

THE ETHICS OF DECONSTRUCTION: A RECONSIDERATION

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SUMMARY

In this paper I contribute to a debate concerning the ethics of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction by answering whether there can be an ethics of deconstruction. In a nutshell, I argue that there cannot be an ethics of deconstruction, but that there *can* be an ethics of deconstructive reading or strategies. I argue this through a discussion of two important claims for and against an ethics of deconstruction, that of Simon Critchley and Martin Hägglund.

In *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, Critchley argued that deconstruction can be understood as ethical through the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. According to Levinas, ethics arises through an encounter with another human being. The 'Otherness' of this person cannot be assimilated or known and therefore refutes reduction, which produces feeling of goodness and respect in the Other. Critchley argued that deconstruction is produced by a similar primordial respect for 'otherness' and that deconstructive reading can in turn produce this respect.

In response to this, Hägglund argued that deconstruction cannot be ethical. He formulated three main arguments against the Derrida-Levinas connection, saying that 1) deconstruction cannot be primordially ethical, 2) they use the term 'absolute other' in radically different ways and 3) the unconditional affirmation in deconstruction is not ethical. I agree with his argument that deconstruction cannot be ethical in the Levinasian sense. Nonetheless, his argument has proven to be contradictory because he argues against the assimilation of Levinasian ethics to deconstruction, but he ultimately concludes that deconstruction cannot be ethical at all.

In the remaining part of this paper, I then argue that this contradiction can be solved by maintaining a distinction between deconstruction and *deconstructive* reading or strategies. Ultimately, I conclude that deconstruction can indeed not be ethical at all, but that deconstructive reading or strategies can be understood as ethical, in the sense that they provide guidelines for ethical behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Jacques Derrida is a controversial philosopher who has been subject of many debates in- and outside the field of philosophy. One of these debates concerns an alleged ‘ethical turn’ in Derrida’s writings. The debate started during the 1980’s and continued well into the 1990’s, when Derrida’s writings became increasingly ethically and politically engaged.¹ Derrida’s philosophy had already received strong criticisms from Willard Van Orman Quine, John Searle, Hilary Putnam and many more for being incoherent, obscurantist and generally not deserving of the label ‘philosophy’.² Moreover, Derrida’s philosophy was said to be irresponsible, nihilistic, ethically trivial, and it was said that deconstruction paved the way for ‘anything goes’.³

In reaction to this, many philosophers in favor of Derrida’s philosophy started to defend that his work has an ethical dimension. One of these philosophers is Simon Critchley. In his influential *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (1992) he argued that Derrida’s most well-known concept, deconstruction, is not nihilistic or irresponsible. Deconstruction was by then understood as a way of reading that exposes underlying hierarchical assumptions, but Critchley argued that deconstruction should be understood as ethical through the specific understanding of ‘ethics’ of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.⁴ According to Levinas, the western phenomenological tradition has tried to reduce the ‘Other’ to something that can be known and controlled. Instead, Levinas contends that the complexity of the Other is irreducible and appeals to our feeling of responsibility. For Levinas, an encounter with the Other is the condition for ethics. According to Critchley, Derrida has a similar understanding of ethics. Rather than positioning himself in the field of ‘traditional’ ethics, Derrida deconstructs the conditions that make ethical behavior possible in the first place.⁵

Critchley’s interpretation, in turn, received a lot of criticism. Philosopher Martin Hägglund criticizes Critchley for incorrectly assimilating Derrida’s and Levinas’s philosophies. Instead, he argues that that their philosophies are not compatible: Derrida’s philosophical thought cannot be understood through a Levinasian respect or peace instigated by an Other.⁶ However, Hägglund’s argumentation is problematic because he only argues against the Derrida-Levinas connection, while

¹ Arthur Bradley, *Derrida’s Of Grammatology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 2.

² See, for instance, *Limited Inc*, ‘the Cambridge affair’, in which nineteen philosophers sent a letter to Cambridge to protest against Derrida’s honorary doctorate, or see Nicole Anderson, *Derrida: Ethics Under Erasure* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012): 169, for an overview of Derrida’s critics.

³ See Nicole Anderson, *Derrida: Ethics Under Erasure*, 2, see Gadmer’s discussion of Derrida’s ethics in Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 49n6 and see also Rorty’s discussion of Derrida’s work in “From ironist theory to private allusions: Derrida” in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁴ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992): 3.

⁵ The term ‘traditional’ ethics is often used in opposition to Levinasian ethics and Derridean ethics. It refers to the academic fields of meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics and to the research done within these fields.

⁶ Martin Hägglund, “The Necessity of Discrimination: Disjoining Derrida and Levinas,” *diacritics* 34, no. 1 (2004): 40.

concluding that that Derrida cannot be understood as an ethical philosopher at all. On the one hand then, Critchley states that deconstruction is ethical in the Levinasian sense, and on the other hand, Hägglund argues that deconstruction cannot be ethical at all. The question arises: if it is not through the ethics of Levinas, to what extent can deconstruction still be understood as ethical? Because ‘ethics’ is a huge concept, I will work with a minimal definition of ethics: ethics provides guidelines for action, in the sense that an ethics can, for example, aid someone in making decisions.

In recent years, academics have applied Derrida’s notions of for instance hospitality and responsibility to their research while the Levinas-Derrida debate is still unsettled.⁷ Therefore, it is important to elucidate what the ethics of deconstruction actually entails. In this paper, then, I will critically examine both Critchley’s and Hägglund’s arguments for the existence or non-existence of an ethics of deconstruction. I will argue, in agreement with Hägglund, that Critchley’s interpretation of the ethics of deconstruction is incorrect, but that Hägglund is also wrong in saying that deconstruction cannot be ethical at all. This will lead to my final argument that there cannot be an ethics of deconstruction, but there can be an ethics of deconstructive reading or strategy.

