would treat the subject as indeed nothing more than an imaginary locus, a side-effect of language" (48). Does your standpoint rest on any sense of human capacities and properties, such as transcendental features of reason (as, for instance, in your references to "broader regularities of human understanding within and across cultures" [26], the "exercise of the human faculties—of understanding, reason and judgment" [56], "Kant's argument that there is indeed a 'deep further fact' concerning the nature of human identity or selfhood, a 'condition of possibility' in the strong (*a priori*) sense" [82]) or an instinct for freedom or need for collectivity? Is the category of "human nature" redeemable, especially given its traditional essentialist and reactionary application? How does resistance come about?*

Norris: Yes, I think the category of human nature is redeemable, and I think one of the ways to redeem it critically is to examine some of its misuses and abuses and its dehistoricized, essentialist, and usually deeply conservative rhetorical uses. Having been brought up on early Roland Barthes and *Mythologies*, I still have quite a strong trust in the capacity of reason to see through some of those camouflages, those self-interested and narrowly partisan uses of the term. But I think it's possible to defend a notion of human needs, communal needs, without falling into a crude biologism or essentialism or what used to be called humanism by post-structuralists. But, I think, there again, that's a word that's been abused. There is no good politics without humanism. Our needs extend all the way from the basic human needs, the physical needs for shelter, and food, and at least a decent level of material provision, to the human need not to be grossly misinformed, not to be fooled, not to be made the victim of large-scale systematic distortions through the media and the doctrinal system: the need,

which again you can find formulated perhaps most effectively by Habermas, for an adequate flow of information and not a one-way or partial or distorted flow of information. I would want to call this a need, not just a desirable perquisite, but a basic human need, especially in the complex structures that we have to inhabit in society now. So, information should, I think, be regarded as a basic human need—simply because we base many of our crucial life choices on having adequate information or access to information sources.

So, yes, I think we can and should defend the notion of human nature. I would not be as shy as some people in drawing certain lessons from socio-biology, although generally speaking critical theorists regard it with deep suspicion and not without reason, I should add. But some of the lessons of socio-biology about human mutual reliance are actually rather encouraging; there's a whole range of heartening lessons to be learned about the fact that a certain degree of altruism is built into even the nature of human self-interest. Other-regarding principles seem to be basic to species survival. So, without going all out for some of these fashionable socio-biological doctrines, I think it's possible to base the argument for human needs on some of those arguments.

The problem with Chomsky is that perhaps early on he banked on the wrong rationalist tradition. In his book *Cartesian Linguistics*, in 1965, he went back very much to that Descartes, Port Royal grammarian tradition, that high rationalist philosophy of mind, which was largely evolved in isolation from any wider social context. Had he gone back to Kant, I think, he would not have run into some of these later problems that he's experienced in relating the two aspects of his work, the political and ethical, on the one hand, and the linguistic, cognitive, psychological, on the other. Because what you get in Kant, contrary to the current anti-foundationalist wisdom, is not an extreme foundationalist position on epistemology which argues that there just *are* certain foundational principles of knowledge. If you go back and read the preface to the first *Critique*,[8] you find Kant saying that all

8 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.

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our incentives, reasons, and interests in establishing the truth in questions of epistemology in fact come out of our belonging to a wider sensus communis that gives us this sense, this communal need, for establishing certain truths with regard to the powers and limits of human understanding, human theoretical intelligence. So, Kant was never a real rock-bottom, hard-line foundationalist in the way he's supposed to have been. Chomsky does talk about Kant, but Kant is not his main philosophical point of reference in that early work. Had he not gone back to the bare forked creature of Cartesian dualism, had he gone back to Kant instead, then I think he might have been able to construct a more viable and convincing account of the relations between the two sides of his work.

The reason I do keep harping on about Kant is that, although Kant doesn't provide all the answers—that would be an absurd position to take—he does provide the essential starting points, I think, for some of these debates. And they've been systematically distorted by the very curious and I think rather perverse misreadings of Kant that have gained currency among the postmodernists.

Arnove: *You are quite committed in your defense of the continuing relevance of Marxist categories of analysis, such as class, ideology, and relations of production, against the reductive caricatures and hostile dismissals of post-structuralism. You are also quite clear in your defense of socialism against the "widespread tactical retreat from socialist principles" (*Truth About Postmodernism *3) on the left and the apologists of capitalism who see the East European revolutions as the triumph of the market and freedom against socialism in their indefensible equation of "state monopoly capitalism" (so-called actually-existing socialism) with socialism per se. But it is not clear to me how you would situate your work positively vis-à-vis Marxism? Do you consider your work to grow out of a Marxist or reconstructed Marxist position?*

Norris: Well, I suppose a reconstructed Marxist position in the sense that almost everything written about Marx since Marx has

been a kind of reconstruction. But I think those central categories of Marxist analysis are still applicable, and the postmodern critique of Marxism, especially as it takes shape in Baudrillard, in Baudrillard's more interesting, early books on Marx, largely misses the point. The concept of ideology is an essentially contested concept and obviously can't be invoked as if it were beyond any challenge, but I think you see it everywhere. In the last three election campaigns in Britain, what you've had is a massive instance of the exploitation and manipulation of ideological self-images, and it's something you can verify on the doorstep, as Terry Eagleton would say, empirically, simply by talking to people when you go canvassing before the election. People identify with their ideologically induced self-image as first-time house buyers, let's say, and they vote conservative because they're first-time house buyers and they've been told that first-time house buyers have a natural interest in voting conservative. What's going to happen next time, when these first-time house buyers find their houses are worth about half what they were when they first paid for them, is a different matter.

I think that ideology is massively and pervasively present and the idea that somehow we've outlived the usefulness of those categories and lived on into a post-ideological hyperreality or whatever is itself a piece of pure ideology.

Arnove: *In* Uncritical Theory, *you introduce the category of "alternative resources against postmodernism" (86). Could you elaborate on the alternative resources you take to be most critical, particularly in relationship to traditions of critical thought and political practice that inform your own work? Also, do you see any alternative resources currently emerging, spaces where new forms of political and critical work is possible? Do you get the sense that any critical mass of work is turning the tide against the doxa of postmodern social theory or, as you say in Uncritical Theory, "reversing the drift" (119)?*

Norris: Inevitably, the alternative resources are going to be fairly scattered and piecemeal. I think that one of them, for instance,

which I'm working on now, is realist philosophy of science and the anti-conventionalist defenses of scientific realism, or of critical naturalism, in the history and philosophy of science developed by people like Roy Bhaskar.[9] I think that's important because one of the first casualties of postmodern counter-Enlightenment thinking is precisely the notion of scientific truth, so that you find people like Rorty and Fish basically ridiculing the idea that science actually finds things out about the world. They would say it simply constructs the world in the image of its own preferential metaphors, language games, "final vocabularies," and so forth. That whole anti-realist line, along with all its counter-Enlightenment political implications, I think, has to build on an anti-realist philosophy of science; one of the things one needs to defend, then, is that science, although very often it discovers dangerous things or at least follows very varied, sometimes inhuman and destructive lines of research, nevertheless is very good at finding things out about the way that things stand in nature.

I think that there has always been a link between scientific realism and the Marxist project. Without some workable notion of reality, it's impossible to maintain the basic categories of Marxist ideology critique. So, philosophy of science is one important resource. And I think also, again, some attempt to redeem and restate the premises of Kantian Enlightenment thinking is going to be the source of any revived Marxist ethics. The sources are going to be fairly heterogeneous in a way. But one of the problems about arguing against postmodernism, especially against its more adroit, nimble practitioners, like Rorty and Fish, is that they have this wonderfully neat, all-purpose, knock-down line of argument, which can be put across in a very stylish way, as Fish does to brilliant effect. But most of the counterarguments have to be more roundabout, more laborious, and have to be constructed out of various building blocks from various traditions and disciplines, and can very easily be both lengthy, long-winded, and rather tedious to read perhaps. I did make an attempt to answer Stanley

9 See, among others, Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality* and *Scientific Realism*.

Fish,[10] but it ran to a great length, about sixty printed pages, and I don't know how many readers actually had the stamina or the interest to plow through it.

At the moment, I'm planning, beginning to write a book, actually, on the history of aerodynamics, as a series of counterexamples to the current extreme conventionalist idea of science—the fact that aerodynamics does actually find out something about the way that airfoil sections behave at certain velocities and so forth. I'm not quite sure how all these jet-setting postmodernists can sit happily on airplanes and believe that aerodynamics is merely a product of this or that language game or cultural code or whatever. I think also various developments in linguistic philosophy and cognitive psychology are instructive. Very often, this is a matter of not cobbling together but articulating some link between different projects, between say Chomsky and Habermas, which I tried to do in the Gulf War book, in a rather sketchy, polemical way.

Arnove: *I am curious whether you take the detour through post-structuralism and deconstruction to be necessary. That is, given the trenchant critique you offer of all but exceptional figures within deconstruction, namely Derrida, and post-structuralism, can't one, like Chomsky, avoid this detour through post-structuralism and/or deconstruction? If, as you say, "Alternative resources are not hard to find if one looks outside the narrow domain of post-structuralist thinking about language, discourse and representation" (*Uncritical Theory *88), can't we go to these other resources?*

Norris: Well, it would clearly be absurd for me to say to Chomsky, "Look, you must read some deconstruction because this will make your critique of American power and vested interests more forceful." But what I'm saying is—partly I'm speaking from my neck of the woods, I suppose—this is the stuff I've worked in, and I think it's important to argue that deconstruction does have a kind of radical force, specifically in the context of neo-

10 Norris, "Right You Are (If You Think So): Stanley Fish and the Rhetoric of Assent" (*What's Wrong* 77–133).

pragmatist, Rortian, Fishian views that consensus goes all the way down and that we only discover in texts what we're predisposed to discover by virtue of our membership in a certain linguistic or cultural community. I thought it important to establish that deconstruction comes up with startling, surprising, and sometimes very disconcerting and potentially, not radical—that's a misused, overused word—but things about texts that in fact get in the way of our placid established habits of response. I think de Man is an extraordinary example of actually discovering hitherto unnoticed and really quite crucial things about texts. And I think it's politically important in that if we weren't able to learn from our reading, and if texts didn't once in a while jump out at us and subvert our expectations, then in the same way, social reality wouldn't have that effect; quite simply, we're discovering things about the world, sometimes shocking things that may very well turn us into left radicals or dissidents.

But on the Fish-Rorty view, and I take this to be the political bottom line of what they're saying, we could never be thus affected by political events or social circumstances because we would always be swimming around happily in the goldfish bowl of our own social, conventional, or cultural assumptions. So, I take it that deconstruction, at least in its Derridean–de Manian form, is a kind of textual equivalent of the jolting encounter with brute facts of reality that sometimes, at least, turns people into political radicals. It's an odd way of reading it, but I think it's important to argue that case against Rorty's understanding of deconstruction, which is simply an easy-going, laid-back pragmatist appropriation of Derrida's work. So, this idea, that in reading texts we sometimes find out things about both the text and the world, which can in fact radically change our thinking about both, is an important point to establish. Fish would say it's totally impossible, of course, and I try to argue in that long essay on Fish that it is possible and, what's more, that you can see it happening in Derrida's or de Man's best work.

Arnove: *I'm interested in the seeming absence of an engagement with Pierre Bourdieu in your writing, particularly in light of*

Bourdieu's cogent critique of Derrida in Distinction *and elsewhere*[11]*; his decisive intervention in the debate on the relationship between Heidegger's embrace of National Socialism and his philosophical thought in* The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, a debate you have engaged in your own work and which is implicated in your reading of Derrida; the importance of his work on intellectual and cultural production more generally; and the critical analysis and alternative model of the intellectual he offers. Do you have disagreements with Bourdieu that have led you not to discuss his work?*

Norris: No, it's just that you can't read everything and write about everything. I suppose I ought to have talked more about *Distinction*, especially the appendix on Derrida and the various references to Derrida. And I suppose I resist the idea that you can reduce either deconstruction or the realm of the aesthetic to mere reflexes of social conditioning or a way to signal your class membership by, say, hanging a picture on the wall. I do think that there is more to aesthetics. Not that I'd want to claim that there's some unique, aesthetic state of experience. But I think I would agree more with Terry Eagleton that aesthetics has been the ground, the essentially contested ground, on which all kinds of very important philosophical, social, ethical, and political questions have been fought out, often in a very obscure, displaced, and sublimated way. But I don't think you can reduce the history either of art, literature, or of philosophy to so many sociological reflexes in the way that Bourdieu sometimes suggests.

If you apply that treatment to Derrida, as indeed someone has, I noticed, in a recent American sociological journal, and treat him simply as a kind of cultural phenomenon thrown up by post-war French social, political life, I think that immediately removes everything that's of distinctive value and interest about Derrida's work. Of course, it's designed to. It's a kind of sociologist's takeover bid, really, to command the intellectual high ground. It

[11] Pierre Bourdieu, "Postscript: Towards a 'Vulgar' Critique of 'Pure' Critiques" (*Distinction* 485–500). See also Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Invitation* 62–65 and 154–156, and Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* xi–xxvi.

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seems to me that Bourdieu's analysis, although fascinating and detailed and in many ways having great explanatory diagnostic power, is ultimately reductive. I would want to say that there is something specific to the various cultural domains, be it that of philosophy, or of literary criticism, or of the arts generally, which holds out against that kind of reductive analysis. So, I think Derrida is not simply a product of his life or times or of his own reception history; he's not simply a cultural symptom thrown up by those various extraneous forces and pressures. I think that there's more to Derrida's work than that. So, ultimately, I suppose, my attitude is quite traditional in that I don't think you can exhaust the categories of philosophy, art, or intellectual history in terms of a symptomatic sociological history. Having said all that, I think Bourdieu is fascinating, and the fact that I haven't read more of him is just a function of not having infinite time at my disposal.

Arnove: *Many of the people with whom I've discussed* Uncritical Theory *and your work generally have been puzzled and distressed by your continued insistence on defending Derrida against his critics and his literary-theoretical proponents. In* Uncritical Theory, *your defense of Derrida seems increasingly strained, if not untenable, in light of his refusal to respond to those who you take to so radically misread him as a thorough-going discursivist. As you state, "I think it is unfortunate—all the more so in light of Baudrillard's latest pronouncements—that Derrida has not come out firmly against this postmodernist takeover bid" (*Uncritical Theory *19) and "there is a sense in which Derrida's work invites such misreading" (32). You critique "the American deconstruction industry" (11) in* Deconstruction and the Interests of Theory, *to which we could also add the "Derrida industry," more specifically, but hasn't Derrida himself participated in and perpetuated that industry? Doesn't Derrida have an intellectual and political responsibility to address these apparent misreadings, to clarify his politics, and to combat the commodification of his work? Can this defense of Derrida really be sustained? While on the question of Derrida's intellectual and political responsibility, what do you*

make of the so-called Derrida affair, specifically the exchange that occurred recently in The New York Review of Books *about Derrida's actions regarding* The Heidegger Controversy?[12]

Norris: Well, I regret that Derrida has not taken a more firm, principled, explicit stance on some of what I regard at least as the misreadings of his work. I think this is partly a reflection of the genial side of his character. Naturally enough, he likes to be read and praised, and he likes to have followers, as people do, so he doesn't particularly like criticizing them, and it would seem, I suppose, to him, rather churlish to deny, say, that he was really a negative theologian when there are people like Mark Taylor arguing that he is. I think it's regrettable in a way because it's led to misrepresentations of his work. And I think he used to be much firmer in that regard. If you go back to his book on Husserl, the early book *Speech and Phenomena*, he lists a whole series of reasons why deconstruction is not negative theology; he spells them out one by one, and it's perfectly clear and explicit. More recently, I think, he's tended to take a much more accommodating line, and this is, I think, partly a result of his decency of character, generosity, and unwillingness to stir up controversy where there's no need. But I agree with you. I could wish that he were a little more explicit in distancing himself from some of the things done in his name.

On the second question, the Heidegger issue, it seems to me that Derrida's entire stance toward Heidegger has been, again, a mixture of this amiable desire on his part to say the best that can be said of his friends, mentors, colleagues, and those who have influenced him, whether it be Paul de Man or Heidegger. I think that in both cases, when he writes about de Man and when he

12 The exchange began with the publication of Thomas Sheehan's review of *The Heidegger Controversy*, edited by Richard Wolin, first published by Columbia University Press in 1991 and then reprinted, without an interview with Derrida that had appeared in the first edition, by MIT Press in 1993 (Sheehan, "Normal Nazi" 30–35). The exchange on what became known as "L'Affaire Derrida," in which Derrida himself participated, appears in *The New York Review of Books* 40.4 (Feb. 11, 1993) through 40:8 (Apr. 22, 1993).

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writes about Heidegger, he leans over backwards, and he goes to quite extraordinary—extremely generous and noble, in some ways, but nevertheless very tenuous and wiredrawn—efforts of argument, not to justify or exonerate them, but at least to explain why they wrote as they did at certain periods, and sometimes the—I wouldn't say excuses—but the accounts he offers of those writings are to me unconvincing, in both the Heidegger and the de Man case. But I think Derrida has been so pressured, in America especially, that he's found himself forced into, in the end, I think untenable positions, forced to defend those positions, sometimes against extremely unscrupulous opponents who want nothing more than to put Derrida in a false position. And I think that's what happened in the *New York Review of Books*. I think he started out with decent intentions. He was maneuvered, manipulated, and boxed into a corner by some pretty unpleasant opponents.

I think it's unfortunate. I'm sometimes tempted to think Derrida would have done much better to have remained in France, to have lived in decent…not obscurity exactly, but without the limelight constantly on him, and got on with the serious philosophical work that he was doing in his first twenty years or so, rather than be drawn into so many polemical confrontations which I think don't come naturally to him. I think he's naturally an irenic character who doesn't enjoy the ferocious polemical confrontations that are almost second nature to some American academics. It's unfortunate. But that's about all I can say. It's not for me to say that Derrida should be denouncing his disciples; it would be absurd.

Arnove: *In* Uncritical Theory*, you conclude that "The apparent inability of much of what currently passes for critical theory to take any principled oppositional stand on issues of local or world politics must surely be cause for concern. It therefore seems to me that it is time for a thorough-going critique of the whole line of thought which discovers its inaugural moment in Saussure and then runs down to the various schools of present-day post-structuralist, neo-pragmatist or textualist fashion" (27) and you refer to "paths*

not taken by the arbiters of the recent (post-1960) Francophile theoretical debate" (28). Could you elaborate what you see as the mistaken paths taken, the paths not taken?

Norris: I have mentioned some of them already, such as philosophy of science. But I was thinking there more specifically about linguistic theory and the whole apparatus of cultural theory built upon Saussure. Saussure's model of language is a very specialized, heuristic, narrow theory of language, which, among other things, is something we can learn from Chomsky. But the way it has been, as Perry Anderson says, "abusively extrapolated"[13] and turned into a basis for, well, anthropology, literary criticism, political theory, for cultural analysis and so forth, I think has been quite disastrous—I think partly because you can go straight from Saussure's account of the sign as a kind of atomic unit of meaning to large, general, and ill-focused theories of discourse without going by way of the proposition. One of the alternative resources to this is the post-Fregean tradition of philosophy of language that gives very good reasons for thinking that it's not the sign or the word or the total discourse; it is the proposition which is the basic unit of language and that carries values of truth and falsehood. From that position, I think you can derive a far more workable and sophisticated notion of the relation between sense and reference or meaning and reference, all of which completely drops out of the structuralist and the post-structuralist picture, which begins from a very narrow, inadequate basis in linguistic theory and derives unworkable and mystificatory general ideas from that.

Arnove: *I would like to challenge your assertion in* The Truth About Postmodernism *that "Foucault's writings have undoubtedly done more than most to sustain the existence of a genuine oppositional culture…during these past two decades of concerted right-wing ideological offensives" (70). First, I'm quite skeptical that Foucault has sustained the existence of a "genuine oppositional culture" and,*

13 *Tracks* 40–49.

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as you argue later, "questioned the prevailing self-images of the age" (77) given his participation in the widespread "disenchantment" you describe within the French intellectual scene and "his failure to recognize the consequences of this postmodern shift toward a private-aesthetic conception of ethical issues" (79), and I am curious where, concretely, you see this Foucaultian oppositional culture manifested. Second, the liabilities of the Foucaultian project, which you elaborate in your essay on Foucault and Kant, seem to me to outweigh the fact that Foucault was committed in a practical way to political change, whatever performative contradictions that may have entailed.

Norris: Well, I think you have to believe people when colleagues and people you meet, say, at political rallies and protest meetings, tell you that they have been empowered or inspired by Foucault's example. Very often, it's at the level, as I suppose he would have recommended, of very specific, "micro-political"—but I think that's a rather misleading word—specific, local campaigns. But one does meet such people, and you have to believe them. They can't all be victims of some massive confidence trick, and I can very well see that if one were actively engaged in campaigns, say, of prison reform or prison support groups, or in protesting forms of sexual discrimination, then Foucault might offer real inspiration. For instance, Clause 28 was a British focal point for this kind of political activity. It was a very repressive, or at least it would have been if carried into effect—in fact, it went by default and was more or less forgotten—but it more or less prevented local authorities from encouraging or being seen to support or even tacitly endorse any kind of gay activity or any suggestion that, say, school libraries should have books recommending alternative gay lifestyles. Had it been carried into force, it would have been an extremely repressive, stupidly repressive, and unbelievably retrograde piece of legislation. As I say, it more or less disappeared from view; it was unworkable. But many people said to me then, people who were involved in gay rights campaigns, that Foucault's example had been helpful to them or even inspiring to them, and it would be arrogant for me to say

that, no, he can't be because he got Kant wrong. Maybe you're right, and my theoretical diagnosis of what was wrong with his thinking and my praise for him as a political activist got a bit out of kilter there, but that often happens, after all. The most inspiring political figures don't always have adequate theoretical backup. I think I just have to accept that as a problem.

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4

Two Cheers for Cultural Studies: A Philosopher's View

Interview With Paul Bowman

Paul Bowman: *How do you position yourself and your work in relation to the cultural studies project? Or rather, do you see cultural studies as a "project," and is contemporary cultural studies still the "same" project or discipline as it once was?*

Christopher Norris: One of the difficulties that I have in answering that question would be the difficulty I have with the trend toward interdisciplinarity. Of course, it's good that people should talk across disciplines and that they should question some of the more restrictive practices that go on within disciplines. It's good that philosophers should talk to sociologists, sociologists to cultural theorists, cultural theorists to historians, historians to economists and legal theorists, etc. It opens up all sorts of interesting and valuable avenues of enquiry. But there's also the risk, I think, that if you push too far towards that breaking down of disciplinary distinctions, then you'll lose any sense of focus or intellectual integrity within disciplines.

I suppose that among philosophers (and I count myself a philosopher, since I teach and work within a philosophy department, and I write mainly about philosophical issues)

there's always been a strong desire to maintain the integrity of their own discipline. So, you do get philosophers—some of them—attacking cultural studies from an assumed position of intellectual superiority. Quite often, this produces a very specialized and narrow self-definition, especially within certain branches of analytic philosophy. So, on the one hand, there is a danger of excessive protectionism and defensive resistance to incursions from outside. On the other hand, I think there is a case to be made for maintaining certain criteria of what counts as a genuine or valid philosophical argument. And this goes back a very long way.

Philosophy in a sense is a whole range of questions that are left over when the other disciplines have had their say. If you go right back to the Ancient Greeks, then you find that this was a time when philosophy recognized no limits to its subject-domain or range of legitimate interests. Aristotle thought of philosophy as a discipline of reflective inquiry, which in principle covered every subject under the sun, from the natural sciences to rhetoric, from politics to literary criticism, from logic to ethics, medicine, and cosmology. Then gradually, one by one, the various disciplines split off and established their own standards and their own fields of competence. The natural sciences were among the first to go, and psychology was perhaps the most recent. So, philosophy is left with, if you like, the "big questions," those that specialists in the other disciplines haven't got the time or leisure to investigate: questions of truth, knowledge, meaning, the mind/body problem, freewill *versus* determinism, and so forth. And that's perhaps created a kind of defensiveness within philosophy, a sort of anxious desire to reestablish its own legitimacy as a discipline.

This is even more of a problem with cultural studies. At any rate, *my* main problem with it is that cultural studies can seem a rather amorphous discipline or a whole bunch of disciplines trying to establish a sense of shared identity, a shared range of questions and concerns. It's rather like semiotics, I suppose. I'm old enough to remember the first dawn of excitement about semiotics and the possibility of taking Saussure's structural-linguistic model and extending it to a whole range of other fields in the human,

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social, and even the natural sciences. But I also remember going to conferences where most of the time was spent in discussing just what this new discipline of semiotics was, what its scope and its limits were: territorial questions, if you like, but also questions of method and priority. These sorts of meta-theoretical questions occupied everyone's time. So, on the one hand, you get lots of diverse, distantly connected, vaguely analogous fields of study; on the other, you get these meta-questions, which then become a specialized field of research in themselves. So, that's at least a part of the difficulty.

Bowman: *So, do you see it in any way as a coherent project? Stuart Hall, for instance, most famously, calls it a "project." Do you see cultural studies in any way as a project or not? Is it "just another" discipline?*

Norris: It is a project in the sense that, as I was saying, it's still a fairly young discipline, at any rate comparatively "young" in terms of having a place in the university curriculum. It's still trying to establish its credentials and mark out its own area. Part of the difficulty is that, as a young discipline, it has to address high-level theoretical questions about methodology, and it also has to do the groundwork, the empirical research. Sometimes, the two things can seem wildly disconnected.

One of the claims for the specificity of cultural studies, though, is its claim to be a political project in some way. Do you think that cultural studies has to "have" a kind of politics? Do you think it "possesses" one, whether that be left, or even liberal, or whatever? Or is it maybe "political" in some other sense? And do you tie your own work to a political project or a project of some kind?

Well, taking the second question first: like a lot of academics, I worry periodically about the disconnection (or so it often feels) between my academic work and what I'm doing, so to speak, "in my own time"—political engagement and protest (in my case, singing with a Welsh socialist choir, involved in all sorts of activist concerns, local and national and international). There

often doesn't seem to be much connection between that and the kind of thing that takes up a lot of my time and intellectual energy in often quite technical areas of philosophical semantics or philosophy of logic or, during the last few years, philosophy of science. So, it does seem that these two things are pretty remote and disconnected. But I manage to square it with my conscience by trying to convince myself that all this concern with the realism/anti-realism issue in philosophy of language and logic goes back to a desire to defend realism against various kinds of skeptical, postmodern, or cultural-relativist attack.

I do think there's a politics there, if not always an explicit politics. So, I can see a connection between this philosophical work and what I wrote about postmodernism and the Gulf War, that is, the whole debate about Baudrillard's infamous essay "The Gulf War Has Not Taken Place." There is a moral and political desire to defend realism against these kinds of skeptical assault and also—related to that—a desire to question some of the more facile and philosophically misconceived interpretations of, say, quantum mechanics, which involve (needless to say) a very different kind of anti-realism. Of course, you wouldn't write a book about quantum mechanics that was directly inspired by such moral or political motives. Still, the connection is not so remote if you think about the way that Lyotard and other postmodernists exploit a whole rhetoric of "uncertainty," "undecidability," "chaotic" phenomena and so forth, based on a vague understanding of modern (or, as they would have it, "postmodern") science.

The work I'm doing now in fairly technical branches of philosophical semantics is defending realism against the quite extreme anti-realist positions adopted by analytic philosophers like Michael Dummett. These positions are argued from a standpoint within post-Fregean and post-Wittgensteinian philosophy of language and logic. But their arguments, if you follow them through consistently, lead to a pretty extreme kind of skepticism about—among other things—historical truth and the reality of past events. Dummett is actually worried about this, I think partly for political reasons, since he is a thinker of strong left-liberal persuasion and very anxious not to be associated with

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right-wing historical revisionism. Still, his anti-realist position in philosophy of logic and language leads to the idea that ultimately past events—not only the *significance* of past events, but any "truth" concerning their occurrence or nonoccurrence—must somehow be determined by the scope and limits of our present-best (or maybe our future best-possible) knowledge. And this—although I'm sure he would reject the comparison—is pretty much what some postmodernists and "strong" revisionists are currently saying.

Bowman: *So, it sounds like you're saying that work associated with cultural studies, work in postmodernism, for instance, is very politically dodgy. Is that the way you feel?*

Norris: Yes. But I think "postmodernism" is one of those blanket terms that covers a multitude of positions, often not very clearly spelled out—not only philosophical positions but also political positions. There are some postmodernists who would quite honorably defend the idea that any kind of absolutism about truth or knowledge, especially historical truth, is dangerous, that it can be used in a coercive, oppressive way, to enforce dominant and to marginalize dissident views. So, I think that the ethical impulse behind their work is often, in that sense, good or at least ethically defensible. But it very easily leans over into a kind of far-gone cultural relativism, which is not only philosophically misconceived but also politically disabling. For in the end, it prevents you from saying that certain positions, certain historical interpretations, are wrong, that they're based on a partial, misinformed, biased, or ideologically loaded construal of the evidence. So, any thinker—say, any feminist—who wishes to assert that the historical record has been falsified or misinterpreted in order to enforce hegemonic values is then in a very difficult position. If historical truth is ultimately up for grabs, then no interpretation—no rendering of "the facts"—can be better (more accurate, less slanted or distorted) than any other. In which case you are in no strong position to protest about versions of history that happen to support some political agenda that you find morally repugnant.

