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Derrida à l'œuvre: "Doing Theory" Against Inequalities



Stones (and) Touching

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Stones (and) Touching

Anders E. Johansson

In *Politics*, Aristotle writes that it is when we are faced with an aporia, a contradiction that cannot be resolved—at least not within the limits of ordinary reason—that we must begin to think, must begin to philosophise (87). Must, but rarely do, one might add. Especially not when it comes to aporias related to phenomena that we consider good, or that we embrace. Usually, we just ignore aporias.

In my work with gender scholars, we have articulated the need to constantly deconstruct our own position in terms of ambivalence and Gayatri Spivak’s concept of strategic essentialism.¹ To have a voice you need an identity within a community, but you also need to put that identity in parentheses, to distance yourself, to see it as only *strategically* necessary, in order to continue to be aware of the contradictions that come with *any* identity. Today, however, when aporetic contradictions and conflicts permeate our world, from the scale of global hyperobjects, like the climate, down to our most mundane private actions and feelings, despair lies closer at hand than strategies. At least for me.

When a political party with roots in Nazism becomes the most influential party in the Swedish parliament, there is of course a need to unite in defence of democratic values, because, in the Derridean words of Wendy Brown, liberal democracy may be something we “cannot not want” (53). But, on the other hand, it is becoming increasingly and inescapably clear that the democratic community to which I belong is in many ways preserving the dark

heart of European colonialism—“Kill all the brutes!”—in its seemingly less violent way of exploiting everything useful and just letting everything else die. As we know, only four per cent of the mammalian biomass lives in the wild; the rest is made up of humans and their domesticated animals (Greenspona et al.). As we know, up to 40% of insect populations are threatened (IPBES 9), and, as we *also* know, 90% of the world’s fish stocks are depleted (UNRIC). And, as we also *do* know, wild vertebrate populations have declined by an average of 69% in just over 50 years (WWF).

In recent years it has become clear that all political parties in Sweden have come to the conclusion that all efforts to prevent climate change must be compatible with a society that depends on continuous growth. Since scientific reason will save us by technological means, we don’t need to change anything, everything will be fine, or at least will not be so bad for *us*. What this decision really means—which, of course, no one mentions—is that all life that is not useful to *us* can be left to die, and that nothing in nature is exempt from exploitation when society demands it. One of the absurd consequences of modern rationality thus becoming a mythical second nature, completely deterministic in its “realism,” is that the fight against climate change is now set in *opposition* to biological diversity. In order to preserve our society, everything else can be sacrificed. The fact that the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has emphasised in its latest report (2022) that we need to think about climate and biodiversity together—“This report recognizes the interdependence of climate, ecosystems and biodiversity, and human societies and integrates knowledge more strongly across the natural, ecological, social and economic sciences than earlier IPCC assessments (5)”—is a sign that the panel has realised that the politicians’ solution, or non-solution, is to continue to cling to the myth of modern rationality, and thus to continue to turn a blind eye to the consequences of doing so.

Already in the title of her book *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant points out that hope is what makes us continue to do what is bad for us. Jacques Derrida, in “Plato’s Pharmacy,” and Bernard Stiegler, in *What Makes Life Worth Living*, have used the concepts of *autoimmunity* and *pharmakon* to analyse how what is supposed to protect us can also harm us. And so, here we are. We ourselves have created the risks we face in and through our quest for a safe and good society.

But Derrida goes even further. Our society has not just accidentally produced undesirable consequences. It is itself constituted by death. Like all societies. It is this aspect of Derrida’s thought I want to discuss in this essay. His insistence on death *in* life, technology *in* spirit, difference *in* togetherness,

and, thus, the importance of remaining within the aporetic, and not trusting in the solutions offered by those who see themselves as belonging to a good community of rational human subjects who can control the consequences of their decisions with methods of calculation. The order of a society is not only based on rational planning, community and belonging, but also on violence and exploitation (as IPCC and IPBES have empirically shown when it comes to our society). So, you have to deconstruct what you cannot not want to protect, and even what you love.