This paper will proceed as follows: in the first section, I will introduce the concept of deconstruction. In the second section, I will discuss Critchley’s interpretation of the ethics of deconstruction. In the third section, I will discuss my own as well as Hägglund’s criticism on Critchley. Hägglund argues through various Derridean concepts such as ‘absolute responsibility’ and ‘undecidability’ that the ethics of deconstruction as it is understood by Critchley is wrong. These concepts will also be introduced. Furthermore, I will argue where and why I part with Hägglund’s argumentation. In the fourth chapter, I will discuss my results, in order to answer the question: can deconstruction still be ethical, when it cannot be understood through Levinasian ethics?

⁷ The last substantive work on specifically the ethics of deconstruction was written in 2012 by Nicole Anderson. Just like Hägglund and myself, she states that Critchley is wrong in completely ‘subsuming’ deconstruction into a Levinasian ethics. See Nicole Anderson, *Derrida: Ethics Under Erasure*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012): 26. However, her work received relatively little response. After that, Derrida’s notion of hospitality has for example been applied to family therapy, see: Peter Rober and Lucia De Haene, “Hospitality in Family Therapy: A Further Engagement with Jacques Derrida, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* no. 38, 2017. Also in 2017, another book has been published on specifically Derrida’s later work, but the focus of this work is a new-materialistic reading of deconstruction. Although Levinas’s influence on Derrida is discussed, ethics is not the focus of this book. See: Clayton Crockett, *Derrida after the End of Writing. Political Theology and New Materialism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018). In 2018, Derrida’s thought has been applied to environmental issues. For instance, a book has been published on deconstruction and environmental philosophy as well as on biodeconstruction. See, respectively, Matthias Fritsch, *Eco-deconstruction: Derrida and Environmental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018) and Francesco Vitale, *Biodeconstruction. Jacques Derrida and the Life Sciences*, trans. Mauro Senatore (New York: State University Press of New York, 2018).

WHAT IS DECONSTRUCTION?

In this section I will briefly introduce deconstruction. However, I cannot give a definite account of what deconstruction 'is'.⁸ Instead, I will discuss a couple of elements that are important for understanding deconstruction. Firstly, deconstruction exposes the 'metaphysics of presence'. Secondly, deconstruction is constituted by 'différance'. Thirdly, deconstruction is a 'strategy' or 'way of reading' that exposes hidden oppositions and hierarchies in a text or system.⁹

Deconstruction exposes the metaphysics of presence

Deconstruction signifies that presence can never be 'in itself'.¹⁰ In *Of Grammatology* (1976), Derrida develops on this idea, where he characterizes western metaphysics as the metaphysics of presence.¹¹ According to Derrida, western metaphysics has always searched for that which is the most present, both in the spatial sense of our sensory experience, as in the temporal sense of the 'here and now' in which we live. The underlying assumption of, for Derrida, the entire western metaphysical tradition, is that "what is most real, true or important is what is most present".¹² He explains this through the concepts of 'speech' and 'writing'.¹³ Speech is regarded as closest to our thoughts and the purest form of expression. Writing, however, happens *after* speech. A text can be interpreted in many different ways and its meaning can change. Also, the speaker is absent, so the intended meaning of a text is not evident. Writing is, therefore, regarded as mediated, secondary and impure. For this reason, Derrida states that "the history of truth, of the truth of truth, has always been [...] the debasement of writing, and its repression outside 'full' speech".¹⁴ In *Of Grammatology*, one of Derrida's main arguments is that *all speech is writing*. There is no immediate or pure present: everything is mediated.¹⁵ In this

⁸ As will become clear throughout this paper, deconstruction refuses definition. Deconstruction entails that the fixed meaning of a sign or context can never be established. Derrida has never given a definite or complete definition of deconstruction and scholars who explain what deconstruction 'is' often provide this disclaimer in their explanation. Therefore, I do not pretend to give a definite account of what deconstruction is, but I rather have chosen to highlight elements that are important for understanding what deconstruction entails.

⁹ Leonard Lawlor, "Deconstruction," in *A Companion to Derrida*, ed. Zeynep Direk and Leonard Lawlor (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014): 122.

¹⁰ Derrida borrowed the term 'deconstruction' from Heidegger. See Jacques Derrida, *The Question of Beyng and History*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016). Also, with 'in itself' I mean that the ontological or epistemological limits of an object can be known.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976): 12.

¹² Bradley, Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, 6.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 27.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 3.

¹⁵ A few comments on this statement are necessary. First of all, the most obvious objection to this statement is that Derrida writes in *The Force of Law* that 'justice' cannot be deconstructed. My response is that the notion of 'justice' as Derrida introduces it should be distinguished from a general concept of justice as something 'good' or 'ideal'. Rather, it should be understood in line with absolute responsibility and undecidability as something that necessitates decisions and opens ethics and politics. These concepts exceed mediation because they are not signs or contexts. It is rather the case that they constitute signs or context. They open up the question of how things should best be understood if nothing exceeds mediation. For a full account of this, see Hägglund's

sense his famous sentence *'il il n'y a pas de hors-texte'* (there is no outside-text) should be understood.¹⁶

Deconstruction is constituted by 'différance'

Because presence can never be 'in itself', Derrida argues that our idea of presence is fundamentally unstable. There is no such thing as a solid ground or a pure starting point from which our understanding of concepts starts. Instead, our idea of 'presence' is constituted by something that Derrida has named 'différance'. Derrida described *différance* as "the movement by which any language, or any code, any system of reference in general, becomes 'historically' constituted as a fabric of differences".¹⁷ With 'any language, code or system of reference in general', Derrida is referring to his radicalization of Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of signs. De Saussure makes a distinction between the signifier (the sound-image) and the signified (the ideal meaning). The relationship between the signified and the signifier is arbitrary: there is no natural resemblance between a word and the object it represents. Rather, the meaning of the signifier and signified is constituted by difference.

