

In recent times, few philosophers have been as conversely condemned and commended as frequently as Jacques Derrida, the founding father of deconstruction. For some, he has quite the extensive intellectual rap sheet, deserving the blame for corrupting philosophy, comparative literature, and academic institutions in general,<sup>[1]</sup> not to mention lending credence to Holocaust revisionism<sup>[2]</sup> and Mormon polygamy.<sup>[3]</sup> Yet, for others such as John Caputo, Derrida seems at times to be more messianic than the Messiah Himself. He is, for them, a savior come to bring justice to the world, liberating the Other as a suffering servant turning the other cheek towards the academic establishment so rashly seeking to purge his influence.<sup>[4]</sup>

So is Derrida in fact a misunderstood liberator in need of a little liberation himself? This essay will give a sympathetic ear to Jacques Derrida, presenting his conceptions of the undeconstructible, messianicity, and community, all the while analyzing how well Derrida addresses human suffering caused by structural evil. I will then set forth my own views on God, salvation, and the church (corresponding respectively to Derrida's conceptions of the undeconstructible, messianicity, and community), explaining how a Trinitarian perspective better addresses the shared concern for structural evil.

## **Jacques Derrida and Structural Evil**

### *Deconstruction and the Undeconstructible*

In his autobiographical work "Circumfession," Derrida laments that even his own mother has misunderstood his religion.<sup>[5]</sup> Although claiming to "quite rightly pass for an atheist," Derrida asserts, "the constancy of God in my life is called by other names."<sup>[6]</sup> These names include the gift, forgiveness, justice, love, and hospitality. All are examples of what Derrida terms "the undeconstructible,"<sup>[7]</sup> the impossible Other towards which deconstruction strives. In this section we will briefly look at deconstruction and the undeconstructible before using the example of justice to analyze deconstruction's import in addressing human suffering caused by structural evil.

An invaluable succinct albeit tongue-in-cheek definition given by John Caputo concedes that "cracking nutshells is what deconstruction *is*. In a nutshell."<sup>[8]</sup> Whereas "nutshells" are attempts to delimit the limitless, deconstruction is the splintering of the nutshell that occurs when what is not confinable begins to break out of its confines. Caputo explains that "the very meaning and mission of deconstruction is to show that things – texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices... do not have definable meanings and determinable missions... that they exceed the boundaries they currently occupy."<sup>[9]</sup> It is in this sense that *deconstruction* must not be confused with *destruction*. The purpose of deconstruction is not simply to negate or destroy, but to crack open the nutshell and let the Other contained therein loose, free to be truly other.

In his essay "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'", Derrida analyzes the undeconstructible concept of justice. He makes the distinction between "the law" which can be deconstructed and "justice" which cannot.<sup>[10]</sup> The law, as used here by Derrida, is composed of all the legislation on the books and the structures of the judicial system as they stand. Justice, if it exists at all, is what calls on the law to be more just. It is the impossible, non-existent ideal that the law always unsuccessfully attempts to embody.

That being the case, rigidly enforcing the law does not achieve justice in Derrida's line of thought. In fact, to the extent that laws are historical and contextual, one may be decidedly *unjust* by enforcing the law. As contextual circumstances change, laws must change as well, or risk closing themselves off from justice. Laws must frequently be deconstructed so that they may always be open to justice, the undeconstructible.

Derrida's distinction between the law and justice is surely helpful; justice, indeed, has not arrived, and those who claim that it has ignore the structural evils right under their nose. Derrida, in order to protect justice from ever mistakenly being identified in present circumstances, makes justice, if such a thing exists, utterly transcendent. This makes the pursuit of justice a restless and perpetual endeavor, forming the basis for Derrida's claim that "Justice is what gives us the impulse, the drive, or the movement to improve the law, that is, to deconstruct the law."<sup>[11]</sup> In other words, by constantly opening the law to justice we do not ever achieve justice (it's impossible), but we make things relatively more "just" in the process, even if only for a moment.

