

Margins of Desire: The Foundations of Derrida's Social Ethics

Niva Arav

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Boca Raton, Florida
USA • 2010

ISBN-10: 1-59942-307-3
ISBN-13: 978-1-59942-307-4

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Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my deepest thanks to my supervisors Prof. Michael Strauss and Prof. Oded Balaban . Prof. Strauss introduced me to the philosophy of Derrida, and Prof. Balaban guided my way with sensitivity and wisdom. To both, I owe my way of thinking. Prof. Gabriel Motzkin, who was the external advisor, encouraged me to articulate my interpretation, although it did not always fit it with the common views on Derrida's philosophy.

There were many people who gave me interesting feedback, valuable suggestions and precious support, for which I am grateful. Dr. Avner Choen and Dr. Orna Harari criticized my ideas in a very productive way. Ruthie Lustig was there for me in all my difficult moments. Dr. Albert Ginzberg patiently corrected my French spelling. Amira Kedem Ronit Rot and Tirtsa Valentine read the manuscript and helped to make it more reader friendly. Dr. Rebecca Toueg translated the thesis from the Hebrew version with great patience and a critical eye.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to express tremendous thanks to my family. To my husband Amos Arav who listened to all my indecisions, read the manuscript, and did not complain even once, even though he did not always understand what I was talking about. And to my children Yehuda, Tirza and Reuma, who encouraged me and were happier than I was when I received my Ph.D.

Introduction

Derrida, who is known for his complex and obscure style of writing, presents a challenge that is occasionally frustrating to anyone who tries to read his works. To the same extent, he is known as having introduced linguistic innovations such as deconstruction, *différance*, trace, *supplément*, etc. that have taken root in contemporary intellectual thought in the West philosophy and has influenced it. But for what purpose were these linguistic innovations created? What was the question that troubled Derrida? What was the problem he was trying to resolve? The aim of this book is to actually deal with these issues. In the course of this book I shall focus on the problems that troubled Derrida, explain the reason for the linguistic innovations in his philosophical teachings, and hopefully dispel the clouds of obscurity that pervade his writings.

One of the main reasons for the considerable difficulty in reading Derridean texts is the gap between the expectations of the reader regarding the way in which the contents of the text would be presented before him and the way in which these contents are actually presented. Readers of Derrida's writings encounter a text that seems to correspond to the strictest rules of academic composition in which an ordered set of arguments lays out the problem that the text will focus upon, the reasons for accepting or rejecting them, and finally the conclusion to be derived from what has been said so far. Normally, careful treading of this kind conducts the reader over pitfalls and provides a clear pathway from the beginning of the argument to its end. But in following Derrida, the pathway disappears and we do not know from where we have come and where we are going. Since Derrida uses his writings to converse with the reader rather than to present his philosophical arguments,¹ the reader finds that the more he progresses the more he becomes entangled in a mass of arguments and statements. The reader does not know how he has reached the position he is in even though he has followed the written text step by step. In the kind of writing that is conducted as a conversation between Derrida and an imaginary audience, the logic of conversation predominates,² and the subject matter is displayed before the reader through associations that the contents arouse in Derrida or in the imaginary audience with which he converses. In his book *De la grammatologie*,

¹ This is more evident in the French original, and disappears to a great extent or diminishes in translation.

² On the difference between the logic of conversation and the logic of writing, see Vernant, pp. 204-208.

Derrida himself calls conventional writing (as described above) one-dimensional, and characterizes his own writing as multi-dimensional.³

The multi-dimensional writing to which Derrida refer is an indication of the world that Derrida has created. This world is not the two-dimensional one that develops linearly, but a multi-dimensional world that proliferates like a living colony. In this world, every concrete individual voice serves as a creative center. A collection of concrete individual voices creates and constitutes the phenomenon, the political reality that is linguistic, cultural, historical, scientific, aesthetic, religious, etc.

Derrida's multi-dimensional writing comprises one of the main sources for the difficulty in reading the texts. I shall therefore present in this book the multi-dimensional Derridean world in a one-dimensional form, while attempting to indicate wherever the multi-dimensional aspects of his writings are clearly expressed. The analysis that will follow the presentation of Derrida's philosophical thought is one that will transform the multi-dimensional Derridean ideas into a single objective-rational dimension. This transformation seems to me to be of the kind that the landscape artist creates when he projects a three-dimensional scene onto a two-dimensional canvas. Even when there is such a high degree of similarity between the landscape and the painting that one can say there is "no difference" between them, a real gap exists between the landscape and the painting. In the present case, the landscape is Derrida's oeuvre, and the degree to which this book is a faithful painting of that landscape others may testify. I can testify that the gap between them definitely exists. In answer to the question as to when Derrida's arguments are being presented and when it is my interpretation that is being advanced, it may be said that everything that is said is my interpretation. However, I have tried to be faithful to Derrida's arguments and to present them without judging them or presenting my position even when I disagree with Derrida's position. The working method I have adopted is aimed at exposing the presuppositions that underlie Derrida's standpoints and at clarifying the philosophical problems with which he grappled. The catch here is that this very clarification may be perceived by his disciples as depriving his writings of their radical irony. In my opinion, the interpretation that I offer does not exclude other interpretations and does not negate the many possibilities that Derrida's disciples have found in his writings. I believe that the interpretation presented here sharpens the innovation and audacity of

³ DLG, p. 130; OG, pp. 86-87.

these writings instead of blunting them. At the same time, I hope that this interpretation will be seminal in opening up a new avenue of thought in connection with Derrida's writings.

