Review of “Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines”

Neal DeRoo
Boston College

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Recommended Citation
Jacques Derrida’s work received a rocky reception (at best) in the world of English-speaking philosophy. Throughout the 1970's, 80's, and 90's, Derrida’s ideas gained traction in comparative literature and Romance Languages departments, but could make no positive headway in philosophy departments; even so-called ‘Continental’ philosophy programs in North America tended to ignore or downplay Derrida’s work. Books like Marian Hobson’s *Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines* are a big part of the reason why this is, happily, starting to change (if somewhat slowly).

Hobson’s book endeavors to explain the structure and style of argumentation in Derrida’s texts. The claim is that the structure of argumentation that Derrida employs enacts certain themes that are not always explicitly thematized in the works in which the argumentation appears. Hobson’s book is admirable on at least three levels. First, by going through so many of Derrida’s texts so carefully, it can serve as a very difficult and advanced elaboration of Derrida’s thought. Secondly, by focusing especially on the mode of argumentation, it can suggest a new pattern of rigor found in Derrida’s texts, granting a certain amount of credibility to Derrida in the eyes of those who value rigor above all in philosophy. Finally, and in part because of the work accomplished on the first two levels, Hobson’s book works as a sort of Derridean apologetics to those working in the Anglo-American tradition of philosophy.

The first chapter shows that certain patterns recur throughout Derrida’s writings, thereby relating these writings to each other even when the content does not seem to explicitly connect. The author refers to these recurring patterns of argumentation as ‘syntaxes,’ that is, forms of argument that, by means of philosophical terms acting in relation to their distribution, convey a structural, rather than a lexical, form of meaning (8). Among the most dominant of these syntaxes are the two studied at length in this chapter: the relation between the empirical and the transcendental, and the paradoxes of infinity. The author develops these two syntaxes by a close examination of Derrida’s early texts, especially *Speech and Phenomena*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Of Grammatology* (the three works published by Derrida in 1967). While these texts provide fruitful fodder for the author’s analysis, it is somewhat curious that she does not devote more time at this stage of the book to Derrida’s *Introduction to Husserl’s Origin of Geometry*, the work in which he deals most explicitly with the relationship between the empirical and the transcendental and how these terms grow out of the Husserlian milieu (a more detailed reading of this work occurs in chapter four). This curiosity aside, the author’s close textual analyses reveal in Derrida’s early work a clear pattern or structure of argumentation that oscillates between the empirical or historical, on one hand, and the transcendental, on the other. A second pattern of argumentation, in another register
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and in view of certain paradoxes that arise from the first one, oscillates between negative infinity, on the one hand, and positive infinity, on the other. In both of these different syntaxes, the structure of argumentation, that is, the syntax itself, reveals that Derrida’s ‘deconstructive’ work always happens in relation to the history of philosophy: Derrida purposefully brings up terms from previous thinkers and epochs in philosophical history in order to unsettle the meaning of those terms (‘transcendental,’ ‘infinity,’ etc.), thereby reinscribing them with a new meaning, a meaning that does not try to purge itself of previous meanings, but holds itself in conscious relation with those previous meanings, proliferating meanings even as it determines them. As such, paradoxes, as they occur in Derrida’s thought, do not close down or stall argumentation, but rather open it as a form of intertextuality (24). While none of this is explicitly thematized in Derrida’s early writings, the syntaxes brought to light by Hobson’s analyses help us understand that, for Derrida, the work of philosophy always occurs in relation to the history of philosophy, even, and perhaps especially, when one tries to do something ‘new,’ and this is not an accident: anything that could be called ‘transcendental’ in philosophy (and Derrida does believe in such things) must necessarily have an historical provenance, even as it in some way transcends this historical provenance as a ‘transcendental.’ It is the complex relationship between the historical/empirical and the transcendental that Hobson’s discussion of the Derridean syntax reveals.

