Deconstructing Ethics:

The Search for New Origins

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Part 1

Fall 2021

I am nowhere mainly concerned to refute any individual writer. I believe that all those to whom I have referred, even those with whom I disagree most strongly, have contributed significantly to our understanding of ethics: where I have quoted their actual words, it is because they have presented views or arguments more clearly or more forcefully than I could put them myself.

J.L Mackie (1997)

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Introduction

Sharif Abouleish

Moral realism suffered two major blows in the 20th century.[1] The first strike came from the reemergence of moral skepticism most forcefully argued by J.L. Mackie (1997). In *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Mackie forwards two arguments against the case for objective values. The first is that different people disagree about what is right and wrong; it is thus more probable that ethics is constructed rather than non-contingently discovered. The second argument is that if moral properties or entities hypothetically existed, they would be strange things indeed, constituting something utterly unlike anything else in the universe. Without a very strong account for how such objects came about and how we know about them, we should dismiss moral realism. Put plainly, in Mackie's words, "There are no objective values."

The second strike against moral realism came from a series of arguments broadly summed by Jacques Derrida's (1963) *Différance*. In the work, Derrida invokes the ancient problem of self-reference to undermine objective ontologies and the truths that flow from them.[2] His position represents a stronger opposition to objectivist forms of realism than Mackie. Where Mackie only proposes perplexity at 'real' normative Things, Derrida's ontological thesis raises skepticism with *any* 'real' Thing.[3]

However, unlike Mackie, Derrida surprisingly does not dismiss strong ethical obligations. This is where our argument begins. In the first chapter, we will suggest what Derrida himself does not; we propose that by undoing the grounds for 'real' Things (concepts, relations, properties, or entities), Derrida also undermines the grounds for a strong sense of ethics. This first chapter is intended to clarify our sense of contradiction and analyze possible ways to resolve it by using untraditional interpretations of ethics and logic. Does Derrida imply a sense of objective ethics?

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[1] We can break moral realism down into three claims: (1) Normative statements deal with truth/falsity (in opposed to affect) (cognitivism), *and* (2) at least one of these statements is true (procedural realism), *and* (3) they are true independent of the reasoners knowledge of them (objectivism).

[2] We carefully go through Derrida's argument in Chapter 2.

[3] Here, 'real' does not mean merely existing; rather, it refers to non-constructed Things. We discuss what it means for a Thing to be non-constructed in Chapter 1, Section 3.

Are contradictions problematic? How do the subjective conditions of agenthood effect logic and ethics? Ultimately, after answering these questions and more, we conclude that *prima facie* there is a meaningful tension between the metaphysical means and ethical ends of Derridean scholarship.

The second chapter formalizes this position and is dedicated to answering Derrida's objection to our claim. At the end of this chapter, we conclude that invoking both a strong sense of ethics and Derridean metaphysics is a violation of the principle of non-contradiction. You cannot do both. Thus, either the deconstructionist tradition must adjust its sense of ethics or adjust its metaphysical model. We end the chapter by providing reason for why we run greater risk abandoning ethics than searching for a new metaphysics.

The following chapters, then, are dedicated to this search; in them, we explore a new metaphysics that emerges out of a structural problem in Derridean thinking. This new metaphysics presents a strange and uncanny origin of ethics which may, perhaps, satisfy Mackie's 20-year-old demand for a strong account of where normative Things emerge from and how we know about them.

Chapter 1 of *Deconstructing Ethics: The Search for New Origins* (2021)

Metaphysical Views in the Ethical Poststructuralist Debate

Sharif Abouleish

In this chapter, we clarify the discussion on whether there is a substantive contradiction between a strong belief in ethics and a belief in Derridean metaphysics. Section 1 tentatively outlines the reasoning of our 'contradiction'; in this chapter, we treat the contradiction as hypothetical and yet unproven. After establishing the topic of debate, we investigate different possible ways to resolve the contradiction through adjusting our understandings of ethics, critical studies, and logic. Section 2 examines whether a substantive portion of critical studies is ethically oriented. Section 3 explores whether critical studies makes a claim toward subjective or objective ethics. Section 4 considers the ways that holding contradictory moral beliefs may be logically valid. After crystalizing each topic, we ultimately conclude that even with untraditional interpretations of logic and ethics, we cannot easily resolve or dismiss the hypothetical contradiction. That is, if a hypothetical contradiction does exist, then it is most likely an issue for critical studies.

I. The Hypothetical Contradiction

Many authors view Derrida's *Différance* as a radical turn in poststructuralist thinking: the work established a vastly applicable metaphysics that undermined not only objective Things, but also the western philosophical desire for objectivity (Sweetman 1997). Others see *Différance* as simply a generalized retelling of the logic established in prior kritiks (see, e.g., Anderson 1994). Some interpret it as both. No matter the case, it is relevantly uncontroversial to suggest *Différance* made explicit the metaphysics underlying key assumptions in past and contemporary poststructuralist thought (Dooley et Kavanagh 2007).

This claim holds especially true for critical studies. Broadly speaking, since its earliest stages, the field has aligned with the deconstructionist tradition in positing no particular Thing is intrinsic to the universe (Rekret 2019). Here, the core idea is that no Thing is woven into the fabric of the world and, as a result, there is a sense in which all Things are both constructed and deconstructable: deconstructable because

there is no irrefutable bind between particular Things and the universe they inhabit; and constructed because these Things take upon the illusion of objectivity. That is, the field tends to use a metaphysical model in which all Things are misleading representations that, against what common sense might suggest, do not describe anything fundamental to the world.

As a result, it seems this metaphysics does not allow for non-constructed Things. This suggests a problem when some critical theorists *prima facie* invoke both deconstructionist claims *and* special non-constructed ontologies (see, e.g., Butler 2001). Specifically, our interest lies with claims about non-deconstructable ethics. We suggest *it is strange when some critical theorists presume a sense of ethics that is distinct from other ideological constructs.*

This is the broad, tentative thesis of the first half of our book.[4] Depending on the reader, it can appear either as obvious or a complete misreading of Derrida and critical studies more generally.

More specifically, one could consider the argument trivial at best and off the mark at worst. The response is to deny that critical theorists imply a strong sense of ethics, and to consider it clear that ethics is purely ideological (see, e.g, Slocombe 2006; see also Rose 1984). Here, the Derridean conclusion is applied to all Things, including ethics: morality is ideological, the subject can only play in their dark delights, all differentiation is illusionary. (The Pure Poststructuralist Stance)

Another way to view the thesis is as a misreading of Derridean metaphysics. That is, to accept the Derridean conclusion, but when faced with its ethical implications, reject such implications (see, e.g., Drabinski 2000; see also Kakoliris 2015).[5] Of course, some say, there is Ethics. To suggest otherwise is outrageous, immoral, or repugnant. (The Ethical Poststructuralist Stance)

These two responses are widely different.[6] They are also mutually exclusive. This, most likely, speaks to a need for some clarification. In this chapter, we will attempt to provide that clarification and roadmap a third position which we adopt in later chapters.

[4] This thesis is formally argued in Chapter 2.

[5] Most attempts to derive ethics under a poststructuralist model utilize, in some fashion, Levinas' (1987) arguments about the primordial conditions of subjectivity. Thus, we give such arguments special attention in Chapter 2.

[6] There many more possible responses. Here, we choose only these two because they provide a gateway to necessary clarification. Other possible responses can be found in Chapter 5 and 6.

Moreover, if either of these two responses are fully correct, this chapter's argument is substantively weakened because both undermine even a hypothetical contradiction. The Pure Poststructuralist Stance suggests that critical studies does not make a claim upon ethics, thus a hypothetical contradiction is not plausible; and the Ethical Poststructuralist Stance suggests that a hypothetical contradiction emerges out of some misleading confusion about the sort of ethics or logics found in critical studies.[7]

Subsequently, before we try to establish any sort of contradiction, we must provide reason to reject, move past, or qualify each of these positions. That is, we must first establish that if a hypothetical contradiction existed, it would be a problem for critical studies.

II. Ethical Orientation in Critical Studies

We begin with the Pure Poststructuralist Stance and the question of whether critical theorists invoke a strong sense of ethics. This question speaks to the intention of critical studies. Does the field generally assume an ethical stance? If so, is this ethical stance a strong one? Since a full literature review would be lengthy, and probably still insufficient to answer these questions, *we will only aim to show that a substantive portion of critical studies is ethically oriented*; and for those theorists who are not concerned with morality—that is, believe it trivial—we will provide a tentative argument for why they should concern themselves.

Critical studies tends to position itself against oppression. Since all things are constructed, we can (or at least, we should try) to reorder society in a more just and equitable manner (see, e.g., Butler 1990). No social construct (race, gender, class, etc.) is woven into the fabric of the universe, and so if a construct is oppressive, we should get rid of it. One interpretation of this opposition to oppression is that critical studies is using ethically weighted terms: Justice is good, Oppression is bad. If we believe there are concrete, irrefutable reasons for why people should strive for justice and oppose oppression, then we are probably also implying some sense of second-order objective morality.[8] The other possibility is a non-normative interpretation. Although there are many different possible articulations of this stance, it probably

[7] Alternatively, it could suggest that a hypothetical contradiction comes from a misreading of Derrida. Since we cover in-depth Derrida's argument and how it relates to normative concepts in the following chapter, we do not deal with this objection here.

