
PROBLEMY

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THE SYSTEMIC INCOMMENSURABILITY OF THE DISCOURSES OF HABERMAS AND DERRIDA

Abstract

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The conflict between modernism and post-modernism is one of the defining philosophical debates of the latter half of the 20th century. Proponents of modernism, striving to uphold the banner of the Enlightenment, have sought to undermine dogmatism while maintaining the tenability of certain inviolable principles. Proponents of post-modernism, similarly seeking to advance emancipation, have seen "principles" as inherently antithetical to the achievement of the professed goals of the Enlightenment. In Habermas and Derrida – prime speakers of these respective camps – this debate reached a crescendo. Yet, in both of them, we see that the respective positions of modernism and post-modernism are essentially systemically incommensurable, whereby the position of each side is undermined – in the view of the other side – by its own stance.

Key words: modernism, post-modernism, Habermas, Derrida, incommensurability

Słowa kluczowe: modernizm, postmodernizm, Habermas, Derrida, niewspółmierność

I

"This economic aspect of *différance* [...] confirms that the subject, and first of all the conscious and speaking subject, depends upon the system of differences and the movement of *différance*, that the subject is not present, nor above all present to itself before *différance*, that the subject is constituted only in being divided from itself [...]" (Derrida 1981, 29).

"Even Derrida does not extricate himself from the constraints of the paradigm of the philosophy of the subject" (Habermas 1987, 166).

Proponents of modernism believe that the current debate between modernism and post-modernism is being fought before the citadel of progress: to abdicate before the forces of post-modernism would entail a forfeiture of central emancipatory goals of the Enlightenment

tradition. Proponents of post-modernism similarly view the debate as a battle directed toward the achievement of social emancipation, yet see modernism as a metaphysically informed platform that has long overstayed its welcome and even betrayed its original emancipatory utility. Proponents of modernism believe that post-modernist theory bars post-modernists from having a coherent notion of “progress”, since post-modernist theory does not only not affirm a teleology, but also disavows such teleologies altogether. “By what measure and right”, the modernist would ask, “can post-modernists speak of ‘progress?’” Similarly, some proponents of post-modernism believe that modernist theory bars modernists from having anything more than a heuristic notion of progress, since modernist theory not only affirms a teleology, but also disavows the possibility of the *lack* of teleologies. “How”, the post-modernist would ask, “can modernists maintain intellectual honesty and integrity if they enter the debate antecedently convinced that there are such things as teleologies?” Consequently, the debate between modernism and post-modernism is rendered passionate by the gravity of the common social concern, yet violent by the mutual belief that the ideas of other side are not only wrong, but also potentially dangerous.

The dispute is not without irony, as each side advances tenets that can be construed to produce effects opposite of those intended. Habermas, for example, has the best intentions in grounding and promulgating a liberal political philosophy, yet his attempts to resurrect the project of the Enlightenment and to renew the legitimacy of language can, according to mistrustful proponents of post-modernism, be twisted to support self-righteous claims to knowledge of “the Truth” and the (intentionally or unintentionally oppressive) implementation of that “Truth”. Similarly, some post-modernists (especially Foucault and Derrida) have done much to promote awareness of various “hidden” hierarchies of power and of perceived oppression, yet the vehemence with which some “post-modernist liberals” have sought to counter such perceived oppression has sometimes assumed all the grotesque features of any intolerance that these “liberals” are supposedly trying to combat. As Richard Rorty has written, “So we find French critics of Habermas ready to abandon liberal politics in order to avoid universalistic philosophy, and Habermas trying to hold on to universalistic philosophy, with all its problems, in order to support liberal politics”¹.

In what follows, I will first present and analyze the major arguments that Habermas advances against Derrida in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. This book is especially interesting and valuable for two reasons: 1) It is perhaps the most sustained and serious attack yet on post-modernist theory and 2) Habermas is the most vocal and credible proponent of a resumption of what he believes is the unfinished project of the Enlightenment – a project that is definitively modernist in its sympathies and outlook. After I have looked at Habermas, I will turn my attention to Derrida, whose position is crafted in such a way as to defy articulation and exposition, yet who nevertheless obliquely attacks the presuppositions of Habermas’s own critique of post-modernist theory. I will argue that, in Habermas and Derrida, the debate between modernism and post-modernism has reached a discursive impasse.