But by making justice so radically transcendent, does Derrida not make justice, for all practical purposes, radically imminent? If we could not recognize justice even if we saw it,<sup>[12]</sup> then we only have what is already in place to work with in our pursuit. At the very least, without any transcendent ground whatsoever the call of justice would be weaker and weaker the more structurally embedded an injustice may be. The only resources to amplify this weak call then becomes the whims of the deconstructors, whom James K. A. Smith has shown to be contextually embedded themselves.<sup>[13]</sup> As will be explicated more fully later, an apophatic and Trinitarian perspective of revelation both keeps present laws from being confused with justice *and* provides the transcendent ground needed to speak prophetically concerning structural evils.

### *Messianicity*

If the undeconstructible represents the "constancy of God" in Derrida's religion, then salvation comes by deconstruction, the cracking of the nutshell enclosing the undeconstructible. The undeconstructible Other, deconstruction's Messiah, is always coming but never arriving. It is the hopeful and active preparation for this promised but perpetually delayed Messiah that Derrida terms "messianicity."<sup>[14]</sup>

Derrida frequently borrows from the following parable of Maurice Blanchot.<sup>[15]</sup> The Messiah comes to Rome, living disguised among the poor, diseased, and outcast. Someone recognizes him as the Messiah and approaches him, asking "When will you come?" Blanchot explains, "His being there is, then, not the coming. With the Messiah, who is there, the call must always resound: 'Come, come.'"<sup>[16]</sup> In deconstruction, salvation depends precisely on the Messiah's never arriving. Messianicity, or the "opening of experience," as Derrida explains, takes place "as soon as you are open to the future, as soon as you have a temporal experience of waiting for the future, of waiting for someone to come."<sup>[17]</sup>

For the Messiah to finally come would mean disaster for Derrida.<sup>[18]</sup> The importance of the Messiah in deconstruction is not that He *has* come or *will* come, as in Judaism, Christianity or Islam, but that He *is coming*. Messianicity does not save by revealing some absolute, objective truth about God or the world, but by shattering the idea that there is some truth like that present. That sort of truth, for Derrida, is downright dangerous and leads to structural evil, the violence against whoever views things differently and are therefore in the way. It is the Messiah's absence which then saves us from structural evil. But if the Messiah

never arrives then this salvation is better described as a complacency with lesser evils than a true liberation from the bondage to evil that all of us are both complicit in and victimized by. What is then needed is not the absence of the Messiah, but a humble Messiah who comes to serve rather than lord over.

### *A Hospitable Community*

Lastly, Derrida does not desire the kind of hyper-individualized subjectivity in which anything goes, despite some caricatures of his thought. In fact, he places a strong, positive emphasis on the role of community in interpretation, even suggesting that communities must set certain flexible and open rules for interpretation.<sup>[19]</sup> This is where many of his critics seem to misunderstand him. Hans Boersma, for example, claims that Derrida's conception of community amounts to a "refusal to judge, condemn, or penalize the other."<sup>[20]</sup> Although Derrida's thought could lead to that excess, Derrida clearly holds a place for the enforcement of rules in a community and even to a certain extent between communities,<sup>[21]</sup> a fact Boersma seems to have disregarded. A pure diversity between people, leaving them in anarchy, would be as disastrous as a homogenizing unity.

What Derrida does desire is a reassessment of the privilege typically granted to unity over diversity in Western thought. Discussing the role of community, Derrida remarks, "disassociation is the condition of community, the condition of any unity as such... A state without plurality and a respect for plurality would be, first, a totalitarian state."<sup>[22]</sup> A community's self-identity must be flexible and open, respecting internal and external difference. Without some give and take, a sense of identity too often leads to forced homogenization and violence in the name of establishing some sort of purity, whether it be national, ethnic, or doctrinal. Rather than tipping the scales between diversity and unity in favor of diversity, Derrida wishes to throw away the scales altogether in favor of a community that makes room for diversity in unity.

