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The Contamination of Content and the Question of the Frame

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I make four claims. First, in departure from Husserl's phenomenology to Derrida's early reflections on phenomenal content (via Searle and Habermas) it turns out that the status of this content is systematically insecure and doubtful. Second, this systematic insecurity of phenomenal content is what aesthetic experience is basically about. Third, following Derrida this insecurity is not only what drives art but is vital also for understanding each other, i.e. the domain of ethics. Fourth and finally, I want to show that the examined relation of ethics and aesthetics can be traced back to the founding documents of the Age of Aesthetics, namely the *Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism* (1796/97). This program became, as I want to claim, lucid philosophy in the thinking of Jacques Derrida. After all, modernity and post-modernity are more intimately connected than one might expect.

1. What is the Problem of Phenomenal Content?

Husserl conceives phenomenal content in the following way: A phenomenon is given as an evident unity of itself or there is no phenomenon at all. For what is a phenomenon? Let's consider an example used by Husserl: The sound of a tone consists as a phenomenon only in its "patently given unity"¹. Now, what Husserl means is that there is a difference between the mere phenomenalist appearance of the phenomenon on one side and the actual experience of that appearance on the other side: "The appearing of

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¹ Cf.: „Perhaps the sound lasts. We have there the patently given unity of the sound and its duration with its temporal phases, the present and the past.“ Edmund Husserl, *The idea of phenomenology*, trans. by W.P. Alston et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2010), 8.

the things does not itself appear to us, we live through it.”² The sound of a tone does therefore not just appear, but as a phenomenon someone experiences that appearance. Experience, thus, is more than appearance as it is subject-related – a difference that Husserl stresses in order to differentiate his phenomenological approach from a strictly phenomenalist position, which would be based on a third person perspective with no account of subjectivity at all. That is also why phenomenology contrasts with empiricism. But as we shall see this contrast is all but straight. To sum it up, the question, which is neither sufficiently answered nor posed by Husserl, will be: What is experience?

Let’s have a closer look on that! The difference between mere appearance and experience can but exist, if the subject, who experiences something, contributes in a somehow decisive manner to the constitution of a phenomenon. Now, consider again the example of the sound of a tone: It appears to be given *now*, in the very present of *this moment*, but if it merely appeared in the very blink of an eye, it would not be the phenomenon it actually is. It would then just be something: something you can hear of course, but that would not be enough to qualify it as a tone. This does not necessarily mean, that you must be able to identify that tone – let’s say, as a high g – but it must be sufficient, to realize what is appearing – and that is something well different from the snapshot of just anything appearing noisily, which cannot be explored in any descriptive manner. In contrast, to realize what is appearing is – at least – to correlate a phenomenal present to a phenomenal past: I experience the sound of a tone, that is to say: I experience the present of a tone *as* that tone *that* was present just an instant ago. Presence is but a relation of two parts (present and past), which are, however, given as an evident unity. This is all the more true, if it is not a tone I am experiencing but a melody. There were no melodies, if not for a subject’s capacity to correlate a phenomenal present to a phenomenal past. Melodies are – just like any other phenomenon – temporal entities. But their temporal identity is nothing they possess by themselves, but it is something that a subject performs, which is why Husserl calls such performance an *act* of experience.³

² Husserl, *Logical Investigations*. Volume 2, trans. by J.N. Findlay (London: Routledge, 1970), 538.

³ “Experiences of meaning are classifiable as ‘acts’, and the meaningful element in each

Indeed, this is as insightful as it is troublesome. Of course no one – except some hard-core empiricists – would say that there is no act character in experience, that there is no performance as contribution to experience by the subject at all: the entire philosophical domain of intentionality shares this intuition.⁴ Intentionality is – in a minimalistic sense – the capacity to experience something that appears. But epistemologically this is a contentious issue: For then there is no criterion to know whether intentionality is a neutral – i.e. at least an intersubjectively neutral – sort of thing: If different people have different intentional contents, how can they ever agree on something? If there is phenomenal content but as evidently given unity, there is no way to decide within an experience what in this experience is actually appearance and what is contribution by part of a subject. To put this paradoxically: In the intrinsically subjective act of experience, i.e. intentionality, there is no way to know the extent of that subjectivity. However, this generates further paradoxical consequences as we shall see.