*

It is easy to avoid despair by taking refuge in humanism. A temptation that even a Derrida reader like Martin Hägglund has fallen for in his book *This Life*. In this book, finite life, its meaning, and its possibilities, are entirely bound up with human society. When Theodor Adorno, in *Aesthetic Theory*, comments on his earlier statement that it is no longer possible to write poetry after Auschwitz, he draws a different conclusion, one more in line with Derrida, namely that poetry must learn to speak like stones, must learn from Paul Celan how to renounce a mystifying belief in the intrinsic goodness of meaning, understanding and community—all of which we often consider to be the most precious and exclusive capacities of humanity:

Celan's poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence. Their truth content itself becomes negative. They imitate a language beneath the helpless language of human beings, indeed beneath all organic language: It is that of the dead speaking of stones and stars. The last rudiments of the organic are liquidated; what Benjamin noted in Baudelaire, that his poetry is without aura, comes into its own in Celan's work. The infinite discretion with which his radicalism proceeds and compounds his force. The language of the lifeless becomes the last possible comfort for a death that is deprived of all meaning (422–423).

Derrida has carefully deconstructed friendship, love, communities, but also other words and concepts whose good meanings we take for granted. Where presence has been seen as something obviously good, and absence as something bad, Derrida has tried to disrupt this order. Another concept that carries with it a positive paleonymic charge is “touch.” When we speak of touch, what comes to mind is tenderness, awareness, and closeness.

In phenomenology, touch has always been important. For Husserl, and even more so for Merleau-Ponty, it was essential to understanding man's

relationship to the world. In recent decades, touch has also become an important concept in theories of science. Hans-Jörg Rheinberger (402), Jean-Luc Nancy and Karen Barad, among others, have emphasised the importance of recognising that experimental science, as well as reading and thinking, has always involved touching, sensing, groping, and even thinking with one's fingers.

However, in his book *On Touching*, dedicated to the thinking of Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida also makes clear the *risks* of taking touch, and the concept of touch, as something self-evidently good. Instead, in intimate touch with Nancy's "exact" understanding of the concept, as Derrida puts it (8), he constantly insists on maintaining a distance, insisting on the differences between his own thinking and that of his close friend, always aware of the risks of believing that one agrees with and understands the other. Not least when the precision of the thinking in question consists of an accuracy that is "faithful to the excess of the exorbitant" (26). Usually we see accuracy and faithfulness as incompatible with "exorbitant excess," but here the pun is very serious. Thinking touch touches the aporetic.

Where Aristotle describes touch as *Psyche's* contact with the world, Nancy, according to Derrida, points to its dead conditions of possibility: "the prosthesis, the metonymic substitute, the autoimmune process, and *technical survival*" (19). We recognise the common thread that connects the thoughts of Derrida and Nancy. Death and technology are part of all life, absence conditions presence, and so on. But in the book about Nancy, it is as if the very closeness and deep friendship between the two, in thought and in life, and the close affirmative deconstructive reading's exact fidelity to Nancy's text, compels Derrida to insist on the ever-present risk that Nancy will forget this, that the words he uses will become too spiritually meaningful, or, at least, that the possibility of such a reading opens up when Nancy uses words like "generosity," words that carry too spirited a history:

Doesn't my timid, reticent concern about the *word* "generosity" (it is the word I worry about and not necessarily the concept at work in it) pertain to the very reserve that the *congenial* motif and the *good movement* of "fraternity" always inspire in me? (22)

Derrida spent an entire book, *Politics of Friendship*, wrestling with the word and concept of friendship and how it is haunted by the masculine spectre of fraternity. And here he reminds Nancy and the reader, though at least the former of course already knows, that we have the words we have collectively, and therefore cannot control them when we try to use them differently. The

insistence is a reminder never to think that you fully understand and agree with each other, even if you are close friends, that even what or who you love must be deconstructed, reread carefully, over and over again, because there are always differences, even between thinkers whose thoughts are so close as to touch.