But instead of maintaining the rigid distinction between the signifier and the signified (which is still indebted to the metaphysics of presence), Derrida argues that every signifier corresponds not with a signified, but with another signifier.¹⁸ A simple example is that "every time we look up a word in the dictionary – 'love', for example – what we find is not the meaning of that word but merely other words that act as synonyms for it ('love' means 'adoration' or 'desire') or even antonyms ('love' means the opposite of 'hate')".¹⁹ Therefore, every sign is infinitely constituted by other signs. This does not only apply to actual words or language, but to meaning in general. Deconstruction is therefore a movement of signs infinitely referring to other signs, that is *always already at work* within a text, system or theory, but is at the same time itself also part of the movement. Therefore, Derrida has often stated that deconstruction 'takes place' or 'is what happens'.

Deconstruction is a strategy that exposes hidden hierarchies and oppositions

Building on the movement of 'différance', it is important to understand that according to Derrida, deconstruction is never value-free. So although deconstruction is what 'takes place' as opposed to something that can be actively 'done', he mentions in *Positions* (1981) that he tries to pursue "along

discussion of justice in his article. Furthermore, I want to point out that Derrida here heavily draws on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. For a discussion of Hegel and Derrida, see Johan de Jong's PhD dissertation (which will soon be published) "The Movement of Thinking: Hegel – Heidegger – Derrida" (University of Amsterdam, 2015), or see Nina Belmonte's article "Evolving Negativity" in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 28.1 (2002): 18-58.

¹⁶ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, ed. Newton Garver, trans. David Allison, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973): 141.

¹⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 7.

¹⁹ Bradley, Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, 71.

other lines now” a “kind of *general strategy of deconstruction*” [my italics].²⁰ This strategy entails that oppositions within a text or system must be deconstructed, because in “a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-a-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand”.²¹ A strategy of deconstruction therefore aims to expose and disorganize this hierarchy without establishing a new hierarchy. Nonetheless, deconstruction is not a method or a theory. In an interview, Derrida is asked what deconstruction can offer as a method, to which he answers: “I don’t know. But I don’t think deconstruction ‘offers’ anything *as* deconstruction”.²² Deconstruction does not carry a set of rules that can be applied to a specific situation, nor is it a coherent and definite set of ideas.

Therefore, a distinction is often made between deconstruction and a *deconstructive* strategy or way of reading.²³ Deconstruction is ‘what happens’, whereas a deconstructive strategy or reading can be applied to a text. Roughly, the difference is that deconstructive reading is applied to a text, often fiction, whereas a deconstructive strategy denotes a more general approach, for example to a body of texts or ideas. Note that Derrida mentioned in the interview that he pursued a deconstructive strategy “along other lines”. Furthermore, the distinction is especially important in this paper because it has consequences for the existence or non-existence of an ‘ethics of deconstruction’. But first, I will discuss Critchley’s interpretation of the ethics of deconstruction.

CRITCHLEY’S ACCOUNT OF ‘THE ETHICS OF DECONSTRUCTION’

Critchley was the first philosopher to really put the ‘ethics of deconstruction’ on the map. His principal argument is that deconstructive reading should be understood as an ethical demand.²⁴ This ethical demand is however not about normative or applied ethics, but about ethics in the Levinasian sense.²⁵ Ethics is understood by Levinas as that which takes place during an encounter with an ‘Other’.²⁶ This Other is specifically another person: a human other. In encountering an Other, the ego seeks to incorporate and reduce the alterity of the Other to ‘sameness’, to something which can be fully known and comprehended. The Other, however, refuses this reduction.²⁷ The refusal of this reduction incites respect from the ego towards the Other, because her or his irreducibility exerts power over the ego. Hence, we feel responsible and obliged to respond to the Other. This responsibility and respect is

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981): 41.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley, “Hospitality, justice and responsibility: a dialogue with Jacques Derrida,” in *Questioning Ethics. Contemporary Debates in Continental Philosophy*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1999): 74.

²³ Critchley and Derrida both maintain this distinction (see, for example, “Questioning Ethics”).

²⁴ Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 1.

²⁵ Ibid., 3.

²⁶ Throughout this paper, the capitalized ‘Other’ refers to Levinas’s concept of otherness, as he also capitalizes this word in his own work, whereas I have used lower case when referring to other uses of the term.

²⁷ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 5-7.

something *primary* to our rational thought and understanding: it is an immediate demand that cannot be negotiated with.

In *Otherwise than Being* (1981), Levinas tries to articulate the Other's refusal of reduction by making a distinction between what he named the 'Saying' and the 'Said'. The Saying is that which escapes philosophical inquiry because it cannot be described, defined, or comprehended in descriptions. The Saying is therefore called an "ethical residue", because it only occurs during an encounter with the Other and it cannot be grasped and analyzed.²⁸ As Critchley describes it, "the Saying is my exposure - corporeal, sensible - to the Other, my inability to refuse the Other's approach".²⁹ The Saying is therefore the immediate demand that cannot rationally be understood or negotiated with. The Said, on the other hand, tries to explain and reduce the ethical moment (the encounter with the Other) in descriptions and propositions, for example by formulating moral rules or guidelines. The point is that according to Critchley, deconstruction attempts to do justice to the 'Saying' and to the irreducible alterity of the Other.³⁰ Deconstruction is the 'opening' of this 'other' (Levinasian) ethics because it takes the irreducible alterity of encountering an Other into account.³¹

That deconstruction is the opening of Levinasian ethics is only one part of Critchley's argument. He also argues that deconstructive reading commands respect for the Other because deconstruction carries an unconditional 'ethical' imperative. About this, Critchley states the following:

What interrupts the closure of a determinate context, making that context an open structure, is an unconditional affirmation that intervenes in this context and motivates deconstruction. Such, I would claim, is the ethical moment in Derrida's thinking.³²

In order to explain the ethical moment, Critchley draws on the concept of *différance*, as well as on the afterword of *Limited Inc* (1988). In this afterword, Derrida explains that his famous sentence '*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*' should have always been understood as 'there is no outside-context'.³³ Deconstruction is therefore not only about 'text' but about the world, history, reality, being and the Other.³⁴ This context is constituted by *différance*, meaning that contexts are never fully determined. So on the one hand, there is no outside-context, but on the other hand, there is always something which escapes the context because it can never be fully determined. What can be determined, however, are the "hypothetical imperatives" of a context, which designate moral rules and guidelines, or as

²⁸ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 30. Irreducible alterity is from here onwards the used term to denote that the 'otherness' of a person or context cannot be reduced.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

³² *Ibid.*, 32.

