Jacques Derrida on the Reality of Universal Happiness

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1. Introduction

Can there be universal happiness? Including this huge philosophical topic, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), an influential anti-realist, uncovers the underlying assumptions of Western philosophy since Ancient Greece, and contends that its premise on the existence of universals cannot be maintained. He thought Western philosophy is "impossible" since it presumes the reality of universal that is the objective of all the foundations or all processes, such as idea (Plato), God (Augustine), Cogito (Descartes), and absolute spirit (Hegel). This short paper addresses the way Derrida made his case against the reality of universals (including universal happiness) and discusses its consequence in society. Section 2 introduces his deconstruction thesis in connection to the reality of universals. Section 3 addresses the impact of his deconstruction on the contemporary society. Section 4 briefly discusses the significance of Derrida's philosophy on written texts and the existence of universal happiness with a Christian doctrine in view. Section 5 concludes this paper.

2. Deconstruction and the reality of universals

Derrida calls such existence "existence - God - purpose - theory of origin" in his seminal *Of Grammatology* (Derrida, 1974 and 1978). These are indeed the starting assumptions of Western philosophy.

The philosophical premises of existence - God - purpose or happiness - theory of origin and so on all have a feature of dichotomous relationship: "essence (as idea) / appearance (as particular)" and "ego / subject". The two dichotomous things are not equal to each other. For example, Plato decided that an idea would be established by Idea. And the dichotomous conflict represents a hierarchy in which one is superior to the other.

In the case of Plato, only the particulars can actually be experienced and confirmed, and the universal Idea or Form could only be prescribed as having the opposite characteristic to the particular. In other words, even though the former (Idea or Form) is officially said to generate the latter (particular), the latter (particular) is actually present first, and the Idea is "created" in our minds. Thus, Derrida's method of uncovering the fact that philosophical principles such as essence are made by the particulars, is called "deconstruction".[1]

In terms of epistemology, Derrida's (2011) work "Voice and Phenomenon" (originally published in 1967) has criticized the essential intuition at work in the "objective phenomenon" phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). In Husserl's phenomenological reduction to capture the true nature of objective events by stopping phenomena occurring in consciousness, Derrida finds a metaphysical dogma and asserts that it is impossible to specify "pure

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[1] Derrida (1968: 7) states: "A text remains [⋯] forever imperceptible. Its law and its rules are not, however, harbored in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked, in the present, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception."

intact consciousness content."

Husserl conceived philosophy as a universal generalization of timeless, regional, and personal "exact sciences," by proxy and reproducibility of the characteristics of the framework "language = symbol." In Derrida's view, when trying to express with words the thing or something's pure consciousness content, token events of the truth, the difference ("différance" which was coined by Derrida) among the language, the events and awareness (deviation) is inevitably born. Figure 1 depicts Derrida's view, which was inspired by philosophical linguist Charles Sanders Peirce: there is a connection between "object" and the "sign"; but there also is "interpretant", which is arbitrarily linked to the object (the dashed line indicates that).

Derrida's criticism is that humans cannot directly express objective events and conscious experiences as they are by using language. When this arbitrary linking is repeated infinitely as depicted in Figure 2, the infinite semiosis becomes unstable and lacks the anchor linking to the universals. Words are defined in terms of words, which are further defined by yet other new words and so forth.

One symbol creates a symbol that interprets it, and the symbol also creates a symbol that further interprets it, and the process forms an infinite chain. Deconstructionism is both a postmodern epistemological understanding of written texts, and it is also used as a tool for criticizing political institutions. Derrida believed deconstruction could be used as a means to avoid violence and work towards justice by means of re-conceiving the difference between the self (self-consciousness) and the other.

