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A Cosmopolitical Philosophy to Come : Derrida and the Ends of Humanity

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Between a “disappearance of man” too well known today not to be badly known, a general critique of humanism too well received to be, in its turn, worthy of being questioned, and the shameful humanisms, naïve or reactive, onto which so much discourse, for lack of anything better, yet falls back, it might well be that the question of “man” demands today to be posed in a new way—philosophical as well as literary, ethical, or political—and that it demands to be asked as a question of ends.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy
Introduction, *Les Fins de l'homme: A partir du travail de Jacques Derrida*

It might seem strange to argue that Derrida, often considered an arch “anti-humanist,” offers a new way of thinking about the legacy of humanism. But his broad and complex engagement with this legacy is not as one-sided as is usually supposed. The problem of the human is one of borders, of inclusions and exclusions, and these are important and recurring themes for Derrida, as is well-known. What’s more, this problem is, for Derrida as well as for ourselves, of world importance. Its context, indeed, is the world itself, this world that is undergoing, if not exactly “globalization,” then perhaps the “*mondialisation*” or “worldwide-ization” of which he speaks in later texts like *Rogues*. For Derrida such ideas, “human” and “world,” should be taken in the Kantian sense, that is, as capital ‘I’ Ideas that are beyond experience but which provide a horizon for thought and action. Ideas taken in this sense are teleological: they define their objects in terms of ends or purposes that are given beforehand. This is to say that they define in advance what is to come, that they “authorize” it (“The ‘World’ of the Enlightenment to Come” 121).

One of the things this means is that humanism cannot simply be conceived of as a tradition that has come and gone, or as one that theory is “over” or “past.” It depends upon Ideas that must be situated within a very specific

philosophical and political history, one that is still very much alive, and which has, as we will see, profound philosophical and political effects. Though the sense and function of such Ideas may shift with each new context, each new economy, they permeate philosophical and political thinking, many of whose categories are possible only in relation to them. It is a central part of the Idea of humanity, for instance, that humans transcend political and cultural boundaries. If states or nations have borders, humans can nonetheless look beyond them to each other and say “we.” This is the root of cosmopolitanism, of what we might call a “global” ethics or politics. But it is also the root of the problem of the other, of the human taken as a question, and therefore of the question of humanism. It is a question that Derrida raises time and again through various figures, from the “ends of man” to hospitality and animality. If this is an old question in Derrida’s thought, then, it is one to which he returned repeatedly, one that he was still raising anew in the final texts before his death. And perhaps it remains to be asked, or asked again: Why did Derrida feel the need to return to the question of humanism, to the question of the human? What might this tell us about the legacy of humanism? How might this legacy be related to figures like globalization or cosmopolitanism? And what might this relation imply for the future of philosophy and of the humanities more generally, especially given the European roots of these discourses and of the Ideas that are central to them?

As the quote from Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy above suggests, Derrida takes humanism in this teleological sense, that is, as a question of ends, of the proper end or ends of humankind. This is also the question of humankind’s end, to invoke the ambiguity between “purpose” and “death” that forms a major figure in “The Ends of Man,” one of Derrida’s best-known meditations on humanism. If humanity has an end in the sense of purpose or telos, then it can also come to an end, at least theoretically, when it fulfills this purpose and reaches its final “destination.” Any concept of an end in the first sense implies an end in this second sense. This is the tension and even the paradox of trying to think the human teleologically. The questioning of this logic might be one of Derrida’s best-known contributions to thinking about humanism: that the “death” of the human haunts any notion of its proper and final end.

But questioning this teleology also opens a path for an alternative way of conceiving the human. Over the course of a number of works spanning many lines of inquiry, Derrida will raise at least two questions regarding the “ends”

of humanity. The first, which may seem obvious these days but which has not always been so, is whether it can be said today, in a time of so-called “multi-culturalism” and of plural rationalities, that all humans share the same “end”? We can see that this is a question of and for philosophy, that discipline which, more than any other other, has centred itself on attempts to think the nature of (a single) humanity in terms of purposes. Such a question has its roots in metaphysics, in the effort to give an account of the kind of things humans are. But because this is also the question of what such an end means for how humans ought to act and organize themselves, it is obviously also a question for ethics and politics, and perhaps too for those approaches to economics that claim that human beings are inherently and above all self-interested—a claim that would not entirely avoid the metaphysical.