So, for instance, feminists who adopt a postmodernist position will find it difficult to argue that history has often been written from at best a gender-blind and at worst a grossly male-centered viewpoint. Or if they do, then they can only say that this is a sort of persuasive, rhetorical strategy which tries to get to people to consider other stories, other possible interpretations. But they won't be able to claim that their interpretation is better, more truthful, or more historically accurate. This is a pretty standard line of argument against cultural relativism in its various forms. And I do think it has some force.

Bowman: *So you see the concept of historiography as a kind of "pharmakon" in the Derridean sense—both poison and medicine? So, it's almost as if historiography without some rigorous academic protocols is potentially dangerous, politically dangerous: a kind of revisionism?*

Norris: I think so, yes. There's a bad tendency among some high-brow Sunday-paper journalists to use postmodernism as a stock term of abuse. It actually came up a couple of weeks ago in an article in *The Observer* about David Irvine, the holocaust denier. The journalist quite rightly excoriated Irvine for suppressing evidence and for offering a massively slanted, not exactly "misinformed," but utterly mendacious and ideologically driven account of events which minimized the scale and extent of Nazi atrocities. Suppressio veri and suggestio falsi, to adopt the old legal phraseology. In the last paragraph, there was a casual reference to postmodernism—well, post-structuralism, as a matter of fact—saying that of course, this type of position, which Irvine takes, gains comfort from the fact that so many academic endorse a skeptical view which would likewise deny the reality of historical events or the existence of objective truths concerning them. When I come across that sort of thing, I get cross, and I fire up in defense of the post-structuralists and post-modernists, because they clearly don't want to come out in support of crazed ideologues like Irvine.

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On the other hand, their position does lie open to that kind of recruitment. Take for instance Hayden White, who in his early and (I think) his best book, *Metahistory*, puts forward the fairly modest claim that one interesting way to read historical texts is to look at their narrative and rhetorical structures, that is, the relative dominance of certain tropes and figures—you know, the famous four: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. But at that stage—way back in 1973—he wasn't denying the reality of certain historical events or even (so far as one can tell from his book) the objective truth-value of certain statements concerning them. Rather, he was making the interpretative point that those events could be emplotted or described or narrated or explained in different ways. But then, in the 80s, he went to a more extreme position which seemed to be saying that history is a textual construct and that there's ultimately no difference between historical narrative, even when it claims to be offering an account of what actually happened, and fictive narrative. That's the kind of conceptual confusion that philosophers are good—or ought to be good—at pointing out: the difference between saying that all history is narrated from a certain point of view and saying all history is a fictive construct. You can say that history is narrative, in some sense irreducibly narrative: you've got to make sense of historical events, and the way you make sense of them is sure to reflect a certain preferential bias, which no doubt amounts to an ideological viewpoint. But there's a great difference between that and saying that history is a kind of fiction, in which case there must be as many different kinds of fictive emplotment or rhetorical construction as there are different ideologies.

Bowman: *So, is your defense of realism related to what you'd call the "event" as opposed to its narration? So, there can be something like relativism in terms of an event's narration, but* there are *events?*

Norris: Yes. (I keep replying "yes" in this rather brusque way, but I want to get straight to the point!) There is a connection between apparently rather technical disputes in, say, philosophical

semantics and the kinds of debates you get in cultural studies between realists and constructivists. But the anti-realist position within philosophical semantics would be the position that (to put it in the jargon) there are no verification-transcendent truths. So, someone like Dummett would say (although he's a bit more qualified and cautious about it now) that it doesn't make sense to say, for example, that either Julius Caesar sneezed twice as he crossed the Rubicon or he didn't. After all, such an "event" was too trivial for anyone to record it, and of course, it doesn't figure in Caesar's writings, so we just don't know—and will never know—in which case it belongs to Dummett's "disputed class" and is neither true nor false. A realist would say, conversely, that there's a fact of the matter—an objective fact—even if we have no possible means of knowing it, because no one was a witness, Caesar didn't record it, or it was too trivial an event for anyone to notice at the time. Even if it's beyond verification, nevertheless, there is an objective truth-value that attaches to the statement "Caesar sneezed twice as he crossed the Rubicon," a truth-value (as it happens) unbeknown to us. But anti-realists like Dummett would say there isn't: that if we don't have some means of verification, then there is no fact of the matter, so we can't apply that sort of either/or logic.

Moreover, he'd extend that argument to other disciplines or areas of discourse such as mathematics. So, for instance, if there's an unproven mathematical theorem, like Goldbach's Conjecture (that every even number is the sum of two primes), then the same anti-realist argument applies. You can check it out with a powerful computer program, up to huge numerical limits, but you can't actually *prove* it. There's no formal proof. So, Dummett would say it's neither true nor false that every even number is the sum of two primes. That would strike a mathematical realist as just crazy. They would say, yes indeed, there is a truth of the matter, an objective (verification-transcendent) truth; it's just that we don't have any means of ascertaining it by our current—or maybe our best available—proof procedures.

Now, I reckon that, although this sounds very technical—just the sort of thing that only a philosopher could get really worked

up about—it does have large implications, because if you extend such arguments to matters of historical interpretation, then the Dummett-type anti-realist stance does lead very quickly to some pretty extreme relativist or revisionist conclusions.

So, does that mean that perhaps, to your mind, the political motivation comes first with cultural studies? You know, its attachment to the left, to notions of democracy, or liberty, or fraternity, or sorority? Does that mean for cultural studies—to be political, and not to slip into relativism, which can lead to all sorts of revisionism, or fascism, or anything—that the ethics or the politics have to come first?

You'd have to look at it on a case-by-case basis. You'd have to ask what was it that inspired this investigator, this theorist, to choose that particular field of study. I think very often they wouldn't have been fully aware of it, or they might have been doing what I was doing just now: trying to construct an ex post facto justification of what they were doing. But I think that the first impulse—what you first get interested in early on—has a lot to do with motives that are not narrowly academic. I think that must be the case more with cultural studies than perhaps with philosophy, in that cultural studies is primarily concerned with issues that are squarely and directly political. It would be very difficult to take a kind of hands-off, clinically detached approach to cultural studies, without falling into bad faith or simply ignoring or suppressing one's own motives. I think that was more explicit in the first (one is tempted to say the heroic) phase of cultural studies, perhaps during the early days of the Birmingham Centre.

If the Birmingham Centre and especially the work of people like Stuart Hall is something like the founding work, the first, the initiation of the archive, the constitution of the discipline; if that's the *institution* of cultural studies (in both senses of *institution*, as in its *moment* of institution and it being the Institution), does that have consequences for what cultural studies *can do*, insofar as that orientation, those methods, those politics, that bias, orients the possibility of work that can be included *as* cultural studies? So, do you see any limitation? Does it forbid things, does it censor

or censure things—both enable *and* limit things at the same time?

I think that any discipline, almost by definition, is based on certain exclusions and inclusions. In the case of cultural studies, the strong, original, motivating impulse comes from reasserting the value and the interest of what you might call popular culture over elite culture. The whole early formation of cultural studies, not only in Stuart Hall's work but also in Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, comes from a desire to convince people that there are all sorts of really interesting, valuable, academically worthwhile, but also socially important work to be done on so-called popular culture. It was a massive, concerted effort to redefine the notion of culture, to take it away from high, mandarin, elitist, mostly right-wing thinkers and open up a new field of study. There was a politically motivated impulse behind the foundation or the first development of cultural studies, which is still there and which still defines the field to some extent. So, there is a natural in-built bias, a natural affinity with popular culture. There is the desire simply to knock down some of the shibboleths of high culture. But whether it's a limiting bias, I really don't know. It *can* take that form, I suppose.

For instance, to take one case: the whole Bourdieu-inspired approach to cultural studies, which often involves a degree of, not so much resentment toward high culture, but a sort of intradisciplinary desire to scale the commanding heights. So it is sociology—talk about "cultural capital" and so forth—which puts the other disciplines in their place, especially philosophy and any version of critical theory that leaves some room for notions of aesthetic value. You could say this about Bourdieu: that really what he's doing, and one thing that cultural theorists are doing on the basis of his work, is to cut the other disciplines down to size by insisting that they are simply products of the drive for cultural hegemony. So, Bourdieu's approach to deconstruction, to philosophy generally, but specifically to Derrida (as in the Appendix to his book *Distinction: A Critique of Taste*), is to say that philosophy has set itself up as some kind of master discipline but in fact can be shown to be the product of certain class interests, certain sociocultural and high-ground professional motivations.

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So, Bourdieu's approach in the end amounts to just a way of asserting the credentials of a certain sociology of culture at the expense of other disciplines.

In Bourdieu's reading of Kant, for instance (no doubt I'm speaking here as a philosopher, so I'm doing the same thing in a way), his approach to aesthetics is to say that this is a nondiscipline which was invented at a certain time, which takes its inspiration from Kant, which sets up certain values of disinterest, detachment, pure aesthetic contemplation, and so forth, without any taint of political or worldly interest. But this is merely a cultural construction which reflects the need of the emergent bourgeoisie to legitimize itself by laying claim to this kind of idealized "aesthetic" disinterest. And Bourdieu would extend that argument to the modern university system and the whole system of cultural capital, so that (for instance) Derrida's reading of Kant is simply one more example of philosophers trying to colonize a subject area which is entirely of their own creating, simply as a means of establishing their own academic prerogatives. I think this a very reductive, very biased and prejudicial reading of Derrida, since Derrida is doing all kinds of far more valuable and complicated things, among them a deconstructive (which is *not* to say merely dismissive or downright skeptical) reading of precisely that Kantian aesthetic ideology. One thing he's not doing is trying to scratch up a few more points on his own cultural credit account.

I'm not saying that Bourdieu is typical of cultural studies, but I think there is that strain within cultural studies that consists in knocking other disciplines down to size and trying to explain them simply as products of certain sociological variables which can then be explained perfectly adequately in terms of cultural capital.

Bowman: *It's interesting that you speak of Bourdieu as if he simply is cultural studies. But Bourdieu, in my experience, holds cultural studies in some contempt, almost. So, you're affiliating Bourdieu with cultural studies, but maybe it's more the other way around. I'm thinking of all this talk between academics (between Bourdieu*

having a pop at philosophy, cultural studies using the work of Bourdieu, but Bourdieu having a pop at cultural studies…) and wondering what you think the significance of cultural studies within the university might be? When you inject something like cultural studies into the institution, what sort of effects might that have? And also—this is a different question, but I'll ask it now, because you've mentioned cultural studies' interest in popular culture—does it have any significance outside of the university?

Norris: I'll take the last question first: yes, I think it does. I think it's had a huge influence, and you can see that in the supplements of the Sunday newspapers, the weekly magazines, and radio broadcasts—Radio Three, Radio Four, especially late night on BBC Radio Three in the "world music" or "mixing-it" slot. You get these sometimes rather miscellaneous, rather disconnected programs, but there is a general sense that there are all sorts of things to be investigated outside the standard canon of things like "great (Western) music" and standard topics for cultural debate. It would take some effort to trace that back to *particular* influences within cultural studies. But I think the sense is that the canon has been, if not destroyed, at least opened up and challenged. This is a very direct result of the sort of work done by people in cultural studies and those who have gone from work in that area to work in the broadcasting media.

In some ways, my answer to the first part of your question—that of cultural studies' significance within the university—is that it has had the same sort of influence. To take a personal example, when you get students who are doing joint honors philosophy and cultural theory, different questions tend to come up in seminars. One of them is the question we started off with: by what right or through what sort of historical prerogative does philosophy claim the high ground on these big issues of meaning and truth? From there, you go on to questions like why do we count certain things fit topics for philosophical debate and other things not fit topics? Part of this is the result of the challenge to the traditional self-image of philosophy mounted by people like Martin Bernal in *Black Athena*, where he says that our whole modern image

of philosophy as a discipline comes out of a concerted effort by (mainly) nineteenth-century German philosophers to establish their credentials, to set philosophy up as an academic field, and to establish a privileged link with Ancient Greece. This position you find in extreme, almost caricatural form in Heidegger—you know, the claim that the *only* languages in which you can do authentic philosophy are ancient Greek and German! So, what you get is a very narrow definition of what counts as philosophy, genuine philosophy, or authentic *thinking* as opposed to mere idle, quasi-philosophical chatter.

Then, other questions tend to come up in seminars, such as why is it that certain cultures or traditions are thought to have produced genuine "philosophy" whereas others are standardly denied that claim? For instance, most philosophers recognize that there has been great Arab philosophy and Jewish philosophy but not African philosophy. I read an article the other day in which the writer (Don Howard) told how he saw a flier for an undergraduate degree scheme in Native American Philosophy, and he confessed that his first reaction was "This is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms: how can there be Native American philosophy? They might have creation myths, they might have poetry, oral tradition, legends, all sorts of other things, but not, surely, philosophy." But then, he realized that this was a sheer prejudice on his part. For why do we allow that, say, the subcontinent of India has a philosophical tradition, whereas Africa doesn't? You can go back to Hegel and see some quite startling, quite appalling passages in Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of history, where he says that Africa is this dark-age, closed continent that hasn't yet achieved self-consciousness, perhaps even consciousness! And there are passages in Kant—in Kant's "anthropological writings," as distinct from his critical philosophy—where he says some equally outrageous things about the native inability of other cultures (or races) to achieve even the earliest stage of conscious let alone "philosophical" awareness.

You know, we think of the Indian cultural tradition as having a distinct philosophical component, partly because the Vedanta were influential on Schopenhauer and others, so they found their

way into European philosophy and its elective self-definition. Likewise, there's sufficient cultural closeness between, say, Greco-Christian, Judaic, and at least some branches of Islamic thought for us to count the latter in as genuine contributions to the ongoing philosophic dialogue. But of course, it was through Islamic culture that the texts of the ancient Greeks were transmitted to us. There's a fairly selective filtering process that very often goes on here.

So, my general point is that one major influence of cultural studies is to open people's minds to the possibility that their minds have been closed in all sorts of quite drastic ways. But I'd want to make a distinction between that sort of salutary recognition that the canon needs to be opened up, that the self-image of philosophy needs to be questioned, and the kind of cultural relativism which says that *everything* is a kind of philosophy and philosophy is just a kind of writing and that there is just no difference between philosophy and whatever else you care to name—in other words, the Rorty position. Rorty's spent a long time now, twenty years or near enough, saying that really philosophy doesn't exist as a discipline or that, insofar as it does, then it's just a matter of professional self-definition or amour propre. He says let's read philosophical texts as if they were poems; let's value them for their metaphors, their narrative interest, their creative brilliance, and so forth. But you don't have to go that far; you don't have to push right through with the relativist argument and effectively dissolve the discipline, in order to recognize that in some ways, philosophy has often defined itself in a narrowly prejudicial way.

Bowman: *I'm just trying to work out precisely what you're saying about philosophy, because on the one hand you're saying that it's a result of its institutionalization and institutional self-definition that makes us think what philosophy is and makes us recognize it as such, which is what can stop people from acknowledging that Native Americans, say, have their own philosophy. And so, a slightly different perspective can say well, yes, of course there is Native American philosophy, there is African philosophy, or you can reduce Indian (or even Western) philosophy to a kind*

of mythology. But that seems to be just what Rorty is saying, and then, you're saying Rorty is wrong. So, I'm just trying to work out exactly what your position is.

Norris: My position is that you have various kinds of academic, professional, and cultural bias, and their effect has been to dissuade philosophers from reading all sorts of texts that they might in fact find philosophically interesting. I think you can go that far with the historicist idea that philosophy and other university disciplines are to some extent products of fairly recent changes in the institution, in the way university departments or faculties are divided up. You can trace it back to the institution of the German university system in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. You can go that far with the social constructivist position but at the same time hang onto the idea that there are distinctive philosophical questions and distinctive philosophical ways of reading texts, not just the texts of philosophy, but also distinctively philosophical ways of reading literary, historical, and other texts. So, I certainly wouldn't want to defend what is usually in fact a very right-wing position—the sort of thing you find in Alan Bloom and others: you know, that there just *is* this discipline, philosophy, and there *are* great texts, that they *are* canonical, and *these* are the texts that self-evidently merit our attention. I certainly wouldn't want to say anything like that. But I do think that you can hang onto the idea that some texts are more worth reading than others or worth more detailed attention than others and that not all texts are philosophically relevant or interesting.

The point I was making with the Native American example—or the point that Don Howard was making about it—was that he was quite shocked at his own prejudice, shocked as to why that phrase "Native American Philosophy" struck him as a contradiction in terms. So, he asked himself, can we possibly be justified in making that sort of distinction? And I think the answer is that we shouldn't be making it in anything like such an arrogant manner—or with anything like the kind of false a priori certitude—that Kant and Hegel brought to the question when so

little was known about other cultural (including philosophical) traditions. After all, the ancient Greeks—or the freer, more speculative thinkers among them—were already aware of this, of the fact that other people had different gods, different ideas, different ethical values. Still, I would want to say that there are certain questions—for instance, questions about historical truth and the difference between historical narrative and fictional narrative—that *are* philosophical questions, which of course doesn't mean that only philosophers can discuss them.

What I'm resisting, really, is the Rorty-style dissolution of all disciplinary boundaries. He has an essay called "Texts and Lumps"—a bit tongue-in-cheek, maybe, but very much in keeping with his general line—where he says we need to get away from the idea that texts and lumps are two very different sorts of thing, so that some people specialize in reading texts while others specialize in doing whatever the experts do with lumps. So, if you have a text and want an expert opinion, then you take it along to a literary critic or a rhetorician or a cryptanalyst or a specialist in hermeneutics. And if you have a lump, then you take it to a botanist or a chemist or a biologist or maybe a surgeon. But why should we stick to this standard, this boring old conventional way of parceling out the various departments of knowledge? In Rorty's view, it is just because we have this fixed (though actually quite recent) idea of the disciplines as being quite different, as each having its own special kind of expertise and its own distinctive object domain. You might get more interesting answers, he thinks, if you took your lump to a literary critic or if you took your text to a molecular biologist, because then you'd get some really striking new metaphors, and we'd live in a perpetual state of Kuhnian revolutionary science, which would help us to break with that old way of carving up the disciplines. So, the text/lump distinction goes out of the window, along with the idea of natural kinds, the "essentialist" notion—as Rorty thinks it—that there are different sorts of things with distinctive properties or attributes and different sorts of knowledge we can have of them. All this is just a product of our having been brought up in a culture that prizes special expertise (scientific, academic, professional, etc.)

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over the interests of creative self-fashioning and open dialogical exchange.

Bowman: *But it seems from that that for a literary theorist or a post-modern philosopher, a lump is going to be a text, whereas to a scientist, a lump is a lump. Or at least, there's a completely different orientation in the face of that lump. The lump is going to be either a "problem" or a "feature" for the scientist, or a development, whereas for someone in the arts or humanities, it's going to be something to reflect upon. So…*

Norris: Well, Rorty thinks that, in the end, descriptions go all the way down. He says that…

Bowman: *But you don't go to a scientist just to have your symptom described!*

Norris: Well, Rorty thinks that the best thing anyone can do for any discipline is shake it up periodically: devise new metaphors, new modes of description, a new turn in the "cultural conversation," as he would say. And that's what keeps things moving along. So, the idea that if you have a lump then you had much better get expert advice from a chemist, or a biologist, or a doctor just reflects that fact that we've accorded these particular kinds of experts a particular kind of accredited knowledge. In which case what is to prevent you from seeking out other opinions—taking it along to an art historian or a psychoanalyst, or maybe an ex-analytic philosopher turned "North Atlantic postmodern bourgeois liberal pragmatist" thinker, which is how Rorty now describes himself? At least he or she is more likely to produce some striking new turn in your own way of thinking about the lump. This may all sound pretty wacky, but I assure you I'm not misrepresenting Rorty's argument.

I could see how you could take your lump to a psychoanalyst, and I could see how possibly that could have some influence on the lump. And actually, if we stick with the lump and the text problem, although I haven't read the article, it does raise

questions about the *orientation* of any academic work. So, if, let's say, our lump is a cultural or political antagonism, a problem—sexism, racism, homophobia, something like that—then to the arts or humanities academic, that's still a text. For, let's say, the social sciences, that lump is the problem that you need to act upon, whereas, with the arts and humanities, it's not so much an act "upon," as a critical reflection in relation to. So, there's that kind of issue in the sense that the arts and humanities and philosophy have no "real" relation to the object and can't make any difference. I know that it's simply not so simple, but how do you view this?

Rorty seems to be saying something more extreme than that. Of course, you might get some interesting descriptions from a psychoanalytic point of view, were you to take your lump along to a psychoanalyst. Let's shift the topic just slightly since we're getting a bit fixated on texts and lumps! You might do a study of the revolution in physics at the turn of the century and the advent of quantum mechanics from a cultural-historical point of view, and that could be very useful. It might tell you all sorts of interesting things about historical conditions, sociopolitical pressures, and perhaps the way that the orthodox (Copenhagen) interpretation of quantum mechanics was influenced by factors like these. There has been quite a lot of work done in this area, and I have written about it myself. Still, I would want to say that that the truth or falsehood of the orthodox quantum theory is a strictly scientific matter—one for the physicists to sort out, maybe with some help from philosophers of science—and has absolutely nothing to do with those historical, cultural, or ideological factors. But I think Rorty wants to push the argument much further than that. He wants to take a strong descriptivist position which says that language goes "all the way down," that there is no distinguishing "reality" from the ways we describe it, whether at the microphysical level (as with quantum mechanics) or at the macrophsyical level (as with texts and lumps). He wants to shake everything up, including the criteria for what counts as an interesting description relative to a certain context of enquiry.

Of course, he may be doing this partly to flutter the dovecote,

to provoke scandalized responses from stodgy old realists and hidebound disciplinarians like me. In which case he's succeeded, you'll be thinking, since our discussion has been sidetracked into Rorty's agenda for quite a while now. So, let's get back to the main topic. I'm not equating cultural studies with, say, the strong program in the sociology of knowledge. But I do think there's often a marked affinity between the two things. The strong program goes quite a long way toward the Rorty position, in the sense that it makes no distinction, at least from a sociological standpoint, between successful scientific theories, or so-called progressive episodes in scientific history, and failed episodes, dead ends, discredited theories, disproven conjectures, or those that have fallen by the wayside. Thus, it works on the principle of "parity of esteem" where you have to subject both kinds of theory to the same kind of sociological investigation. This approach is currently quite widespread among sociologists of science and cultural theorists of a similar inclination.

The classic example of that sort of argument is a book by Steven Shapin and Simon Shaffer called *Leviathan and the Airpump*, which is about the controversy between Boyle and Hobbes concerning the existence or nonexistence of vacuum phenomena. Boyle was an experimental scientist, one who made lots of detailed observations and was careful to replicate his results, and has therefore gone down as a hero of early modern science. Hobbes, on the other hand, is mostly regarded as a thinker in the grip of certain nonscientific (political as well as metaphysical) presuppositions who took a sheerly dogmatic line against Boyle and said that there just couldn't be any such thing as a vacuum in nature. This was partly for sociohistorical reasons: he'd lived through the civil war and thought that the result of any power vacuum in society—any lack of effective top-down monarchical power—would be to create civil strife and calamitous social consequences. So, Hobbes's vehement opposition to Boyle was in fact just a piece of pseudo-scientific posturing, a politically motivated refusal to accept even the possibility that there might exist a vacuum in nature. Hence the standard view that Boyle was a good scientist, because he was empirical and nondogmatic

and made every effort to replicate his observations, whereas Hobbes got it wrong—disqualified himself from the company of genuine scientists—because he allowed his thinking to be swayed by various extrascientific (metaphysical and ideological) preconceptions.

The strong sociological approach which Shapin and Schaffer take is that you have to explain the scientific theories of *both* those protagonists in terms of their historical placement, social background, political views, class affiliation, and so forth. They accept that Hobbes was motivated by ideological and ultimately metaphysical principles—the impossibility of a vacuum in nature—but they think that Boyle was also representative of the emergent middle-class hegemony in scientific method, which included empiricism, observation, and the collective witnessing (by persons of appropriate rank) of controlled vacuum experiments. So, they say that in principle you should subject both of them—Hobbes and Boyle—to the same sort of sociological explanation. In fact, for all their talk of even-handed treatment and the "principle of partity," this really works out as a strong bias towards Hobbes—a kind of proto-Foucauldian bias where knowledge is conceived as a reflex effect of power and where power is thought of as pervading every aspect of social existence, from "laboratory life" to politics, ethics, and religious belief. Hobbes's opposition to Boyle has to do with his acceptance of the plenist hypothesis: everything must be full at every point; in other words, there cannot be a vacuum, whether in nature or in the body politic. This fits in with his metaphysics and epistemology, which again involve the proto-Foucauldian idea that ultimately knowledge is power, and power is something pervasive, diffuse, omnipresent.

It seems to me that this bias goes deep and has produced a regular distorting effect in various applications of the "strong"-sociological approach. So, during the past five or six years, I've spent a lot of time looking at other examples of that and arguing that this kind of cultural relativism, or social constructivism, is philosophically misconceived and can have, for the reasons I was discussing earlier, quite harmful political effects.

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Bowman: *You have said that you haven't kept up with cultural studies. Does that mean that you lost interest in it for some reason, and was that something to do with its direction or its orientation?*

Norris: Well, it's partly for the boring practical reason that I spend a lot of time reading what I have to teach, which sometimes—if I'm lucky—fits in with some project of ongoing research. It's partly that. But my main involvement in cultural studies was through an M.A. course we launched about ten years ago in Cardiff, called "Music, Culture, and Politics." It was started by a colleague of mine in the history department, Rob Stradling, along with myself, a couple of colleagues in philosophy, and people in the music department. and it was very much a cultural studies approach. It was premised on the idea (which I didn't share, but was more than happy to debate) that there was no such thing as musical value, or "good" music, or a canon of acknowledged great works apart from the way the canon has been constructed through various sorts of hegemonic interest. So, it soon turned into a lively discussion—very good for the students, I should say—as to whether some music is better than other music, and according to just what criteria, or whether all judgments of judgments of value or taste are sheerly cultural constructions. Rob Stradling had coauthored a book (with Meirion Hughes) on the English Musical Renaissance, which set out to "deconstruct" the idea that there had been this great blossoming of musical creativity in England during the early years of the twentieth century, starting with Elgar and Vaughan Williams. Again, it was a social constructivist approach, which said that this so-called musical renaissance was planned, devised, programmed, "orchestrated," if you like, through various well-placed institutions, like the BBC and the Promenade Concerts and the big music festivals. So, we shouldn't be taken in by the idea of Elgar's emerging as the newfound voice of English musical genius after four centuries—since the death of Purcell—during which England had been justly described as *das Land ohne Musik*.

I suppose I had been sympathetic to that sort of idea until about the mid-1980s. I edited a book called *Music and the Politics of*

Culture, which was a collection of essays putting pretty much that case, along with other theoretical perspectives (post-structuralist, postmodernist, Frankfurt School, etc.) which fitted the approach well enough. Then, I became disenchanted with it and would now want to argue *not* that there is self-evidently "great" music, so that you just stamp your foot and insist "This is a great piece, whatever you think!" but at least that one can go a lot further in offering reasons or justificatory arguments in matters of musical evaluation. Of course, these are never definitive or knockdown arguments—you can never hope to "win" in a dispute about musical value, or literary value, for that matter, simply because aesthetic criteria are always open to debate. Kant is a useful guide here, as so often, when he says that aesthetic judgments don't involve determinate concepts (which may be either true or false, right or wrong) but rather involve the subjective—more precisely, the intersubjective—play of our various faculties. But the fact that such responses can be intersubjective (that is to say, make appeal to certain shared evaluative criteria) means that we can go a lot further in defending our judgment of a piece of music than just saying "I like it" or "I think it's good." You can even do old-fashioned things like thematic analysis or the study of long-range tonal development, and you can explain *why* you think it's good. So, quite a lot of the discussion in these seminars over the last ten years has involved that kind of debate: whether aesthetic value is ultimately a cultural construction relative to a set of ideological priorities or whether it's something that *can* be discussed, not so much in "objective" but at least in intersubjectively valid terms.

I think music's a particularly good example, because people have such fierce passions about it and very often are willing to defend their judgments as far as they can. In Literary Studies, I have the impression that it has all gone a bit off the boil because a lot of these debates have been worked over for so long—you know, the debate about the canon, about whether it still exists in any form, or how best to open up or explode the canon. To some extent, they've become stale. But they've hit musicology and music theory much more recently, so they're still fiercely disputed.

I suppose I sound as if I'm boringly trying to take a middle-ground position on everything, but again, with this question of the musical canon, you can go some way in agreeing with the argument that the canon as we have it—the standard concert promoter's idea of the great canon of Western music—is to some extent a historical construct. In fact, you can be much more specific than that: you can say that it's largely the construct of a certain Austro-German idea of musical development, which began with Bach and continued through Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and then, according to taste, Schubert, Schumann, either Wagner or Brahms, Bruckner, Mahler, Schoenberg, and so forth. It is very much centered on that Viennese classicist idea not only of what constitutes musical history but also of what constitutes a great musical work of art. You get the same metaphors involved, metaphors of growth, organic form, evolving structure, preordained development, etc.

So, there is a case to be made for that argument, the constructivist argument that these are just metaphors and ones that have served some highly partisan, narrowly exclusive, and indeed—at times—ideologically motivated interests. But I'd still want to defend the idea that that doesn't commit you to any kind of all-out value relativism. This wouldn't be just a matter of saying dogmatically there are good composers and bad composers; it would also be a matter of saying, well, there's some terrific Mozart, but there's also some very boring early Mozart. Or again, there is a whole lot of "serious" (not to say "classical") music which is nothing like as creative, inventive, or original as some present-day "popular" music. I could go on multiplying examples of this, of the fact that you can take a stand on issues of critical-aesthetic judgment without falling into some elitist or snobbish commitment to the values of so-called high culture. But that's just my point: that you've got to bring in certain evaluative criteria to talk about music in a worthwhile or relevant way.

