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The challenge of a critique — deflation & deconstruction of realism¹

I. Introduction

I will produce below a number of counters to an opinion that there is (or *must* be) some fundamental difference between deflationist critique of realism *a la* Putnam and deconstructionist critique of realism *a la* Derrida. This rather popular conviction, which echoes the outworn quarrel between the analytic and the Continental traditions, rests (at least in cases known to the author) on a misinterpretation of either or both of the two approaches. It may very well be that the widely spread tendency to misinterpret the two thinkers stems at the bottom from the muddled state of discussion on the question of "transgression of metaphysics". In what follows I will attempt to undo certain proposals as to the alleged abysmal difference between deconstruction and deflation with the end in view of presenting the challenge of the critique of metaphysics in a less muddled way.

I concentrate on Derrida's critique of logocentrism and Putnam's critique of metaphysical realism, because I regard them as paradigmatic cases of deconstruction and deflation, respectively. Both practices exemplify the post-Kantian type of criticism in that they are directed against metaphysics as such (I will qualify this crude contention towards the end of this paper). Both practices take as their target metaphysics in all its historical guises (including its epistemological, psychologistic, and linguistic guises). I concentrate on Derrida and Putnam because they take the challenge of the philosophical criticism not to be so much the abolition of this or that absurd position, as the systematic, or at least persistent, criticism of the way of thinking that engenders conceptual absurdities. I contend that, due to the way in which they appropriate the old Kantian theme of the "transcendental illusion", they are to a larger extent fellow travelers than any one of them is ready to admit.

II. Realism in a double fire

To introduce the background of our discussion, let me first sketch in brief the critical positions of Derrida and Putnam and then respond to certain proposals concerning the alleged difference between them.

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The critique of logocentrism, put in a nutshell, concerns what Derrida calls the presupposition of the "transcendental signified". The latter term refers to de Saussure's distinction of signifier and signified. By "transcendental signified" Derrida means a bare essence present to mind independently of any relationship to language, in fact to any sign system; a pure limit of a series of signs which determines unequivocally the whole series although it itself is not a sign and in itself, in its essence, stands in no relation to this or any other series of signs. Derrida likes to speak in regard to this presupposition of the "metaphysics of presence". Now, this presupposition turns out under critical scrutiny to be a myth, as it is not intelligible how there could be a signified not being in the position of the signifier and vice versa. The argument passes from the all-important premise about the structure of sign to the conclusion that the idea of a signified that is not (even potentially) a signifier is an absurdity.

Does not this criticism, presented in an oversimplified form as it is, resemble deflationary arguments against metaphysical realism? The typical deflationary argument runs like this: "In supposing that all claims to truth and knowledge rest on some uniquely determined relation of language to some language-independent reality one is supposing an unintelligible point of view, a view from Nowhere, so to speak. The trouble with this theory is not that we can never be sure whether we have finally discovered language-independent reality, or that we have a difficulty with describing such a reality. The real trouble is that the idea of our language as mapping (representing, picturing, referring to) language-independent reality is not coherent. It is not coherent to assume that something is in itself independent of any relation to language and determines (and that means warrants) the truth and objectivity of our knowledge. Yet, what the metaphysical realist has in mind is precisely the idea of a relation which makes our claims to truth, to objective knowledge, to accurate representation justifiable. This idea is a misunderstanding".

We observe a far-reaching affinity in both the subject matter of criticism and the strategy of argumentation. The target of criticism in both cases can justly be termed "transcendental realism". It is, to repeat, the idea that all linguistic relations are founded in a language-independent relation between language and non-language; the demand in question is transcendental in the sense that the allegedly fundamental relation is supposed to be at once irreducible to any intra-linguistic relation (be it signification or representation) and constitutive of any intra-linguistic relation (be it signification or representation). However, the all-important point of affinity has to do with the strategy of criticism. In neither case is the aforementioned demand rejected as unsatisfied, the corresponding postulate that it is satisfied

refuted as false. For if this were the case, the critique would quite naturally lead to antithetical position, or at least leave space for the opposite claim that there is no language-independent reality and that language is an autonomous self-contained system. Alas, the aim of deflation and deconstruction was to put in the brackets the whole system of thought by which metaphysical positions are generated. Both Putnam's and Derrida's critiques were designed to debunk the very conjuring trick by which both realist and antirealist positions lure our minds. It is therefore misleading, to say the least, to gloss the results of either type of criticism by slogans like "There are only signs (texts)", "There is no language-independent reality", "Language refers only to itself", etc. The problem with these slogans is that they willynilly succumb to this philosophical trick.