The truth of the world and consciousness, altered through the language, changes over elapsed time. Because it is impossible to share universal truth due to the recognition that pure meaning does not pass through the function of human language (knowledge), the "truth" of the pure world cannot be

Figure 1. Three-valued logic (semiosis) by Charles Sanders Peirce

Interpretant

Sign ———————— Object
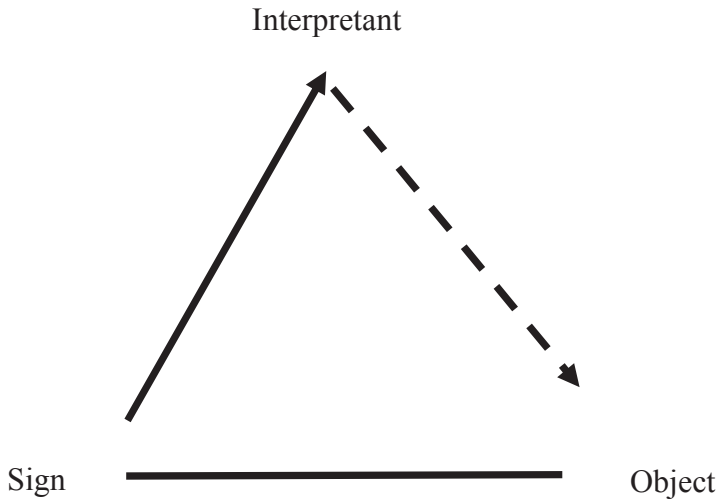
Source: Made by the author based on Derrida (1974).

Figure 2. Infinite semiosis
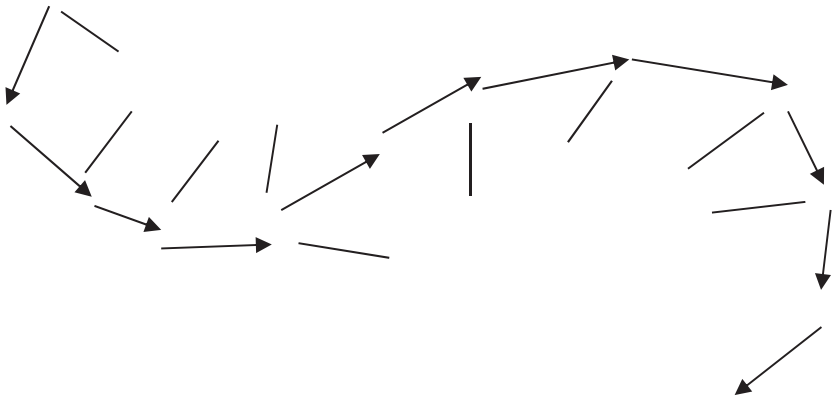
Source: Made by the author based on Derrida (1974).

shared in our society.

Derrida notes the collapse of Western-style, or Cartesian, foundationalism as an epistemology—that is, the collapse of the idea that one's beliefs can stand upon a "firm and permanent", i.e., universal, foundation and can be build up to a level of certainty. Descartes in his "First Meditation" attempted to deconstruct his own knowledge ("what do I *really* know") until he got to what he believed was a firm foundation—his knowledge of his own existence—"I think therefore I am." Derrida, however, deconstructs the self even further, saying at bottom the foundation of our knowledge is not a single unified self, but rather a delimitation between "myself" and "myself-as-other."

Derrida's reaction against universals can be usefully understood as a reaction against Platonism, which views ultimate reality as constructed of clear, separate substances or universals "forms." On Derrida's view (Derrida, 1974), these ideal forms are reduced from transcendence to immanence and the essence of the forms is brought down into the appearance of tangible things. But of course this brings us to the realm of experience, which is varied.

From Derrida's viewpoint, we find ourselves in a situation of "undecidability": in the face of uncertainty and possible-impossible dichotomies and paradoxes, Derrida formulates all decisions to be "leaps of faith" much like an extension of Kierkegaard's decision towards religious belief, but towards all decisions. Because of undecidability we must make a choice that is a leap beyond logic and calculative reasoning—in this way Derrida is turning away the logocentric heritage of Western thought. It is a step away from the self-contained subject (the "I") simply reflecting on the subject/decision at hand. He held the view of "multiple universalism" (Colebrook, 2016). Post-modern thinkers, including scientists, are struggling to understand Derrida's case for epistemology concerning subject/object.[2]

3. Impact of Derrida's deconstructionism on the contemporary society

Deconstruction as a post-modern worldview takes the stance of non-decision, both/and, hanging in the balance the self and the other's view; in this way Derrida defines justice as the "experience" of the undecidable because he no longer believes in the possibility of an observer being absolutely exterior to the object under consideration. And so undecidability and the need for decision are placed in tension. And for Derrida, "Hegemony" is the bridge that can collapse undecidability and actuality.