The second chapter moves from the examination of structural patterns of argumentation to an examination of the coalescing of these complex arguments into particular words or lexemes. Even here, though, the author carefully shows that there is more at stake in each particular work than the explanation of one lexeme or another. Through a detailed reading of Derrida’s *Dissemination* (1972) it becomes apparent that the very plurality of these lexemes (pharmakon, hymen, supplement, différance, etc.), the fact that each article from this time period seems to put forward a new lexeme that functions as the focal point of argumentation, reveals a certain proliferation and ‘doubling’ at work in Derrida’s texts. By the use of phrases such as “conditions of possibility and impossibility,” Derrida subverts the Kantian definition of the transcendental as the conditions of possibility. In doing so, Derrida moves ‘upstream’ from many of the key distinctions in the history of philosophy (like empirical/transcendental, or form/matter) to show the common root of these distinctions. However, the multiplicity of words used to describe these common roots is not accidental: it shows, first of all, that there is not one common root or genus from which all other philosophical distinctions or terms originate; and, because of this, it shows, secondly, that Derrida’s analyses, though they provide insights that are usable beyond the context in which they are developed, can, at the same time, not be fully separated from those contexts. For example, the pharmakon arises out of Derrida’s discussion of Plato’s *Phaedrus*. The ambiguity inherent in the Greek (which means both ‘poison’ and ‘remedy/medicine’) reveals a certain undifferentiated milieu that exceeds the distinctions that arise out of it (most explicitly the privileging of speech over writing, but also truth over falsity, essence over appearance, etc.). This excess then reveals itself in a constant replication or repetition of the gesture by which the distinction was made in the first place: writing, that is, the use of repeated signs to convey meaning even in the absence of the sign-maker or sign-receiver, is shown to be that which makes possible repetition, both as ideal repetition and as ‘mere’ repetition. Hence, writing, as the ‘transcendental’ name for the undifferentiated milieu, can be split into eidos (ideal repetition, the ‘remedy’ or ‘gift’ of writing as pharmakon, in a move that harkens back not only to Plato, but also the discussion of Husserl’s notion of the transcendental discussed in Chapter 1) and appearance (mere repetition, the ‘poison’ of writing as pharmakon). However, this mere repetition (that is, the use of repeated signs to convey meaning even in the absence of sign-maker and/or sign-receiver) is itself associated with writing. Thereby, one side of the distinction, appearance or mere repetition, because it functions like the ‘transcendental’ writing, repeats the original distinction: as writing, it can again be split
into eidos, on one hand, and mere repetition/writing, on the other; which can again be split, ad infinitum. This ‘unequal splitting,’ in Hobson’s phrase, not only allows for a plurality of repetitions and doublings (a point echoed by Derrida’s stylistic use of quotation [e.g., in “Dissemination”] and irony [e.g. in Glas], as Hobson adeptly shows), but also reveals that eidos springs from the same possibility as its opposite (appearance, phantasm, mere repetition), and hence the condition of possibility is also the same thing that makes it impossible (as eidos is always connected to, or entangled with, its ‘opposite,’ that is, appearance, mere repetition). Alternatively, the possibility that something may not happen (that some particular piece of writing might not accurately transmit an eidos, for example) derives from the same core as that which makes possible that it can happen: that something may not work is not an accident at all, but is part of its essence, so to speak (this is, as the next chapter will suggest, the root of Derrida’s infamous disagreement with Searle). The plurality of lexemes around which Derrida variously crystallizes this point, then, is necessary: first, because they arise out of different historical contexts, and hence must be different; second, because the undifferentiated milieu to which these lexemes refer cannot be controlled by one law, one genus, or one master word – the lexemes must be plural to remind us of the nature of relation to this excess.

The relation to this excess re-emerges as the theme of the third chapter. The author deals with it in terms of the notion of “strange attractors,” a name referring to the pattern into which a type of turbulence seems to be tending (at infinity) to settle (252 n.30). For Derrida, Hobson argues, the relation to the excess is two-fold: there is a pattern of negotiation that is constantly in a relation of interruption. That is because the excess cannot be spoken of, or even named, without losing something of what makes it unique. But this does not immediately leave us in the realm of ‘mere’ phantasms or fetishes, as Derrida’s texts on Marx and Freud make clear. Both fetishism and phantasms rely on a notion of the ‘thing itself’: phantasms are a mere copy of what is real, while fetishes seek to go beyond representations to the unsubstitutable (phantasm and fetishism being not entirely unrelated, therefore). For Derrida, however, this ‘thing itself’ does not appear. Rather, the absolutely singular is like certain sorts of mathematical limits: it can be approached, but never made present. For this reason, it should not surprise us that Derrida never adequately thematizes precisely what this absolutely singular is (though he names it variously; the most consistent name for it, especially in the later works, is ‘other’). This is why the author prefers to speak here, as we have said, of patterns or circuits of argument. There is something in the way that Derrida writes and argues that reveals what cannot be explicitly discussed in his texts: a certain double movement, both towards the subject and, through discourse, towards the referent or the other. The relation with the referent, then, is not suspended, even if its naive possibility is called into question. Rather, out of the structure of repeatability (discussed in the previous chapters) the possibility of relation emerges (this will be discussed further in chapter 4). This relation to the ‘absolutely singular’ arises from the attempted negotiation with the excess, here related explicitly with the positive infinite (hence reinvoking the other Derridean syntax discussed in chapter 1, the paradoxes of infinity). Though actual relation to the positive infinite is always interrupted (I can never experience the infinite as infinite), through these attempts at relation, through a process of approximation, the singular emerges, which functions like the ‘strange attractors’ mentioned earlier: it attracts, but remains out of reach (147).