The second of Derrida’s questions comes out of the first: What if the relation between humanity and its end (or ends) were open to interruptions? Interruptions that would “liberate” it from its ends, or alter those ends—ends, indeed, that would no longer be able to determine or define the human at all? Such interruptions would leave the very idea of what is human open to the unexpected. The stakes of such interruptions are rather far ranging, since this susceptibility to chance would mean, on the one hand, that what is human cannot be fully determined. One would not know definitively what it is or where it is going. But on the the other, decisions would still have to made, paths chosen, fellow humans (or at least relevant others) identified, and such needs would be even more pressing in the moment of suspense this interruption inaugurates. In such a moment the most basic ethical and political questions (to whom is one responsible? whose needs must one consider?) must be asked anew, and are open to alternative answers.

These are the clusters of questions around which I want to offer some thoughts on Derrida’s relation to humanism. My aims are modest enough. On the one hand I want to track what I take to be certain shifts in Derrida’s engagement with the humanist tradition, particularly in the context of his interest, in the later writings, in cosmopolitanism. On the other, I want to raise the question of what these shifts imply for philosophy as a humanistic discipline. For it may turn out that philosophy itself, if it is to continue to engage in trying to think the world today, will have to become other than what it has been. It may have to take another way. It may even be called to take this other way in the name of justice itself. Such would be one legacy

of Derrida's engagement with humanism. If this is the case, then for all that is claimed to be known about this engagement, it remains one that "we" today can hardly afford to ignore.

From what's already been said, it should perhaps come as no surprise that one of Derrida's earliest and best-known meditations on the question of humanism, "The Ends of Man," begins with the invocation of a lurking politics, a politics, in this particular case, having to do with philosophical colloquia such as the one at which "The Ends of Man" itself was first delivered. Every philosophical colloquium, Derrida tells us there, "necessarily has a political significance" (111). The colloquium in question has chosen the discourse on *anthropos* as its theme, and Derrida's suspicions regarding this notion of "man" are made clear from the outset. Contrary to the implied promise of a "common element," "the universality of philosophical discourse" that gives support to the idea of an international philosophical colloquium, he speaks of "all those places—cultural, linguistic, political, etc.—where the organization of a philosophical colloquium simply would have no meaning" (112). These are not places, obviously, where philosophy might be *contested*. They are places where the notion of a philosophical colloquium is outside the system of meaning (*Speech and Phenomena* 103). That such places exist undermines philosophy's assumption—an assumption usually made under the banner, precisely, of universal humanity, universal *anthropos*—that it can mediate cultural differences. Philosophy, as Derrida conceives it here,¹ forgets that there is a difference "of an entirely other order" than the differences of philosophical opinion that would have currency at any such colloquium, including discourses that would oppose themselves to philosophical thought. This "other" is not philosophical, but neither is it "other" in such a way that it would simply be the negative of philosophy, which would link it to philosophical thought in a relation similar to Hegel's self and Other. Such

1. Broadly, philosophy as it is construed in the "West," without denying the inherent tensions and contradictions such a term implies. In later works Derrida variously invokes the "Greco-Roman," "Greco-Roman-Arabic" and even "Greco-Roman-Abrahamic" (by which he means "Greek, Roman, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic," "Globalization" 371) origins of this theological and philosophical tradition (which ought already to show the problems of identifying such origins). But as we will see, in these later works he will come to problematize more explicitly the originary authority of such traditions to lay claim to philosophy as such. See "Of the Humanities," *passim*, and below.

an other as this latter would retain meaning for philosophy, would be open to a dialectical movement by which it could be sublated. Here, on the contrary, the otherness in question is not philosophy's own.² Nor, importantly, is this other "barren," that is, empty, impoverished, or lifeless ("The Ends of Man" 113). If these places do not take part in this "universal" discourse, it is not due to educational or cultural lack. They do not speak the language of philosophy, nor that of "man" insofar as it is conceived by this philosophy. Of course, philosophy's universal discourse is not so much a reality as an Idea in the Kantian sense that we invoked above, "a project," as Derrida puts it (112). But in this claim to universality it fails to acknowledge that it is "linked by its essence ... to a certain group of languages and 'cultures'" (Ibid.).