Therefore in rejecting foundationalism and any ultimate reference point for laws, democracy, and international relations to be guided by (e.g. reason and human rights), Derrida has uncoupled western democracy from "logic" and from pure implementation of known just "law." This leads to the decoupling of enlightenment rationality (epistemology) and enlightenment liberalism (politics[3]). There is now, on Derrida's view, no context-independent, universal language to persuade dissonant viewpoints. Take for instance, the Islamic project of bringing the entire world into *dar al-Islam* and western ideals of pluralism, equality, and religious tolerance. These worldviews are incommensurate.

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[2] When a scientist involves in some sort of scientific "observations", the measuring apparatus and the object to be interpreted are strangely involved (Kirby, 2016). In this sense (inspired by the modern-day quantum physics), there is no dichotomy of subjectivity and objectivity.

[3] Derrida's critique of the reality of universalism does not prevent him from being strongly committed to the defense of the political side of the Enlightenment, i.e., the democratic movement concerning, e.g., death penalty (Gratton, 2016). In this connection, Derrida (1987) puts it: "In the beginning, in principle, was the post, and I will never get over it." While playing with the Biblical verse (John 1:1), "In the beginning was the Word," Derrida replaces "Word" with "post." used in mailing. Derrida implies here that "distance", i.e., the distance between one speaker and another, is inevitable for communication. And there is a gap Without the gap between them, much like the slow-paced post (mailing) system.

If we cannot persuade anyone on any universal truth by means of reason (i.e., demonstrating logically that the other is irrational), then perhaps a new project could offer itself—couldn't relationship be a pragmatic tool to advance justice?

> By putting an exclusive emphasis on the arguments needed to secure the *legitimacy* of liberal institutions, recent moral and political philosophy have been asking the wrong question. The real issue is not to find arguments to justify the rationality or universality of liberal democracy that would be acceptable by every rational or reasonable person⋯ what is needed is the creation of a democratic *ethos*. It has to do with the mobilization of passions and sentiments, the multiplication of practices, institutions and language games that provide the conditions of possibility for democratic subjects and democratic forms of willing. (Mouffe, 1996, p. 5).

The philosophical attempt of Derrida was to sequentially devastate the logocentric system of Western metaphysics. In "modern" societies, there was a common social belief that universal values, or common sense values exist, right and wrong exists, and universally normative behaviors exist. Not any more in the post-modern society under the influence of the representative anti-realist philosopher Derrida.

Some religious fundamentalists believe that there exist ethical norms that are supposed to be protected, including sexualities that are considered to be general (sexual orientation / sexual preferences). However, when considering the basis of these value judgments, there is often no objective, empirical, and uncontestable grounds undergirding these common beliefs. Except in the case of practical right relationships where advantages and disadvantages occur (which are often testable and predictable), there are only vague differences

between individuals of how to interpret the events and problems facing us. This is exactly what Derrida addressed in his deconstruction tenet.

4. Significance of Derrida's philosophy on the written text and universal happiness

Derrida was instrumental in poststructuralist and deconstructionist thought, which was inspired by Martin Heidegger's work "Being and Time." Derrida's deconstruction is a concept raised in the context of criticizing logocentrism dominant in Western thought since Plato, which is dualistic in nature; it is a concept raised in the context of both spoken and written language, as a refutation of the dichotomy between the phenomenological world and the world of ideas. The effect of the concept of deconstruction on the refutation and denial of the binary confrontation diagram (dualistic worldview) accompanied by a value judgment such as imagination and reality, which always follows the traditional metaphysics, phenomena and ideas, subjective and objective, good and evil.

Derrida is also called a post-structuralist thinker because he devoted himself to the construction of a new metaphysics after dissolving the existence of the "objective general structure" that structuralism was premised upon. The general structures and relationships elucidated by structuralism are not unambiguous in the context of post structuralism, but rather are ambiguous and can be modified.