¹ R. Rorty, *Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity*, [in his:] *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, p. 165.

II

Particularly since the publication in 1981 of his monumental work *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas has been keenly interested in restoring the viability of the project of the Enlightenment. Even more recently, Habermas has been concerned with what he sees as the challenge – indeed, the threat – that post-modernist theory poses to this endeavor. His 1985 collection of essays, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, is his most sustained, coherent effort to search out and to sterilize the intellectual roots of post-modernist theory; at the same time, it is also his attempt to explain how the project of the Enlightenment became derailed in the first place. Thus, whereas *Theory of Communicative Action* is a remediative attempt to rehabilitate the project of the Enlightenment, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* is a diagnostic attempt to lay bare what Habermas sees as the intellectual ills that beset our times and threaten modernity; the former work seeks to put modernity, i.e., the project of the Enlightenment, back on track, while the latter seeks to put the final nail in the coffin of post-modernist, i.e., anti-Enlightenment, theory. Thus, Habermas writes:

The concept of a communicative reason that transcends subject-centered reason, which I have provisionally introduced, is intended to lead away from the paradoxes and levelings of a self-referential critique of reason. On the other front, it has to be upheld against the competing approach of a systems theory that utterly shoves the problematic of rationality aside, strips away *any* notion of reason as an old European drag, and then light-footedly takes over from the philosophy of the subject (as well as from the theory of power advanced by its sharpest opponents)².

Habermas believes that his theory of “communicative action” is sufficient to steer the project of Enlightenment back onto its proper path and away from the detours – and dead-ends – that it has taken under the misguided stewardship of “subject-centered reason”. Philosophical and attendant linguistic models based on the paradigm of “subject-centered reason” have led, on the one hand, to Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s notion of a dialectic of enlightenment and, on the other hand, to contemporary post-modernist theory. While Horkheimer and Adorno became stymied and Adorno sought to maintain a pale vestige of emancipatory *Ideologiekritik* in the form of a “negative dialectics”, post-modernist theory has appeared in two general variant strains, each of which, according to Habermas, derives from Nietzsche: a critique of metaphysics, which is derivative of Nietzsche’s own critique of reason and metaphysics, and a theory of power, which is derivative of Nietzsche’s postulation of a will to power. Habermas sees Heidegger and Derrida as representatives of the first strain and Bataille and Foucault as representatives of the second³.

Habermas’s critique of Derrida, although discrete and scattered about in several of the lectures that comprise *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, is forceful and tightly argued. I identify four principle components of the critique. They are the claims that: 1) Derrida does not escape the strictures of the philosophy of the subject, insofar as 2) his notion of “archewriting”, which is essential for his conception of “*différance*”, represents a retrogressive appeal to a sort of religious mysticism and is logically incoher-

² J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. F. G. Lawrence, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1987, p. 341.

³ *Ibidem*, p. XXX.

ent; 3) Derrida's "leveling" of the distinction between philosophy and literature erases the distinctions that demarcate the "value spheres"; and 4) this leveling and consequent erasure render deconstructionist theory unable to ground both itself and any ethical claims that it might make. I will now look at these claims in turn.

The "philosophy of the subject" to which Habermas repeatedly refers is inseparably linked to the old epistemological paradigm that affirms a dichotomy between the knowing subject and the objective world. This type of philosophy has appeared in many variants during the past 200 years and has been the point of departure for much of the thinking of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Adorno, Foucault, and Derrida⁴. These thinkers have tried to describe the relation that exists between the knowing subject and the objective world in terms of reason, production, will, intention, Being, nonidentity, power, and *différance*, respectively; each of these attempts to offer an adequate description of the relation between knowing subject and objective world has either run into problems of self-referentiality ("instrumental reason") or been consumed by a totalizing critique of reason ("inclusive reason")⁵, which leads Habermas to conclude that the paradigm of the philosophy of the subject is "exhausted"⁶. Thus, Habermas comments on Derrida's thesis of the primacy of writing over speech:

It is important to note that in the course of pursuing this line of thought Derrida by no means breaks with the foundationalist tenacity of the philosophy of the subject; he only makes what it had regarded as fundamental dependent on the still profounder [...] basis of an originary power set temporally aflow. Unabashedly, and in the style of *Ursprungsphilosophie*, Derrida falls back on this *Urschrift*, which leaves its traces anonymously, without any subject [...].

