

On Deconstruction and Education in a Post-Truth World

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In the context of the presidential election in the United States and the EU referendum in the UK, Oxford showed the term ‘post-truth’ gaining immense popularity, especially in conjunction with ‘politics’ and ‘society’; by the end of 2016 Oxford Dictionaries declared it as the word of the year (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2018). Post-truth is an adjective which refers to ‘circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’, and even though the concept has been around for centuries, several philosophers have resorted to blaming postmodernism for our ‘post-truth’ politics.

A relatively mild accusation is put forward by A. C. Grayling who, in a BBC interview, identified postmodernism and relativism as the intellectual roots which are ‘lurking in the background’ of post-truth (Coughlan, 2017). A harsher accusation is made by Daniel Dennett, who maintained that people should begin to realise that philosophers are not as harmless as generally thought, and that philosophical notions (such as the ones espoused by postmodernists) can have serious consequences that can come true. He goes on to say:

I think what the postmodernists did was truly evil. They are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts. You’d have people going around saying: ‘Well, you’re part of that crowd who still believe in facts’ (Cadwaladr, 2017).

It may also be fit to note that such criticisms have not been levelled by philosophers, exclusively. In his piece “‘Preparing for the incalculable’: Deconstruction, Justice, and the Question of Education’ (2001), Biesta maintains that it is a widely held notion amongst educators and educational theorists such as Beyer and Listen (1992) and Hill et. al. (1999) that postmodern philosophy is untenable for the moral and political support required for the project of education. For these theorists, ‘postmodernism threatens to cripple the very concept of the political in the human and social sciences’ (McLaren and Lankshear, 1994, 392). One of the central targets of this debate has

been Jacques Derrida and his philosophy of deconstruction. Deconstruction has often been accused of being a critical analysis which destroys everything in its path, with many arguing that it has very dangerous nihilistic and hyper-relativistic implications (Ferry and Renaut 1990; Fleming 1996; Habermas 1987).

I claim that one of the best ways out of our social malaise is through education; as a proponent of postmodern philosophy I argue (against those who say otherwise) that not only does it make sense to use it as a thinking cap through which we can re-think education, but also to use this thought to help us better understand how we have ended up in our post-truth world, and consequently, how to go forward. In this paper, to acquaint the reader with the philosopher and 'his' philosophy, I shall begin by putting forward an account of one of Derrida's most seminal texts, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences' (1967), which is, famously, his formal critique on structuralism and western metaphysics. I will then go on to comment on the relationship between deconstruction and truth in order to provide context to the next section of the paper, in which I will be arguing how a deconstructivist perspective tackles important and recurring topics in education such as justice and responsibility, amongst others, to show its relevance to education. There are, of course, a plethora of other channels and methods to be explored if we are to call ourselves serious about doing away with the problems resulting from our post-truth world. My argument is simply that a deconstructivist perspective to education can act as a tool which may allow us to move a step away from our post-truth world, a step in the right direction

The Myth and the Origin

Jacques Derrida presented his paper, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences', at the Johns Hopkins International Colloquium in October 1966, which was an international seminar on structuralism. Ironically, Derrida's lecture subverted the certainties of structuralism by questioning the very concept of structure. In his work, he effectively identifies flaws in western logocentrism: from ancient Greek philosophy up to structuralism. Derrida begins his work by referring to the history of the concept of structure and to an 'event' in this history which is 'loaded with meaning'. The notion of 'event' in the history of the structurality of structure is how it had always already been at work and neutralised due to a fixed origin, which he argues had been

spontaneously attributed. The aim of having a fixed point, a centre to the structure, is to limit what Derrida calls the free play of the structure. He goes on to argue that it has been 'forbidden' for elements at the centre to be substituted; but this does not mean that the substitution of the centre was/is impossible, but rather, that it has been prohibited from changing (352). Play, therefore, refers to that which resists the organization of the structure.