The next chapter discusses how, through his use of the structure “pas sans pas,” Derrida is able to highlight both movements of our attempted relation to the excess of the positive infinite: we are attracted to it, even as we are never able to reach it; it shows itself to us, even as it hides its full infinity from us. The “pas sans pas” structure is able to trade on an ambiguity in the French word pas, which means both ‘not’ or negation, and ‘step.’ Derrida’s syntax, Hobson argues, enacts two forms of negation (first
discussed by G.H. von Wright in 1959) to show both that we never reach the infinite, but also that this not-reaching can be a step towards it. von Wright distinguishes between a weak negation, to which the principle of excluded middle applies, and a strong negation, “where it cannot be truthfully said that the subject either has the predicate or not” (151). By employing phrases and lexemes that trade on this distinction in negation, Derrida is able to suggest that the pharmakon, for example, must be either remedy or poison (weak negation), and yet is neither (strong negation). The resulting paradox does not leave the argument stranded, but rather enables it to move on in another register (153). This movement is expressly anti-Hegelian because there is not subsumption of one side of the disjunct in the other. Rather, by negating the very disjunct, the argument requires a certain “halting gait” that establishes an intellectual heritage (170), while also creating, by its movement, the very trajectory of the argument. What we get, then, is a development of a halting, stilted argument that operates on a pre-dialectical level, from a place before disjuncts apply (before A or not-A can either apply or not apply). This return to a pre-dialectical level is in-line with Husserl’s Rückfrage, return inquiry or questioning back (cf. Husserl 1970 and Derrida 1978). The pre-dialectical level, before disjuncts apply, hearkens back, in its function in Derrida’s argumentation, to the excess upstream from distinctions discussed in chapter two, and the singularities of chapter three. The mode of argumentation put in play by the structure of the “pas sans pas,” then, repeats the two-fold relation of negotiation and interruption, and the “strange attractors”: we are drawn toward something, but we are halted before we can get there; we arrive in paradoxes, but the disjuncts that made this paradox are themselves struck down, and hence we can move on from the paradox.

This movement on from the paradox, then, enables us to move forward. Chapter five discusses this moving forward, showing how the negation of the paradox leaves us open to make connections. Again, Hobson will show how this happens in Derrida’s argumentation rather than how Derrida thematizes this movement in what he says. If the argument so far has seemed to be somewhat discontinuous at times, this is intentional: for Hobson, what a careful analysis of Derrida’s style and mode of argumentation reveals is a certain similarity or proximity which allows for discontinuity. Indeed, it is because of this sense of proximity and discontinuity that the new is able to emerge in Derrida (190). This, then, seems to return us, if I can make explicit a point only alluded to in Hobson’s text, to the syntaxes of chapter one: it is because of the proximity – and the discontinuity – between historical meanings of key philosophical terms, for example, that we can move forward to something new in philosophy. This explains the complex relationship between empirical and transcendental, as well as the necessity of Derrida’s philosophical work occurring in relation to the history of philosophy. The complex relationship to history, then, and to other texts via this mode of proximity and discontinuity, points to a new conception of Derridean rigor suggested by Hobson: rigor is necessarily tied to connection, to intertextuality, to coherence. This cannot predate our actual work of philosophizing, but is “an effect of writing [that is] constructed as things go along, through a placing of what I have called lexemes; or through a repetition of the micrologies [micro-logics], where there is a maximization of the points of contact between the closely similar but not exactly similar circuits” of argumentation (193). These similar, but not identical, structures of argumentation, syntax, and lexemes enable a modular construction of connection to other texts, a connection that is not accidental or secondary, but is part of the very movement of philosophizing, of doing anything ‘new’ in philosophy, of moving toward transcendentals. All of this implies – and in my opinion quite accurately – that Derrida is no enemy of rigor. In fact, quite the opposite – Derrida’s thought is very rigorous, but with what is perhaps a new conception of rigor, one tied to what I have characterized as the ‘modular construction of connection to other texts,’ where texts would refer to other texts in the history of philosophy, but also to other of his own texts. What we are
left with, then, is a refocusing of philosophical rigor onto the question of opening out to connection. As Hobson writes, in what functions as a summary of at least the last two chapters of the book: “Derrida constructs effects of language which frequently allow something which acts as a negative to work under what is said. Yet the effect is not straight contradiction, but rather of the slight offbeat sense, which is not said but not left in silence either . . . What one has is a pattern of thought whose recognition yields a new idea which is not yet thematized – an opening of lines, as the subtitle of the book suggests” (230).