On the contrast, deflation and deconstruction are often characterized by such epitaphs as "anti-foundationism", "anti-representationism", "anti-essentialism", and rightly so. It is very important to see that foundationism, representationism and essentialism are precisely the general presuppositions of the system of thought which generates both realist and antirealist positions. If this is so, then a criticism of these presuppositions impairs any attempt to oppose a realist position with some antithetical position. Consequently, if it is true that the deflationist and deconstructionist criticisms are e.g. antifoundationist, the conclusion to be drawn from them is not that language and cognition are founded in some intra-linguistic relation to the world, but that the whole idea of such a relation, whether it be conceived as relative to a language or not, is a misunderstanding. As Putnam once put it

If we agree that it is *unintelligible* to say 'We sometimes succeed in comparing our language and thought with reality as it is in itself', then we should realize that it is also unintelligible to say 'It is *impossible* to stand outside and compare our thought and language with the world' (1994: 299).

III. Between the deceptive reefs of construction and destruction

What, if anything, could hinder ecumenical attempts to bridge deflation and deconstruction? What, if anything, could divide the two camps? I will examine below several candidates for a disagreement, starting from a rather naive accusation that the project of deconstruction is unfathomable. First, as I have already stated, the project of deconstruction belongs to the post-Kantian tradition of the critique of metaphysics. Second, although a particular "way" of doing deconstruction in a particular context may seem unfathomable, the motives of the

project and its history are quite clear. The project of deconstruction stems from the project of destruction of the history of western metaphysics, announced by Heidegger in the introductory remarks of *Being and Time*. The shift to deconstruction was a consequence of the awareness, clearly present in Heidegger's later writings, that there is no warrant for speaking about "going beyond metaphysics" or "transgressing the limits of metaphysical discourse", for the destruction of history of metaphysics may not presuppose any metaphysically innocent point of view, but on the contrary must subject any such presumption of metaphysical innocence to critical scrutiny. For this reason Derrida dropped the term "destruction" as misleading and preferred to talk about "deconstruction". Deconstruction of western metaphysics can be viewed as destruction of metaphysics performed from within metaphysics. Since the opposition of "within and without" plays on the unnerving motif of transgression of metaphysics, it is safer to say that one deconstructs a given historical discourse, when one reconstructs it in its own terms in such a way that its entanglement in philosophical puzzles is revealed. No doubt this technique of criticism constantly borders on the performative paradox of using the term to question its own presuppositions. But cannot exactly the same be said about the technique of deflationists?

The issue of transgression of metaphysics, which I just touched upon, brings us to a much more appealing candidate for a disagreement. I have often heard the opinion that while deflationists believe that there is (or at least is possible) a metaphysically innocent discourse, the deconstructionists stubbornly deny this. I think this call for a rupture is off the target. First of all, the idea that one can do away with metaphysics and replace it by metaphysically innocent idiom sounds like positivist critique of metaphysics, and not like deflationist one. It is Carnap and others who took the idea of destruction of metaphysics literally and who believed that the business of philosophy is to drive a wedge between metaphysical nonsense and metaphysically innocent and cognitively valuable discourse. But the deflationist approaches, to which I refer here, owe their existence to the rejection of this style of criticizing metaphysics and similar styles, e.g. that of ordinary language philosophy. What thinkers like Rorty and Putnam reject is the idea that you can simply eliminate metaphysics by either reducing metaphysical pseudo-statements to empirically verifiable statements or by replacing metaphysically inflamed language with some natural or invented language, fit to express any truth of cognitive value and uncontaminated by metaphysical nonsense. One starts practicing deflation the moment one realizes that when logical positivists deploy the dichotomies of material and formal mode of speaking, of empirical and theoretical sentences, of verifiable and unverifiable statements to eliminate metaphysics they entangle themselves in

metaphysics as much as Heidegger does when he sets up to destroy the history of western metaphysics by means of the idea of the ontological difference. It seems that you sink into metaphysics most when you are confident that you are talking in a metaphysically innocent language.