This connects with the whole Bourdieu question about aesthetic taste, cultural privilege, and so forth; his idea that really what you're doing when you profess a liking for this or that composer or artist or decide which picture to hang on your wall

is an assertion of class status or aspiring class status. So, some people will have Picassos on their wall, listen to Stravinsky, read T.S. Eliot, or whatever, and that will be a way of signalling their superior taste and hence their most definitely *not* belonging to the class of those who have chocolate-box pictures on their wall, or read "cheap" fiction, or listen to—I don't know—maybe Val Doonigan. Of course, again, there is some truth in this as a matter of sociological observation or of why some people ("arty" types) make a show of their high-class cultural preferences. But it is still a crassly reductive approach and one that itself betrays a kind of professional-cultural one-upmanship: it is a way of asserting the superior insights of sociology over the claims of aesthetics or indeed of other disciplines like philosophy and literary criticism…

Bowman: *But I've always quite complacently agreed with that general sense, in principle. I've never strenuously pursued it, but that's the way I was introduced to all of this stuff, from studying English at university, to cultural studies. I suppose I always just accepted that. But you disagree? Fundamentally?*

Norris: I disagree, yes. I think the test question is "Can you live with it?" in the sense that if someone differs with you over a piece of music or literature or whatever, one that you admire or enjoy, are you content to let it go at that and say, well, no doubt this reflects some formative aspect of my upbringing, or my class background, or my sociocultural development? Or do you want to go on and say no, this is good, really good, for the following reasons which I hope I can get you to recognize? Do you want to take the argument further? Not many people, even those who subscribe to a strong social constructivist or cultural-relativist position, would actually be content to throw up their hands and say "each to her own taste," or whatever.

That's partly why aesthetics is so important. You get a range of positions on this, among them the extreme dismissive attitude of someone like Bourdieu or of Tony Bennett, who may have changed his mind in the interim but who wrote an essay twenty years back saying that aesthetics is "a completely useless kind of

knowledge": in other words, just a hegemonic construct which has no genuine content or object of study but which merely serves to justify certain bourgeois class privileges, cultural prejudices, and so forth. Then, there is Terry Eagleton's more nuanced position, which is that aesthetics is a crucial field of engagement, and partly for just that reason: that it encodes or articulates so many issues about politics, culture, and so forth, that you mustn't let it go, you mustn't surrender it to the mandarins and watchdogs of bourgeois "taste." At the opposite extreme, you'd have a sort of neo-Kantian position, which would be that aesthetic judgment is autonomous, that aesthetic values are timeless and aspire to intersubjective universality and, moreover, that the exercise of judgment in this mode has crucial implications for ethics or the exercise of Kantian "practical reason."

Nowadays, you won't find many people subscribing to this line of argument, at least not many people in critical theory or cultural studies! More of them will be apt to take something like the Bourdieu or Tony Bennett line. So, there's a degree of skepticism, sometimes amounting to flat hostility, about most present-day discussions of aesthetics. Also, there is the fact that Kantian talk of "autonomy" tends to be endorsed most strongly by right-wing ideologues like Roger Scruton who are anxious to keep art safe from the barbarians, by which they mean Marxists, feminists, cultural materialists, canon revisionists, and other politically motivated types. I think Kant was right, in a sense. I don't think he was right that you can distinguish a purely aesthetic realm of experience and judgment which has nothing to do with politics or so-called extraneous interests. But at least he was on to something—something of real importance—which emerges very clearly in Derrida's work on Kant. Derrida has a reading of the *Critique of Judgment* which is, as you'd expect, very skeptical about Kant's idea of aesthetic autonomy or of pure, disinterested aesthetic contemplation. But at the same time, he makes the point that one thing Kant was attempting to do was secure the *possibility* of disinterested judgment as a way of resisting the power of (say) governments or coercive agencies of various sorts to impose their agenda on the conduct of free intellectual enquiry.

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So, Derrida would say that the big question raised by the Third Critique is the question of how so-called pure disciplines relate to "applied" disciplines. Thus, it might be pure maths and applied maths, or pure theoretical physics and applied physics, or what we think of as the paradigm case of "applied" subjects like business or management studies and what we think of as the paradigm "pure" subjects, like philosophy or art history. Derrida would want to question those distinctions; he'd want to bring out their various internal tensions and complications. But he wouldn't want to go the full postmodernist hog and say that the very idea of disinterest (whether in aesthetics or in various kinds of university research) is just an ideological alibi or a kind of self-serving fiction. So, very briefly, that is the difference between postmodernism and deconstruction. Postmodernism amounts to a generalized skepticism (or cynicism) about the whole idea of disinterested, truth-seeking enquiry, whereas deconstruction is a critical probing and analysis of the presuppositions behind it.

This takes us back to music, where "postmodernist" is the label often attached to certain kinds of currently popular minimalist works, such as those of Michael Nyman and Philip Glass, or those of the "holy minimalists," John Tavener and Arvo Pärt. I think that a lot of it is simply bad music and that critics who don't say so—perhaps for fear of being called elitist—are letting themselves and their readers down. Again, I'd want to go further than just saying "I don't like it," because that's no argument at all. I think that this music (or most of it) is repetitive, predictable, mind-numbingly banal, and dreary. Also, I think this is where the connection between aesthetics and ethics comes in: such music is a kind of insult to the listener. It assumes that the listener is incapable of following long-range tonal developments or of recognizing thematic transformations and key changes and all the other things that give value and interest to the experience of music.

So, I always feel sort of insulted when I listen to it—partly because people who've read the critics and who think of it as "serious" music could be listening to other, much better music, that's to say, music that is far more inventive, mind-

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stretching, more intellectually rewarding. I think that Kant's basically right about this, although that's not quite the way he framed the argument. Questions of aesthetic judgment do connect in complicated ways with questions of ethics. In that respect, I suppose I'm a kind of—not exactly unreconstructed first-generation Frankfurt theorist, but someone who agrees with Adorno when he talks about regressive listening and the fetishistic fixation on "big tunes" taken out of context: what you get on *Classic FM*, if you like, where the bleeding chunks of popular favorites are repeated over and over again. It is evidence of a degraded musical culture and degraded habits of musical response.

I hope I'm not being elitist about this. Perhaps, it comes across as a kind of elitism. But it's more the sense that music really is important, and that questions of musical judgment, and even of aesthetic theory applied to music, are also really important. I would go along with Adorno and say that you can do a kind of cultural-political physiognomy of "the way we live now" by listening to the kind of music that is most heavily promoted, the way it is performed, broadcast, or experienced in various social contexts. I would say that Adorno is right that there is such a thing as regressive listening and that it does take the form of a kind of incapacity or unwillingness to listen thoughtfully and attentively to music. This not a puritanical claim, even if it sometimes sounds that way in Adorno; you know, the idea that if music is any good then it has got to be difficult, hold out against easy (pleasurable) consumption, resist the blandishments of the "culture industry," refuse to yield up its secrets without immense effort on the listener's part. Still, it can do some of this—not fall back into all the old clichés and routine patterns of development—without having to be gulped down like a spoonful of nasty medicine.

Insofar as "postmodernism" means anything at all when it's applied to writing about music, it often comes down to an inert relativism which says that any music is as good as any other, since there are no criteria beyond those that are products of cultural background, class privilege, and so forth. Now, you can resist that idea without falling back on some kind of high mandarin

traditionalist defense of the canon—whatever "the canon" is. So, one good thing that cultural studies has done is to raise that question: what is canonical judgment? But again, if it goes too far…for instance, the whole attack on "organic form" in music criticism: it's almost an article of faith among new musicologists that the notion of organic form is a purely ideological construct, one that was invented in the early to mid-nineteenth century in order to uphold the hegemonic claims of a certain musical tradition, along with certain "bourgeois" canons of taste and discrimination. So, "organic form" is not something *there* in the music but something foisted or projected onto it through the efforts of ideologically motivated critics, commentators, and analysts. But that's simply not true or at any rate *not simply* true. One can say with a sense of startled discovery that the notion of sonata form was something that was discovered long after the works that supposedly embody sonata form were composed. But this just means that the composers had a kind of instinctual grasp of it, didn't need to theorize about it, whereas it took the critics and the analysts a bit longer to catch up. It doesn't mean that "sonata form" is nothing more than a cultural or ideological construct. So, there's a kind of counter-cultural attack on the notions of organic form, unity, development, thematic continuity, and so forth—all those classical values. It is healthy in a way, because there are all kinds of other musical forms, all kinds of complex forms that just don't fit into that sometimes (at its worst) procrustean way of thinking about music. But if the counter-movement becomes an iron-cast orthodoxy in its own right, then it becomes as bad as the old dogmatic ways of imposing those notions.

Bowman: *So, you are still involved in very much cultural studies* type *issues and takes on the question of aesthetics, music, and so on. But as you said before, your chief interest at the moment lies with science. So, how do you feel about the direction or nature of cultural studies' relations with science, scientific truth? I'm thinking obviously of the "Sokal Affair." But, in general, what do you make of the developments in cultural studies types of science studies?*

Norris: Well, in this area, as in a lot of other areas, you find two versions of the argument. There is the moderate approach, which says that there are all sorts of interesting facts about the history of science, or the sociology of science, which historians and sociologists are good at digging out. They can tell us about the motivating factors which prompted some particular research program or the reasons why scientists (like Boyle and Hobbes) took conflicting views on some issue of shared concern. They can come up with various detailed accounts—social, political, psychological, and so forth—which go a long way toward explaining these differences of view. Explanations of this sort have to do with what used to be called the "context of discovery," that is to say, everything that arguably has some bearing on why scientists thought as they did. So, for every great scientific discovery, revolution, or advance, you can argue that the scientists involved were prompted *to some extent* by extrascientific motives. These might be religious, for instance, as in the cases of Kepler or Newton—two famous cases where theological interests appear to have exerted just such an influence. Or it might be a matter of metaphysical worldviews, social class backgrounds, political allegiances, etc. But the standard premise, at least until fairly recently, was that this left room for a clear-cut distinction between context of discovery and context of justification. The latter had to do with quite different matters: with issues of truth, evidence, empirical warrant, inductive reasoning, hypothetico-deductive method, and other such essentially normative criteria. Philosophers of science were mainly in the business of studying the context of justification while historians and sociologists of science focused on the context of discovery. Of course, they could exchange ideas and information across this disciplinary boundary and could hardly get along without each having a fair grasp of developments in the other domain. But any conflict of interests could always be averted by reminding themselves of the "two contexts" principle.

The strong version of the sociology of knowledge, or "science studies" as it is often called, rejects that distinction on principle. It claims that social and political interests are always in play

and that philosophers' talk of the "context of justification" is merely a kind of legitimizing ploy, designed to insulate their own discipline from sociological challenge and also to prop up an orthodox progressivist view of the scientific enterprise. As I have said, this is the approach taken in Shapin and Schaffer's book *Leviathan and the Airpump*. It's a principle of parity which says that all scientific theories, successful or unsuccessful, from our point of view, have to be subjected to the same sort of cultural or sociopolitical analysis. You find a similar, albeit very crude, version of this argument among those who are doing so-called creation science. This is the idea that we have no right, we can have no justification, for saying that certain kinds of explanation are genuinely scientific and others are mythical, naïve, dogmatic, unscientific, or whatever. The logic of that position, really, goes toward a pretty extreme kind of relativism, which is why you have so many alarmed scientists and philosophers now lining up to denounce creationism—which I think is a real threat; I don't think it's an exaggerated threat or a hysterical reaction on their part. And of course, you have imbecile pronouncements from politicians like Tony Blair, saying that there is no harm in teachers drumming these crackpot ideas into pupils' heads just so long as the schools come up with impressive A-Level results. If you can get the children to believe that sort of thing, then you can get to accept any kind of irrational doctrine, racist doctrine, for instance.

But it's complicated because—to go back to your point about the Sokal affair—positions have become so sharply polarized. The problem with the first Sokal article, the spoof article, was that in some ways it was quite well aimed. It did target a lot of thoroughly confused arguments, such as the idea that science is entirely a social construct, or that scientific "truth" is nothing more than a product of discourse or of power/knowledge differentials. So, I think that it did some good in that sense. It drew attention to some fuzzy, ill-informed, pretentious, and academically disreputable writing. But it was also a very scattershot approach. The article and the book that appeared soon afterwards took such a sweepingly dismissive view that their effect was dissipated

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simply by not picking targets with sufficient care.

The other big problem is that quite a lot of this skeptical, relativistic, generically "postmodernist" writing about science claims to find some justification in theoretical physics, especially in the various conceptual dilemmas with quantum mechanics that first showed up around 1900 and are still unresolved. So, some of the statements they quote in that book are drawn from physicists like Heisenberg and Bohr, and postmodernists often find inspiration in those passages, because they do seem to be saying, "there is no objective, mind-independent reality," "quantum physics is irreducibly mysterious," or "the act of observation interferes with (for which read: decides or creates) whatever we observe." Then, of course, there is the problem of wave/particle dualism or superposition, which—according to some cultural theorists—shows how the most advanced branches of theoretical physics have themselves undermined the notion of objective reality or of truth behind appearances. So, there's a curious unperceived irony—unperceived by Sokal—in that article, which is that it's the messy state of current speculation in theoretical physics that's given rise to quite a lot of postmodern theorizing. You can find people like Lyotard, for instance, in his book *The Postmodern Condition*, picking up on this idea and promiscuously citing chaos theory, quantum mechanics, Gödel's theorem, undecidability, uncertainty, wave particle duality, as if they all amounted to much the same thing.

The other part of the problem is that you get a curious reversal here, which is that in some ways a sociohistorical approach to the crisis in quantum physics can come out on the side of scientific realism. There have been some famous studies (by Paul Forman, among others) which trace the emergence of the standard Copenhagen theory of quantum mechanics and which argue that physicists like Bohr and Heisenberg were trying to present a kind of "user-friendly" image of the new science. This was just after the First World War, when there was widespread public disenchantment with science, because people (especially in Germany) felt that science and technology had been in the service of the war machine, and there was a general reaction

against what was seen as its inhuman, instrumental, even brutal character. So, quantum mechanics (on the orthodox account) offered a welcome change, because it said there's room for the observer, there's no objective reality, everything is uncertain or undecidable, and this fitted in with a refurbished, supposedly more friendly and humane image of science, as opposed to the old mechanistic nineteenth-century conception. This would suggest that the standard anti-realist interpretation of quantum mechanics is itself a cultural product. Forman goes quite a long way in that direction. Other, more recent commentators have been a bit more anxious to conserve the distinction between context of discovery and context of justification. Still, you can see how this kind of argument might work out as a defense of realism against the orthodox quantum-theoretical view.

So, there's been quite a lot of work just recently by cultural theorists—in a broad sense—which suggests that perhaps this long-running crisis in quantum mechanics is at least partly a product of complicated background cultural and sociopolitical interests. Which rather suggests that the alternative realist interpretation, which has been largely marginalized until quite recently, might in fact have more going for it than has been recognized so far. (David Bohm is the chief modern champion of this realist approach although something like it was proposed by Einstein, Schrödinger, de Broglie, and other early opponents of the orthodox Bohr-Heisenberg line.) So, it's one of the few places where a kind of qualified social-constructivist approach comes out in favor of scientific realism. Usually, it leads to some kind of anti-realism.

But the Sokal thing has done great damage—at least in terms of research funding and academic politics in the United States, I think it's done great damage.

Bowman: *Damage to cultural studies?*

Norris: I think so, yes. I don't know how serious or long-lasting the damage will be. But certainly, in the immediate aftermath, there were lots of mostly right-wing university administrators

and cultural commentators saying, "Well, this just shows that these cultural theorists don't know what they're talking about: we've got science on our side to show you that they're talking nonsense."

Bowman: *Well I've seen several people in various debates who have picked up that book, Intellectual Impostures, and waved it, and said, "This proves a, b, and c," without actually reading it, it seems, or referring to it. Now, I read it, and I am not a scientist, but the standards of academic rigor displayed in it are terrible. And that (academic rigor) is what they say that want: that's what Sokal says he wants: he says "refute me in scientific terms." Yet, they themselves say in the introduction to that book, something like "we more or less randomly browsed through the work of Derrida," say, "and found where he mentions uncertainty or undecidability or Heisenberg or Gödel, or whoever"—and it seems they read those paragraphs and then laughed at them and didn't read the rest. They have no conception of things like protocols of reading and interpretation and the cultural contexts within which they are operating themselves. Moreover, they denounce people who are "unqualified" to speak on science, and then, they tell the world about "left-wing" political theory. And they are utterly "unqualified" to do that. And that really bothered me…*

Norris: Well, that is true actually, yes. It was written very quickly, that book, and they put in nothing like the amount of time and effort required to really know what they were talking about. The original article was amusing in places, quite effective and hard-hitting, and selected at least a few of the right targets. But the book is, yes, a pretty shoddy piece of work. Especially with regard to Derrida. You may think I'm always defending Derrida, but when Derrida mentions, for instance, Gödel's undecidability proof, he introduces it in a very specific context; he explains precisely what it says and then uses it in the context of his argument in a perfectly precise way, and a highly convincing way, as a matter of fact. So, he's not prone to throwing off these references casually, without understanding the detailed arguments or the processes of

reasoning (mathematical or logical) that lie behind them. There are some other things that Sokal and Bricmont pick out, a couple of pretty vacuous pronouncements—not from Derrida, but… well, I won't name the theorists!—really wild and misinformed extrapolations from fluid mechanics to certain versions of feminist theory, which do seem to reflect a large measure of scientific ignorance. But again, it's a very scattershot approach.
Sokal was naïve or disingenuous when he said he was shocked to find himself recruited to the cause of various right-wing ideologues who were busily exploiting the whole thing as a means of trying to cut off funding for cultural studies and other related disciplines. The fact that he taught physics in Nicaragua doesn't get him off the hook in that respect. He must have known what was coming. I mean, the relevant background context for this is the scramble for funding, and the cancellation of the super-collider project, and the threatened removal of US Congress funding for various hugely expensive programs in theoretical physics. So, I think that behind the Sokal hoax, there was a quite blatant and discreditable drive to push the cultural theorists out—or perhaps the humanities in general, and not just cultural studies. So, the overall results, on balance, were pretty bad in terms of practicalities, like research funding.

But the central philosophical issue is one on which, strangely enough, I would agree with Sokal, although it doesn't come out in the book, perhaps because it would complicate things with regard to those passages he cites from Bohr and Heisenberg. That is to say, Sokal is also a realist about quantum mechanics, one who thinks that the orthodox theory is a downright conceptual mess and that it has given rise to a great deal of popular (not to mention scientific and philosophical) confusion, for which people like Heisenberg and Bohr are in part responsible. So, I'd agree with him to that extent, at least.

Bowman: *One of the issues it raised for me, in terms of cultural studies* within *the humanities within the university, is the sense in which it was what Rancière might call a "disagreement," in that it raises questions of legibility, intelligibility. I think that the book is*

possibly a "good thing" insofar as Sokal and Bricmont say "Tell us how we are wrong, in scientific terms,*" and basically what they mean is "in terms* that we understand*, in language that makes sense to us." I think that there is a lot of cultural theory that* could *do this. To me, it seems, they cannot but completely misunderstand that what so many people mean by, say, "the constitutivity of exclusion from any system or paradigm," has in fact quite a reliable, impeccable philosophical and argumentative basis. I'm thinking of the work of Laclau and Mouffe, or Derrida, which was developed without reference to science but which can be applied to science. And they don't know about that. They just simply don't know about it. They've read the bits in cultural theory that are about science. So, what do you think about the kind of "politics of intelligibility" with reference to cultural studies? A lot of it is called wacky, off-the-wall, crazy, unintelligible, mad, zany, trivial, and yet, people doing that work think it is urgent, serious, political, ethical, that it has consequences. What do you think about that kind of "differend," or "disagreement," or unintelligibility across disciplines?*

Norris: Well, that's the old problem of jargon, isn't it? All disciplines develop their own kind of jargon, the scientific disciplines as much as any others. If you take "jargon" as a neutral, nonpejorative term, then it can sometimes be very useful. It's a way of saying briefly and precisely what would otherwise require a lengthy paraphrase and would probably come across as very fuzzy. Some kinds of jargon are almost indispensable. That would include, in cultural studies, words like *hegemony*, which we've used several times. It's a very convenient term: there is no equivalent, no simpler everyday equivalent to it. It says precisely what it is required to say. There's a whole background of complex theoretical ideas that have gone into the working definition of *hegemony*. So, when critics, mostly right-wing commentators, attack cultural theorists for using words like *hegemony*, I think they are completely off the track. There's a place in cultural studies, as in any other discipline, for a certain kind of jargon, or technical language, which is not just an insider trick for baffling

all the outsiders. It's a useful way of communicating. Insofar as Sokal and Bricmont, or any of these commentators, are attacking jargon simply because they don't understand it or because they feel excluded from the fold, then I think they've got it wrong.

But I wouldn't have thought cultural studies was any more prone to that than, say, philosophy. Philosophy is full of it. Not only "Continental" (that is to say, post-Kantian mainland European) philosophy: analytic philosophers are fond of saying that the continentals are woolly, verbose, and obscure, with their quasi-mystical jargon. But analytic philosophy is full of what you might call "jargon," especially the kind of work that appears in the "best," RAE-approved journals, such as *Mind* or *Philosophical Quarterly*. So, if anyone from outside the charmed circle—say, a cultural theorist or literary critic—were to open a copy at random, then most likely, they would be confronted with a whole lot of terms and technical idioms that required something like a translation manual to make sense of them. In fact, they might happen on an article that addressed this very issue in terms of Quine's famous discussion of "radical translation" and which involved all manner of (to them) highly arcane and abstruse terminology. Yet, they would be wrong to put this down to some desire, on the philosophers'part, to erect high fences around their academic preserve and keep trespassers out. And nobody would say—or nobody except the scientifically illiterate—that theoretical physics is nonsense because it involves such a large amount of specialized terminology. So, I think a defense of jargon is perfectly respectable. But is that what you meant? Or was it something more than that?

Well, I'm thinking more about "translation" and the way something is understood. So, work in cultural studies, whether it be on science or aesthetics, or on popular culture, philosophy or literature, or anything, sees itself as, in some sense, important, political—it intends to have consequences. The word that often comes up in cultural studies is *intervention*. They want to intervene into things for various reasons, always with a view to culture or society. Yet, it is received by people outside of that fold as either nonsense or self-aggrandized profundity. So, I

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think there is a question of…You mentioned that philosophy is full of jargon and technical terms and terms that are laden down with a whole history and layers of meaning, for shorthand. But I think that philosophy is protected from the accusation of being radical, stupid, crazy, misguided, febrile, *because it's philosophy*. And it just says "we are philosophers, we philosophize: that's our job." Whereas part of cultural studies' remit has always been to try to "intervene" and "make a difference." And then, the words that it produces sound like nonsense, and it sounds "unrelated." I spend most of my time fretting about these problematics of translation, the politics of intelligibility, the status of the speaking voice. If you speak *as a philosopher*, or if you speak *as a scientist*, there are so many secondary dimensions of cultural capital and status accorded to the worth of your voice. But cultural studies is always represented as a "Mickey Mouse" ragbag discipline, and it seems to, in a sense, shoot itself in the foot in the very way that it enables itself—its jargon, it's "private" languages—in order to try and construct the kind of knowledge that will intervene. For the production of that kind of knowledge makes it unintelligible in all the scenes in which it would hope to count or register.

One reason why these mostly right-wing commentators (people like the ex-chief-wrecker of schools, Chris Woodhead) are able to score points off cultural studies and against what they see as Mickey Mouse disciplines, in what they contemptuously call the "new universities," is that there seems to be a blatant mismatch between the subject matter of cultural studies—popular culture of various kinds—and the technical "jargon" that has developed within those disciplines. It strikes them as an absurd disparity between the heavyweight theoretical apparatus brought to bear (which they don't understand, usually, because they haven't bothered to read it) and what they consider the trivial topics to which it is applied. So, they can rely on getting a laugh among *Daily Telegraph* readers or *Times* readers, simply by listing course titles and descriptions of syllabus content. Roger Scruton is very fond of doing this sort of thing, and it just shows that he hasn't grasped a basic principle of philosophy, that is, the distinction between first-order (object) languages and higher-

order theoretical or formal languages. This was a leading principle of structuralist thought and of course came in from some skeptical treatment by post-structuralists and postmodernists like Lyotard who made a big point of supposedly doing away with any kind of metalinguistic or "metanarrative" approach. But really, the distinction is there, even if not explicitly announced, as soon as you start to theorize about texts, discourses, cultural practices, or whatever.

The same thing happened in philosophy, partly as a consequence of W.V. Quine's famous essay "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," where he claimed to demolish the "old" logical-empiricist distinction between analytic "truths of reason" (statements that were valid simply in virtue of their logical form) and empirical "matters of fact" (those that could be verified only through experiment or observation). This was thought by many to have knocked a huge hole in any version of the case—such as that argued by Rudolf Carnap in his book *The Logical Construction of the World*—for maintaining a clear-cut distinction between first-order empirical statements and higher-order (logical or metalinguistic) levels of discourse. Hence the idea (pushed to the limit by Rorty, but taken on board by a lot of other "post-analytic" philosophers) that such distinctions were just old hat and that all you could do was "redescribe" existing language games in—what else?—some alternative range of first-order "natural" language games. And of course, there were the paradoxes of set theory that Russell famously came up with—"that set whose members include all sets that are not members of themselves," or the one about the barber who shaves every man who doesn't shave himself, in which case who shaves the barber?—that Russell claimed to solve by insisting on the object-language/metalanguage distinction, but which can't really be laid to rest by any such arbitrary fiat. Anyway, as I say, the attack on "jargon" very often goes along with a failure to see that technical language (or language that is out of the ordinary in some way) can be a means of conceptual clarification and not just an obscurantist device for nonspecialists out.

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It seems to me that philosophy—analytic philosophy—is currently on the receiving end of a lot of similar stuff. It takes a different form, but if you look at the responses when Quine died last year, there were some very disrespectful, even mocking obituaries. There was one in *The Guardian*, I recall, which said that philosophy was once a really important, central, humanistic discipline, but now you had a "great" philosopher like Quine who occupied himself entirely with writing about technical issues in philosophy of language and logic and whose jargon was incomprehensible even to the well-educated layperson. This struck the writer (Peter Preston) as a sad reflection on the way that philosophy had become not just out of touch with the wider public but also more trivial—more footling and obsessive—through its overconcern with these technical issues. But this is like saying that mathematicians fail in their public responsibility when they spend years on some fantastically complicated proof rather than writing elementary maths primers or that physicists ought to be writing Teach Yourself books on basic physics rather than trying to come up with some new theoretical advance. These comparisons may seem a bit remote from the situation in cultural studies, but even there, I don't think it is a cause for too much agonized self-questioning if people like Scruton and Woodhead weigh in with the usual know-nothing line of attack.

Another point I'd like to make here—again with reference to my own teaching—is that some of the best students are in fact strongly drawn to just the kind of technical work in philosophy of language and logic that can look pretty off-putting to anyone outside the discipline. A bit of recent history might be relevant here. There was a time (about ten years ago) when Philosophy in British universities was in a really bad state, with declining student numbers and lots of departmental closures all over the country. The Cardiff department almost closed and in fact only survived by joining up with English and Communications as a part of a larger (hence economically viable) unit. And then, there was a concerted campaign by philosophers to convince the Government, parents, employers, and other interested parties that philosophy was a really important, vital, intellectually (and

even economically) productive discipline. Without philosophy, you wouldn't have had modern symbolic logic; without symbolic logic, you wouldn't have had the computer revolution, etc. And of course, besides that, it had a crucial role to play in educating students to be more reflective, more critical, more competent in matters of social and moral concern. That campaign was very successful, so we now have as many students as we can possibly cope with. But I detect signs of a growing counterreaction in the press, where you find people saying things like, "What are they for, these philosophers? They only engage in such trivial, tedious, irrelevant debates, stuff about whether atoms really exist, whether translation is really possible, whether knowledge can be defined as justified true belief, and so forth." So, although the charge is rather different from that aimed against cultural studies—not so much the accusation of triviality and absurdly pretentious theoretical jargon, more the accusation of overspecialism and remoteness from "real" human concerns—it's still the same kind of backlash.

Again, this is exactly what Derrida's talking about when he says that *from a certain point of view*, it may be unrealistic or sheerly utopian to think of philosophy—the Philosophy Faculty—as being the place in the university where questions are raised in a spirit of disinterested, truth-seeking enquiry. From an administrative, profit-led, "realistic" standpoint, this may seem an absurdly quixotic conception and perhaps a good reason for closing more departments down. All the same, Derrida thinks, it's important to conserve that idea of philosophical disinterest—at least as a kind of Kantian regulative Idea—because otherwise there will be no place for criticism, for resistance to state pressure, commercial incentives, or other kinds of "outside" influence. Not that this ideal could ever be achieved in practice, any more than the study of pure mathematics could ever be pursued in *total* isolation from its possible applied uses, or any more than work in theoretical physics could ever claim *total* nonresponsibility for the sorts of applied technological advance to which it gives rise.

