

Swarthmore College

Works

Philosophy Faculty Works

Philosophy

1-1-1988

Review Of "Deconstruction in Context" Edited By M. C. Taylor

Richard Thomas Eldridge

Swarthmore College, reldrid1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

Richard Thomas Eldridge. (1988). "Review Of "Deconstruction in Context" Edited By M. C. Taylor".

Canadian Philosophical Reviews. Volume 8, Issue 1. 40-42.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy/294>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by . It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Mark C. Taylor, ed.

Deconstruction in Context:

Literature and Philosophy.

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1986.

Pp. viii+446.

US\$45.00 (cloth: ISBN 0-226-79139-4);

US\$16.95 (paper: ISBN 0-226-79140-8).

As an anthology of excerpts from major philosophical writings from Kant to the present, *Deconstruction in Context* is organized around an overt argument and philosophical agenda. Selections from Kant, Hegel, Kojève, and Husserl exemplify the “onto-theological tradition” (14), ‘the repeated effort to overcome plurality and establish unity by reducing the many to the one’ (4). Or, in more Kantian terminology, this tradition aims to provide a ‘demonstration of the primal unity of nature and reason, as well as nature and freedom, [in order to establish] the possibility of overcoming fragmentation and alienation by recovering the unity of experience’ (6). That is, the aim of this tradition is to understand human experience as the effect of some ultimate metaphysical subject (noumenal reality or God or *Geist* or transcendental subjectivity), the operations of which might be known, so that life is made intelligible.

Saussure then appears as a transitional figure, for whom ‘identity is derived from difference’ (14), while he nonetheless continues to elaborate a science of semiology that is ‘bound to traditional philosophical assumptions’ (14). Next Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein are introduced as figures who open up ‘other fissures’ (14) in the philosophical tradition in suggesting that tension, plays of forces, contextuality, and difference are omnipresent in human existence.

Heidegger then suggests that it is art – and neither philosophy nor any of its putative central subjects – that “holds open the Open” (20) that is ‘the condition of the possibility of Being and beings’ (18). Hence our lives are lived fundamentally against the background of the radical and illogical opening of experience through art, not within stable structures of being that might be grasped philosophically. Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Bataille, Blanchot, and Derrida each further radicalize Heidegger’s thought, as they see in Heidegger’s talk of art and the Open the continuation of a metaphysical concern to recover and know the origin of experience. Rather than participate in this effort, each of these latter writers sees experience as engendered by differences and oppositions, in ways that cannot be understood. Each, in his own way, undertakes the impossible task of thinking the unthought by interrogating that which exceeds, escapes, and eludes philosophical reflection’ (4). As a result, we are – insofar as we are seriously concerned with the real character of our experience, in all its self-differing unintelligibility – given over not to philosophy, but rather to literature, which ‘writes the end of philosophy by writing without end’ (34).

Taylor’s introductory essay is both lucid and useful in elaborating the argument of the anthology. I can think of no other short essay that so neatly summarizes, with clearly developed references to the major philosophical

texts, the development of philosophy as it is now understood by those preeminently influenced by Heidegger and Derrida.

The selections of excerpts that support the development of the argument are nearly perfect, with one exception: it would have been better to have Derrida’s essay ‘Structure, Sign and Play’ rather than ‘Différance.’ It is useful to have Kant on genius (*Geist*) next to Hegel on *Geist* from the Preface to the *Phenomenology*. Merleau-Ponty and Nietzsche are nicely juxtaposed on ‘the irreducible temporality of self-consciousness’ (23). The difficult choices of material from Heidegger and Wittgenstein are sound.