Derrida is known for his analysis of the texts of other philosophers, and therefore it is almost impossible to discuss his thought without reference to other philosophers, thinkers and writers with whom he is engaged. Since there is already an extensive literature that has dealt with these writers and the relationship between them and Derrida, I have chosen to present them very briefly and simply in a concise form and often merely by exposing the way they appear in Derrida's writings without trying to discuss their basic principles or the complex relationship between them and Derrida. This is in order to present Derrida's position apart from that of the philosophers with whom he is engaged in discussion. Even if the attempt to separate Derrida's position from the one he is criticizing and through which expresses himself, seems to me as contrary to the basic position of Derrida that appears as a dialogue between views and not as absolute and self-sufficient statements, my conformity with this position would make it impossible to present the issues that concern Derrida. For that reason, in the course of my exposition, I shall present them as though Derrida had formulated them in an absolute manner, which of course is not the case at all. For the same reasons I am not going to deal with the ironic aspects of Derrida's writings. This aspect plays a central role in the multi-dimensional writings of Derrida. Yet it seems to me that this very aspect that constitutes such an important component in his multi-dimensional writing⁴ makes it difficult to understand his position. Another matter that will hardly be found in this book is any mention of the various influences on Derrida and a discussion of the similarities and differences between what he says and other philosophical viewpoints. Whenever this occurs in this book it will be in order to draw a comparison that can stress and clarify Derrida's position. Here, too, my guiding considerations are, on one hand, the numerous available texts that deal with this very issue⁵ and on the other hand, an attempt to simplify the complex system as much as possible. The reduced approach described above also affected the range of texts discussed in this book. Derrida's prolific output made it necessary to decide from

⁴ I accept the view of Marian Hobson that Derridean irony functions as a way to indicate the multi-dimensional aspect of a certain issue and not as a way to deride or hint at the negation of the idea. See Hobson, p. 228.

⁵ For example, one can find interesting analyses that deal with the relationship between Derrida and Husserl and between Derrida and Heidegger in the books of Lawlor (2002), Marrati-Guénon (1998) and Kates (2005) among others.

the outset which texts would be included in the discussion. Since the main interest of this book is in the fundamental ethical and social positions of Derrida, I have chosen the first two phases of his writings from which to derive the problems and some of the solutions that have been his concern throughout his life.⁶

Derrida himself thought that his work was of a philosophical nature; therefore this book will treat his work with philosophical tools. As I understand it, Derrida was concerned with the problem of the relationship between the individual and society: how society is composed of a collection of individuals and how the personal privacy of the individual can be preserved within a social system. This means that the problems that had already engaged Derrida's attention in his early writings were concerned with ethical problems. I will attempt to expose the basic assumptions that underlie Derrida's thought and those positions that were so self-understood by him that he did not pay any much attention to them and certainly believed they needed no explanation or elucidation. The understanding of these basic assumptions will shed light both on Derrida's point of view when he asks his questions, and on the solutions that he arrives at. The source of these assumptions lies in his perception of human reality as an irrational and emotional reality and the perception of human individual will as a creative force within the framework of this reality. In this book I shall extract these assumptions, expose their meaning, and clarify how the understanding of human reality as an emotional reality can illuminate Derrida's arguments.

In order to extract Derrida's perception of emotional reality, I have made use of the tools supplied by Cassirer in his book *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. It may be said that these tools constitute the *a priori* supposition of this book since they are presented as analytical tools that are not subject to criticism. Cassirer developed a theory about symbolic forms through which man conceptualizes his world. The choice of Cassirer was made for two reasons. The first is the perception of Cassirer's position as showing the way out from the tradition of rationality. Lofts presents Cassirer, Husserl and Heidegger as the three philosophers who have coped with the philosophical crisis that rationality had led to, and claimed that it was Cassirer who had shown the way to escape from the tradition of rationality.⁷ On the basis of this conclusion I claim that the way in which Cassirer has presented his ideas and method

⁶ In the introduction to the publication of his thesis in 1990, Derrida noted that he was surprised to discover that some of the things still engaging his interest in 1990 had already troubled him in 1954 when the thesis was written. Since Derrida agreed to publish his thesis only in 1990, this book will not refer to it.

⁷ Lofts, p. 584.

of analysis provides a point of view that seems fruitful when used to examine Derrida's work. Cassirer speaks of the various forms of conceptualizations and proposes two different kinds of logic. He claims that human reality is not a given objective reality but one that develops together with the development of human consciousness. His works are entirely devoted to proving this claim. It seems that Derrida would have accepted this claim if he had required it since for him the developing reality that Cassirer was trying to prove is something that was self-understood by him and did not require proof. After the publication of Vernant's book,⁸ it seems that Derrida did not think he had to prove that there were several orders of thought and that rationality, which called logocentrism, was not the sole order of thought possible. The question that troubled him was not if there were mutual interactions between the reality which had its development conditioned by human consciousness and that which conditioned it, but what was the nature of such interactions. What was the order, the logic, of such interactions in which concrete human awareness creates a concrete reality common to all concrete awareness, and is created by it at one and the same time.