All of this is, as Derrida concedes, obvious enough, but it is worth repeating, and not only because he suggests that the very interest in what he calls "the universality of the anthropos" can be read as a part of a more general effort to interiorize the difference of this non-philosophical, non-Western other, a difference which "bears down, with a mute, growing and menacing pressure, on the enclosure of Western collocation" (Ibid. 113). It is worth repeating also because Derrida will invoke it again in the final passages of this paper when he speaks of "the violent relationship" the West has to its others (Ibid. 134). This interiorizing of the other is itself violent, an attempt at mastering, as Len Lawlor puts it, those places in the world where the discussion of the issues designated as "philosophy," those questions considered "philosophical," are without sense, foreign, unrecognizable (Lawlor 6). The presence of this violence here would seem to put a very strong political pressure on the discourse on anthropos, which is, of course, the discourse of humanism.

Derrida's position in this essay with regard to humanism is well known, accusing as he does the more or less "essentially" humanistic thinking of much post-war French philosophy for failing to examine the unity of "man" ("The Ends of Man" 115), for failing to inquire into the history of the concept of "man," or to interrogate the all-too-ready linkage between the "we" of the philosophers and the "we" of humanity, "the we in the horizon of humanity" (Ibid. 116).³ He blames much of this complicity with the notion of "man,"

2. I take this notion of an otherness that is not philosophy's own from Rodolphe Gasché. For a discussion of an alterity in Derrida that would not be a mere negativity complicit with Hegelian dialectics, see Gasché 95-105. For reference to an Otherness that is no longer thinking's own, 101.

3. Were we to interrogate this term "man" ourselves, it is not at all clear that we

in France at least, to anthropologic readings of Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger, a reading that he goes some length to counter. And yet in spite of the critiques of anthropologism and humanism that each undertakes, there exists a “subterranean” justification for viewing the thought of each German thinker as “essentially *anthropic* or anthropocentric” (Ibid. 119), a “*relève*”⁴ of humanism at work in each one’s critique and delimitation of that very humanism.

One might be tempted, then, to see Derrida as criticizing his German pre-cursors for failing to properly exorcise the anthropos (the Greek word is important for the cultural-linguistic point being made here) from their thought, and to some extent, of course, he is. But we might also note, even here in “The Ends of Man,” the suggestion that philosophy is in some way dependent on this discourse, which appears to a certain extent inescapable for philosophical thought. And thus, inescapable for a certain kind of *political* thought. This ambiguity is perhaps more apparent in *Of Spirit*. In speaking there of the “humanist teleology” that he finds at work in Heidegger, Derrida concedes that he does not mean to criticize it, since “it has remained *up till now* (in Heidegger’s time and situation, but this has not radically changed today) the price to be paid in the ethico-political denunciation of biologism, racism, naturalism, etc.” (56, italics given). Here Derrida describes his task as analyzing the “logic” of this humanist teleology, its limits and aporias, its presuppositions and the decisions in which it becomes entangled. But this is only to “exhibit” and “formalize” this program’s “terrifying mechanisms” (Ibid.). No sign would suggest an immediate escape from it, neither in Heideggerian nor in “anti-Heideggerian” thought. To the question of the possibility of its *transformation*, Derrida is less sure in this text. But “it will not be avoided all at once and without reconnoitring it right down to its most

would find it to be as inclusive of all humanity as is sometimes assumed. At any rate, *homme* is the word Derrida uses in this essay; I have chosen to retain “man” in order to remain as faithful as possible to Derrida’s language, but to place it in quotation marks in order to suspend any commitment to it.

4. As is well known, *la relève* is Derrida’s proposed translation of Hegel’s *Aufhebung*. Here’s how Alan Bass glosses it: “The word comes from the verb *relever*, which means to lift up, as does *Aufheben*. But *relever* also means to relay, to relieve, as when one soldier on duty relieves another. Thus the conserving-and-negating lift has become *la relève*, a ‘lift’ in which is inscribed an effect of substitution and difference, the effect of substitution and difference inscribed in the double meaning of *Aufhebung*.” See “The Ends of Man” 20, n.

tortuous ruses and most subtle resources” (Ibid.).

This ambiguity with regard to the discourse of humanism, which on the one hand operates with a “terrifying mechanism” and is violent to those outside its discourse but which, on the other, provides the only ethico-political horizon upon which to resist racism, biologism, and, we might add, various sexism, might seem slightly surprising. But we might recall that this ambiguity, or something like it, is to be found in a famous passage from “Structure, Sign and Play” also, in Derrida’s description of “two interpretations of interpretation.” One tries to decipher a truth or origin that “escapes play and the order of the sign”; its operations are thus in keeping with the idea of “man” taken as the name of that being that “has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play” (292). The other, inaugurated by Nietzsche, attempts to go beyond both “man” and humanism. These two interpretations of interpretation are “absolutely irreconcilable,” even if they “together share the field” of those paths of inquiry we call the social sciences (293). Nonetheless, for Derrida there is no question of choosing between them, in part because the category of choice is trivial today; but also because the first task of thought is to try to “conceive of the common ground, and the *différance* of this irreducible difference” (Ibid.).