Thus, as Derrida says, the US Navy has invested in a whole (on the face of it) wildly improbable range of projects—semiotics,

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literary theory, even deconstruction— with a view to their possible long-term deferred benefits, maybe in areas like machine translation or "intelligent" weapons guidance systems. So, on the one hand, you've got to acknowledge that realistically there's no discipline—no area of "pure" research—that might not find itself beholden to "outside" interests or involved with applications that find no place in its preferred self-image. On the other hand, you've also got to recognize that if you let go of that distinction, then this results in the kind of cynical acquiescence—"if we weren't doing it, then other people would, and besides, our department needs the money"—which is such a depressing feature of current university life.

Bowman: *You've discussed these connections between philosophy and cultural studies, aesthetics, music, art, and science. The traditional idea is that cultural studies was kind of born out of literary analysis, postcolonialism, postmodernism, and popular culture. What kind of connections do you see there? What kind of relations?*

Norris: Well, there's a bit of personal history there. The relevant point would be that my first degree was in a very traditional London University literature-based English degree, with almost no literary theory. A very canonical approach: "Beowulf to Virginia Woolf," as the old joke had it. Then, as a postgraduate, I went to University College, London. Frank Kermode was there, running a graduate seminar, and we read a great range of mainly French or French-influenced theoretical texts: Barthes and Derrida especially, but also a lot of new fiction and other, "classic" literary works which came out (I think through Kermode's gentle prompting) as *nouveaux romans* before their time. I was very much thrown in at the deep end and was very excited about all this and remember thinking, "Why didn't I read all these things much earlier?" That was when I began to question all sorts of received ideas about literary meaning and value, and it did seem extremely progressive, in a political sense, not just in a vaguely cultural and academic sense, especially the reading of Derrida,

which made an immense and lasting impression. That was what first got me interested in philosophy—via literary theory. I did a lot of belated catching up. I read philosophy backwards, so to speak, from Derrida to all the philosophers Derrida had written about: Austin, Husserl, Nietzsche, Hegel, Kant, Descartes, right the way back to Aristotle and Plato. So, it was a curious kind of reverse philosophical education.

Anyway, to return to your point about literary theory: I certainly thought those ideas were radical, not just in the "infantile leftist" sense of turning everything upside down, but in the sense of being socially and politically progressive. And then, about ten years later, I came to have some doubts about that, partly because I thought that post-structuralism had turned, *via* postmodernism, to a kind of blanket skepticism about truth, knowledge, and reason. Partly on that account and partly because I came to have doubts about that whole late-60s *Tel Quel* conjuncture—semiotics with a certain reading of Freud *via* Lacan and a certain reading of Marx *via* Althusser, and the idea of the plural text, or the limit text, as Barthes would call it, as a potentially radicalizing, progressive, or even revolutionary force. You know, the "semioclastic" idea (I think this terms came from Barthes) that by transforming our language, or our forms of signifying practice, or our modes of discursive or narrative representation, we could somehow transform the world. This came to seem a rather upside-down way of putting it—a sort of reversal of Marx's theses on Feuerbach.

It was also partly the feeling that Frank Kermode identified when he reviewed some of my books and registered a steadily increasing sense of disillusionment with literary theory. What started out as a way of reading texts in imaginative, interesting, productive new ways had now turned into a kind of orthodoxy, where theorists showed little interest in novels or poems but used them mainly as pegs on which to hang some clanking theoretical argument. So, I suppose he feels partly responsible for having introduced all these new ideas which have now turned into something he doesn't recognize or want to acknowledge. Insofar as personal histories are relevant to this, it's been one of partial

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disenchantment on my part. But also, what I thought of then as philosophy of language—having approached all these things *via* fairly recent, skeptically inclined French ideas—later came to strike me as philosophically deficient and open to all sorts of potentially harmful misapplication. Again, I would make an exception of Derrida, but then, he is an exception to just about every generalized statement you could make about the way that philosophy has gone during the past half-century. So, really, it is a matter of belated education on my part!

Literary theory was once really marginal. Literary criticism was considered marginal, but literary theory was a kind of meta-reflection on the principles of literary criticism. What happened in the mid-1970s—putting it crudely—was that this once marginal discipline then suddenly became very central, and you could see this happening year by year across various disciplines. It first began to have an influence in cultural studies, then in sociology, then in anthropology (or Geertz-style ethnography), then in legal studies, then in musicology—and the list could on. In 1986, when I was teaching at Berkeley, I had a graduate seminar on deconstruction where students from the Law School used to come along and wrote essays that were full of references to Derrida or to articles in the law journals that cited Derrida in every second footnote. Again, it's good to see these interdisciplinary overtures but not so good when the result of that sort of discipline hopping is to turn everything into a kind of literary text.

Stanley Fish would be one example of an all-purpose rhetorician whose ideas come out of literary theory but who has since turned his hand to legal studies and a whole bunch of other topics which he treats in just the same way. So, he thinks that all theorists are sadly in the grip of one or the other delusion: "positive foundationalist theory-hope," which leads them to suppose that they can reinforce their case with some knockdown principled argument, or "negative anti-foundationalist theory-hope," which leads them to suppose (just as vainly) that they can knock down someone else's argument by subjecting it to this or that form of skeptical critique. So, on the one hand you have earnest-minded hermeneutic thinkers like E.D. Hirsch, in his book *Validity in*

Interpretation, bringing up Husserl and other big philosophical guns to make his case stick, and on the other, you have various Marxists, psychoanalytic critics, feminists, deconstructionists, et al., finding "theoretical" reasons to think that texts don't say what they mean or mean what they say. But all this stuff is beside the point, Fish argues, since what texts mean *just is* what they mean according to the prevalent norms within this or that existing "interpretive community." So, Hirsch's arguments make sense to people of a similar persuasion, while the Marxists, feminists, and deconstructionists will also find a receptive readership only if there are already enough people around who share their language game, discourse, technical jargon, or whatever. It is not only truth that drops out completely from Fish's neo-pragmatist view of things but also any notion of learning something new or seeing the error of one's past ideas. In which case, we might as well pack up reading, thinking, or debating these issues. Thus, as Fish says, the most fitting response from any reader of his work would be a postcard with the message "You're right!" and then complete silence.

Anyway, back to the personal narrative. I experienced a growing unease with the hegemonization of other disciplines by a certain kind of literary theory, which tended toward the skeptical postmodern position that everything is ultimately a textual construct. So, to the extent that I've been focusing on issues in philosophical semantics, and in epistemology and philosophy of science, it's perhaps been a roundabout way of trying to resolve questions that were raised most directly in the book I wrote about the Gulf War, *Uncritical Theory*. That was written in the white heat of indignation, mostly on coach trips up to London for anti-war demonstrations. It started off as a polemical response to Baudrillard's two articles on the Gulf War, and then, it turned into a book, which took in all sorts of other issues. But the general point behind it is that unless you have a sufficiently strong, philosophically defensible conception of truth, then your arguments will be prone to some Fish-type skeptical or other sort of cultural-relativist rejoinder, with ethically and politically dubious results. Fish says that "theory" has no consequences, nor

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indeed his own kind of anti-theory, since this whole debate is just a matter of rhetorical preaching to the converted. I think he is mistaken about this and that getting things right or wrong "in theory" has all sorts of consequences for the way we read, think, and conduct our lives.

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Deconstruction, Anti-Realism, and Philosophy of Science:

Interview With Marianna Papastephanou

Marianna Papastephanou: *One of the questions I would like to raise concerns philosophy of science and its implications for philosophy of education. In particular, I would like to ask you whether postmodernism in its deconstructionist form has anything useful to offer to philosophy of education with regard to the teaching of science.*

Christopher Norris: Well, I think you have to draw some important distinctions which very often get ignored or elided in this context. First, you need to draw a distinction between postmodernism and deconstruction. I suppose there is a sense—a rather vague and ill-defined sense—in which deconstruction can be seen as a part of the wider postmodernist movement of thought. All the same, I would argue, it is more than just a subbranch of that wider movement or a way of reading texts (philosophical, literary, and other kinds of text) which has developed mainly in response to our current (so-called) "postmodern condition."

It is worth getting clear about this, I think, since the stakes are quite high in ethical and political as well as in "purely" philosophical

terms. Postmodernism amounts—philosophically speaking—to a kind of generalized skepticism, a skepticism with regard to such typecast "modernist" concepts as truth, reason, critique, and other such supposedly outmoded enlightenment values. So, it involves, as Lyotard famously said, an incredulity toward "metanarratives," toward any way of thinking that implies some idea of truth, progress, enlightened understanding, the exercise of reason as a liberating power, or freedom of moral and intellectual conscience. In other words—as Habermas claims—it represents a very definite and programmatic break with the "philosophic discourse" of enlightenment or the "unfinished project" of modernity. Lyotard is quite explicit about this: we can no longer carry on thinking in those old Kantian-enlightenment terms once we have taken stock of all the melancholy counterevidence—the history of setbacks, ironic reversals, revolutionary hopes betrayed, and so forth—which has gone clean against those old, discredited values and beliefs. So, we had much better accept that we have now lived on ("we" collectively—not just disenchanted postmodern types like Lyotard) into an epoch when the only genuine ethical imperative is to multiply the range of "first-order natural pragmatic narratives" and renounce any appeal to such delusive—he would say coercive, even totalitarian—ideas.

Papastephanou: *So, deconstruction is not a skeptical movement of thought, at least not skeptical to the same degree as postmodernism?*

Norris: Well, deconstruction is skeptical up to a point, I think. Thus, it raises questions—very searching questions—about truth, knowledge, meaning, and representation. It is also skeptical (again up to a point) about the possibility that we could somehow reassemble or reconstitute historical knowledge in such a way as to speak with any confidence about the progress of human knowledge or the emergence of better, more "enlightened" forms of ethical, political, and social thought. Still, I would want to say—on the evidence of Derrida's texts—that it doesn't amount to anything like an outlook of wholesale postmodernist skepticism or a complete renunciation of enlightenment values in the Lyotard

fashion. No doubt deconstruction entails a questioning of what Derrida calls "logocentrism' or the "metaphysics of presence," that is to say, of a certain philosophical (but also more widely cultural) way of thinking whereby the values of truth and reason are equated with some kind of privileged epistemic access to thoughts "in the mind" of those presumed or authorized to know. This approach comes partly from Nietzsche, partly from Heidegger, and from a succession of post-Kantian German (and latter-day French) philosophers who have challenged the Cartesian foundationalist appeal to "clear and distinct ideas" as a bulwark against the threat of all-encompassing skeptical doubt. At the same time, Derrida is far from adopting any line of outright dismissal with regard to enlightenment values or the "unfinished project" of modernity. More accurate to say that he maintains, even (in certain passages) eloquently defends those values while also calling attention to the blind spots of prejudice—the symptomatic moments of potential exclusionary violence—that emerge within the enlightenment discourse of self-assured reason and truth.

There is an essay ("'f an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy") where Derrida raises these issues explicitly with regard to Kant's attack on anti-enlightenment "mystagogues" like Jacobi and Hamann, but also—obliquely—with regard to his own ambivalent response to the charges levelled against him by Habermas. At any rate, he is far from rejecting enlightenment values, any more than he rejects humanist values in an early essay like "The Ends of Man," where in fact Derrida criticizes those—Heidegger among them—who speak too readily of a "post-philosophical" discourse which would somehow (impossibly) declare a break with all such "humanist" values.

Papastephanou: *How does this connect with my other question, about science, philosophy of science, and education?*

Norris: Going back to that question (not before time!), I think that something rather similar can be said as concerns Derrida's address to issues in philosophy and history of science. There is a close, complex, and intriguing relationship between Derrida's

thinking on these topics and the thinking of French critical-rationalist philosophers of science like Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canghuilhem. They are also skeptics in a certain sense, that is to say, in so far as they write a critical and to some extent revisionist history of scientific discoveries, conceptual revolutions, paradigm changes, and so forth. More than that, they are concerned—like Derrida in his essay "White Mythology"—with the way in which "poetic" devices like metaphor and analogy play a crucial (indeed indispensable) role in the development of scientific theories, hypotheses, or modes of reasoning. But at the same time—especially in Bachelard's work—there is an emphasis on the process of "rectification and critique" whereby metaphors are rendered scientifically operational, that is to say, shorn of their residual anthropomorphic "residues" and enabled to function as operative terms in a developed (conceptually mature) science. Thus—to take one famous example—the cellular theory of organic tissue starts out as a metaphor carried over from the beehive, from ideas of cooperative labor, of the whole as a complex, self-evolving system of mutually dependent parts… But it then undergoes a process of critical refinement to the point where it is not "just" a metaphor but a scientific concept with genuine descriptive, conceptual, and explanatory power.

Some readers of Derrida—literary theorists mostly—take him to be saying (in vulgar-Nietzschean fashion) that "all concepts are metaphors" or that scientific knowledge is nothing more than a collection of dead or sublimated metaphors. Certainly, he runs through the standard moves of that argument in the first twenty or so pages of "White Mythology," where he shows just how pervasive—even ubiquitous—are the various tropes that have played a role in the construction of scientific theories. Yet, he then goes on to say—in some passages that these readers typically (or tactically) pass over in silence—that any adequate understanding of metaphor has to account for the way that metaphor has been *conceptualized* by philosophers and theorists from Aristotle down to Bachelard and Canguilhem. That is, a deconstructive reading cannot stop short at the stage of just inverting the received order of priority between concept and metaphor and treating the

discourses of science and philosophy as so many failed attempts to dissimulate their own metaphorical character. Rather, it has to take full account of that "rectifying," "critical" process whereby metaphors are capable – as Aristotle said – of yielding knowledge and advancing our powers of scientific or conceptual grasp. And if this is the case, then one can argue—*contra* postmodernists like Lyotard and paradigm relativists like Thomas Kuhn—that there *is* such a thing as scientific progress, that there *are* significant discoveries, and that we *can* make sense of scientific theory change without embracing a full-scale doctrine of paradigm incommensurability.

Papastephanou: *Could I bring you back to the last part of my previous question, that is, the bearing of all this on issues in education and (especially) philosophy of education?*

Norris: Well, I don't want to dodge the question here—and I am sure you won't allow me to anyway—but I would answer that one really can't separate curricular issues of "what gets taught" from philosophic issues concerning the educational whys and wherefores. After all, what a teacher thinks about the kinds of questions we have just been discussing—questions of scientific truth, knowledge, progress, and so forth—is sure to have an impact (for better or worse) on her whole approach to the teaching of science and presentation of course material. Either that or she will be placed in the awkward (even hypocritical) position of not really *believing* the kinds of things that her students are required to write down in their essays and exam papers. When I was at school, there were teachers of Religious Education—often people who had trained for some other subject but who had to offer RE as a backup—who were stuck in just that unfortunate position. This was a time, you understand, when it was still taught very much as a means of bringing kids up in the received faith and before the arrival of a more "multicultural," comparative, or (at any rate) less doctrinally driven approach. So, we tended to conclude that these teachers were either hypocrites (pushing an agenda which they clearly didn't believe in) or, in so far as they did believe it, too

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gullible to earn much respect. Many years later, I read a piece by William Empson attacking what he saw as the bad moral effects of religious (especially Christian) education and suggesting that a lot of discipline problems in schools resulted from this perception of teachers as dupes or pious frauds. I think he was right about this and that pupils or students are quick to pick up any sign of insincerity or any sense that teachers are pushing a line in accordance with orthodox views.

Of course this whole issue has lately come up in quite an urgent way with the debate about creationism which had been rumbling on in the US for a long time and which has now caused a big stir among British educationalists, scientists, theologians, politicians, and media pundits. Thus, we have even been treated to a typically bland and evasive statement by Tony Blair, who said, in effect, "let them (the creationists) follow their conscience in matters of religious faith just so long as the schools keep on getting good exam results." To be honest, I find it well-nigh incredible that anyone with qualifications sufficient to get themselves a job in teaching—let alone in teaching teachers or pronouncing on matters of educational policy—could think that there is a serious case to be answered from the creationist side. It is the question whether teachers in "faith schools" should be allowed to say, "Well, here you have one theory (Darwin's) and here you have another (the Genesis account), and it is only fair to give them both equal time since Darwinism is also a 'faith' position and cannot claim to have the last 'scientific' word." That is to say, since there are "gaps" in the Darwinian theory—missing items in the fossil record, details that have yet to be worked out, theoretical issues still not fully resolved even after the advent of Mendelian genetics and molecular biology—therefore, Darwinism involves a "leap of faith" just as great as that required by the Genesis account.

It is hard to know just where to start in explaining the various confusions here, but I suppose the best thing for any teacher to do—should the topic come up in classroom discussion—is to point them out patiently, one by one. Thus, she might well begin, in good Popperian style, by suggesting that creationists typically skew the issue through their notion that science wants

to claim "the last word" (to assume the finality of scientific knowledge as we have it), rather than adopting a fallibilist outlook which always allows for the standing possibility of future disconfirmation. And again, that the Darwinian theory is strongly (indeed overwhelmingly) borne out by the empirical evidence, unlike the creationist account, which can always be revised to fit *any* kind of evidence that might turn up and which is wholly incapable of falsification for just that reason. It is the difference between "faith" in methods of enquiry that are open to rational assessment and debate and "faith" in a doctrine that grants itself total exemption from any such standards. This is all familiar ground in philosophy of science, and it is heartening to see that a good many philosophers as well as scientists—not to mention a few worried bishops—have weighed in heavily against the latest drive to put creationism back on the agenda. But it doesn't help so much to have people around (postmodernists and some "strong" sociologists) committed to the view that there is simply no deciding the issue between Darwinism and creationism since each must be treated—on a principle of parity—as making sense by its own cultural or interpretative lights.

Anyway—to return to your original question—this is one case where it is hard to distinguish curricular issues concerning "what gets taught" from broader (more "philosophical") issues concerning the nature of scientific enquiry and the aims and purposes of education. And it is also very much an ethical matter since there is something altogether wrong—morally and socially wrong—about stuffing the children's heads with superstitious beliefs which then leave them cruelly exposed to other, yet more insidious kinds of irrationalist (for instance, racist or anti-Semitic) propaganda. This is really what the present controversy is all about, as can be seen from the US context, where creationism is mostly pushed in the name of a right-wing fundamentalist crusade to uphold the values of Christian faith against all manner of "liberal," "multicultural," or other such perceived threats. I am still hopeful or naïve enough to think that it won't go so far in Britain since we don't have the same problem—or not on the same scale—with people's capacity for willing self-delusion

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through forms of mass-induced irrational belief. Still, there is danger that this might just happen, especially if the government presses on with its misguided and irresponsible plans for increasing the number of "faith schools" and, along with them, the chances for creationism or other fundamentalist dogmas to get a hold. Clearly, teachers and educational policy advisers are in the front line here and have a duty—a moral and professional duty—to speak out against the kinds of muddle-headed thinking promoted by politicians with an eye to the electoral main chance.

Papastephanou: *So you would want to defend a realist and progressivist account of scientific knowledge, as opposed to the various constructivist or cultural-relativist approaches—for instance, those deriving from the "strong program" in sociology of knowledge—that have lately claimed to occupy the high ground?*

Norris: I should perhaps make it clear—just to anticipate the standard postmodernist line of attack—that this is *not* the kind of nowadays deeply unfashionable nineteenth-century Whiggish outlook according to which the history of science can be written as a constant onward-and-upward march toward truth at the end of enquiry. Skeptics like Lyotard score a lot of polemical points by setting up this false idea of what the argument for scientific "progress" amounts to and then proceeding to knock it down as naïve, vulgar, parochial, ideologically blinkered, historically underinformed, etc. On the contrary, what you get from Derrida's reading of philosophers from Aristotle to Bachelard and Canguilhem is a complex, nuanced, and detailed account of the way that advances in scientific knowledge have often been enabled by certain productive or heuristic metaphors but are sometimes held back when other metaphors receive inadequate critical scrutiny and hence become an "obstacle to thought." So, the main point here is that the historian/philosopher of science can continue to make such crucial distinctions and needn't go along with the Kuhnian "radical" line on paradigm relativism, incommensurability, or the absence of objective (transparadigm) criteria.

This is why I should want to reject the equation between a "deconstructive" approach to the philosophy and history of science, like Derrida's in parts of "White Mythology," and the approach adopted by a postmodernist thinker like Lyotard. Thus, Lyotard says in his typically bland, sweeping, provocative way that we have now arrived at an epoch of "postmodern" science when it is no longer a question of scientific statements having a decidable truth value or being open to evaluation in terms of their empirical warrant, conceptual yield, causal-explanatory power, or predictive success. In the most advanced fields of present-day science, everything is a matter of chaos, undecidability, uncertainty, conflict, paradox, heterogeneous language games, incommensurability, the whole repertoire of postmodernist idees recues. This is a pretty extreme kind of cultural-relativist doctrine, and one that defines itself squarely against "naïve" (i.e., "modern") ideas of reason, objectivity, progress, and truth. Also—I would argue—it trades on a whole promiscuous conflation of ideas from various fashionable sources like chaos theory, complexity theory, and a certain (fairly orthodox but nonetheless questionable) interpretation of quantum mechanics.

Papastephanou: *So, why have these ideas come to exercise such a powerful appeal among postmodern cultural theorists?*

Norris: What gives them their appeal for Lyotard is their chiefly rhetorical—or "performative"—usefulness in suggesting that there is just no room any longer for such obsolete notions as that of science as a disciplined attempt to gain a progressively more adequate knowledge of the physical world and its various properties, microstructural features, causal dispositions, etc. Quite frankly, I find this argument "rhetorical" in the commonplace (pejorative) sense of that term, a sense that we are not supposed to use nowadays, at least if we are postmodernists who think that reality is a purely discursive construct and that performative success is the only thing that counts. I know that some readers take Lyotard to be adopting a critical or even a sardonic line on all this, that is to say, in some sense lamenting the fact that scientific

"knowledge" has nowadays been commodified to the point where all that matters is the performative ability to get published in the right journals, persuade the relevant peer group, raise the biggest research grants, and so forth. But the same thing is often said about Baudrillard, that he didn't really *mean* all that stuff about the Gulf War not taking place, about our now inhabiting a postmodern world of pure simulacra where there is simply no room for the appearance/reality distinction or other such relics of Enlightenment thought. Rather, he is exposing this whole sorry charade of mediatized spectacle and mass delusion to a withering satirical commentary, and we miss the point (us earnest-minded types) when we take him straight and get worked up into a lather of self-righteous indignation.

Still, I find these defenses pretty unconvincing, even in Lyotard's case, since he writes with such po-faced solemnity most of the time and banks so much on his interpretation of "postmodern" science (quantum mechanics, chaos theory, and the rest) as bearing out his general diagnosis. And of course, he claims philosophical warrant from his reading of Kant on the sublime ("presenting the unrepresentable"), of Austin on the constative/performative distinction, of Wittgenstein on "language games" and "forms of life," etc. I just don't think that you can put it all down to a subtle strategy, on Lyotard's part, for exposing the kinds of nonsense spread about by other, less savvy or more credulous proponents of the postmodernist line. But of course, I am more than willing to change my mind if someone can produce a reading of Lyotard—like my own reading of Derrida—that consistently supports this "between-the-lines" interpretation. I suppose they could always appeal to Leo Strauss's idea in *Persecution of the Art of Writing* that every great philosopher has to be construed in this way (one reading for the hoi polloi, another for the cognoscenti) since otherwise their true—necessarily secret or occult—meaning would threaten the existing social order and lay them open to severe reprisals. But I think it would be pushing credibility beyond the limit to apply this hermeneutic principle in Lyotard's case.

Papastephanou: *So, Derrida (unlike Lyotard) is definitely not saying that we should collapse the difference between logic and rhetoric, as many deconstructionists and post-structuralist commentators routinely claim…*

Norris: What you find in Derrida—in "White Mythology" and other related texts—is a much more careful, detailed, meticulous, and I think more knowledgeable approach to these questions. Thus, for instance, Derrida at several points makes reference to Gödel's undecidability proof, which holds that in any mathematical or logical system rich enough to generate the axioms of elementary arithmetic, there will always be at least one theorem that is not provable in terms of the system itself. That is to say, the system will always contain a certain "unthought axiomatic"—Derrida's, not Gödel's phrase—which it requires as a matter of internal consistency but which cannot be shown to follow on logical-demonstrative grounds. This is one of the most famous and deeply problematical results in twentieth-century philosophy of logic and mathematics. In fact, it was the finding that blew a great hole in David Hilbert's confident 1900 pronouncement that mathematicians would soon come up with an answer to all the big problems that remained as yet unresolved. And then, there emerged a number of closely related conceptual difficulties, like Russell's self-referential paradoxes (e.g., "the set of all sets that are not members of themselves") which threatened to undermine the whole edifice of modern set theory. Indeed, Russell managed to rule them out only by requiring, as a stipulative rule, that logicians should respect his "theory of types" which laid down a rigorous distinction between first-order "object" languages and higher level "metalanguages" and would thus (so he hoped) prevent such paradoxes from arising in the first place. Still, this "solution" is likely to appear less than convincing to anyone who thinks that philosophical problems can't be made to vanish through a flat declaration that they go against some newly invented rule.

Postmodernists such as Lyotard dwell happily on these and kindred topoi since they offer welcome support (so it seems) for the idea of science as "chaotic," "paralogistic," "unrectifiable,"

or prone to all manner of classically unthinkable problems and complications. As I have said, there is a limited analogy here with Derrida's thinking, especially with the texts of his early period (such as *Writing and Difference, Margins of Philosophy*, and his extensive work on Husserl) where he makes constant reference to undecidability—and sometimes explicitly to Gödel's proof—for its bearing on issues of truth, meaning, and textual interpretation. My point (if this doesn't sound too quaintly moralistic) is that Derrida has earned the right to these allusions, rather than exploiting them in a vaguely suggestive or an ad hoc, opportunist way.

This is not the place for a detailed account of Derridean "undecidability" as it figures—for instance—in his deconstructive reading of Husserl on the antinomy between "structure" and "genesis" in the philosophy of mathematics or his account of the contradictory logics that characterize Plato's discussion of speech and writing in his dialogue the *Phaedrus*. Then again, there is Derrida's near book-length exposition of the "logic of supplementarity" which emerges throughout Rousseau's writings and which works to destabilize his overt arguments with respect to the priority of nature over culture, presence over absence, speech over writing, melody over harmony in music, and so forth. None of this would carry much weight, philosophically speaking, were it just a matter of invoking "undecidability" as an all-purpose slogan adopted (in the typical postmodernist manner) to signify a break with the "classical" values of truth, reason, and logic. However, when Derrida uses the term, he does so in a way that on the one hand manifests a detailed grasp of its working out in philosophy of logic and mathematics and on the other hand shows precisely what its implications are for philosophy of language and the reading of texts like those of Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, and Husserl.

Papastephanou: *This is all very different from the usual understanding of Derrida's work among literary and cultural theorists. Why do you think they have misrepresented him or read him from such a sharply divergent (as you would*

say, "postmodernist") angle? Perhaps I should add that some educational theorists have read him in a similar way, that is, as offering support for a social-constructivist approach to various disciplines, including science and the history of science.

Norris: Here, we should recall that Derrida, like most French philosophers, received a strong early training in the more "technical" branches of the discipline, including philosophy of logic, mathematics, and the physical sciences. So, there is a straightforward sense in which he knows what he is talking about when he raises these issues with regard to topics which "analytic" philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition tend to treat as belonging to them by a kind of exclusive professional birthright. You see this proprietory attitude at its most zealous in John Searle's flat refusal to believe that Derrida could have anything of interest or value to say on the subject of Austinian speech-act theory, even though Derrida is an acute reader of Austin and alert to problematical aspects of the theory which count for nothing on Searle's confidently orthodox approach. Here again, it is a matter of undecidability in the strict usage of that term and not at all in the other (postmodernist) sense that exploits a whole range of vague, all-purpose analogies with the supposed situation in mathematics or physics. And I think that this does have a great deal to do with Derrida's close though highly complex and in some ways dissident relation to that critical-rationalist approach in epistemology and philosophy of science adopted by a thinker like Bachelard.

As regards your point about social constructivism, no, the educational theorists are quite simply getting Derrida wrong—picking up on a few scattered pronouncements taken out of context—when they claim to enlist him in that particular cause. Here again, I would refer them to the essays in *Margins of Philosophy* where Derrida comes out very strongly against any levelling conception of "the text" (in constructivist parlance: the "social text") as providing our sole means of access to the history or of scientific concepts, theories, discovery procedures, etc. Of course—as I have said—there are certain passages that

can be plucked out and read in that way, passages that insist (rightly enough) on the need for a close and attentive reading of philosophical and scientific texts, not least with an eye to the role of metaphor in various crucial or formative stages of scientific theory construction. But this is very different from claiming—as the social constructivists routinely do—that the "truth" of any given such theory (along with the objects which constitute its field of enquiry) are *nothing but* products of some particular "discourse," whether hegemonic or emergent, that happens to exist within a certain culture at a certain time. Well, some of them—the more "radical" types—seem fully committed to this line, while others (more cautious or scientifically better informed) stop short at claiming, sensibly enough, that the sociology of knowledge has plenty to teach us concerning the historical context of discovery. But it is something to worry about, I think, if teachers have gained the impression that a "strong" sociological approach is the best way to teach history of science and moreover that Derrida's work can be recruited by way of "philosophical" support.

