Responding to the Bottomlessness of Human Being

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If the linguistic turn in twentieth century philosophy succeeded in establishing anything of enduring importance to education, it is that the deep hidden truth of the species *Homo sapien* is there is no deep hidden truth. We are not born with an essence, a mind, a self, rationality, free will, nor are we made in God's image. On this matter, philosophers as diverse as Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida agree.

These philosophers emphasize that the historical sociolinguistic practices of a culture form the human subject. Education (*bildung*) is the best name for such processes of forming. Relying on Wittgenstein, C. J. B. Macmillan shows indoctrination is inevitable.[1] The basic argument is simple. According to Wittgenstein, the linguistic propositions constituting an individuals world-picture are pre-critical: "For how can a child immediately doubt what others are imparting to him? That could only mean that he was incapable of learning certain language games."[2] Wittgenstein further observes, "The child learns by believing the adult. Doubt comes after belief."[3] You cannot doubt a language game until you acquire one that plays the doubting game. Similar arguments work for other founding beliefs. Educators should come to grips with the inevitability of indoctrination. Devotees of decontextualized rationality, for instance, commonly concede that indoctrination into rational world-pictures is necessary, but they quickly add it is redeemable later by reasons.[4] Those indoctrinated in Christian communities prefer the Redeemer. Of course, any successful indoctrination into some system of verification is subsequently self-justifiable.

Whatever *structures* of mind or self we may possess, our essence (*eidos*, form) is the contingent consequence of participating in the sociolinguistic practices of some historical community, or critically reflecting on those practices. Without some structure, we would not have a mind. Dogmatic indoctrination is better than never possessing a mind at all. Some structure is necessary to sustain mental life much as with biological life where those who cannot maintain homeostasis perish.

With structures of personal identity in place, we may begin to examine our society and our selves. Only by creative reflection upon our constitutive cultural structures do we come to possess unique minds of our own. We cannot carry out such reflection, however, without using those very structures that give us a mind. Reflective beings are never simply inside or outside the site of their primary indoctrination. I am particularly interested in the contribution to reflection of others different from ourselves because their indoctrination was different. Imagination is limited to the possibilities offered by our sociocultural heritage. Others different from us may initiate processes of meaning co-construction that provide alternative possibilities for thought, feeling, and action.

I will examine several replies to the failure to find an ultimate foundation for human existence including the self-assertive aesthetic responses of Nietzsche's

ubermench (overman) and Foucault's "dandy" as well as Heidegger's more self-transcending search for authenticity through openness to Being. Emmanuel Levinas seeks transcendence in openness to the being of uniquely different others while identifying the violence in Western thought that reduces all otherness to the same identities. The fundamental anxiety of not having a fixed identity tends toward such reduction as a defense. Xenophobia arises because the validity of the historical sociolinguistic practices of individuals indoctrinated in another culture reveals the bottomlessness of our being. It also arises because the Other may enslave or slay us in their anxiety.

Levinas introduces metaphysical desire for otherness, especially the unique, individual personal ipsiety of "the Other" (*l'autrui*) rather than the other (*autre*) of things, ideas. I will connect Levinas's metaphysical desire with what Thomas M. Alexander calls "the Human *Eros*;" that is, the passionate desire to live a life of expanding meaning and value.[5] *Eros* may satisfy itself by simply possessing or consuming its objects (food, water, the labor of slaves). The Human *Eros*, however, satisfies itself only when the Other draws us outside our selves. Satisfying the Human *Eros* requires growing in such a way that we can never return to our former selves. Only the Other has the vocabulary, meanings, plot lines, values, and grammar we need to retell the story of our life; we need them if we are to be born again.

I examine Derrida's response to Levinas along with his deconstruction of the violent logical and metaphysical structures of Western thought. Actually, I believe any cultural form is violent simply because any structure is exclusive of what cannot satisfy its demands. Nonetheless, it is impossible to live without structure.

I conclude by describing "the Trickster" as my ideal type for responding to humanity's dark secret. An ambivalent figure who is neither inside nor outside the structures he transforms, Trickster rejects the Liberal dualism separating self from society. The cultural structures within which he lives sustain his contingent, ever-evolving identity, for outside all structure there is only chaos and death. Trickster realizes we never entirely overcome indoctrination. Trickster revels in not having an eternal essence. He lives in the openness of infinite possibility to satisfy his needs and desires. His response to the bottomlessness of being, his lack of absolute identity, is to dance in the joy of being a created creator who continues to create himself by recreating his world.

