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Beyond the Performative and the Constative

Martin Hägglund

Yale University

Michael Naas' new book *Miracle and Machine* is an important contribution to Derrida scholarship for a number of reasons. First, Naas sets out to do what no one else has previously done: to study a single text by Derrida (his seminal essay on religion, "Faith and Knowledge") on every level of its composition. Naas treats the philosophical argumentation, the rhetorical organization and the intertextual references, as well as the significance of syntax, syllables, and even the choice of font (!) in Derrida's essay. Second, this attention to detail is not a myopic, self-serving enterprise but rather opens a unique access to the way Derrida thinks and writes throughout his work. Through Naas' careful reconstruction of how "Faith and Knowledge" operates we learn a great deal not only about how Derrida writes; we also come to see on how many levels his texts demand to be read. Naas' impressive command of Derrida's entire oeuvre here allows him to make the relevant cross-connections, which confirm the status of "Faith and Knowledge" as one of Derrida's most exemplary texts. Third, *Miracle and Machine* is characterized by a stylistic verve and pedagogical clarity that belies the prejudice that writers on Derrida indulge in esoteric jargon and obscurantism. The text is elegantly written and engaging throughout and the appendix on Kant's philosophy of religion, for example, exhibits masterful pedagogical skills. Fourth, at a time when the composition of books is too often reduced to a compilation of articles, Naas has taken care to write *an actual book*, which displays a beautiful internal composition and a gradual development of the argument that no collection of essays could ever match. The way in which Naas interlaces his reading of Derrida's "Faith and Knowledge" with Don DeLillo's *Underworld* is here particularly remarkable. In four interludes, Naas illuminates the implications of Derrida's abstract arguments about the relation between religion and science, miracle and machine, faith and knowledge, by anchoring them in the concrete texture of DeLillo's novel and thereby also in the concrete world of post-Cold War United States. The

sensitivity that Naas here displays as a reader at the intersection of literature and philosophy makes one hope that one of his next projects is a book on DeLillo.

Now, in responding to this rich, important, and wide-ranging work, I want to focus on the question of the political significance of Derrida's thinking, interrogating in particular the link between Derrida's conception of faith and the apparent value he ascribes to the openness of the future. One of the most striking aspects of Derrida's late work is his insistence on a *universal* structure of experience that he describes in terms of *faith*. Specifically, Derrida argues that faith—taking in trust—is constitutive of experience in general. In order to do anything, we must have faith in the future and in those on whom we depend, since we cannot *know* what will happen or what others will do to us. Consequently, the faith that sustains us—the trust that allows us to act—is necessarily open to being deceived and the credit granted to the other open to being ruinous. Given that Derrida describes this experience in terms of a “messianicity” or “originary faith,” Naas perceptively notes that “it might look as if Derrida is sugar-coating an experience of the other that is anything but reassuring. Indeed it might appear as if he is willing to, we might say, ‘drop the F-bomb’ in order to appear more amenable to those of various religious faiths.”¹ Naas rightly goes on to contest such a reading, and yet his own account of faith in Derrida remains sugar-coated in certain ways. On the one hand, Naas is clear that faith and messianicity are general structures of experience that are at work whatever we do and whatever we believe. On the other hand, he often speaks of faith or messianicity as if it were an *alternative* to determinate forms of belief, as if we could promote a belief in messianicity *instead of* a belief in a determined messianism or a general faith *instead of* a faith in a determinate set of principles (whether secular or religious). Thus, for example, Naas invokes the “promise of a messianicity without messianism and of a universalizable culture of singularities that allows one to criticize or question every determined messianism and every nonuniversalizable culture, this promise of a universal rationality (linked always, as we have seen, to an elementary faith) that allows one to contest or ‘deconstruct’ all beliefs and all determinate notions of universality” (185). On Naas' account, then, it often seems as if Derrida is deconstructing something because it not “*universal enough*” (186), whereas deconstruction is on the side of a “universal rationality” (187) that