Derrida points out that the centre of the structure is both inside the structure, as well as independent from it, in order to control it. He thus refutes the law of identity by claiming that 'the centre is not the centre' (1978, 352). Derrida analyses the history of western philosophy to maintain this. But what types of centres existed? Derrida names a few: essence, transcendentality, consciousness, God, Man, and so on. It should be noted that for every centred concept which existed, by default, there were concepts which were marginalized, thus creating a hierarchy of binary oppositions. The 'event' is, therefore, a (re)thinking of structure, which is simultaneously a rupture as well as a repetition. This happened with the linguistic turn as language burst into the scene and replaced the centre with discourse. Instead of a structure of concepts, there was a collection of signs, that is, language. The word became intrinsically intertwined with concept which gave rise to a 'play of signification'. Words, that is, signs, could possess meaning within an infinite play (354). Derrida explains that even his greatest influences have denounced metaphysics whilst relying on it: Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics, the Freudian critique of self-presence/consciousness and Heidegger's destruction of metaphysics and of the determination of Being as presence. He maintains that this pattern of thought can even be found within the human sciences, whose 'critique of ethnocentrism' runs parallel to the destruction of the history of metaphysics (345–355). All of Western thought, according to Derrida, formed pairs of binary oppositions in which one member of the pair is privileged, thus freezing the play of the system, whilst marginalising the other member of the pair.

Derrida goes on to analyse Claude Levi-Strauss' mythological studies and unearths the weaknesses of the epistemological quest for the unity of a structure. Structuralism, as Derrida maintains, has become a critique of itself. In his work, *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964, 1996), Levi-Strauss privileges the Bororo myth, a 'reference myth' which he places at the centre of the structure of his mythology. It is

not the analysis of the myths as such that is important, but the methodology of analysis, that is, the basic principles of a structural approach to the myths and mythology in general. The idea, basically, is that myths cannot be understood in isolation, but as parts of a system. Derrida, however, questions why this myth is privileged over other myths and surmises that this myth was not preferred by Strauss because it stands out from other myths, but because it holds an irregular position within a group of myths. In this case, there exists no valid reason for choosing one centre over another because any choice that is made will ultimately be arbitrary (357–360). Furthermore, Derrida also shows how the myth itself is decentralised in terms of its origin, which means that it cannot have a pure centre, nor can it be a centre in and of itself. In this sense, structural discourse on myths must itself be *mythomorphic* (363). What Levi-Strauss aims to do in his work is to gauge the underlying structure of the myth, in this case, the ‘grammar’, in order to understand the language that is the myth. In this sense, a primary code would provide substance, that is, the substance of language, while the secondary code are the myths and the tertiary code (that of critical discourse) allows for the translatability of myths. But this meant that the discourse in Levi-Strauss’ work is itself a myth, the myth of mythology. And as long as myths are anonymous, so too is this discourse, the function of which ‘makes the philosophical or epistemological requirement of a centre appear as mythological, that is to say, a historical illusion’ (Derrida 1978, 363).

From these arguments Derrida concludes that there exist two kinds of interpretation. One is nostalgic for a sign which is free from free-play, one which ‘dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play’ (369). The other kind of interpretation is ‘no longer a turn toward the origin, affirms man and tried to pass beyond Man and Humanism’ (369). Though it may seem like Derrida urges us to choose the latter form of interpretation, that is, the one which affirms the free-play of meaning, he maintains that one cannot simply choose between two interpretations of interpretation. This is because, according to him, there exists no authoritative centre which validates our choice. The consequences which stem from this are impossible to predict; however, we must strive to not be among those who ‘turn their eyes away when faced by as yet an unnameable which is proclaiming itself’ (370). Due to the scope and limitations of this paper, I shall not be delving deeper into Derrida’s analysis

of Levi-Strauss' work. However, I believe that this section provides the reader with the brief understanding required to move on to the next sections of the paper.

Between Text and Truth

The word for 'text' in Latin is *texere*, which stands for the verb, 'to weave' and is cognate with *techne* in Greek (art or craft). The word 'text' still holds that meaning. Evidently, the use of 'text' to describe a passage or book is possible by way of referring to the action of weaving. This is arguably because it is appropriate to think about the way in which a text or book is 'put together', by how writing is woven into a text by the fabric of language. But what about the 'true' reading of the text? In a post-truth society, should the educator's job be to 'find' Truth? I argue not.

The text, as it has been thought of throughout history, is a vehicle for meaning. The word 'text' can have a twofold sense. In the *narrow sense*, one can consider the text as Ricoeur does, as 'discourse as writing' (1975, 66). This is the most popular view of text: it is the nature of the text to become discourse, which raises fundamental hermeneutical questions regarding the text. In the *broad sense*, we can think about the text as referring to everything which offers itself to interpretation (Byrne, 1990). But language opposes the text to all the things it represents, that is, the World, God, Consciousness, the Real and so on. So, is the best kind of text that one which gives accurate accounts of such things?