We can call such a question *historical*, Derrida tells us, and we are only catching a glimpse of it today—which means that we are by no means over or past it. In Derrida’s vocabulary of reproduction (invoking, consciously or not, the figure of the Socratic mid-wife), it still requires conception, formation, gestation, labor. It requires us to face what is as yet not only unnamed but, more importantly, unnamable. Anticipating a little, this unnamable (which seems to add another register to this language of reproduction) can be associated with what Derrida will come to call the event: the nonspecies, the mute, the infant, the “terrifying form of monstrosity” he speaks so famously of in this text (Ibid.). Such a monstrosity can certainly no longer be the human of humanism. But we cannot simply choose against the latter. What we might call, following Lyotard, the “differend” between them indicates a new kind of question.

What the nature of this question is will require us to turn to other, more explicitly political texts, and perhaps to another or broader conception of the possibility of philosophy. But we can already see that Derrida’s thought cannot unproblematically be called “anti-humanist,” not because there is another humanism hiding “beneath” or “behind” his thinking, but because Derrida

senses, in most of the texts that address the question of humanism, at any rate, that it will not be so easily left behind. The oppositional logic of “anti-”humanism would indeed situate any such thinking within the purview of humanism by the logic we referred to above, a logic that is familiar to readers of Derrida. To say that one is “against” or “past” humanism is perhaps the surest way to carry it forward by other means. But we see from both “The Ends of Man” and *Of Spirit* that the problem here is not just conceptual, but has a sharper political edge. The question is not simply one of rejecting a particular intellectual tradition (and the many forms it has taken) in the name of some “death of man.” If the various forms of humanism can be linked together through the common failure to question the unity of the value of “man” and its history, if the “we” of humanism permits the philosopher (or the political theorist) to speak too quickly on behalf of others, the notion of the human nonetheless also underlies all the basic political structures and institutions that lay claim to a “globalized” or cosmo-politics. What would notions such as human rights or crimes against humanity mean, if not to invoke a trans-national notion of the human as a proper subject of both ethics and politics? Humanism’s claim to universality, which is Western philosophy’s claim to universality, is grounded in the ancient Greek and Roman ethical and political concept of cosmopolitanism, of citizenship in the world. A citizenship, that is, without boundaries—other than those boundaries, deemed essential in more than one sense of that word, between the human and its other.⁵

And so we find ourselves within the orbit of a certain kind of philosophy, one that purports to universality, but only from a very specific cultural and linguistic tradition and locale. The word “philosophy,” like the word “cosmopolitan,” is Greek, its heritage European, its history “Western.” To take an image from *Rogues*, this philosophy—along with its best-formed child, reason, that most “human” of all human essences according to this tradition—set out from the shores of the Mediterranean. But in this “multi-cultural” or “global” world (neither word is satisfactory), reason finds itself in crisis, as does the philosophy that produced and reared it. It has been cast adrift, has gone out from its place of birth. Or perhaps, Derrida suggests, there is a better metaphor, that of the colonizer, armed or unarmed: reason has “unful[ed]

5. I don’t have the space in this essay to discuss the figure of animality that is nonetheless obviously also of great importance here.

its sails for a geopolitical voyage across Europe and its languages, across Europe and the rest of the world” (“The World of the Enlightenment to Come” 119). And the question is just how it has fared on its voyages, whether it will return, and return unaffected. Indeed, is reason first of all Mediterranean? Does it remain tied to its shores, even in all of its wanderings? Can it break, “in a decisive or critical fashion, from its birthplaces, its geography, and its genealogy” (Ibid.)?