As for the second reason, it is an open secret that Derrida was influenced by the philosophy of Heidegger. As we shall see later on, Derrida accepted Dasein as a starting point (although he does not call the reality he refers to by that name). In spite of this, his philosophizing leads towards a non-deterministic world that does not correspond to that of Heidegger. Even Cassirer accepted the Heideggerian Dasein, but did not accept the deterministic worldview that Heidegger derived from it. In April 1929 Heidegger and Cassirer met at Davos in Switzerland and conducted an argument that aroused great public interest and has continued to be the subject of scholarly debate. This great interest was due to the fact that these two personalities, in addition to being well known philosophers, held opposing positions and were diametrically opposed in character. In this debate the sharp difference in the starting point of these two philosophers became evident. Heidegger presupposed a deterministic worldview, while Cassirer presupposed a non-deterministic worldview.⁹ Thus the use of the tools

⁸ The text of Vernant, to which Derrida refers us in note 63 in his article 'Plato's Pharmacy', ends with the claim that myth activates a different form of non-contradictory logic that serves philosophy, and asks how one can give form to such a logic. See Vernant, p. 260

⁹The documentation of this debate can be found in the appendices to Heidegger's *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, under the title 'Davos Lectures'.

constructed by Cassirer will help in sharpening the difference between Heidegger and Derrida, and extract the special position that Derrida develops.

Throughout the book I have made wide use of the term 'politics'. This term functions as a concept that concerns the broad intersubjective-interactive experience of mankind and is not to be interpreted in the narrow sense of political activity. One may speak about ethics, religion, society, culture or history, but these ideas conceal the dimension of will that is involved in their creation. The political field, on the other hand, brings into prominence the relation between the different wills and the reality that these wills bring into existence. As we shall see later on, Derrida does not think that there exists any essence or sphere that is totally independent of the individuals that function in front of or within them, including the intersubjective sphere in which the individual functions.

The book consists of a prologue and three sections. The prologue presents the conclusions that are derived from the entire book. This course of action was done to free the reader from the need to guess in which direction the arguments are working towards. The prologue can therefore be skipped and returned to later at the end of the discussion. The first section is devoted to laying out Derrida's thought. In the second section the emotional reality that shapes the special position of Derrida is presented. In the third section I shall show how the understanding of reality as an emotional reality, which develops from a desire that things should be other than they are, makes it possible to resolve the problems of interpreting Derrida's philosophical beliefs. In this section the necessity of both the freedom of desire and its limitations are exposed, a necessity that is, in my opinion, the most significant revelation of Derrida in his early writings, and is the reason why this book is called *Margins of Desire*.¹⁰

¹⁰ In French as well as in English margin refers to an amount allowed or available beyond what is actually necessary and to a limit in condition. The margins stand for freedom and limitations at one and same time.

Prologue as Epilogue

How is a society created out of a collection of individuals? How do the individuals preserve their individuality within a social system? These are the questions that troubled Derrida from the outset. Derrida's work is based on the assumption that every person is singular. The meaning of this singularity is that every person has been gifted with his own unique voice, a concrete individual voice that is free in spite of the constraints imposed upon him when he tries to realize his ends. The claim regarding the freedom of the voice stems from the assumption that the voice is the only one that determines for itself the end it tries to realize. Normally I would have said that Derrida is speaking about what we call in everyday language 'will', and therefore I would have opened by saying that every person is gifted with his own unique will. But the concept 'will' can be understood on one hand as that which determines the aim ('I want to smoke') and on the other hand as the power that prevents me from realizing a certain aim ('I have stopped smoking by my will power', which means that my will has forced me not to perform something that I am interested in doing) or has organized my aims according to an order of priority ('I want to smoke but do not want to cough as a result of smoking'. In the order of priority, the desire to prevent my coughing is prior to my desire to smoke. Therefore my will prevents me from smoking even though I desire to do so). In order to distinguish between a will that sets an aim and a will that functions as a 'superego' and prevents me from doing things that I desire to do, Derrida calls the will that sets aims without their classification, 'voice'.¹ Since this voice is realized in speech, in language, Derrida begins his discussion by rescuing the voice from the deterministic system within which it is revealed. He claims that the discussion within the deterministic system, the system of the signifiers and the signified to which the attention of the individual is directed, overlooks the individual himself and thus obscures the status of the voice, of the individual, as an independent and free entity who determines his own ends. The irony is that this very claim was interpreted as a discussion in language, an interpretation that deflected it from being a moral discussion regarding the responsibility that rests on the voice as an entity free to determine its own ends, and turned it into a discussion about interpretation, signs and language.

¹ This essential will, that is presented here as the voice, will be called by Derrida singularity in his later writings.

Derrida begins his journey with a study of Husserl's writings. Husserl claimed that scientific research had lost its moral justification, and he called for a return to the discovery of the true aim of science. From the claims made by Derrida it may be understood that scientific research has become so abstract that it is perceived as a reality that has imposed itself upon man. The process that is perceived by thinkers (such as Cassirer for example) as releasing man from imposition, leads according to this reading to coercion and the perception of man himself as a captive of forces greater than himself. In the scientific system man is perceived as a passive creature that is not responsible for the course of events imposed upon him by genetically inherent cultural surroundings or psychological circumstances. Derrida tries once more to reveal the components of abstract concepts in order to provide man again with the understanding that he is the ruler of his world and that he is not a passive creature subject to the whims of forces greater than himself. This would be possible by linking abstract concepts once again with concrete realities.