One philosophical perspective that departs from here can be explored in the positions held by Jürgen Habermas or John R. Searle: Both follow an idea of Intentionality,⁵ which enables them, as I want to claim, to shortcut the difference of experience and appearance. Both are willing to pay the price for this shortcut, which is to abandon the question of truth as phenomenal truth – which, by the way, is why eventually both can be

such single act must be sought in the act-experience, and not in its objects; it must lie in that element which makes the act an ‘intentional’ experience, one ‘directed’ to objects.” Husserl, *Logical Investigations*. Vol. 2, 533.

⁴ To provide a typical example: John R. Searle, *Intentionality*. An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind (Cambridge: University Press, 1983).

⁵ It would go too far, to presume to show here in depth how Searle or Habermas conceive intentionality in detail. But what their conceptions share can easily be identified. – It is what Habermas grants Searle: “Searle has now shown [...] that the literal meaning of an expression must be completed by the background of an implicit knowledge.” Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume 1, trans. by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1984), 336. This “background of an implicit knowledge” is for Habermas accessible “only in the prereflective form of taken-for-granted background assumptions and naively mastered skills.” *Ibid.*, 335. – Now, this is just what Searle says, namely, that our so-called background knowledge is nothing but consisting in “various skills, abilities, preintentional assumptions and presuppositions, stances, and non representational attitudes”. Cf. Searle, *Intentionality*, 151.

taken to hold idealistic positions. Of course they do not abandon truth as such – or at least: an equivalent notion of objectivity –, but in either case, truth and objectivity become social phenomena – think of: Habermas’ consensus-theory of truth as well as his discourse theory of morality, politics, and law and Searle’s *Making the Social World*.⁶ Now, this is all but consequent. If there is no criterion to cut through experience in order to gain the reality of appearances, then institutionalized practices of experience is all reality there is – and, of course, a discourse on these practices is then all critical thinking can demand.

Besides, my guess is that Husserl is well aware of the fact that he employs – in his conception of the phenomenon – a contrast between form and content and that one is not given without the other. To come back to the example of how to experience a tone, temporality can be considered as the form of phenomenal content. The acoustic content then is that content but through time – and time is what a subject contributes to an appearance, enabling time to be temporal in the first place: There is no time *per se* as there is no appearance *per se* but phenomenal temporality or – what amounts to the same – temporal phenomena. Only when joined, form and content perform something at all.

Now, to better understand this contrast let’s take it as an ability⁷ and in those terms, which Husserl used to describe it in his study on the “consciousness of internal time”.⁸ Part of the capacity of this consciousness is then the ability to differentiate between an ideal (phenomenal) object that remains the same in time – which is why it is ideal – and the constitution of that temporal ideality through temporal differences. It can then be taken as the difference between temporal duration and the ability to wonder in what way this duration takes place. – Husserl himself, though,

⁶ Again, it cannot be shown here what these positions consist in but what can be said in either case that they are theories shedding light on the social shape of our techniques to construct values. Cf. Habermas, “Wahrheitstheorien”, in *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984), ch. 2. Also, Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discursive Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. by W. Rehg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996). And of course: Searle, *Making the Social World. The Structure of Human Civilization* (Oxford: University Press, 2010).

⁷ Of course, I rely here on Searlian terminology, cf. fn. 5.

⁸ Husserl, *On the phenomenology of the consciousness of internal time* (1893-1917), trans. by John Barnett Brough (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers), 1991.

would not be able to describe this difference in those terms – and no one would be able to understand him –, if there was no capacity to wonder about the ways in which duration takes place. There is a certain natural and intuitive understanding of the temporal form of phenomenal content, which alone can be a subject of investigation. Such investigation, however, is not necessary for the ability to deal with phenomena. We just deal with them. They are temporal, of course, and most probably temporality is but one of a lot of formal criteria which qualify something to be an accessible and understandable content. Among temporality, space or spatiality is another formal criterion for content as are all cultural practices of experience. The overall question that seems to be misunderstood in Searle as well as in Habermas, is – again – what is experience? Husserl seems to have traced this question, when stating: “Foreground is nothing without background.”⁹ What the background is, though, is not interesting in terms of *what* there is; that is the question of the foreground, which is the thematic content of phenomena. Instead, the question of the background is expressed in terms of *how* something is. Usually, though, the background is not thematic; that is why it is the background.