It is here, perhaps, where deconstruction resonates the most strongly with Christian thought. Both deconstruction and Christianity have similar goals: extravagant community with diversity. In deconstruction, however, community is the impossible goal to be achieved despite structural evils. For Christians, in contrast, God has already graciously established communion with and within the church, a communion which leads the church to struggle against structural evils.

### **A Trinitarian Perspective on Structural Evil**

Although Jacques Derrida's heart longs for the liberation of the Other, I have shown above that this desire to address structural evil is plagued by several weaknesses in his thought. The rest of this essay will be devoted to presenting an alternative recourse from a Trinitarian perspective that addresses the same concerns while avoiding deconstruction's shortcomings.

### *A Wholly Other God*

We found the first chink in deconstruction's armor to be its conception of God. Derrida's undeconstructible is so radically transcendent that it is radically imminent, with no room for revelation. An apophatic approach to the Triune God, on the other hand, maintains

transcendence while still allowing for revelation, which provides the needed basis to speak prophetically concerning even the most culturally accepted structural evils.

In the apophatic tradition of Christianity, God remains beyond all human conceptions. Even the most seemingly harmless descriptions of God such as “the Good” fall short of who God is, making the use of such descriptions without qualification risk idolatry.[23] This striking transcendence is rooted in God’s being a Creator who creates *ex nihilo*. [24] We are created and therefore cannot think outside of such conditions as time, space and materiality, whereas God is uncreated and so transcends all such creaturely confines.

The apophatic tradition, however, does not stop at this insurmountable abyss, as does deconstruction. For the apophatic tradition, God reveals Himself so that “the relationship between God and the world as ontological otherness [is] bridged by love,”[25] by God’s gracious entrance into relationship with humanity. Jesus Christ is the bridge between God and humanity through His being both fully God and fully man without division or confusion. He has dwelt among us within the same creaturely confines that frustrate our attempts to conceptualize God, thereby making God known to us (Jn 1:14, 18). Only by this revelation can humanity know God, and even then revelation is not acquired by human investigation, but is mediated personally by the Holy Spirit, leaving humanity humbly dependent (1 Jn 4:2). This revelatory work is continued as the Spirit witnesses to the revelation of Christ through Scripture and the church community.[26]

In terms of the example used above, this means that no human laws can lay claim to being divine justice. All human structures fall short of the glory of God, so no structures remain unquestioned by God’s revelation in Christ. This protects the church from ever thinking justice has been attained this side of the Second Coming. This potentially stifling suspicion of human efforts, however, gives way to God’s presence in Jesus Christ, who makes God and His will known to us as He redeems all of creation, including fallen structures (Jn 1:18; Col 2:15), as will be explicated below.

### *Jesus, the Present Messiah*

The question posed to the Messiah in Blanchot’s parable, “When will you come?”, is posed to Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. John the Baptist had been imprisoned by Herod, and sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Mat 11:2-3). No doubt this question reflects the messianic expectations of the time: Israel was waiting for a political ruler, one who would realize the nationalistic hopes of Israel by throwing off the Roman yoke. And yet John sees Jesus fiddling around in the backwoods of Galilee, far from Jerusalem, while he sits in chains as a political prisoner!

Even so, as Jesus answers in v. 4-5, “the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.” Jesus points to the prophecy of Isaiah in which the effects of sin would be reversed with the Messiah’s coming (Is 35, 61). Though it may not match expectations, Jesus proclaims that now is the time when the Lord would comfort grieving Zion, victimized by the injustice of the surrounding nations, by coming in the flesh and beginning to reverse the effects of sin.

God is present to us in the Messiah Jesus, but not as an overbearing presence like Blanchot and Derrida feared, nor as the nationalistic revolutionary of Jewish hope. The Messiah was present as a humble servant, sent to suffer for the liberation of the world from the bondage to sin. This liberation effects all aspects of creation, as can be seen in the writings of Paul.

