Anniversary Seminar on Foucault and Derrida: Theory and Practice — Review

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In December 2014, the Departments of Educational Studies, English, and Philosophy at the University of Malta met at the KSU Common Room for a one-day conference to mark the thirtieth and tenth anniversaries of the deaths of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, respectively.

Indeed, the double anniversary was a perfect opportunity 'to commemorate the work of Foucault and Derrida, and to support postgraduate work on their ideas both at a theoretical level and in their application across various disciplines'—as was in evidence not only from the variety of academic backgrounds of the speakers, but also from the audience, with students of various disciplines being present. As Mr Kurt Borg, one of the organisers of the event, stressed in the opening speech, this was, if nothing else, a collaborative interdisciplinary effort and an experimental set-up which, if successful, could possibly result in more events of a thematically similar nature. The following summary of some of the papers presented will hopefully give a better appraisal of all the above.

The first paper, 'Lifelong Learning and the Making of the Self in Confession (Reflections on Foucault and Education)', was presented by Professor Kenneth Wain from the Faculty of Education, and was based on a chapter he had contributed to a book entitled Foucault and a Politics of Confession in Education, published by Routledge in 2015 (and edited by Andreas Fejes and Katherine Nicoll). Prof. Wain explored the concept of lifelong learning whilst drawing on insights garnered from Foucault's writings. A recurring point throughout the paper was a focus on the definitional differences between learning and education, especially in terms of the institutional superstructures Foucault was interested in, which can potentially inculcate students with various ideologies which they may not even be conscious of absorbing. From this perspective, a sense of the responsibility of educators was developed, for these arguments create a vision of an educative structure whose primary mission is the teaching of the care of the self. The ethical implications of this relating to how one can practise one's own freedom were also explored.

Following this was Doctor Michael Camilleri's paper, 'Derrida on Human Rights', which provided a unique insight into what a practical implementation of philosophy for a lawyer working in the field of the protection of human rights entails. Indeed, not only is philosophy itself not enough when dealing with the reality of the subject, but so are the legal frameworks based on these philosophies—unless they are actively and constantly supported by political good will. Dr Camilleri demonstrated how even, for instance, the United States Declaration of Independence (among many others) suggests through its language that that there is a violence, a precariousness, fragility, and illegality to the law—precisely because the law

needs to be enforced (through a binding vote) to take place. In this sense, one can only speak of a democracy 'to come' (l'avenir) and for whose coming we are all responsible. Upon further elaboration on these points, Camilleri provided a case-study from his career with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in Malta which had made international headlines in 2013. The case—which is not yet entirely over—involved the fate of 102 immigrants who were going to be returned back to Libya by the Maltese government in a clear attempt at a "push back" policy (though the fact that Camilleri himself had just won a similar constitutional case rendered the attempt at deportation illegal—which is why, in part, the push back did not happen). This is also linked more generally to Dr Jean-Paul De Lucca's paper 'À venir/l'avenir: Derrida and the Advent of a Cosmopolitan Democracy', and his points regarding Derrida's view that 'ethics is hospitality' and 'hospitality is ethics'; or, as Derrida asked elsewhere, 'Is not hospitality an interruption of the self?', that is some sort of accommodation of the Other?[1] This rebuts in part the frequent (academic and not) accusations levelled at Derrida for not "being political enough". Indeed, for Derrida, as Dr De Lucca further pointed out, there ultimately has to be a 'concrete proposal', for 'utopia is always grounded in practice'.

Another very intriguing perspective at the conference was offered by Professor Clare Vassallo from the Department of Translation, Terminology and Interpreting Studies, with her paper 'Foucault and Eco: Classification as Culture'. The presentation focused on the early works of Foucault and his idea of epistemic systems of thought. These epistemes require an understanding of the way in which we make sense of the world around us; in the same manner in which Aristotle endorsed the value of categorisation for scientific purposes, classification can also be done through and for the discipline of semiotics. Yet, Aristotle admitted that structures of knowledge are based on different remnants of the past, and this is problematic. Here, Foucault's texts on archaeology and the idea that one has to dig down in order to find himself was explored—especially in view of the understanding of language as a cultural artefact. Because of the troublesome relationship of the self with the other, semiotics studies needs to be conscious of the difficulty in overcoming what Thomas Kuhne describes as a type of 'blindness' to what does not fit in the paradigm one has constructed (or found already-constructed). As demonstrated by some apt examples given by Prof. Vassallo, there are some words which appear to resist any straightforward categorisation and, therefore, language itself demonstrates its control over us since, as Julia Kristeva states, language pre-exists our entering into the world.