This criticism is especially interesting and serious because it attacks Derrida on exactly the point that, according to Derrida, extricates the deconstructionist enterprise from such binary opposites as "subject/object" and the "metaphysics of presence" that such opposites entail. Indeed, this is the heart of Derrida's criticism of, or, if one will, "improvement" on, Saussure, since Saussure, despite his abandonment of a strictly referential linguistic paradigm ("this word refers to that independently existing thing") in favor of a differential one ("this word means what it does because it does not sound exactly like any other word"), nevertheless maintained the "signifier/signified" dichotomy (a dichotomy, Habermas would be quick to note, that is clearly consistent with the "philosophy of the subject") and thereby left open the door for the reentry of the notion of concepts that are signified in and of themselves, insofar as he still maintained the model of a signifiatory relation between utterances and concepts⁸.

However, by applying to written language Saussure's idea that meaning in spoken language is produced differentially, Derrida believes that he overcomes the problem of the "signifier/signified" dichotomy that still lingers in Saussure's scheme. And Derrida does indeed thereby seem to eradicate the role of and need for a subject, since writing "makes what is said independent from the mind of the author, from the breath of the audience, as

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 249–296.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 341.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 296.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 178–179.

⁸ J. Derrida, *Positions*, trans. A. Bass, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1981, p. 19–20.

well as from the presence of the objects under discussion”⁹. “This archewriting is at the basis of both the spoken and the written word. The archewriting takes on the role of a subjectless generator of structures that, according to structuralism, are without any author”¹⁰.

Nothing – no present and in-*different* being – thus precedes *différance* and spacing. There is no subject who is agent, author, and master of *différance*, who eventually and empirically would be overtaken by *différance*. Subjectivity – like objectivity – is an effect of *différance*, an effect inscribed in a system of *différance*¹¹.

But Habermas insists that “archewriting”, which is the source of *différance*, is an appeal to yet another, albeit absent, authority that fulfills essentially the same function as “presence”. Furthermore, Habermas somewhat bizarrely charges Derrida with resurrecting Jewish mysticism¹², despite the fact that Derrida himself anticipates this charge¹³.

As a participant in the philosophical discourse of modernity, Derrida inherits the weaknesses of a critique of metaphysics that does not shake loose of the intentions of first philosophy. Despite his transformed gestures, [...] he, too, lands at an empty, formulalike avowal of some indeterminate authority. It is, however, not the authority of a Being that has been distorted by beings, but the authority of a no longer holy scripture, of a scripture that is in exile, wandering about, estranged from its own meaning, a scripture that testamentarily documents the absence of the holy¹⁴.

Derrida’s grammatologically circumscribed concept of an archewriting whose traces call forth all the more interpretations the more unfamiliar they become, renews the mystical concept of tradition as an ever *delayed* event of revelation. Religious authority only maintains its force as long as it conceals its true face and thereby incites the frenzy of deciphering interpreters¹⁵.

I think that Habermas tries to milk this argument for too much (indeed, he devotes an entire lecture to it). He seems bent on trying to convict Derrida of a sort of unintentional complicity in religion – a conviction that, if upheld, would indeed be more than a minor embarrassment for Derrida – and, in the process, merely cursorily mentions a much more plausible criticism of the idea of archewriting. Perhaps Habermas thought that the criticism is too obvious to warrant an extended exegesis. At any rate, this more plausible criticism raises the question of how, according to Derrida’s notion of archewriting, words could come to be imbued with any significance whatsoever. Habermas refers to this process of signification as “the labyrinthine mirror-effects of old texts, each of which points to an-

⁹ J. Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 165–166.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 180.

¹¹ J. Derrida, *Positions...*, p. 28.

¹² J. Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

¹³ See J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Ch. Spivak, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1974, p. 47: “The trace must be thought before the entity. But the movement of the trace is necessarily occulted, it produces itself as self-occultation. When the other announces itself as such, it presents itself in the dissimulation of itself. This formulation is not theological, as one might believe somewhat hastily. The ‘theological’ is a determined moment in the total movement of the trace”. Or J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1982, p. 7: “By means of this solely strategic justification, I wish to underline that the efficacy of the thematic of *différance* may very well, indeed must, one day be superceded, lending itself if not to its own replacement, at least to enmeshing itself in a chain that in truth it never will have governed. Whereby, once again, it is not theological”.