<div align="center">RESPONDING TO THE FAILURE OF SELF-FOUNDATION</div>

For Nietzsche, the superlative response to the absence of an ultimate human essence is aesthetic creation beyond the bounds of good and evil. Instead of the autonomous, innately free, rational man, Nietzsche gave us the autonomous, autopoetic, Dionysian man, the *ubermench*. A monster of self-creation, the overman is joyful and agile. He is an ancestor of Foucault's Baudelairian self-creating "dandy." Nietzsche and Foucault often conceive the creation of a unique self as a war of every will to power against every other such will, although their philosophies undermine any possibility of such an innate essence. Such monsters are more self-indulgent than self-creative. Monsters of creation and dandies differ from the Liberal man in almost every way except egotistic, selfish assertion.

For Heidegger, we are "thrown" into a world of preexisting sociolinguistic practices. He examines the fundamental anxiety that arises because our own being is never within our power. We tend to flee this anxiety by accepting the norms of preexisting cultural practices. Educating students as "human resources" or standing reserve for the capitalist production function institutionalizes this flight. Heidegger's inauthentic self is "fallen" because he passively accepts safe cultural interpretations (for example, the official curriculum) of personal identity. When culture entirely interprets our lives, we never have possibilities uniquely our own. The authentic self does not seek to escape cultural throwness because it recognizes it cannot. Unlike the *ubermench*, authentic selves are more receptive than willful; knowing their emptiness and vulnerability opens them to possibilities.

LEVINAS ON THE VIOLENT REDUCTION OF THE OTHER TO THE SAME

Levinas reveals the violence concealed in the *logos* (being, word, account) of sovereign reason. Western philosophy was born of the *logos* as giving the one exclusive account of the essence (*eidos*) of the substance (*ousia*) that is the *telos* of some developmental process from origin or foundation (*archia*) to its perfection (*entelecheia*). Usually the *eidos*, *telos*, *entelecheia*, and *ousia* are the same. The *logos* assures Western man he has a fixed and final essence (for example, rationality) that is either his endowment or his destiny. All these terms are associated with what Derrida calls "the metaphysics of presence" and Levinas calls "ontology." This metaphysics of the *logos* has controlled Western thought from the beginning. Classical metaphysics and ontotheology provide existential comfort by telling us who we are with certainty. We tend to react violently toward those indoctrinated into other metaphysical systems, because, having no assured self-identity, we are threatened by them.

Levinas locates the violence in the exclusivity of the *logos* that always strives to reduce the Other to the Same one true essence. This is the logic of what he calls "ontology," which yields what he terms "Totality." Nothing, no difference or alterity, escapes totalization. "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology," writes Levinas, "a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and [supposedly] neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being."[6] The neutral mediator might be the Absolute at the end of history in Hegel and Marx, innate Rationality and Freedom (including the free Market) in liberalism, or God. Such mediators are all functions of "sovereign reason" that "knows only itself" because "nothing other limits it" (*TI*, 43). Totalitarian reason reduces anything or anyone to the rule of its categories and concepts. In Western metaphysics, reason has no Other except error, or, in ontotheology, fallenness from God's law.

Levinas contrasts what he calls "metaphysics" with ontology where we move from what he calls "need" to "Desire." "As commonly interpreted," he indicates, "need would be at the basis of desire" (*TI*, 33). The ontological *Eros* seeks to possess the Other to satisfy its needs thereby reducing the other to its sameness. In possessive relations with the Other, "Their *alterity* is…reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor" (*TI*, 33). As needs, hunger, thirst, and sexuality satisfy themselves in possession that strives violently to eradicate difference.

By contrast, the "metaphysical desire does not long to return, for it is desire for a land not of our birth" (*TI*, 33-34). More fully:

> It is a desire that can not be satisfied.…Love itself is thus taken to be the satisfaction of a sublime hunger.…The metaphysical desire…desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness — the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it (*TI*, 34).

Openness to the Other depends less on intellectual cognition than on embodied artistic, moral, affective, and even erotic modes of existence. The Human *Eros* finds satisfaction only when the Other draws us outside our indoctrinated values, beliefs, and attitudes. Satisfying the Human *Eros* requires growing in such a way that we can never return home. Transaction with Others different from ourselves transforms our identity. Satisfying the Human *Eros* requires metaphysical desire much as Levinas describes it, for Others different from us readily provoke the creation of meanings and values beyond those prescribed by our culture.

The metaphysical *desire* "is desire for the absolutely other" (*TI*, 34). It yields transcendence: "Infinity is characteristic of a transcendent being.…The transcendent…is infinitely removed from its idea, that is, exterior, because it is infinite" (*TI*, 49). Levinas believes we may form no idea adequate to the absolutely infinite other. Others "are not individuals of a common concept;" instead, they appear as "the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself;" they are those over whom "I have no *power*" (*TI*, 39). Levinas writes, "The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face" (*TI*, 50).