Papastephanou: *Perhaps you could bring our discussion a bit nearer home by explaining how this might connect with more familiar issues and debates in recent English-language philosophy of science?*

Norris: The point can made by comparing Thomas Kuhn's distinctly undertheorized conception of scientific paradigm change—one that has exerted considerable influence on postmodern thinkers like Lyotard—with the far more detailed and conceptually rigorous account offered by Bachelard in his writings on the same topic. For Kuhn, there is no making sense of such episodes except in terms of a radical shift from one to another paradigm or a wholesale change of conceptual scheme that effectively precludes any talk of scientific "progress" or advancement in knowledge. Thus, for instance, Ptolemy and Galileo must be thought of as having inhabited "different words," the one a geocentric cosmos of interrevolving spheres, the other

a heliocentric system with the earth and other planets pursuing their orbits in accordance with certain (as yet imprecisely formulated) laws of mathematics. So, likewise, when Aristotle observed a swinging stone, he saw it as an instance of matter seeking out its natural place in the order of the elements, whereas Galileo perceived an instance of gravitationally induced pendular motion. And of course, the same applies to Priestley and Lavoisier with their two strictly "incommensurable" theories of combustion, the one involving the emission of phlogiston and a consequent reduction in the quantity of "dephlogistated air," while the other involved the uptake of oxygen and production of various oxides. For Kuhn, there are periods of prerevolutionary "crisis" when the anomalies pile up and defenders of the old paradigm have to introduce all kinds of makeshift adjustment, like the Ptolemaic epicycles. Then, it reaches a point where the complications become too much to handle and scientists (the more open-minded or progressive among them) switch to another paradigm.

However, Kuhn offers no very detailed or convincing account of just how such crises develop or on just what rational or evidential grounds those scientists embrace the new theory. In fact, it is left utterly mysterious why anyone would ever abandon any orthodox or well-entrenched theory given Kuhn's endorsement of the Quinean view that all theories are "underdetermined by the evidence," that every item of scientific evidence is itself "theory laden," that adjustments can always be made at any point in the overall "fabric" of beliefs-held-true at some given time, and hence that the only reasons which count in deciding between alternative theories are those of pragmatic convenience or a conservative desire to retain as much as possible of existing scientific lore. Quine arrives at this verdict on the basis of his radically holistic doctrine that everything is ultimately up for revision, from statements at the observational "periphery" of the fabric (where one can always save a cherished theory from empirical disconfirmation by instancing perceptual anomalies or defects in the measuring apparatus) to statements at the logical "core" where one might prefer to revise or renounce

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some ground rule of classical logic (such as excluded middle) in order to accommodate discrepant findings such as quantum superposition or wave/particle dualism. So, there is no statement or privileged class of statements that must be taken to hold true "come what may," whether those which on the face of it possess the very strongest empirical warrant or those others (i.e., analytical statements or self-evident "truths of reason") which supposedly stand proof against revision in virtue of their logical form.

Thus, according to Quine, it is just another "dogma" of old-style logical empiricism that statements can be sorted one-by-one on the basis of a clear-cut distinction between empirically warranted matters of fact and self-validating (hence tautologous or strictly uninformative) logical truths. Rather, as he says, our various statements face the "tribunal" of sensory experience "not individually but as a body," and any choice of which statements to abandon or revise "turns on our vaguely pragmatic inclination to adjust one strand of the fabric of science rather than another in accommodating some particular recalcitrant experience." And from it is no great distance to Kuhn's idea of paradigm change as a kind of collective conversion experience, one whose world-transformative effects come about through a process of large-scale "adjustment" that cannot be explained—or rationally justified—except in such vaguely holistic terms.

This takes us back—by way of contrast—to Derrida's engagement with issues in philosophy of science and, in particular, his relationship to that distinctively critical-rationalist line of thought represented by the writings of Bachelard and Canguilhem. What is crucial here is the fact that these thinkers went a lot farther than Kuhn in explaining how scientific revolutions came about not merely through a process of ad hoc (rationally undermotivated) paradigm change but as a consequence of highly *specific* problems thrown up in the course of empirical investigation and conjoint theoretical enquiry. Thus, Bachelard has much to say about the ways in which (e.g.) subatomic physics or molecular biology has very often advanced on the basis of speculative metaphors or modes of analogical

thinking which have then—at a later stage—become subject to progressively more adequate methods of testing, refinement, and conceptualization. One example from Bachelard is the tetrahedral structure of the carbon atom, an idea that started out very much in the mode of intuitive-metaphoric "perception of resemblance" but which thereafter proved capable of rectification and critique to the stage where it acquired the status of a fully operative scientific concept.

In "White Mythology," Derrida presses very hard on this metaphor/concept distinction and indeed may be said to "deconstruct" it in so far as he shows—convincingly I think—that any attempt, like Bachelard's, to explain the progress or advancement of knowledge as a passage from (inadequate) metaphor to (adequate) concept is sure to make covert appeal to certain residual or sublimated metaphors. On the other hand, Derrida also remarks that this whole discourse on or of metaphor presupposes, as its very condition of possibility, that same (albeit problematic) distinction and the various *conceptual* terms in which it has been theorized by thinkers—philosophers, rhetoricians, literary theorists—from Aristotle to the present. I think it is worth repeating this point since it is often ignored by commentators on Derrida, Richard Rorty among them, who routinely take him to have shown that "all concepts are metaphors" (not least the terms *concept* and *metaphor*) and hence that it is futile—a self-defeating endeavor—to make any such attempt. On the contrary, what Derrida shows, here as in numerous other contexts, is the *absolute and principled necessity* of thinking these issues through with the utmost analytical rigor even though the outcome may reveal some constitutive aporia which defeats the best efforts of adequate conceptualization.

Papastephanou: *So, the idea that Derrida has "deconstructed" the concept/metaphor distinction is one that has gained credence among people (literary critics and cultural theorists) who don't have a knowledge of this relevant background in French philosophy of science?*

Norris: There is another aspect of Bachelard's thought which will perhaps be more familiar to literary critics and cultural theorists. This has to do with the "psychoanalysis" of poetic reverie, that is to say, with certain intuitive or preconceptual modes of creative thinking which inherently put up greater resistance to analysis along these lines. All the same, it is clear from Bachelard's oeuvre as a whole that he does find room for the idea of advancement in knowledge through the critique of such anthropomorphic or poetico-metaphorical "residues" at least in so far as they figure in the discourse of science and thus become subject to the process of "rectification" which issues in adequate concepts. Here again, the comparison with Kuhn is highly instructive since it points up the related contrast between Derrida's meticulously reasoned approach to these issues and that taken by "strong" textualists like Rorty or postmodernists such as Lyotard who have arrived at a Kuhnian position by a different philosophical route. What drops out entirely on the latter conception is any plausible account of why some metaphors have proved their value as a means toward better (more adequate) scientific understanding while others have proved incapable of further rectification and critique.

Bachelard makes this point very clearly when he talks about the need to distinguish *histoire sanctionée* from *histoire perimée*, that is to say, concepts in the history of science that have played some decisive role in the progress of scientific knowledge to date and metaphors (or putative concepts) that have turned out "peripheral" or devoid of any genuine conceptual-explanatory power. Thus, Priestley's "phlogiston" and Aristotle's notion of "natural place" would plainly belong to the annals of *histoire perimée* since they play no role in our current best scientific understanding of the process of combustion or the nature of gravitational attraction. On the other hand, a theory like Black's concept of "caloric"—the intangible fluid once thought to explain conductivity and various heat-related phenomena—can be seen as discredited in so far as it refers to a nonexistent substance but nonetheless as belonging to *histoire sanctionée* in so far as it led to the formulation of a concept (that of specific heat) which does still play such a role. That is to say, our present-best theory of heat

as "mean kinetic energy of molecules" is one that would not have been arrived at except *via* these strictly indispensable interim stages. And the same can be said of Newtonian gravitational theory despite its having been superseded—or assigned to a special-case limiting status—with the advent of Einstein's more powerful or encompassing General Theory of Relativity.

Papastephanou: *However, as you know, Derrida has been attacked by some philosophers and also by the physicist Alan Sokal for the way he exploits certain fashionable ideas about "postmodern" science to promote his own theories. In fact, Sokal singles out a passage which appears to equate relativity theory with the notion that "everything is relative" or that scientific truth claims only make sense within some given discourse, language game, cultural context, or whatever. So, I would like to ask how you assess Derrida's attitude to issues in philosophy of science and whether you think that passages like the one I mentioned do justice to his grasp of those issues.*

Norris: Well, no, I would say they don't. Certainly, Derrida is very far from espousing the naïve postmodernist idea that relativity theory somehow lends support to cultural relativism or to the incoherent idea that "everything is relative." That particular passage was cited by Sokal in his spoof article "Transforming the Boundaries: Toward a Transformational Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" and then in the book (*Intellectual Impostures*) coauthored with his physicist colleague Jean Bricmont. Basically, what Sokal set out to do was to punch a large hole in the credibility of people—post-structuralists, postmodernists, a wide assortment of "left" cultural theorists—who produced a lot of ill-informed and woolly minded talk about quantum physics, relativity, chaos theory, and so forth. To that extent, it certainly hit the intended mark, as well as inflicted collateral damage (if you'll forgive the hideous metaphor) across a range of vaguely associated movements of thought. In other words, it was a kind of scattershot polemic and one that in some ways rebounded on its authors since it showed a failure to distinguish between the various

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items of fashionable nonsense that they gleefully expose to view and the work of thinkers—Derrida among them—who emerge unscathed for anyone possessing a first-hand acquaintance with their texts.

There was also the irony—unperceived (so far as one can tell) by Sokal and Bricmont—that the postmodern "take" on quantum theory had its source in pronouncements by Bohr, Heisenberg, and other leading proponents of that theory in its orthodox ("Copenhagen") form. That they cite some of those canonical pronouncements alongside the set-piece quotes from the motley array of postmodern gurus should at least have given them pause in launching yet another round in the old "two-cultures" (science *versus* humanities or literature) debate. But to return to your original point, Derrida is perfectly aware of the difference between Special and General Relativity and also aware that, on Einstein's account, all spatiotemporal locations and velocities are relative to an absolute constant, namely, the speed of light. In other words, there is no privileged *observational* rest frame (as in Newton's conception), but there is an objective set of coordinates by which to calculate those relative locations and velocities. At any rate, Derrida is far from endorsing the half-baked idea that "everything is relative after Einstein," a notion that doesn't very often get expressed in quite so blatantly absurd a form but which seems to be implicit in the background of some postmodernist and cultural-relativist debate. Here again, I think that teachers and educationalists would do well to read up on this whole "science wars" debate since it is likely to emerge in classroom debate, at least among advanced (sixth-form) students who may have come across it in the newspapers and journals like *New Scientist*.

Papastephanou: *Still, you do seem to have some sympathy with Sokal's original aims and motives in publishing the spoof article? Even if he got Derrida wrong and failed to understand why deconstruction was not just another indistinguishable branch of the wider postmodernist trend?*

Norris: Well yes, his intervention did some good in showing up the kinds of pretentious nonsense that occasionally get past the editors of journals with a high reputation among cultural theorists. Where it struck home with particular force was in relation to the "strong" sociology of knowledge, that is, the idea (with its source in Kuhn, Wittgenstein, and the so-called linguistic turn) that we should treat all scientific truth claims as strictly on a par as regards their sociocultural conditions of emergence or their ultimate lack of any truth content beyond some existing currency of belief. I have said already—perhaps belabored the point—that this relativist approach is philosophically incoherent and is nowhere endorsed by anything that Derrida has written. Indeed, he has taken issue with polemical misreadings of his work that make him out to deny, subvert, or "deconstruct" (in a likewise polemically distorted sense of that term) the values of truth and reason. Or again, in a more "analytical" register: Derrida is in no way rejecting the idea that language has a referential function and that certain statements (among them the statements of the physical sciences) are truth apt or subject to assessment in terms of bivalent truth and falsehood.

Papastephanou: *This all makes him sound quite "traditionalist" in a way, more so than many of his disciples would have us believe. Isn't there a problem here, either for your way of reading his work or for theirs? Perhaps, you could say a bit more about Derrida's relation to philosophy of logic in the "other" (analytic) tradition.*

Norris: Well, as I have argued elsewhere, Derrida's thinking is more conservative in this regard than the thinking of many analytic philosophers—among them Quine, Michael Dummett, and Hilary Putnam—who would consider it rational to suspend or revise certain precepts of classical logic (e.g., bivalence or excluded middle) if the empirical evidence required it. Thus, we might do best, pragmatically speaking, to give up excluded middle and adopt an alternative three-valued logic as a means of "resolving" the issue about quantum superposition or wave-particle dualism, which otherwise creates all sorts of problems when you try to

assign a physical interpretation to the measurement data. I would want to put quote marks around that word *resolve* since there is a problem about explaining how science could ever have made any progress—or why any theory should ever have been revised or abandoned in response to anomalous findings—if scientists had actually worked on this Quinean principle of least resistance. That is to say, there would always have been sufficient room for adjusting the requirements of logical consistency so as to conserve some cherished theory by redistributing truth values, if necessary right down to the innermost core of beliefs-held-true at any given time. Derrida has never written about Quine, although one of his earliest publications—surprisingly enough—was a French translation of one of Quine's essays. However, as a good student of Husserl, he has always held a strong line against the kind of pragmatist outlook that would treat logic as revisable in the face of empirical counterevidence.

Papastephanou: *So, you would want to count Derrida among the upholders of truth, logic, and reason despite his reputation as a mischievous subverter of precisely those "classical" values?*

Norris: There is a nice (perhaps slightly tongue-in-cheek) example of this when he declares himself shocked at Searle's charge that he (Derrida) has muddied the waters of Austinian speech-act theory by requiring a strictly impossible degree of conceptual precision in the terms of that theory and then making out that its failure to meet this requirement must be seen as deeply problematic. Come now, Derrida chides, what philosopher worthy the name has ever been content with fuzzy concepts, or with a merely approximative "logic," or with a pragmatist approach that relaxes the standards of bivalent truth and falsehood? After all, he goes on (rather warming to the theme), we are not here dealing with "more-or-less" matters or vagaries of subjective response, such as judgments of taste with respect to flavors of toothpaste or ice cream…But there is a serious point behind Derrida's jokes at Searle's expense, namely, his refusal to accept the idea that logic might be revised or pragmatically adjusted whenever enquiry

comes up against "deviant," anomalous, or nonstandard cases of speech-act usage.

What Derrida most likes about Austin is his readiness to give up certain distinctions—like that between "constative" and "performative" speech acts—when they turn out, upon further analysis, to permit of no such tidy or clear-cut categorization. This is the famous midway turning point in *How to Do Things with Words* where Austin proposes a more adequate three-term distinction between the "locutionary," "illocutionary", and "perlocutionary" aspects of every successful speech act. Of course, Derrida still finds problems with Austin's attempted policing of the bounds between genuine (authentic, serious) examples of the kind and those other somehow "deviant" or "etiolated" samples such as speech acts spoken in jest, uttered on the stage, attributed to characters in a novel, or cited out of context, perhaps in an essay or a lecture on the topic of speech-act theory. For is it not the case—Derrida asks—that *all* speech acts partake of a generalized "iterability" (or citational character) which enables them to function in various roles or across an open-ended range of possible contexts, some of them utterly remote from any putative "normal" or everyday mode of communicative utterance? Such is the very condition of possibility for speech acts in general, namely, their unlimited capacity for "grafting" from one context to another, not excluding the "deviant" contexts that Austin is so anxious to rule off bounds. Still, there is the fact that they continue to signify—to carry a certain performative force—despite the manifest *im*possibility of appealing to any normative criterion of utterer's intent or assigning any definite (restricted) range of fitting or appropriate contexts.

So, Searle is simply missing Derrida's point—and ignoring the complexities of Austin's text—when he declares, with presumptive Austinian warrant, that we *can and do* distinguish reliably enough between "normal" and "deviant" kinds of speech act and that Derrida is either incapable of grasping this elementary fact or just playing games at Austin's expense. Still, as I have said, this response leaves room for Derrida to turn Searle's argument back against himself and remark on the irony of his

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wanting to extract a full-scale systematic theory of speech acts from Austin's highly elusive and problematic text, while claiming that Derrida has got things wrong (perversely or mischievously so) by applying inappropriate standards of conceptual rigor and precision. In other words, Searle's drive toward system and method comes at the twofold cost of his remaining obdurately blind (or deaf) to the subtleties of Austin's argument and also falling back upon the desperate recourse—as Derrida sees it—to fuzzy, ill-defined, or indeterminate "concepts." For it is another curious irony about this exchange that Searle, while denouncing Derrida's confusions in the name of "analytic" clarity and good sense, should nonetheless have shown himself ready to adopt such a vaguely pragmatic line of least resistance when countering Derrida's arguments. Or again, that Derrida should find himself obliged—not without a certain relish—to remind Searle that "concepts" are nothing if not rigorously defined and that logical reasoning has no place for fuzzy or indistinct pseudo-concepts.

Papastephanou: *And yet, there is surely some truth in the idea that Derrida is out to "deconstruct" the various binary oppositions—speech/writing, nature/culture, concept/metaphor, logic/rhetoric, and so forth—that have structured the discourse of "logocentric" reason throughout the history of Western post-Hellenic thought? How does this square with your claim (as I take it) that he is actually doing no such thing but abiding by the strictest standards of classical (two-valued) logic?*

Norris: There are several points that I should wish to make in this connection. One is that Derrida—contrary to widespread report—is a great respecter of logical argument whose revisionist proposals (e.g., with regard to the "logic of supplementarity" in various texts of Rousseau, or of the pharmakon in Plato, or of "parergonality" in Kant's aesthetic theory) are arrived at always through a rigorous process of reasoning on the textual evidence. That is to say, those proposals result (like Gödel's undecidability theorem) from a willingness to apply the principles of classical logic right up to the point where they encounter some obstacle to

thought—some moment of aporia—which marks the limit of any such approach. Just recently, some "analytical" philosophers—those with an interest in various forms of nonstandard, deviant, or paraconsistent logic—have recognized this feature of Derrida's work and given it the kind of attentive reading which Searle and others had conspicuously failed to provide. It is a feature most evident in Derrida's early work on Husserl, where he addresses a range of issues—about the nature of mathematical knowledge, the role of a priori intuitions, and the scope and limits of formalized proof procedures—which have also preoccupied philosophers in that "other," i.e., mainly Anglophone, analytic tradition. Indeed, I would go further and claim that Derrida's treatment of these issues *via* their exposition in Husserl (especially as regards the antimony of "structure" and "genesis") is among the most acute discussions to be found in the recent literature on philosophy of mathematics.

Papastephanou: *Could you explain what precisely the terms* genesis *and* structure *mean in the context of Husserl's and Derrida's work? They are clearly central to Derrida's thinking about the problematic relationship between phenomenology and structuralism, a theme that preoccupies many of his early texts. But you are also suggesting that this issue relates in some way to questions in philosophy of logic and mathematics, questions more typically raised by analytic philosophers who have little or no interest in such continental movements of thought.*

Norris: What the term *genesis* means in this context is that ongoing process of enquiry by which (say) geometers from Euclid down have discovered certain ways of proving theorems or establishing geometrical truths. So, it is a process that seemingly requires some reference to the kinds of thinking—the knowledge-constitutive methods and procedures—whereby those theorems were proved or those truths established. And yet (as Plato purported to demonstrate in his dialogue the *Meno*), truths of this sort compel us to conceive them as objective or verification transcendent, that is to say, as in some sense already "there" awaiting discovery,

and in no sense dependent on our happening to possess the methods or conceptual resources to find them out. What Derrida means by "structuralism"—as with his otherwise curious claim that "a certain structuralism has always been philosophy's most spontaneous gesture"—is precisely this realist conviction (in mathematics and the formal sciences) that the truth value of our statements, theorems, or hypotheses is fixed quite apart from our present-best knowledge by the way things stand with respect to an order of abstract but nonetheless objective truths.

Now, it is just Derrida's point about Husserl that he strove to *think through* the conflict of priorities between "genesis" and "structure" or how we could ever gain knowledge of such entities as numbers and sets or points, lines, and planes geometrically (abstractly) conceived. That he ultimately failed in this endeavor—that the two conceptions could not be reconciled—is, for Derrida, a strictly inevitable outcome of any such project, an *exemplary* failure which results from Husserl's rigorous attempt to explicate a structural phenomenology of the formal sciences. This phrase *structural phenomenology* may be seen as a contradiction in terms at the end of Derrida's close and meticulously argued deconstructive reading. It is the same aporia that is revealed, so to speak, from the opposite side when he shows how the project of Saussurean linguistics fails to account for those expressive or intentional aspects of language that elude any purely structural account. But, again, this should not be put down to some error, shortcoming, or lapse of theoretical rigor on the part of Saussure or his successors in the structuralist enterprise. Rather—like the problems that beset Husserl's enquiry into the origins of geometry—it emerges from the strictly unavoidable conflict between two (on their own terms) highly developed and internally consistent modes of thought. Hence, the paradox about mathematics: that any adequate account of mathematical knowledge has to explain what it means for us to grasp such truths, even though it must also (somehow) explain their existing in a realm of "absolute ideal objectivity" that might always transcend our best-available proof procedures or methods of verification.

Papastephanou: *Do philosophers in the "other" (analytic) tradition have anything to say on this topic? Or would they tend to regard it—as Searle regards Derrida's deconstructive reading of Austin—as just another instance of perverse and misguided "continental" problem mongering?*

Norris: Well, if they took that routine dismissive line, then they would have to say the same about a great deal of recent Anglo-American debate. Some thinkers, among them Hilary Putnam, have inclined to the despairing view that ultimately "nothing works" in philosophy of mathematics since we can have *either* humanly attainable knowledge *or* objective (recognition-transcendent) truth values but surely not both. Others again—like Michael Dummett—have opted to resolve this dilemma by espousing an antirealist conception whereby the range of truth-apt statements is taken to be strictly coextensive with those that we are able to prove or establish by the best means at our disposal. That is to say, any well-formed but unprovable statement (such as "Fermat's Last Theorem is true," uttered before Andrew Wiles produced his recent celebrated proof) must belong to Dummett's "disputed class" and hence lack an objective truth value, i.e., be counted neither-true-nor-false. This is not merely because we don't know which value to assign but because there *just is* no truth of the matter beyond our furthest powers of ascertainment. Mathematical realists reject this argument on the grounds that it collapses the distinction between knowledge and truth or that it adopts an epistemic (as opposed to an alethic or objectivist) conception which equates truth with the scope and limits of humanly attainable knowledge.

What emerges from Derrida's writings on Husserl—to end this rather lengthy excursion—is a sustained and intensely critical meditation on the way that such problems inevitably arise in our thinking about issues in the philosophy of logic, mathematics, and the formal sciences. Moreover (as I have said), Derrida follows Husserl—even though he brings out certain deep-laid tensions and aporias in Husserl's project—to the extent of asserting that any address to these issues must go by way of a phenomenological

reduction, that is say, a rigorously theorized account of the conditions of possibility for our coming to acquire a knowledge of the truths in questions. And this despite the fact that they may also turn out to be conditions of *im*possibility in the sense that such truths can never be subject to an adequately formalized proof procedure or to the kind of a priori, self-justifying warrant that some philosophers (like Kant and Husserl) have sought to maintain.

Here again, there is a close analogy with Gödel's incompleteness proof since, after all, Gödel arrived at this result through a process of argument that involved large amounts of classical logic, mathematics, and formal (axiomatic-deductive) reasoning. So, there is a problem as to how the proof can stand up, given its reliance on formal methods and procedures whose "completeness" (or provability) it calls into question. On the other hand, some commentators—Roger Penrose among them—have taken this as the single most important consequence to be drawn from Gödel's result, namely, that the mind is capable of grasping mathematical or logical truths beyond the utmost limits of computability or formal proof. In which case—they argue—the result has large implications for philosophy of mind and the question whether any program of artificial intelligence could ever simulate the human capacity to discover or comprehend such truths.

However, the main point of relevance here is that Gödel was a realist about mathematics, one who believed in the objective (i.e., the mind-independent) reality of numbers, sets, classes, etc. Indeed, he was a thoroughgoing Platonist in this regard, that is to say, a thinker who took it that mathematicians *discovered* (rather than devised or "constructed") those various mathematical entities through proof procedures that were likewise subject to objective or verification-transcendent standards of validity and truth. So, Gödel's philosophy of mathematics is squarely at odds with the antirealism of a thinker like Dummett who would restrict the range of truth-apt mathematical statements to those for which we possess some decisive proof or formal means of verification. And it also contrasts with Putnam's skeptical

verdict, as mentioned above, that quite simply "nothing works" in philosophy of mathematics since we can think *either* in terms of attainable knowledge *or* in terms of objective mathematical truth but cannot reconcile these claims since that would involve our having epistemic access to truths which by very definition exceed our powers of cognitive grasp.

However, it is clear from various statements of Gödel that he didn't espouse the kind of Platonism—the notion of quasi-perceptual contact with a realm of transcendent "forms" or "essences"—which the skeptic is then able to exploit as a knockdown argument against the mathematical realist. Indeed, such ripostes have been the stock-in-trade of epistemological skeptics from Hume to the present who standardly remark that if truth is conceived as transcending the scope of our present-best knowledge, then ex hypothesi, we could never be in a position to know anything whatever concerning it. Or again, everything could appear just as it does on the best evidence to hand, and yet, we could be wholly mistaken with regard to the reality "behind" or "beyond" phenomenal appearances.

What Gödel argues in the crucial case of mathematical knowledge is that the skeptic's argument trades on a false dilemma, one that latches on to the absurd idea of our making perceptual "contact" with abstract entities in order to discredit any form of mathematical realism. That is to say, it excludes the possibility that mathematical truths might be discovered or accessed through another kind of knowledge, one that has to do precisely with objects (such as numbers, sets, or classes) that transcend the conditions of perceptual or empirical verifiability. This is not the place for a detailed exposition of Gödel's views or of the arguments advanced in support of his position by recent defenders of realism with regard to mathematics, logic, and the formal sciences. My point is that Derrida's approach to these issues is likewise concerned with the scope and limits of formalization or with the way that certain texts (such as those of Plato, Rousseau, and Husserl) can be seen *at the limit* to complicate—or to problematize—any reading premised on a classical logic of bivalent truth and falsehood. But again, I would

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emphasize that he advances this revisionist claim only at the end—and as the necessary outcome—of a textual exegesis which argues its case according to the strictest criteria of logical rigor and accountability.

So, the comparison with Gödel is not just a matter of some vague analogy (like those typically exploited by postmodernist thinkers) between *undecidability* in the context of mathematics or the physical sciences and *undecidability* as a catch-all term which equates pretty much with *ambiguity*, *paradox*, or other such items of literary-critical parlance. On the contrary, it is one that can be shown to hold up through a close reading of Derrida's texts, that is, the kind of reading that few philosophers have yet seen fit to provide but which he himself accords to the texts of Plato, Rousseau, and Husserl. Moreover, it is a reading which doesn't so much reject "Platonism" as reject that particular version of Platonism that takes us to have quasi-perceptual contact with mathematical, logical, and other such abstract truths. This is what Derrida has chiefly in view when he broaches his critique of "logocentric" thought as involving a notion of truths vouchsafed to the receptive mind through a mode of direct, unmediated epistemic access. In other words, it is a critique of "intellectual intuition" or the claim—much debated by scholastic philosophers and firmly rejected by Kant—that human knowledge might somehow attain to the kind of transcendent insight that would bypass the need to bring sensuous intuitions under adequate concepts. Not that Derrida is concerned (like Kant) to place strict limits on the scope of knowledge in order to make room for faith. What he seeks to do, rather, is make room for knowledge—in mathematics, logic, and the formal sciences—by revealing the inherently aporetic character of certain unsustainable doctrines, among them (to repeat) the logocentric idea of our having immediate or a priori access to truths beyond reach of the discursive intellect.

Papastephanou: *So, Derrida has been totally misunderstood by opponents (like Habermas) who charge him with wanting to level the genre distinction between philosophy and literature, or science and poetry, or concept and metaphor…*

Norris: Yes, he has been coopted by both parties in the current round of "science wars," with admirers (wrongly) citing his authority to just that effect and detractors (wrongly) holding him up as a cautionary instance of postmodern antiscientism. Both views are utterly wide of the mark, as I would hope to have convinced you by now. In this respect, Derrida's thinking should be seen as continuous with those scientific developments—such as non-Euclidean geometry and the post-Newtonian (relativistic) conception of space and time—which have likewise entailed a decisive break with notions of intuitive self-evidence. Here again, I would cite his early readings of Husserl as a notable case in point, and one that philosophers in the "other" (analytic) tradition would surely have acknowledged were it not for their fixed preconceptions with regard to Derrida's "textualist" gamesmanship and supposed lack of argumentative rigor. At the same time—as I have said—he is more resistant than some thinkers in that tradition (Quine and Putnam among them) to the idea that we should always be willing to adjust or revise our logic in response to whatever anomalies might turn up in the course of empirical investigation. Thus, his thinking retains at least this much from Husserl: that any break with a priori concepts or guiding intuitions must come as the result of a rigorous and detailed textual analysis rather than provide a kind of coping strategy designed to ensure in advance that such problems simply cannot arise. This is why Derrida declares himself shocked at Searle's overquick resort to a "logic" of fuzzy or indistinct truth values. He would likewise would be shocked by Quine's overreadiness to entertain the notion of revising excluded middle, or by Dummett's proposal to suspend bivalence for unproven or unverifiable statements, or even by Putnam's long-term effort—replete with second thoughts and qualifications—to make sense of the idea that there is no such thing as a genuine (i.e., unrevisable) a priori statement.