Furthermore, the question about transgression of metaphysics can be reformulated in such a way as to reveal a substantial tension in various critical stances, but I think this tension can be found within the deflationist tradition as well as within the deconstructionist one. The question about transgression can be reformulated thus: should we abandon the concepts of representation, meaning, reference, sign, truth, being etc. as metaphysically biased or reconstruct them in the way that will free them from certain unacceptable presuppositions. Consider the polemic between Putnam and Rorty about what the critique of realism should look like and about its ultimate consequences. This polemic has been going for years. I do not intend to summarize its history. But I want to highlight one of its recent twists. The point in question is evoked by the quotation above taken from Putnam's 1993 lecture "The Question of Realism", in which he attempts (successfully I think) to make clear the points of his disagreement with Rorty. According to Putnam, Rorty notoriously slides from a deflationary argument against realism to some idealist, relativist stance which testifies to the same metaphysical yearning which motivates realist stances. The sentiment of the frustrated yearning for transcendence can be acutely heard in such declarations as "We cannot step beyond our language to compare it with reality", "There is no truth but intratheoretical truth", "We can know reality only such as is represented by our language games" etc. Putnam insists that these are wrong conclusions drawn from sound critical arguments, arguments to the effect that the idea of first taking language and reality in view separately and then comparing them with each other is unintelligible, that the idea of truth as divorced from all our criteria of truth is unintelligible etc. The problem with these conclusions, on Putnam's view, is that they create the feeling of metaphysical confinement in language or theory. Rorty, as Putnam reads him, succumbs to this feeling of confinement and impossibility only to find solution in a radical step, which is to throw all talk of representation, truth, etc. in the garbage can of tools that have proven not to help us cope with our environment. A rather dramatic situation is generated when the very concept of representation is kept hostage to the demands of the transcendental realist. For when it is admitted that these demands cannot be satisfied, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the concept of representation is problematic at its root. For Putnam the last dramatic step is both unattractive and unwarranted; unattractive because it

seems to drain of sense even the ordinary talk of truth as agreement with reality, etc.; it is unwarranted because it is based on arbitrary generalization.

Then, this is the tension. It is the tension between saying e.g. that all talk of representation is a mere mythology and saying that certain accounts of representation are unintelligible. The first alternative seems to suggest that we should do away with all talk of representation, the second that we should reconstruct our talk of representation so as to eliminate the unintelligible presuppositions. Where does Derrida stand on this issue? On the one hand, he seems to incline in the direction of a radical debunking critique, just as Rorty does. For example in an interview with Julia Kristieva from 1968, where he discusses the metaphysical presuppositions of de Saussure's semiology, He states:

He [Saussure] accedes to the classical exigency of what I have proposed to call a "transcendental signified", which in and of itself, in its essence, would refer to no signifier, would exceed the chain of signs, and would no longer itself function as a signifier. On the contrary, though, from the moment that one questions the possibility of such a transcendental signified, and that one recognizes that every signified is also in the position of a signifier, the distinction between signified and signifier becomes problematical at its root. Of course this is an operation that must be undertaken with prudence for: (a) it must pass through the difficult deconstruction of the entire history of metaphysics which imposed, and never will cease to impose upon semiological science in its entirety this fundamental quest for a "transcendental signified" and a concept independent of language; this quest not being imposed from without by something like "philosophy", but rather by everything that links our language, our culture, our "system of thought" to the history and system of metaphysics (Derrida 1981: 20)

Let me intersect this long quote with the following remark. The critique of metaphysics, as Derrida rightly points out, involves more than a sobering criticism of this or that flight of speculative imagination, for the metaphysical ideas that we designate by the terms "objectivism", "foundationalism", "essentialism", "representationism" etc. form a system and stem from the same historical root. Moreover, the point of this critique is not to undermine a set of historical philosophical discourses, but to question any discourse in current use, whether philosophical or not, in as much as it is linked in one way or another to the history and system of metaphysics. Now to return to Derrida's text:

(b) nor is it a question of confusing at every level, and in all simplicity, the signifier and the signified. That this opposition or difference cannot be radical or absolute does not prevent it from functioning, and even from being indispensable within certain limits — very wide limits. For example, no translation would be possible without it (1981: 20).