In addition, experience depends on the various forms of the difference of foreground and background, the various contrasts of form and content. Husserl tried to describe a transcendental background, i.e. a background, which is a precondition for any experience to take place – such is his assumption of transcendental time.¹⁰ Understood that way, however, no experience can ever change the way of our experience. This means to leave aside experience as a constituting factor of experience. Drawing now a further paradoxical consequence, we could say: Experience does not matter to experience – no experience could ever shed light on the contrast of form and content, although, this contrast is all what experience consists in. This is the bullet to bite, once we accept the phenomenal indifference

⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁰ Cf. “We seek to bring the *a priori* of time to clarity by exploring the *consciousness of time*, by bringing its essential constitution to light, and by exhibiting the apprehension-contents and act-characters that pertain – perhaps specifically – to time and to which the *a priori* temporal laws essentially belong.” *Ibid.*, 10. Cf. also Paola Marrati’s work on this topic: Paola Marrati, *Genesis and Trace*. Derrida reading Husserl and Heidegger (Stanford: University Press, 2005).

of form and content as “there is no difference between the experience or conscious content and the experience itself.”¹¹

However, this leads straightly to the core of Derrida’s philosophy, namely the insight that “the condition of possibility of those effects [of experience] is simultaneously [...] the condition of their impossibility, of the impossibility of their rigorous purity.”¹² What makes phenomenal content possible – the contrast of form and content –, is what makes it impossible to ever come to terms about the purity of this content. Experience itself is therefore the name for both, the experience of a possibility and the experience of an impossibility. This insight looms large. For in phenomenology – at least in phenomenology – only experience of possibility is thought of in terms of providing content in a proper way. The debate between Searle and Derrida about whether cases of “non-standard”, “non-serious” and “abnormal” speech acts can be part of a general speech act theory simply explores this assumption in the specific context of language philosophy. But, I guess, that Derrida is right, stating that: “In classical terms, the accident is never an accident.”¹³ Derrida’s method – so called *deconstruction* – becomes then a necessary counterpart to set the accident in its rightful place, to emphasize the experience of an impossibility. Structurally, however, there is no gap between possibility and impossibility, or to put it otherwise: there is nothing else but that gap. However, that does not mean that there cannot be stated anything as right or wrong. Rather the point is that there is no purity in the judgment of anything as either right or wrong, that there is no right and no wrong in themselves. Thus, setting the accident in its rightful place is nothing but a structural impossibility since the accident is always opposed to what is non-accidental. The accident cannot be purely an accident as it is dialectically determined to play the counterpart of what is non-accidental. This structural impossibility turns then out, though, to be part of the paradoxical structurality of experience. This “structurality of structure”¹⁴ is then what enables structure to rise in the first place. To examine it, we have to focus on both, aesthetics

¹¹ Husserl, *Logical Investigations*. Vol. 2, 540.

¹² Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context”, in *Limited Inc*, ed. by Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1-25, 20.

¹³ Derrida, *Limited Inc a b c ...*, Glyph 2 (1977), 162-255, 200.

¹⁴ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), 278.

and ethics.

2. What is Aesthetic Experience?

There are phenomena, which – more than others – disable the distinction of form and content to take place. Effectively, they do not really disable the distinction but delay its arrival. If form and content were about to happen instantly – as in everyday life it is often the case –, we would not be aware of them taking place at all. Therefore, if they arrive, they are in indifference towards each other in a way such that phenomenal content can be grasped easily. If, however, the indifference of the contrast of form and content is not given instantly, the contrast itself becomes thematic. Usually, though, as highlighted by Husserl, only the foreground, the content is thematic – that is what makes the content proper content. The relation of foreground and background, then, is itself indifferent and therefore unproblematic. That is why the delay of its unfolding is phenomenologically problematic – however, as I want to claim, this is the way art works.

Aesthetic experience is what makes us draw attention to the undecided-ability of what is phenomenal content and what is the form of that content. It is the impossibility to accomplish an indifference of form and content, which would give way to a clear phenomenon. In art, the aesthetic phenomenon itself cannot be identified like, for instance, this table in front of me. On the other hand this table in front of me could be aesthetic, if it was impossible to come to terms *how* this table happens to appear. – To make this example plausible, we would have to invest a few more assumptions, like, the table had to be arranged in a certain disturbing or fascinating matter, maybe painted in wild colors, with grotesque figures attached on it, and what more there is done to art works.