Derrida's resistance to this way of thinking is a product of his early and in many ways formative engagement with the texts of Husserl and hence his acute awareness—one not shared by the proponents of wholesale logical revisionism—that giving up the ground rules of "classical" reason is very much an option of

last resort. At this point—space permitting—one would want to go back into the history of post-1920 developments in the broadly "analytic" tradition and explain just why a movement so committed to the priority of logical concerns should then have given rise (after Quine) to a countermovement which did so much to challenge or contest that priority. Where the emphasis would fall—I suggest—is on the well-known failure of logical positivism to justify its leading doctrine, that is to say, the verification principle according to which the only meaningful (non-"metaphysical") statements were (1) those that fell within the class of analytic, self-evident, and hence purely tautological "truths of definition" and (2) those whose warrant was a matter of empirical, e.g., scientific investigation. That this doctrine proved incapable of any formulation that satisfied either of its own criteria—being itself neither analytic nor empirically verifiable—was of course an objection quickly brought against it and one that old-guard defenders like Ayer spent much time and effort in striving to refute. But there is also the point, as mentioned above, that this whole chapter of developments proceeded in virtual isolation from the kinds of epistemological enquiry (like those conducted by Husserl) that offered a more detailed, nuanced, and critical account of the genesis of judgments and truth claims in various fields of knowledge. Thus, the logical-positivist approach—like its logical-empiricist successor—found absolutely no room for sustained reflection on the way that such judgments are arrived at through a process of thought which cannot break entirely with modes of intuitive self-evidence yet which also allows for their refinement or (at the limit) their supersession when confronted with problems beyond their power to resolve.

This is where Derrida's intense albeit highly critical engagement with the texts of Husserl can be seen as relating very closely to his interest in the "applied rationalism" of thinkers like Bachelard and Canguilhem. It is also—as I have said—what chiefly distinguishes modern "continental" work in epistemology and philosophy of science from most recent work in the Anglophone analytic tradition. One could trace the split back to that moment in the 1940s when thinkers like Gilbert Ryle

who had previously shown an informed interest in Husserlian phenomenology decided that Frege had been right after all and that really it was just a form of thinly disguised psychologism. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness (on the analytic side) that this verdict was misinformed and that Husserl's phenomenological researches—in particular his distinction between formal and transcendental logic—simply don't answer to any such charge. Michael Dummett has been among the first to essay this large-scale revision of the received analytic view, even though (predictably) his "rehabilitation" of Husserl turns out to have sharp limits when it comes to the main points at issue. What he won't acknowledge is any idea that the course of post-Fregean analytic debate might have taken a wrong turn—and hence run into a number of philosophical dead ends—through its failure to recognize certain of Husserl's most crucial and productive insights.

Papastephanou: *So, you think that things are changing, that the reception history of Derrida's work (along with Husserl's) might be "on the mend," so to speak…?*

Norris: Really, it is a matter of progressively dismantling various obstacles to informed and open-minded debate, obstacles that have mostly been kept in place by fixed preconceptions of just that kind. I think that once the process has gone a bit further—beyond its present, rather cautious and grudging stage—then we shall witness a quite dramatic reassessment of Derrida's work among philosophers in the "other" tradition. That is, they will recognize his claim to represent a different, no doubt (to them) somewhat alien but nonetheless properly *analytic* way of doing philosophy, in a sense of "analytic" that signifies the virtues of rigor, precision, and acuity of philosophic grasp, rather than its usual professionally narrowed or merely proprietory sense. In other words, we shall at last have moved beyond the stage of reflex hostility on the basis of minimal acquaintance with his texts that has so far characterized most "responses" to Derrida among philosophers in the Anglo-American mainstream.

So, yes, I think that the signs are encouraging, at least if judged by the relatively small but steadily increasing number of intelligent, well-qualified studies that are now finding their way into various "analytically" respectable journals. Indeed, it is ironic—though another encouraging sign—that philosophers seem to be taking Derrida's work more seriously at just the time when it appears to be losing its radical *cachet* among the fashion-prone cohorts of cultural and literary theory. This is all to the good, I think, since its reception history was so badly skewed (and philosophers so readily put off) by the ideas advanced in Derrida's name among "strong" textualists, cultural relativists, or promoters of the Rortian—most definitely *not* the Derridean—line that philosophy is just another "kind of writing." No doubt such ideas are still current in some quarters, but they cannot stand up to scrutiny on even the most minimal acquaintance with Derrida's work. One thing he has held out for very firmly is the need to know what you're talking about and to base that knowledge on a firsthand acquaintance with the relevant texts, even if the upshot of a deconstructive reading is to find that they don't make sense in quite the way (the orthodox, canonically approved way) that you first expected. This seems to me a salutary lesson and one which should surely have a central role in any educational philosophy that merits the name.

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Derrida and Indian Thought: Prospects for an East/West Dialogue?

Conversation With Alison Scott-Baumann

Alison Scott-Baumann: *Chris, today we are taking up this challenge of comparing and contrasting Derrida's philosophy with Indian philosophy. Indian philosophy falls broadly into two areas: the Brahmanical tradition that has a definite core to it, something permanent, strong, robust, and timeless, to be found in the Upanishads; if you like, the "substance" view. The other is the Buddhist tradition, very different from the Brahmanical tradition; all is in flux; all is an illusion. This is termed the modal view. I don't know if any of that resonates for you with Derrida.*

Christopher Norris: Well yes, I suppose, in the sense that from his earliest work, from the essays he was writing in the early-to-mid sixties, he has been concerned with questions that go right back to the ancient Greeks, metaphysical ideas about substance, reality, appearance, and (in this respect following Heidegger, though "following" at a distance of finely judged critical reserve) the primordial "question of Being." So, in a sense, he has been engaged with the ancient issue between, say, Parmenides, who

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held that that everything is one, that change and multiplicity are just illusory surface appearances concealing or distorting that ultimate reality of things, and, on the other, the idea of Heraclitus that everything is in a constant, perpetual state of flux, that you never step into the same river twice. The Parmenidean idea gave rise to some famous paradoxes about time, change, and motion, and to an extent, you could say that a lot of Derrida's work, early and late, has been an attempt to work through but also to sharpen some of those paradoxes. Of course, they have also resurfaced elsewhere in modern philosophy—for instance, in the problems that Russell brought to light with regard to the axioms of classical set theory or in Gödel's undecidability theorem—and you will find some incisive commentary on that in Derrida's great early texts on Husserl and the aporias of mathematical thought.

So, although I am rather doubtful, indeed (to be honest) highly skeptical about various recent attempts to affiliate Derrida's thought with some of these main currents in Indian philosophy, I do think there's a case to be made that all the great philosophical traditions in the world must in a sense concern themselves with certain very basic conceptual problems, such as the relationship between the one and the many, the relationship between substance and attribute, essence and accident, reality and appearance, which perhaps connect with your distinction between those two main traditions of Indian thought. These are problems which I think present themselves to any kind of philosophical reflection beyond a certain stage of conceptual advance, so they crop up very early in the history of Western philosophy, and in a sense, they are still what philosophy is concerned with, at least those branches of philosophy—Derridean deconstruction included—which continue to engage in a critical dialogue with their past. In fact, I would say that deconstruction, in so far as you can speak of it in general terms, is a particular, highly advanced and very close-focused, text-specific way of engaging with those same issues.

If you look at the early formative influences on Derrida's thought, especially the influence of Heidegger, but also that of Husserl, not to mention Kant, Descartes, Aristotle, and Plato, you can see that he was led to engage with these issues through

a philosophical tradition that stretches back to the very origins of classical philosophic thought. To that extent, it is possible to draw comparisons, and I am sure that you could do—as indeed some scholars have already done—some very detailed studies of deconstruction in relation to Jewish thought, to Christian thought, to Islamic thought, and (as you are suggesting) to various ancient or more recent main currents in Indian thought. Still, it seems to me that the comparisons work at a pretty high level of generality and mostly concern certain basic binary distinctions like those I mentioned: substance and attribute, reality and appearance, permanence and change, etc., which are sure to crop up in just about any mode of philosophical reflection quite early on.

Scott-Baumann: *I suppose at some point we should grasp the nettle and discuss whether we can say anything about why Derrida and, for example, a second-century Buddhist thinker like Nagarjuna have both engaged in an attempt to deconstruct those dualisms and whether the energy they thereby generate can lead us to significant advances or whether that energy achieved by pitting such terms against each other is simply a pretext for yet further displays of deconstructive ingenuity. I would like to think that this could lead on to a discussion of whether Derrida's work has important ethical, social, and political implications, for instance with regard to the drastic, often violent, sometimes murderous binaries which structure the way that so many people live out their relation to various perceived "others." I suppose that in this connection, one would look first to Derrida's writings explicitly on the topic of racism, on the conflict between peoples who define themselves by who or what they are not, which raises the question whether deconstructive thinking can perhaps do something to point a way beyond this appalling "logic" of self versus other as a governing mode of cultural and ethnic perception.*

Obviously, that would be a huge undertaking, and I guess that before we get there, we would have to look at whether these dualisms are artificially created just in order to be knocked down or whether they really are fundamental to the way we are, to the way we think of ourselves and others. Certainly, Nagarjuna

argues that the dualism that has attracted so much philosophical debate over the centuries is intrinsic, not artificially created; it is inherent to the way we think, inherent to language itself. Thus, he tries to use language in order to deconstruct its categories from within and show that each concept is dependent on the other, on its opposite, at least when conceived in binary or exclusive (either/or) logical terms. If they are viewed, on the contrary, as mutually defined or reciprocally dependent pairs, then any attempt to grant self-sufficient meaning or absolute priority to just one term is surely bound to fail. Still, this relational *approach doesn't work out as any kind of cultural or linguistic relativism, any idea that it is all just a matter of how we interpret such things. Indeed, this relativistic tendency is much abhorred by Buddhist thought, which would argue that such relativism is not compatible with the attempt to configure the idea of nonduality. The dualism has to be deconstructed, not merely dismissed or subject to some kind of rhetorical vanishing trick.*

Norris: Well, yes, again, whenever you look at these things, you find suggestive parallels, analogies, convergences, or sometimes (one suspects) just chance resemblances. For instance, let's take as a starting point what Kant has to say about the inbuilt tendency of the mind, of what he calls pure speculative reason, to produce all sorts of insoluble antinomies, of paradoxical or aporetic thoughts that can't be reconciled with the basic principles of logic, such as noncontradiction of excluded middle. Thus, whenever we reflect on metaphysical topics like the immortality of the soul, or the nature and attributes of God, or cosmological topics (is the universe finite or unbounded?) or temporal questions (did time have a beginning, and in that case, what came before the beginning of time?), then you always get two equally cogent but mutually inconsistent or downright contradictory answers that leave us completely at a loss what to think. Kant has an answer to this, a kind of answer, although many people (myself included) feel it is not entirely satisfactory. He lays it down as a stipulative thing that pure reason has to recognize certain liabilities in its own nature, namely, those imposed by its going beyond the limits

of conceptual understanding. When we understand something in the proper (Kantian) sense, we do so by applying concepts to sensuous intuitions or again—as he puts it—by bringing intuitions under concepts so as to achieve a cognitive or epistemic match/correspondence between them. Pure reason is perfectly at liberty to speculate and, moreover, is compelled to do so by a kind of inbuilt metaphysical tendency of thought that constantly seeks to transcend the bounds of "mere" conceptual understanding. Indeed, such thought has to do with issues of the utmost human concern, such as the immortality of the soul and the central questions of ethics, metaphysics, and even natural science. All the same, we go wrong—run into various kinds of antinomy or dead-end paradox—if we suppose such questions to leave room for any kind of answer or adequate solution on conceptual terms. Hence, the title of his first critique, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where Kant tries to set limits to this speculative tendency whilst conceding that it cannot be prevented, that the human mind has an inbuilt speculative urge which inevitably leads it to generate these sorts of puzzling but metaphysically revealing dilemma.

Now, there do seem to be parallels here—or at least a certain suggestive affinity—with that particular current of Indian thought (Nagarjuna's Buddhist philosophy) which you described a few minutes ago. According to Kant, the best we can hope for in relation to these problems and perplexities is to get a firm grasp on the essential difference between speculative reason, which has this intrinsic paradox-creating character, and cognitive understanding, which is always a matter of bringing sensuous (or phenomenal) intuitions under adequate concepts. In a way, this is quite typical of what many Western philosophers, Derrida included, have tried to do. Thus, you find Wittgenstein, for instance, saying in his later work that the proper business of philosophy is to put itself out of business, to give philosophy peace, or to coax us down from all that needless fretting about the "problem of knowledge," "other minds," how to answer the skeptic, and so forth. So, if only we recognized what Wittgenstein has to show us, which is basically that it is language—or the philosophers' chronic "bewitchment" by language—which leads

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us into all these perplexities, then we could just let them go with a sigh of relief and achieve, I suppose, a kind of Buddhist deliverance, a wise and philosophically untroubled acceptance of the way things are. And yet, of course, Wittgenstein, like Derrida, was a thinker who compulsively worried away at those same old problems and dilemmas. He wrote an enormous amount, not (of course) for the sake of academic advancement or even with a view to eventual publication but out of a deep and well-nigh obsessive concern with problems that he nonetheless urged us to regard as mere pseudo-problems. These latter were artificially induced by the philosophers' habit of removing language from its natural, everyday context and giving it some different, specialized and troublesome range of alternative meanings. Still, this doesn't make the problems go away for all Wittgenstein's sage counsel, either in his own case (where they keep cropping up with undiminished force and power to disturb) or in the case of his legion disciples and commentators, where they have sustained a veritable academic industry devoted to (what else?) the same old issues of knowledge, skepticism, other minds, and so forth.

Thus, it may well be, to go back to the point you were making, that there is a certain innate, perhaps even "hardwired" tendency of the human mind to think in terms of binary opposites, of one thing as opposed to or distinct from another, including all the famous Derridean pairs: speech/writing, presence/absence, nature/culture, reason/rhetoric, concept/metaphor, male/female, the intelligible *versus* the sensible. Perhaps they constitute a strictly inescapable aspect of human thinking, even—as a cognitive psychologist might say—something that results from the very physiology and structure of the brain, since the neuron is either firing or not firing…No doubt it is vastly more complex than that if you wire millions of neurons together and allow for massive parallel processing, but maybe there is something intrinsic, in a sort of Kantian sense, about the nature of human thinking that pushes us towards this constant binary urge to classify and differentiate and define one thing as opposed to another. On the other hand, as you say, this can take many forms, sometimes benign or ethically neutral, but sometimes vicious and dangerous

forms, as in those currently resurgent strains of ethnocentric, racist, or deep-grained sexist prejudice. So, it is a mode of thought that, understandably, certain philosophical traditions, including the Buddhist tradition, have seen as something we should try to overcome, something that requires therapy, something we need to wean ourselves off by whatever available means. Whether this can be achieved I really don't know, but it is very noticeable that in the case of a thinker like Derrida, the effort to achieve it goes along with a curious (though maybe, as I have said, an inevitable) attachment to just those binary distinctions which he expressly sets out to deconstruct.

To be sure, Derrida is in some sense "attacking" those distinctions, bringing out their problematic nature, showing that they are so complex, unstable, or intrinsically self-subverting that they cannot be held in place except through a kind of unwitting blindness to whatever challenges their authority. Nevertheless, his own thinking is deeply vested in certain binary distinctions, as is all philosophical thinking and, indeed, all thinking tout court. He can't frame his arguments without setting up certain oppositions, which he then of course proceeds to complicate and disrupt, but without (as he would be the first to admit) coming out altogether on the far side of such binary pairs. Even if he shows (as in those classic early readings of Plato, Rousseau, Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, etc.) that one term is implicated in the other, that the apparently primary term turns out in fact to be dependent on the other, i.e., "secondary," "derivative," or "supplementary" term since the latter is its type-constitutive opposite or—in Kantian parlance—its very condition of possibility. So, this is a pretty standard definition of what deconstruction is or does, but it still bears all the hallmarks of its structuralist origins in the sense that it is inescapably based on a series of binary oppositions. Thus, it may be the case, and probably Derrida would concede this now, that once we stop thinking in binary terms, we just stop thinking altogether. Possibly we enter some kind of seventh heaven of enlightenment, but it would be a heaven beyond language, beyond articulation, certainly beyond the kind of highly articulate,

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intensely *philosophical* discourse that typifies Derrida's work. In fact, it would be a purely private, inexpressible state of grace, so you can't afford to have too many people entering it; otherwise, everything would come to a stop, or certainly philosophy would.

Scott-Baumann: *But I think that is precisely what Nagarjuna would recommend as a solution to the ills of the world, that if we were able to, if we worked harder at attempting to achieve a state of calm and nonduality, we would be better off even if our state was imperfect and prone to accident, because, you know, the meditative Buddhist would argue that it is only occasionally and by accident that he can actually come anywhere near a state of enlightenment. So, it is precisely by striving towards it that he makes himself more accident prone, more liable to be able to have an accidental, aletheic revelation. I think that would be Nagarjuna's ultimate aim, and I guess it would not be Derrida's, and yet, I think there is something in common between them, something that makes this a worthwhile dialogue…I am not sure about Derrida, but Nagarjuna is famous for his advocacy of the middle path, the middle way by which he attempts not to find a mean between existence and nonexistence but to slip between and then away from these binary categories. This might just allow us to look at Derrida in a slightly different way, because although he cannot escape from them, still at the end of all his arguments, in the very process of thinking them through, he may be opening up possibilities that would allow us to free ourselves from these binary oppositions, to free ourselves from certain sterile, metaphysical debates. We may end up still stuffed full of words, but in that process, perhaps there could be something closer to a calmness of detached and contemplative, nonbinary or at least (I'd want to say) nonviolent or nonaggressive thought. There I go again with a binary distinction, but I hope you see what I mean: a calmness which enables one to look at oneself as an integral part of the universe, so that one experiences no further conflict, no further friction between myself and others, because it is my conviction that nonduality is better than duality.*

Norris: Yes. Well, I think that ethically, in terms of real-world situations, especially present-day political situations, and also in interpersonal terms, so in all sorts of ways, that would be a very good thing in so far as you could reach it or at any rate aspire to it. But what still worries me so far as our present topic is concerned is that I can't see Derrida moving in that direction. No doubt this goes all the way back to his early engagement with structuralism, but I am thinking more specifically of one passage in Derrida where he is responding to John Searle on the topic of his famous, in some circles notorious, exchange with Searle about Austin's speech act philosophy. A quick rundown might be useful here since I think it provides a different way into some of the things we've been discussing. Derrida basically problematizes some of Austin's philosophical premises, showing that Austin's binary distinctions were often rather leaky or not logically watertight. Thus, according to Derrida, Austin hadn't distinguished clearly between felicitous and infelicitous speech acts; he hadn't clearly defined the notion of an "appropriate" as distinct from an "inappropriate" context for this or that kind of speech act, and he hadn't specified the sincerity conditions—or conditions for good-faith performative utterance—with anything like the required degree of conceptual precision. There were borderline cases, problematical instances, contexts (a potentially infinite range of them) that might always defy the best efforts of speech-act theory or classification…So, Derrida had offered a critical yet nonetheless admiring or appreciative commentary on Austin, in the process of which—as it happens—Austin comes out as an extremely interesting, complex, subtle, and indeed (one might say) proto-deconstructive thinker.

However, John Searle, an analytic philosopher and speech-act theorist with no taste for such subtleties, came along and accused Derrida of muddying the waters by demanding a kind and degree of conceptual precision in Austin that Austin did not seek to provide. Austin was, after all, a noted practitioner of "ordinary language" philosophy and was therefore not in the business of creating conceptual problems and dilemmas such as those that Derrida discovers or, as Searle would have it,

perversely and absurdly invents. Rather, he (Austin) was talking about the way we actually use language to express ourselves, communicate, make promises, utter threats or blandishments, get married, enter into binding legal commitments or contractual obligations, and so forth. In such cases, there is always a certain amount of contextual imprecision or unpredictability and you don't have clear-cut, conceptually precise, strictly exceptionless logical distinctions. Then, Derrida came back and responded to Searle by saying, rather mischievously, that it was really quite disgraceful on Searle's part to claim that you could do philosophy without making your distinctions sharp and precise. We are not dealing here (he admonishes Searle) with flavors of ice cream or toothpaste; we are dealing with philosophical concepts, and a concept is clear and precise or it is nothing at all. Any fuzziness as regards the classical (binary) values of truth/falsehood—or their various speech-act correlates—means that we are no longer dealing with concepts but with something much more vague and ill defined, such as "ideas" or maybe "notions."

Now, Derrida is really pushing the boat out here because there do exist a whole variety of nonclassical logics (many-valued, deviant, paraconsistent, even Derrida's "own" logics of supplementarity or parergonality) which would at least raise certain questions about this claim. So, really he was turning the tables on Searle, in, as I said, a rather mischievous way, because Searle claimed to speak very much for the values of mainstream analytic philosophy, and these were identified so closely with the norms of conceptual rigor and precision. Derrida was basically saying, look, I am more "analytic" than you, not at all the kind of maverick, careless, willful misreader of Austin's text that you (Searle) are so keen to denounce. There was that side to it, but I think Derrida was quite serious when he also said, look, if you are going to philosophize and especially if you are going to analyze, perhaps in a deconstructive way, certain assumptions and premises of speech-act philosophy, then you have to have clear concepts, and you have to strive for as much clarity as possible. So, this is not just Derrida upping the ante, although I think that is one of his motives in the reply to Searle. What he does, here

and elsewhere, is argue in a very careful, cogent, logically precise, rigorously conceptual way, to the point where you encounter certain limits of classical logic, points at which that logic can be seen to break and pass over into something different. This is connected with what he calls "iterability" in the context of Austin and speech-act philosophy, a feature of performative language that creates real problems for the sorts of categorical distinction which Searle takes pretty much for granted even though he is prepared, scandalously Derrida thinks, to fuzzy them up a bit as and when required. And his point *contra* Searle is that all this is all there to be read in Austin's text, in his book *How to Do Things With Words*, much more so than Searle perceives or is willing to admit, determined as he is to bring Austin out in agreement with his own (Searle's) understanding of speech-act theory.

I know you will be thinking "How can I get him back to the topic of Derrida and Indian philosophy?" but I do have a point to make, and it has to with this highly distinctive way of raising logical issues through modes of deconstructive close reading. To be sure, the logics that emerge in his texts on Plato, Rousseau, Saussure, and others are nonstandard, deviant, perhaps paraconsistent logics, but they are logics nevertheless—often of a highly complex modal or tense-specific type—and they are arrived by dint of rigorous argumentation. This is what I like so much about early Derrida, the way that he strives for maximum logical precision and even for a reading consistent with the norms of classical (two-valued, i.e., true-or-false) logic, but is constantly forced to acknowledge its limits in the face of certain recalcitrant or anomalous features of the text in hand. This takes us back to what we were saying earlier about the ancient Greek philosophers, about the kinds of anxiety they suffered on account of the fact that certain kinds of perfectly logical thinking seemed to get you into various aporias or forms of paradoxical dead end. That is why they worried so much about Zeno's paradoxes or why they found it so hard to acknowledge the existence of irrational numbers. For us, "irrational" in this context doesn't mean absurd or antirational; an irrational number simply means that it does not work out as a fraction expressible as one integer divided by

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another. But for them, this was something very worrying; these numbers couldn't be worked into a consistent "logical" system or at least any system computable in terms of their own mathematical understanding. Now, Derrida knows a good deal about modern philosophy of mathematics and logic, as you will know from his early texts on Husserl and his far from casual or opportunist citing of the paradoxes of classical set theory or Gödel's incompleteness theorem. So, he is not going to be fazed by the notion of irrational numbers! But, he does have a keen and vigilant sense of the need to strive for logical rigor and consistency even—or especially—when his own responsiveness to the complications of the text in hand leads him to question the scope and limits of classical logic.

This is why I am not altogether happy with the notion of a deep affinity between Derrida's work and that particular strain of Eastern philosophical thought that counsels a wise abstention from any such futile and self-defeating quest. Of course, there is another side to his work—an aspect more in keeping with that idea—which is apt to strike readers who approach him mainly through his post-1990 writings on topics such as religion, hospitality, friendship, justice, and an ethics of absolute "alterity" or otherness with its source in Levinas's thinking. Not that there is something "Eastern" about this in a vaguely well-meaning, ecumenical way, but there are passages—and indeed entire texts—where Derrida does seem to gesture beyond the inherited concepts and categories of Western philosophical thought. I suppose this comes out most strikingly in his more ethically oriented writing about the need to rethink the possibilities of justice, democracy, and a certain "cosmopolitical" ideal in a way unprovided for by any of our standard conceptual resources. Still, I think that Derrida is too much a thinker who works from within that particular tradition—albeit from a highly dissident, critical and self-consciously marginal standpoint—to let go the values that provide the very basis for his various acts of resistance. One thing you can definitely say about Derrida, whatever else you may think about him, is that he is a quite extraordinarily gifted close reader of texts and one who inhabits those texts with a depth and acuity of insight that is unrivalled by any of his current

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detractors, whether on scholarly or philosophic grounds. He has a vast philosophical literature at his fingertips, and I think it would be simply impossible for someone like that to achieve some kind of intellectual nirvana, some deliverance from all our inherited philosophic problems and dilemmas, unless (maybe) they had gone through some kind of drastic conversion experience.

Wittgenstein was always suggesting that he had managed it, come out on the far side of all those problems, but he still kept on worrying about them and actually spawned a whole vast secondary literature where they keep cropping up. As somebody once said about Richard Rorty, you don't truly rid yourself of obsessions like that by just cultivating a nonobsessive tone. Besides, Derrida has made the point again and again: that thinkers who claim to "turn the page" on philosophy or leap to some postphilosophical "beyond" (beyond metaphysics, beyond modernity, beyond "Western logocentrism," or whatever) are usually just philosophizing badly. I don't think this rules out the kind of cross-cultural comparison you're keen to make, but it does mean the argument needs working through in a detailed and meticulous way.

Scott-Baumann: *Well, yes, I agree with that, but I still think the dualisms are not so tenacious or philosophically deep-rooted as to make the encounter between deconstruction and certain forms of Indian thought such a hugely problematic and fraught affair. I guess that is why people find this juxtaposition between Derrida and Nagarjuna attractive because some would argue, like David Loy for example, that a Buddhist thinker like Nagarjuna takes deconstruction even further than Derrida does by deconstructing not only ideas and arguments but also the very sense of personal identity which (he would argue) Derrida leaves intact, perhaps so as to continue being, as you say, an extremely prolific writer and philosopher. I am not at all sure whether it is possible at this point even to challenge this dualistic way of thinking which is fundamental to both Derrida and Buddhist thinking, but when I am faced with racist preconceptions, racist situations, racist behavior, I find myself deploying certain modes of thought—certain conceptual strategies,*

if you like—that can perhaps more readily be found in a thinker like Paul Ricoeur, one who has devoted a lifetime of effort to finding some way beyond the various conflicts of present-day thought and culture. When I am working with my colleagues from within the British Muslim community, I have to consciously resist the dualist habits of mind and response patterns which come to me almost automatically, almost as "second nature." In order to empathize with their condition, I have to suspend my disbelief; I have to accept certain constructs which are alien to me in my sense of identity as a "liberated" Western woman, and the price that I pay is something possibly akin to sunyata*, which is nothingness, because I find that in order to achieve understanding of people who seem to be very different from me, I have to empty my value sets of a lot of their baggage, but what I then end up with is a more universalizable, more generalizable range of thoughts which allow me to encompass some, no doubt limited and limiting, comprehension of their way of life. This does give me a less parochial, more open-minded and tolerant way of thinking about myself as well as about them, but it is often extremely uncomfortable, and I am not sure whether Derrida can help me very much with that. Nagarjuna would offer support, but the price I would then have to pay is that I would have to meditate regularly, I would have to become "other-worldly" as you intimated earlier on, not just a pacifist, but I would have to renounce the opportunity to debate vociferously about ideas, renounce the logophilic culture in which Derrida and the rest of us are steeped. Maybe I would then become so passive, so introverted, so "navel-gazing" as you rather unkindly put it, that I wouldn't be able to think or act to any worthwhile effect.*

Norris: Well, I suppose it's a version of the old objection to the monastic ideal, isn't it, that if you really take those ideas to the limit, you don't actually do anything. You become a totally self-absorbed person concerned with perfecting their own inner life or spiritual self, and that means neglecting all sorts of other social and political (as well as intellectual) responsibilities. In this sense, all the big issues about deconstruction and its relation to various religious traditions connect with issues in philosophy of ethics.

What is so odd about these debates is they often flip over from one extreme to the other, from self-absorption to an outlook (or a proclaimed outlook) of total selflessness in the face of the "other," the other who, as Levinas would say, confronts us with the absolute ethical imperative to relinquish our very selfhood in response to her or his implacable demand. Take the question of altruism: does altruism necessarily require that you empty yourself in that sense? Do you (should you) become so completely receptive to other people's needs, so utterly self-effacing or devoid of "egological" interests and concerns that you would no longer really exist as a willing, thinking, experiencing subject? I don't think there is anything cynical about the idea that ethical reflection and behavior can include a fair amount of enlightened self-interest. People actually get a good deal of pleasure not simply out of thinking well of themselves but through actually identifying with other people and deriving satisfaction from the knowledge that they have brought about a situation in which other people can achieve various kinds of happiness, fulfillment, etc. So, altruism can include a fair amount of not egotism but (as I say) a kind of enlightened self-interest without becoming something other than altruism.

