

What is it like to be a philosopher? Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and nineteenth century British anthropology

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Abstract. In this paper, I respond to the infamous letter to *The Times* warning the University of Cambridge against awarding Jacques Derrida an honorary degree. I draw attention to an assumption of that letter.

There was a debate that dominated late nineteenth century British anthropology. It was between the evolutionists and the diffusionists. They were trying to explain cases where society A and society B have the same feature. The evolutionists thought that there are stages in the evolution of a society. If two societies have the same feature, such as that they are both dominated by attempts to understand reality in terms of magic, then the evolutionists would often say that this is because they are at the same evolutionary stage. But in some cases they would say that the shared feature is because one or both societies have remnants from an earlier stage of evolution. The diffusionists, on the other hand, posited centres of creativity from which ideas and customs and technology spread.

Now let us move forward about 100 years. In 1992, the University of Cambridge decided to award Jacques Derrida an honorary degree. A letter was written to *The Times* before the ballot, opposing such a decision. Here is one of the claims from this letter:

M. Derrida seems to us to have come close to making a career out of what we regard as translating into the academic sphere tricks and gimmicks similar to those of the Dadaists or of the concrete poets.

The writers of the letter assume a kind of diffusionism here. These tricks and gimmicks that Derrida uses “diffused” from avant-garde artistic movements. But there is an evolutionist position, which is that there are stages in the evolution of a philosophical culture and one stage involves typically Derridean things: subversive interpretations and philosophical puns.

Even if one does not apply such a Victorian approach, one might say that there are pathways of development and on some pathways this is the next stage for an individual philosopher, or a set of philosophers. One is on the literary-philosophical line and this is the next stop! Certainly about the fellow French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, I would say that you can end up doing Deleuzian things. The preface to a book by Deleuze tries to capture Kant’s philosophy in four poetic sayings, starting with one from Hamlet. I would normally set aside that part of the book for the part that looks as if it meets the requirements of the local philosophical tradition, but I came up with the idea of inverting Hamlet to capture deconstructive interpretation: “There are more things dreamt of in your philosophy, Horatio, than on heaven and earth.”

Also I have seen quite a few unusual “advertisements” at bus stands to do with being in line with one’s gut and thereby producing ideal excrement. That led me to consider the question “Why be moral?” while focusing on a person who finds that they can achieve this ideal by engaging in immoral acts. I started using the language of Mommy-Daddy-Me and engaging in more poetic adaptation: “There are times when the head has its reasons which the bowels know not.”

References. Deleuze, G. (translated by H.R.E. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam) 1984. *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.

Smith, B. et al. 1992. Letter to *The Times*. 9th May 1992.