[8] The question of whether the normative concepts of critical studies are objective or subjective is discussed in Section 3.

follows something like: "My opposition to X is pathological rather than strictly moral." If you are an ethical poststructuralist, this reaction might seem cold or appalling. But it is plausible. Since oppressive forces personally hurts many people, it follows many people have private (not necessarily moral) reasons to want to undo these forces. It is important to note that these two interpretations are not inherently mutually exclusive. Someone can have both moral and private reasons for opposing oppressive forces. However, so long as someone to some degree concurs with the first interpretation, independent of whether they also believe in the second, they have not abandoned ethics to the realm of ideology. And if a contradiction does exist between Derrida and the ethical project, these theorists should be very concerned. They should be worried because a contradiction means one of their beliefs—either in ethics or in the poststructuralist model—is probably wrong. That is, a hypothetical contradiction would give us strong reason to reject their position.

However, this line of reasoning—that the opposition to oppression seems to imply a strong sense of ethics—does not deal with people who fully accept a world of ideology. To them, the claim that there is a contradiction in invoking both ethics and Derridean metaphysics is misleading since they do not make any strong ethical claims. We suspect the number of theorists who fall under this category is small—but not trivial—so, for now, we will only tentatively propose this: even though currently there does not appear to be normative Things, there is substantial risk in abandoning the search for such Things. Since there is no moral cost to searching for ethics in an amoral world, and there is a potential cost to abandoning ethics in a world with normative Things; without absolute certainty in error theory, we should not dismiss the ethical project.[9,10] Independent of whether we buy this tentative argument or not, we can probably still say a hypothetical contradiction is not a trivial concern for many critical theorists.

III. Confusion about Subjective Ethics: First and Second Order Moral World Views

[9] This topic is more formally argued in Chapter 2, section 4.

[10] Since theorists who fully acceptance the Derridean conclusion are not invoking both ethics and Derridean metaphysics, they are *ex facie* defended against Chapter 1's argument. We are not speaking to them. Such theorists, if they lack spare time, can skip ahead to Chapter 3 where we begin our search for new ethical grounds.

Thus far, we have tried to refrain from using the term 'objective morality' and opted for the more vague 'ethical project' or 'strong sense of ethics'. This is because there is some confusion between the meaning of subjective and objective ethics; this confusion, we believe, accounts for why some theorists simultaneously hold a belief in Derridean metaphysics and a strong sense of ethics. At the very least, we hope clarification will disillusion the belief that *if a hypothetical contradiction exists, it is not meaningful.*

Consider the claim: 'people ought to do what they believe is morally right' (T). Is T subjective or objective? On the one hand, it seems clearly subjective: the particular ethical demand(s) of T shift between subjects.[11] However, less intuitively, T also makes a claim to objectivity: it applies to everyone. Despite this, we can say the content of each possible prescriptions is subjective; and, in this sense, T is a first-order subjective claim. But what do we do with the sense in which T is objective?

It seems to us this sense of subjectivity does not reach very far because it leaves unanswered a central question of meta-ethics that accounts for the hidden objectivity: what precisely is the ontology of the prescription. That is, what is the nature of the ethic. Do we hold that T is woven into the fabric of the universe? Is a fact of the world that T is true, and that T applies to all subjects? Or do we view someone who holds T as merely confused? Such a person has mistakenly blurred together their beliefs about the world with the world itself. Do they have to be confused? They could believe T but also recognize that their belief is a product of social conditioning.

The important thing to pay attention to is that each of these views about the nature T operate independent of the contents of T.[12] We could be a first-order subjectivist (that is, believe in T), and still hold a view that ethics is objective; that is, there are right and wrong actions, and their rightness or wrongness is inescapable.[13]

In this sense, holding merely a first-order belief in subjectivity does not defend against the teeth of an ontological anti-realist position. Such beliefs are not even in the same sphere of debate. The kinds of claims we are interested in, claims about the constructed nature of Things, are about the ontology of ethics. They try to provide answer to that second kind of question, questions of second-order objectivity and

[11] For example, Thanos might believe killing half of all living beings in the universe is morally good; and Iron man might believe stopping Thanos is morally good; T would tell Thanos to try and kill half the universe, and T would also tell Iron man to stop Thanos. That is, T would prescribe different actions depending on the subject. Its particular ethical prescriptions are different depending on the subject.

[12] This is why, of course, we denote the prescription as a flexible variable (T).

[13] Some authors suggest that the relevance of such a distinction between first and second order moral world views is not immediately clear. *See, e.g.,* Hare (1981). For a satisfactory response to Hare, *see* Mackie (1991).

subjectivity. Is ethics fundamental and inescapable; or can ethics be deconstructed?[14] *It is extremely important to note that, here, it becomes clear a non-deconstructable ethics invokes a sense of second-order objectivity*. This is because such an ethics would be, by definition, a fundamental Thing: inescapable and woven into the fabric of the universe. If we want to say ethics is not a deconstructable Thing, then we are forced to make some claim about the objective nature of ethics.

This is the first place where we have noticed major confusion. It is easy and understandable to claim that you believe in an ethics with strong prescriptive force; and this ethics, because the subject is important to the theory, is compatible with a poststructuralist subjective world view.[15] However, as we have hopefully shown, this kind of commonly invoked subjectivity does not provide an adequate escape from our hypothetical contradiction because the poststructuralist stance does not merely hold a belief in first-order subjectivity, but also an ontological belief about the constructed nature of Things. That is, if ethics is a Thing, and Derrida's argument implies all Things can be deconstructed, then there is probably a contradiction between non-constructed ethics and Derridean metaphysics. In this sense, our thesis and its relevant oppositions are both second order and ontological in nature.

IV. Confusion about Contradiction

Another reason why some theorists do not have a problem with a hypothetical contradiction between Derridean metaphysics and ethics is because they do not raise issue with *contradiction itself*. This is a strange sort of position, and as a result, we will begin at the most fundamental level: what is a contradiction?

In classical logic, we may define it as any system that permits both p and ¬ p. Moreover, in classical logic, permitting such a contradiction is grounds for the disqualification of a system. This seems both intuitive and irrefutable: how can both a claim and its negation be simultaneously true?

Despite the intuitiveness behind this conclusion, not all agree. There are many critical theorists comfortable with contradiction or, at the very least, the appearance

[14] This question is modal, not empirical, in nature. For example, it may be empirically impossible to fully deconstruct ethics; confused agents like the one described above may always exist because of certain material conditions. Despite this, one could still say that nothing about ethics makes it inherently non-deconstructable. That is, *there are possible worlds where the Thing—ethics— is deconstructable*.

[15] *See, e.g.,* Derrida's (2000) primordial conditions of the subject. These conditions, ironically, are not subjective: they apply to all subjects. 'Primordial' is smuggling in a claim of second-order objectivity. We explore the implications of this objectivity in Chapter 2.

of contradiction (see, e.g., Jaeggi 2017). We will start with the milder position—appearance—and move to the more radical position: that contradiction itself is not grounds for rejecting a set of maxims.

IV.I: Appearance of Contradiction

Contradiction assumes that we make a claim about both p and ¬ p; that is, we are confronted with a proposition and its *identical* negation. One way to become comfortable with seemingly contradictory things is to believe that, in applied logic, no two situations are sufficiently similar such that the permissibility of a position and its identical negation is seen. More precisely, the argument is that the subjectivity of agents is so strong and so radical that every situation is different; and thus, no two situations can have substantive contradiction. There is no contradiction in applying logic differently to situations interjected with the subjectivity of agents because, then, *the situations themselves become different.*

This reasoning becomes significantly more powerful if we also believe that all situations involve the subjectivity of agents. Here, we are combining the first claim that (a) subjectivity defends us against apparent contradictions, and (b) all situations substantively involve subjectivity; thus (c) any contradiction is merely an *apparent contradiction*. That is, contradiction in its traditional problematic sense does not follow from the conditions of subjectivity that are present in all human situations of applied logic.

The sleight of hand here that makes this reasoning not so iron clad comes from the word 'substantively.' Hidden within the term is the claim that the *differentiation based on subjectivity is sufficient to show that a given logic cannot be applied in the same way twice*. In other words, subjectivity must make some sort of claim on the logic, and this claim must be strong; here, subjectivity means the particular and hypothetically knowable conditions of a situation.

There are some cases where this is obviously true. For example, there is a difference between a white man saying the n-word and a black man saying the n-word. Thus, the contradiction in the two conclusions that 'it is not permissible agents for agents to say the n-word' and 'it is permissible for agents to say the n-word' is merely an apparent one; when we consider the subjective factors, the two conclusions are not very similar at all.

Yet, here, it is clear the contradiction is not resolved by a magic appeal to subjectivity; rather, particular and hypothetically knowable conditions of the subject lead to a necessary differentiation between the two conclusions. This is where we first get a taste of our argument. Subjectivity does not essentially make a claim on a

logical line of reasoning.[16] For example, the subjective differences between two white agents are not sufficient to permit the contradictory conclusions outlined above. That is, one of them is not permitted to say the n-word. In this sense, this first comfortability with contradiction is not a *de facto* defense against contradiction itself. It is dependent on whether the conditions of subjectivity are sufficient to differentiate two seemingly contradictory propositions. In other words, this defense is not a defense against contradiction at all; rather, it is a complaint against poorly outlined contradictions. Or, more correctly, it is a call to consider subjectivity in applied logic.

Thus, if we are capable of showing that despite considerations of subjectivity there is a contradiction between ethics and Derridean metaphysics, this comfort with apparent contradiction should be no comfort at all. Here, we are presented with an additional requirement of our hypothetical contradiction, not a rejection of its meaningfulness.

IV.II: Contradiction Itself

The less common, but more powerful defense, is to become comfortable with the claim that sometimes both p and ¬ p are necessarily valid.