This idea of rigor begins to shine light on the third level of Hobson’s book. As has already been suggested, Hobson’s book, in addition to its other virtues, also seeks to be something of a Derridean apologetics to philosophers working in the so-called ‘analytic’ tradition. Proving its rigor is necessary to combat claims that Derrida is an enemy of reason, sensible discussion, and the basic values of philosophy and of the university itself, as Brian Hebblethwaite suggested when Cambridge University sought to offer Derrida a doctorate honoris causa in 1992 (Hebblethwaite, et al. 1992). Part of the objection to Derrida was his supposed “contempt for argumentative rigour and clarity of expression” because “the major preoccupation and effect of his voluminous work has been to deny and to dissolve those standards of evidence and argument on which all academic disciplines are based” (Allen et al. 1992: 687; cf. also the discussion of this in Smith 2005). Unfortunately, this view of Derrida’s work was widely (though not unanimously) accepted among many Anglo-American philosophers at the time. In order to make Derrida palatable to members of this philosophical tradition, it is first necessary to disavow them of this unwarranted presupposition; hence, it would seem, Hobson’s focus on establishing rigor in Derrida’s work.

Having thereby established that he is rigorous, it remains for Hobson to show that Derrida is interesting, and is philosophically valuable. To do this, Hobson seems to go out of her way to tie Derrida’s work to related work in the fields of Anglo-American philosophy, mathematics, and even science (as the discussion of ‘strange attractors’ has already noted). For example, Derrida’s work on transcendentalists and history is associated with the work of Dummett and Wittgenstein (40 ff.), the discussions of infinity are related to Cantorian mathematics (52 ff.), the discussion of singularity is related to Dummett and McTaggart’s work on time (115-120) and Kripke’s work on rigid designation (125 ff.), and the roots of Derrida’s conception of undecidability are tied to the ‘Decision problem’ of investigations into the foundations of mathematics by Church and others in the late 1920's and early 1930's (54). These are but a few examples – in every chapter, Hobson relates some of the main tenets of her arguments about Derrida to analytic philosophers. This is an admirable project: I am convinced that there are similarities in object of study and in conclusions between Derrida and many different strands of analytic philosophy (for one example, cf. Wheeler III, 2000). Derrida himself has claimed to be an analytic philosopher (Derrida et al. 2000: 381), and has regretted that he had not paid more attention to its textual tradition. I think that future inquiry into the overlap between these two areas of philosophy could be particularly fruitful, and I hope this field of inquiry will continue to expand and develop. How well Hobson’s book works as a sort of Derridean apologetics in order to justify such a field of inquiry is difficult for me to determine. However, that the field is opening up at all seems to suggest that Hobson’s goals in this area (which are never explicitly stated in the book, but seem to come through clearly in a study of her own style and mode of argumentation) were adequately met.

Hobson’s desire to make Derrida palatable to analytic philosophy seems to have driven, at least in part, her desire to examine Derrida’s style and mode of argumentation, which in turn establishes certain things not thematized in Derrida’s texts. By paying careful attention to Derrida’s syntax, lexemes, and circuits
of argumentation, Hobson shows fundamental similarities in Derrida’s corpus. Rather than a ‘late’ and an
‘early’ Derrida, Hobson shows a rigorous continuity throughout Derrida’s work. This is immensely
helpful in debates between Nietzschean and Levinasian readings of Derrida (Dooley and Kavanagh
provide an introduction to this debate in Dooley and Kavanagh 2007). The picture of Derrida that
emerges from Hobson’s careful analysis of the style and mode of his argumentation suggests that
Derrida’s early works on Husserl and literary theory contain fundamental similarities to the later, more
political works. The syntax of the infinite that Hobson brings to light in chapter one, and then weaves
throughout the rest of the text, is one example of this. By showing the beginning of this theme in
Husserl’s account of The Origin of Geometry, Hobson’s work suggests that the later discussions of the
infinite other are not only continuous with the early discussions, but indeed answer problems raised by
the early encounters with Husserl (such as the relationship between positive and negative accounts of
infinity).