Although Derrida will not change his mind about a certain kind of philosophizing, we can see that “The Ends of Man” is not, as it were, his last word on the subject. In his essay on Kant’s “On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy,” Derrida plays on the apocalyptic tone of crisis that may be said to accompany Kant’s discussion—and we might also recognize in this tone a certain reactionary current in present thought, especially regarding the apocalypse of so-called “anti-humanism.” What interests Derrida in Kant’s combat with the “mystagogues” that are the occasion for Kant’s essay is what happens to the term “philosophy” in this debate. Let us remember that Kant is concerned in this article with a particular kind of “philosopher,” personified by one Schlosser, for whom the truth is revealed in intuition. This means that the truth is a kind of secret, one whose owners “have it in *themselves* but unfortunately cannot express and universally communicate it in language” (Kant 51, italics given). Such a state of affairs is of course of considerable horror for Kant, who twice speaks of this “surrogate of cognition,” this “exalting vision” in terms of the very death of philosophy (62, 71). This potential death, this fear of apocalypse, is what interests Derrida, who points to a claim that Kant makes at the outset of the essay regarding the meaning of philosophy itself. According to Kant, philosophy has relinquished its “first meaning” as the “scientific wisdom of life” (Kant 51). It is this relinquishment of an original meaning that makes it susceptible to being taken over by these mystagogues, who adorn themselves with it in spite of the inherent irrationalism hiding in their exaltations. Such an event, says Derrida, tells us something about the name “philosophy,” that it “can circulate without its original *reference*” (“On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone” 126, italics given). The name can wander, its relation to its originary sense is not insured against accident.

That Derrida might be happy to draw such a conclusion is perhaps not very surprising. But let us note that this possibility, which is a possibility that Derrida’s entire thought opens, is what in turn opens philosophy to that to which, in “The Ends of Man,” it still appeared closed. And the question of

this opening is linked to another, one that is very pressing for us today, those of us who still try to think and study what are called the “humanities.” What is the place of the humanities and of the philosophical discipline today, in this age of crisis and among the various calls to order to which it is subject (and which I take it we have seen anything but the end of)? What is the place of these pursuits in this age of “technoscience” and of “globalization”? If the narrative of emancipation can no longer be legitimated, if the discourse of a certain reason is ineffectual or, worse, violent in the face of a plurality of rationalities? If humanism is dead? And if the discourse of development has no room for the endless debates, musings, readings, cul de sacs, indecisions, of disciplines that provide nothing to technoscientific advancement?

Perhaps its place is nowhere. But if it is a question of justice, and of justice in a time of a “globalization” that ignores both the reason of the Enlightenment and the ever prominent plurality of discourses, then there will at the very least be a need for a thinking—and we might still call it, following a certain Derrida, “philosophy”—of the world, or better, worlds, that such a program misses. Such a philosophy, however, would depend precisely on the ability of this name to wander from its originary sense. That is, it would depend—and depend necessarily—on the failure of philosophy (taken, for instance, as the “scientific wisdom of life”) to fulfill its original purpose of producing a cosmopolitan kingdom of rational ends. It would depend, then, on the resulting failure of humanity to reach this end, on the interruption of its journey. But would a philosophy that has wandered from its course as a result of going out into the world not still be cosmopolitan? Even, perhaps, more cosmopolitan than when it first set out from the shores of the Mediterranean to conquer the cosmos?

In order to approach such questions, let us leave the philosophical colloquium and turn to a more explicitly political forum. In a paper originally delivered as a lecture at UNESCO, Derrida defines the philosopher as “someone for whom philosophy is not given, someone who in essence must question him or herself about the essence and destination of philosophy” (“Of the Humanities and the Philosophical Discipline” 9). This questioning is a duty, and it is perhaps more pressing than it at first appears. Derrida suggests that UNESCO and all the other international institutions that are built upon and invoke ideas of human rights and international law “imply a philosophy, indeed, imply philosophy in the discourse, and I would even say in the language, of their charter” (Ibid.). Derrida’s themes here are precisely the words

“philosophy” and “cosmopolitan.” Indeed, it is Kant’s “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose” that is a starting point for his considerations, this famed text that, as Derrida puts it, can be described (among others of Kant’s historical and political writings) “as *announcing*, that is to say, predicting, prefiguring and prescribing a certain number of international institutions which only came into being this century” (7, italics given).

Humanity, universal history, the concept of a final end for rational human beings (*Endzweck* or *letzter Zweck*, it doesn’t really matter which)—we will not escape the Idea in the Kantian sense so easily, and Derrida is aware of it. But he is also aware of the issues that it poses for a philosophy that must attempt to think the situation that we call “today.” We will not go into the limitations of the philosophical approach to universal history that informs Kant’s conception of this cosmopolitan history. Let us only note that what Derrida calls the “teleological axis” of Kant’s discourse “has become the tradition of European philosophy” (14), a discourse and a teleology that has consistently put Europe at the top of the hierarchy or at the end and purpose of universal history. This leaves the thought of both a philosophy for today and of the institutions it has been fundamental in founding (institutions that may even be becoming increasingly urgent) with a problem: “This eurocentric discourse forces us to ask ourselves ... whether today our reflection concerning the unlimited extension and the reaffirmation of a right to philosophy should not both *take into account and de-limit* the assignation of philosophy to its Greco-European origin or memory” (Ibid., italics given).