The normal response to such a defense is to show that a belief in a system which concludes both p and ¬ p leads to an explosion of true maxims.[17] And, when all maxims are true, each maxim is meaningless.[18]

This line of reasoning is almost irrefutably correct for classic logic systems. However, we are not necessarily bound to classic logic systems. Our area of interest is with the plentiful number of paraconsistent logic systems (Barrio e.t al. 2017). Pointedly, these systems are formally defined as any logic system capable of containing true contradictions without an explosion of true maxims. The goal here is to prevent an explosion of true maxims once we remove the safeguard of deeming maxims false on the basis of contradiction. That is, we need another way to filter maxims. This is achieved by eliminating possibly true theorems on more than the

[16] To be more formal: subjectivity does not make an essential claim on either the applied rules of inference or the nature of logical identity.

[17] For a formal, but simple, proof of this, *see* Carnielli and Marcos (2001).

[18] *e.g.*, witch hunts. Imagine we throw someone chained and bound into a lake and use the following premises to determine if they are a witch: they are a witch if (a) they sink because God has punished them, or if (b) they float because they have used magic to survive. Such a test does not tell us if someone is a witch or not because no matter what happens, a person will be deemed a witch. That is, the conditional is not a determinant of the conclusion. More precisely, without a set of premises being able to determine a false conclusion, those premises cannot establish any meaningful conclusion.

basis of contradiction. (Ironically, as a result, paraconsistent systems tend to be more selective). The new basis of elimination arises from removing at least one of the following two possible rules of inference found in classic logic systems: the Rule of Disjunction Introduction or the Rule of Disjunctive Syllogism.

Although such paraconsistent systems seem unintuitive, permitting contradictions could provide useful answers to moral paradoxes.[19] However, despite their potential usefulness, eliminating either one of these two tools of inference makes it near impossible to derive an ethical theory. Paraconsistent logic systems should provide no refuge for someone who holds beliefs in contradictions involving ethics. Consider the Rule of Disjunctive Introduction:[20]

$$P \xrightarrow{\text{yields}} P \nabla Q$$

On face, removing the Rule of Disjunctive Introduction makes generalizing an ethical theory near impossible. This is because we cannot infer that the truth of an ethical claim will hold when we add any other possible factor. That is, if we believe ethical belief P is true, the addition of an any—even non-casual factors—Q, means that P is no longer necessarily true. This does not mean that P is necessarily false; rather, we simply cannot infer it to still be true.[21]

It seems difficult to suggest that all possible factors are so substantive we cannot logically infer ethical similarity. If I press a button that kills 100 people I dislike on an arbitrary basis with no anticipated benefit to anyone, and in the same room as the button there is a chair and an apple, and we conclude that killing people in such a way is morally bad, then whether there is a chair or an apple (or any other factor) does not seem to really matter. It seems implausible to suggest that we cannot infer from the claim that the first kind of murder (where the chair or apple is present) is morally bad that the second kind of murder (where all factors are the same except for the presence of the apple or chair) is also bad.

However, some people might not have a problem with this inability to generalize; it actually fits quite neatly with the idea that no ethical situation is logically relevant

[19] For example, it could provide an alternative explanation to what Nagel (1991) calls moral tragedies; situations where all possible actions are both morally wrong (which seemingly violates the ought-can doctrine).

[20] *e.g.*, Abouleish is cool, therefore Abouleish is cool or there is a teacup floating around mars.

[21] This, of course, makes perfect sense if we believe contradictions are possible.

to each other because subjectivity is a substantive factor in all possible ethical situations. Moreover, especially in mathematical and logical systems, the unintuitive nature of a conclusion is not an inherent reason to reject that conclusion.

Thus, we need a deeper and more powerful reason paraconsistent systems are not good grounds for ethical conclusions. That is, we need a reason for why it is near-impossible to derive ethical conclusions from within a paraconsistent system.

Here is that reason: by opting into a paraconsistent system (and thus removing the Rule of Disjunction Introduction or the Rule of Disjunction Syllogism, or any rule that establishes a paraconsistent logic), we also remove the ability to achieve truth negatively; because we cannot use *not* (or contradiction) to rule out theorems and define other theorems. This means that an ethic must be *positively—that is, transcendentally—established*: truth on the basis of truth. (Moreover, this is particularly relevant for Derrida who argues such self-definition is impossible).[22] This becomes even more difficult because most paraconsistent logics still have an issue with circular reasoning.[23]

But even if we accept that such a transcendental ethical truth is possible, this still doesn't address the main problem with this stance. The real issue with allowing contradiction in our present discussion, and why we would hope to avoid doing so, comes into play when we must decide which contradictions are allowed. Why might we allow ethics to be compatible with Derrida theory and not with gender? Without an extremely formal application of paraconsistent logic to show ethics, and ethics alone, is a valid contradiction (and the removal of two necessary rules of inference make this highly implausible), we should have issue with contradiction.[24]

[22] Ironically, then, if we accept this premise, we probably do not need paraconsistent logics in the first place. That is, the only case where paraconsistent logic is plausible grounds for ethical conclusions is the very case where they are not needed. For, as Derrida describes at the end of différance, such a transcendental sign would allow escape from différance. Put plainly, if we use a paraconsistent system to resolve the contradiction between Derrida and ethics, then Derrida, and the deconstructions that rely on his metaphysics, is already flawed..

[23] To be more precise, most paraconsistent logics confirm to the rule that although circular reasoning is not contradictory and thus in some sense valid, it is not a basis to prove a given proposition.

[24] With this said, we have not formally ruled out the possibility of using a paraconsistent logic to derive an ethical theory. We would be extremely excited to see an author try to derive such a system. We would encourage them to start with the connection we drawn between an logical inability to generalize and current thinking about how subjectivity might make any ethics non-generalizable.

V. The New Poststructuralist Stance

So far, we have suggested that most critical theorists are ethically oriented such that if there is a contradiction between a belief in ethics and Derrida metaphysics, then it is problematic.

As a result, if we assume a hypothetical contradiction, either (a) we must revise Derrida's argument to provide space for normative Things or (b) we must abandon objective values. In such a case, since we are not in the mood to give up on objective values just yet for reasons articulated in Chapter 2, and neither the Ethical Poststructuralist nor the Pure Poststructuralist stance is convincing when trying to support a belief in non-deconstructable ethics, we must necessarily challenge the very deconstructionist theory used to expose ideologies. (The New Poststructuralist Stance). This is the position our paper adopts.

The kind of qualification we will advocate is not a strong rejection of Derrida. We are not convinced with the various ways authors have tried to dismiss Derrida's thesis. Many of these positions fail to adequately account for a transcendental source of ethics; many outright ignore the issues that the problem of self-reference raises; some hide behind the—albeit confusing—language of Derrida to launch misleading attacks (see, e.g, Chaves 2002). In the following section, then, we will carefully outline the full extent of Derrida's profound argument and why it stands strong even after 60 years. We are not interested in defending against any particular author, but instead hope that a faithful retelling of the argument will show why we believe many aspects of his model are immensely strong.

The second half of the book, then, is dedicated to various possible qualifications, each—hopefully—providing plausible grounds for objective values. These qualifications walk a dangerous tightrope. We want to make sure not to trade one kind of self-contradiction for another. That is, if we maintain Derrida's argument is strong and thus also maintain many deconstructionist beliefs (e.g., the constructed nature of Gender or Class), we cannot undo the force of Derrida's argument. Thus, our stance is left with its tightrope: qualify Derrida without undermining him. Specifically, make room for objective values without assuming too much room.

In the following chapter, we will start this task by providing a retelling of Derrida's différance.

Chapter 2 of *Deconstructing Ethics: The Search for New Origins* (2021)

Deconstructing Ethics

Sharif Abouleish

This chapter outlines a formal contradiction between Derridean metaphysics and the ethical project. Section 1 describes Derridean metaphysics in generally accessible terms, examining its strengths and weakness. Section 2 applies this metaphysics to ethics. Here, we conclude what Derrida himself does not: a strong sense of ethics is incompatible with Derridean metaphysics. Section 3 addresses Derrida's objection to this conclusion, finding it unsatisfactory. Section 4 provides reason why there is more risk in critical studies abandoning the search for objective ethics than abandoning an attachment to Derridean metaphysics. In the following chapter, then, we tentatively propose ways to qualify Derrida's position to allow for the possibility of objective ethics.

I. Derridean Metaphysics

Derrida's most interesting insights come from his subtle move away from first-order questions of ontology towards second-order questions of identity.[25] First-order questions of identity examine whether a Thing constitutes some identity. A classic example of is the Ship of Theseus: what makes a ship a 'ship', what makes one ship identical to itself, etc. On the other hand, second-order issues of identity question the nature of the category itself: is the category of 'ship' woven into the fabric of the universe or is it subjectively constructed. Derrida's thesis is interested in this second kind of questioning. He attempts to point out a problem with seemingly non-constructed categories; and, in doing so, also raises issue with non-constructed Things.

This relationship between the ontology of categories and the ontology of particular Things is slippery. We could call categories the conditions of particularity. That is, for a particular ship to exist within an ontological scheme, it probably requires the category of 'ship'. In this sense, the category of a particularity is a

[25] To save words, we do not continuously recite Derrida. All references come from "Différance" trans. Allison, in *Speech and Phenomena* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

necessary condition of that particularity. This seems clear enough. However, fuzziness emerges from the observation that *these categories themselves are a kind of particularity.* That is, the category of 'ship' is a Thing that is distinct from the category of 'water'. Thus, in conversations about second-order identity, we are on one hand talking about the conditions of particularity but on the other hand also discussing particularities directly. This sense of circularity will grow in importance as we work our way through Derrida's argument.