Allow me, then, to attempt to distill from Hobson’s account of Derrida’s style and mode of
argumentation an elaboration of Derrida’s philosophy. I take full responsibility for this attempt, as it is a
work of (hopefully productive) interpretation and commentary on Hobson’s text. The syntax of Derrida’s
argument, as much as the explicit content, reveals that philosophical transcendentals – that which, in
philosophy, can exceed or be more than just the empirical – necessarily have an historical/empirical
provenance because they are a type of idealized repetition: the same thing (act, idea, etc.) can occur at
different times, to different people, in different mental acts, and yet remain, for all this difference, in
some way the same thing. However, this idea of repetition, even ideal repetition, assumes a context out
of which repeatable acts occur, and a structure or possibility of repetition in the first place. This entails,
as Derrida shows multiple times, that what makes ideal repetition possible is the same thing as that which
makes non-ideal repetition (that is, ‘mere’ repetition) possible. In other words, the conditions of
possibility for any ideal repetition, any eidos, is at the same time the condition that makes a pure eidos or
pure ideal repetition impossible. Does this entail, therefore, that we can never get anything like a ‘pure’
transcendental? If this means, can we ever get access to an ahistorical truth in some ahistorical fashion,
the answer seems to be no – at the very least, our access to it is always historical, as we are always
historical. Also, if the eidos itself is a repetition, even an ideal repetition, then it must be submitted to the
same conditions (including historical conditions) of any repetition whatsoever. Hence, there must be
some historical/empirical conditions to any repetition, even an ideal repetition. If, however, the question
regarding our access to transcendents meant to ask whether there is anything that exists outside of
historical context, the answer to this would seem to be yes – something (though it is not a ‘thing’ in the
banal sense of that word) exists that is not merely historical, even if our access to it and its manifestation
to us is always historical. These ahistorical items (one must be very careful in how one understands
‘ahistorical’ here) are referred to under the rubric of the actual or positive infinite and function like an
ideal limit in some mathematical theories: it can be approached, but never made fully present. Hence, our
knowledge of, or relation to, the positive infinite is double: on one hand, we always try to approximate it
as best we can, by negotiating its historical manifestations; on the other hand, these negotiations are
always interrupted by the fact that, as infinite, it can never be accessed as it is by finite creatures such as
ourselves. Derrida consistently uses the negative as an undercurrent to keep intact this pattern of
negotiated but always interrupted relation. But the purpose of the negative is not to emphasize what we
cannot do, but to open us to ambiguity and the multiplicity of words, and this not for the sake of
obfuscation, but for the sake of opening our eyes to the trembling of the finite caused by the relation to
the infinite. The multiplicity of Derridean lexemes, for example, is to help us see that we are after the
infinite, approaching the infinite. The negative infinity, then, of our inability to understand, meets up
with the positive infinite that is beyond (but appears within) the historical. Our negotiations with historical manifestations of this infinite are always also interrupted by this infinity, with a (non-Hegelian) negation that introduces a notion of ‘opening’ into philosophical rigor: Derridean rigor not only connects his ideas through various texts, contexts, and modes of inquiry, it also opens a text up to other interpretations, other meanings – and ultimately, to the infinite itself, both in its negative guise, by our inability to halt the play of references and meanings, and in its positive guise, by reference to ‘undeconstructibles,’ like Justice, which are always different from their historical, and hence deconstructible, manifestations and modes of appearing, like the law. It is the job of the deconstructionist, then, to try to revive the promise of the undeconstructibles by revamping the deconstructibles, to try as best we can to let the manifestations of the positive infinite be as like that infinite as possible: to revive Justice by reworking the law to make the law as Just as possible. In a more traditionally academic sense, the job of the deconstructionist-cum-philosopher is not to look for contradictions inherent in the text in the name of obfuscation and ambiguity, but to look for those moments in texts where the infinite, the ahistorical, conditions key themes of that text, and trace out how the infinity of the conditioning factor unsettles the text, showing multiple replications and entailing paradoxes, not to shut down inquiry, but to open it up to other texts, and to the infinite which conditions it.

From this picture of Derrida that, I argue, emerges from Hobson’s work, we can see a fundamental similarity between the earlier, more ‘academic’ work of Derrida, and the later, more ‘political’ writings. There is no ethical or political turn – there is only patterns of argumentation, and the modular construction of connections in a newfound sense of Derridean rigor. This is, perhaps, the most important contribution of Hobson’s book to Derrida scholarship, though it is definitely not the only one. The book does indeed ‘open lines’ of communication and connection to countless directions of philosophy. It also shows, within Derrida’s thought, a certain similarity, which also allows for some discontinuity.

If I have in some way exceeded Hobson’s explicit tasks for her text, this is to further open her text to other connections. It is what this text promises in terms of ‘opening’ Derrida (to himself, to Analytic philosophy, etc.) that is perhaps its most valuable contribution of all.

Neal DeRoo
Boston College

Works Cited