In his paper 'Foucault, Critique and an Ethics of Self-Transformation', Kurt Borg provided an interesting follow-up and linked to Prof. Wain's earlier presentation on Foucault and education. Borg focused on the relationship between critique (as understood by Foucault) and the potential this allows for self-transformation, thus filling what is normally deemed to be a lacuna in the works of Foucault. Thus, the act of writing acquires some of the benefits of education Prof. Wain had outlined in his paper regarding the development and care of the self, because critique allows one the opportunity to get to know oneself better. This is, of

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *Adieu*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Micheal Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 51.

course, a theme that recurs in a lot of contemporary works of fiction as well. Borg then went on to qualify the type of self-exploration that writing instigates in view of the pessimism with which postmodernity appears to be riddled. Here, Foucault's affirmative statement—that reality is not as bad as it might seem but rather only dangerous—for Borg provides a source of affirmation, in some ways, in that it allows him to propose the implementation of a philosophy with an ethics of self-determination. This kind of activism would therefore undertake philosophy as a sort of askesis.

In addition to the above-mentioned papers, there were two more theoretical offerings. Niki Young's 'Derrida's *Signature Event Context* and Realism' sought to delve into the various controversies surrounding Derrida's philosophical output. Some of the harshest criticism has come from those philosophers working in the analytic tradition who characterise Derrida's work as that of a 'pseudo-philosopher' and a language prankster overrun by the endless playfulness of his own rhetoric; yet, there are others who praise Derrida's work precisely for his insightful and (perhaps more importantly) meaningful playfulness, which has resulted in the 'displacement of philosophical categories' which had been previously thought of as stable. With all this in mind, Young decided to analyse one of Derrida's more seminal works, *Signature Event Context*, in order to provide a critical re-assessment in light of more recent scholarly work.

Roderick Camilleri's equally theoretical paper, 'Deconstruction, Logology and Language', considered the works of Kenneth Burke and Derrida; specifically, the relationship between Burke's *Dramatism/Logology* and Derrida's deconstruction. As Camilleri pointed out, both problematise various notions of rational thinking in order to reveal that which might go beyond normal logic structures of language. Despite the seeming resemblances in their rhetorical strategies, Camilleri argued that there are essential differences between the two thinkers, something which many critics tend to ignore—chief among these is the fact that while Burke firmly grounds his work in a 'logocentric paradigm', Derrida does not..

The conference was one of the first of its kind, at least in a local interdepartmental context involving specific philosophical themes or philosophers; however, one would hope that more resources are allocated to such initiatives next time round, should there be another conference. While the seminar in and of itself felt like a neat and compact event, the number of speakers, through no fault of the organisers, was limited; and despite the breadth of subjects necessarily covered by any conference focusing on the works of Derrida and Foucault, a lengthier conference with more speakers (even if the single-day format is still used) would possibly have better served the wide scope of Derridean and Foucauldian studies.

As it was, the anniversary conference felt somewhat attenuated and abridged at points; indeed, because of the reduced format (specifically, a shortened one-day conference format), the discussions that could be had were far briefer and less expansive than they could have been. Overall, it seems that a future sequel would benefit not so much from more interdisciplinary and interdepartmental effort—as was made clear, various fields of thought were represented at the conference—but rather from depth: more time, more papers, more discussion, and even more talk afterwards over coffee. Even a different venue would have

helped in this regard (again, a lack of resources is hardly the organisers' fault). Rather than a set of critical remarks, this is intended as an apprehension of something (one hopes) that has been set in motion; something that, organised on a larger scale and with more resources at hand (different venue, better logistics, increased timeframe and number of panels, and so on), could become a permanent yearly feature on the local academic calendar rather than a one-off anniversary seminar. In its progression, it could easily come to include international speakers and keynotes. Mr Kurt Borg, whose dedication and hard work in setting up this conference is to be commended, noted that 2015 would be the twentieth anniversary of the death of another great philosopher—Emmanuel Levinas. Maybe the next conference to be held in this possible series could focus on Levinas, ethics and other relevant topics. Whatever the subject matter, one hopes that a second conference does take place in the near future. In the local context of deeply ingrained and widespread parochialism, amateurism and even philistinism, it would at least, from time to time, offer a refreshing alternative.

List of Works Cited

Derrida, Jacques, *Adieu*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Micheal Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999)