¹⁴ J. Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 183.

other, yet older text without fostering any hope of ever attaining the archewriting¹⁶. Play of *différance* or not (Habermas seems to be contending), Derrida's view of the process of signification must provide for a final appeal, an appeal that the notion of archewriting certainly does not, indeed cannot, provide. Without such a provision, even the idea of *différance* becomes incoherent, since it is (rather ironically) unable to escape one of the same problems that also haunted Saussure's structuralist account of signification. As Jonathan Culler explains with respect to Saussure:

[A] theory based on difference does not escape logocentrism but finds itself appealing to presence, not only because concepts of analysis, demonstration, and objectivity involve such reference but also because in order to identify differences responsible for meanings one needs to treat some meanings as if they were given, as if they were somewhere 'present' as a point of departure¹⁷.

So Habermas's comparison of archewriting with „labyrinthine mirror-effects” is quite apropos, since it raises the question, „Where does meaning reside, if even in *différance*?” Habermas sees the deferment of meaning as an activity that forever holds out the promise of a fulfillment but that, by definition, must forever remain withheld. “Earnestly pursued deconstruction is the paradoxical labor of continuing a tradition in which the saving energy is only renewed by expenditure: The labor of deconstruction lets the refuse heap of interpretations, which it wants to clear away in order to get at the buried foundations, mount ever higher”¹⁸.

Habermas's remaining two principal criticisms pertain to Derrida's “leveling” of the genre distinction between philosophy and literature, to the consequent rupture, brought about by such a leveling, of the boundaries that separate the traditional “value spheres” of truth (philosophy), beauty (aesthetics), and justice (ethics), and to the potential deleterious effect that such a rupture could have on our understanding of history. Habermas is convinced that Derrida, in *effectively* placing literary and philosophical discourses on a par, wants to install rhetoric over logic, the literary over the philosophical. (I stress “effectively” because Derrida and Habermas have quite different ideas about what Derrida is trying to do: Habermas believes that Derrida wants to elevate rhetoric over logic, whereas Derrida states that he wants to do away altogether with the distinction between rhetoric and logic. It is indicative of the chasm that separates Habermas and Derrida that they disagree even about the object of their disagreement.) Despite the fact that Derrida himself, as will be shown below, disavows any such mere inversion of the hierarchy of rhetoric and logic (i.e., of literature and philosophy), Habermas believes that any attempts to compromise the autonomy of philosophy will undermine the sovereignty of each of the value spheres and that this will ultimately deprive each sphere of its unique ability to contribute to the greater “lifeworld”.

Summarizing a key tenet of the project of deconstruction, Habermas writes:

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 179.

¹⁷ J. Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York 1982, p. 110.

¹⁸ J. Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

The rebellious labor of deconstruction aims indeed at dismantling smuggled-in basic conceptual hierarchies, at overthrowing foundational relationships and conceptual relations of domination, such as those between speech and writing, the intelligible and the sensible, nature and culture, inner and outer, mind and matter, male and female. Logic and rhetoric constitute one of these conceptual pairs. Derrida is particularly interested in standing the primacy of logic over rhetoric, canonized since Aristotle, on its head¹⁹.

Habermas has a major stake in claiming that Derrida is “particularly” interested in inverting the primacy of logic over rhetoric, because he sees such an inversion as the primary danger that deconstructionism poses to his own philosophically grounded position, insofar as (in Habermas’s view) this inversion would usurp philosophy’s role as the adjudicator among the value spheres and thereby emasculate philosophical discourse itself. Thus, recapitulating one of the primary advantages that he sees in his own theory, he states that “in communicative action the creative moment of the linguistic constitution of the world forms *one syndrome* with the cognitive-instrumental [i.e., philosophical], moral-practical [i.e., ethical], and expressive [i.e., aesthetic] moments of the intramundane linguistic functions of representation, interpersonal relation, and subjective expression. In the modern world, ‘value spheres’ have been differentiated out of each of these moments”²⁰. Yet he writes of deconstruction, “The primacy of rhetoric over logic means the overall responsibility of rhetoric for the general qualities of an all-embracing context of texts, within which all genre distinctions are ultimately dissolved; philosophy and science no more constitute their own proper universes than art and literature constitute a realm of fiction that could assert its autonomy vis-à-vis the universal text”²¹.