When Nancy, in *The Experience of Freedom*, brackets “fraternity,” crosses it out, smiles at its “ridiculousness,” but still suggests that it can be used in another way, as “fraternity in abondenment, of abondenment,” Derrida therefore insists that perhaps one must be even more careful than that in tracing what a word carries with it:

Briefly, what embarrasses me in the word “generosity,” as in the word “fraternity,” finally amounts to the same thing. In both cases, one acknowledges and nods to some genealogy, some filiation, a principle having to do with “birth,” whether or not it is “natural,” as it is often thought to be. Above all the word privileges some “virility.” Even if he is an orphan, a brother is a son and therefore a man. In order to include the sister or woman or daughter, one has to change words—generously—and then change the word “generosity” itself while one is at it. Indeed, if one gives or offers because one is naturally, genially, congenitally, or ontologically *generous*, at birth; if it’s because one has to give or has something to give, because *one can give*, thanks to a power, a force, or a capacity related to giving, to having what it takes to give, with sovereign power; once giving is *possible*, or there is a “generosity of being”; then does one offer, does one still give? Here, like the gift, like spacing, “freedom” or “decision” perhaps presupposes the interruption of generosity as well as fraternity. To give, out of *generosity* or because *one can give* (what one has) is no longer to give. Giving is possible only where it remains *im-possible*, and not even im-possible *as such*. It here comes down to the impossibility of the “as such,” to the fate of phenomenology as much as ontology (*On Touching*, 22–23).

The passage allows for the, let's say, linguistic-technological observation that words carry more meaning (and other things) than the individual user can master when he or she tries to interrupt them. It is not enough to generously give the woman a place in the “fraternity,” because the words “give generously” carry with them a logic that presupposes a sovereign subject who *can give*, who can control what it means, and who thus remains within a logic of the possible, reproducing the order that stands in the way of any other form of “generosity.” That is why we must try to do the impossible, try to give a generous gift that lets the other come first, beyond the good will of the giver. And, thus, also beyond an ontology that clings to identity itself, to

the excluding identities of subject and object, me and the other, the possible and the impossible. And, this is my point here, the demand to do the impossible has to do with the fact that it is not possible to control the use of a word, that “the excess of the exorbitant” is always already there. Giving only what is possible is not giving, and hearing or reading only what is possible is not really hearing or reading. Communication that works, that takes place with noise reduction within the framework of the possible, is only instrumental transmission, not communication as an event in a general ecological sense, beyond the intentions and understanding of the human subject.

Derrida reminds Nancy of this, although he knows that Nancy already knows. How little faith the latter has in the idea of a sovereign human subject becomes clear when it comes to stones. Nancy, Derrida explains, is using a gap in Heidegger’s concept of freedom in order to think about the generosity of stones: “...a gap into which Nancy proceeds with his original meditation on a freedom that is no longer a subject’s or someone’s freedom (he says, daringly: ‘In this sense, the stone is free’” (*On Touching*, 23).

In a meditation on Heidegger’s famous definition of a stone as not having a world, Nancy deconstructs its anthropomorphism. To *have* a world means appropriation. The stone does not have a world in this sense, but what prevents us from describing its relation to other things, its “*areality*,” as *touch* or at least as *contact*? The stone is the world, says Nancy. This is not animism, he claims, but “being this here” means a minimal discreteness, since “a *quantum* discreteness, borrowing from physics the discreteness of material *quanta*, makes up the world as such, the ‘finite’ world liable to sense” (Nancy 62).

In her article “On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am,” Karen Barad could be said to have taken Nancy’s borrowing from physics seriously: “In an important sense, touch is the primary concern of physics. Its entire history can be understood as a struggle to articulate what touch entails. How do particles sense one another?” (208). In the background there is a serious play on the ambiguity of the English word “sense,” which means both perception/feeling and meaning, an ambiguity that is also found in Nancy’s French word *sense*, a play with very important consequences, for it allows openings between the seemingly self-evident divisions between meaning and materiality, mind and body, nature and culture, physics, and philosophy. The title of Barad’s article shows her dependence on Derrida, and Derrida, who follows Nancy closely, also follows Barad—in advance—but also interrupts *her*—also in advance, being dead when her article was written—when he,

reading Nancy, insists on the importance of carefully sensing the impossibility of spirit to control the mechanics of words. Not the least a word like “touch,” which easily carries with it such problematic other words as inspiration, motivation, faith, and hope:

The possibility of this affirmative statement (“To touch upon the origin...is properly to be exposed to it” [a quote from Nancy])—a statement that is possible for him, and not for me—may be what inspires, motivates, dictates, and compels the thinking and desire of “touching,” and especially so when one can see this thinking and desire of “touching” invade his corpus [...] And this is how I further explain, without seeking too much to justify a virtual question or objection (it does not matter here), that the figure and lexicon of “touch” remain rather scant as far as I am concerned, at least on the rare occasions when, as it were, I speak in my own name. That is why those who have this easier “touch” fascinate me. I admire them, yet I cannot bring myself to believe in it very much—in touching, that is. Some ill-intentioned though well-programmed philosophers may conclude from this that I am more of an “idealist” than Nancy.

My defense attorney would not be long in responding, playing up two counterclaims:

1. What has conferred on “touch” its absolute privilege and its titles of philosophic nobility is a great “idealistic” tradition. From Berkely’s absolute idealism to Kant’s or Husserl’s transcendental idealism. Plato had already started this (as we’ll later see).
2. As for idealists, isn’t Nancy just another one, guilty rather because of his imprudence when he still credits the appropriation of a properness and when he quietly says: “To touch upon the origin is not to miss it: it is properly to be exposed to it”? (*On Touching* 116)

His insistence on recognising differences leads Derrida to review how the phenomenological tradition (especially Husserl and Merleau-Ponty) has associated touch with the hand and thus with a “humanistic philosophy,” a “continuistic intuitionism,” and a “cult of natural immediacy” (154). Is Nancy’s way of thinking about “touch” really so different, he asks. And the answer, as we have seen, is no, at least sometimes. *But* Derrida also insists that Nancy is not *only* a victim of the history of philosophy buried in words, that something else also happens in his texts, at the same time. If we read them carefully, and reread them again and again, even when we notice how they fail, there emerges, out of Nancy’s insistence on dead technology, difference, interruption, distance, being part of all touching, also an impossible insistence on staying in the aporetic:

We need to reread “*technē* of bodies,” in *Corpus* again and again, since this “question of the hand,” which is also a history of the hand, as we know, remains—should remain—impossible to dissociate from the history of technics and its interpretation, as well as from all the problems that link the history of the hand with a hominizing process. (154)

It is not a matter of liberating “touch” from its history; to think so is to risk falling victim to that history. Instead, it is important to remain in the impossible aporia and to see how the possible also carries an impossible opening towards the other. The call to speak like stones has nothing to do with including stones in a human brotherhood, but with recognising and letting it count that we are always already stones, too, that we are different from ourselves, are stones and are not stones.

In this essay, I just wanted to remind us of what we can learn from Derrida. At a time when it may feel right to defend our community, and we (perhaps) cannot not defend it, the lesson of Derrida’s insistence requires us to remember that such a protection will also include aspects of ourselves and our society that we don’t want to preserve, that we shouldn’t protect. We cannot control where this will lead. Or where a refusal to defend would lead. But we must, as when Derrida repeatedly interrupts Nancy, remind ourselves to be careful as we tentatively and unpredictably attempt the impossible. Not to try to resolve the aporias, but to insist on their inevitability, so that we are forced into an incalculable decision, an impossible ethical act that requires a precise and exact accuracy.

Notes

¹ In the research projects *Challenging Gender and Normalization and the Neo-liberal Welfare State*, questions about ambivalence and the need to continuously question one’s own positions and identities were central issues. An attempt at a summary is made in the book I wrote together with Siv Fahlgren and Katarina Giritly Nygren, *Utmaningar: feminismens (o)möjlighet under nyliberalismen* (Translatable to: Challenges: The (Im)possibility of feminism under Neoliberalism), Malmö: Universus Academic Press 2016.

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