Texts do not convey the 'right' or 'true' impression, which is misleading. There is, therefore, a rhetorical fortification between the 'truth' and the text. History has taught us that the text is on the outside, and the 'truth' of the text is hidden away, somewhere on the inside. But according to the same logic, the 'truth' of the text is hidden on the inside because it lies outside the text, far from being anywhere close to the text. One is therefore faced with a history-laden prejudice, bound by the empirical (text) and the transcendental (truth) (Derrida, 1972, 2016).

Deconstruction, therefore, deals with the text in a way that prompts questions about the limits and borders of the text. The meaning of a text is defined by its borders, by opposing it to other concepts, that is, definition through difference. So deconstruction asks: 'what are the borders, and why do they exist?' Indeed, this is precisely what Derrida does in his work, 'Living on/Borderlines' (1979). It may,

therefore, be argued that one fails to read text if they make rash decisions or generalisations about what the text is about or what it means. We must abandon our logocentric yearning for the presence of meaning and instead be patient enough to read the text slowly and carefully. This is what Kafka maintains in one of his great aphorisms: 'All human errors are impatience, a premature breaking-off of methodical procedure, an apparent fencing in of what is apparently at issue' (Kafka, 1994, 3).

Like all of Derrida's terms, deconstruction occupies two contradictory meanings: destruction/(re)construction. As has been shown in the previous section of this paper, the projects of enlightenment metaphysics—namely the epistemological, ethical, aesthetic, and other institutions and structures—need to be de-sedimented in order to expose their underlying assumptions and contradictory logic. But deconstruction must also (re)construct. This (re)construction, however, cannot erect 'ideal' or 'pure' structures. In this sense, deconstruction is the undoing, and desedimenting of structures, which in a certain sense is more historical than the structuralist movement it called into question (Derrida, 1976, 2016, lxxviii). Rather than destroying structure, it is necessary to understand how the 'ensemble' was constituted and to reconstruct it to this end. Deconstruction, therefore, names the conditions according to which institutions are constituted in order to understand the context within which they were built. For Derrida, this desedimenting and decentring, particularly of the logos, is an affirmation. As he maintains in 'Ellipsis': 'Why would one mourn for the centre? Is not the centre, the absence of play and difference, another name for death?' (1978, 297).

It is also at the end of 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' (1978) that Derrida voices his concern about an 'affirmation [that] determines the noncentre otherwise than as loss of the centre' (292). Deconstruction, then, does not set out to break down institutions in order to erect others in its place. Rather, it persistently opens up institutions to their own alterity which makes the structure within the institution change and adapt. In this sense of alterity, a non-concept can act against the sedimenting of dogmatic thought. As I attempt to bring deconstruction to the fore of educational discourse, I wish to note that what deconstruction has to offer is not a set of formulas, rules or regulations which should be applied to education, but rather a perspective, a rethinking of education, whilst

analysing the hidden and underlying assumptions in the ethical, the political or the juridical. Cahen (2001) maintains that if one acknowledges the radically affirmative nature of deconstruction, then, the question of deconstruction is also the question of education.

On Deconstruction and its Others

In this section, I will be focusing on the relationship between deconstruction and the topics of religion, the other, racism and justice in the context of education. There are, of course, a plethora of others that can be discussed; but I have specifically chosen these topics because I believe that post-truth propaganda seeks to interfere with one's moral thinking and, as such, one should not only know how to refute fake news and discern whether sources are reliable, but also attempt to remedy the damage that has been made.

Derrida's text helps us tackle recurring topics in education that are still very relevant today—topics which have been misconstrued through post-truth politics. One of these is religion. Whether it is Allah, Yahweh or Christ, God can never be completely represented by imperfect human beings. We live in an age in which a multitude of conflicts are being shaped by people who claim that God is on their side. From a Derridean perspective, it may be argued that, as the world's main religions claim to be built upon unshakeable foundations, they do not always provide us with clear meaning and certainty (Taylor, 2004). Following this argument, it may be said that such religious traditions cast further doubt, and call security and certainty into question. As we become more connected, not only are conservatism and religious fundamentalism around the world becoming more manifest, but also the number of misconceptions about what religion does and for what it stands. It is therefore important to educate our students about what religion is and how it means, but also how to criticise and question it. It is important to note that questioning one's beliefs does not mean abandoning them. Rather, it means becoming more thorough and rigorous in one's beliefs.