Artistic techniques therefore aim – whether intended or not – to threaten one's capacity to experience them properly – while under proper experience I understand the capacity to associate a context to something in a way such as to determine sufficiently *how* that something has to be experienced – which means providing form in the first place. Still, as long as this *how* is not sufficiently determined, the *what* neither can be identified properly. Of course – take it for granted, that this table indeed was

an artwork –, we would still know that this is a table. But there would be something odd about it that we could not name – and naming it “table” would just feel improper. We would hesitate to do so, just as it happens to feel a distance between the title of an artwork and the artwork itself. Hesitation and delay are here not to be taken as accidents, which could have been prevented and therefore are not to be taken as proper accidents. On the contrary, they are necessary as they are, *how* they are – to shed light on what would otherwise fade out immediately into the background. Delay and hesitation are nothing else but the search for a proper background, a proper form, a proper category – what Kant called “reflective judgment”¹⁵ that is seeking universals for given particulars.

Moreover, this delay of proper experience as aesthetic experience is founded in what can be called – following a notion of Derrida – the logic of the frame.¹⁶ The frame can be considered as what is in between foreground and background, between form and content. As long as foreground and background or form and content are in a relation of indifference, framing takes place successfully and no one was ever aware of the fact that it took place. However, to frame means drawing a border, a line of separation between foreground and background in such a way that the foreground can become thematic in the first place. But to determine *possible* content is only possible, if it amounts to determine *impossible* content, too. Framing has therefore two directions: one is it to form content, the other is to form form. Besides, this is what Derrida calls “formation of form”¹⁷: the infinite play of substitution, the movement of ever new differences, which itself can never become the object of formation, because it is at the same time antecedent *and* subsequent to all practices of formation. It is what is the

¹⁵ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), First Introduction V, 20:211-13.

¹⁶ Obviously, the notion of the logic of the frame relies at least three important works on the topic: Ulrike Dinkelsbühler, *Kritik der Rahmen-Vernunft. Parergon-Versionen nach Kant und Derrida* (München: Fink, 1991). Barbara Johnson, “The Frame of Reference. Poe, Lacan, Derrida”, in *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 457-505. And under the rubric of „Borderline Aesthetics“: David Carroll, *Paraesthetics. Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida* (New York: Methuen, 1987). Cf. there chapter six, Borderline Aesthetics

¹⁷ “Differance is therefore the formation of form.” Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 63.

problematical itself; what becomes thematic in all situations of hesitation, doubt and insecurity.

What becomes thematic in these cases is the frame itself as the act of framing is detained. That is precisely the aesthetic situation: In an artwork it is impossible to decide ultimately what is thematic foreground and what is enabling background. Every possibly nameable aspect of an artwork can be thematic itself: figures, colors, light, canvas, everything. That is why we cannot come to terms about what makes an artwork an artwork. What Derrida states of deconstruction is therefore also true for the very aesthetic undecidability:

[D]econstruction has never claimed [...] to be possible. [...] For a deconstructive operation, possibility is rather the danger, the danger of becoming an available set of rule-governed procedures, methods, accessible approaches. The interest of deconstruction, as such force and desire it may have, is a certain experience of the impossible.¹⁸

Furthermore, this “experience of the impossible” can be aesthetic but, if so, the domain of the aesthetic goes beyond itself as that is the very nature of the frame: Once confronted – aesthetically – with the problem of framing, everything can be put into question. Everything can be foreground – everything can be background. Nothing is definitely unimportant and any detail can gain importance. In music as in poetry nothing can be as significant as silence and even temporality itself can become thematic, for instance, if a movie or an opera is extremely short or long. Framing is therefore the most fundamental operation of aesthetic experience but also the most difficult to justify. As Derrida puts it in *The truth in painting*:

I do not know what is essential and what is accessory in a work. And above all I do not know what this thing is that is neither essential nor accessory, neither proper nor improper [...]. Where does the frame take place. Does it take place. Where does it begin. Where does it end. What is its internal limit. Its external limit.¹⁹

On top of that, aesthetic experience is intimately connected to a logic of question and questionability. For aesthetic experience reveals, that experience is possible in its impossibility. What makes this impossibility

¹⁸ Derrida, *Psyche*. Inventions of the Other (Stanford: University Press, 2007), 15.

¹⁹ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: University Press, 1987), 63.

possible, though, is an infinite force of questioning. Still, what this force is, cannot be answered – or answered easily – as all this force is about is questioning – not answering. However, adequate responding is a way of doing justice to what cannot be answered. Contemplating an artwork is one way of responding to this force.