Making a correlate criticism, Habermas argues that this erasure of the genre distinctions leaves rhetoric, now primary over logic, unable to ground itself. Referring to Derrida’s project of deconstruction (as well as to Adorno’s aesthetically rooted *Ideologiekritik* and Foucault’s genealogy of power), he states that “[t]hese discourses can and want to give no account of their own position. Negative dialectics, genealogy, and deconstruction alike avoid those categories in accord with which modern knowledge has been differentiated – by no means accidentally – and on the basis of which we today understand texts. They cannot be unequivocally classified with either philosophy or science, with moral or legal theory, or with literature and art”²².

But the damage resulting from deconstruction’s failure to supply a rational grounding for itself does not stop there. Having severed all attachments to a rationally grounded, sovereign philosophical discourse, deconstruction is not able to address seriously the social – that is, the ethical – issues in whose service it claims to stand. It is “guided by normative intuitions that go beyond what [it] can accommodate in terms of the indirectly affirmed ‘other of reason’”²³.

Indeed, this inability to establish an ethical foundation is a problem common to all variants of post-modernist theory: “With the counterconcepts (injected as empty formulas)

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 187.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 339.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 190–191.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 336.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 337.

of Being, sovereignty, power, difference, and nonidentity, this critique points to the contents of aesthetic experience; but the values derived therefrom and explicitly laid claim to – the values of grace and illumination, ecstatic rapture, bodily integrity, wish-fulfillment, and caring intimacy – do not cover the moral change that these authors tacitly envision in connection with a life practice that is intact [...]”²⁴.

Thus, by leveling the genre distinction between literature and philosophy, deconstructionism sabotages itself in a two-fold manner. By usurping the primacy of philosophical discourse, which decides the validity of competing truth claims, Derrida simultaneously cuts the ground out from underneath his own feet, insofar as his position is dependent upon the same appeal to reasoned argumentation that he seeks to neutralize by placing rhetoric on a par with logic. At the same time, this usurpation undermines the legitimacy of any purportedly ethically based social aspirations that the project of deconstruction might entertain. This leads Habermas to conclude that the leveling of the genre distinction between literature and philosophy renders each incapable of performing its proper, allotted function. “The false assimilation of one enterprise to the other robs both of their substance”²⁵.

Philosophy, robbed of its substance, can then no longer serve as a referee among the value spheres, and all three value spheres – the philosophical, the ethical, and the aesthetic – merge into a homogenized aesthetic, thereby eviscerating even the aesthetic.

III

Whereas Habermas is engaged on two fronts, insofar as he must put the project of modernity back on track and attack post-modernist theory, Derrida needs to maintain only one front and thus can proceed much more efficiently, since the project of deconstruction is itself an overt attack on that which Derrida believes is the residual metaphysical underpinning of modernism. Derrida sees deconstruction as a process that reveals its position in the *activity* of “deconstructing” and repeatedly insists that deconstruction is not an idea or a theory that could be presented as a finished intellectual edifice. Holding steady at the helm of modernism, Habermas blasts Derrida for failing to give an argued account of his position: “Since Derrida does not belong to those philosophers who like to argue, it is expedient to take a closer look at his disciples in literary criticism within the Anglo-Saxon climate of argument in order to see whether this thesis [i.e., the thesis that there is no genre distinction between literature and literary criticism] can be held”²⁶. And, indeed, many of Derrida’s writings, in contrast to Habermas’s, are not so much reasoned arguments as attempts to manifest the themes and ideas that Derrida implicitly entertains, insofar as they are illustrative rather than discursive. So, what Habermas sees as a serious weakness in Derrida’s philosophical style is actually what Derrida himself sees as the (ever ongoing) realization of exactly what he is trying to say and to accomplish, and the method that Derrida uses to present his views is at least as revelatory of those views as any exegesis or argument that he might offer in support of them. This is why – and *how* – Derrida is able,

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 210.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 193.

in one breath, to state his own position obliquely while attacking other positions (including Habermas's) overtly. As a consequence, a reader finds it difficult – if not impossible – to offer an “account” of Derrida's critique of foundationalist thinking without doing injury to that critique, since the idea of an “adequate summation” of Derrida's position is altogether antithetical to his position in the first place.