I think this does connect directly with some of the debates around the ethics of deconstruction. There's an early essay of Derrida which I am very keen on, more so than some of his more recent ones, an essay called "Violence and Metaphysics," which is actually a very long, detailed, and in many ways highly critical discussion of Levinas. Levinas has been a great influence on Derrida, but in this early essay, he looks very closely at Levinas's notion that ethics, any ethics worthy of the name, any genuine ethics, must be founded upon an unqualified respect for the absolute alterity of the other. This would perhaps be a kind of equivalent to what you were saying just now, the idea that we should totally empty ourselves of what Levinas calls "egological" concerns, that is to say, whatever has primary reference to the thoughts, values, beliefs, desires, and priorities of the first-person subject. This is why, for Levinas, ethics is "first philosophy," rather than the theory of knowledge (or epistemology), as supposed by

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just about every mainstream Western philosopher from Plato to Descartes, Kant, Husserl, and beyond. So, we are to wean ourselves off all those dominant notions of the self, the ego, the Cartesian *cogito*, the Kantian transcendental subject, or however it has been described, and take Levinas's point that Western philosophy, almost from the outset, got off on the wrong foot because it placed the first-person knowing subject at the heart of its concern. Thus, the big questions were issues like "What can I know? How can I know it? What precisely are the scope and limits of my knowledge? How can we defeat the epistemological skeptic?" Levinas says that this is getting things back to front. Ethics is first philosophy and the only genuine, authentic ethics is one that involves a complete renunciation of that first-person epistemological perspective through which we come to accept the other person as being quite possibly, so far as we can know, so utterly different from us that none of our interests, values, or priorities may be thought of as applying to them. So, it involves this emptying out of the self which you might perhaps analogize to certain strains of Indian thought.

Now, in his early essay "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida, as I have said, expresses various misgivings with regard to this whole line of argument and indeed offers what might fairly be described as a full-scale critique of Levinasian ethics. Basically, he says it is impossible to achieve because if we were to make this effort and actually succeed in thinking of the other person as unknowably different from us, then we wouldn't be thinking of them as a person at all. We must always to some extent, Derrida says, think of them as an *alter ego*, which of course means respecting their alterity—their otherness—but also means accepting that we couldn't begin to understand them, to sympathize with them, even to make due allowance for their differences from us unless, as fellow human beings, we shared a great deal in the way of basic needs, experiences, interests, perceptual modalities, conceptual (including linguistic) resources, etc. So, issues of knowledge (epistemology) do have a crucial bearing here and cannot be simply demoted—as Levinas would have it—to some merely derivative or secondary role. But it is also an ethical question. If

you like, to change the idiom somewhat, Derrida is saying that there *can* be such a thing as enlightened or other-regarding self-interest, just as we can treat others as sharing certain basic aspects of our own experience or lifeworld without thereby reducing them to mere creatures or projection of our own egos. So, ethics doesn't—cannot—involve a total emptying out of the self in response to the intransigent demand of the other conceived in terms of absolute alterity.

This is also a point that Derrida makes *via* his reading of Levinas on Husserl. To summarize rather brutally, Levinas claims that the project of Husserlian transcendental phenomenology is the last, no doubt the most advanced and refined but also perhaps the terminal stage in that same "egological" tradition of thought which presumes to derive the conditions of possibility for all thought and experience by reflecting on them from a first-person epistemological standpoint. This involves a very rigorous, intensely self-critical, and (at any rate so Husserl would claim) a universally valid since apodictically self-warranting exercise in transcendental reflection. Levinas wrote several early books on Husserl that adopted a broadly sympathetic approach, but he then reacted very sharply against Husserl's influence and said that, on the contrary, we have to pass beyond that stage and open ourselves to a thinking of otherness—of absolute alterity—which leaves phenomenology far behind, along with all its surplus epistemological baggage. Now, Derrida is very respectful of Levinas but not so respectful—at least in this early essay—as to take these arguments on board without criticism. If we did somehow manage to think of other people in the way that Levinas proposes, then they would become so remote, so utterly strange, so alien to all our most basic modes of shared knowledge, understanding, and experience that we would have no genuine sense of them as persons but as so many objects in our field of perceptual acquaintance. That is to say, we would be confronted with the problem of "other minds" but in a form more acute than ever comes across when analytic philosophers raise that question as a standard skeptical topic of debate.

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All the same, I should mention, that Derrida has shifted ground quite a bit in his later work with regard to Levinasian ethics. He is now much more receptive to Levinas's thinking, not without certain residual doubts but at least as regards that basic idea of the other as exerting an ethical challenge beyond anything remotely comprehensible within the horizons of Western post-Hellenic philosophical thought. Thus, he does venture some criticisms of Levinas—and likewise of Heidegger—for ignoring issues of sexual difference when raising these supposedly primordial concerns. Still, his subsequent writings on Levinas have taken a much more emollient line, and when he now addresses ethical themes, it is from a standpoint far more in tune with notions of radical alterity, of ethical decisions as involving an almost Kierkegaardian leap of faith, or as somehow arrived at without any recourse to grounds, reasons, justifications, guiding principles, and so forth…I have to say that, for me, Derrida's later writings very often seem to lack the critical edge, the philosophical cogency of his earlier work.

Scott-Baumann: *So, are you saying that, as Derrida becomes more explicitly ethical, he tends to relax his previous standards of argumentative rigor, logical precision, or whatever?*

Norris: Well, I think there is some truth in that, although others—including many who have written about the ethics and politics of deconstruction—would disagree sharply. They would say that those later writings mark the transition from a negative, critical mode of thought to something more affirmative, more deeply engaged with issues that were always there in his work but kept, so to speak, in reserve.

Scott-Baumann: *Still, you seem to think that he is in some sense lowering his critical guard, or even suspending his critical faculties, in order to not contaminate or complicate the ethical argument?*

Norris: I suppose you might say he's become more irenic in his later writing, less apt to criticize those (like Levinas) whose work has been important to him. Not that Derrida was ever very

polemical except when he felt himself attacked and traduced by those (like Searle) who hadn't taken the trouble to properly read or understand him. But I think that the case for drawing comparisons between deconstruction and various religious traditions becomes more convincing in his later work, partly because he is quite explicit about it. He talks about the Jewish theological tradition, about Christianity in various forms, about the interplay of Greek philosophical thought with the Judeo-Christian heritage…And of course, he has lately had quite a bit to say about those strains of broadly postmodern theological (or "post-theological") thinking that have carried on from the "death-of-God" debates of the 1960s and evolved, very often, in close relation to developments in critical and literary theory, deconstruction among them. Here again, Derrida has shifted ground and done so in a way that involves some relaxation—if not exactly a slackening—of critical engagement. In his early work, he is very insistent that deconstruction has nothing whatsoever to do with negative theology of the type that goes back to thinkers like Meister Eckhart and has most recently been picked up by "deconstructionist" theologians such as Thomas Altizer. Negative theology involves a process wherein you start by applying various predicates in the attempt to define or describe God, and then you discover that they can't be applied in that way, because God necessarily—by very definition—exceeds or transcends whatever range of predicates you have at your disposal. But of course, you started out with just this conclusion in mind, and so, it amounts to a roundabout way of defining what you mean by "God."

Early Derrida states very firmly that deconstruction is *not* doing that; it is not just a negative or inverted form of theological, metaphysical, or (in Heidegger's parlance) "onto-theological" discourse. But then, in his later work, he becomes much more receptive to that idea, I think partly because there is now a flourishing, mainly US-based school of deconstructive theology—including people like Mark C. Taylor—which claims to derive inspiration from Derrida. I suppose he appreciates the compliment, so he's much more, well, not exactly enthusiastic but at least tolerant and good-willed toward it. Again, there is a

kind of mellowing with age, I suppose, something that fortunately happens to most of us but which I think connects with lots of other issues as regards the passage from "early" to "late" Derrida. Still, he never lets up on the basic requirement that thinking should aspire to the highest, most rigorous, and (as he often says) the most *intellectually and ethically responsible* standards of philosophic discourse. I talked about Searle, the exchange between Derrida and Searle, but I think this goes back to the point you made at the very beginning, that in some sense human thinking is irreducibly binary and that we won't understand where differences can turn into conflicts, antagonisms, and hatreds unless we think these issues through with the utmost care and precision. This may have to do with brain structure, I think it probably does, but it also has to do with cultural structures, and of course, it has a lot to do with linguistic structures. If you believe Saussure, and in this sense at least he seems to be right, we do define things, pick them out, classify and describe them according to their perceived differences one from another or their various distinctive attributes.

Still, this is no reason to go along with post-structuralists, postmodernists, social constructivists, or "strong" sociologists of knowledge and end up by embracing a wholesale version of cultural-linguistic relativism. Indeed, you can draw just the opposite conclusion, i.e., that quite literally it *doesn't make sense* to claim that language is prior to thought or that the structure of some given natural language (e.g., ancient Greek) must determine what counts as a logical statement, argument, or thought form for speakers of that same language (e.g., the subject-predicate form as reflected in the grammar of ancient Greek and its various successor tongues). The "analytic" philosopher Donald Davidson has effectively demolished this sort of argument in his well-known essay "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," but it is also—as some may be surprised to hear—demolished to equally telling effect in Derrida's essay "The Supplement of Copula." Anyway, my point in all this is that you can't opt out of thinking logically—or suppose that there exist as many different logics as there exist different languages or conceptual schemes—without running into various kinds of absurdity or patent self-contradiction. In

the case of a statement like *p* or not-*p*, the two things are logically exclusive; they can't both be true, just as somebody who makes a statement to the effect *p* and not-*p* will be taken to be speaking in riddles, indulging a penchant for paradox, or just plain stupid or confused. To be sure, as I have said, there are various other logics—many-valued, paraconsistent, nondialethic, etc.—but the point Derrida is making against Searle is that at least for basic philosophical (and indeed for most everyday-practical) purposes, we need to operate with logical concepts which do involve sharp, well-defined binary distinctions. Thus, there is a logical form of reasoning called *modus ponens* which goes if *p*, then *q*, but *p*, therefore *q*. And there is another, modus tollens, which runs if *p*, then *q,* but not-*q*, therefore not-*p*. "Rules" of logic: this may sound restrictive, coercive, even (as some cultural critics might think) downright ethnocentric or imperialist, but even those critics won't get far in arguing their case unless they abide by the basic standards of logical thought. Moreover, those standards simply must apply across otherwise large differences of language and culture because they are built into the way we think and act—must think and act if we want things to come out right—in all sorts of everyday situations.

Scott-Baumann: *Yes, but at this point, I feel quite affectionate towards Nagarjuna because, perhaps, he pushes a little bit further to the point where we should realize that although what you have described is obviously true, it is fundamentally ridiculous and futile to run our lives on such drastic polarities. If we see ourselves as being part of the universe, then the polarities are something that we create in order, as you say, to get through the working day, get through our leisure time, get through our various relationships. That allows us to make certain predictions, so if we think in dualisms, then perhaps we can predict other people's behavior, we can predict their belief systems, we can define, post hoc, the way we do things, but that doesn't mean to say that it is a particularly realistic, desirable, or constructive way to think. I suppose Nagarjuna is extremely stubborn in insisting that we have to cast aside these dualities if we are to have any real sense of the self as*

a nonself. Then of course you get into those dualistic paradoxes again, but I guess that if Nagarjuna calls to his aid at this point all the meditational tools that have been developed, then he can make his case a bit more robust. That brings us back again to the point that it might render one unable to act upon one's insight about the holistic nature of being alive because one would then be in a deeply meditative state, which could be mistaken by an outsider as a merely vegetative state.

Norris: Well, you know, there's that puzzle about where all the little monks come from…But this puts me in mind of an essay on Gandhi by George Orwell where he says that saintliness is all very fine in its way, but you just can't afford to have too many Gandhis. Your average saint requires a large support mechanism of practical-minded, nonsaintly types, including a few who can think straight on everyday matters, and too many saints can make life very difficult for those around them. So, a certain number of saints is probably a good idea, for moral uplift and so on, but if a large section of society went that way, you wouldn't have much of a society.

Scott-Baumann: *According to Nagarjuna, you would have a peaceful state, a state of achieved nonconflict, and obviously that is beyond our comprehension. But let's go back to your comparison between my account of the efforts I've made to reduce racist feelings and Levinas's very strong but, as you see it, highly problematical notion of absolute alterity. In my own defense, I would want to say that I don't go anything like that far but rather that, simply in order to displace my own ego, I may exaggerate the primacy and the call on our moral, social, and political conscience of the rights of the other. Of course, it's a delicate balance, and I think that perhaps multiculturalism in this country has made the mistake of effacing the predominant, "white" set of cultural values and priorities so as to hand over some moral entitlement which can then, as an unintended side effect, entail that the existing white culture becomes confused and loses its own sense of identity.*

Norris: Then it becomes fragile, defensive, and embittered.

Scott-Baumann: *Yes, exactly, and at this point, I think I would want to draw on Ricoeur because he seems to me, in much of his writing, to be very much on guard against the kinds of culturally entrenched dualism which, as you say, can take some pretty vicious and destructive forms. Of course, he accepts that the basic thought forms exist, that they have existed as long as the human mind has functioned, but they are still products of a certain cultural mind-set which we tend to fall back on just because we haven't got a better one to work with. Still, Ricoeur doesn't see this way of thinking as particularly helpful, constructive, or humanly beneficial. That may not be so dissimilar from Derrida's views as you have described them here, but I think it comes across as a real difference of emphasis and ethical tone. Ricoeur's sense of self as being reflected in the other creates in one's mind a very interesting kind of zigzag, whereby I see my own values, interests, and beliefs given back, so to speak, in a different form but one that I can still get on terms with through an effort of sympathetic insight. I try to understand how they might see me, and in doing so, I gain a much better understanding of how I might see them despite and across all the differences between us. It is a complicated process all right, but one which could contribute towards intercultural understanding at a much higher level of genuine reciprocity than we are managing to achieve at the moment. Maybe we're really saying much the same thing, you from a basically Derridean standpoint and me from a standpoint more directly inspired by Ricoeur's kind of hermeneutic and phenomenological approach. Either way, it could surely help to deconstruct some of our more deep-rooted and insidious racial stereotypes.*

Norris: I agree with that, the idea that these much-touted disputes between various thinkers, schools, or movements are a lot less important than their points of contact. If you start off from that fairly ecumenical but not too fudgy position, then all sorts of possible working alliances come to mind. Take for instance

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some of the work done by linguistic philosophers, people like H. P. Grice, his idea of the kinds of mutual understanding that normally result through what calls the "co-operative maxims" of social or interpersonal discourse, or the implicit, taken-for-granted guidelines of conversational "implicature." A lot of our linguistic or communicative uptake depends on this sort of thing. That is, it involves an often highly complex but largely intuitive process, you know, the intention that when we say something—make a statement, utter a promise, express an opinion—then our interlocutor should understand us as intending to say it with a certain kind of force and intending that they should understand it just as we intended it and understand us to have had that second-order (or maybe third-order) intention and so forth. So, there might seem a danger of infinite regress, but of course, it has got to stop at some point since a vast amount of human social-linguistic interaction goes on in that way. We are predicting, second-guessing what people will make of our words; we are framing our utterances so as to elicit the right kinds of feedback loop, if you like. Presumably, this started out at the earliest stages of proto-linguistic communication when one cave dweller intended to warn his cave-dwelling neighbor that a wild animal had just entered his (the neighbor's) cave and also intended that this should be recognized as his intention, etc., etc. At least, it seems an intuitively plausible idea that language began like this and then built up its more elaborate structures on a basis of reciprocal communicative grasp through imputed meanings and intentions.

Scott-Baumann: *So, in a way, you are agreeing with Ricoeur that the main thing (and perhaps the first thing, logically or philosophically speaking) is to bridge linguistic and cultural differences, to achieve a background of shared understanding against which we can then work more effectively to grasp those differences and make due allowance for them. Rather than coming at it from the opposite end, starting out from the supposed fact of radical difference and then raising it into a full-scale theory of "incommensurable" language games, conceptual schemes, paradigms, or whatever.*

Norris: Well, yes, that's right, and it is the kind of argument you find in a philosopher like Donald Davidson, the idea that such scheme-relativist talk about different, "incommensurable" languages or paradigms just doesn't make sense *unless* you interpret it against such a background, in which case the talk is completely off-the-point. The same thing follows, at a rather more basic level, from Grice's theory of conversational implicature and his way of applying the co-operative maxim as a ground rule of dialogue and discourse generally. If you don't start out from this and the other Gricean maxims—especially the relevance maxim—then you won't get the hang of other people's meanings, and they won't get the hang of yours. Unless you are being ironic, or making a joke, or of course trying to deceive them, in which case the ground rules are suspended. But very often, you guess that they are suspended—you pick it up from various contextual cues and clues—so you will spot the joke, the irony, the metaphor, or maybe (if their strategy didn't work) the intent to deceive. You realize that they can't have meant what they said, as it is so wildly off the point or out of keeping.

Scott-Baumann: *Can you link this up with what we were saying earlier about Levinas, Derrida, and the ethics of radical alterity? I mean, in so far as those issues relate to Davidson's or Grice's take on the question of just how much must be presupposed, in the way of shared understanding, before we can talk intelligibly about differences of language, belief, or conceptual scheme? There does seem to be some connection…*

Norris: Yes, indeed: it is the point we discussed way back, about Derrida's rejecting the notion of radical alterity, since if we thought of other people as being *so very* different from us, then they would fall outside the sphere of ethical responsibility, as well as the realm of interpersonal relations and shared linguistic understanding. But I'd like to return to the main topic here, the topic of deconstruction and Indian thought, because in one sense, we've rather veered off it while, in another, it goes to the heart of these issues about language and communication. After

all, there are other philosophers in the Western tradition who would perhaps come to mind more readily if you were looking for cross-cultural links of this sort. Schopenhauer is the most obvious example, the thinker who really was influenced by his reading in Indian philosophy, although maybe he is a bit of an embarrassment here since the lessons he derived were so uniformly grim and repugnant to most modern tastes. Life was, on balance, more to be endured than enjoyed; what we took to be "reality" was merely a veil of illusion; the ultimate reality was Will, a blind, ceaseless, unconscious striving that drove us from one unsatisfied desire to the next, without respite except for occasional moments of detached (mainly aesthetic) contemplation. And of course, he had some pretty obnoxious views: deeply misogynist, politically ultraconservative, nothing you would want to promote as an advertisement for Buddhist or any other "Eastern" way of thought.

Still, Schopenhauer is a pretty way-out thinker by just about any standard. There are more interesting comparisons to be drawn with a present-day philosopher like Derek Parfit, who wrote a book called *Reasons and Persons*, which has made quite a splash in recent ethical debate. It is a speculative, highly adventurous book which uses a range of often far-fetched but intuitively powerful thought experiments with the aim of convincing us that we need to get away from first-person-centered—if you like, "egological"—ways of thinking about ethical issues. He says that we should take a much larger, wider, longer-term, impersonal, or transindividual view of things, since only by doing that can we break the hold of such thinking. In a way, he wants us to return to something more like Hume's skeptical position on the nature of personal identity, that is to say, a notion of the "self" as really just a loose-knit bundle of impressions, memories, desires, anticipations, and so forth, which don't add up to anything like the self (or the person) as usually conceived. Thus, for Parfit as for Hume, we had much better let go of this idea that there's a deep further fact about me that makes me what I am, whether the soul as in much religious teaching, or the mind as some sort of Cartesian theatre, or as what Kant calls the "transcendental unity

of apperception." For Kant, conversely, there has to be some kind of framework that contains all our memories and experiences, present perceptions and sensations, future anticipations and so forth, since otherwise we couldn't make sense of our lives. Certainly, morals would make no sense, Kant says, if we didn't have this underlying sense of personal continuity, of our being still responsible—as autonomous agents—for our own past actions, choices, or commitments and of our also having responsibilities in the present that carry over to subsequent stages in our lives when we ought to keep promises, honor marriage vows, atone for past misdeeds, etc. So, if you take Hume's view—that the unitary self is nothing more than a kind of consoling illusion—then, according to Kant, you are cutting away the very basis or foundation of morals.

Parfit thinks that Kant got it wrong, not only as concerns the metaphysics of personal identity but also with regard to what works out best as a matter of ethical theory and, more directly, of making good choices on a rational and well-considered basis. We are, most of us, capable, unless we are suffering some kind of psychopathological affliction, of thinking or projecting ourselves into other people's situations so as to take adequate account of their needs, priorities, wishes, and desires. We can think of future generations and their best interests, for instance, when weighing up the pros and cons of some policy decision on matters of environmental concern. We can go at least that far beyond the sorts of limiting perspective imposed by a narrow, first-person-centered, merely "egological" approach. After all, Parfit asks, what can be the difference between taking a sensible, long-term rather than short-term view of the best choice to make with regard to our own, "individual" future interests and taking a broad, socially inclusive rather than narrow and self-preoccupied view? In both cases, the wiser approach is one that so far as possible resists the tendency to base our ranking orders—our sense of what counts as important, desirable, morally compelling, etc.—on what merely happens to be closest to us in temporal or subjective terms. So, ranking other people's interests and concerns on a par with our own and the interests and concerns of future generations on a

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par with those of people now alive is really just a matter of logical consistency with the same basic principle.

Of course, it is hard, maybe even counterintuitive, given our acculturated habits of thought. Maybe we are all parochial in some degree, incapable of truly living up to Parfit's ideal by adopting a wholly impersonal viewpoint from which to evaluate the rights and wrongs of some present course of action. So, when weighing up our own priorities, we tend to have proportionally less concern about temporally distant events than about what is likely to happen tomorrow. On the other hand, we can develop this capacity for taking other people's needs and interests into account, just as (when it comes to environmental issues) we can reckon on the needs and interests of future generations and not just those of our children, or our grandchildren, or people with whom we feel some immediate bond of kinship or affinity. So, if it is a question of making decisions on matters of long-term environmental concern, then you would probably find a good measure of agreement, not perhaps among politicians, certainly not among US republicans, but at least among most ethical philosophers and morally or socially aware people that future generations must come into the reckoning. It's a complicated issue because it has to include consideration of presently nonexistent, that is to say, future-possible or potential persons who don't yet have any needs or interests. And it is even more complex because our present decisions may decide whether or not there might be any such future persons, more or less of them, along with the quality of their lives and the kinds of condition they will possibly or probably live in. Still, it is not so utterly remote or so completely beyond the scope of rational reflection as to leave us at a loss for anything to think or decide.

I hope this will chime with some of the things you are saying about Indian philosophy, the emptying of self, the transcendence of the ego, and so forth. Parfit wouldn't want to get there by means of a contemplative, a religious, or (least of all) a mystical route. He would say that we can best, most reliably get there by rationally thinking through the options and seeing that we are often misled—betrayed into making morally wrong, even socially

calamitous decisions—by the false belief that there is some deep further fact about the self which makes these issues crucially a matter of autonomous, individual choice. He argues that it is rational to give up that way of thinking, especially nowadays when decisions of this sort might always turn out to have such far-reaching consequences, geographically speaking and also with regard to the interests and the very existence of future generations. So, it's a practical imperative, arrived at on rational grounds. But he also brings in lots of thought experiments, about brain transplants and split identity. Thus, for instance, he poses this question: if you were going to have a brain transplant and your brain was going to be put in another body, would you rather wake up from the anesthetic and find that "you" were now that body or that brain? Of course, most people opt for the second possibility, since they suppose the mind to be somehow identical with the brain, or at any rate to be more dependent on certain brain states than on bodily functions or perhaps—if they're philosophers—to stand in an "emergent" or "supervenient" relation to various physical goings-on in the brain. But of course, this amounts to just a version of old-style Cartesian dualism, however nuanced or qualified, along with all the well-known problems thrown up by that line of argument. And besides, even if you went for the "brain" option, would it still be *you* in any other than an abstract, disembodied, and hence merely notional sense?

Or again, Parfit asks, what if they—these future surgeons and neurophysiologists—could produce a perfect, neuron-by-neuron, identically wired-up and configured replica of your brain? Would there then be two of "you," and would it then be a matter of perfect indifference as to whether *you*—the person who was posed this question before the operation took place—woke up in possession of the "original" brain or its cloned counterpart? Parfit has lots of other examples in a similar far-out speculative vein. Some have to do with teletransportation and the question whether you would care—whether you would have any reason to care—if your whole body (including brain) were deconstituted into a computer program, beamed to some distant region of the universe, and then perfectly reconstituted atom-by-atom

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together with all its memory imprints, acquired characteristics, neurophysiologically based personal traits, etc. These are really extraordinary, mind-boggling questions and of course invite the charge that they belong more to the realm of science fiction than anything remotely conceivable within the limits of present-day medical or techno-scientific possibility. Thus, we can't yet do brain transplants; we can't yet produce perfect clones of existing brains or a machine that could teletransport you or me to Alpha Centauri. Still, these possibilities are not absolutely unthinkable, not in breach of some basic, exceptionless law of nature (such as the conservation laws or the veto on retroactive causation), so it is legitimate to run thought experiments like this if they get us to do some hard thinking about issues—like that of personal identity and the scope and limits of ethical concern. So maybe, if these questions strike us as lacking any "rational" solution on presently acceptable terms, then we should set about radically rethinking those terms and coming up with some alternative, that is to say, less restrictive and dilemma-inducing habits of thought. After all, what we usually think of as "our" memories and experiences, as distinct from the memories and experiences of other people, is a pretty fuzzy distinction at best and sometimes impossible to draw. We often have a much more vivid recollection of what we read in a novel, perhaps, or in someone else's diary, than of events in our own lives. And this is not just a kind of naïve illusion, like the people who write in to "East Enders" or "The Archers" with advice on how the characters should sort things out, but a reflection of the fact that our "individual" lives are bound up with the lives of others in all sorts of complex, intricate, and often quite inseparable ways. Parfit is not a Buddhist, not a practicing Buddhist, at least so far as I know, but you can see how it connects with his thinking about ethical issues, about the need to move beyond unitary concepts of selfhood, and so forth…

Scott-Baumann: *Yes, I am not sure if I can go anywhere with brain transplants, although maybe thought experiments like that are useful as metaphors or speculative instruments. I think a lot of people who work with Derrida and with Indian philosophy,*

people like Coward and Magliola, would find real affinities between the two, in that they wish to provide some kind of map that can help us to make sense of our daily lives. Whether this is really translatable into our daily lives or not is another matter, but the offer, the invitation is there. I don't know if I can use Derrida to guide and inform my daily actions. I can certainly use him as a powerful inspiration for my thinking. He has the power, the imagination, the speculative range, the ability to come up with new and – very often – with profoundly unsettling ideas that challenge metaphysical assumptions. But when he writes more explicitly about ethical issues, about moral dilemmas and matters of urgent, real-world political concern, then sometimes, his writing seems to lack the critical edge that you find in his earlier, more "philosophical" work. Does this take us back to the notion that you have to set up those same old dualisms and dichotomies in order to achieve any kind of intellectual rigor? If this is the case, then we seem to be trapped, as Loy would say, in an endlessly circulating verbal whirlpool, whereas Nagarjuna would leap out of the whirlpool and invite us to use the power of our thinking to liberate ourselves from the dualisms that constrain us.

Of course, here is a problem about chronology here, about cultural change and the availability of past ideas to present understanding. Nagarjuna wrote in the second century, so we must be seeing him differently now from how he was understood then. I can do no other than try and understand him through the overeducated, oververbal milieu in which we function now. I have to take what I can from thinkers like Derrida and Nagarjuna and hope to see a way beyond my anxieties, my anger and frustration when looking at the state of things now, such as the political structures that are offered to me in this so-called democracy that we live in. I can try to achieve a sense of relative calm that allows me to put some distance between myself and those frustrations and perhaps to act ethically, to behave a bit better as a result. I actually derive more inspiration from Ricoeur, with his tentative and nuanced (you would probably say his eclectic and inconclusive, even philosophically evasive) way of approaching these issues.

From one of his early works, Fallible Man*, through to a fairly recent text,* Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur provides ways of puzzling out a route through and beyond the dualisms that we set up for ourselves. This helps me to act ethically with small groups of others at a local level, but it can certainly be quite a difficult, sometimes painful experience. Derrida gives me intellectual challenge and the challenge of deconstructing texts but not necessarily insight into the ways in which I can deconstruct racism for myself and with others.*

Norris: Well, there is a big difference between "early" and "late" Derrida in this respect. At one time, if people asked him in interviews whether there were any general lessons to be taken away from his readings of Plato, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, or whoever, then he would say quite firmly no. These were very specific, highly detailed readings of particular texts, and they might raise interesting philosophical problems that were perhaps capable of being extended to some limited range of other contexts, but you certainly couldn't derive from them any general deconstructive method, theory, or worldview. Derrida reacted, as many French thinkers of his generation did, against the Sartrean idea of the public intellectual, the *maitre à penser*, the figure who exploited his philosophic eminence as a platform from which to pronounce on matters of wider (national or international) public concern. Sartre was treated as a bit of an embarrassment, one who took a much-publicized stand on all the major public issues and was seen as making too much of himself as one of these grand, authoritative figures. In fact, this was highly unfair to Sartre, as Derrida has recently conceded in some much more generous and conciliatory, even quite admiring remarks. He has never claimed that kind of status for himself, but he has shown a much greater readiness to talk about world-political issues and questions of immediate, topical relevance. This can be seen in the series of interviews he gave after 9/11 that were published as a book, alongside interviews with Habermas. (The two of them didn't engage in any direct, face-to-face dialogues, which is a pity, given their unfortunate history of past disagreements and mutual

misunderstandings.) Here, Derrida is talking very explicitly about global politics, about the so-called clash of civilizations, about the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism, and also about the dangers posed—in the wake of 9/11—by the kind of resurgent Christian fundamentalism, linked to a US neo-imperialist drive, represented by George W. Bush and his entourage. Now, here are some good, politically acute, at times very courageous things that Derrida says in the course of these conversations. They are linked in with a whole range of themes from his other writings over the past decade: themes like hospitality, asylum, cosmopolitanism, global justice, thoughts about the future, the possible future of a federal Europe as a counterbalance to the threat of US global hegemony. On the other hand—and this is something I feel about a lot of Derrida's recent work—they are positions, basically progressivist or left-liberal positions, that you could arrive at (so to speak) without benefit of deconstruction. That is, they are not reached by anything like the highly distinctive, characteristically "Derridean" mode of argument that typified his earlier writings.