Levinas asserts the primacy of the ethical relation over the knowing or ontological relation. He states, "The relation between the same and the other is not always reducible to knowledge of the other by the same, nor even to the revelation of the other to the same" (*TI*, 28). Instead, our primary relation is ethical:

> We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics (*TI*, 43).

Desiring the transcendent Other involves hospitality or "my welcoming the other" (*TI*, 43). Since for Levinas, our relation to the Other involves Desire, it is more accurate to say that for him our primary relation to Others is ethical-erotic.

DERRIDA'S DECONSTRUCTION OF LEVINAS

Derrida acknowledges he "was fascinated and attracted by the intellectual journey of Levinas" especially his "posing the question of the other."[7] We may even read his *Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas* as homage.[8] Having taken the linguistic turn, Derrida finds there is no thought without linguistic structure, which means the violence of philosophy infects all western thought. However, we cannot, *contra* Levinas, find an absolutely safe space within philosophy, or simply leap out of it. Levinas constructs the Other as absolute alterity incommensurable with the self-same (ipsiety). For Derrida, this dualism only varnishes over the violence. Still, Derrida also wants to affirm some version of the radical Other while defending them from violence as much as possible. Derrida does so by deconstructing the logocentric metaphysics of presence, but he does not dispose of it because total discontinuity with our past is impossible:

> There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics.
> We have no language — no syntax and no lexicon — which is foreign to this history; we can
> pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form,
> the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest.[9]

Derrida recognizes we must live with the tensions of our sociolinguistic inheritance
because, having been indoctrinated, our culture has us before we have it.

Derrida champions an ambivalent, paradoxical, and inclusive both/and strategy
to alleviate the violent exclusion of the Other in philosophical constructions. He
does not want to deny the self-identity of concepts only the claim they are
impermeable barriers marking off the conceptual purity of X from everything not-
X. As one commentator states:

> It is not the identity is drowned in otherness, but that it is *necessarily* open to it, contaminated
> by it. Yet the necessity or essential character of this contamination cannot be named unless
> we first grasp the concept of essence or form [*eidos*] as purity, as pure positive self-identity.[10]

Derrida indicates, "according to Levinas, all violence is a violence of the concept"
(*VM*, 140). This stance extends to personal identity also. Derrida's both/and strategy
recognizes that purity (for example, racial purity) is oppressively violent. Derrida
realizes we *both* need working sociolinguistic structures *and* that such structures are
dangerous.

For Levinas, according to Derrida, "The face is presence, *ousia*" (*VM*, 101). For
Derrida, though, there is no realization of some substance, some transcendental
signified outside the mediated play of language; that means there is no "pure
unmediated…perfect self-presence," no immediate recognition of the face of the
infinite Other (*VM*, 115). There is no immediate possession of meaning, knowledge,
or anything else. There is only linguistic mediation. The Other is never absolutely
incommensurable.

Derrida rejects the binary structure of the *logos* along with its formal laws (for
example, the proposition "A and not A" is always false). Without the pure,
unmediated, and certain presence of self-identity, such immutable laws of reason
cannot function. For Derrida, there is no absolute inside or outside to the "philo-
sophical *logos*" (*VM*, 112). That means "the infinite…cannot be stated" and we must
acknowledge "the original finitude of speech and of whatever befalls it" (*VM*, 113).
Therefore, Levinas cannot use language to capture something infinitely exterior to
language such as the absolute Other. There is no Other so transcendent we may not
exercise power over them, or they over us. Derrida asserts, "As soon as one attempts
to think Infinity as a positive plenitude…the other becomes unthinkable, impossible,
unutterable" (*VM*, 115). This does not mean we cannot recognize alterity, only that
it is never entirely beyond language or thought. We have no positive conception of
any such thing as the absolutely infinite Other, all we can do is think about the "in-
finite," which is the negation of the finite things we can think.

Derrida believes, "language can only tend toward justice by acknowledging and
practicing the violence within it" (*VM*, 117). Paradoxically, acting on such
acknowledgement involves "Violence against violence" (*VM*, 117). The question is
always, is the violence we take against violence in fact less violent than the violence
we would allay. Levinas's ideal of the ethical good beyond knowledge (what Derrida

identifies as the classical Greek *epekeina tes ousias*; that is, the substance of justice), is a valuable guide, but because the violence of the *logos* also infects this concept of the Good, it too is violent, though tending toward amelioration.