It is not by chance that Derrida begins his philosophizing with the writings of Husserl. In a certain sense his work can be seen as a response to the challenge set by Husserl whose phenomenological philosophy was a call to return to things in themselves. Heidegger returns to things in themselves, to being, but this is an abstract being. Derrida also deals with things in themselves, but unlike Husserl and Heidegger whose work led them to even higher levels of abstraction, Derrida tries to do so literally – by relating to concrete rather than abstract things. He agrees with Husserl that that man should take responsibility for his actions by philosophical research. He repeatedly sets ethics as the goal of philosophical research just as Socrates had done, and it is in this sense one may understand his claim that his work is philosophical.

Derrida presents a concrete model and focuses attention on the concrete voice, on the individual will as a motivating force. This active, indeterminist force is not merely a force but a concrete human will. It does not wish to activate a general, abstract plan but seeks to realize its own individual concrete aims. Here we can understand Derrida's criticism of Western philosophy. In Western philosophy there is a tendency towards ever increasing abstractions and generalizations that reduce existing things to a single essence. This reduction leads to the limitation of the range of possibilities that lie before the individual in two ways. Firstly, the generalization is carried out by relating to an existing whole while discarding particular instances and emphasizing the common factor. This reference only to what actually exists assumes

that there are no other possibilities except whatever is generally thought to exist. . . Such a position contradicts the assumption that underlies the perception of the voice as a free agent in that it can see in existing things what has not yet come into existence. Secondly, a problem arises when particular instances are discarded, because their very presence can raise possibilities for the concrete individual that no one else can see. The incorporation of particular instances within the generalization conceals them and prevents the possibility of seeing them as new possibilities. The way in which Derrida copes with these problems is a double one:

1. He makes use of concrete terms, and the discussion is always concrete – confronting a concrete text and presenting concrete conclusions for the text under discussion. Sometimes the text itself is a literary one that by its very nature narrates a concrete, individual story.
2. He proposes the act of deconstruction that deals with the dismantling of generalizations and abstractions. This allows for the individual concrete voice to expose what he perceives as having been incorporated and concealed during the process of generalization and abstraction. The more these concepts are perceived as self-understood the more limited are the possibilities that they present to the individual voice. The ability of the concrete individual to expose what these concepts are saying to him opens up the possibility for him to accept or reject the messages he receives.

The individual, concrete point of view that Derrida proposes obviates the possibility of setting up an objective criterion for moral behavior to which one could refer. In his book, *After Virtue*, MacIntyre points to the loss of the objective criterion and on the individual viewpoint as the root cause of emotive ethics that threatens to disintegrate the social system. Emotive (emotional) ethics claims that ethics is actually another name for judgment that expresses preference, position or feeling. This is another kind of judgment than that which relates to facts. The judgment related to facts can be, true or false and whether it is true or false can be determined objectively. For example, if we say that someone uprooted a tree, one can go to the place where the tree had stood and see whether the tree was uprooted. On the other hand, moral judgment that expresses a position or feeling is neither right nor wrong, neither good nor evil, because there are no objective criteria. The criteria it uses may be social norms but these are not objective criteria. For example, if we say that someone uprooted a tree and by doing so committed an evil act, it is no problem to determine whether or not

the tree was uprooted but only as to whether it was an evil act, which must be examined by applying some criteria. Perhaps the tree was old and was a danger to the public, so that uprooting it was a good deed, or that the old tree was of a high historical value and therefore uprooting it was an evil act. There are no objective criteria to determine the moral status of the act. MacIntyre claims that this argument can continue and emphasize that we are using moral judgment not only to express our feelings and positions but also to create these same reactions in others. This claim assumes that there is no difference between manipulative and non-manipulative relationships. The elimination of the difference between manipulative and non-manipulative relationships stands contrary to previous moral perceptions. Kant, for example, distinguishes between the mutual relations among people that are moral relationships, and non-moral relationships, precisely on the basis of the difference between the way a person uses another in a manipulative manner, such as treating him as a means, and a non-manipulative relationship, such as treating the other person as an end. Treating the other person as an end means to present him with the reasons for an action in such a way as to enable him to weigh and consider the reasons. It means not to try to convince him only by means of reasons which the other person will think are good reasons. It implies recourse to a valid decisive criterion without relation to the specific aims for which man, as a rational creature, must carry out his own decisions. Contrariwise, to treat the other person as a means implies making use of every persuasion or consideration that might influence him effectively. Effective influence enables me to turn the other person into a tool to fulfill my own aims. In order to do so, I must make use of emotional rather than rational means of persuasion.

MacIntyre claims that if emotivism is right, the distinction between treating the other as a means or an end is illusion since it has no objective criterion and one cannot treat others as ends but only as means. In such a reality, from my point of view, everyone can help me or, alternatively, hinder me from realizing my wish. Thus the distinction between treating others as a means or an end is no distinction at all.