The bibliography, however, is both seriously incomplete and highly eccentric. Over four pages are devoted to works by and about Derrida, while scarcely over a page is devoted to Kant. Standard works on Kant by Kemp Smith, Paton, Körner, Strawson, Melnick, Ameriks, and Nagel, among others are not listed. Works on Hegel by Charles Taylor, on Husserl by Maurice Natanson, on Wittgenstein by Baker and Hacker, and so on are likewise omitted. Neither the introductory essay nor the bibliography acknowledges the existence of ways of looking at philosophy since Kant that lie outside the generally Heideggerian tradition. One would have to correct this one-sidedness in using the anthology as a principal text for a course in philosophy, literature, and criticism. With this correction, however, the anthology is invaluable.

Both the organization of the selections and the introductory essay display an argument against the discipline of philosophy that has considerable currency at present. This argument, however, is not free from problems.

1) Taylor sometimes seems to argue: (i) there are numerical differences among various objects; therefore (ii) there are real or essential differences; therefore (iii) there is in reality only difference – reality itself has no underlying substance or structure. This argument is logically invalid; at best it turns on an uncritical equivocation on ‘difference.’ Indeed, it would seem that (ii) implies the *falsity* of (iii). Considerable more clarity and consistency in the use of terms such as ‘difference,’ ‘substance,’ and ‘subject’ are called for. (iii) is also urged largely through the criticism of Descartes and Hegel. Realist metaphysical schemes, such as that of Davidson, that require neither the independent characterization of a correspondence relation nor a God-like agency of history are not considered.

2) The comprehensive anti-realism that is urged is taken to imply a general rejection of normative discourse, insofar as such discourse could be useful or intelligible only if it were grounded in an understanding of the essences of things – and there are no essences. Here one might observe that both Plato and Kant emphasized the partial character, given our finite and embodied rationality, of such understandings of essences as we can manage. Yet they went on to offer us articulate partial understandings and plausible systems of normative discourse. Hence there may be a place for traditional philosophy against the claims of deconstructive criticism. And one might further wonder whether normative commitments and traditional philosophical presuppositions can ever be escaped through a move to the literary. (Taylor’s argument itself seemingly urges that literary study and open-ended writing and criticism are uniquely true and valuable.)

3) It is dubitable whether literature 'writes ... without end' – dubitable, that is, whether literary writers and critics lack organizing, albeit implicit, assumptions about a *telos*, either of the work or of those who would receive it. (That in writing and reading we make such assumptions does not imply that it is knowable either a priori or with certainty which of them are sound.) These implicit assumptions may be open to philosophical criticism, as their implications are developed and tested for plausibility. Here, too, there may be a place for philosophy.

Richard Eldridge
Swarthmore College

INQUIRY

An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy

Editor: Alastair Hannay

Vol. 31 No. 1, March 1988

- *Peter Skagestad*: On History's Witness Stand: Rubashov, Bukharin, and the Logic of Totalitarianism
- *Paul Seabright*: Objectivity, Disagreement, and Projectibility
- *Harold I. Brown*: Normative Epistemology and Naturalized Epistemology
- *B.J. Garrett*: Best-candidate Theories and Identity: Reply to Brennan
- *Andrew Brennan*: Reply to Garrett
- *Richard C. Jennings*: Alternative Mathematics and the Strong Programme: Reply to Triplett
- *Maurice A. Finocchiaro*: Science and Society in Newton and Marx (Georgy Markus, *Language and Production: A Critique of the Paradigms*, Gideon Freudenthal, *Atom and Individual in the Age of Newton: On the Genesis of the Mechanistic World View*)

To: Norwegian University Press
P O Box 2959 Tøyen, 0608 Oslo 6, Norway

Please enter my subscription to **INQUIRY** (4 issues per year)

Rates 1988 (postage included) **Airmailed to subscribers in the Americas**

Nordic countries only: Institutions NOK 400,- Individuals NOK 205,-

All other countries: Institutions USD 67.00 Individuals USD 34.00

(Single issues: NOK 125,-/USD 21.00 plus postage)

Name:

Address:

Individuals must order direct from publisher

Cheque enclosed

Please send invoice

1-88/108A