Another difficulty that confronts students of Derrida consists in the fact that, whereas traditional philosophical argumentation demands that all of its participants abide by the rules of syllogistic reasoning, Derridean discourse requires that its interlocutors declare themselves ready to accept, at least provisionally, a suspension of exactly those rules that have defined the practice of traditional philosophical argumentation. “What I will propose here will not be elaborated simply as a philosophical discourse, operating according to principles, postulates, axioms or definitions, and proceeding along the discursive lines of a linear order of reasons”²⁷. To refuse to accept such a suspension means to consign oneself to a position of hopeless bafflement and frustration in the face of statements such as “the *pharmakon* is neither remedy nor poison, neither good nor evil, neither the inside nor the outside, neither speech nor writing”²⁸, so it is altogether understandable that critics of Derrida and deconstruction would come down hard on what one could see as Derrida's disregard of logic in the name of an “other” logic. John Ellis, one of the more methodical and powerful critics of deconstruction, even goes so far as to accuse Derrida and his allies of being mystics: “Derrida and [Derrida scholar Barbara] Johnson have, then, seized on an ancient rhetorical device for their new, ‘other’ logic, but the mere application of this standard mystical formula to a question of literary influences does nothing to advance discussion of that question”²⁹.

Each of these difficulties results directly from and is consistent with both Derrida's project of the deconstruction of the metaphysical (i.e., foundationalist) trappings of language and his attempt to wrestle with both the predicament that he is forced to use language to talk about language and the paradox that he must use certain concepts to debunk the tenability of those concepts. Derrida is quite aware that even he cannot entirely avoid recourse to metaphysically-tinged language³⁰. Yet, rather than lamenting this fact and attempting to wiggle out of what looks like a trap of self-recursivity (language contra language), Derrida accords metaphysically-tinged language and its attendant concepts a key position in his view, stating that “[s]ince these concepts are indispensable for unsettling the heritage to which they belong, we should be even less prone to renounce them”³¹. At the same time, he seeks to turn such language and concepts against themselves in an ongoing process that, by definition, can never come to rest, lest the process itself become the static entity that it seeks to overthrow: the ossified metaphysics entailed by the model of binary opposition. “In fact, I attempt to bring the critical operation to bear against the unceasing reappropriation of this work of the simulacrum by a dialectics of the Hegelian type [...], for Hegelian idealism consists

²⁷ J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*..., p. 6–7.

²⁸ J. Derrida, *Positions*..., p. 43.

²⁹ J. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1989, p. 8.

³⁰ J. Derrida, *Positions*..., p. 36.

³¹ J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*..., p. 14.

precisely of a *relève* of the binary oppositions of modernist idealism, a resolution of contradiction into a third term that comes in order to *aufheben*, to deny while raising up, while idealizing, while sublimating into an anamnestic interiority (Erinnerung), while *interning* difference in a self-presence”³².

Derrida is using very clever tactics here, immediately steering us into his direction by involving us, the readers, in the question of how to approach and to evaluate his writings, which he himself already regards as problematic at the outset. “What am I to do in order to speak of the *a* of *différance*? It goes without saying that it cannot be *exposed*. One can expose only that which at a certain moment can become *present*, manifest, that which can be shown, presented as something present, a being-present in its truth, in the truth of a present or the presence of the present”³³. In stark contrast to Habermas, Derrida does not so much debate *about* the topics that he addresses as problematize his own texts and thereby turn them into illustrative instances of the debate. As Peggy Kamuf observes:

If we would ask the question of genre of Derrida’s writing, we must be prepared for a response that itself poses a question to our confident distinctions among kinds of writing. Derrida repeatedly reminds us that the concepts ordering these distinctions, and principally the concepts of a representable truth, are already determined from *within* philosophy rather than determining philosophy from some place outside it. As such, they can distinguish philosophical from non-philosophical discourses only in terms that are already themselves philosophical. [...] The poetic or the literary has been not so much distinguished from philosophy as subordinated to it³⁴.

This is a point on which Habermas severely criticizes Derrida. Thomas McCarthy, one of Habermas’s sympathetic readers, summarizes:

In Derrida and his followers, Habermas argues, language’s capacity to solve problems disappears behind its world-creating capacity. Thus, they fail to recognize the unique status of specialized discourses differentiated out from communicative action to deal with specific types of problems and validity claims: science and technology, law and morality, economics and political science, and so forth³⁵.