MacIntyre sees emotive society as a place where individual desires encounter each other, and in which each person with his own positions and preferences considers the world merely as the arena in which to obtain satisfaction and interprets reality as a series of opportunities for pleasure, as a place where the enemy is boredom. The supreme value in such world is a freedom of action. But, argues MacIntyre, such a way of life is available only to someone who is rich enough to support it. How would

a society that accepts the assumptions of emotivism appear? In MacIntyre's view, since not all the members of society are rich enough, society develops by establishing organized life with a bureaucratic structure that is sharply contrasted with the wealthy style of life described above. The life of the wealthy with their unlimited means are constantly in search of aims for which means can be used. But bureaucratic organizations are characterized as being in state of constant struggle to preserve resources. The central responsibility in the organization of bureaucratic life is to direct the human and material resources of the organization in the most efficient manner in order to realize its aim. Every economic organization weighs the cost against the benefit as a criterion of achievement. Economic rationality is the adaptation of means towards an end in the most efficient and inexpensive manner.

In a system of this kind, there is no criterion that will tell us which value is higher or lower. Values are created by human choice. Everyone has a conscience that cannot be disputed, and values are based upon a choice that has a completely subjective justification. Questions about the aims are actually questions about values that cannot be resolved but can only be chosen. As a system that is totally emotional there is no rational criterion that can be referred to in order to justify it except the criterion of utility. The application of the utility criterion will show that within the economic framework the only authority is the one in which its power is effective. The economic framework is basically a competitive one because it presupposes the accumulation of power and means that will enable the individual to realize his freedom of action. This means that within the framework of those values that are aimed as providing freedom of action, a form of life is created in which one individual can amass enough resources and power that can limit the freedom of action of other individuals without giving us an objective criterion by which we can limit this accumulation of resources in the hands of a single person or a group of people. The concentration of resources in the hand of a single person or a small group of people can lead to a society in which the range of possibilities open to most of its members is very limited.

From an analysis of Derrida's position we obtain the picture indicated by MacIntyre. Derrida claims that individual considerations are always teleological and that their rationality serves the aim that the individual wishes to realize. Therefore the attempt to claim that it is possible to set up a system of non-teleological rational arguments has no basis. The other is perceived as someone who is able to prevent me

from realizing my wish or to help me to do so. In order to obtain his cooperation in helping me to realize my wish I shall use every argument that will serve my purpose. As in the system that was sketched by MacIntyre, within the system Derrida constructs there is no possibility to resolve the differences between different aims and it is necessary simply to choose. The system of general considerations that MacIntyre presents corresponds to the general considerations presented by Derrida. That is to say, the same system described by Derrida corresponds to the emotive system described by MacIntyre.

MacIntyre analyzes the social system in this way in order to show that an emotive moral system leads to social disintegration, and as such it cannot be considered a moral system at all. Derrida, on the other hand, thinks that this is human political reality and not a moral system. From the way in which he analyzes this reality it may be said that he accepts MacIntyre's claim regarding the disintegrating forces that underlie the system. But he thinks that the limitation of possibilities among a large group of people would be a real threat to the administrative freedom of the individual and expose the need for a balance between the individual tendency to realize concrete individual aims and the threat that unlimited realization of this kind could lead to the degeneration of society and the disappearance of the individual. Therefore, although human political reality needs some ethical considerations to avert this threat of degeneration, it may by no means be considered in itself a moral system.

From an initial glance Derrida's position may be seen as a repetition of the claim that the freedom of a person ends where it clashes with the freedom of another person. But Derrida does not formulate any ethical principle, nor does he present such a principle. An ethical principle assumes the existence of society and formulates the kind of behavior suitable for that society. Derrida, on the other hand, does not assume the existence of society as an obvious fact just as he does not assume the existence of the concrete individual as self-evident. Man and society are not the creations of God who ensures their existence until he decides otherwise, irrespective of how the individuals behave in a given society. His very presentation of both the individual and society as a continuous human creation implies that their existence is not ensured. The existence of the individual and society depends on the way in which individuals act. The need to allow for the realization of desire on one hand and to limit it on the other is a fundamental necessity derived from the essential nature of man and society. For this reason, Derrida claims that in order to preserve his ability to desire, the individual

must assume responsibility for the systems he establishes, and he cannot act automatically. The responsibility that Derrida refers to is the concrete responsibility that demands intentional considerations for every action performed by the individual throughout his life.

Derridean philosophy is concerned with the concrete awareness that places every person in confrontation with a reality that is shaped by his own decision. In Derrida's view, there is no other power in which man can find refuge and to which he can transfer responsibility for the actions taken. In a certain sense this can be seen as a truly Copernican revolution that places every person in confrontation with himself, since his very existence as an individual is merely the creation of himself for which he must take responsibility.

This emphasis on concrete individuality may lead to an extreme individualistic and relativistic interpretation that dismantles the whole system of relationships between people and places each of them as a separate unit on its own. In this kind of situation there is no place for ethical considerations in order to preserve the system of human interrelations. But in Derridean philosophy the voice of the individual can only exist within the social formations in which it functions. Thus, despite the essential freedom of the voice to act without prior conditions, its ability to realize itself and act depends upon the society in which it lives. In order to act and realize his aims, a person must take responsibility to ensure that the society in which he lives will be one that will allow him to set up his aims and realize them. The viewpoint that could have been interpreted as egocentric and inconsiderate is now found to be one that demands the consideration of others. The question as to what is the framework of interrelations that will facilitate the setting up and realization of concrete and individual aims, and what are the forces that will ensure that the emphasis on the realization of individual aims will not destroy it, remains an open one.