¹ Michael Naas, *Miracle and Machine: Jacques Derrida and the Two Sources of Religion, Science, and the Media* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 95. Subsequent page-references are given in parentheses in the text.

constitutes a “culture of singularities” that does not promote or project anything determined or limited but maintains itself in indeterminate and absolute openness. Yet Derrida’s argument (as Naas also knows) is precisely that there is no culture or rationality—or any type of position whatsoever—that can operate without exclusion and determination. The indeterminate openness of the future is not something that one can promote *against* the closure of determination; the indeterminate openness of the future is rather what makes the closure of determination necessary and unavoidable while compromising its integrity from within.

Derrida himself does not always follow through on the logic of the above argument, but that is all the more reason for distinguishing between two different arguments that often are conflated in commentary on Derrida’s work. It is one thing to say that the general structure of openness to the future that Derrida analyzes—under the heading of *khōra*, messianicity, and so on—is what opens every determinate ideal, identity, or community to critique by exposing them to what exceeds them. It is a quite different thing to say that determinate ideals, identities, or communities can and should be criticized *in the name of* the openness that exceeds them. Yet Naas seems to tacitly assume this latter premise. Thus, for example, he maintains that “it is the historical origins and nonuniversalizable aspects of every democracy, of every determinate democracy, we might say, that lend themselves to being criticized or ‘deconstructed’ *in the name of* the democracy to come” (186). This is certainly true on one level, but the fact that something has historical origins and “nonuniversalizable aspects” is not in itself a reason to criticize it. Are there not countless situations in which one may rather want to defend and seek to indemnify as much as possible the principles of a determinate democracy? And even if one criticizes a determinate democracy it is not “in the name” of absolute, indeterminate openness but in the name of certain other determinate principles that one wants to implement, defend, or inspire respect for. One may certainly argue that a democratic regime in general is more open than a totalitarian regime, but this truism does not yield the criterion that it is better to be *more* open rather than *less* open when it comes to particular political questions. Indeed, the question of political decision is never a question of being closed or open per se, but of which questions to close down and which ones to leave open.

It would thus be a mistake to assume that the structural openness that Derrida analyzes as a general condition can serve as a principle for political intervention. Again, Derrida himself occasionally commits this fallacy, but that is not a reason for repeating it. On the contrary, if we are to read Derrida with “the kind of close textual attention that Derrida always gave to the texts of

others”—as Naas rightly says we should (3)—we need to inquire into whether each step of his arguments work, rather than assume in advance that they are coherent. To illustrate this point, let me dwell briefly on Derrida’s notion of democracy to come and Naas’s treatment of it. Naas begins by recalling Derrida’s argument that democracy to come is like the *khōra* of the political. *Khōra* is one of Derrida’s names for the general spacing of time that is operative as a condition for whatever we do and whatever we believe. Indeed, in a phrase that Naas himself recalls, Derrida emphasizes that “‘*khōra s’en fout complètement*’—that is, *khōra* couldn’t care less, couldn’t give a damn” (180). If democracy to come is the *khōra* of the political, then, it means that it spells out the conditions for politics in general but doesn’t give a damn about specific political principles; it designates the autoimmune opening to the future that compromises the principles from within and opens them to transformation or destruction, for better or for worse. Yet Derrida will nevertheless go on to speak about democracy to come as if it had inherent, determinate principles. For example, Derrida claims that democracy to come “assumes secularism, that is, both the detachment of the political from the theocratic and the theological, thus entailing a certain secularism of the political, while at the same time, encompassing freedom of worship in a completely consistent, coherent way, and absolute religious freedom guaranteed by the State, on the condition, obviously, that the secular space of the political and the religious space are not confused.”² Derrida is here clearly defending a set of ideas about democracy that have a historical origin and nonuniversalizable aspects (for example, the secular division between political and religious space). According to Naas’ earlier statement, we can therefore criticize this notion of democracy in the name of democracy to come, although Derrida is here defending it in the name of democracy to come. My point is not that we should either defend or criticize it, but that whichever option we choose, it cannot be legitimized “in the name” of the indeterminate openness of democracy to come. If we defend Derrida’s vision of a secular democracy, it is not because we want to defend indeterminate openness (since there are clearly possibilities that Derrida wants to close down, first among them the “confusion” of political and religious space). Inversely, if we criticize Derrida’s vision, it is also not because we aspire toward indeterminate openness but because we want the relation in question to be negotiated differently.

