

**Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction and the Failings and Fallacies of
Practical Postmodernism in Multiculturalism**

An IB Extended Essay in: Philosophy

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Abstract:

In this paper, the intent is to show the failings of postmodern multiculturalism through a philosophical analysis of its invalidity. To do this, the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, deconstruction, is used to expose the tensions and contradictions in the concept of postmodern multiculturalism as well as some of the arguments of its proponents. The investigation begins with a discussion of the terms of deconstruction, so as to ground the reader in its terminology and theory, including *différance*, logocentrism, undecidables, and binary opposition, which will be used throughout the paper. Following this a definition of multiculturalism is given, along with a demonstration of how it and postmodernism are linked through Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. With the links established, a deconstruction of the idea of multiculturalism reveals a tension: the desire to unify and yet differentiate. The ideas of Jacques Derrida put forward in the interview *A Madness' Must Watch Over Thinking*, and *On Cosmopolitanism* are used to both highlight the problems in a multicultural community as well as his theoretical solution. In the concluding analysis, philosopher Satya Mohanty's reflections are used to firmly refute Lyotard's ideas of scientific/narrative cultures, and the thoughts of cultural anthropologist Talal Asad's are cited to describe the traditional problems in cross-cultural understanding, as well as the action one must take to amend them. In the conclusion, a solution is proposed in the form of an 'evolutionary culture,' which would avoid the issues caused by a static or dogmatic one. The final words are devoted to reminding one of the relevance of this issue, as well as the impasse which holds society today: do we want to live in a state with no overreaching law or formal governance, or do we want to tread on at least one group's rights?

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In today's world we are plagued with questions about culture and integration. It seems that there can be no conclusive statement, idea, or plan as to what we should do to establish a just and free society for all peoples. Oblivious to this problem, I was reading through the Ottawa Citizen one day and I came upon an editorial denouncing current multiculturalism, claiming its problems lay in the postmodern movement. The very idea that multiculturalism, one of our society's most sacred virtues, could be at fault seemed both heretical and inconceivable, indeed I owe my existence to the benefits of multiculturalism, the fusion of Japanese and Canadian cultures—surely his claims deserved further investigation. However, the further I read, the more disconcerting the situation seemed—and the more problematic postmodernism became.

Founded in the beliefs of relativism and hermeneutics, postmodernism brought many heavy questions to bear on modern practices such as the following: how can we create a government or society when each culture cannot truly understand the other due to historio-sociological differences? The answer did not seem clear; indeed, any conceivable response could be challenged on the basis that the answer had cultural bias.

At the same time as this realization was coming into play, multiculturalism was being pushed forward with increasing resolve. It is understandable then how the two ideas cross-fertilized and became intertwined in each other's arguments. Now, after decades of struggle, multiculturalism has become the sociological norm in many developed nations. However, as much as we are glad to have won battles for human and cultural rights, new problems are arising. Increasing tribalism is fracturing communities along the cultural lines, free speech is becoming the right to hate, and increasing xenophobia is arising

within some multicultural nations. It would seem as if the multicultural dreams are dying; but why? The answer appears to lie in postmodernism; its relativistic outlook on philosophy has won much autonomy for people but at the cost of granting absolution to radicals and hatemongers. Under the justification of hermeneutic-relativism, no opinion is safe from refutation, nor morally can we stop and condemn another's behavior; but how can one challenge this relativistic machine? The answer in part lies with one of the children of postmodernism, post-structuralist Jacques Derrida's deconstruction.

In the following paper, the terms and trends of deconstruction will be discussed, so as to ground ourselves in, at least, the basics of this complex critical theory, the main currents in the deconstructive 'process' relevant to this study being: *différance*, binary opposition, signifier/signified, undecidables, and logocentrism. Following the definition of terms, a deconstructive critique of some postmodern multicultural theorists will be included. Finally an analysis of these theorists and more general ideas will be discussed, using contemporary philosophical theories and by the end of this paper, it will be clear why postmodernism cannot be applied to real world practices and what system of thought may preserve the classic ideas of multiculturalism, without the relativistic drawbacks.