Furthermore, to privilege one religion and to teach one, exclusively, would mean to marginalise all others. I am not saying that schools of faith should not teach their religion of practice in favour of others, but rather that one should be taught other religions alongside the main religion of practice. In this sense, students get a more

well-rounded and holistic perspective of what religion is as a concept. This may also help clear up several misconceptions and inconsistent or fallacious arguments brought about by post-truth propaganda. Furthermore, as our classes become increasingly multicultural, there is a growing demand for such a practice. It is, therefore, our responsibility to create classrooms in which we continuously seek to create an environment within which students can respect each *other*, even if they do not agree with them.

In this sense, respect for the other means to respect the other in their otherness. Encountering the other opens us to new experiences and perspectives about the world and, as such, we must always strive to be hospitable towards the other. Integration does not equal assimilation, so that, when guest meets host, it is important that neither are totalized, and neither lose their identity. In this sense, it is imperative for us to safeguard both identities, whilst simultaneously creating a space within which the other and I can integrate and develop a common culture. In the context of globalization, one of the responsibilities of a deconstructivist educator is to recognise that they (as well as the curriculum) should go beyond Eurocentrism. As Egea-Kuhene maintains, 'While upholding the memory of a philosophical heritage essentially Euro-Christian (Greek, Roman, Jewish, Christian and Islamic, or Mediterranean/Central European, or Greco-Roman-Arab/Germanic), it is necessary to both recognise its origins, and go beyond its limits' (2004, 27). It is important to note that this should not be done for the sake of difference, but for the appreciation and understanding of perspectives which we may, perhaps inadvertently, silenced.

Another recurring theme in education, and certainly one that has been magnified due to fake news, is racism. When anti-racism is taught, it must never be the end of teaching for anti-racism. It cannot be codified into a piece of the curriculum as it is taught. Anti-racism must, therefore, become the starting point for a pedagogical investigation into racism. So, if a student has been educated to be against racism, they must never think that there exists some identifiable thing that racism is (Bingham, 2008). This is not to say that the student should not identify it as a concept, but rather, that they understand that the binary oppositions of black and white are nothing more than a social construction. There exists no foundation for privileging one over the other, for if it were the case, how white would one have to be, in order to be white? And

consequently, how black must one have to be, in order to be classified as black? This is just the beginning. Bingham asserts that teaching in this deconstructive sense must include education about combating injustice. If my student ‘learns’ to combat racism, then they must commit themselves to the long-term project of combating racism (30). So, just as the educator must offer their interpretation of racism, so too must the pupils learn to make interpretations about what racism is. What Derrida maintains about critical pedagogy is that there exists no pure critical pedagogy unless the student is aware that they are embroiled within a society which needs interpretation. As Bingham writes:

I must say to myself: ‘Alright, I have learned a classroom way, if not perhaps my teacher’s own idiosyncratic way, of fighting social power. Now, I have my own interpretations to make. From now on, I will put my own stamp on what social power may or may not be. Now, I must foster my own way of creating social change. For, I now know that there is no social power that is simply “there”, that can be pointed to in some non-obtrusive way. When I identify oppression in the future, I will have the responsibility of knowing that such an identification is my own interpretation’ (Bingham, 2008, 30).

My education as a rigorously-minded pupil must begin over and over. In other words, I must constantly re-assess my own values, interpretations and principles. My ‘education’ must not end after the professor delivers their lecture. My constant re-assessment must be ceaseless, for if it stops then I will be stagnant as I, by default, will end up holding on to (and privilege) a new centre. In a sense, this holds true for educators with regard to the way they teach their subjects. The university system often calls upon educators to act as if they were beginners—as Bingham argues, educational practice at all levels has a ‘certain mandate of erasure’ (2008, 19). In this sense, one may think of the philosophy professor who must teach Platonic philosophy to new students of philosophy or the physics teacher who must teach first-year physics as though quantum mechanics did not exist. This of course also goes for the way one teaches. For a professor to be a better teacher, they must constantly review the way they teach. This does not necessarily mean that they will understand the material any

better. It means that hopefully, with time they will convey what they teach in better ways for the benefit of their students.

In this context, one can also discuss the relationship between deconstruction and justice in educational discourse. Justice, as Derrida (1992) maintains, is always directed towards the other, it is a relation to the other. Justice, however, cannot be spoken about *directly* by saying ‘this is just’, because to do so would mean to betray the concept. In this sense, declaring an action to be just dismisses the possibility for the other to voice whether justice has been rendered. If justice concerns itself with the other as other, in their otherness, then by definition we can neither totalize nor foresee, because if justice addresses itself to the very singularity of the other, then one is under the obligation to keep the possibility of the in-coming of the other open. It may therefore be argued that we can never really decide on what Justice *is* out of concern and consideration for the otherness of the other. More than ever, we are living in times when we are surrounded by different tongues and voices. It is in this sense that justice is denied if one does not address one’s self to every individual voice. As Derrida declares: ‘Deconstruction is, in itself, a positive response to an alterity which necessarily calls, summons or motivates it. Deconstruction is, therefore, a vocation — “a response to a call”’ (1984, 118).

