

Possibilities and Limitations: The Political and Ethical Horizons of Postmodernism

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at delineating the problematics of postmodernism both as a theoretical as well as political stance by focussing on its refusal to acknowledge and assume any foundational ethical categories. It does this by drawing a contrast between some ideas of Jacques Derrida and some of those of Emmanuel Levinas. This refusal which does not allow one to assume stable categories of the self and the other is a product of postmodernism's focus on freeplay and difference. While the ethical drive of postmodernism is towards an acknowledgement of the other, it is my contention that by refusing any kind of categorisation, it deprives itself of the tools to do so.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Nietzsche, Levinas, Ethics, Other, Deconstruction, Political

The gradual turn towards postmodernism has been discussed in relation to a variety of social and theoretical phenomena such as architecture, literature and philosophy. This makes it difficult to delineate its many aspects and express all its themes in a coherent fashion. The 'postmodern problematic' (White, 1991) can be used as a background to provide an understanding of postmodern ethico-political concerns. This problematic can be seen in terms of four primary traits. Firstly there is a strong suspicion of foundationalist metanarratives of modern scientific and political projects. Second, an awareness of the dangers of rationalization. Lastly there is an availability of new informational technologies and a spurt in the growth of social movements. The ambiguity that is implied in the term postmodernism and its emphasis on ambivalence, multiplicity and paradox point to the fact that contemporary social reality can be characterised in these terms and cannot be understood through familiar cognitive and social structures.

The ethical ideas of postmodernism are based upon a number of other characteristics. Postmodernists invoke a Nietzschean critique of human morality and an affirmation of 'freeplay'. There is a scepticism regarding metanarratives such as progress and teleology, metaphysics of presence and ontology. This results in a tendency to negate any positive formulation of ethics in contemporary discourse. Secondly, postmodernism defines ethics in terms of sensitivity to 'otherness' and 'difference'. The deconstruction of metanarratives is thought to lead to the 'other' who is ordinarily suppressed. The assumption here is that marginalization in discourse also leads to suppression through violence in social reality. This

is how postmodern thinkers by dismantling traditional philosophy and social theory identify themselves as proponents of a 'politics of difference'.

The question that is being looked at here is if postmodern ideals contain emancipatory ideals within their Nietzschean frameworks. While postmodernism's critique of philosophy and theory can be regarded as a radical move in academia, the deconstruction that is intrinsic to postmodernism deprives it of categories for their avowed position of being sensitive to the 'other'. Philosophical deconstruction and sensitivity to the 'other' undermine each other within the public sphere. This is because the deconstructive nature of postmodernism makes it untenable to differentiate between kinds of political positions and categories. For instance, it is important to distinguish between the self and the other or between reactionary and progressive ideals. Postmodern ethics needs to provide criteria for distinguishing between political positions. Otherwise it cannot avoid the threat of becoming a conservative framework that would undervalue emancipatory ideals via deconstruction. (Habermas, 1981, 1987)

This shows the tension between the postmodern sensibility to otherness as well as its commitment to articulating the free-floating nature of texts. But for most postmodern thinkers like Derrida this does not indicate a tension. Rather, the latter is the condition for the former. Responsibility to otherness cannot be achieved without being sensitive to the aspects of discourse that have been historically suppressed, the unearthing of which requires an unfamiliar gesture. Within postmodern thinking, deconstruction is linked to ethical affirmation.

Despite the space that is opened up by deconstruction for liberating and emancipative practices within traditional discourse and textual practices, its limitations are visible when one applies it to ethical and political practice. The postmodern approach to ethics does not provide any determinate framework for taking a position in conflicting ethical claims or how to understand emancipatory ideals and democratic accountability in determinate political terms.