Perhaps most essential to the basis of deconstruction is the idea of binary opposition. Binary opposition is the conflict which exists between two concepts; light/dark, man/woman, up/down. These are all common binary oppositions—they both depend on each other for relevance and meaning and all share the underlying government of the principle of either/or. The problem within this system is the undecidables. These

are concepts which defy proper allotment into this binary system. Common examples are that of a virus, or a zombie; both of these are things which possess characteristics of the living and the dead, thus to which pole do they belong? Conventional logic demands that they either are dead or alive, not both, but there is no easy way to resolve this, and often in society to avoid being plagued by this logical monstrosity we 'decide' what the term is, usually based upon ethical or other biased assumptions.

Then how does Derrida use this rough collective of terms to 'use' deconstruction? Although deconstruction has no set guidelines or rules (these would defy the principles of deconstruction!) there are general ways in which deconstruction goes about exposing flaws in arguments. The first is that of the undecidable. This concept starts to erode the solidity of conventional metaphysical being. Metaphysics relies on something Derrida calls 'logocentrism', the idea that truth stems from an undividable origin. To create a logos, or origin, one makes a binary opposition such as: being/nonexistence, for the logos of being¹. The first term is then privileged and from it the context for the second, indeed the existence of the second, is created. The second is then lowered into a subordinate position and becomes the opposing force to the logos. From here, the logos have been established and now all questions regarding this concept will flow from the favored term to the un-favored one, in a hierarchy. However, now that undecidables are brought into play, this flow is disrupted as the undecidable refuses to be sorted into a subordinate or superior position. Deconstruction takes advantage of this paralysis to reverse the hierarchy, by placing favor on the second term and establishing a flow towards the previously disfavored term. This shows the possibility of multiple logos, as

neither is more valid than the other due to the presence of an undecidable, and in essence this is what deconstruction is—the presentation that there are multiple possibilities for a given concept, ideal, or law.

To truly delve into deconstruction and how it works, one must also examine its basis in structuralist linguistic theory. One of the main themes in structuralist theory is that of the sign (composed of the signifier and signified). The linguist Ferdinand de Saussure claims that the main connections between words and concepts were that of a signifying object/concept (such as a word, material possession, or theory) and its signified (also perhaps an object, word, or theory). To explain, an example of this relationship is that of a spoken word, such as 'boat' and the idea/meaning tied to that sensory perception. These two elements form a sign, which is the basic unit of meaning. Saussure furthermore claims that these two parts of the sign cannot exist apart; that they are complimentary to each other, so fully intertwined that removal of either would result in something unintelligible. However it is also important to note that the connection between the signified and the specific phonic arrangement is completely arbitrary—that is to say, a cat is not called a cat for any particular reason; it is the link between this name and the signified that is intertwined.² It was this insistence on the important role of the signifier that led Derrida to introduce the concept of *différance*. This is to say, that meaning cannot be entirely derived from a sign relationship, an element of *différance*, of distinction is also required so that one may recognize one sign from another, something that enforces the uniqueness of a sign. *Différance* is, in part, the idea that every word is

¹ Bill Mayblin and Jeff Collins, *Introducing Derrida* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2005), 46.

² Richard Appignanesi et al., *Introducing: Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2004), 59.

defined by other words, deferring meaning endlessly to other concepts—thus 'true' meaning is always in flux. Because of this freedom, 'meaning' and 'truth' become something more than that which can be solid and defined, it endlessly slips and allows for play in understanding.

Now that the terms and trends of deconstruction have been established, one may look as to how deconstruction and, more largely, postmodernism relates to the field and theories of multiculturalism. The first duty is to establish what multiculturalism is, and for the purposes of this essay, multiculturalism will be treated as a movement which seeks universal acceptance of all cultures and religions, and to celebrate the differences between these different faiths and practices. Already, one can see the links that postmodernism has to multiculturalism are many and strong. Postmodernism supports the notion that by using hermeneutics—rationality, reasoning, and truth are universally variable, as all are inextricably linked to cultural biases which render them impossible to be absolute. The link can be seen in that multiculturalism contends that no culture is superior to any other, and no one may impose any 'truths' upon any other culture because they have experienced life through a different set of moral guidelines, practices, and other minute details which create a person wholly different from another in another culture. Jean-François Lyotard, the famous author of The Postmodern Condition, puts it in terms of traditional 'narrative cultures' and modern 'scientific cultures' stating, "It is [...] impossible to judge the existence or validity of narrative knowledge on the basis of scientific knowledge and vice versa: the relevant criteria are different. All we can do is

gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species.”³ Essentially, this states that two cultures cannot truly communicate their ideas to each other, for their styles are too different to transfer the original meaning in earnest. Thus, our nations are left in this wonderment, bound and kept from action.