In terms of justice, deconstruction is heavily concerned with the question of alterity, the question regarding the other, so the ethico-political horizon of deconstruction can be portrayed as a concern for the other (Biesta, 2001). For Derrida, we can further our understanding of the other through our encounter with the otherness of the other. This experience though is always a particular one and, in this regard, must not be generalised into a recognisable language of ethics. There is, however, a very tense dynamic at play between the experience of the other and the universality of language. In this regard, the relationship between the other and a universal language is a central theme in education. A tangible example of this relationship is put forward by Edgoose (2001). In his essay, *Just decide! Derrida and the Ethical Aporias of Education*, he describes a situation in which a difficult student in their most challenging class, who had not previously responded to the educator’s teaching, suddenly makes a lot of effort and progress in their assignments. The student’s grades, however, are not high enough to pass the module. Should the

educator offer the student a deal whereby the student would pass if they continued to show a significant amount of progress in their work? Would it be 'ethical' or 'just' to make this offer? Should the educator bend the rules, or should he or she stick to their grading rubric and not offer the deal? What would it mean to be a just educator?

The educator could turn to an educational ethics text for guidance, in which case he might conclude that an ethics of care might probably lead him to offer the deal and deontology might not, but which one is correct? The educator is caught between what policy dictates and the uniqueness of the situation. Nevertheless, one *has* to decide, 'but a just decision is impossible – this very mad impossibility makes justice possible... Justice comes, then, from the failure of fluency, from an ethical hesitation in which the said reveals its Saying' (2001, 129). As Kierkegaard knew well, between the universal and the particular, one must leap. Derrida's analysis of justice does not oppose the attention that one must give to the particular other, nor does it dismiss a necessity for the universal in the pursuit of justice. From a Derridean perspective, it may be argued that an educator is just if he or she constantly negotiates between his or her responsibility towards many others, and the need to be intelligible as an educator in a bureaucracy (130). The educator must negotiate between the curricular requirements set by their educational authorities, whilst simultaneously being the fair educator that the students, parents and colleagues expect him or her to be.

As Edgoose argues, such a negotiation exposes the educator beyond ethics in a traditional sense as deconstruction does not provide an ethical calculus which must be followed as a guide to justice. Neither justice-based ethical theories nor caring-based theories which concern the particular shall suffice. In this sense, Derrida highlights the unstable ways in which these approaches coexist in a *caring justice* (131). In a world which is dealing with the highest levels of displaced people since World War Two, today's classrooms are more diverse, and it is because of this that a deconstructivist perspective to education is important. Of course, this does not guarantee that educators will always make the right choice, or that they will always be just. It does, however, prohibit the educator from being complacent and simply doing as policy dictates. Furthermore, deconstructivist education highlights the importance of encountering the other, of being sensitive to the other's needs, and of constantly negotiating in terms of what counts as 'just' for each individual he or she encounters.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored how Derrida's 'concept' of deconstruction is at work in recurring topics in education such as religion, the other, racism and justice in order to argue for how such a perspective can help us move away from our post-truth problem. It has also been shown that, despite harsh criticism, deconstruction is neither nihilistic nor relativistic. Rather, it offers a playful strategy of interpretation that allows for the complexity and heterogeneity of reality, one which does not endorse rejection of truth but 'Truth'. Deconstruction does not guarantee that one will always 'do the right thing'. At the limits and heart of deconstruction lie hesitation and confusion, but it is the same hesitation and confusion which make us question our values and principles. It is therefore important that, in a post-truth world, educators are sensitive to the many others whom they are confronted with daily. I have argued that educators must go beyond teaching students about how to refute fake news by incorporating the encouragement of activism and critical analysis against the many misconceptions propagated by such news. In these tumultuous times, it is also imperative to recognise the insurmountable limitations and inherent contradictions within the norms that govern our actions. This recognition may, in turn, contribute to keeping one's norms open to constant questioning and assessment, as '[there] can be no ethical action without critical reflection' (Taylor, 2004).

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