Again, for artists and art critics this may sound like a bizarre, if not absurd, consequence. But what “deconstruction” or the force of questioning is about is not any sort of undefinable and hence obscure irrationalism. For does not mean to abandon all criteria to judge artworks and aesthetic impressions. On the contrary, it means that there are specifically aesthetic criteria, which are irreducible and thus different as well as alternative to any other sort of critical thinking.

3. The Common Ground of Aesthetic Experience and Ethics

Generally spoken, ethics can be considered as everything that concerns one’s relation to another one. There is no good action in an ethical sense that has impacts exclusively on my own situation. Therefore, for ethics to be possible, one has to come to terms with another one. One technique to understand another one, is to understand him hermeneutically, that is to understand him on the basis of my own understandings, my own background. This technique, however, has its limits: The other, then, will appear only within the limits of my understanding of him. The other will never appear in his otherness.

Of course, complete otherness cannot be understood. I have always to assume a background of his actions, a setting, a context, to understand what he does, why he does it. If all that is true, the question of the frame is as relevant for aesthetic experience as it is for understanding each other. If aesthetic experience consists in an act of sensible complementation of what is foreground and what is background, then so is proper understanding of one another. For what is sensible complementation, if not a certain desire towards what is but indicated? There is no space of knowing easily how to take this or that in an artwork – if so, it was no artwork, but just that table in front of me. Aesthetic experience involves a notion of infinite sensibility in respect to *how* I have to take what I have to face. This

sense of sensibility can be understood, as I want to claim, in ethical terms as responsibility.

Moreover, both, art and understanding each other, demand a consideration of communicated content in terms of its being contaminated by external settings and vice versa, a consideration of that background as being contaminated by what appear to be facts and deeds. Understanding someone perfectly would only be possible, if we knew exactly what his background is and under which constraints he acts. Only then could we see which choices he made, which decisions he took. However, this is – entirely – as impossible as a painting that was never framed. The painting per se is not an image, and the image is given only because of an act of framing and so is understanding. Regarding someone's actions, background assumptions are always made, but it cannot be assumed that this assuming is ultimately correct, as that would make the other a creature of one's own assumptions. Besides, what I can see in an image is different from the mere structure of the painting. In other words: there is no mere structure but only the setting of structure ("structurality").

Furthermore, neither can I assume ultimately the background of another one, nor can I ultimately assume the correctness of my own background. For instance, it is always possible, to wonder whether a specific action would have been right also in view of another background. If, for instance, every action of mine should be coherent with the background assumption of climate change, then probably some actions should change. The possible plurality of backgrounds is something that responsibility forces us to consider. Yet, no matter how careful such consideration will be, it can always turn out to be shortcutting.²⁰

On the other hand, it seems to be easy to do the right thing like helping an old woman stand up, after she had fallen. Yet, this is not what concerns ethics. Ethics begin when norms, telling us what to do – like: Help the needy, the weak, the poor! –, begin to lose some of their rigorous force; when we have to wonder whether a particular norm indeed is a good thing (situation of conflicting norms). It is always easy and ethically effortless to rely on the structures that tell us right from wrong. But how is it guaran-

²⁰ Cf. in particular for the sake of the example of climate change, though this goes in general as well: Jeroen van der Sluijs, *Uncertainty and Dissent in Climate Risk Assessment. A Post-Normal Perspective*, in: *Nature Culture* (Vol. 7, Nr. 2), 2012, 174-195.

teed that these structures are right themselves? If you grow up in a violent state, you grow up with norms of violence – yet which state or society could actually claim to be thoroughly innocent of producing violence?

And there the question is posed of infinite responsibility. [...] There is no more responsibility when there are norms. Thus, if one wants to normalize, to norm the ethical overload, it is finished, there is no more ethics.²¹

The disbelief in an ultimate grounding neither in art nor in ethics is crucial for the existence of both phenomena. The absence of this belief (in an ultimate grounding), however, enables another one, that is: the belief of finding a common ground – which itself can be considered as an act of art or of understanding. Besides, both cannot be taken *simply* or *merely* as absence of grounding. Rather, they express the belief that something will appear, the certainty that something is about to happen – as both take into account what is indicated and what is indicated is never certain, never really present. Still, it is there as being promised. What maintains doubt and hesitation is therefore not just something negative but also a positive expectation that something is coming. An artwork just like acts of understanding promises in a way to reveal a still hidden insight. The prior absence of a fixed frame, a fixed contrast on one hand and the hope for the coming of such a frame on the other hand turn into the very presence of art and understanding.