Derridean philosophy that exposes the constant need to discuss and formulate the framework of interrelations in which freedom of action can be realized, turns out to be a philosophy in which the ethical question regarding the right way to live stands at the center of its concerns.

In this book I shall follow the path taken by Derrida by reconstructing the way in which his philosophical and ethical concerns are formulated.

First Section – The Concrete Individual and Politics

In this section I shall present Derrida's philosophy as an investigation that seeks to answer the question regarding the relations between the individual and society.

Derrida tries to clarify how on one hand the uniqueness and freedom of will of the individual who is constructed and designed by society is preserved, and on the other hand how a society with a collection of common aims is being created out of individuals that have freedom of will and personal aims.

In Part I, which is devoted to the voice, I shall show the way in which Derrida presents the concrete individual will. I shall demonstrate that Derrida's concern with the concrete is expressed through the representation of the voice (and not the will) as the motivating free force to set out its aims. The voice constitutes the non-deterministic intuitive instance that is both creative and primary that gives itself presence in writing. Writing is the realization and presence of the voice in the world, and constitutes the axis that allows the phenomenon to develop.

In Part II, I shall discuss the way in which the phenomenon is created. Phenomenon is the system of social and cultural conventions that constitute what is given and is expressed in writing. In this way, writing becomes the meeting point between the presence of the individual voice and conventional social and cultural generalizations. It is important to understand that, for Derrida, writing is a general term for culture, history, politics, science, art, etc.¹ This means that writing is what is given. In this framework there are conventions that dictate the ends that the individual perceives as possibilities. These conventions are expressed by the generally accepted meaning of the words, the concepts and the signs, as well as in the concepts of time, space, number, and subjectivity that shape reality and constitute the system of possibilities for the concrete individual to act. All this leads to a common factor that finds expression in historicism, culture and science. For Derrida, the fact that the system of conventions changes does not mean it does not exist. At any given moment, the concrete individual experiences the system of conventions as absolute and fixed.² It seems that this is the reason why Derrida rejects the attempt to ascribe relativistic positions to him.

¹ A very good explanation and expansion of this claim can be found in the introduction of Johnson, (1993): 1-11

² A similar assertion can be found in Gasché, (1994): 6-11.

This section will also clarify Derrida's position as a moral one that revolves around the axis of responsibility, which in itself is a phenomenon of the voice. In the course of this section it will be made clear that Derrida creates a revolving system that moves like the motions of a tornado, with multidimensional axes that serve as the centers of motion (voice, trace, writing, responsibility) that cannot be located or reverted to. The constant change in axes indicates perpetual change and motion in the system. As a result, the whole system evolves between concrete individual and undetermined vertices, and its development constitutes a general-abstract deterministic vertex that stands opposite the individual vertices.

In this section I have made little use of other interpretations in order to present my own close reading of the Derrida's text without interrupting the sequence. Since Derrida himself raises the issues in the form of a debate with various thinkers, an analysis of this writings may be confusing. The reader may accompany me on the journey of decipherment in discussing Derrida's debate with Husserl, for example, and the moment he begins to get used to his presence, Husserl vanishes and someone else appears in his place. Another difficulty that may arise during the reading of the first section comes from the need to present the special concepts of Derrida and the way in which he uses them. In a certain sense, this section seems to me as though it is the beginning of a novel in which the author presents the characters of his plot. The multiplicity of characters and the fabric of their lives, with their still unclear interrelationships, seem confusing at times. But as the story goes on, the characters become more familiar and the earlier details that were meaningless come together and clarify the plot. Here the characters are the concepts, and the discussion about their function and relations with other philosophical concepts corresponds to the story of their childhood and the relationships between the characters in the novel. During the course of writing, I have endeavored to clarify every new concept when it appears so as to make understanding easier even when the explanation mars the continuity of discourse.

Part I – The Voice

One of the main forms in which Derrida's multi-dimensional writing is expressed is the way it makes use of the texts by philosophers and writers. From a first impression it seems as though his intention is to present an interpretation of the selected text, but in the course of reading it becomes clear that this is not really an interpretation but a kind of debate that he is conducting with the writer, during which his own positions are raised.¹ Since Derrida, who opposes the presentation of a systematic method, presents his position only in this way, I am bound to join him in his journey and retrieve his arguments from within the discussion he conducts. Below, I shall follow the way in which Derrida sets up the concrete individual will (voice) as the producer of a world. For this purpose I shall clarify what the voice is in Derrida's philosophy and show that it is concrete individual will that serves as the origin of the socio-cultural system and is free of prior conditions.

In Derrida's philosophy there is a special validity in the common expressions such as "I want to make my voice heard" or "every voice counts". Derrida claims that consciousness can only become viable through the voice, and stresses that the voice he is speaking about is not the material, physical voice.² What is the non-material voice? An examination of Derrida's arguments will show that the voice, which constitutes for him the essential aspect of his individuality, is without sound, and is not characterized by any noise that he can emit.