Well, maybe that is not entirely true; there is still a certain kind of deconstructive turn that leads him, for instance, to essay the limits of justice, or hospitality, or federalism as normally conceived and to show how those conceptions run up against certain constitutive aporias or blind spots. In fact, he makes some telling points to this effect in the context of post-9/11 global politics and the current situation in what we are pleased to call the "Free World" of US-dominated Western liberal democracy. Still, they are points that might have been made, if not perhaps quite so strikingly, if one approached these topics from a more conventional left standpoint within the discourse of political philosophy or of international-relations theory. This struck me first when I read Derrida's book *The Other Heading*, published in 1989. It is a book about the future of Europe, about the prospects for a united, federal Europe, written at a time when there was much debate (as now) concerning this particular topic. What Derrida has to say is impeccably left-liberal, extremely well-informed, meticulously balanced, even-handed almost to a fault. It's very much a "both/and" book, in fact, and this is I suppose the main

difference that strikes me between "early" and "late" Derrida. Early Derrida, although he sets out to deconstruct the logic of certain binary oppositions, still pushes that either/or logic to the limit and doesn't suggest that we abandon it in favor of something more inclusive, less contradiction-prone, a "both/and" logic, if you like. But in *The Other Heading* and in some of his later texts, he does seem to take something more like this approach, not a line of least resistance, exactly, but one of balancing rival claims, alternative priorities, competing interests, and so forth. In the case of European federalism, you have to balance the aspiration for a united, peaceful, transnational, "cosmopolitical" future with a respect for the particularity of national traditions—of cultures, languages, traditions—and, beyond that, for various regional cultures or ways of life. Which is all very much what you would expect and want him to say, as a left intellectual with progressivist views but also with a keen, deconstructively inflected sense of the risks that come from suppressing difference, from imposing coercive or premature forms of totalization…Still, you do feel a certain lack of critical edge, a certain easing off in the degree of analytic or conceptual rigor.

Up to a point, Derrida is adopting a very Kantian line on all this. Kant, in his political writings, takes a cosmopolitical approach and says that we should try to create new kinds of transnational structure, even global forms of governmentality beyond these isolated nation-states which constantly generate wars and competition for scarce resources. We should recognize that the most basic human interests are universal human interests, and we should construct our political systems in the light of that universality. We may never get there; in fact, Kant thought we never would, not to the stage of actually achieving global democracy, "perpetual peace," an international sensus communis, etc., but at least, this can serve as a regulative idea that guides our various imperfect efforts in that direction. Now, it is important to hang onto this kind of Kantian distinction because otherwise you are apt to get conservatives (or postmodernists like Lyotard) saying, "Well, look what has become of all those fine ideals; they haven't worked out in practice, so let's dump

that whole discredited enlightenment discourse and stop telling such naïve stories about progress, democracy, and social hope." Still, there is a problem when Derrida insists on drawing such a sharp, categorical distinction between the idea of a democracy always "to come"—something that can never be cashed out in terms of present or realizable future institutions—and anything, any sociopolitical order, that we might actually hope to achieve. Here again, you want to say (well, I want to say) that this can all too easily work out as a recipe for quietism or for placing such an absolute, unbridgeable gulf between political philosophy and political practice that there seems little reason to strive for improvement in the here and now or at least in the foreseeable future.

The same is true of some of his more recent books, *Spectres of Marx*, for instance. In many ways, this is a brilliant book, dense with allusions, quotations, cross-references, offbeat yet strangely evocative, like that between the opening ghost scene in *Hamlet* and the famous first sentence of the *Communist Manifesto*: "A spectre is haunting old Europe…" And Hamlet's reflection that "The time is out of joint," which Derrida links with the promissory character of Marxist thought, the idea of a Marxism "yet to come," something that continues to haunt the thinking of those (like Fukuyama) who nowadays so jubilantly trumpet its demise. Nevertheless, it is a very elusive piece of writing in political terms, that is to say, if you go to it in hopes of finding some definite political content, some clear indication of just what is required in order to realize its potential. If we wish to remain true to that promise, so Derrida implies, or if we want to avoid betraying it, then we need always to think in terms of a "Marxism to come," a spectral possibility that is forever beyond any prospect of actual achievement. Again, this resembles a Kantian idea of reason, but with certain quasi-theological implications, as when Derrida speaks (here alluding to Walter Benjamin) of a "weak messianism" that holds open this endlessly deferred promise. And again, one wants to say that this is all very well—a subtle, brilliant, sometimes profound, often highly eloquent, even passionate meditation on Marxian themes—but it does leave the reader

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wondering just what all this amounts to in philosophic, let alone in practical-political terms. If I were to offer a general account of the way Derrida's thinking has gone, it is from the early work where he is engaging closely with a range of philosophical texts, where he is pursuing the anomalous logic of deconstruction with maximum rigor and sharpness of analytic focus, to the later work where he is much more willing to accept a logic of "both/and," an inclusive logic that often works out as a kind of good-willed ecumenical advice that we should stretch our minds all around certain issues and try to see them from every point of view. Of course, this is a very good thing in certain contexts and for certain purposes. To anyone like yourself, Alison, concerned with race relations and ethnic conflict, it is probably the best approach to take.

Scott-Baumann: *Although, as you say, it can come to seem rather lacking in logical rigor or philosophic force. But then, how about Derrida's work on the politics of friendship? That seems to me perhaps more satisfying than some of his texts on big issues, questions to do with Europe and the world, globalization, US hegemony, East and West. Maybe this is a possible solution to certain otherwise irreconcilable dualisms, that through friendship, individuals can forge bonds that will transcend the conflicts that may be orchestrated and fuelled by bigger forces. Friendship on its own cannot resist such forces, but maybe it's the best we can do. That is certainly very often the situation in my work with Muslims, Hindus, Jains, or Sikhs. There is always some hope of improved relations if we can just come together, initially, with a shared idea, be it for an educational project in Britain or in another country. This sense of common purpose is enough to begin with, but in the long term, as is so often the case, it's the personal friendship which becomes the enduring feature. Yet, this all seems very remote from philosophy, at least from academic philosophy, and I suppose that is ultimately a problem for me, because in my projects, which are real-world projects, I long to apply philosophy and would be very enthusiastic about using the work of Derrida, for example, to deconstruct racist attitudes, but I am not sure how to proceed, as*

there seems to be a discrepancy between how he treats philosophical issues and how he addresses issues of more immediate ethical concern. Issues to do with race seem to be as intransigent now as ever, not least with the media whipping people into an almost hysterical fear of immigration.

Norris: Well, it depends on what sort of students you are teaching and how directly you want to bring Derrida's work to bear on their particular concerns. If you were teaching in a department of politics, especially international relations, you could very well give them a text like *The Other Heading*, and they might find something useful, even inspirational in it, because—despite my misgivings as mentioned before—it does set out the prospects and problems in a clear-headed and provocative way. I think that what Derrida now really wants to avoid is the idea put around by some "literary" deconstructionists that it is all about inverting received distinctions, binaries, structural oppositions, etc. Just turning them upside down, so to speak, which of course leaves the same opposition very firmly in place. This is why he has always insisted that it is a four-stage operation: first, locating the binary in question; then, showing that one term in the pair (speech, nature, melody, etc.) is taken as the primary or privileged term; then, the reversal stage where it turns out that the second, supposedly derivative or adjunct term (writing, culture, or harmony) is a prerequisite, a condition of possibility for the first; and lastly, the stage when it becomes apparent—through a kind of perpetual oscillating movement—that there is no stability here, that neither term can achieve a position of absolute conceptual priority. But, again, there is that difference between "early" and "late" Derrida, that the early texts show a detailed and meticulous working through of these four stages while the later writings tend to take that labor for granted—take it as read, if you like—and adopt the view that one had better just avoid any risk of setting up the kinds of binary distinction that might fall back into polarized, exclusionary habits of thought.

I think that this is also what has kept Derrida from identifying himself more strongly or explicitly with any Jewish tradition of

thought and also what explains his degree of critical reserve—albeit less marked in recent years—with the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas. In brief, it is the danger of a certain kind of particularism, the identification with some marginalized, persecuted, yet highly resilient cultural or religious tradition which then raises itself into a universalism with punitive sanctions attached. This can be especially dangerous when it is linked, as in Levinas, with the idea that there has always existed a special, even if complex and in some ways antagonistic relation between that tradition and some other, more "universal" or world-historical counterpart. Just recently, I was reading a PhD thesis by Paul Overend, a colleague in Cardiff, who makes this point rather forcefully. In fact, he cites some disturbing, not to say shocking, passages where Levinas says that for him, the only traditions, the only intellectual and religious cultures that really, importantly count are the Greek and the Judeo-Christian, and within the Greek, he includes certain prominent aspects of the Christian, so it's the Helleno-Christian tradition. He says he cannot take seriously any claims for other traditions of thought, and he actually speaks about the "yellow hordes," about the threat of dilution or of disintegration posed (one assumes) by Asiatic religious or cultural ways of thought. Overend's thesis finishes with some dramatic words to the effect: "So there we have it, Levinas, Judaic thinker, philosopher of religion, holocaust survivor, and racist."

I don't think Derrida was aware of these passages, but I do think he is very aware of the logic that can lead you from resisting oppression in the name of the oppressed to raising the claims of the oppressed until they acquire a kind of sovereign status, a universality with its own, potentially oppressive powers. I suppose we can see that process at work in the Middle East today, in the situation of Israel with respect to Palestine or the Occupied Territories. Also, nearer home, you could see a movement like Christian Zionism as a version, albeit a crude and primitive version of that same Levinasian idea, the idea of Judaic thought and culture as rooted in a stubborn particularism that nonetheless achieves universality through its special, however complex relation to Helleno-Christian values. And of course,

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that movement has some pretty violent and nasty things behind it. What they seem to believe—on the basis of Old Testament prophecy—is that Israel should utterly defeat or destroy the Palestinian people, extend their occupation as far and wide as possible, and then (as foretold) convert to Christianity, at which point they and all God's elect will receive their eternal reward. Pretty repulsive stuff, and a long way from Levinas's thinking, I admit, but not so utterly remote as to make the comparison downright irrelevant or mischievous. At any rate, it helps to explain both why Derrida has distanced himself from certain aspects of Levinas's thinking and—in a more general way—why he has always been so very anxious to insist that deconstruction is not just the overturning of binary oppositions.

Scott-Baumann: *There is a phrase that Loy uses: "the metaphysics of common sense." He pays tribute to both Derrida and the Buddhist tradition, their ability to shatter common sense. We could easily lead lives in which we do not question what comes down to us through the philosophical tradition, a life that appears, on the surface, to be quite reasonable but is in fact a life constructed only of those surface features. Loy's conclusion would be that, although Derrida does not go as far as the Buddhists, his aim is very similar to Buddhist ideas. Yet, for me at least, his whole approach can at times be very confusing and is difficult to relate to real-life problems.*

Norris: It's very hard to say what a life would look like if lived according to Derridean principles. There are critical theorists who claim to have derived a politics of deconstruction or an ethics of deconstruction, where the ethics usually works out as a somewhat more "deconstructive" version of Levinas. This is what you see, most influentially, in Simon Critchley's work. I do have to say that I have problems with this whole line of thought, for reasons I've explained already. The politics mostly works out as a kind of left-liberal or sometimes left-communitarian position based—as you would expect—on the leading idea of respecting differences, all sorts of differences, whether of culture, politics, religion, or sexual (for which read gender) orientation. Thinkers

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like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have pressed further in this direction, a "post-Marxist" direction, I suppose, which takes for granted the obsolescence of political theories—like classical Marxism—that privilege just one (e.g., class-based) mode of analysis above the manifold discourses, practices, subject positions, and so forth, available at any given time. Here again, I find this type of argument elusive and ill-defined almost to the point of philosophical vacuity, but I don't think it is the only way of understanding Derrida's work.

Scott-Baumann: *Where does it come from, this "politics of deconstruction"? Does it come from Derrida's philosophical texts or from his more explicitly political thinking, which, as we have agreed, can present themselves very differently?*

Norris: I suppose it comes from his idea, one that goes right back to his earliest writing, that you should always look to the margins of the text or, for that matter, to the margins of culture and society. You will find the most interesting, often problematic, but also most revealing details of a text very often in footnotes, parentheses, stray remarks, "incidental" metaphors, and other such unlikely places. Or maybe in some "minor," noncanonical text that has been marginalized by mainstream scholarship, like Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Language*, which was long considered very marginal, very minor but has become much better-known now, chiefly because Derrida has written about it. In the same way, so this argument goes, if you're going to deconstruct certain mainstream, dominant conceptions of politics, or certain hegemonic modes of theorizing cultural identity, then you should always look first to the writings and experience of those who have been marginalized in various ways and degrees. That is to say, it's the people who are most oppressed, excluded, or victimized by society who actually have the best understanding of how that society works and, more specifically, of how it works to oppress and exclude them. The idea comes from Hegel's master–slave dialectic, a famous section in the *Phenomenology of Mind*, where he argues that the slave knows more than the master with respect

to the conditions of his own servitude and is therefore ultimately in a stronger, or at least an epistemologically privileged position. After all, the slave is, by very definition, at the sharp end of things, the suffering end, like the working class under capitalism. The master is entirely dependent on the slave, just as capitalism depends entirely on those who sell their labor, but the slave and the proletariat are those who have the least interest in upholding the system.

You get a version of this argument in what is called "feminist standpoint epistemology." This is the claim that women's exclusion from various fields of knowledge—such as the physical sciences—leaves them better placed than men when it comes to understanding just how that exclusion has worked not only to restrict their own life opportunities but also to influence and distort the development of knowledge. It is an argument with its sources in Marx and more directly in Lukacs's great book *History and Class-Consciousness*. In a way, Derrida's appeal to the margins, whether it's the margins of society or the margins of the text, is a similar kind of claim. Critics of Derrida—mainstream scholars, historians, philologists, some philosophers—often say he's perverse in picking out details, passages or whole texts that haven't hitherto been regarded as very important. He would claim, on the contrary, that if a writer feels (perhaps in some obscure or semiconscious way) that they have to acknowledge some problematic point which is apt to disrupt an entire line of argument, they are not going to stick it right up front, in a prominent passage or central part of the text. Much likelier, it will turn up in the sorts of place where Derrida looks in his readings of Plato, Rousseau, Kant, Husserl, or Saussure.

Scott-Baumann: *This sounds rather similar to current research trends, where the outlying, discrepant data that does not fit the curve of the graph can be suppressed or "normalized" for just that reason. They may well be the most interesting, valuable, groundbreaking results, yet they are rejected because they cannot be reconciled with dominant trends or expectations. But doesn't this lead to some real ethical difficulties? For the argument that you*

have just outlined to possess any force, we would always need to have certain marginal groups which are effectively disenfranchised. But this is problematic, since presumably Derrida would like to endorse the idea of friendship as developed by philosophers from Aristotle down, and that would mean seeking equality so far as possible, whatever the paradoxes that Derrida reveals when he examines that idea of friendship. But it is hard to see how you can logically maintain any such position if you are taking that deconstructionist line, that is to say, if you are depending—as a matter of preconceived theoretical commitment—on insights that are only gained from the perspective of perpetually marginalized others.

Norris: Yes, that is a problem. Whenever you try to privilege marginality, you get into that sort of contradictory logic. I suppose it might be possible to argue, on Derrida's behalf, that of course we must do all we can to equalize differences of wealth, rank, opportunity, privilege, education, cultural access, and so forth, but there will always be those who are relatively marginalized or who occupy a sufficiently marginal position to have a critical view of what is going on at the center. To some extent, Derrida is no doubt thinking of his own childhood and experience as a schoolchild in Algeria. At this time, he was marginalized several times over, being outside French metropolitan culture, subject to French colonial rule, the child of a Sephardic Jewish family in a culture locally dominated by Arab and Muslim values, and above all a victim of persecution under laws imposed the French collaborationist regime. So, there is undoubtedly a certain autobiographical element here, a keen awareness of marginality resulting from personal experience and a well-developed set of critical strategies for putting that awareness most sharply and productively to work. Still, I wouldn't for a moment want to suggest—and here, for once, I'm sure of Derrida's agreement—that these factors come anywhere near to accounting either for the various philosophic directions that his work has taken or for the force of his arguments when assessed in philosophical rather than autobiographical terms. In fact, I would want to side with

the "analytic" types on this issue and say that if you're going to do philosophy as distinct from sociology, or cultural criticism, or the history of ideas, then you need to draw a firm line between "context of discovery" and "context of justification" or what counts as interesting background information and what counts as philosophical argument. I guess that this claim won't go down at all well amongst most Derrideans, but it is one that I think Derrida would endorse readily enough.

Scott-Baumann: *Well, we've come a long way around in all this, but we ought to get some of these issues back into focus. How should we answer the challenge that we started out with, namely, the suggestion that perhaps, by looking at Indian philosophy and at Derrida, we might be able to gain some insight into the fundamentally racist history of Western philosophy and even some indication of a future philosophy which would not be racist. The Brahmanical tradition is rooted in the caste system, which is still very strong in India. Systems have been put in place, such as the reservation system, to try to reduce the effect of caste. Buddhism, reacting against Brahmanical hegemony, takes the extreme opposite view that caste distinctions are a product of power/knowledge, of an epistemic will-to-power whose most immediate effect is to keep those distinctions firmly and forcefully in place. So, in the present-day context, Buddhism defines itself very much against that divisive, hierarchical, violently imposed system of thought. If there can be no substance, if there is ultimately nothing to distinguish, differentiate, or classify, then of course there can be no hierarchy. Whether deconstruction has anything useful to contribute here—anything that might really help to undermine the kinds of deep-grained cultural prejudice that we're always coming up against—is for me a very difficult question, as you'll surely have gathered by now!*

Norris: There is a standard, rather routine sort of answer that you often get when critical theorists are asked about the relevance of this kind of work for real-life, urgent, everyday-practical, or sociopolitical problems. It can come across that way, but we

shouldn't too readily discount it when the theorists concerned have their own claim to speak from a marginal, a post-colonial, or in some sense "privileged" (which here means culturally underprivileged) standpoint. They would say that their work in critical theory as applied to texts or to social, cultural, and educational structures is deconstructive just to the extent that it has encouraged people, students and others, to criticize and challenge existing distinctions, be they distinctions of caste, social class, cultural privilege, or color and ethnic origin. Of course, this answer is a bit too pat; it's open to objections from other people—those outside the academy—who are even more marginalized and a whole lot worse off in terms of intellectual or cultural capital. In this context, I remember reading a piece by an Indian critical theorist who remarked that it was all very well for these high-caste, émigré (mostly US-based) Indian scholars to make a big deal of their "marginal" status *vis-à-vis* the academic establishment, but their marginality was nothing compared with his own situation back home as a member of the untouchable caste. So, "marginal" is very much a relative term, especially in the academic context, and one that is always liable to be turned back against the user on grounds of their being less underprivileged—less marginal—than other, more deserving candidates.

In a way, this resembles the kinds of debate around liberalism—debates about the scope and limits of liberal thought—that have been going on for decades now. There is always a chance for political opponents, whether of the left or the right, to attack liberalism by pointing out how often it has fallen woefully short of its own professed values, its own aims and ideals. So, you know, there were people like the US Founding Fathers who espoused all sorts of very fine, impeccably liberal sentiments as regards human freedom, dignity, moral status, citizenly rights, and so forth but who saw nothing wrong—no conflict of principle—in the existence of an institution like antebellum slavery. Or again, those of a "liberal" persuasion on other social and moral issues who thought it perfectly acceptable, indeed just a part of the natural order of things, that women should not have the vote. You can multiply examples of this

sort of thing, almost to the point—especially in the current US context—where to call oneself a "liberal" is to risk being treated with a kind of pitying fondness, as if one were simply too stupid to have learned all those chastening lessons from history. Either that or the word gets hijacked by those—supply-side economists and neoconservative gurus—who equate "liberal" values with the freedom to maximize profits and the redistribution of wealth in favor of the most highly paid. Also, of course, they want to ensure the restriction of state "interference" to a night watchman role of just making sure that nothing impedes this process, such as (for instance) the provision of a decent welfare system and adequate health care for the less well-off.

Now, there are two points I'm making here: first, about the issue of marginality with regard to the politics and ethics of deconstruction and, second, about this whole question—which you're rightly trying to keep on our agenda—concerning the relationship between theory and practice. On the first point, I'd just want to say that, whatever its specific political credentials, deconstruction does share at least one saving grace of the liberal tradition in politics, namely, its capacity for self-criticism, for eventually coming to recognize its own ideological blind spots. So, you can always argue that it has fallen short, that it has failed to live up to its own best values, principles, insights, etc., but if so, then you'll be arguing from just the same standpoint that liberals—real liberals, not the fudgers, US think-tank pundits, or advocates of a "third way"—themselves seek to promote. And this connects with the issue of marginality because one has to be aware of the manifold, constantly shifting ways in which groups, classes, or ethnic communities can find themselves subject to various, often quite subtle and far from obvious kinds of marginalization. It seems to me that there is a large enough (and strong enough) body of work in post-colonial criticism, subaltern studies, feminist theory, and other politically engaged areas—all of them bearing the mark of Derrida's influence—to refute any idea of deconstruction as a narrowly academic, ivory-tower sort of enterprise. So, to the second point, your worry about how these complex theoretical issues might link up with

your work in the classroom or in the wider community where often there are simply more urgent, more practical things that need sorting out, like defusing ethnic tensions or getting people to talk across barriers of mutual fear and mistrust. Well, I suppose I'm enough of a dyed-in-the-wool theorist to reject the idea that we can separate "theory" and "practice" in quite that way or that practice can ever get along without some kind of implicit theoretical content. The economist John Maynard Keynes once said that those who claim to have no need for theory are usually in the grip of a bad old theory which they just don't recognize or just won't acknowledge. So, if theorizing makes you more aware, more reflective, self-critical, or less in the grip of unexamined beliefs and prejudices, then surely, that's sufficient justification.

Besides, there is fairly straightforward sense in which changing your mind (or other people's minds) through an effort of independent thought is absolutely basic to any kind of social or political advancement. I once wrote a book, an introductory book, called *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, and a couple of reviewers objected very strongly to that: if Norris thinks you can make that distinction after reading Derrida, then clearly he hasn't begun to understand what deconstruction is all about. At the time, I thought this was just a piece of one-upmanship, a rather tiresome rhetorical ploy, but really, they were right, and the subtitle was ill chosen. Aristotle makes the point that there exist certain kinds of practical reasoning whose form approximates to that of the deductive syllogism—with major and minor premises—but where the most fitting, most adequately justified conclusion is not a statement or another strictly entailed proposition but an action, a way of behaving that draws the appropriate consequence. So, this could be something like Huck Finn's deciding, on the basis of broad moral but also very specific considerations, that he ought not to turn in the runaway slave since to do so would be not just wrong but inconsistent with the conjunction of premises on which he operates. Or again, to take an example from Derrida, what we properly admire about Nelson Mandela is his courage in applying this sort of practical (but nonetheless logical or rigorous) thinking to issues that were

systematically obscured or distorted under the pressures of a wicked socio-politico-judicial dispensation.

In putting it like this, I'm aware of going very much against the grain of those commentaries on Derrida that stress his recent paradoxical statements about justice as a kind of transcendent, almost quasi-mystical ideal beyond any possible instantiation in legal or sociopolitical terms. Still, I make no apology for bringing his reflections back down to earth in this particular way since I do think it is another side of his work that has gone unremarked, or has been consistently downplayed, by some of his more prominent commentators. What I would want to say basically is that anyone who has read Derrida, who has read him carefully and without being got at by those commentators, will have reason to adopt a critical stance with regard to certain kinds of prejudice, injustice, unwarranted preconception, or whatever. This might lead them not to undertake a PhD on Derrida but to go and do what they can to alleviate the effects of ethnic prejudice or racial discrimination in Palestine, India, sub-Saharan Africa, the United States, Britain, or elsewhere. Or they might combine that sort of practical, politically and socially engaged work with the business of writing a thesis that sets out its philosophic justification in deconstructive or other such critical-diagnostic terms. Of course, there is an issue of priority here—of apportioning one's available time and resources and doing the most important work that comes to hand—but there is no need to think that theory is some kind of bolt-hole or alibi for intellectual types who don't want to get politically involved. If deconstruction is to have any kind of ethical or sociopolitical impact, then it will need to take a line firmly opposed to that way of thinking.

Scott-Baumann: *Let me try to take up those points in relation to the kinds of issue I've been raising throughout this interview. In my project work, both with children and adults, on national and global citizenship, I find that people, adults especially, and perhaps with good reason, very often don't wish to express an opinion about, for example, the conflict in Iraq. They would much prefer not to be asked to have an opinion. Teachers believe it is*

somehow inappropriate to express an opinion in class, as this could influence the children. They don't feel it is right to become engaged in any discussion about the Middle East, for instance, although, or maybe because, they have strongly held ethical views about justice and peace. Now, I know that Derrida has been much involved with certain movements or pressure groups concerned with the teaching of philosophy in school, at lycée level, and I wonder if you think that this might be extended to other, more "elementary" stages of the educational process. This might involve setting up a community of enquiry in the classroom, such that the children themselves learn to debate and discuss in an atmosphere of mutual trust, so that they can work toward clarity of thought, clarity of expression. It is like the Buddhist long journey which never ends and, instead of feeding them the pap of the National Curriculum, it could teach them, as you say, to spot a bad argument, to think through and beyond false dualisms, but also to derive energy from the dualisms that we have, which after all are what we have, so we must to some extent work with them. Then, they will see that their teachers accept the idea that some problems have many answers, that some truths are provisional and that they must work hard, in a Ricoeurian way, to interpret their world ethically. Possibly, as adults, they will then make decisions that define their place as citizens in a just community. Still, this verbally based, in some degree duality-dependent approach falls far short of Nagarjuna's ideal. There is some glimmer of Buddhist influence in schools, in that teachers of religious studies use techniques known as "stilling" and "guided visualization," and these are good for freeing the mind, albeit temporarily and briefly, from the constraints of daily timetables.

This is why I do think there are some similarities, some occasional points of convergence between Derrida's thinking and various forms of Buddhist thought. You have rather resisted this idea so far or expressed certain reservations, but I still want to press the case because it seems to me both philosophically valid and important for the kind of work I do, my work with teachers and students. Bhartrari has a much more linguistically orientated approach and therefore resembles Derrida more than Nagarjuna.

The differences are very striking if we look at some of Derrida's more recent remarks that it is just not possible to get along without the notion of the subject or the notion of ethical responsibility as vested in the choices, decisions, and commitments of a subject who cannot be simply "deconstructed" into so many "post-humanist" fragments, discursive functions, subject positions, or whatever. You might say that Derrida has this much in common with Bhartrari: that they both find language to be a constituent part of inner personal experience. We deconstruct our own consciousness by deconstructing our own thinking and ways of speaking through language. For Nagarjuna, personal identity is a great burden, something that stands in the way of peaceful coexistence, that obstructs our progress toward that desirable condition. Moreover, Nagarjuna sees language as mundane and as a kind of conceptual entrapment. On the other hand, Derrida is more "like" Bhartrari in so far as he uses deconstruction to dismantle difference, to show us the flux that underlies certain metaphysical dualisms, concepts, and categories. If, on balance, the differences are more significant than the points of similarity, still this doesn't prevent us from exploring the creative tension that is thereby created…

Norris: Well, again, we are pretty much in agreement on that, even if, as you say, what our talk has come around to is more a kind of creative tension than a meeting eye to eye on all the basics. Partly, I think, it is question of emphasizing different aspects, even different periods of Derrida's thought. My own strong preference is for those early-to-middle-period texts where he is, very clearly, engaging with philosophical issues and doing so, moreover, in distinctively philosophical ways. Indeed, I would want to claim that these modes of engagement can be formalized to some extent, even—as I have argued with regard to his reading of Rousseau and "the logic of supplementarity"—expressed in the kinds of symbolic notation developed by theorists of modal logic, tense logic, and certain forms of deviant or paraconsistent logic. So, this is very much my angle on Derrida, and if it has come out as a certain resistance, a certain lack of responsiveness to some of your proposals, then no doubt that's the main reason. Still, I

think you're on stronger ground with his recent (say, post-1990) writings, where Derrida broaches a good many themes—of justice, human rights, forgiveness, hospitality, asylum, cosmopolitanism, subjectivity, as well as religion and (most recently) the question of our ethical relationship to nonhuman animals—which very clearly connect with various topics you've raised in the course of this interview. Anyway, I'm grateful to you for pointing me in these directions and putting up with my various diversionary tactics. I'm sure that Derrida is one of the very few, maybe the only living philosopher whose work will still be read and debated centuries from now, if humankind survives that long. And maybe you're right that if we read him with a view to some of these lately emergent concerns, then we'll have a better chance of pulling through.

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