Ordinarily, postmodernism treats ethics as a category with suspicion because it is thought of as a branch of philosophy that includes logical categories, metaphysical presences and ontological foundations. These are all terms that postmodernism seeks to deconstruct. Recent theorizations have tried to show the ethical aspect of deconstruction such as Derrida's assumption that ethics is essential to deconstruction and that ethics is the final goal of his work. The difference between Derrida's conceptualization of ethics and a traditional concept of ethics becomes clearer if one looks at Derrida's understanding of Levinasian ethics. Keeping in mind the difference, there is both an affirmation as well as negation of Levinas' ethics by Derrida.

Keeping in mind the subversive effects of deconstruction and the Nietzschean 'joyous affirmation of the play of the world' (Derrida, 1978, p.292), deconstruction is conventionally understood as a type of Nietzschean philosophy that rejects the entire legacy of post-Kantian Enlightenment thought. On the other hand, Derrida's reading of Levinas in 'Violence and Metaphysics' (1978, pp. 79-153) indicates the influence of Levinasian ethics on Derrida. Levinas' influence may account for Derrida's understanding of deconstruction in ethical terms. They both try to understand ethics in terms of respect for alterity or the 'other'.

Levinas' work aims at describing a primal ethical experience rather than constructing a system for judging the moral acceptability of certain norms related to societal action. In this sense, Derrida refers to Levinasian ethics as an 'ethics of ethics' (1978, p. 111). Levinas himself defines ethics as 'the putting into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the other' (Levinas, 1969, p.43). What Levinas refers to as the 'other' plays an important role in Derrida's conception of ethics. For both Levinas and Derrida, the 'other' is the basic condition of the possibility of ethics and identity itself. But according to them the ontological tradition consists of suppressing or reducing all forms of otherness by subsuming their alterity within one's self.

Levinas' ethics can be understood more clearly if one looks at his distinction between 'the saying' and 'the said' (1981). 'The Saying' is described as an individual's exposure to the other, an ethical performance that defies description. 'The Said' is a statement, an assertion or a proposition, the truth or falsity of which can be philosophically determined. Levinas is of the view that traditional philosophy caught in the realm of 'the said' cannot capture the ethical experience. He also says that the interruption of the ontological Said by the ethical Saying leads to the deconstruction of the ontological nature of philosophy.

Derrida on one hand accepts the Levinasian commitment to the ethical over the ontological, on the other however he is sympathetic to Nietzschean and Heideggerean reservations about the use of the term 'ethics'. His view of ethics is therefore two-fold. Both Levinas and Derrida attempt to rethink the category of ethics by relocating it in relation to the 'other'. Their effort to elucidate the manner in which this relation to the 'other' should be utilised in practice however retreats into ambiguity. Derrida understands deconstruction or an interrogation of texts to be ethical in nature. Understanding alterity or marginality in a text is an ethical act according to Derrida. Also, freeplay or undecidability presupposes the unconditional affirmation that motivates deconstruction. The unconditioned ethical conditions of possibility for disrupting logocentric textuality are to be seen as the 'opening of another ethics' (Derrida, 1988, p.122).

Logocentric conceptuality creates an illusion of transparency based on a belief in human reason. The 'other' remains unexpressed by logocentric reasoning. For Derrida, ideas and reality co-exist. There is an assumption that marginalization of the 'other' in discourse has an effect on social reality as well characterised by violence. Conceptual marginalization of the 'other' and suppression of it in social reality through violence go together in his view. This is the reason that for Derrida, deconstruction becomes an ethical practice.

Derrida's emphasis on difference directs our attention towards the repressed and excluded history of the victim. The assumption underlying the deconstructive project is that while the history of a logocentric metaphysics of presence is given from the perspective of the victor, a respect for the 'other', as his understanding of the ethical implies, can open a way to speak of the victim and the marginalized. The paradox that haunts Derridean discourse is that the only language that is available to deconstruction is the language of logocentric philosophy. This leads to an ambiguous situation of both belonging and not belonging to what is to be deconstructed.