Contrary to how philosophy is treated in “The Ends of Man,” Derrida invokes here a “right to philosophy,” the right of all people, “men and women,” to philosophy. This right is “cosmopolitical” (6), not European and not national, “no longer simply national, less national today than ever” (8). But the concerns of “The Ends of Man” remain relevant—eurocentric philosophical discourse remains violent to the very difference of the “other” that presses down upon it, the difference, indeed, with which the other threatens this discourse. The difference that makes it anxious. The question, then, is whether it is possible, in invoking this cosmopolitical right of *all* people (men and women—Derrida repeatedly insists on this) to philosophy, to conceive of a philosophy that neither denies nor surrenders to this “Greco-European origin or memory.” A conception of philosophy that would nonetheless avoid “the old, tiresome, worn-out and wearisome opposition between Eurocentrism and anti-Eurocentrism” (14).

The question of this possibility returns us to what we above referred to as the event, to the interruption of the teleology of the Kantian Idea. For Derrida's claim is that philosophy "is no longer determined by a program, an originary language or tongue whose memory it would suffice to recover so as to discover its destination" (Ibid.). It is, in fact it always has been, open to the event, to what happens to it, including a kind of "appropriation" that would not be a process of making one's own what belongs to others. Philosophy can be turned to different ends, is already turned away from its end. It defies ends, saturable contexts, the limits of any frame or parergon. It is not a question simply of doing philosophy another way. Philosophy, says Derrida, "if there is such a thing, is the *other way*" (15, italics given). Even its birth, its origins, are suspect, "bastard, hybrid, grafted, multilinear and polyglot" (Ibid.). It does not have a sole memory. Which means we must adjust our practice of the history of philosophy, the practice of history and of philosophy more generally, "to this reality which was also a chance and which more than ever remains a chance" (Ibid.). One cannot and must not deny its history, its attachment to a particular set of cultural and linguistic traditions. But this history does not and cannot define it or confine it. It is not a question of "inclusion" or of "exclusion," but of recognizing that no telos can control what happens to philosophy, which is always already open, for instance, through the logic of the parergon, to its own interruption, to the event of what will happen to it. To what is happening to it ("On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone" 168). And the same, by extension, applies to the human.

Against the "globalization" of which he is so distrustful, Derrida, perhaps surprisingly, comes to speak of "a new cosmopolitics" ("On Cosmopolitanism" 4). But given what we have seen, such a cosmopolitics would obviously not be a simple return to the modern version of this tradition, of which Kant is perhaps the most famous exponent. This new cosmopolitics is interested in "forms of solidarity yet to be invented" (Ibid.), forms that remain a task for political thought, for a certain kind of *philosophical* thought today. But this thought would not and could not be a thought that simply adhered to or tried to re-establish an old or existing law. It would have to accept that ours is a time that is calling for the establishment of a new law ("Mochlos, or The Conflict of the Faculties" 110). The question that remains, in the face of this demand and in view of the fact that no previous law is up to the task, is how to "transform and improve the law" in order to establish this new cosmopolitics ("On Cosmopolitanism" 22). It will be a question of judgment or, perhaps

more properly here, *decision*: of what Derrida calls that abyssal leap between knowledge and doing, of negotiating between the law and the unconditional demand for justice that exceeds that law. Such a task would thus operate outside the program of any teleology. Indeed, teleology would here be unjust precisely because it closes off or attempts to close off the unconditioned, the monstrous or badly formed, the bastard, polyglot or hybrid. Of course, such a thinking could not deny the claims of law any more than those of justice. But if there is to be an “Enlightenment” to come (and in this respect, Derrida tells us, he remains Kantian, “Of the Humanities and the Philosophical Discipline” 17), it will have to be open to a new reason in order precisely to do justice to the plurality of reasons, and of ends, it now encounters.