As per the goals of deconstruction, tensions within the theories of a doctrine should be exposed to display contradictions and limitations. In postmodern multiculturalism, these contradictions occur right at the crux of its argument. The simultaneous obligatory acceptance of all cultures and the assimilation of those cultures into the fabric of a larger definition creates a problem, an “undecidable” as Derrida puts it. It is simultaneously unifying and dividing; for multiculturalism claims to keep distinctions very real, through the celebration of one’s own unique culture. Without these cultural distinctions, one would not have the same exclusive celebration that is called for by postmodern multiculturalists. The celebration must be exclusive, because as its private nature is compromised the culture becomes exposed to corruption by outside influences. This problem manifests in actuality when groups ‘decide’ the true nature of the principle. In cases such as in France, as was evident in the Parisian suburb riots in the summer of 2006, groups may decide to completely identify with their culture to the exclusion of all else. This can be seen in the phenomenon of ‘ghettoization’ in areas such as Vancouver, Canada. In this city, it is possible to live as a Chinese-Canadian without ever leaving the community, or speaking English. This kind of situation is called ‘shallow

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 26.

multiculturalism' by Janice Gross Stein who in her essay Living Better Multiculturally

states,

[In shallow multiculturalism] can strengthen the boundaries around each community and, in so doing, help to seal one community off from another. A Home Office report, issued in England after riots broke out in three northern industrial towns in 2001, found "separate educational arrangements, community and voluntary bodies, employment, places of worship, language, social and cultural networks," producing living arrangements that "do not seem to touch at any point." Trevor Phillips, chair of the commission for Racial Equality, warned recently that much of Britain was "sleepwalking its way towards segregation."⁴

In another example, the formation of Catholic, Muslim, or Jewish schools simultaneously exhibits the celebration of culture as called for by multiculturalism, but also segregation for it both celebrates a particular culture, but to the exclusion of others (especially in private schools, or in nations where Catholic education is private, and therefore not obligated to include other cultures). Indeed, radical multiculturalism seeks to have absolute acceptance, in a way forming a community built upon very distinct groups of peoples. But even here there is contradiction as Derrida himself states:

If by community one implies [...] a fundamental agreement beneath the phenomena of discord or war, then I don't believe in it very much and I sense in it as much threat as promise.

[...]

There is doubtless this irrepressible desire for a "community" to form but also for it to know its limit-and for its limit to be its *opening*.⁵

Derrida here senses contradiction that lies in the desire to form a community with all imaginable cultures, with all imaginable opinions, and yet demand that *all* share a tolerance of others as one of a fundamental set of beliefs, regardless of how this would comply with their original beliefs; in effect, the sacrifice of the true individual culture for the appearance of uncompromised harmony. This challenge has come to postmodern

⁴ Janice Gross Stein, "How to Live Better Multiculturally," *Literary Review of Canada* Vol. 14 No.7 (2006): 5.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, "A Madness' Must Watch Over Thinking," in *Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994*, Trans. Peggy Kamuf, et al. and ed. Elisabeth Weber, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 355.

multiculturalists and in response many have issued a very dogmatic reply. As postmodern sociologist Ben Agger relates, “[...] postmodern multiculturalists deny the possibility of uniting groups’ differences into common causes that begin to change overreaching social structures.”⁶ But then a community cannot exist. By the removal of a unifying principle there is no longer a community, but rather many distinct peoples living in close proximity to each other. This returns us to the issue of ‘shallow multiculturalism’s’ problems that Stein brings up.

Deconstructed, cultural identity is inherently exclusive. As one begins to differentiate one culture from another, it tribalizes and closes the definition of each culture, community, and society as a whole, forming a binary opposition between culture x vs. ~culture x. As Derrida would say, it closes the concept rather than leaving it open,⁷ establishing a logocentrism. Therefore, the only culture that avoids bias would be one which incorporated all other cultures (and all those possible) in its definition. But this would seem to go against the very notion of culture, to define something; someone must be outside the definition for meaning to form. Still, perhaps it could exist, indeed this is what idealized postmodern multiculturalism would seek to achieve. To work, all cultures would have to live in a constant state of submission, of ‘being a guest’ with every other culture to maintain a required amount of respect; from this, the fundamental right to amnesty, to the status of the guest must be granted⁸. This cultural guest would then have

⁶ Ben Agger, *Critical Social Theories: An Introduction*, (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, c2006), 70.