Derrida's hesitance to speak of ethics and politics can be understood if seen from the perspective of undecidability. Derrida says that what has always interested him is 'strictest

possible determination of the figures of play, of oscillation, of undecidability' (1988, p. 145). Undecidability according to Derrida is always a determinate oscillation between possibilities of meaning and acts. These possibilities are again determined by defined situations such as political, discursive, ethical etc. Derrida claims that his analyses of undecidability concern these pragmatic determinations and definitions as opposed to some vague 'indeterminacy.'

Derrida identifies the goal of deconstruction as a search for openness to the 'other' from the standpoint of the victims in the histories of both social reality and human thought. Due to his deconstructive assumption of undecidability, however Derrida cannot specify what or who has been repressed and victimized in determinate terms. If he intends to defend deconstruction as the affirmation of emancipatory ideals, expressing his position in determinate political terms would be the ideal first step. He attributes this weakness to the fact that 'the available codes for taking a political stance are not at all adequate to the radicality of deconstruction... because all our political codes and terminologies still remain fundamentally metaphysical, regardless of whether they originate from the right or the left' (Kearney, 1984, pp. 119-120). As a result of this overall negation of political codes, Derrida deprives himself of any means of substantiating his affirmation of political ideals. Derrida's one-sided emphasis on the undecidable nature of the political leads him to avoid any positive determinate commitment and action. While he claims that his greatest interest lies in the determinations of an undecidable terrain, he cannot specify the determinations themselves because determinate concepts and categories are not available within his deconstructive framework.

As an epigraph to his essay on Foucault, Derrida (1978, p. 31) cites Kierkegaard: 'The instant of the decision is madness.' This epigraph reflects the dilemma facing a Derridean politics of deconstruction or undecidability. Once the ground of one's political decisions is ultimately contingent, devoid of a set of principles or procedures, the moment of political decision can be unmasked as an instance of madness. But this picture of the political world, while it would illuminate the hidden side or the negative or irrational aspects of western democracies, does have limits in accounting for the actual political practices in modern democratic societies and in suggesting a positive vision for moments of decision. This difficulty reflects an impasse of the political in Derrida's position and the limitations of deconstruction to offer a coherent account of the passage from the ethical double gesture to political practices of questioning and critique.

Postmodern thinkers consider it ethical to resist the temptation of defining the ethical in terms of an idealized system of rules and laws. There is an assumption that there exists no theoretical justification for ethical commands, and that our ethical decisions should be made without resorting to any positive articulation of criteria. This is the motif of 'negative autonomy' in postmodern thinking, negative as it abandons the concept of a coherent agent which underlies its defence of marginality, difference, heterogeneity against the coercive power of totalization. In the same manner, for postmodernists ethics means remaining suspicious of the utopian images that are generated by a society that is committed to humanism. These hesitant aspects of postmodern thinking undercut any notion of a collective and deliberate self-determination.

In spite of the above mentioned limitations of postmodernism, there remains a possibility for understanding postmodern ethics in a positive manner. If one understands that

the final aim of postmodern deconstruction is to demonstrate that there always exists an 'other' to any given system, then this has to be understood as an ethical aspiration. For postmodernists, the recognition of this limit always remains in the realm of the undecidable, which is identified with the ethical. In such a case, the ethical by definition becomes indeterminate. The very possibility of ethics is limited by assuming that no positive socio-historical determinations are possible. Emancipatory ideals themselves require us to specify the historical conditions for their realization, and this specification inevitably involves a certain form of categorization and conceptual definition or stabilization.

The postmodern dilemma lies in the fact that postmodern thinkers cannot provide any positive alternative in determinate political terms. They emphasize the subversive nature of deconstruction where it is conceived as an opening to the 'other' and the marginalized. But the premise underlying deconstruction leaves little room for any for positive ethical and political proposals. The postmodernist negation of a traditional philosophy of Truth and Objectivity can be seen as a radical move in the realm of the academy. But in the realm of public discourse and political practice, postmodern discourse leads to undecidability, ambiguity and irony leads to the occlusion of intelligible public discourse.

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