In a written sentence expressing a certain truth/value, there is a viewpoint of relativistic perception that the opposite sense (position) is indirect from the written content. Interpretation that a certain value is correct can be discerned ambiguously from a position that is contradictory (conflicting) with its value and one cannot determine the meaning unambiguously from the written content itself. There is a conflicting meaning of B inevitably in the

text indicating the meaning of A. This paradox is inherent in the text itself. The very core of Derrida's deconstruction is to illustrate the absence of the transcendental meaning (= truth) in Ecriture (written text). Concepts are necessarily rendered in writing as a mediator. His statement that "there is no outside-text" means that there is nothing in our world that is unmediated. Nothing ever comes to us in a pure state, without being under- or over-written with textual ideas or literal texts.

Turning now to the Christian doctrine, Ezekiel 29:3 states: Speak to him and say: This is what the Sovereign Lord says: "I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, you great monster lying among your streams. You say, "The Nile belongs to me; I made it for myself." The great monster was created thanks to all the blessings of the Nile, and not the other way round. By the same token, reason was created by God who is revealed in the Bible, and there is no inherent paradox on this point, unless one wishes to dismiss the existence of God. Indeed, philosophy based on self-promoting autonomous human reason, including Derrida's deconstructionism, is futile after all; and philosophy must be done under the context of a worldview.

Declaration of the death of God leads to the death of meaning in philosophical reasoning including his own philosophical thought: when he is expressing his deconstructive thoughts in his own written text, he is also deconstructing his deconstructive text. Derrida's viewpoint is the application of an atheistic world view to language itself. A serious epistemological error is arising from the ethical error of turning away from Biblical God who reveals universal truth (creation account, fall, and salvation) to us.

To sympathize with him, Derrida needed spiritual rest. Derrida was born into a Jewish family in Algeria. Before and during the second world war, he had the personal experience of being cast out of the logocentric European (French) community where he lived. The "difference" of his skin color (he had

a rather dark skin) with a Jewish background had much influence on the way he was segregated (in a subtle way) at school (Glendinning, 2011). This fact implies that his "universal" theory of deconstruction was created from his own personal and "particular" experience of social marginalization in France[4].

While Derrida admits that religion[5] is dangerous (Newheiser, 2017), he demonstrates that it is nevertheless an indispensable resource for philosophical reflection. He may have been holding an ambivalent emotion to, or the combination of hatred against and attachment to, Judaism. When he says "There is no outside-text" in his *Of Grammatology* (Derrida, 1974), he might have been emotionally dismayed and in the state of deconstruction: the almighty God (of the Jewish people) written in the holy text (scripture) could have saved him (as a Jew) from his own situation of social ostracism (in a physical and metaphysical sense). The same text, however, was used against him by mainstream French people (as Christians).

Because Derrida's work is itself a written text, the question suggests itself: what happens if we deconstruct Derrida's work? What happens when deconstructionism turns against itself? Then we would come to see the meaning and beauty inherent within the opposite perspective of deconstructionism— that is, that objectivity and universality are useful and needed. We would hold that Derrida's ideas have no inherent truth within themselves and can only be asserted and maintained in an act of hegemony. Thus his ideas are shown to be

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[4] In this connection, Derrida (1971) puts it: "What is metaphysics? A white mythology which assembles and reflects Western culture: the white man takes his own mythology (that is, Indo-European mythology), his logos-that is, the mythos of his idiom, for the universal form of that which it is still his inescapable desire to call Reason. […] What is white mythology? It is metaphysics which has effaced in itself that fabulous scene which brought it into being, and which yet remains, active and stirring, inscribed in white ink, an invisible drawing covered over in the palimpsest."
[5] In this connection, it is often pointed out that "Deconstruction is the death of God put into writing." (Carl Raschke, "The Deconstruction of God").

self-referentially incoherent—they commit intellectual suicide—and because they are self-refuting cannot be consistently applied. Derrida does not want his readers to hold in suspension their beliefs regarding his own work, but rather intends for it to be fully adopted as a means of stopping injustice and oppression. Thus there is an inherent intellectual tension embedded within the project itself.[6]

As an example, Derrida wrote the following concerning the underpinnings of deconstructionism:

The idea behind deconstruction is to deconstruct the workings of strong nation-states with powerful immigration policies, to deconstruct the rhetoric of nationalism, the politics of place, the metaphysics of native land and native tongue⋯ the idea is to disarm the bombs⋯ of identity that nation-states build to defend themselves against the stranger, against Jews and Arabs and immigrants.[7]