⁷ Derrida, “A Madness’ Must Watch Over Thinking,” in *Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994*, 355.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism*, trans. and ed. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (New York: Routledge, 2004), 22.

to be offered and accept hospitality offered to him/her⁹. However, in order for this to work, the guest *must* accept the dominance of the hospitable one; this is the contradiction that lies in hospitality: one can only be hospitable by asserting some control over what one owns. If I were to invite my friends over for a party, except I held it in a public park, with other peoples' food, and using others' time, few would think I was being hospitable—it is the fact that I give what is *mine* that allows, and limits, hospitality. This is what Derrida calls the problem of absolute hospitality¹⁰: one always places conditions on hospitality, whether it is merely respect, or a more elaborate set of requirements such as in the immigration process¹¹. Nevertheless, though we may never achieve perfect hospitality, there is no reason to stop trying to attain it. In a guest/host relationship, aware of its limitations, the host experiences a good feeling at his generosity, and the guest gains a feeling of acceptance and a foot hold in the community he is in. One of the best outcomes this relationship can hope to achieve is the reversal of the opposition in guest/host, where the guest can eventually transcend his limited and subverted position and move forward, to host others—perhaps even the ones who once hosted him; this shows the advancement of knowledge of the other, and a greater cultural awareness. Still, without an acceptance of another's role as the host, true hospitality is not present and therefore asylum hasn't been taken, meaning the cultures are not integrating, but invading. In order for the open society to work, *all* must be masters and subjects simultaneously. In a sense, postmodernism endorses this idea, but denies the ability to be dominated by another culture. However, this kind of domination is essential; if not,

⁹Ibid, 7.

¹⁰ A. J. P. Thomson, *Deconstruction and Democracy: Derrida's Politics of Friendship*, (London: Continuum, 2005), 92.

society must be closed, and multiculturalism abandoned, indeed the concept of the state must be weakened too.

Still, some would argue that this guest/host form of multiculturalism would too actively assimilate other cultures and therefore weaken them all. Charles Taylor, a prominent cultural philosopher with communitarian/postmodern leanings, would argue that: "it [would be] inhospitable to difference because it can't accommodate what the members of a distinct society really aspire to, which is survival."¹² However, it is this notion of cultural survival which is placing overwhelming strain on the notion of multiculturalism? Examples of this are the acts in Quebec, Canada which deny francophones and immigrants the right to have their children attend English schools. Taylor describes them as "Policies aimed at survival [which] actively seek to *create* members of the community, for instance, in their assuming that future generations continue to identify as French-speakers."¹³ However, this attempt at survival is in fact bastardizing the ideals which justify its actions. The freedom to these peoples (especially immigrants') right to their own culture is being compromised under the banner of sustaining Quebec's right to culture.

Deconstructively speaking, there is a tension in Taylor's argument in that earlier in The Politics of Recognition; he claims that there is a dialogical character formation in cultural identity. The two parts are the internal definition and 'definition by dialogue' (or

¹¹ Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *On Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (London: Continuum, 2000), 15.

¹² Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. D. T. Goldberg (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 94.

that by 'significant others')¹⁴. Taylor defends internal definition when he says that by representing myself, I am representing my personal diversity; something uniquely mine which only I can discover—by articulating this I define myself.¹⁵ Nevertheless, he further goes to say (the rest of his work favoring this point) that “My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others.”¹⁶ From a deconstructive lens, it should first be mentioned that this argument places importance of dialogue over reflection in the creation of identity, subverting the other term and presuming a logocentrism, favoring others opinions over one's personal discovery. Furthermore, this very idea of self reflection is challenged by the fact of cultural survival. If one is truly unique, and has a unique variant, or even an entirely novel culture (or even still the potential to form one) it is being corralled and dismantled under the direction of 'survival' by rounding up peoples not fully/or at all under the sway of one culture and putting them into one without consultation. For example, I am a person with Japanese, American, Canadian, and British-Welsh heritage, all very much connected to who I am and all these cultures vie for my assimilation into their body. Oddly, it was my introduction to middle school that would provide a definition. During my first day of grade 7, all the new students were brought into the gym to be sorted into classes/homerooms. Much to my dismay, I had none of my childhood friends in that grouping. As I was mourning my fate, a tall, skinny Lebanese kid walked over to me and, wrapping his arm around my shoulder said, “Hey, we Lebanese brothers got to stick together,” and quickly became my friend. He, nor anyone else, would or could believe that I was not in fact Lebanese, but due to my mixed

¹³ Ibid, 93.