Derrida is critiquing the notion that particular identities (categories and the Things which derive from them) can be woven into the fabric of the universe. That is, he attempts to show that Things, due to a structural problem, are necessarily constructed rather than non-contingently derived. Agents confuse their beliefs about how the world is delineated into ontological categories with the world itself. For example, an agent would be mistaken in believing a 'chair' or an 'electron' are unconditionally part of the world.[26]

There are many ways to understand Derrida's justification for this radical sense of error. Since Derrida's own language is field specific, we will not use it. Rather, we will try to present a more generalizable retelling of his argument.[27] To do this, we suggest viewing différance as a strange application of Kant's notions of subjectivity and escapability.

Kant (1785) famously proposes that an agent can reasonably question whether any particularity is constitutive of a reason for action. We can imagine a hypothetical line of questioning:

1. Why should I act in ways that give me pleasure?
2. Because it is intuitive to seek out pleasure.
3. Why should I act in ways that are intuitive?
4. Because it is intuitive.

There are many ways to formulate this call-and-response, but eventually—for Kantians—it will inevitability break down into some kind of circular reasoning. This breakdown is sufficient to claim that the given reason for action is subjective; because a belief in such a reason requires an agent to opt into a special logic to which not every rational agent would agree (see Velleman 2009). In this sense, an agent can always 'escape' the motivation.

[26] That is, there is no *intrinsic* reason to chop up the matter of an atom into electrons, neutrons, and protons.

[27] Derrida would probably resist this kind of generalized systematic understanding of his argument. Despite this, we believe the cost of excluding those not experts in critical studies outweighs the benefits of relying on an implicit subjective discourse. For such a discourse, *see* Rekret (2019)

Similarly, Derrida proposes that ontological schemes are escapable and thus subjective. Where Kant thinks there are some special kinds of universal beliefs that escape this problem, Derrida finds no such exception. He questions the bind between any identity and the universe, arguing that when we look carefully at our beliefs about what constitutes the world, we will find they depend on us believing an escapable, special logic. Consider a Kantian-esc questioning of a belief in the objective nature of chairs:

1. Why should we define a particular set of matter as a chair that is distinct from the floor?
2. Because the chair is visually distinct from the floor.
3. Why are visually distinct Things separate Things?[28]
4. Because it is useful to separate Things on the basis of visualization.
5. Why is usefulness a basis for ontological definition?
6. Because it is useful.

If Derrida is correct, any formulation of this conversation eventually breaks down into "We should believe R because of R." Without some transcendental R (that is, self-justifying reason), we cannot justify a belief in a particular identity without using some hypothetically escapable logic. This is because, eventually, the justification for a Thing's ontology must refer to the Thing itself; and once it does, the belief collapses into circular reasoning.

There are many ways to apply this kind of questioning; there are many ways that subjective beliefs disguise themselves as seemingly natural facts of the world; the underlying point is that ontological justification is infinitely deferred. Put plainly, Derrida is applying the well-established logic of ethical escapability to ontology. In the same way this reasoning *prima facie* rules-out many motivations as objective reasons, here it challenges seemingly objective ontologies.[29]

As a result, we are presented with the central conclusion of Derridean metaphysics: *there is no objective way to categorize the world into particulars because no metaphysical category is fundamental to the world***.** Not because of some magical appeal to subjectivity, not because of empirical analysis of social institutions in different societies, but because of a structural problem: positive ascription is not possible, and negative ascription eventually fails. The critique Derrida raises is not merely that 'ontology is deferred without a transcendental (R) that binds

[28] *e.g.*, A rational sub-atomic entity might visually define what we believe to be a single blade of grass as thousands of distinct Things.

[29] It seems plausible to suggest this is the ontological implications of supervenience theory. *See* Mackie (1997).

metaphysical identities to the fabric of the universe'; but also that, because of the problem of self-reference, a strong account for such a transcendental (R) is implausible. This is where the strength of the argument comes from. It is a dual attack: *on one the hand it points out the need for a transcendental origin of ontology and on the other hand it shows why such a transcendental account is probably impossible.*

Take for example Kant's Transcendental Deduction of the Categories.[30] In Kantian terms, Derrida pushes back against the objective nature of the categories, arguing that no categories are fundamental to agents.[31] (For example, Derrida's critique of presence undermines Kant's category of causality).[32] That is, neither experience nor the categories that mediate it are objective.[33] The resulting Things, then, are subjective and constructed rather than non-contingently derived.

Moreover, Derrida's theory also points to a problem with Kant's sense of unification. Différance suggests that the process of unifying a manifold produces another manifold, which in turn requires unification.[34] How, Derrida might ask, is any newly unified system (U1) not immediately transformed into a manifold? U1 requires something else to define it (U2). U2 then requires another Thing; thus, we enter différance. In this way, particularity structurally fails because, for it to have form, it would need a self-defining particularity. This kind of self-definition isn't possible because, using Kant's reasoning, particularity is only intelligible through unification; particularities are not intelligible in themselves (otherwise they would be manifolds).

Some readers of Kant might still be unsatisfied. This is because, if we are to take Kant's critique of totality seriously, an undefined infinity can still be unified. Imagine

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[30] The following reasoning works for both the A and B Deduction. For a brief, comprehensible summary of both Deductions, *see* Ewing's (1923). All of our explanations of (a) Kant's reasoning, and (b) his vocabulary are insufficient. As a result, the following argument should be treated as only tentative.

[31] Here, we are referring to Kant's 'The Categories' rather than the strictly ontological usage of 'category.'

[32] In his critique, Derrida argues that our being is not necessarily governed by *a priori* concepts like causality and time. Thus, even the temporal unification of thought, is not intrinsic to rational agents. This attack seems natural since Derrida's contemporaries undermine Kant's connection between meaning, sentences, thought, and in turn, judgement.

[33] To be more formal, we put Kant in a tricky double bind. Either (a) we can work backwards through the deduction and suggest that no set of logical functions of relation is intrinsic to subjects, or (b) we must let go of the link between *a prior* logical functions of relation and the categories. In either case, the reasoning of the deduction is broken.

[34] A Kantian manifold is (a) an ontologically unintelligible thing because (b) it lacks differentiation. For example, in the blare of trumpets, no one note can be heard (see, e.g., Kitcher 1990).

a white cube that appears defined by an endless black background. We could suggest that negative ascription is successful here: the white cube is defined by the black background and the black background is defined by the white cube. A firm Kantian would, here, conclude that the manifold is thus unified and mutual identity is established. As a result, there is no infinite 'deferral'.

Although the blackness contains an identity, we can still claim the identity is incomplete, at least in the sense it lacks bounds. Derrida might suggest that an incomplete identity is insufficient to establish identity. This kind of claim is not, on the surface, very satisfactory. This is because infinity is not a manifold in the traditional sense. It is perhaps impossible (or very difficult) for our cognition to imagine a 'particular infinity', but particularity and infinity are not necessarily—by nature of their properties—mutually exclusive. For example, in mathematics we can define some infinity (e.g., all Real Numbers) as a particular set (e.g., the set of All Real Numbers). Yet, when we imagine these sets as particulars, they then require another particularity to define it (Russell 1896). *We cannot both establish an infinity as a particularity and use it to escape the paradox.* If the white cube is to define the blackness, the blackness needs another particularity; for example, a white cube on a black background on a white piece of paper. This requirement is mathematically clear, but difficult to visualize because—at least for us—it's hard to imagine a physical infinity as a particular (Abouleish 2021). For us, what is clear is that *we can only imagine blackness as a particular when there is another particular present*; that is, the only way for us to imagine the blackness as a particular is to imagine it upon a background.[35] Thus, there is a, albeit unintuitive, double bind: either (a) incomplete identity is insufficient to establish identity or (b) infinity is a particularity, in which case, it defers its identity onto some other particularity and re-enters the problem of self-reference. If this seems unintuitive, it is so. Infinities are strange things with strange properties, but ultimately, even in their strangeness, do not provide an answer to Derrida's (or in this case, Russell's) articulation of the problem of self-reference.[36]

In this sense, Derrida is providing an extremely rigorous structural argument for why positive ascription is not possible and negative ascription eventually fails when trying to establish objective ontology. With one stroke, Derrida is providing an argument for why it is impossible for *any particularity to be fundamental to the universe.*

We will now apply this argument to ethics.

[35] For us, when we close our eyes, that background is either white or strangely clear).
[36] We explore Russell's naïve set theory paradox with significantly greater care in the following chapter.

II. Applying the Metaphysics to Ethics

Thus far, we have viewed Derrida's argument in general terms. This systematic presentation is stylistically different from how Derrida is traditionally discussed. Normally, Derrida's critique of essential identities is presented as a critique of ideology. Under this view, we directly apply his metaphysics to ideologies which cut up society in unsavory ways (rich and poor, white and non-white, etc.). Since Derrida shows us there are no set of identities is essential to the world, any unjust system of ontological categorization can, hypothetically, be undone. For example, if we assume Derrida's metaphysics, we can conclude that there is no intrinsic reason why a human being must be a 'man' or a 'women'; there is no necessary connection between the universe, human life, and the category of masculinity and femineity. In this sense, Derrida de-essentializes the underlying terms of any ideology; by terms, we mean the identities that are constitutive of the ideology. Since such terms are constructed, they can be deconstructed.

Here is where ethics—a system of categorizing actions or agents as 'good' or 'bad'—begins to run contra to the conclusions Derrida reaches in *Différance*. Since all ontological categorization is constructed, and 'good' and 'bad' are ontological categories, they too are constructed. That is, since all Things are constructed, and ethics is a Thing, ethics too is constructed. As a result, it hypothetically can be deconstructed.