The irony is that after deconstructionism does its work, these social structures are left with no authority, rights, or justified power to accomplish the goods Derrida seeks. Derrida himself realized that democracy was better than

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[6] To avoid this tension, one could attempt to read Derrida's project as merely descriptive or as pragmatic suggestions. If his work is purely descriptive of the human condition（e.g., "in our post-modern state, an adult mind *just happens to tend toward* the state of *aporia* and undecidability"）, then his thoughts are in no way normative or binding. This says nothing about whether we should try to reverse these trends or encourage them. Or else they could be read as merely pragmatic suggestions—the claim that it would be *useful* for people to maintain a state of *aporia* and undecidability. In this case Derrida himself admits the state of undecidability is useless in helping us govern. Further, considering the prospects of political and economic integration, democratically elected officials must act and decide in a way that representing the interests of one's own constituents.

[7] As quoted in: John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion*, Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 231.

tyranny and justice was better than injustice. Within this quote we can discern that Derrida believed love and goodwill towards Jews, Arabs, and immigrants is good and desirable. But the question becomes how does deconstructionism not become a "universal acid" that dissolves both negative and positive aspects of nation-states; the same acid that eats away at destructive nationalism also dissolves the authority of justice-making institutions.

Take for instance the European Union's *Aquis Communautaire*, or acquired community. This is the idea of a supra-national standard, a solution for political and economic integration in a post-modern world. This body underlines such institutions as the European Court of Human Rights. But in the hands of Derridian deconstruction this structure has no deep authority grounded in any universal or objective truth. In the name of what, or on what grounds are these laws binding if we have acquired a new community by fiat?[8]

This point can be usefully illustrated by comparing the treatment of human rights in the U.S. Declaration of Independence vs. the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration of Independence, written in 1776 while modernism was in full-bloom, treats human rights as grounded in absolute truth of coming from the "Creator" (i.e. God): "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, on the other hand, drops any language of a Creator and simply declares that such rights exist. But what grounds this assumption apart from a universal truth, such as God?

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[8] As the Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton famously asked, "In the name of whom or what do you ask me to behave? Why should I go to the inconvenience of denying myself the satisfactions I desire in the name of some standard that exists only in your imagination? Why should I worship the fictions that you have imposed on me in the name of nothing?" Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, 2002, p. 112.

In the Christian view, the Creator guarantees these rights beyond (reversible) human opinion due to creating humans beings "in the image of God," and therefore making humans have infinite value. Without the grounding concept of such a Creator, then perhaps so-called "universal human rights" are really just another example of Western cultural imperialism in disguise. How is there any ground for imposing them on other societies? Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for instance, reads:

> Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

But some countries view this as a form of Western imperialism. They do not agree that people should have a right to change religion. The Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam was specifically drafted as an alternative document to the UN resolution, for instance. The Cairo Declaration says people have "freedom and right to a dignified life in accordance with the Islamic Shariah."[9]

So the American Declaration of Independence takes a Creator for its absolute; the Cairo Declaration takes Shariah Law for its absolute; and the UN Declaration simply asserts the existence of these rights with no foundation. On what basis can we contrast these three opposing views of human rights given Derrida's framework? With no ultimate reference point for grounding human values, there is no ultimate framework to justify our efforts towards freedom, peace, supporting the weak, etc. There remains no recourse of rational persuasion for those who do not want to be included in the new acquired community. How is this idea powerful to cross the problem

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[9]　https://www.oic-oci.org:443/english/conf/fm/27/27th-fm-political(3).htm *Organization of the Islamic Conference.* 2000-06-27. Retrieved 2017-12-11.

of sectarianism and each tribe just looking out for itself? There seems to be no means inherent within this idea (as essentially a form of relativism) to compel others to join its ideals.

Further, there is no recourse for *punishment* for those who transgress its commands and ideals. Punishment requires proper authority for it to be legitimately employed, or else it is not truly punishment, but rather the simple use of *power* exercised by "our group" to force "your group" into compliance with our wishes. Cooperation and political integration collapses into mere pragmatic mutual self-interest, and as such becomes incapable of promoting self-sacrifice and promotion of good for the "other" at one's own expense. President Trump's recent call for putting "America First" is unsurprising when put in this light. Christianity, on the other hand, excels in this area with the supreme symbol at its heart being Christ's self-sacrifice for the good of others.