Traditionally, sight is perceived as the intuitive sense of perception, and therefore it is usually seen as an instance of direct apprehension and represents intuition. But in Derrida's view sight lacks immediate apprehension and is not active and creative. For this reason, Derrida believes that sight cannot fulfil its function as an instance of direct apprehension and replaces it with the voice. In this section I shall examine the way in which Derrida presents the voice and show that it embodies within itself individuality, concreteness, unmediated apprehension, independent creation and activity all together. I shall also show that this combination, that

¹ For demonstration of this claim see appendix 'Parole and Discours in Derrida's *La voix et le phénomène*'

² Car ce n'est pas à la substance sonore ou à la voix physique, au corps de la voix dans le monde qu'il reconnaîtra une affinité d'origine avec le logos en général, mais à la voix phénoménologie, à la voix dans sa chair transcendante, au souffle, [...] LV p. 15 (For it is not in the sonorous substance or in the physical voice, in the body of speech in the world, that he will recognize an affinity with logos in general, but in the voice phenomenologically taken, speech in its transcendental flesh, in the breath, [...]) , S p.16

constitutes a vital component of Derrida's position, cannot be found except in the voice.

Chapter 1 – Voice versus Sight as an Intuitive Instance

In his book *La Voix et la phénomène* (Voice and Phenomenon), Derrida conducts a debate with Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen* (Logical Investigations) in which Husserl tried to form a theoretical framework that would form a solid basis for scientific knowledge. For this purpose, Husserl sought a way to make a distinction between meaning that was dependent upon its associations and pure meaning that was true under all conditions.¹

Derrida says that while attempting to isolate the meaning and retrieve it from its associations, Husserl distinguishes between expression² and indication.³ Indication draws attention to the predicate of interest, the object, like pointing with a finger at something to indicate "this". Indication is therefore the actual, concrete act of transmitting the meaning but is devoid of meaning in itself. Expression is the meaning⁴ to which indication points. This meaning does not change and remains with the same content without dependence on surroundings (place), period (time) or speaker (subjectivity). The Hebrew word 'arieh', for instance, indicates the lion animal just as the English word 'lion' indicates the lion animal. In spite of the two different indications ('arieh' and 'lion'), the content indicated by them remains the same and is not dependent upon time, place and speaker. When Derrida clarifies what Husserl means by an expression without any physical-empirical elements, he claims that this is fixed expression with a meaning that is repeated without change. Pure meaning is an ideal object detached from all its associations, standing by itself and embodied in expression. Expression, Derrida claims, in the sense used by Husserl, is an action that goes beyond itself and its sense, and can remain within itself only in a phenomenological voice.⁵ In this way expression provides the instance for preserving meaning: the phenomenological voice, that is to say the voice that is without materiality, the inner voice.

¹ As I noted in the Introduction, the discussion of the relationship of Derrida to other thinkers, in this case Husserl, is concise and synoptic as far as possible. Those who are interested in a deeper study of the issue can find this in books such as Marrati-Guénon, Lawlor, (2002) Kates, (2005) and Evans, (1991).

² 'Ausdruck' in German, 'expression' in French. Derrida writes in French and refers to the text of Husserl which is written in German. Derrida's text has been translated into English. The concepts referred to in this chapter will be presented as they appear in the translated texts.

³ 'Anzeichen' in German, 'indice' in French.

⁴ 'Bedeutung' in German, 'vouloir-dire' in French.

⁵ LV p.3, S p. 33. The phenomenological voice has the ability to suspend all relationship with the world. It does not involve any external relations by the outside world and thus preserves the pure intimacy of consciousness. From now onwards, when I mention the word voice, I mean the phenomenological voice.

Derrida does not expand on the subject of the voice in the first stage of the discussion he holds in his book *Voice and Phenomenology*. Only after he links meaning with self-consciousness as self-sufficient and analyzes consciousness as immediate and unmediated presence,⁶ does he deal with voice once again.

Self-consciousness that is self-sufficient attains meaning through internal discourse.⁷ Derrida presents discourse⁸ as the unification of voice⁹ represented as intuition and thought. Intuition means unmediated perception, a perception that does not need any intermediary, such as sound, in order to reach understanding.¹⁰ Therefore, positioning the phenomenological voice as intuition can explain the lack of sound and the ability to reach understanding, but is unable to explain the very positing of voice as intuition.

In order to understand why the voice is posited as intuition, we must follow Derrida's views of thought. Derrida analyzes Husserl's position as one in which the aim of expression is to present again what has been understood in such a form that the sense,¹¹ the meaning, will be actually and immediately present (that the expression will make the meaning present without the indication that serves as intermediary). Since sense is determined on the basis of relationship to the object, the person who composes the expression must protect, respect, and preserve the present sense both as an object that is laid before us and open to observation and also as proximate to one's inner self.¹² At this stage, Derrida presents the perception of the object as observation. The perception of the object is a pure thought that can be conceived without the need to give it concrete form in the world. The ideal object is one that can be re-presented

⁶ LV, S, Chapters 3,4, 5.

⁷ LV p. 79, S p. 70-71.

⁸ In French 'discours'

⁹ In French 'voix'. This concept is sometimes translated as 'speech', or 'voice', or 'discourse'.