³³ Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Samuel Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988): 136.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

Critchley puts it: “this or that maxim as belonging to his or her happiness”, such as “riches, knowledge, long life or health”.³⁵ Critchley contrasts the hypothetical imperatives with the unconditional ethical imperative made by the other, which cannot be negotiated with and is “good in itself” because it commands respect. Critchley then continues to say that “ethics arises in and as the undecidable yet determinate articulation of these two orders”.³⁶ The two orders are that of the hypothetical moral imperatives and the unconditional ethical imperative. It might be useful to emphasize yet again that the ‘ethics’ that Critchley mentions is strictly Levinasian: the ethics that arises according to Critchley therefore commands respect in encountering an Other. This means that every context carries an unconditional and primordial respect for the Other.

How does this relate to deconstruction? According to Critchley, the unconditional ‘appeal’ (Critchley uses the terms imperative, affirmation and appeal interchangeably) connects deconstruction to the ‘Yes’, “the moment of affirmation that one finds repeatedly in Derrida’s writings”.³⁷ Deconstruction is, for Critchley, a ‘Yes-saying’ to the irreducible alterity of the Other in every context. Furthermore, this ‘Yes-saying’ is linked to deconstruction in the sense that it is “the source of the injunction that produces deconstruction and is produced through deconstructive reading”.³⁸ This statement is important because here Critchley introduces the distinction between deconstruction and deconstructive reading in relation to the ethical: on the one hand, the unconditional affirmation produces deconstruction, but on the other hand, the unconditional affirmation *is produced through* deconstructive reading. To put it differently: deconstruction is produced by respect for the Other person, which is immediate and unconditional, and deconstructive reading produces respect for the Other.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE ETHICS OF DECONSTRUCTION

So far we have seen the arguments for why there is an ethics of deconstruction. To sum up, Critchley argues that deconstruction is ethical because it respectfully takes irreducible alterity into account and because a deconstructive reading of a text produces this respect. Critchley justifies his assimilation of Levinasian ethics to deconstruction because Derrida’s work is highly indebted to Levinas’s philosophy.³⁹ One could wonder whether this justification is sufficient: Critchley quotes interviews in which Derrida states that he subscribes to everything Levinas writes, but, seeing how Derrida constantly withdraws and reshapes his work and statements throughout his philosophical career, the value of this statement can be questioned.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Critchley justifies the Derrida-Levinas

³⁵ Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 40

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

connection by arguing that Derrida's essay on Levinas, "Violence and Metaphysics" (1967), poses a constructive reading of Levinas, but upon reading "Violence and Metaphysics", it becomes apparent that Derrida also criticizes important aspects of Levinas's philosophy.⁴¹ Apart from whether the Derrida-Levinas connection is justified, Hägglund argues that the Derrida-Levinas connection is based on an incorrect understanding of deconstruction. His principal argument is that *Levinas's idea of a primary peace that constitutes ethics is incompatible with deconstruction*. In this section I will discuss his main arguments against Critchley's ethics of deconstruction. First of all, he argues that the logic of deconstruction does not allow for a primordial ethical experience. Second of all, he argues that Levinas uses the term 'absolute other' or 'absolutely other' in a way radically different from Derrida, and third of all, he argues that the unconditional affirmation is not ethical.

Deconstruction and the impossibility of a primordial ethical experience

Hägglund characterizes Critchley's ethics of deconstruction as a 'primary peace', or as something that aspires a "non-violent relationship to the Other".⁴² He characterizes Levinas's ethics as the longing for a 'primary peace'. He opposes this to the *violence* that he argues is at work in deconstruction. It might be unnecessary to state that with violence he means *corruption*, not actual physical aggression. The violence of deconstruction is based on the fact that nothing can be 'in itself', as explained in Section 1. For Hägglund, this means that our relationship with the Other and our understanding of the world and ourselves can at all times be corrupted, which he also calls the 'logic of deconstruction'. One can now already begin to understand that this fundamental notion of violence is incongruent with Levinas's idea of a primary respect for another person, because this respect is absolute and therefore exists in itself. For Levinas, the encounter with another person exceeds any form of mediation, while the point of deconstruction is that nothing exceeds or escapes mediation.⁴³

However, Hägglund acknowledges that there is a moment in deconstruction that still causes ethical tension: the moment of decision. Because how do we decide, if our reasons to decide are fundamentally unstable? Derrida explains that this 'aporia' of decision-making is not a problem at all, but that decisions can be made by virtue of the impossibility of making decisions. Derrida names this 'undecidability'. In an interview, he states that

Many of those who have written about deconstruction understand undecidability as paralysis in face of the power to decide. That is not what I would understand by 'undecidability'. Far from opposing undecidability to decision, I would argue that there would be no decision, in the strong sense of the word, in ethics, in politics, no decision, and thus no responsibility,

⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, ed. and trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001): for instance, 132-133, 142-143, 156-157.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴³ See, again, my point about the undeconstructibility of justice in footnote 15.

without the experience of some undecidability. If you don't experience some undecidability, then the decision would simply be the application of a programme, the consequence of a premiss [sic] or of a matrix. So a decision has to go through some impossibility in order for it to be a decision.⁴⁴

Therefore, for Derrida, ethics starts with the experience of undecidability. Häggglund interprets the process of decision-making as choosing a 'lesser violence'. This 'lesser violence' is a "rigorous deconstructive thinking" that "maintains that we are already inscribed in an 'economy of violence' where we are both excluding and being excluded. No position can be autonomous or absolute but is necessarily bound to other positions that it violates and by which it is violated".⁴⁵ For Häggglund, lesser violence therefore denotes the fundamental vulnerability that is at the heart of deconstruction: a deconstructive strategy, for instance, aims at laying bare hierarchical assumptions and show that they are not 'in itself', but the analysis itself is also not definite, complete, 'in itself'.