Christianity's critique of Derrida's view is that the rejection of universals and ultimate meaning itself can lead to a form of oppression. Derrida has an underlying assumption that there is no God to guarantee absolutes, and hence the idea of certainty and truth are hindered. He thinks such ideas were only power structures imposed on us by our past or by societal institutions and do not exist in reality at all. But perhaps Derrida too quickly disposed of the idea of God as a unifying force. Perhaps universal truth alone is not the cause of oppression and rather what is needed is the "correct" absolute—in other words what we really need is an intrinsically *non-oppressive absolute*. Christianity is unique as a universal absolute in that it demands love for others and categorically rejects all oppression. In contrast to the tension within Derrida's view, the Christian "love of neighbor" presents itself as a consistently applied ethic. We still need a metanarrative of "Love," with the command to love your neighbor as yourself.

This is not to say that a purportedly "Christian" universal cannot be twisted into an instrument of oppression. Yet, the intrinsic characteristics of the biblical story make it "uniquely unsuited to being an instrument of oppression" because "distortion of the biblical story into an ideology of oppression has to suppress the biblical meaning of the cross."[10] Thus Dr. Timothy Keller has written:

> Remarkably, then, we can conclude that a professed Christian who is not committed to a life of generosity and justice toward the poor and marginalized is, at the very least, a living contradiction of the Gospel of Christ, the Son of God, whose Father 'executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry' (Psalm 146:7).[11]

To sum up the discussion in this section, we have highlighted a broader problem facing the prospects of political and economic integration in the world today. Namely, with the collapse of modernist ideals and onset of postmodernism, we are left floating amongst incommensurate absolutes. Derrida's deconstructionism has been argued to fare no better, while a Christian universal truth offers itself as a non-oppressive, consistent solution.

5. Conclusions

In sum, Derrida contends that the opposition between speech and writing is a manifestation of the "logocentrism" of Western culture—i.e., the general assumption that there is a realm of universal "truth" existing prior to and independent of its representation by linguistic signs. Logocentrism encourages us to treat linguistic signs as inextricably bound up with them. The logocentric

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[10] Richard Bauckham, "Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story," *The Art of Reading Scripture*, edited by Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, Eerdmans, 2003, p. 52.
[11] Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical*, Penguin, New York, 2016, p. 210.

conception of truth and reality as existing outside language derives in turn from a deep-seated prejudice in Western philosophy, which Derrida criticizes. According to him, written texts do not have an objective determinate meaning, hence non-existence of "universal happiness". Derrida's personal background as a Jew living in France might have affected his philosophical thinking to dismiss the reality of universals, including the universal values undergirding "human rights" (since he was not treated with them).

Human language is a system (structure) of interrelated signs, but, for Derrida, there is not rationalism and universalism behind the signs. Without taking a rigorous account of undecidability, it is impossible to think the concepts of political decision and ethical responsibility. It takes hegemony for the society to make communal decisions (including segregation). It is, for Derrida, always undemocratic about how people view the world through written texts (law codes during the war period included). Every societal decision appears as a stabilization of something essentially unstable and chaotic. Therefore decision always includes undemocratic overriding of non-mainstream groups. There is no transcendent reference point. In a nutshell, language is not a divine creation, so we can play with it as we wish. These were what Derrida held in his mind against the reality of universals. He was, albeit ambivalently, committed to linguistic atheism. It looks like a success of the enlightenment project in the post-modern period to downgrade universal values.

Deconstruction, however, confirms that the system itself is ultimately self-defeating, in the sense that it can also be deconstructed as people wish. Reason and morality, together with happiness, as universals come only from a commitment to the absolute "God" as revealed to humans for believers. This statement (a written text) is revelation, and it is not deconstructible by human philosophical and political efforts. Believing that transcendent

absolute standard, including the one for happiness, exists universally and realistically in our subjectivity, a sound epistemological bias, is indeed the indispensable starting premise in the conduct of perceiving objectivity.

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