This point, on the other hand, is in the Putnam's vein. It is the absolute opposition of language and reality that is to be dismantled and abandoned, but not every distinction of beliefs and facts, for some such distinction seems to be involved in most of our claims to knowledge and truth. Similarly, it is the absolute opposition of sign and its object that is to be abandoned, but not the very distinction between signifier and signified, which seems to be indispensable for the practices of translation (later in the interview with Kristeva Derrida makes a very similar point with regard to communication). Again, we should not hastily abandon the very distinction between what can be said or expressed and what cannot be said or expressed in a given linguistic system, although we have reasons for rejecting the absolute distinction between sense and nonsense as mythological. As Wittgenstein once said, "if the words 'language', 'experience', 'world' have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words 'table', 'lamp', and 'door'."

However, even Rorty in recent years seems to take this carefully balanced line, dissociating himself from positivist, absolute distinction of metaphysically inflated and metaphysically innocent discourse. Consider the following passage:

I should not speak, as I sometimes have, of "pseudo-problems," but rather of problematics and vocabularies that might have proven to be of value, but in fact did not. Criticism of other philosophers' distinctions and problematics should charge relative inutility, rather than "meaninglessness" or "illusion" or "incoherence" (Rorty 1993: 445).

So perhaps the tension between different deflationist and deconstructionist approaches arises out of different manners of saying the same thing. When Rorty advises us to abandon the term 'representation' or the term 'correspondence', it is because he regards these terms as technical, as elements of strictly philosophical vocabularies, and distinguishes them from ordinary talk of "aboutness", or "being in accord with facts". Derrida occasionally advises his readers to replace the extant metaphysically corrupted vocabulary by some new technical term, less vulnerable to metaphysical misinterpretation. He does this for example in the passage that follows the last one quoted above:

In the limits to which it is possible, or at least *appears* possible, translation practices the difference between signified and signifier. But if this difference is never pure, no more so is translation, and for the notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of *transformation*: a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another (1981: 20).

However, in all cases we want to say that a certain vocabulary, or a certain use of this vocabulary, deforms our understanding of our practices and misleads into metaphysical puzzles. In response to this unpleasant situation we propose to account for our practices either by a different use of the same vocabulary or by inventing a new vocabulary or by relying on some different old vocabulary. At any rate we want to learn to speak in the way that does not lead to the same metaphysical troubles.

I believe that the real tension, which does not concern merely heuristic choices, is the tension between deconstruction and reconstruction, this tension being internal to the method of any well designed deflationist or deconstructionist critique. Since Derrida feels very unhappy about the word “method” in connection with deconstruction, I feel obligated to say that, of course, there is no Cartesian recipe for dismantling philosophical puzzles. To recall the famous passage from *Philosophical Investigations*, "There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies" (§133). However, despite of the diversity of methods employed by deflationist and deconstructionist critics, all these techniques exhibit – if I am right — certain common characteristics.

First, although both deflationist and deconstructionist approaches descend from the Kantian critique of metaphysics, they hardly ever attack metaphysics directly. It can be said that metaphysics is not given, but has to be detected in our discursive practices. In particular, it is incorrect to think that deconstruction somehow takes as its target the history of western metaphysics in its entirety. Such Hegelian ambitions are kept at safe distance from the field of critique. Deconstruction always operates on the discourse in which it is phrased; its immediate object are the problems and debates around which this discourse centers. In case of Derrida it was the discourse of phenomenology from Husserl to Heidegger and the discourse of semiology from de Saussure to Hjemslev. Similarly, deflation set of as the critique of reductionist programs in the analytic philosophy of language, philosophy of science and philosophy of mind. The history of metaphysics is summoned only to the extent that it is dormant in the contemporaneous discourses, on which deflation or deconstruction parasite. Thus we read Derrida on "Plato after Heidegger" and we read Putnam on "Aristotle after Wittgenstein".

Second, the critical efficacy of both deflation and deconstruction consists in their ability to expose the equivocal relation between extra-philosophical discourses and the language of metaphysics. This can be done only by exhausting the conceptual resources of a given discourse, by pondering its limits, by investigating the possible and the pathological

uses of concepts that belong to it. In this way the mythological ingredients of even quite ordinary discursive practices can be exposed. Derrida at a certain point goes so far as to say:

Now, “everyday language” is not innocent or neutral. It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are knotted into a system (1981: 19).