Consequently, instead of interpreting deconstruction as something *positive* in the sense that it is respectful to alterity, Häggglund formulates a *negative* account of deconstruction. This is also supported by the fact that for Häggglund the violence or, as he also names it, discrimination that is inherent to deconstruction is constitutive for life in general: "Without divisional marks - which is to say: without segregating borders - there would be nothing at all".⁴⁶ According to Häggglund, deconstruction is therefore the possibility for existence but it does not *add* something to existence, let alone that it would be intrinsically respectful towards another person. All in all, it has become clear that Häggglund proposes a negative account of deconstruction.

The use of the term 'absolutely other' in Derrida and Levinas

The second point that Häggglund makes is that Derrida and Levinas use the term 'absolute other' or 'absolutely other' in different ways. How does Derrida use the term 'absolute other'? In *The Gift of Death* (1999), in which Derrida develops his ideas on absolute responsibility, he writes about the 'absolute singularity of the other', which is contrasted with all others that are not the particular other for which I have responsibility. In this work he also introduces the term 'absolute responsibility', which is closely linked to undecidability. He introduces this term through a reading of Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843), in which Kierkegaard explores the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. In this story, Abraham sacrifices his son Isaac for God. Kierkegaard writes that Abraham had no significant reason to choose the command of God above the love that he felt for his son. Furthermore, he also had no significant reason to choose the command of God, which is based on

⁴⁴ Kearney, "Hospitality, justice and responsibility: a dialogue with Jacques Derrida," 66.

⁴⁵ Martin Häggglund, "The Necessity of Discrimination," 47.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

faith, above God's law of 'thou shalt not kill'. Kierkegaard states that "the instant of decision is madness", since there is no ultimate reason for Abraham to base his decision on.⁴⁷

The sacrifice of Isaac can be read as a "narrative development" of what Derrida names absolute responsibility.⁴⁸ Absolute responsibility is the condition of responsibility in general: it is our inability to not respond to others. We must always respond to the appeals and demands of other people or situation: even a refusal to respond is still a response. So when we decide to respond to someone or something else, we necessarily neglect all other things or persons that ask for our 'response'. This decision cannot be justified. Therefore, responsibility is always based on an irresponsible decision: "As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is to say by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others".⁴⁹ The question arises on what grounds Derrida makes a distinction between the appeal of a singular other to which I must respond, and all other others. In the same interview mentioned above, Derrida explains that "I cannot be certain that 'I' made a decision. Not only should I not be certain that I made a good decision, but I shouldn't even be certain that I made a decision. A decision may have happened".⁵⁰ So how can you respond to 'the one', if there is even no way of saying that 'I' have taken the decision?

These are valid questions, but Häggglund points out that they only arise when the 'absolute other' is interpreted in a Levinasian way. For Derrida, absolute responsibility entails that one can only fully be responsible *because* one can never know all the conditions that are involved in making a decision, as well as for whom or for what I am deciding. Häggglund states therefore that "Derrida's use of terms like 'absolutely other' or 'wholly other' must be rigorously distinguished from Levinas's use of the terms".⁵¹ What is Levinas's understanding of the 'absolute Other'? Levinas refers to the Other as a 'positive infinity', which means that the other is infinite without being limited by something other than itself.⁵² In "Violence and Metaphysics", Derrida comments on this positive infinity of the Other by saying that "the infinitely Other would not be what it is, other, if it was a positive infinity, and if it did not maintain within itself the negativity of the indefinite".⁵³ Therefore, when Derrida uses the term 'absolute', he means this in the sense of a negative infinity: the absolute other, by which Derrida means *anything* that is other (in *The Gift of Death* he for example also writes about animals) is only absolute because it can never be in itself. Therefore, Häggglund argues that deconstruction cannot be produced by the respect that is commanded through the encounter with one 'Other', and deconstructive reading does not produce this respect towards one 'Other'.

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 66.

⁴⁸ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 67.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵⁰ Kearney, "Hospitality, justice and responsibility: a dialogue with Jacques Derrida," 67.

⁵¹ Martin Häggglund, "The Necessity of Discrimination," 56.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵³ Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", 142-143.

The unconditional affirmation

Up until now Hägglund has argued that the alliance between Derrida and Levinas is incorrect because the logic of deconstruction does not allow for a primary ethics and because their use of the term ‘absolute’ differs radically. From this follows Hägglund’s third argument that the unconditional affirmation cannot be ethical. Again, Hägglund proposes a negative interpretation: “the unconditional ‘yes’ is nothing in itself: it only marks the opening of an unpredictable future that one will have to negotiate, without any affirmative or negative response being given in advance”.⁵⁴ Moreover, the unconditional yes is, like discrimination, the possibility of life itself: “whatever we do, we have always already said yes to the coming of the future, since without it nothing could happen”.⁵⁵ The unconditional affirmation is therefore a necessary consequence of the fact that presence can never be ‘in itself’.⁵⁶ Hägglund emphasizes that this “can give rise to both the desirable *and* the undesirable, to every chance *and* every menace” [original italics’].⁵⁷

So instead of producing a primary respect, Hägglund presents the unconditional affirmation as a neutral condition: the unconditional yes is the fact that we cannot stop time and that we necessarily have to say yes to the future. Hägglund and Critchley therefore have a very different idea of the unconditional affirmation. For Critchley, the affirmation is *substantive*, whereas for Hägglund it is not. Another argument that Hägglund makes against the unconditional ‘ethical’ imperative is that deconstructive thinking “exercises a critical vigilance”, but that this does “*not* entail that the deconstructive thinker can automatically be ascribed any ethico-political insights; he or she is as liable as anyone else to make mistakes” [original italics].⁵⁸ This argument is again based on the ‘lesser violence’ as explained above. In the next section I will explain why both these arguments against the unconditional affirmation are very problematic.