We find the inclusive both/and of deconstruction working below as Derrida disassembles Levinas's construction of the Other. Derrida observes that "to make the other an alter ego, Levinas says frequently, is to neutralize its absolute alterity" (*VM*, 123). Derrida does not think there is any such infinite Other; so, he concludes:

> The other as alter ego signifies the other as other, irreducible to *my* ego, precisely because it is an ego, because it has the form of ego. The egoity of the other permits him to say "ego" as I do; and this is why he is Other.…Dissymmetry itself would be impossible without this symmetry (*VM*, 125).

Complete incommensurability implies complete unknowability, unrecognizability, and unrealizability, which would mean that the Other does not appear to challenge us, call us out, or resist us.

For Derrida, violence is the price we pay to have a mind. If there is a site beyond the bounds of Western philosophy where we may have a mind and a self nonviolently, we in the west will not arrive there until we escape our history. I think any linguistic structure is violent, simply because any structure is exclusive of what cannot satisfy its demands. Derrida does not think anyone in the West can entirely escape history, but he agrees with Levinas that there are "ruptures of history" and that when "man truly approaches the Other he is uprooted from history" (*TI*, 52).

We cannot live without structure, but the same structures that enable deliberate conduct also bind and constrain us. Derrida decries the metaphysical structures of traditional Western metaphysics:

> The entire history of the concept of structure…must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center.…It could be shown that all names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence æ *eidos*, *arche*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject).[11]

Derrida rejects the metaphysics of presence with its assurance that we have, or are destined to have, a fixed and final essence.

"Metaphysically," writes Derrida, "the best liberation from violence is a certain putting into question, which makes the search for an *archia* tremble" (*VM*, 141). Among Derrida's tools for deconstructing supposedly fixed structures, ameliorating violence, and making the *archia* tremble is the infrastructure of *differance*. *Differance* has a double meaning. First, there is "difference"; the sign is different from the signified. Second, there is "deferred presence." For structuralist thinkers any system of signs (for example, a theory, a text, a narrative) eventually terminates a "transcendental signified" outside the symbolic system to which all the symbols ultimately refer. The transcendental signified terminates the play of signs because it is, supposedly, the presence of the indubitable self-identical thing, the referent. Derrida denies the existence of the transcendental signified thereby challenging Western metaphysics.

Derrida argues, "Deconstruction certainly entails a moment of affirmation. Indeed, I cannot conceive of a radical critique which would not be ultimately

motivated by some sort of affirmation, acknowledged or not. Deconstruction always presupposes affirmation."[12] He is quite clear deconstruction creates "an openness towards the other."[13] Deconstruction problematizes by constantly points away from itself toward absence while welcoming the excluded other:

> I mean that deconstruction is, in itself, a positive response to an alterity which necessarily calls, summons or motivates it. Deconstruction is therefore vocation æ a response to a call. The other, as the other than self, the other that opposes self-identity....The other precedes philosophy and necessarily invokes and provokes the subject before any genuine questioning can begin. It is in this rapport with the other that affirmation expresses itself.[14]

Deconstruction urges recognition and respect for differences of identity, mind, and self. In an essay on "Metaphysics and Essence" Derrida urges,

> *respect* for the other *as what it is*: other. Without this acknowledgment, which is not a knowledge, or let us say without this "letting-be" of an existent (Other) as something existing outside me in the essence of what it is (first in its alterity), no ethics would be possible....The "letting-be" concerns all possible forms of the existent and even those which, by essence, cannot be transformed into "objects of comprehension" (*VM*, 138).

Deconstruction exposes an ethics of acknowledgment that opens one's indoctrinated identity to the Other and the possibilities they provide.

Deconstruction is remarkably open to differences while calling attention to the violence wrought by exclusionary concepts, norms, and standards. Nonetheless, it is difficult for Derrida to take strong positions in ethical, political, or institutional struggles, yet there is no politics possible without taking at least temporary positions. Derrida recognizes the problem: "I try where I can to act politically while recognizing that such action remains incommensurate with my intellectual project of deconstruction."[15] Derrida underestimates the political power of deconstruction. In the next section, we meet the Trickster who pursues a playfully disruptive politics that resembles Derrida's.