It is little wonder, then, that Habermas sees Derrida as “one of those philosophers who do not like to argue” and that Derrida would see Habermas as a latter-day devotee of the metaphysics of presence: Habermas sees Derrida’s texts, whose genre cannot be clearly identified, as examples of exactly the sort of chaos that would ensue in the world at large if Derrida got his way, and Derrida would see Habermas’s texts not so much as revelations of rationally apprehended discoveries as restatements of beliefs of which Habermas is antecedently convinced.

Nor is it much wonder, then, that Habermas and Derrida are unable to agree even on how deconstruction ultimately affects the relationship between philosophy and literature, logic and rhetoric. As we have seen, Habermas bases his criticism of Derrida on the con-

³² *Ibidem*, p. 43.

³³ J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy...*, p. 5–6.

³⁴ P. Kamuf, *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, Columbia University Press, New York 1991, p. 143.

³⁵ J. Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. XXX.

attention that deconstruction levels the genre distinctions between philosophy and literature, concluding that such a leveling not only inverts the existing primacy of philosophical discourse over literary discourse, but also renders philosophical and literary discourses – including Derrida’s own – unable to perform their proper functions within their respective value spheres. Yet, while it is indeed true that Derrida is trying to level the genre distinctions between philosophy and literature, he also maintains that such a leveling does not invert the existing primacy, but rather reveals that the hierarchy cannot be maintained as a hierarchy, insofar as any hierarchy is parasitic upon the existence of the (ultimately untenable) model of binary opposition; he thereby does not place the various discursive genre on a par per se, but rather (as Habermas does correctly remark) erases the grounds of their differentiation altogether³⁶. Thus, although Derrida is not at all interested in simply substituting one hierarchy for another (since this would simply preserve hierarchy *qua* hierarchy), Habermas believes that this is exactly what happens as soon as Derrida starts to tamper with what Habermas sees as the sacrosanct borders between discursive genre. Yet, Habermas’s argument against Derrida hinges on his contention that Derrida wants to *elevate* rhetoric over logic, as he clearly states:

Derrida’s claim that ‘deconstruction’ is an instrument for bringing Nietzsche’s radical critique of reason out of the dead end of its paradoxical self-referentiality therefore stands – or falls – along with thesis number 3³⁷.

And what is “thesis number 3”? It is the thesis that “[t]he primacy of rhetoric over logic means the overall responsibility of rhetoric for the general qualities of an all-embracing context of texts, within which all genre distinctions are ultimately dissolved; philosophy and science no more constitute their own proper universes than art and literature constitute a realm of fiction that could assert its autonomy vis-a-vis the universal text”³⁸. However, Derrida would say to this that Habermas could not help but see the deconstruction of the hierarchy between philosophy and literature as the *de facto* elevation of rhetoric over logic, since his (Habermas’s) own position is itself dependent on the maintenance of that hierarchy of logic over rhetoric.

IV

The profound rift between Habermas and Derrida reveals itself already in the terms and manner in which they choose to conduct their attacks on one another. Indeed, how could this fail to be the case? *The rigid distinction between philosophical and literary discourses, between logic and rhetoric, is what legitimates Habermas’s own discourse as a philosopher*, and he could no more abandon this distinction without betraying an essential tenet of his own credo and philosophical identity than Derrida could engage Habermas in traditional philosophical discourse, with all the trappings that Derrida sees in such discourse, without betraying an essential tenet of *his* own position.

³⁶ I. Saluszinsky, *Criticism in Society*, Methuen, New York 1987, p. 11.

³⁷ J. Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 190–191.

This disagreement is a paradigmatic manifestation of the rift between modernist and post-modernist theory. Habermas's discourse is defined by his adherence to a rigid, categorical meta-structure, yet Derrida's discourse is defined by the process of deconstructing such rigid, categorical meta-structures. Habermas would say that the argumentative and rational force of Derrida's position (if it is to have any force at all) must rely on exactly the sort of discursive meta-structures that he (Habermas) is defending, and that Derrida therefore has two options: either 1) to disregard discursive meta-structures (as he, in fact, does) and thereby eviscerate his own discourse, or 2) to accept discursive meta-structures and thereby concede his (Habermas's) own point. Derrida, on the other hand, would say that the argumentative and rational force of Habermas's own position depends on exactly the sort of discursive meta-structures whose validity and legitimacy he (Habermas) must establish in the first place. Thus, Habermas sees Derrida's position as self-refuting, and Derrida sees Habermas's position as self-gratuitous.