¹⁰ The English translation creates an interpretation problem when it translates 'l'instance de la voix' as 'vocal medium' in S p. 70, and LV p. 78. Instance is a stage in the course of the sentence, while medium is a means, an intermediary. The two words in French and in English are both identical in meaning. It is not clear why the translator found it necessary to use another word for that of Derrida, a word that has a meaning that represents the voice as an intermediary, as a medium, when the whole chapter deals with presenting the voice as an unmediated perception. Another interpretation besides the one given here for the voice in Derrida's writings can be found in Lawlor, p. 191-192. See also: Lawlor, (1998):185-193., Lawlor, (2004):79-80. A near understanding of the voice as what I call here intuition can be found in Haravey, (1986):104. although the whole interpretation of the book is completely different and some times even opposite to that of mine.

¹¹ In German 'Sinn', in French 'sens'.

¹² [...] le telos de l'expression intégrale est la restitution, dans la forme de la présence, de la totalité d'un sens donné actuellement à l'intuition. Ce sens étant déterminé à partir d'un rapport à l'objet, le médium de l'expression doit protéger, respecter, restituer la *présence* du sens à la fois comme être-devant de l'objet disponible pour un regard et comme proximité à soi dans l'intériorité. LV p. 83

([...] the telos of perfect [integral] expression is total restitution, in the form of presence of a sense actually given to intuition. Since sense is determined on the basis of relation with an object, the element of expression consequently must protect, respect and restore the *presence* of sense, both as the object's being before us, open to view, and as a proximity to self in interiority.) S p. 75 .

endlessly and its presence in front of the indicating sign¹³ never changes because it is free of materiality. In Derrida's view, the form of presence is connected with idealism, and therefore he finds an undeniable association between idealization and the phenomenological voice that is free of all bodily aspects. The phenomenological voice, which completes this process by indicating the ideal object, is not divided into indicator and comprehensor because within the framework of the phenomenological voice there is no difference between the indicator (voice) and the indicated (the ideal object).¹⁴ Understanding the nature of the ideal object indicates on the observation as essentially foreign to the ideal object because the very act of observation places what is seen in front, in an opposite position. Observation carries out the very division that the voice does not require. It stands outside the ideal object and therefore its perception is a mediating one. The ideal object is the most abstract of all objects and is not dependent upon actions of the here and now or subjective, empirical actions, but remains as it is without change forever. But an object of this kind can be expressed only by an instance that is immaterial (because everything that is material changes). This instance is the voice.¹⁵

The voice that we are dealing with keeps silent.¹⁶ Can we understand from this that the voice was not chosen for its sound, for being heard, or perhaps just because it can

¹³ In German 'Zeichen', in French 'signe'.

¹⁴ Or entre l'idéalisation et la voix, la complicité est ici indéfectible. Un objet idéal est un objet dont la monstration peut être indéfiniment répétée, dont la présence au Zeigen est indéfiniment réitérable précisément parce que, délivré de toute spatialité mondaine, il est un pur noème que je peux exprimer sans devoir, au moins en apparence, passer par le monde. En ce sens, la voix phénoménologique, qui semble accomplir cette opération "dans le temps", ne rompt pas avec l'ordre du Zeigen, elle appartient au même système et en parachève la fonction. LV p.84 (There is an unfailing complicity here between idealization and speech [voix]. An ideal object whose showing may be repeated indefinitely, whose presence to Zeigen is indefinitely reiterable precisely because, freed from all mundane spatiality, it is a pure noema that I can express without having, at last apparently, to pass through the world. In this sense the phenomenological voice, which seems to accomplish this operation "in time", does not break with the order of Zeigen but belongs to the same system and carries through its function.) S p.75 .

¹⁵ L'objet idéal est le plus objectif des objets: indépendant du hic et nunc des événements et des actes de *La* subjectivité empirique qui le vise, il peut à l'infini être répété tout en restant le même. Sa présence à l'intuition, son être-devant le regard ne dépendant essentiellement d'aucune synthèse mondaine ou empirique, la restitution de son sens dans la forme de la présence devient une possibilité universelle et illimitée. Mais son être-idéal n'étant rien hors du monde, il doit être constitué répété et exprimé dans un médium qui n'entame pas la présence et la présence à soi des actes qui le visent : un médium qui préserve à la fois la présence de l'objet devant l'intuition et la présence à soi, la proximité absolue des actes à eux-mêmes. L'idéalité de l'objet n'étant que son être-pour une conscience non empirique, elle ne peut être exprimée que dans un élément dont la phénoménalité n'ait pas la forme de la mondanité. La voix est le no, de cet élément. La voix s'entend. LV p: 84-85 (The ideal object is the most objective of objects; independent of the here-and-now acts and events of the empirical subjectivity which intends it, it can be repeated infinitely while remaining the same. Since its presence to intuition, its being-before the gaze, has no essential dependence on any worldly or empirical synthesis, the re-establishment of its sense in the form of presence become a universal and unlimited possibility. But, being nothing outside the world, this ideal being must be constituted, repeated, and expressed in a medium that does not impair the presence and self-presence of the acts that aim at it, a medium which both preserves the presence of the object before intuition and self-presence, the absolute proximity of the acts to themselves. The ideality of the object, which is only its being-for a nonempirical consciousness, can only be expressed in an element whose phenomenality does not have worldly form. The name of this element is the voice. The voice is heard.) S p. 75-76

¹⁶ Chapter 6 of LV is called *La voix qui garde le silence* (The voice that keeps silent)