Mythos versus the Logos: Trickster Tales

Oddly, Derrida does not extensively engage Levinas's discussion of *eros*, though it serves his both/and strategy well. *Eros* unified opposites in the myths of the Orphic mystery religions in Egypt and Mesopotamia before the dawn of western philosophy.[16] Philosophy emerged only after the *logos* overwhelmed *mythos*. *Mythos* is from the ancient Greek for "a legendary fable" (*muqologia* — mythologia); significantly, as with *logos*, it ultimately derives from the Greek word (*legeiu* — legein) for "to tell." The ancient battle was over what kinds of stories Greek culture would authorize. Even today, many curriculum and cultural wars are battles between *mythos* and *logos* (for example, religion and science). *Mythos* is the Other of *logos* and reason and a promising site for self-interrogation beyond philosophy. I want to draw on the mythological figure of the Trickster as a nonphilosphical response to the absence of any metaphysical human essence.

Tricksters find ways out of traps, impasses, and *aporias*. Trickster goes by many names, Coyote among the Navaho, Krishna among the Hindu, Legba in west Africa, Monkey among Chinese Buddhists, and Hermes in Greek mythology (from whence the word hermeneutics). Trickster is a multicultural character who allays the violence of fixed laws, concepts, codes, categories, and norms by making the *archia*

tremble. He uproots cultural foundations thereby creating ruptures in history. A liminal character, he moves agilely between worlds. (Liminal derives from the Latin *limen*, meaning the wooden crosspiece at the base of a door, the threshold). Derrida is a Trickster in that his both/and strategy refuses fixed boundaries, purity, and perfection, or to locate itself simply inside or outside the structures of that philosophy that gave him his mind and self. Trickster is a destroyer and creator of cultural forms, logical categories, and moral codes; his violence is against the violence of inflexible rules and laws. Lacking fixed essence, he evolves continuously by deriving intelligence, meaning, and value from the excesses of his desires. Trickster lives on the highway and loves playing at the crossroads of cultural language games. Like Martin Luther King, Jr., he will break laws to expose lawlessness and, thereby, transform moral codes. Trickster is transgressively moral in ways hard for authority to comprehend or capture. He lies to tell a greater truth. As a philosopher and cultural critic, he refuses to "argue" or otherwise play by the rules.

Lewis Hyde asserts that "all structure — no matter how 'good' — exists by excluding something. If there is a love that lies beyond the law, only a thief can be its prophet."[17] Likewise, if there is a law that lies beyond "the law," only an outlaw can be its prophet. The problem with pure and perfect structures is having created them, how do we dispose of the leavings? Trashing human garbage yields the most violent moments in human history. It is the logic of Hitler's "final solution." Trickster restores deteriorating persons and cultures by doing the dirty work of importing needed but excluded ideas and ideals, exposing surds, and transforming structures by releasing suppressed desires.

According to Hyde, Trickster knows how to find "the hidden joints holding an old world together, the hidden pores leading out" and that to "kill a god or an ideal, go for the joints" Trickster exercises violence against violence even as he seeks to ameliorate violence.[18] A culture's values, including its *Summum bonum*, are vulnerable wherever they arbitrarily exclude otherness and possibility. Any finite structure (*ethos*, *logos*, or *nomos*) must exclude some of the infinite plenitude of existence by denying or denigrating what it cannot sanction. Trickster finds openings, or what the classical Greeks called *poros* (portals or windows), that look out while letting in possibilities.[19] Trickster finds ways of including the unwanted Other and reinvigorating the existing social order by reapportioning justice. He creatively locates imperfections in supposedly perfect, pure, eternal, and immutable structures of cultural and personal identity, thereby letting in beauty and light while fulfilling the Human *Eros* for Growth. I like him better than monsters of creation.

1. C.J.B. Macmillan, "On Certainty and Indoctrination," *Synthese* 56 (1983): 363-72. See also, Jim Garrison, "The Paradox of Indoctrination: A Solution," *Synthese* 68, no. 2 (1986): 261-73.

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), 283.

3. Ibid., 160.

4. Harvey Siegel's, *Rationality Redeemed? Further Dialogues on an Educational Ideal* (New York: Routledge, 1997), does not specifically use this argument, but he assumes it.

5. Thomas Alexander, "The Human *Eros*," in *Philosophy and the Reconstruction of Culture*, ed. J.J. Stuhr, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 203-22.

6. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961/1995), 43. For all subsequent references this text will be cited as *TI*.

7. Jacques Derrida, "Deconstruction and the Other" in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, ed. R. Kearney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 107-8.

8. Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing And Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964/1978), 79-153. For all subsequent references this essay will be referred to as *VM*.

9. Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing And Difference*.

10. Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 18.

11. Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," 279-80.

12. Derrida, "Deconstruction and the Other," 118.

13. Ibid., 124.

14. Ibid., 118.

15. Ibid., 120.

16. See William Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1952/1993).

17. Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), 286.

18. Ibid., 253 and 292.

19. Poros is the father of Eros in the later Greek myths. His name implies craft, method, and opening.