Assessment of Hägglund’s argument

All things considered, Hägglund has argued that deconstruction is not motivated by an ethical ideal, that it does not necessarily lead to a respect towards an Other and finally and most importantly, that deconstruction cannot be understood through Levinas’s understanding of the term ‘ethical’. In this section it will become clear why Hägglund’s argument is contradictory. First of all, Hägglund argues against a point that Critchley does not make. As explained in the previous paragraph, Hägglund argues that the unconditional affirmation is ‘nothing in itself’, where Critchley argues that the unconditional affirmation is ethical. One could wonder, however, if they are talking about the same thing. Namely, Critchley nowhere states that deconstruction necessarily *leads to* something desirable. That would be a misunderstanding of the most basic premise of deconstruction. To recall again, Critchley states that the

⁵⁴ Martin Hägglund, “The Necessity of Discrimination,” 58.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 69.

unconditional affirmation is “the source of the injunction that produces deconstruction and is produced through deconstructive reading”.⁵⁹ So although he does state that deconstructive reading can produce respect towards an Other, he does not state that deconstruction always has a desirable outcome. Häggglund has therefore not argued against Critchley’s argument that deconstructive reading can produce respect.

Another argument where Häggglund misses the point, is where he states that a deconstructive thinker cannot be ascribed ethical insights. Even apart from the fact that someone cannot be a ‘deconstructive thinker’ (see section 1), Critchley does not argue that a person who exercises deconstructive thinking automatically has ethical insights. Rather, he compares the opening of deconstruction to a metaphysical condition for ethics in general and argues that respect is produced through deconstructive reading, but he does not argue that this person is automatically respectful or has ‘ethico-political insights’, whatever that may mean. It is very important to note that twice now, Häggglund criticizes Critchley on his interpretation of deconstruction where Critchley actually writes about deconstructive reading.

Apart from the fact that Häggglund’s arguments against Critchley do not follow through, another problem is that Häggglund argues against the appropriation of deconstruction by Levinas’s understanding of ethics, but that he implies that deconstruction cannot be understood as ethical in general. This leaves open the question if there are perhaps other ways to understand deconstruction as ethical, without the metaphysical ethics of the Other. Throughout the article, Häggglund sometimes implies that there *are* other ways to understand deconstruction as ethical. For example, he writes that “it is only by coming to terms with the deconstructive ‘logic’ of violence that one can assess the ethico-political significance of deconstruction”.⁶⁰ This ethico-political significance is the exposure of “the internal contradictions of the doctrines that hold it to be desirable to eliminate exclusion once and for all”.⁶¹ Therefore, Häggglund states that Derrida privileges democracy above other political systems not because it can guarantee a good society, but “because it more evidently than other concepts takes into account the double movement of stabilization and destabilization”.⁶² And finally, because violence is a constitutive condition for decision-making, it “will always be urgent to reflect on ethico-political questions, to work out strategies for a ‘lesser violence’ that is essentially precarious”.⁶³

It is therefore very telling that Häggglund does not explain *why* one should “work out strategies for a lesser violence”. He does state that “all decisions made in the name of justice are made in view of what is judged to be the lesser violence”, but as I will explain, this argument does not follow through.⁶⁴ To start, what are decisions made in the name of justice? Here Häggglund draws on Derrida’s

⁵⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁰ Martin Häggglund, “The Necessity of Discrimination,” 61.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 69.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 48.

concept of justice. Derrida analyzed the ‘general idea’ of justice, which strives for an ideal state of being, and according to which “the demand for justice is raised as a demand concerning how things *ought to be*” [original italics].⁶⁵ Ultimately, this ‘general idea’ of justice means that the demand of justice is raised to attain absolute peace and that justice should *de jure* put an end to violence.⁶⁶ However, as I pointed out in section 1 and what Hägglund named the ‘logic of deconstruction’, deconstruction can never strive for justice as an ethical ideal. Even more so, an ideal state of absolute peace can never be reached: it would mean that time would stop.⁶⁷ However, this is where his argument stops: he only explains what justice is not. Because of this it is not clear why lesser violence is a struggle for justice, when this struggle for justice only designates that absolute peace can never be reached. It now seems that both terms actually mean the same thing: both lesser violence and justice denote that absolute peace can never be reached.

It can be concluded, then, that deconstruction at least carries ethical significance for Hägglund, although he does not explain how or why. The question therefore remains why one would try to make a decision that is the least violent, and how. And finally, if through deconstruction one tries to make a decision that is the least violent, can you not also say that this the most peaceful decision, as long as one acknowledges that this decision is made within a discriminative framework? It is in these unanswered questions that Hägglund’s argument is contradictory: he argues against the appropriation of Derrida as an ethical philosopher, but he still acknowledges that deconstruction has a certain ethical and political significance. It is also in these unanswered questions that I do not agree with Hägglund that there can be no ethics of deconstruction. Although I do agree that deconstruction cannot be primordially ethical, the unanswered questions point to the fact that a certain ethics of deconstruction might still be possible. In the next section, I will explore to what extent an ethics of deconstruction is still possible.

CAN THERE STILL BE AN ETHICS OF DECONSTRUCTION?

So far, we have seen that deconstruction cannot be ethical in the Levinasian sense of an encounter with an Other that commands respect. To this extent, I agree with Hägglund’s argument. Nonetheless, a couple of concepts were introduced throughout this paper that still possibly mark an opening for an ethics of deconstruction. These concepts are undecidability and absolute responsibility.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Martin Hägglund, “The Necessity of Discrimination,” 48.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ One could wonder if Hägglund’s opponents really meant to pose an ideal state of being that literally, but nonetheless it is clear that justice is not an ethical ideal and not something that would (and should) put an end to the violence that the logic of deconstruction exposes.