² Mustapha Chérif, *Islam & the West: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, trans. Teresa L. Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 50; quoted in Naas, 188.

We can thereby return to the basic conceptual question that I raised at the outset concerning Naas' tendency to construe faith or messianicity as an alternative position rather than as a general condition. On a technical level, we can locate this problem in terms of Naas identifying the messianic with the performative. According to Naas, "the messianic belongs to the performative regimen of language, while all messianisms belong, in some sense, to the constative" (164). In contrast, Derrida explicitly aligns the messianic with a "nonperformative exposure" to what happens, which he distinguishes from the notion of an "imperative injunction (call or performative)."³ To be sure, Derrida also describes the unconditional in terms of a "call." Yet, what is "called" for by the unconditional is not something unconditional (e.g., unconditional love) but rather acts of engagement and performative commitments that are *conditional* responses to an unconditional exposure.

That performative acts are conditional does not mean that they are determined in advance but that they are dependent on a context that is essentially vulnerable to change. This unconditional exposure may always alter or undermine the meaning of the performative act and is therefore not reducible to it. Following Derrida's emphatic distinction, there is

on the one hand, a paradoxical experience of the performative of the promise (but also of the threat at the heart of the promise) that organizes every speech act, every other performative, and even every preverbal experience of the relation to the other; and, *on the other hand*, at the point of intersection with this threatening promise, the horizon of awaiting [*attente*] that informs our relationship to time—to the event, to that which happens [*ce qui arrive*], to the one who arrives [*l'arrivant*], and to the other. Involved this time, however, would be a waiting *without* waiting, a waiting whose horizon is, as it were, punctured by the event (which is waited for *without* being awaited); we would have to do with a waiting for an event, for someone or something that, in order to happen or 'arrive', must exceed and surprise every determinant anticipation.⁴

It is the latter structure of the event—"what comes about in an unforeseeable and singular manner"—that Derrida describes in terms of a nonperformative exposure.⁵ Derrida even provocatively emphasizes that the unconditional

³ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. M. Naas and P-A. Brault (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 91.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Marx & Sons," trans. G. M. Goshgarian, in *Ghostly Demarcations*, ed. M. Sprinker (London: Verso, 1999), 250–51.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Typewriter Ribbon," trans. P. Kamuf, in *Without Alibi*, ed. P. Kamuf (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002) 146.

exposure to the event “couldn’t care less about the performative.”⁶ The unconditional is thus the openness to the future that is not reducible to a performative commitment, since it is the condition for all performative acts, and it cannot be embraced as something good in itself, since it is the source of every chance *and* every threat. By the same token, the unconditional exposure to time is inseparable from (“calls for”) conditional, performative responses that seek to discriminate between the chance and the threat. As Derrida clearly underscores, the exposure to the event—an “exposure without horizon, and therefore an irreducible amalgamation of desire and anguish, affirmation and fear, promise and threat”—is “the condition of praxis, decision, action and responsibility.”⁷

What is at stake in the distinction between the conditional and the unconditional is therefore a *logical* (rather than ontological) distinction, which makes explicit what is implicit in reckoning with the temporality of everything to which we are committed. As Derrida emphasizes, it is *because* one is exposed to the incalculable that it is necessary to calculate, and it is *because* one is exposed to an undecidable future that it is necessary to make decisions. These conditional decisions are in turn unconditionally haunted by the relation to the undecidable. It is not only that I cannot calculate what others will do to me; I cannot finally calculate what my own decisions will do to me, since they bind me to a future that exceeds my intentions, and in this sense I am affected by my own decisions as by the decisions of an other. To insist on this condition is not to deny the responsibility for the future but to elucidate the inherent exigencies of such responsibility. The openness to the future is unconditional in the sense that one is necessarily open to the future, but it is not unconditional in the sense of an axiom that establishes that more openness is always better than less.

