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## Living the Life of the Mind

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# Living the Life of the Mind

*Charlotte Knowles on the value of openness in philosophy*

The autumn of 2020 marks 16 years since the death of Jacques Derrida, but even from beyond the grave he still manages to provoke ire. My most recent encounter with this “Derrida Dread” happened a short while ago when I stumbled across a heated debate on social media initiated by the reposting of Eric Schliesser’s informative blogpost “The Letter against Derrida’s Honorary Degree, re-examined.”

## *Deconstruction puts into question apparently stable oppositions*

For those unfamiliar with his work, Derrida is the silver fox and founder of deconstruction. It’s very difficult to say exactly what deconstruction is, not least because it’s very hard to define a theory that aims to resist definitions, but let’s give it a go. Broadly speaking, deconstruction is a method of critical analysis that is used to “deconstruct” literary and philosophical texts, as well as political institutions. Deconstruction seeks to dismantle hierarchical thinking and puts into question apparently stable oppositions on which identity is founded. If this sounds complicated, that’s because it is. But this doesn’t stop Derrida and his work from being extremely influential. We can see,

for example, the impact of deconstruction in the realm of feminist thought, where it has been deployed as a way to rethink the supposedly natural opposition between man and woman, and the notion that these represent distinct and fixed identities. Among other things, deconstruction aims to show that things only gain their meaning relationally and so any “real” opposition is only an illusion.

Engaging with someone who is a deconstructionist may be very irritating. It may feel as if they are constantly pushing against the normal bounds of analysis or argumentation, reading against the grain of the text, trying to uncover what is said in what is unsaid.... I can feel some of you getting annoyed just as you read this. But it is not primarily the attempt to earnestly engage with deconstruction that seems to provoke anger in even the most mild-mannered of our philosophical companions. The mere mention of Derrida’s name can cause philosophers of a certain bent to spit derisively on the floor. As someone who doesn’t particularly have any skin in this game, I do find it amusing and slightly absurd *how angry* he makes people. It’s as if Derrida had broken into these people’s houses, defecated on their living room floor, and replaced their *Just For Men* with a box of writhing ants, rather than just, you know, written some admittedly dense and often hard to follow academic texts.

As should now be clear, Derrida is one of the most divisive philosophers – although of course even this is a contentious claim, as many object to him even being called a philosopher. Among such people are the signatories to an open letter published in *The Times* in 1992 objecting to his honorary degree from Cambridge. As the writers of the letter stated:

Derrida describes himself as a philosopher, and his writings do indeed bear some of the marks of writings in that discipline.... In the eyes of philosophers, and certainly among those working in leading departments of philosophy throughout the world, M. Derrida's work does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigour.

The condescending tone leaps off the page: he “*describes himself as a philosopher*” but “*in the eyes of philosophers ... throughout the world he does not meet the accepted standards.*” So it's not just the signatories of the letter who don't think Derrida is a philosopher, it's EVERYONE. Glad we cleared that up.

But of course, it's not everyone. There are lots of people, even those working within “leading departments of philosophy,” who find Derrida a very productive – I'm going to say it – *philosopher* to engage with. His work is undoubtedly very complicated and difficult if you're not used to that sort of thing. But I also don't think that's a reason to dismiss it out of hand when, in most cases, those dismissals – as Schliesser notes in his blog – come from people who have not really tried to engage with his work.

The authors of the letter say that Derrida does not “meet accepted standards

of clarity and rigour,” but this accusation seems to miss the point of what Derrida was trying to do. Derrida's project set out to critique and problematise what was taken for granted and what was standardly accepted. Moreover, it doesn't take a deconstructionist to ask, of the letter writers, “Who exactly defines these ‘accepted standards,’ and who is the ‘everyone’ that accepts them?” That is not to say we have to endorse some kind of academic relativism where everyone gets a gold star. I will not, for example, be defending the work of Paulo Coelho. We all have our limits. And I do agree there is a danger that obtuseness breeds obtuseness. One need only look at the work of an undergraduate who has been exposed to the work of Derrida and other French theorists without supervision to see that this is a dangerous path.

*It's as if Derrida  
had broken into these  
people's houses*

But just because it's not easy to replicate, and we perhaps shouldn't be encouraging people to attempt to write in this very difficult style, that doesn't mean that it's worthless. Take, for example, Samuel Beckett. His theatrical and literary work pushes the boundaries of the discipline in innovative and exciting ways. I once had a very intense experience in the Barbican centre in London on seeing a Beckettian trilogy performed in total darkness, save the mouth of “Not I” illuminated on the stage. But that doesn't mean that I also think that Daisy's



*avant-garde*, one woman show in the Channel 4 sitcom *Spaced* is equally good. In the words of her flatmate Tim, “it’s harder than it looks.”

In one respect, writers like Derrida and Beckett certainly have a lot to answer for by way of pretentious undergraduates and banal theatre kids. But just because these derivative imitators don’t do it well, and perhaps are worthy of the “bullsh\*t” classification so often levelled at their heroes, that doesn’t mean there’s nothing of worth in the original. What writers like Derrida and Beckett remind us is that there is value to be found in getting to grips with something that might initially be very challenging. Engaging with work that falls outside “the accepted standards of clarity” can often open up new ways of thinking about something precisely because the meaning is not immediately transparent. This is something

observed by another contentious philosopher, Martin Heidegger, who notes how the ambiguity of meaning that is present in poetic language is able to communicate something that would not be accessible if the same ideas were rendered in line with “accepted standards of clarity.” Appreciating this can draw our attention to the merits of being more open to philosophy written in different styles. This is not to say you have to become a disciple of deconstruction, but by broadening your horizons you might find new ways of thinking about or addressing a problem or an idea that might not have otherwise been accessible, and isn’t that at least part of the point of philosophy?

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