Philosophy tries, and has always tried, to think the “world,” this cosmos, and to place humanity within it. How is this to be done in a world characterized by “plural rationalities” or “regional ontologies” (Derrida) or by “micrologies” or “local determinism” (Lyotard)? The most obvious question is perhaps whether philosophy needs to or can think this world at all—and yet we have seen Derrida explicitly urging a “right to philosophy,” a right that has certain echoes with another supposed “anti-humanist,” Lyotard, who claims at the outset of *The Differend* that, in response to the “miserable slackening” of our time, “The time has come to philosophize” (xiii).

Such possibly unexpected assertions would certainly seem to indicate that philosophy has not yet arrived at its “end,” the death that so exercised Kant in the “Superior Tone” essay. Nonetheless, if this is so philosophy has a problem, for if it must continue to think the world, a “globalized” world (which if nothing else indicates—no more—a world of complex values and multiple ends), this demand comes at a time in which the tools it has traditionally used to do so are most in question. Philosophy, too, will have to mean something other than it has. The suggestion here, however, is that it cannot simply be abandoned. I have tried to suggest that this is at least in part because it is linked to something else that cannot simply be abandoned: the figure of the human—and perhaps to the (cosmopolitan?) “forms of solidarity” this figure continues to demand. Though I cannot do full justice to this claim here, I think that a very similar argument appears in Lyotard also, who urges us, perhaps to the surprise of some, to begin to trace a line of resistance to what he calls modernity’s failing (*défaillance*: also “default” in the legal sense) (“Universal History and Cultural Differences” 323). Lyotard too links the entire problem we have been discussing here to the status of the human “we,” a “we” that

has become increasingly problematic in the face of cultural and other differences. Let us at least remark on the resonances of this claim with similar ones by Derrida, who opens his essay on Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties* with the question whether "we" can say "we" and debate together in a common language today ("Mochlos, or The Conflict of the Faculties" 87)—a seemingly essential possibility for any politics based on rational discourse. Indeed, the very need to ask this question is a sign of what Derrida calls there the "being-ill" (*mal-être*) that characterizes our time. This being-ill is a result precisely of the difficulty of saying "our" time: "our time is perhaps the time in which it is no longer so easy for us to say 'our time'" (*A Taste for the Secret* 7). "Our time" is one in which human solidarity can no longer be taken for granted. To resist this being-ill, however, to suggest that there is no crisis of reason and to insist that the issue is simply one of not being reasonable—not to say rational—enough, to insist, then, on this "we," is to risk being violent to the multiplicity of cultures and worlds invoked by Lyotard and referred to by Derrida in "The Ends of Man" under the name of philosophy's other. This multiplicity or diversity has shaken humanism, has caused the name of "man" to "tremble" (133)—and has thus shaken the very foundations of political philosophy.

But one should not be fooled into thinking that this leads unproblematically to any "anti-humanism." Indeed, that the entire problem of "humanity" is of considerable import in Derrida's work should make us cautious about such hasty conclusions. Rather, in keeping with his talk of a malaise or "being-ill" of our time, we should note that Derrida has spoken, and in some very public political forums, of what in one of those forums he calls "a worldwide shake-up in which humanity is in search of itself" today, and suggested that the concept of humanity is not only still very new (at least "for philosophers who aren't sleepwalking"), but that the "old question about what is specifically human needs to be entirely reworked," especially with regard to "all the traits that metaphysics restricted to humans, of which *not one* is resistant to analysis" ("My Sunday Humanities" 105, 103, italics given). Humanity remains the "promise" of humankind (103) in spite of this impossible or hardly possible "we," a promise that is linked to the political questions raised above. It is in the name of this promise, which is precisely not an end, that justice is to be done.

Justice to what? If we consider the figure of monstrosity invoked at the end of the "Structure, Sign and Play" essay, we can see that this question, though surely necessary, already asks slightly too much. For we do not

entirely know what the human is or ought to be. Surely we recognize other human beings. But do they represent moments of a single “humanity”? Do we know, in every case, what kind of things they are, how they think, what ends they pursue, how they will or ought to judge, feel or act? For Derrida, justice demands that the very idea of humanity remain something that can surprise us, something that can arrive unannounced, that cannot ever be fully anticipated. It is thus a kind of event itself; it is open to the event. When Derrida refers to humanity, at least in the more explicitly political texts, he is referring to the coming of that which cannot be fully programmed or “authorized” in advance through its name.