However, as I have already suggested, the critical function of deflation and of deconstruction consists in showing that this relation to metaphysics is equivocal, e.g., that although some distinction between signifier and signified is indispensable to justification of our practices translation, the opposition of the sign and its transcendental signified seems to be superfluous, that some concept of transcendence of the object of knowledge is indispensable if we are to justify our claims to knowledge, but the idea of an object independent of any relation to any language, is an excess. In order to expose this equivocal relation of a certain discourse to metaphysics, a critique must at the same time question the metaphysical presuppositions of this discourse and reconstruct its conceptual structure in the way that relieves it of these presuppositions. I feel justified to conclude that in any well designed deflationary argument, deconstruction and reconstruction must go hand in hand. When we forget about reconstruction and concentrate solely on deconstruction, we end up in the stalemate situation, where we can neither use a system of concepts in good faith nor abandon it. (Derrida is dangerously near to this impasse when he bluntly identifies everyday language with the language of Western metaphysics.) When we forget about deconstruction and concentrate solely on reconstruction, we are likely to slide into metaphysics without noticing it.

Third, I think that at least Putnam and Derrida would concur on the following point: a critique of metaphysics should not only expose the mythological ingredients of our discourses, but, so to speak, recycle them, i.e. show that the metaphysical pictures, although conceptually pathological, are nonetheless indispensable to our understanding of our practices. The reconstructive part of the critique may not simply cut off the links to metaphysics, but must explain by what manouvre metaphysics (or ontotheology, as Derrida calls it) has permeated so deep into our minds as to constitute the frame of our scientific, literary and political discourses. Derrida, perhaps most sensitive to this exigency, suggests that the idea of a Transcendental Signified, although an absurdity, constitutes an irreducible axiological dimension of our ordinary practices. Following the same impulse, he insists that

what he calls phonologism, or the idea that writing is but an instrument of codification of speech, is not just a poor usage of otherwise sound concepts.

Actually, it could be shown, as I have attempted to do, that there is no purely phonetic writing, and that phonologism is less a consequence of the practice of the alphabet in a given culture than a certain ethical or axiological *experience* of this practice (Derrida 1981: 25).

Speaking above of equivocal relation of our discourses to metaphysics, I said that the ideas of a transcendental signified, of a language-independent reality, etc. are obsolete from the point of view of justification of our discursive practices. But, if Derrida is on the right track (and I believe he is), they are not obsolete as far as our concern for — or faith in — these practices is concerned. This attitude is close enough to a Wittgensteinian approach to metaphysics. It was the antipositivistic attitude of Wittgenstein to appreciate the importance of metaphysics as picture and myth, and not to depreciate as picture and myth. In fact, it is the reconstruction of the axiological aspect of our practices (and of cognitive, descriptive practices in particular) that constitutes the point at which the practitioners of deflation and deconstruction brake radically with their maternal or, if you prefer, paternal traditions; the point at which they decisively renounce the idea that one can either ground or uproot metaphysics by some primordial phenomenological insight and the idea that one can either reduce metaphysics or eliminate it by a systematic theory of language. Setting aside self-deceptive projects of construction of a metaphysically innocent language and sweeping destruction of the history and system of metaphysics, deconstruction and reconstruction combine their efforts to reappropriate our conceptual systems in the way that makes them sensitive to the deepest resources of our culture. This is the point of Putnam's otherwise paradoxical suggestion that we should criticize realism in the name of the realistic spirit².

² By the way, I think that this is a crucial point about the challenge of deflationary critique which Rorty misses when he advises us to "charge relative inutility, rather than "meaninglessness" or "illusion" or "incoherence"". If we grounds for charging incoherence, we should charge. On the other hand, the argument we deliver may very well exploit the vocabulary in which the criticized position is framed. The problem in most cases concerns the uses of the same vocabulary. Furthermore, we must do more than just distinguish good uses from misuses and abuses. We must stretch the use of our vocabulary as far as possible in order to make it sensitive to whatever passion pushes us against its limits. Rorty's version of "throwing away a climbed ladder" metaphor seems blind to this demand.

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