Consider the prescriptive claim: "Agents ought not steal." Here, we might deconstruct the category from which the claim basis itself; the ethical claim is not operatable without the category 'private property.' If we do not dwell in a universe with private property, private property cannot be stolen. In the classic Marxist critique, we might want to deconstruct 'private property' because it is the Thing/category through which imbalances of economic power are created (see, e.g., Rosen 2000).[37] We could invoke the problem of self-reference to do this; then, we could support the Derridean conclusion by pointing to societies without private property as case-studies that show private property is not an essential fact of the universe. For our account of why people incorrectly believe in the objective nature of private property, we could even use the ethical claim itself. The prescription naturalizes—through repeatedly and continuously dictating the bodily actions of agents—the existence of private property. It does not really matter how we deconstruct the ethical prescription. What is important is the observation that under

[37] Since certain individuals can own more than others, some individuals *might* unjustly maintain more power within a society. In this sense, the ethical claim is rooted in a potentially unjust system

a Derridean model, *the operatable terms of ethical prescriptions are deconstructable*.[38] Since the Derridean model applies to all identities equally, we can also say that the operatable identities of all ethical prescriptions are deconstructable.[39]

But we might go further. We can also deconstruct the inherent connection between the 'good' and the prescribed action. Built into an ethical prescription claim is an essentialist assumption that a certain act is constitutive of goodness. But, since there are no essential identities, no particular Thing is intrinsically constitutive of goodness and goodness is not intrinsically any particular Thing. That is, as all Things, the 'good' is a constructed identity; there is no link between 'goodness' and the fabric of the universe. In other words, *if all identities are negatively defined, the 'good' lacks a positive identity; and if all negative sources of ontology are ultimately illusionary, ethics is also illusionary.* If all things are constructed, and ethics is a thing, then ethics is deconstructable.[40] Derrida, in undoing the ground for transcendental or essentialist identities, also deconstructs the basis for ethical frameworks. In other words, *Derridean metaphysics is prima facie incompatible with the ethical project.*

III. The Derridean Objection

Derrida is an extremely salient, self-aware theorist. He recognizes the possible contradiction within his own work and presents a strong resolution to the problem: an ethics of hospitality. Although we might not currently know a positive source for ethics, we can be open to its eventual arrival (Derrida 1998; Derrida 2000; Kakoliris 2015).[41] Since our world is filled with choices—that is, we are constantly confronted with the Other—ethical questions will always remain. Thus, even though we cannot

[38] This claim is potentially incorrect regarding Kant. A totally non-situational maxim might only rely on the agent themselves as a subjectless subject.

[39] To save words, we do not go into a discussion on whether this is a substantive problem for the formation of ethical prescriptions. On the one hand, it seems clear that for any claim to be true it requires each assumption of the claim to also be true. For example, for the claim "I sat on a chair" to be true, there must be something called a 'chair', something called 'I', and something called sitting. On the other hand, we do not necessarily need to invoke an objective sense of Things to create an ethical prescription. We could always say "A metaphysically constructed person ought not engage in the metaphysically constructed Thing called stealing."

[40] If we define ideology as a deconstructable belief, we might imagine the problem as an inability to distinguish between ethics and ideology.

[41] I give thanks to Andrew Chang, Bowdoin College, for helping me decipher this more exact interpretation of an ethics of hospitality.

locate a transcendental ground for morality, we can conclude ethics is an essential component of human life; and thus, a moral agent must be open, hospitable to the potential arrival of an eventually true ethical theory.[42] Here, Derrida is exchanging a strict notion of deconstructive theory for an *ethos of deconstruction*. Ethics in a strong sense is deconstructed, but the demand for ethics remains non-deconstructable. That is, the only non-contingent moral prescriptive is Derrida's ethics of hospitality.[43]

An ethics of hospitality fails on two levels. First, it assumes that the 'yet arrived ethical theory' is not self-effacing. Since we do not have information about this hypothetical theory, we do not know what actions or conditions follow or transgress it. There is, based on our current knowledge, an equal possibility hospitality towards this hypothetical ethical theory would follow its prescriptions well or poorly. Consider a scenario where the devil built the universe such that following this hypothetical 'to come' ethical theory (thus denoted as T) would result in the opposite of T occurring.[44] Here, T would prescribe you be inhospitable to it. It would be self-effacing. Although this seems like a strange imagination of ethics, since we do not have information about this potential ethics, we do not know if it would be strange or not. In other words, *the pre-ethical state Derrida describes does not give way to any one imagination of ethics—not even an ethics of hospitality.* Since we do not know the contents of T, we do not know if we should be hospitable to T. Moreover, *since we do not know the contents of T, we do not know what actions constitute hospitality.* In this sense, 'hospitality' is empty. Although Derrida hopes hospitality would entail a respect for the Other, our recognition and respect for the Other could be in violation with T. A transcendental sign is needed to give 'hospitality' substance. Derrida, at best, delivers an empty ethics. In other words, an ethics of hospitality does not necessarily prescribe either 'hospitality to the Other' nor 'hospitality to ethics.'

The second objection is focused on the claim that ethics is a necessary part of human life. That is, choices necessarily raise ethical questions. This is probably not correct. The notion of a prescriptive good and evil is relatively recent phenomena. For example, although Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* describes a 'good' life; for

[42] Derrida also implies that hospitality to ethics is synonymous with hospitality to the Other. We will go on to deny this argument; but, for now, we find a more generalized version of the position is used.

[43] One might imagine the more generalized form of Derrida's argument as a de-morphed version of Pascal's bargain. They both deal with 'hedging one's bets' so to speak in the face of an unknowable ethical question. Derrida's hospitality is stronger than Pascal's because instead of choosing one ethical location, hospitality is less defined. It leaves open for *some* ethics, rather than an exact one. Despite this, as we argue, it falls victim to similar problems.

[44] This example is borrowed in part from Parfit (1984).

Aristotle, goodness arises out of a function (Brown 2009). A good knife is one that cuts well; a 'good' human is one that reasons well. In other words, goodness is descriptive, not prescriptive. Although Aristotle might be confused why someone would not want to be a 'good' human being, his theory does not command them to follow it. Subjects are not acting wrongly by rejecting it—they are only 'inferior' in the sense that a less sharp knife is a 'inferior' to a sharp one. Non-prescriptive theories of ethics (in different social and historical contents) suggest that choices do not necessarily entail, in a prescriptive sense, a 'right' or 'wrong' action. Hume (1748) conceives of an even weaker sense of morality where ethical claims are mere reports on sentiment. For Hume, there are no strictly ethical questions raised by action because ethics is not asking prescriptive questions. Although we cannot claim most subjects are not confronted with prescriptive questions, we can claim *not every subject is.*

Here, we are suggesting the Derridean position that all subjects are inescapabilty bound by ethical questions is a objectivist assumption that is probably incorrect. Normally, we would not be so strong with our opposition; but for Derrida's 'primordial' conditions of the subject to be correct they must be 'primordial'; even one example of a subject outside of them shows that they are not an ontological fact about what it means to be a subject. Thus, since subjects are not necessarily bound to prescriptive ethics, we can reasonably say: the world requires subjects to make reflexive choices, it does not require that these choices are ethically weighted. In other words, the primordial condition is one of choice, not one of prescriptive ethics. We must choose to act in certain ways, we do not have to ask the question of which choices are 'better' or 'worse'. Here, we are distinguishing between the content of objective ethics and ethics itself. In the first objection to Derrida, we were left with an 'empty' ethics because we could deconstruct any particular Thing as being constitutive of ethics. But our critique is now taken one step further. If the problem of self-reference is taken seriously, it de-essentializes the orientation towards ethics. That is, it is possible that not only are our ethical theories ideological, but also our contemporary orientation towards ethics.

We will now present an example that attempts to show these two objections.

Consider the following: We are walking along Pleasant Street in Brunswick, Maine. A car stops beside us. In the vehicle there is a family of four—they have been clearly living in their car. One of the parents rolls down the window and desperately asks us for money; her children need to eat; they don't have enough; they've used all their money on gas. Here, we are presented with at least three choices. (A) give aid, (B) leave, (C) take any other action that does not help their situation but does not involve me leaving.

An ethics of hospitality would suggest we choose (A). That is, even though we do not know what ethical theory precisely moves us, we can know we should be hospitable to the Other. We have shown that without knowing the contents of a hypothetical theory, we cannot know it prescribes us to be hospitable to the Other. Moreover, the second objection presents the possibility that *the pre-ethical state is one where we are in a relationship with the Other; but it is not necessarily an ethical relationship*. Thus, again, we are left with options (A-C).

We choose (A). We do so because the idea of a non-ethical world is uncomfortable. We want to be able to say that it is wrong to deny help; that we ought to choose A; that injustice is evil, and justice is something worth striving for. This choice might be ideological in two senses. The first ideology is our orientation towards prescriptive ethics; Derridean metaphysics shows us that although we are confronted with the Other, this pre-ethical relationship is not necessarily morally weighted. The second ideology is the contents of our ethical decision; we do not know what constitutes a 'good' act or a 'bad' act. We are assuming our common-sense notion of morality is correct; and 'common sense' is a dangerous thing. More precisely, the world is not necessarily intuitive; ethics might be strange and uncanny. Without grounds for this content, it becomes deconstructable.

In the next section and Chapter, we will attempt to show that there is a chance this choice was not ideological and there is a possibility of a non-deconstructable ethics.

IV. The Uncomfortable Conclusion

Thus far, we have argued that since deconstructive theory posits that there are no essential or transcendental identities, and ethics requires such an ontology, the ethical project is deconstructable.

For many critical theorists, this conclusion that deconstructive theory is incompatible with ethics is unappealing at best and repugnant at worst. Since many authors use deconstructive theory for explicitly ethical aims (mainly, justice), it is a problem that they are rationally inconsistent. That is, the invoking of both violates the principle of non-contradiction.

