SPECULATIVE GRAMMATOLOGY

DECONSTRUCTION AND THE NEW MATERIALISM

Deborah Goldgaber
Deborah Goldgaber’s reputation as an original interpreter of Derrida far predates the publication of this book. What makes *Speculative Grammatology* different from other existing works on Derrida is its portrayal of that polarising Frenchman as a speculative philosopher who dances secretly to a realist tune. While it is true that other commentators have tried to depict Derrida as a realist, this has usually amounted to little more than a ‘realism of the residue’ in which every act of speech or writing is haunted by a trace of irrecoverable otherness. Goldgaber goes much further, pushing her treatment of textuality towards the realm of lower animals and even the inorganic. From this alone, the reason for including Goldgaber’s book in a series on Speculative Realism (SR) should be clear.

As a committed though unorthodox Derridean, Goldgaber offers an olive branch to the original Speculative Realists, none of whom were ever great fans of Derrida. The Derridean critique of presence, she argues, covers much the same ground as the SR critique of correlationism. For both, the purported coincidence of thought and being is an illusion or fetish, so that SR should seek alliance with such Derridean terms as ‘text’, ‘trace’, ‘spacing’ and ‘arche-writing’, which Goldgaber frames in ways that make an alliance seem strangely inviting. She also concedes that there are very good reasons why both friends and opponents of Derrida have always found him to be obviously anti-realist and anti-materialist in spirit. Even so, Goldgaber is more aware than most of the difference between Speculative Realism and New Materialism: a difference often suppressed even by critics as keen-eyed as Slavoj Žižek and his circle.¹

¹ See Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek (eds), *Subject Lessons: Hegel, Lacan, and the*
Chapter 1, ‘Materialism and Realism in Contemporary Continental Philosophy’, introduces a number of contemporary authors with whom Goldgaber is engaged in serious internal dialogue, especially Karen Barad, Claire Colebrook and Cary Wolfe. There is a separate dialogue here with me and Levi R. Bryant. Goldgaber expresses agreement with us that twentieth-century critiques of the ‘Cartesian subject’ – by the likes of Michel Foucault – failed to get to the root of the problem, since the ostensibly post-Cartesian landscape still left human beings at the centre of the picture. Stated differently, Goldgaber is not playing the tired old game of critiquing ‘humanism’ while doing nothing to displace humans from their philosophical throne. Derrida, she assures us, is a critic of correlationism rather than realism, and thus deserves to be counted as a Speculative Realist avant la lettre. She builds a basis for this case with several crucial citations from Derrida in which he overtly opposes the idea of the ‘linguistic turn’.

In Chapter 2, we are first treated to a new approach to Quentin Meillassoux’s problem of the arche-fossil. While it is often wrongly assumed that Meillassoux thinks that he refutes correlationism by appeal to the ‘ancestrality’ of the universe prior to the existence of all consciousness, Goldgaber notes the explicit similarities between Meillassoux and the correlationist. Above all, they assume that direct evidence is the only kind there is, despite the crucial difference that Meillassoux is troubled by the consequences for science. What Goldgaber seeks instead is absolute rather than direct evidence, meaning a kind of evidence independent of all transcendental activity: this, she holds, is exactly what Derrida provides. Written texts cannot be correlated with a subject, and are ‘structurally readable’ apart from humans. This leads her to an original account of Derridean ‘iterability’ as referring not just to repeatability, but to a heterogeneity implicit in all repetition. This heterogeneity is interpreted further as a form of parasitism, in which the mark is not identical with itself because it always hosts another mark that structures it. While some of the Derridean terminology will seem familiar, the realist uses to which Goldgaber puts it are not.

Future of Materialism (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020). Although most of the chapters in this collection exaggerate the similarities between Speculative Realism and New Materialism, it is still an invaluable resource.

In Chapter 3, Goldgaber argues that Derrida is an eliminativist with respect to meaning, which he replaces with the notion of translatability. In this he is influenced by Walter Benjamin’s idea of ‘translation beyond the human’. While Derrida wants to preserve both signifier and signified as two separate terms, they are not taxonomical opposites, as if one thing were merely a sign and that at which it pointed were a pure terminus of self-evident meaning. Instead, translatability means that any supposed meaning is itself just another text, with one text always modifiable by another in what Goldgaber calls an ‘exchange of form’. Thought itself is just another form of translation; nothing survives without mutating.

Chapter 4 turns to Derrida’s enigmatic concept of ‘arche-writing’, as defined in Of Grammatology’s second chapter.3 Despite more than fifty years of scholarly attention, there is no consensus interpretation of this term, nor even of ‘trace’, as J. Hillis Miller observes.4 Goldgaber reads arche-writing as concerning the ubiquitous entanglement of inside and outside for Derrida, and links this with Karen Barad’s important book Meeting the Universe Halfway.5 This reader wonders, however, whether Goldgaber and Barad are really natural allies on the question of entanglement; much like Niels Bohr, Barad holds that entanglement requires the mind as one of its terms, which is precisely what Goldgaber rejects in her efforts to help Derrida escape the transcendental thought–world relation. This is also the chapter where Goldgaber gives us a close reading of the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, with further attention to the theories of Roman Jakobson and Wilhelm von Humboldt.

But the real fireworks are reserved for Chapter 5, which concludes the book. Referring to the Derridean trace as ‘ultra-transcendental’, Goldgaber soon makes clear that by ‘ultra’ she does not mean very much transcendental, but beyond transcendental. Far from claiming all the credit for this insight, she salutes allies on all sides: just as Barad carries the Derridean trace structure down to the quantum level, as does Wolfe for systems theory, so too does Martin Hägglund account for evolu-

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tionary processes in Derridean terms. But not everyone is an ally: Bernard Stiegler remains suspicious of any Derrida-of-the-outside-world, and Goldgaber specifically takes issue with his approach. Given the generality of the trace structure, absolutely *everything* can be considered as a form of memory. But here an important difference between Goldgaber and Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) also comes to light. In agreement with Colebrook, she holds that deconstructive materialism can have nothing to do with substances or objects, since neither of these concepts rises to the challenge of the *plasticity* of the trace. And speaking of plasticity, who better to consult on this term than Catherine Malabou? The final pages of the book essentially give us Goldgaber’s running inner debate with Malabou. While the two authors agree on philosophical essentials, Goldgaber generally defends Derrida on those points where Malabou thinks he falls short. More specifically, whereas Malabou thinks that ‘writing’ remains trapped in the old opposition of matter and form, Goldgaber argues the contrary. And while Malabou asserts that her idea of the ‘plastic coding of experience’ is non-grammatological because it is non-graphic, Goldgaber sees no graphic restriction in general grammatology.

Quite aside from the details of her argument, Goldgaber brings the interpretation of Derrida to a place that would have been unthinkable in the 1980s and 1990s, when the application of grammatology to the level of worms and stones could only have invited ridicule. She is also unique in the challenge she poses to Derrideans. In recent years, those who have claimed that ‘Derrida was really a realist all along’ have too often done so with the pretence that this had always been obvious, as if recent materialists and realists were Johnny-come-laties and plagiarists in no position to ask questions of their elders. Goldgaber’s take is more honest: while acknowledging the anti-realist baggage of Derrida scholarship, she offers a powerful demonstration of the possible realism lurking beneath the surface of his work. She has already changed my mind on a number of crucial points.

Graham Harman
Long Beach, California
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