¹⁴ Ibid, 79.

¹⁵ Ibid, 78.

¹⁶ Ibid, 80.

parentage, I did not bare all the stereotypical appearance of an Asian person; my skin is tanned ambiguously, my features reveal no conclusive evidence to a stereotyper, indeed over my many years of schooling there are precious few ethnic groups I was not believed to be a part of. This is all to say that sometimes others are assimilated either against their will, or against their background into a cultural identity, and are forced to adopt it as their own, and that 'survival' can be hostile to *différance*. The ability to be free and open is restricted in this cultural survival play of multiculturalism.

So then, having discussed the problems facing multiculturalism, what is the solution? This is indeed a large question, one that cannot easily be answered but I hope to bring a starting point for new studies into a solution. In a diverse society, it seems there is *no way in which it may exist without any underlying principles*. As events have shown us, these are needed to permit a greater amount of positive *différance*. To establish the most tolerant principles, first a dialogue between the various parties must be started. In this dialogue, it is critical to remember not to merely translate another's culture directly into one's own terms. The understanding of even similar concepts might be radically different, and from a Derridian viewpoint, even the binary oppositions might be stated in different terms, or might even be in a different hierarchy. The importance of this can be summed up in cultural anthropologist Talal Asad's words, from his essay The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology. In it he stresses that "The [the translator's] translation is not merely a matter of matching sentences in the abstract, but

of *learning to live another form of life*.¹⁷ If we can understand that we must accept a whole new set of understanding when meeting another culture, then we can open a meaningful dialogue in which there is the ability for both cultures to change, and grow into more tolerant and knowledgeable beings in their own right. It is this that addresses most strongly the issues raised by those such as Lyotard, who state that cultures are distinct and may only appreciate each other on a shallow 'gaze of wonderment' level. This standpoint, as Satya P. Mohanty relates, is to say that from other cultures, 'we may gain only an overly general and abstract kind of tolerance, divorced from an understanding of the other culture.'¹⁸ This divorced understanding is completely superficial and rather pretentious, as it gives up on our ability to truly understand other cultures and implicitly declares the other has nothing to pass on to us.

A possible solution lies in the notion of 'evolutionary culturalism.' This idea stems from a simple observation: one of the main arguments for dogmatic cultures is that their harsh measures are justified by their honoring and preservation of their culture and history. However, is this not in some part a farce? These people are not living the same lives as their parents, or their grandparents, or, least of all, the members of their culture from its inception. The claim that their actions are preserving the old culture cannot be truly accurate, as hermeneutically they do not have the same life as their forefathers, which gave the original reasons for their cultural practices from their personal histories. This is especially true as more and more people are drawn into the fold of globalization,

¹⁷ Talal Asad, "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology," in *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 149.

contaminating their 'pure' past with new ideas and ways. So then, with an absence of an original culture to protect, one can more easily accept an 'evolutionary culture,' one that is more in tune with the current historio-sociological norms and reality of the people of a given culture. This 'evolutionary culture' would be more open to *différance*, and hence would allow fewer boundaries and borders to prohibit better understanding of others and 'learning to live another live.'

To do this is not simple. Over the course of merely researching this issue, there have been changes in the cultural landscape of the world. On Friday, December the 8th, 2006—Prime Minister Tony Blair declared the United Kingdom's multicultural experiment over.¹⁹ He then further stated that immigrants had a right to difference, but a duty to integrate into the United Kingdom's mainstream.²⁰ This would seem to be a rather blunt and brutal move against the societal norm in most countries, but upon reflection it boils down this argument to its crux: do we want to live in a state with no overreaching law or formal governance, or do we want to tread on at least one group's rights. There is much more research into Derrida's theories of 'iterability', the trace, and his other works on hospitality that might expand the debate, but really this question has no right answer. Still, if we can learn to 'live another form of life' through the guest/host experiment and perhaps accept the notion of having a dynamic culture, not one based on survival as Charles Taylor noted in the Quebec population, then we leave room for the cultures of the

¹⁸ Satya P. Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, and Multiculturalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 144.

¹⁹ Tony Blair, *The Duty to Integrate: Shared British Values*, Downing Street, London, 8 December 2006.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

world to grow in new ways and understandings, leaving, as Derrida would say, the system open to différance.

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