⁶⁸ I think that the concept of ‘justice’ also belongs here, but the length of this paper is too short to include it in my discussion. I do, however, recognize that ‘justice’ is a very important notion and absolutely missing here. Nonetheless, I think that Derrida’s theory on justice signifies a similar tension as responsibility and decisions. In *Force of Law*, Derrida roughly explains that there is a distinction between ‘law’ and ‘justice’. They are two sides

Undecidability and absolute responsibility signify something that is *unconditional*. Every decision has to pass through the undecidable, and for every responsible decision, one is always at the same time irresponsible. This cannot be negotiated. I therefore argue that unconditional affirmation is *not* ‘nothing in itself’ or only the condition for life in general, nor that it is a primordial ethical opening. Instead, the unconditional affirmation signifies the specific tension between decisions and undecidability and responsibility and irresponsibility, which gives rise to the question: how do we decide, how can we take responsibility? Deconstruction irrevocably evokes the question: *how do we deal with this?*

This is an ethical question, and specifically with regards to the definition of ethics that I adopt in this paper, the question asks for guidelines on how to act. In *Limited Inc*, Derrida asks: “without this tension or without this apparent contradiction, would anything ever be done? Would anything ever be changed?”⁶⁹ The idea behind this question is that without undecidability, ethics and politics would merely be the application of a rule or the following of a program. This is what Derrida names “the order of the calculable”.⁷⁰ In short, this can be characterized as norms, rules, programs, conditions or expectations that one follows in a specific situation. With only this order, no question like ‘how do we deal with this’ would have to be asked. But the point is that the “order of the calculable” is always interrupted by the unconditionality of undecidability and absolute responsibility. This is best explained through an example that Derrida gives in “Force of Law”, where he states that there would be no justice if judges would only blindly apply the law to their cases:

The decision of a judge, for example, must not only follow a rule or law or a general law but must also assume it, approve it, confirm its value, by a reinstating act of interpretation, as if ultimately nothing previously existed of the law, as if the judge himself invented the law in every case. [...] In short, for a decision to be just and responsible, it must [...] be both regulated and without regulation: it must conserve the law and also destroy it or suspend it enough to have to reinvent it in each case, rejustify it [...] ⁷¹

The same tension is present in ethics: one must make ethical and decisions, but they always pass through something that is non-negotiable: undecidability and absolute responsibility. They intervene in any given context, and signify that “the limit of the frame or the border of the context always entails a

of the same coin, but justice is a necessary part of the law. The law is the enforcement of rules, as ordered by judges and the government. But if these laws would only be applied, they would not be just. Therefore, also the concept of justice signifies a ‘free space’. Elsewhere, Derrida’s concept of justice is interpreted as an ideal that one should strive for. I agree with Hägglund that this not the case. See Hägglund, “The Necessity of Discrimination,” 62.

⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 152.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: the Metaphysical Foundation of Authority,” in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Carlson (London: Routledge, 1992): 23.

clause of nonclosure [sic]”.⁷² Every context, therefore, opens up the possibility to ask *how* one should decide, or act, or take responsibility, instead of merely applying a rule, or following a set of norms or conventions. This interruption is even necessary for responsibility to exist. I want to characterize this ‘clause of nonclosure’ as a ‘free space’ that is present in every moral decision or activity. My interpretation of the interaction between these orders provides a middle ground between saying on the one hand that deconstruction is produced by an ethical notion, and saying on the other hand that deconstruction is merely a necessary outcome of life itself.

To briefly summarize, up until now I have argued that the unconditional affirmation is not ‘nothing in itself’, but rather a ‘free space’ between two orders, that of rules and norms and of undecidability and absolute responsibility. These orders are not separated: they are two sides of the same coin. Out of the tension between these orders arises a free space in which every decision can always be revised, reinvented and reinterpreted, because it is always traced by *différance*, or put differently, because it always contains a clause of nonclosure. The question then arises: can this ‘free space’ account for an ethics of deconstruction?

The most tempting way in which the ‘free space’ can account for an ethics of deconstruction is to regard it as something that should be taken into account in order to make a decision or take responsibility. In doing so, deconstruction would be understood as an ‘insight’ that one can take with, or an ‘experience’ that one can undergo.⁷³ This is, however, an incorrect understanding of deconstruction: deconstruction is not something you can ‘do’ in order to achieve something, as I explained in section 1. You cannot derive something from deconstruction, and one cannot ‘find’ in deconstruction *any* guidelines whatsoever. Any attempt to derive guidelines from deconstruction *as* deconstruction would ignore the basic premises of deconstruction, or what Hägglund has named the ‘logic of deconstruction’. Therefore, the ‘free space’ that I have laid out above does raise a question of *how* one should decide, but nothing more. The ‘free space’ opens the question on how one should act, given these two orders, but does not give an answer. Therefore, there cannot be an ethics of deconstruction.

But does this mean that there is absolutely nothing left of an ethics of deconstruction? I do not think so. It is not enough to say that you cannot derive something from deconstruction and that it can therefore not be ethical. For sure, such a conclusion measures up to the logic of deconstruction, but I argue that in practice, you can in fact derive something from deconstruction. The reason is quite straightforward. Derrida contends that deconstruction “is not a phase, a period or a moment” and that “it is something which is constantly at work and was at work before what we call ‘deconstruction’ started”.⁷⁴ However, it is still the case that we *learn* about deconstruction: deconstruction is not something that we ‘know’ is there. So although there is no ‘after deconstruction’, in reality, reading

⁷² Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 152.

⁷³ Leonard Lawlor, “Deconstruction,” 123.

⁷⁴ Kearney, “Hospitality, justice and responsibility: a dialogue with Jacques Derrida,” 65.

about it and understanding could lead to an insight that one can think about. I think this cannot be ignored. There is no ‘after deconstruction’, but in our understanding of it, there *is*, although this understanding is always vulnerable to revision and reinterpretation.