Luckily, we are not necessarily condemned to this conclusion for two reasons. First, if there are no ethics, then it is not ethically wrong to have ethical orientations. That is, there is no reason to abandon the ethical project. [45] Thus, either (a) non-

[45] In some sense, the orientation towards ethics would still be non-rational since it violates the principle of non-contradiction. However, rationality loses any potential prescriptive force in a non-ethical world.

deconstructable ethics is not possible, which case there is no harm in refusing to abandon ethics, or (b) non-deconstructable ethics is possible. Given (a), we are left in an emotively repugnant, but ultimately non-normative world. If (a) is true, we should not be concerned with our actions on ethical grounds. Given (b), so long as striving for ethics does not work against the ethical project, we would be remiss to abandon the ethical project. If (b) is true, then we should be very concerned with abandoning the ethical project. Hence, it seems, since there is probably no cost to 'a' and there is a possible cost to 'b', we have no reason to abandon a search for non-deconstructable ethics.

Second, although under a Derridean model, as we have described it, it appears rationally inconsistent to use deconstructive theory for an ethical end, we do not have to accept this model. The following chapter is dedicated to qualifying the model such that objective ethics is possible.

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Chapter 3 of *Deconstructing Ethics: The Search for New Origins* (2021)

Ethical Possibility in the Derridean Model

Sharif Abouleish[46]

This chapter explores a possible origin for objective ethics; specifically, we preview a minimal form of realism that arises when slight adjustments are made to différance. The chapter does not strongly endorse this realism; rather, it attempts to establish an area of future research. Section 1 prefaces the chapter with a conversation on the relationship between intuition and normative theories. Section 2, then, presents an unintuitive normative theory, exploring the plausibility of a 'non-descriptive realism' that might emerge when Derrida's model is applied to itself. Section 3 examines the epistemic dimensions of this theory. Lastly, Section 4 summarizes the core questions still at play.

I. Strange and Uncanny Normative Theories

Twenty years ago, J.L. Mackie (1997) famously wrote: "If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe." In the following sections, we embark on a search for such strange origins of objective value. Since the theory we propose is peculiar and unintuitive, it follows we should first speak briefly about the importance of intuition in an account of normativity.

Here, we are not trying to present a full and formal case against intuitionism-- the relationship between the theory and intuitionism is complex and will be discussed in the second half of the book.[47,48] Rather, we simply hope to safeguard against intuitionism as immediate grounds for the rejection of the theory.

[46] This chapter owes a great debt to the works of Lacan, Lyotard, and Zupančič. Our argument could be viewed as the Derridean application of their scholarship. We give them special thanks—their insights flow beneath our words. Let this function as citation for our more subtle invocations of their work. We also give thanks to David Collings. His knowledge and perceptivity proved invaluable to writing this chapter.

[47] For an ingenious take on the arguments in favor and against such a case, see Deutch (2015).

[48] For an overview on the slippery meaning of intuition, see Kauppinen (2012).

This hope takes refuge in two observations. First, intuition is often a flexible thing (see Sinnott-Armstrong 2008). What people find intuitive changes over time as norms dissolve and reforge. In the United States, moral norms about gay marriage rapidly shifted over 30 years (Pew 2019). This is even clearer for strictly metaphysical structures. Anyone who has spent enough time solving integrals can speak to the observation that unnatural ways of looking at problems can slowly become intuitive (Taint 1983; see, e.g., Epstein 1994). Similarly, although the theory we propose is strange now, this is probably not an immutable fact about either its moral or epistemic claims (Nagel and Newman 2001).

Second, if an objective reality exists, that reality is probably not governed by the rules of human intuition. It is not intuitive we are all moving at hundreds of miles per hour, rotating around the sun. It is not intuitive that a tree is made from millions of tiny atoms which themselves are built from tiny protons, electrons, and neutrons, which themselves are constructed from sub-atomic particles that cannot be accurately described with anything familiar to human senses. [49] From the moment humans wake up in the morning to the moment they sleep, they inhabit a seemingly strange and unintuitive universe. Even the metaphysical truths we conceive are often unintuitive: Russel's naïve set theory paradoxes does not clearly arise from the basic rules of logic; the Banach-Tarski paradox is a strange application of 3-dimensonal geometry; it is difficult for most undergraduate students to grasp expected first entry time of a Brownian motion. If we strive for normative truths which are similar in their apparent objectivity to mathematical proofs or the laws of physics, it is plausible these normative realties are similarly unintuitive. [50]

Thus, although the following theory is strange and peculiar, we hope it will not be rejected on these grounds.

II. Non-Descriptive Realism

The following section takes a close look at what we eventually call 'non-descriptive realism.' The claim here is that beneath deconstructable symbologies, there is a non-symbolic reality. Whether knowledge about this reality is determinable, whether ethical prescriptions are contained within it, and what constitutes a rational agent under such a model are all, as we try to show, key questions of future research. Here,

[49] Instead, these particles are best known through mathematics.

[50] With this said, intuition might still be important to understanding those realities. For a rigorous exploration of this distinction, *see* Sosa (2006).

our main task is to establish that (a) it is possible to answer these questions, and (b) the answers to these questions can result in an account of objective normative Things. That is, the goal is to indicate non-descriptive realism as a plausible origin for objective ethics.

II.I Metaphysics

For Derrida, all particularities are constructed.[51] The delineation of my kitchen into particular Things like the "floor", a "chair", and a "table" is the result of a serious confusion between my beliefs about the world and the world itself. Since these Things pretend to represent some particular element of the world but exist distinct from any objective reality, we can identify them as representations that do not reflect anything fundamental to the universe. That is, they are symbols with only the illusion of objective meaning. Derrida posits that all appearances of objectivity are accounted for by these objectively empty, subjectively constructed symbols. Derrida calls this account a system of negative difference. The system is the aggerate of all meaningless symbols; and since there is nothing besides the symbolic, this system is in some sense complete.[52] Put plainly, if all things are illusionary, then *all* things are illusionary.

This sense of totality is where our inquiry begins.[53] If there is only a symbolic order, then we might ask how it came to be. On the one hand, Derrida has shown us that self-evident ontology is not possible. On the other hand, Derrida is telling us that there is no negatively derived 'non-symbolic' reality.

More formally, we are questioning how the symbolic order derives its ontology. This kind of question might seem strange to a Derridean. A purely symbolic structure is precisely 'pure' because it lacks an ontological basis. There is no need, then, to ask about a 'symbolic ontology.'[54]

Our question only makes sense when we draw a distinction between the particular elements of a symbology and the symbology itself. It seems clear enough that différance is sufficient to explain how particular symbols take on the appearance of

[51] To save words, we do not continuously recite Derrida. All references come from "Différance" trans. Allison, in *Speech and Phenomena* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

[52] For clarity, as we connect Derrida to Lacan, we will begin to call this system of empty symbols "the symbolic order"; symbolic because it consists of representation and ordered because, as we will try to show, there are other orders.

[53] We give thanks to Copjec (2002) and Lyotard (1989) for this skepticism with symbolic totality.

[54] As Hägglund (2009) notes, Derrida goes so far as to identify a lack of symbology as a 'nothingness'.

objectivity; but we are not convinced by the account of genesis. That is, we are not sure that the illusion of something can come from nothingness. We are skeptical that there is nothing present in the underlying structure of symbologies. Where Derrida thinks about the contents of symbolic order, we are thinking about its structure.

This distinction is made significantly clearer by echoing Russell's naïve set theory paradox, his formulation of the problem of self-reference.[55] In Appendix I, we formally relate the pure logic form of Russel's proof to the pure logic form of Derrida's différance; but, here, a rough sketch of Russel's insight is sufficient to show our problem with Derrida's thinking.

Bertrand Russell (1901) argues that no set can be complete in the sense that it may positively define itself; that is, not only must the individual elements of a representational system be in some sense negatively defined, *but also the system itself*.[56] In Derridean terms, *a system of negative difference in of itself needs to be negatively defined*. A clarifying example is language.

In a purely Derridean model, any word infinitely defers its meaning onto other words; individual words only gain meaning from not being other words. This explains how individual signifiers gain the illusion of meaning, but it does not explain how the system of language is intelligible. However, using the Russellian insight, not only must individual words gain meaning from not being other words, but *also Language itself must be negatively defined.* That is, there must be a non-language. In more general terms, not only are the particular signifiers of a representational system negatively defined, *but also representation itself*; since there is a representational Order, there must be a non-representational Order.[57] In this sense, a weak form of realism can be established; here, we identify this non-representational Order as the "Real."[58] Since it is not symbolic, it is necessarily part of the world (Collings 2019). That is to say: if the Real does not symbolize existence, but it still exists, then it is tautologically correct to say this Real is in some sense woven into existence. In this

[55] We give thanks to David Collings for first drawing this connection between Russell, meta-systems, and Lacanian thinking.

[56] For a more complete explanation of the proof, *see* Lucero-Bryan (2009).

[57] Why must representations aggregate? To fully answer the question, a more detailed read of Russell's paradox is needed than we have time for is needed. We can, however, say that since any particular representation requires infinite deferral of meaning, it will eventually need to 'eat' other representational Orders. Put plainly, representation is put into a double bind: either (a) it aggerates, or (b) it collapses into a transcendental signifier.

[58] This argument, although not from any singular work, draws from Lacanian thinking. As a result, we use his terminology.

way, by applying différance *to* différance, we can conclude there is a Real. Différance casts a shadow. And it is by looking through this shadow which we may arrive at non-symbolic ontology. That is, the Russellian model allows us to account for the Real.[59]

Thus, by turning différance on itself, a strange sort of realism is delivered. On the one hand we can say there is a Real, but on the other hand this Real emerges precisely in the absence of symbological descriptions. That is, the Real cannot—on the surface—be put into language or other representational models.[60] We denote this account of the 'Real' as non-descriptive realism.

