

Jack Reynolds and Jonathan Roffe (eds). *Understanding Derrida*.

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This collection of seventeen introductory essays, each tackling a single concept or author, was published shortly before Derrida's death last year. Each essay is provided by a different scholar, many of whom have established distinguished reputations in the relation of Derrida's work to their particular topic.

Critics and followers alike take note that Derrida works with very few concepts, but these concepts are of a nature that allows them to be turned to anything that participates in the tradition and trappings of "reason." The problems of approaching Derrida are perennial to reading contemporary continental philosophers. The authors themselves seem the least apt to provide an introduction for a reader who is not already immersed in the subject matter, and yet, Derrida like the others is also making his point again and again. Thus, the arrangement of *Understanding Derrida* is suited to Derrida's work. Rather than overwhelming the beginner with an abstract appraisal of Derrida's essential position, the chapters draw out in each of Derrida's confrontations those elements that remain constant throughout his works.

The frequent use of Derrida's key terms without explication would quickly confuse a completely uninitiated reader. But any common summary introduction to Derrida would be sufficient to make up the required background. This text is much less a straight introduction and than a reading companion. Each chapter concludes with an annotated further reading on each respective topic, allowing the reader to navigate Derrida's massive oeuvre. Secondary literature is bypassed in favour of the texts themselves in each case, in the spirit of the book as a whole.

The first three chapters articulate the broadest scope of Derrida's work. "Language" by Simon Glendinning provides Derrida's recasting of the "sign" with the notion of iterability which is partially explained. Christopher

Norris on “Metaphysics” deals with Derrida’s relationship with the history of the philosophical canon, and address some misreadings. These two essays establish Derrida’s early engagements with philosophy. The third essay on “Politics” by Paul Patton sets out the recurrent concepts of the late Derrida, including the Benjaminian “to-come” and the aporetic possibility- impossibility conflux.

Repetition within the book’s middle chapters seems to aid coherence rather than generate frustration. Jon Roffe’s “Ethics” links Derrida with Levinas while Jack Reynolds’ chapter on “Decision” starts with Kierkegaard’s use of *aporia* before explaining this in relation to Levinas. The chapter on “Religion” a forum for Kevin Hart to return to the parallels he drew between Derrida and Negative Theology as well as to review Derrida’s more explicit involvement with religion during the 1990s. Hart also proposes an interesting hypothesis for the origins of the word “deconstruction.”

“Psychoanalysis” by Matthew Sharpe, “Literature” by Claire Colebrook and “Art” by Julian Wolfreys all show how Derrida’s notion of signification play out in these themes. The chapters cover Lacan, Mallarmé and some of the concepts used in *The Truth of Painting*, respectively. David Roden’s “The Subject” and Jonathan Roffe’s “Translation” focus upon more generically philosophical material, and examine the contexts of Derrida’s foundation. Roden’s chapter, juxtaposing Freud and Husserl, is especially dense.

The second part, consisting of five essays, is also rather disparate in approach. “Husserl” by David Allison examines how Derrida’s critique of the use of the sign in Husserl’s phenomenology is directed at Husserl as a kind of culmination of all metaphysics. On the other hand, Robert Bernasconi’s “Heidegger” chapter leans more towards a history of Derrida’s relationship with Heidegger. “Levinas” from Simon Critchley adds little to numerous explanations of Levinas already made, while David Rathbone’s “Hegel” manages to explain the daunting *Glas*. Fiona Jenkins in “Nietzsche” examines the reasons for Derrida’s peculiar relationship with that thinker, as well as controversies relating to the reception of Derrida’s Nietzsche.

Understanding Derrida’s major strength is in displaying Derrida’s philosophy not as an isolated and idiosyncratic position held for its own sake, but rather as inseparable from the tradition of philosophy. If the book has a weakness beside its inaccessibility to a first-time reader, it is the lack of any conclusion that could of drawn the repetitions together in order to make a much clearer picture of Derrida’s underlying intentions.

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