Thus, as Derrida himself often underlies, one cannot derive a political principle from the logic of deconstruction; the former requires a performative commitment that cannot be justified by or grounded in the latter. That I emphasize this point does not mean that I think deconstruction is a “pure description” or a value-free enterprise that does not engage in performative acts of commitment. What is at stake is rather to elucidate the *hyperpolitical* logic of deconstruction. For a hyperpolitical thinking, nothing (no set of values, no principle, no demand or political struggle) can be posited as good in itself. Rather, everything is liable to corruption and to appropriation for other ends, which also

⁶ Derrida, “Typewriter Ribbon,” 146.

⁷ Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” 249.

means that no instance can have an *a priori* immunity against interrogation and critique. Inversely, when Derrida forgets this and argues as if he can derive his political commitments from the logic of deconstruction, he in fact *depoliticizes* the question at hand. For example, Derrida seeks to justify his preference for Western democracy over Islamic terrorism on the basis of an opposition between “good” systems or actions that are open to the future and “bad” systems or actions that close down the future. In place of a political argument, Derrida thus ultimately appeals to a metaphysical difference that decides in favor of his preference (Derrida even claims, in a statement that could not be more implausible given the logic of deconstruction, that the actions of Islamic terrorism “*have no future*”).⁸ Such an opposition, however, is untenable given the logic of deconstruction. The openness to the future is unconditional in the sense that *every* system or action necessarily is open to the future, but it is not unconditional in the sense of a normative ideal. The mistake is to assume that one can derive a normative affirmation of the future from the unconditional “yes” to the future that Derrida analyzes as inherent in every system or action.

The relation between performative commitment and nonperformative exposure should thus be understood as *inseparable yet distinguishable*, or “heterogeneous and indissociable,” to use a phrase that Derrida often employs. On the one hand, there is no unconditional and nonperformative “exposure” without a conditional being who is engaged in performative acts of commitment, just as there is no undecidability without an engagement in the process of making decisions. On the other hand, while one cannot occur without the other, one can nevertheless make a logical distinction between the two. This logical distinction is what makes it possible to endorse Derrida’s analysis of the to-come structure, without necessarily endorsing all the commitments he makes in its name.

Derrida himself makes this clear when he distinguishes his performative commitment to “democracy to come” from the “nonperformative exposure to what comes” that exceeds it from within.⁹ As we have seen, it is this distinction between performative commitment and nonperformative exposure that Naas does not take into account. By limiting himself to the distinction between the constative and the performative, Naas overlooks that Derrida in fact makes a tripartite distinction. Neither the constative nor the performative can be

⁸ See Jacques Derrida, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” trans. M. Naas and P.-A. Brault, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, ed. G. Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 113.

⁹ Derrida, *Rogues*, 91.

aligned with the to-come structure. The latter designates a nonperformative exposure that no performative finally can master. This distinction is no mere technical matter, but what allows one to *politicize* Derrida's own commitments. Because any performative commitment (for example, one undertaken "in the name" of democracy to come) is exceeded from within by a nonperformative exposure, it is never simply given as legitimate but can always be interrogated with regard to its presuppositions and its context.

Again, to insist on the latter point is not to advocate "neutrality" with regard to matters of political decision; it is rather to elucidate the hyperpolitical logic of deconstruction. The logic of the hyperpolitical does not appeal to something "above" politics. On the contrary, it seeks to demonstrate that no value has an inherent value but must remain open to contestation and that no act or decision can be immune from critique. Accordingly, it is precisely by *not* providing an ethical or political principle that deconstruction politicizes our actions and insists on a responsibility from which one cannot be absolved.