As a result, Habermas is unable to grant the dynamic component that defines Derrida's position; similarly, Derrida is unable to grant the static component that defines Habermas's position. Yet, rather than attempt to avoid what Habermas sees as the self-refuting character of Derrida's position, Derrida *emphasizes* that deconstruction is a never-ending process whose present impetus, *différance*, must eventually turn back even on itself. "I wish to underline that the efficacy of the thematic of *différance* may very well, indeed must, one day be superseded, lending itself if not to its own replacement, at least to enmeshing itself in a chain that in truth it never will have governed"³⁹. Likewise, rather than attempt to overcome what Derrida sees as the essentially tautologous nature of Habermas's position⁴⁰, Habermas maintains that, without the sort of foundationalism that he is advocating, we cannot rest assured that we can provide a coherent account of anything⁴¹.

Habermas does indeed try to extricate himself from the old jam of "subject-centered reason" by means of the "universal pragmatics" of his theory of communicative action, which (he believes) accounts for the generation of language without appealing to the embattled modernist epistemological model that maintains a dichotomy between the knower and the known. Yet, in positing – even if only heuristically – the idea of a consensus toward which participants in the *Lebenswelt* should strive, he nevertheless clings to a modernist metaphysical notion, namely, to the idea of teleology, insofar as his scheme provides, at least in principle, for an end to the process by which consensus is achieved, yet that, like the eternal deferment of meaning entailed by *différance*, must forever remain beyond consummation. And, for his part, Derrida does indeed remain ever vigilant against becoming trapped by and within a metaphysics of presence, albeit at the cost of our having to make peace with the idea that deconstruction is, by definition, a process that cannot only never be completed in practice, but that, in principle, denies even the possibility of its ever being completed, since it knows neither beginning nor end.

The debate between modernism and post-modernism – and, it might well be argued, between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism, representationalism and anti-repre-

³⁹ J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy...*, p. 7.

⁴⁰ J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1978, p. 279.

⁴¹ R. Rorty, *op. cit.*, p. 164–173.

sentationalism, realism and idealism – thus founders on an irresolvable systemic incommensurability wherein each side maintains that the other is fundamentally incoherent. The modernist position, as represented by Habermas, is *defined* by the use of systemic principles that must themselves remain protected from critical review, lest criticism become “totalizing”, i.e., post-modernist. The post-modernist position, as represented by Derrida, is *defined* by the overt, intentional use of systemic principles that must themselves come under critical self-review, lest criticism become “dogmatic”, i.e., modernist. The incommensurability of their discourse consists in the fact that the alleged incoherence of the modernist and post-modernist positions is posed by each position’s own sacrosanct principles, principles that are necessary for the definition of each side’s position yet simultaneously sufficient, in the eyes of the opposing position, for its self-subversion. Failing this possibility of a common vocabulary, there can be no discourse.

Streszczenie

Obie strony sporu między modernizmem a postmodernizmem widzą w sobie rzecznika procesu społecznej emancypacji. Zarazem głoszą, że koncepcja emancypacji bronią przez przeciwnika jest nie tylko błędna, ale i potencjalnie niebezpieczna. W swym artykule autor analizuje najważniejsze argumenty Jürgena Habermasa przeciwko filozofii Jacques’a Derridy, przedstawione w *Filozoficznym dyskursie nowoczesności*, oraz kluczowe zarzuty Derridy wobec habermasowskiej krytyki. W sporze Habermasa i Derridy o koncepcję emancypacji debata między modernizmem a postmodernizmem osiąga dyskursywny impas. Autor odsłania paradygmatyczną niewspółmierność obydwu prądów myślowych. Każdy z nich posługuje się odmiennym językiem, który uprawomocnia ich pozycję w sporze: wejście w dialog z rozmówcą oznaczałoby zatem zdradę własnej tożsamości myślowej. Brak wspólnego słownika uniemożliwia dyskusję.