II.II Ethical and Ontological Implications

Even if we grant the claim that there is such a thing as the 'Real', this does not necessarily entail normative Things are present in the Real. Non-descriptive realism, at best, claims: If non-deconstructable ethics exists, it must live in the Real. Since any ethical grounds outside of the Real are symbolic (and thus deconstructable), then if ethics is to be non-deconstructable, it must locate itself in the Real. This does not necessarily mean ethics *is* located in the Real; that is, the Real does not necessarily prescribe to itself 'goodness'.[61] Rather, it means: "If there any ethical duties at all, and if knowing those duties is a condition of fulfilling them, then agents ought to seek the Real." Let us denote this as claim R.

Claim R is incomplete for at least two reasons. First, R only prescribes action in so far as it is a pre-condition to ethical action. In this sense, it is only in-directly ethical. It leaves open the question of "what is an ethics of the Real." That is, how does a situatedness of the Real create the ethical project. Second, R assumes that actions deliver subjects into the Real. This seems to be true for some but not all cases. For example, seeing someone suffer might cut through symbolic realities, plunging a subject into the Real (see, e.g., Wolfe 2009). This problem of immediacy means that claim R is insufficient since subjects cannot defer ethical content until they intentionally arrive at "the Real." Thus, it is important critical studies answers the question of "What is an ethics of the Real."

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[59] There are contemporary attempts to solve Russell's paradox in a manner that makes non-propositional truths possible. This is not an issue for the overarching goal of the chapter. A sound solution to the paradox will probably also provide an escape from différance.

[60] To save words, we assume language is a symbology.

[61] An example of such a prescription would be "we ought seek the real, or stay in the real, or deny that which is not the Real." This would be an ethics of the Real in a pure sense where the Real is Good.

It seems to us that there are three possible ways of approaching this question: an optimistic, a moderately pessimistic, and a very pessimistic perspective of normative Things and our knowledge of them. The optimistic view argues that already contained within humans is non-describable knowledge of morality. Moreover, this non-descriptive knowledge is not zero-sum with the hypothetically deconstructable beliefs every person holds.[62] That is, we can both hold some ideological beliefs and some non-symbolic beliefs. In this sense, the optimistic view suggests we already have substantive access to the Real and this access somehow generates ethical demands.[63]

The moderately pessimistic view finds this account unsatisfactory on multiple levels. First, ideology—deconstructable representations—infects most moral decision making in serious and dangerous ways. When someone imagines themselves giving to the homeless, they think in terms of class, separations of persons, etc. This implies the conditions of moral knowledge are ideological. How can we have strong confidence in our moral knowledge of something if the conditions of epistemic possibility are distorted? Without strong reason that explains why ideology and the Real are not zero-sum, we can probably reject the optimistic view. Even if we grant such a reason, there is still an issue of triviality.

If we accept that our seemingly ideological moral views are really articulations of a hidden reality, then all our beliefs might similarly be described as such. For many, binary gender roles feel deeply and inexplicably part of the universe. Under the optimistic view, those people could conclude gender roles are the actualization of knowledge from a hidden non-describable reality. Of course, this might be the case; but we can point to societies without binary gender roles to suggest otherwise (Rubin et Reiter 1975). This raises a substantive issue: the optimistic view lacks an ability to distinguish between ideological knowledge and non-descriptive knowledge; and this inability sometimes leads us astray about determining what objectively exists. More formally, if the Real can articulate itself within ideological structures, then we might with equal validity claim any ideological belief as emergence of Real knowledge.

For the moderate pessimist, then, it seems an encounter with non-descriptive knowledge is rare at best. It arises only in uncommon situations where all ideology is exorcised from the subject. Then, and only then, beliefs would be accounted for by

[62] To save words, from this point on, we simply call these beliefs "ideology."

[63] The reason why different agents are moved to different courses of moral action might be because the 'true ethical theory' is something similar to theory T.

the Real and only the Real. We can hypothetically imagine a morally weighted example of this.

Consider: a child is shot in front of you. The immediacy of the violence might lead you to, for but a moment, forget your name, where you are, even your ability to articulate language. The world might blur. You might be filled with a deep moral sickness. You might be moved to help the child. Since you are plausibly emptied of symbolic representations, it seems possible this action is not a result of ultimately deconstructable symbolic structures. Rather, it is born from the void beneath them. In a strange way, violence might dispel representational realities leaving only this non-descriptive realism. And, if we are lucky, this realism might contain inexplicable moral imperatives.

Some might agree with the moderate pessimist—we do not. We are skeptical that any human, if not rational agent, can be fully dispelled of symbolically orientated beliefs. That is, we are unsure whether it is possible to detangle ideology from non-descriptive knowledge. Our view is that if an ethics does exist in the Real, it is almost impossible to access.

Reconsider the Shot Child Case: although you might have been dispelled of the illusion of reflexive consciousness, the differentiation between "yourself" and the outside world probably still persists. If différance is taken seriously, even the separation of subjecthood on the basis of nerve-endings falls to the problem of self-reference (see, e.g., Lacan 1975).

This is one problem of many. While thinking about this case, we should also be careful about denotating the agent's motivation to help the child as strictly moral and non-ideological. We might be confusing emotive motivations to act with objective moral imperatives. We can go all the way back to Kant (1785) to show how emotive motivation ultimately fall prey to the problem of self-reference. To delineate between emotive pathology/ideology and non-descriptive moral imperatives, then, it might be necessary for an agent to fully exorcise themselves of emotions.[64]

Here, an important connection is made clear between Derrida's critique of ideology and Kant's critique of pathological motivation.[65] What Derrida calls ideological in an ontological context, Kant calls pathological in a moral setting. For Derrida, an ideology is deconstructable because not every rational agent would

[64] This seems difficult, but not necessarily impossible.

[65] Here, we begin following Zupančič's (2000) argument quite closely. Where Zupančič considers the Lacanian implications, we think in terms of Derrida.

conclude they are governed by its rules or ontological categories.[66] Similarly, Kant critiques certain motivations as escapable; since not every rational agent would conclude the motivation is a reason for action, the motivation is pathological. In this sense, pathology is ideological, and ideology is pathological. Although we do not like engaging in word games, we need to take this synonym play a few steps further to fully articulate the depth of this connection.

At this point, we can trade in 'pathology' and 'ideology' so long as the underlying belief is based on an escapable justification.[67] This sense of escapability is what leads Kant to identify the pathological as subjective. That is, a pathological belief requires the subject to believe in a special logic that not every agent would agree too. Similarly, in Derrida's terms, any motivation that derives from an ideological basis is subjective.

The beauty in this formulation of Derrida's argument comes out of what Kant does next. For Kant (1781), a non-pathological belief is an objective belief. [68] Since a non-pathological belief would be inescapable, it would be forged from a logic to which every rational agent would agree. In the same way the opposite of a pathological motivation is an objective reason, we similarly think it holds that the opposite of an ideological Thing is an objective Thing (Zupančič 2000). If an agent was completely devested of ideology, it seems there would be nothing to distinguish them from any other agent. That is, in any particular situation, any agent would equally be confronted with 'non-descriptive' reality and the ontologies it entails. In this sense, an agent exorcised of ideology is a 'subjectless subject'; they are non-subjective in the sense they would behave identically to any other rational agent.[69] If such a subject has motivating reason to act, then a non-descriptive, non-pathological reason for action is established.

It is through this objective reason for action that the very pessimistic view might still establish a moral theory. The exact articulation of such a theory is up for discussion.[70] For now we will simply point out that Mackie (1975) formulates his

[66] For example, our non-binary friend Rashon would not conclude that gender is inherent to the human condition.

[67] This becomes clear when we position Derrida' critique in a Kantian dialogue. Why is X a chair? Because it is intuitive that X is a chair? Why is intuition grounds for ontology? Because it is intuitive…

[68] Here, there is some slippage between an objective reason and an objective belief. We can say a reason always constitutes a belief, but a belief does not always imply a reason for action.

[69] The terminology 'subjectless subject' is borrowed from Zupančič (200).

[70] Finkelde (2015), Zupančič (2000), and Reinhard (2015) all provide possible accounts.

thesis as a challenge against non-pathological reasons: for Mackie, each subject's motivation for moral action eventually derives from escapable, ideological reasons. If an 'subjectless subject' is possible, and such a subject has motivations for action, then a strong opposition to, at least Mackie's, anti-moral realism is presented.

This reliance on the 'subjectless subject' leads to the main set of questions for any ethics of the Real. Is a subject exorcised of ideology possible? What does this alien subject look like? Is it possible to take actions to deconstruct all ideologies within oneself? Do we have to be born with a resistance to representational systems? If humans are not capable of this, might some other entity be capable?

There are many possible answers to these questions. We will leave them as areas of future research, and for now only say that even in the most pessimistic interpretation of non-descriptive realism, there are plausible grounds for objective ethics. That is, there is no known structural property of non-descriptive realism that precludes objective ethics from being established.

We can tentatively outline an axiomatic formulation of what this normative theory might look like. That is, if an author can show:

1. Subjects void of representational constructs are possible, *and*
2. These subjects are still moved to some action, *then*

They have probably also shown:

3. There are non-constructed reasons for action. In Kantian terms, non-pathological reasons are possible.

III. Epistemic Plausibility

Although we hope that a correct explanation of normative Things would be knowable, there is nothing—from our current position of uncertainty—that makes it necessarily so (see Parfit 1984). If moral knowledge is not possible, there is no reason to research moral questions. Moreover, if moral knowledge resists linguistic communication, there might be no reason to academically write about it. Thus, when positioning a theory as an area of future research, it is important to consider whether the metaphysical model plausibly allow for us to derive and talk about ethics.