Moreover, both share a particular form of temporalisation different from mere phenomenal experience and superficial social relations where – in either case – everything seems to be clear from the beginning to the end and where illusions always turn out surprisingly and happen most unexpectedly. In those cases past, present and future are indifferent towards each other. On the contrary, for what art and understanding share, is the idea of never possessing anything – exempt from that which “would make or give *place*; it would give rise – without ever *giving* anything – to what is

²¹ Derrida, “Performative Powerlessness – A Response to Simon Critchley”, in *The Derrida-Habermas Reader*, ed. by Lasse Thomassen (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), III-115, 113.

called the coming of the event.”²² This event, however, would be end of aesthetic experience as well as an understanding of the other in his otherness. What is therefore more important than the event is the “eventness of the event”²³: a reflection of the future that maintains the distance between presence and future: the space of the coming.

4. The Question of Modernity

Finally, I want to loose a few words on the notion of modernity. Habermas claims in his lecture on *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* in 1985 that Derrida levels the distinction of literature and philosophy.²⁴ I cannot discuss this claim here properly. But it definitely is true that Derrida at least in some parts of his works employs techniques, which provoke a suspension of the process of reading, of understanding and, even more so, the clarity of logical consequences. This employment can be taken as an attempt to apply deconstructive insights to philosophical texts. These attempts can be considered as more or less successful. However, this is not the point. The point is that to have an insight – be it a philosophical insight or an insight in general – framing is necessary. In fact, reducing framing to the mere establishing of an event, to the possession of an insight is, by the same token, to ignore the process of its genesis. Yet, it is this genesis, which produces always new events, which can be taken as life itself and which can never be reduced to itself.²⁵

Habermas claims that modernity is founded in the “idea of reason as something that is in fact build into communicative relations and that can in practice be seized upon”²⁶. The philosophical project of modernity then

²² Derrida, *Rogues*. Two essays on reason (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), xiv.

²³ Derrida, “Performative Powerlessness – A Response to Simon Critchley”, 112.

²⁴ Cf. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Twelve Lectures, ed. by Frederick Lawrence (Oxford: Blackwill, 1987).

²⁵ Indeed, this captures a central idea of Derrida’s thinking: Life itself cannot be mastered nor learned. Instead, learning to life is all life is about: „And does one ever do anything else but learn to live, alone, from oneself, by oneself?“ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), xvii.

²⁶ Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 82.

is to found this idea in the very communicative relations, which – on the other hand – maintain this idea. According to Habermas, postmodern philosophers such as Derrida cease to do so. However, as I hope to have shown, Derrida rather tries to protect an idea of reason that is beyond the very finiteness of our judgments. What never takes place ultimately, can take place all the time. Being exposed to risk, is being exposed to possibility – as are the practices of everyday life. But these perspective bound practices are not to be confounded with what gives them place to be initially. If we forget that, everything is at risk of being supposed to be eternal: structures, facts, principles, characteristics and whatever more. On the contrary, this means losing the sense of being at risk. However, as Derrida has shown, the foundation of an “idea of reason” is nothing but a promise. This is what art and ethics do: they promise the coming of reason – and in doing so, they are probably more reasonable than claiming the presence (or worse the fulfillment) of reason.

Furthermore, one of the founding documents of modernity as well as the age of aesthetics – namely the so called *Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism* (1796/97) – expresses explicitly: “I am convinced that the highest act of reason, which, in that it comprises all ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that *truth and goodness* are united like sisters *only in beauty*–.”²⁷ As far as I can see, in the discussion on what modernity consists in, this was never caught on. Still, my guess is that what the *Systemprogramm* stated became lucid philosophy in Derrida’s work. In conclusion: What can be developed aesthetically as sensibility or ethically as responsibility can be understood in either way as a form of justice towards what there is. Giving justice to someone or something is the infinite regard for the detail. But this justice can never take place. It is the mere idea of justice, the notion that people and things deserve better than they do that stimulates art and social life. This sort of stimulation is the space of the coming, the distance between present and future. Maintaining this space as the non-identity of present and future is what art and ethics are made of. Indeed, as such they are “united like sisters”. However, it would be a misunderstanding to take them as a foundation of modernity. Rather, what they tell is that there is

²⁷ Cf. *The Early Political Writings of The German Romantics*, ed. by Frederick C. Beiser (Cambridge: University Press, 1996), 1-6.

no such foundation. All there is an infinite act of founding.

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