Christ has redeemed humanity from our sins by becoming a curse for us (Gal 3:13), yet all of creation also awaits its final liberation from bondage to decay (Rom 8:21), and even the spiritual powers and authorities behind structural evil have been conquered by the cross of Christ (Col 2:15). For Paul, these powers and authorities include both “demonic spirits with personalities and human creations, including social structures, ideas, and perhaps a combination of them all.”<sup>[27]</sup> Although not inherently evil, they take on a life of their own in response to human sin, claiming an authority over humanity that is not theirs.<sup>[28]</sup> As with ruts in a road, it is easier to follow along with these fallen powers than to avoid them; but when the ruts lead down a path to sin and injustice, they become a formidable opponent. Christ has disarmed the fallen powers, however, through His saving presence, showing the powers to be false gods through His life, death, resurrection, and ascension to the Father’s side as Lord of all.

### *The Body of Christ*

But even Jesus’ ascension to the Father’s side has not separated the world from His saving presence. His going allowed Him to send another advocate: the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit comes, Jesus said, the disciples will realize “that I am in the Father, and you are in me and I am in you” (Jn 14:20). In other words, Jesus will indwell them and remain the Present Messiah through the church’s participation in the life of the Spirit.

It is Christ’s abiding presence in the church through the Spirit that leads Paul to call the church the “body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:12-13). As Christ’s body, the church is the continuing presence of Christ in the world, participating in God’s ministry of reconciliation of the world to Himself (2 Cor 15:17-21). The church knows that Christ is the Way and that the “ruts” that lead to structural evil are not the only path. Rooted in her identity as Christ’s body, the church’s mission is then to witness to Christ’s Lordship over all and to struggle against the structural evils that lead away from Christ and God’s will for the world. By doing so, the church provides an answer to the question posed the Messiah by a hurting world: “When will you come?”

Although Jacques Derrida is not quite the devil many of his critics accuse him of being, neither is he the Messiah his most loyal disciples see him as. Deconstruction ultimately throws the baby (transcendent presence through personal revelation) out with the bathwater (arrogant wielding of truth as a weapon), and its ability to address structural evil suffers because of it. The works of God should not be confused with the works of humanity, and the gulf between God and humanity must always engender humility in the church’s engagement with the world. But at the same time, the ultimate Other, the One who is both God and man, has arrived from the far shore. There can then be no other ground for Christian engagement of structural evil than that provided by Jesus Christ, the revelation of the Triune God and His will for humanity.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Amy Gutmann, “Relativism, Deconstruction, and the Curriculum,” *Campus Wars: Multiculturalism and the Politics of Difference*, eds. John Arthur and Amy Shapiro (New York: Westview, 1994), 60-61.

<sup>[2]</sup> Michael Howard, as noted in John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham, 1997), 41 and 50.

<sup>[3]</sup> Gutmann, 64-68.

- [4] Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 41 and 123.
- [5] Jacques Derrida, "Circumfession," *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 155.
- [6] Ibid.
- [7] John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 63.
- [8] Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 32.
- [9] Ibid., 31.
- [10] Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 14-15.
- [11] Jacques Derrida, "The Villanova Roundtable," *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 16.
- [12] Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 132.
- [13] James K. A. Smith, "Determined Violence: Derrida's Structural Religion," *Journal of Religion* 78, 1998, 206-207.
- [14] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 59.
- [15] Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 141.
- [16] Ibid., 142.
- [17] Derrida, "The Villanova Roundtable," 22.
- [18] John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1997), 74.
- [19] James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 53.
- [20] Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 30.
- [21] Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 119.
- [22] Derrida, "The Villanova Roundtable," 15.
- [23] Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 40.
- [24] John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 39.
- [25] Ibid., 91.
- [26] Paul Louis Metzger, "The Relational Dynamic of Revelation: A Trinitarian Perspective," *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology*, ed. Paul Louis Metzger (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 27-29.
- [27] Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 70.
- [28] Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, trans. John Howard Yoder (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1962), 29.