What would this understanding entail? A couple of notions could at least be distinguished in understanding deconstruction that arise out of the ‘free space’: 1) our conception of ourselves and others is unstable, 2) a decision passes through the undecidable and 3) in taking responsibility, we are always irresponsible. One could take these notions into account when facing ethical questions and one could use these notions to revise and reinterpret decisions and perspectives. It is important to recognize that this is something different from deconstruction *as* deconstruction, because these notions cannot be derived from deconstruction itself, but rather from *learning about* deconstruction.

Ultimately, this is also why it is possible to do a deconstructive reading or use a deconstructive strategy. A specific deconstructive reading takes place *after* one has learned about deconstruction and it is even very important that one therefore takes the notions, which can be derived from learning about deconstruction, into account upon attempting this kind of reading.⁷⁵ It can therefore be said that deconstructive reading does contain guidelines for action, in addition to deconstruction. These guidelines are for example the three notions mentioned above. Furthermore, a deconstructive reading or strategy attempts to be responsible, because it takes into account that there can never be a ‘definite’ interpretation of a literal text or context, that the decisions made for the interpretation or approach have no stable basis, and that the interpretation is always irresponsible. It does, in Hägglund’s formulation, an attempt to be the least violent. A deconstructive reading or strategy can therefore be ethical. However, it only provides guidelines for thinking or interpreting, but it is still not ethical in the sense that a deconstructive reading is “what you should do”, or that it is good to do a deconstructive reading. It can therefore be seen as a ‘weak’ ethics. Nonetheless, one could possibly derive a normative ethics from deconstructive strategy, although that is a topic that cannot be addressed here.⁷⁶

How would the distinction between deconstruction and deconstructive reading or strategies solve Hägglund’s contradictory argument? As we have seen already, the contradiction is rooted in the fact that he does not address the distinction between deconstruction and deconstructive reading or strategies. He makes a couple of arguments against Critchley’s interpretation of deconstruction, whereas Critchley is actually writing about deconstructive reading. Furthermore, we have seen that Hägglund’s argument is contradictory because he implies that deconstruction is still “urgent” and has

⁷⁵ One can also do a deconstructive reading without being conscious of it, but here I explicitly talk about the intent to attempt a deconstructive reading.

⁷⁶ Some critical questions could already be coined about this possible ethics, because it provides a couple of guidelines for how to act, but one could question whether these guidelines can really be taken into account, or what ‘taking into account’ would actually entail. For example, how would one take into account that every context is traced by a network of differences, by *différance*? How would one take into account that their decision is a leap of faith? And can one take into account that every moment, one is behaving irresponsibly towards an infinite ‘otherness’? Would this “taking into account” result in an experience? An emotion? Or would it never be more than an insight?

ethical and political significance, although he argues at the same time that deconstruction cannot be ethical at all. This contradiction can be solved by maintaining the distinction between on the one hand deconstruction as something that takes place and is always at hand, and on the other hand deconstructive reading or strategies. Deconstruction can indeed not be ethical: deconstruction does not offer anything *as* deconstruction. However, it does offer a way of reading or interpreting.

It is also the only way in which one could bother with making decisions which are ‘the least violent’. Hägglund already implicitly states so himself: “it is only by coming to terms with the logic of deconstruction” that one can attempt to make the least violent decision. Furthermore, in order to make a decision that attempts to be the least violent, one has to *at least* have an inkling of how to do that. Therefore, it is necessary that deconstruction is not just the possibility of life itself, but that it denotes this ‘free space’ between the calculable and the incalculable. Also, it is necessary to acknowledge that certain insights can be derived from *learning about* deconstruction. Hägglund was therefore wrong to say that deconstruction cannot be ethical at all.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I answered whether there can still be an ‘ethics of deconstruction’ when it cannot be understood through Levinas’s ethics. In order to answer this question, I have first of all given a basic idea of what deconstruction entails by highlighting three elements of deconstruction. In the second section, I have discussed the principal argument for an ethics of deconstruction, as formulated by Critchley. Critchley argued that deconstruction is highly indebted to Levinas’s ethics. According to Levinas, ethics arise out of an encounter with another person. This person is infinitely and irreducibly ‘other’ and this commands a respect towards another person. Critchley argues that deconstruction also commands this respect, and that through deconstructive reading this respect can be produced. In the third section, I have discussed criticism on Critchley’s argument for an ethics of deconstruction. I have raised the question whether his justification for the Derrida-Levinas connection is strong enough. Thereafter, I have discussed Hägglund’s three arguments against an ethics of deconstruction based on Levinasian ethics. In the end, Hägglund’s argument turned out to be contradictory because he argued that on the one hand that deconstruction cannot be ethical, but that on the other hand deconstruction still has ethical significance. In the fourth section, I have proposed a solution for this contradiction by arguing that a distinction between deconstruction and deconstructive reading or strategies should be maintained. For Hägglund’s argument, this would mean that deconstruction can indeed not be ethical, but that deconstructive reading has ethical significance because it provides guidelines on how to make a decision that is the ‘least violent’.

This ties in with my own conclusion as well: there cannot be an ethics of deconstruction. This is because any attempt to make deconstruction ethical would ignore the basic premises of deconstruction: deconstruction is not a delineated theory, but deconstruction ‘takes place’. However, I

also conclude that there *can* be an ethics of deconstructive reading or strategies, because they can be applied after someone has learned about deconstruction. In this way, one can distinguish notions from understanding deconstruction which can aid in making ethical decisions. My answer to the question “can there still be an ethics of deconstruction?” is therefore both yes *and* no. To some, this is perhaps unsatisfactory, especially seeing that the debate around the ethics of deconstruction has been a succession of philosophers arguing that deconstruction must be either one thing or the other. It is precisely this ‘all-or-nothing’ thinking that Derrida encourages philosophers to unravel, and I believe that the ethics of a deconstructive reading or strategy paves the way for this endeavor.

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