On the surface, it seems non-descriptive realism is not compatible with discussions of moral knowledge. Such a conversation tries to "describe" the "non-descriptive." Although we accept that philosophical discussion about non-descriptive realism is difficult, we do not think by any means it is impossible. It seems, at least to us, that non-descriptive realism is reasonably epistemologically viable.

This is because non-descriptive realism allows us to side-step many tautological problems with descriptive interpretations of morality. Consider Moore's (1903) open question argument and how it creates an issue with descriptive ethics. Echoing the problem of self-reference, he proposes that we can reasonably question whether any particular instance of goodness is constitutive of goodness. For example, even if we think something like pleasure is good, we can ask whether goodness is pleasure. This similarly works with whatever we replace with 'pleasure': rationality, bravery, even God. We can also, at some risk, exchange goodness with any other normative Thing. In this sense, there is a structural issue with describing what precisely is any normative Thing.

Moore's argument is useful for us in at least two ways. First, on some level, it suggests if there are normative Things, then probably one property of them is they are non-descriptive. If we agree with Moore's open question problem, then we also should look for normative Things in the non-symbolic realm.

Second, Moore provides us with an example of how we can, in a non-trivial manner, talk about non-descriptive Things. In the case given by Moore, although it's impossible to in a strong sense to describe goodness, language can still implicate it.

When we first wrote this last sentence, we were deeply confused.[71] If you can describe non-descriptive Things, even implicitly, then those Things are descriptive in at least in a weak sense. Is Moore's example, then, not applicable to non-descriptive realism? Are we confusing a weak sense of non-descriptive Things with a strong sense? Alternatively, does Moore's open question suggest another way out of différance?

This confusion, these questions, flow from some slippage between our discussion of ontology and our current discussion of epistemology. We can rectify this slippage by thinking carefully about epistemic luck.

Epistemic luck is the idea that using incorrect reasoning, we sometimes can reach correct conclusions. For example, you could believe that (1) Kyle is a wizard, (2) God kills anyone who does not hunt down and murder a wizard every 60 days, therefore (3) one way for you to temporarily stay alive is murdering Kyle with a bow. This seems utter nonsense. But consider a case where Kyle, unrelated to his wizardry, has the black plague and is planning to move into your town. If he does, he will infect you and everyone you know with the deadly disease. In such a rare case, for completely nonsensical reasons, conclusion (3) is correct.

Interestingly, (3) is an example of a claim that is correct but baseless. This special type of claim, we think, resolves the apparent problem that is raised by Moore's open

[71] We stood up for a bathroom break.

question. This is because différance suggests only *that no descriptive Thing can justify its own ontology*. With the Russellian qualification, we identify that non-deceptive 'something(s)' with stable ontologies must exist. Neither of these two positions say that descriptive Things cannot happen to reflect non-descriptive Things. That is, the ontological basis for Things can never be found in the symbolic order but the symbolic order can contain baseless, but ultimately, 'correct' claims. In other words, a special kind of epistemic claim might exist that allows us to contain non-descriptive conclusions in descriptive language. The main limitation is that the justification for these conclusions can never be found in descriptive language.

This is extremely important for the epistemic plausibly of an ethics of the Real. We can imagine a small set of agents who achieve 'enlightenment.' That is, they have access to non-descriptive moral knowledge. They could then use descriptive claims to describe the prescriptions contained in non-descriptive reality. Nothing about the descriptive claim provides grounds for the conclusions; rather, the descriptive claim merely reflects the non-descriptive ethic.

For example, "thou shall not kill might" sufficiently describe the material act of a 'enlightened agent' deciding not to kill someone for strictly objective reasons. Although each element of the description is constructed and thus ideological, it 'accidently' guides us to the moral course of action. It is accidental in the sense that nothing inside the ideological claim is inherently attached to ethical action. That is, *prima facie*, there is nothing clearly problematic about mapping non-descriptive moral conclusions into descriptive claims.[72]

There is much more that can be said about this topic. If we accept that mapping between the symbolic and non-symbolic is possible, can we construct a symbology that is intrinsically meaningless but sufficiently correlates with non-descriptive knowledge such that meaningful communication is possible? Does language already function in this way? How can we know? Is there a way to map the logic of non-descriptive knowledge? Is this logic-mapping needed to substantively talk about non-descriptive realism?

For now, however, we will simply say that non-descriptive realism is a viable source of future research. It is possible to (a) discuss important questions about non-descriptive realism's ethical dimensions, and (b) map the conclusions of these ethical dimensions into preceptive claims.

[72] Here, we use mapping in its technical sense (see, e.g., Nagel et Newman).

IV. Summary, Limitations, and Future Research

We have argued that by looking at différance systematically, it becomes clear that any representational illusion tautologically implies a non-representational reality. If there is a symbolic order, there is a non-symbolic order. In this sense, there are not only signifiers that do not signify anything; but also, things signified that do not correspond with any particular signifier.

We think the possibility of these non-signifiers might provide a viable source of ontology. Where Derrida thinks a transcendental sign is needed for any sort of realism, we suggest a non-signifier is sufficient.

Next, we tried to show that there is no structural contradiction between this non-signifier and normative Things. Specifically, we hypothesized that if agents are moved to action by non-symbolic knowledge, this would constitute an objective moral imperative.

The main limitation of our work is its propositional nature. Some might consider a non-descriptive reality that contains objective normative Things extremely appealing; some might consider it pseudo-religious; others might see it as plausible but extremely unworkable theory.

To distill these different views and move our suggestion from hypothesis to concrete theory, we propose three areas of future research.

First, we must identify how exactly pure non-representational knowledge is derived, and if this knowledge contains moral imperatives.

Second, it is important to think closely about how we might map those moral imperatives, and non-symbolic knowledge more generally, into special kinds of 'lucky' descriptive claims.

Third, it is key to question our neat account of non-descriptive realism. In each section, we have moved closer to a potential account of all ontology. We have no doubt we have made serious errors along the way. It is our hope that future research will clarify and crystalize the work started in this thesis.

Ultimately, we have engaged in a gesture. A first step towards establishing the origins of objective ethics. While the past century has not been kind to similar attempts, we think that various developments in other fields—mathematics, neuroscience, and computer science—provide power tools that make philosophical progress possible

Appendix I: Formally Relating Différance to Russel's Naïve Set Theory Paradox

Derrida proposes that any Thing must be negatively defined. We can describe this as:

$a \in U \supset \sim a \in U$

That is, if a Thing is in the set of all Things, then the negation of the Thing must also be contained in the set.

In simple cases, $\sim a$ is a singular, identical negation. For example, if in the set of colors there is the color black, then also contained within the set is the color white. But, as Derrida points out, such mutual negative definition is not possible.[73] The process of negation continues infinitely. If there is black, there is white; if there is white, there is also some other color. As a result, we need to incorporate this sense of infinity to the proposition above. To do this, we more precisely describe U an infinite set of unique, negatively defined elements:

$|U| \neq 0 \supset U \in a_n, a_{n+1}, \ldots$ where $n \to \infty$ s.t $|U| = \infty$

That is, if anything Thing is in the set of all Things, then also in the set is an infinite number of Things not it and not each other.

We can then apply the rule of substation to this proposition such that it introduces the Russellian problem. That is, we can substate the 'elements' of U for distinct sets, making 'U' a set of all sets. Since, as Russel shows us, this set of all sets (U) is not possible, we can say there is a problem with Derrida's proposition. Put plainly—

$R = \{ x \mid x \notin x \} \supset R \in R \leftrightarrow R \notin R$

sufficiently shows a problem with Derrida's proposition—

$|U| \neq 0 \supset U \in a_n, a_{n+1}, \ldots$ where $n \to \infty$ s.t $|U| = \infty$

[73] For an explanation on why, *see* Chapter 2.

because there is a structural problem with U being described as a set of all sets.

In informal terms, infinite deferral implies all symbologies will be eaten into a singular symbolic order. This is because either (a) any symbology will eventually defer its meaning onto all possible symbologies, or (b) there is an end to différance. (a) assumes an impossible set of all sets is produced; (b) assumes an 'end' to différance. This 'end' implies we will have found a Thing which can define itself and does not need to continually defer its meaning onto other things. As a result, différance is put into a double-bind: either there is a problematic complete symbolic order, or there is an escape to Derrida's différance. In either case, a form of realism can be established. In the first case, there is something 'beyond' symbolic order. In the second case, there is a solution to the problem of self-reference.

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Remarks and Acknowledgments

My goals for writing this thesis were fourfold. It is my hope all four have been achieved.

First, I wanted to research a topic for a sufficient length of time where I could (a) explore its core literature with more rigor than a traditional undergraduate class would allow, and (b) make a potential contribution to that literature. This thesis marks over six years of work.

Second, I set out to put into conversation special topics in both analytic and continental philosophy. If I was successful, then the thesis is a (perhaps unwilling) marriage between the two traditions.

Third, I sought to provide clear and concise explanations of the varied metaphysics and ontological positions poststructuralist thinkers have proposed.

Fourth, I tried to see what is normal as strange. This, I believe, is the ethos of critical studies.

I should note that my goal was never to produce *true* conclusions. I have no doubt that this thesis contains serious errors. It is my hope that despite these errors, the paper provides some insights.

Lastly, I want to thank Professor David Collings for his essay-length-emails and unending patience. Without him, I would not have the confidence or thinking-skills necessary to write this thesis. I also give thanks to Professor Angel Matos for his kindness and support in difficult times. I thank Professor Selinger for his mentorship (and humor). I would also like to thank my Mother and Father for supporting my book-addiction; without your love, I would not be here today. And, of course, I thank Elizabeth Fortson and Daniel Chen. Many of the ideas of this paper first emerged in our late-night conversations. You have debated with me for almost a decade now, and for that, I am indebted.