But Derrida is not pessimistic about this—it is, rather, an affirmative moment. The “monstrous” is formless—not (necessarily) a monster. If one does not know what the human is, one’s work is ahead. Speaking in another but related context and referring to an important and very much related figure, “unconditional hospitality,” Derrida offers a suggestion of how this formless, mute, as yet unnameable “monstrosity” might be conceived with regard to the human:

to be suspicious about the limits of man is not to be anti-humanist, on the contrary, it’s a way of respecting what remains “to come,” under the name and the face of what we call “man.” You have to be more and more human, and it’s not obvious what it means. We are not human enough, we are never human enough, so from that point of view unconditional hospitality is not restricted by what one knows under the name of man or what is proper to man. We have to be hospitable to what is coming, and to a new figure, a new shape of what one calls humanity. (“A Conversation with Jacques Derrida” para. 44)

Humanism in most of its traditional guises (there are many) fails to respect the possibility of this new shape and is not attentive to what is unexpected, to what is “other” to its program, to the idea that we are not and never will be human enough. But so-called anti-humanism thinks it can ignore both the promise and the (political) debt owed to humanism for the notion of human rights, for the possibility of a crime against humanity, even for democracy itself. Derrida is obviously suspicious of humanism and of the underlying and unquestioned assumptions that motivate so much philosophical and political discourse. But he is more cautious of the debt owed to the idea of humanity—and more cautious toward its remaining promise, the promise that resides in this unknown shape of what is to come

under its name. If thinking this promise remains a task for philosophy, this is because philosophy, a certain kind of philosophy (but maybe philosophy is always *this* kind of philosophy), is and must remain open to what happens in the name of humanity. The name of humanity is thus not the invocation of an end, and it therefore has no end. It signals, rather, a demand to be willing to rethink what this name could designate now, today—which willingness is the constant renewal of its promise.

Let us note that this word, “humanity,” does not cease to be an idea, and maybe even an Idea, capital ‘I.’ Indeed, given Derrida’s continual return to it, particularly in some of the more explicitly political texts, such an idea would seem to be a condition of politics itself. One must be able to say, here, today, that a particular situation is unjust, and unjust in the name of humanity. The recent and on-going genocides and sexual violence in Darfur would be an all-too-ready example. This situation is intolerable and will not wait, nor can it await the fulfillment of any cosmopolitan universal history. Those who suffer, in Darfur and elsewhere, will not conform neatly to the dictates of such a history, given to them by others. And let us also note that in this very description of the problem another idea is present: that of a world, even a shared world, in which one is nonetheless called to respond to such injustices. This idea too seems to be a condition for thinking the politics of “our time.” Perhaps we can to some extent track where such ideas have come from. What Derrida’s engagements with humanism suggest is that philosophy, and the humanities more generally, will also need to be more open to wherever these ideas will have been going. It may be, indeed, that only the humanities can be so open, since they themselves are susceptible to wandering from their ends, and that the time of the humanities is therefore, in a very real way, now.

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Abstract

Although Derrida is often taken to be “anti-humanist,” this paper argues that his engagement with the legacy of humanism is not only much more complex, but that it retains and alters this legacy in such a way as to provide a new way of thinking about the human in a trans-national or “global” context. This argument is at the same time an occasion to briefly explore some of the implications of this for Derrida’s relation to philosophy as a humanistic discipline. It first tracks some of Derrida’s most explicit discussions of humanism over the course of several works and lines of inquiry, showing what I take to be a shift in his work from the critical stance of “The Ends of Man” to the more nuanced discussions in some of the later “political” writings. My main goal is to link Derrida’s discussions of humanism to his work on cosmopolitanism and particularly to his argument that political thinking must negotiate the troubling but important legacy of a philosophical universalism that is nonetheless tied to a very particular cultural and historical past. I take this problem to be analogous to the ambiguity of a humanist legacy that is potentially violent and limiting in its conception of universal humanity while being at the same time what underwrites important political concepts such as human rights. Derrida argues that philosophy is the “other way” and is thus always open to redirection and reappropriation by traditions other than its own. Taking the “human” as an Idea in the Kantian sense, I argue that it too can wander from its end, liberate itself from the strictures of universal humanity while nonetheless retaining the promise and the political consideration due that humanity. Derrida thus offers an innovative way to rethink the humanist legacy in the context of a plurality of cultures. I end by suggesting that philosophy and the humanities more generally, far from being irrelevant, may thus be more relevant than ever.

Keywords: Derrida, humanism, cosmopolitanism, philosophy, politics, humanities

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