
Derrida on responsibility in the university

La responsabilidad en la universidad según Derrida

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Abstract: In this essay I examine Derrida's proposal for a new understanding of responsibility in the university, as it is articulated in "Mochlos, or The Conflict of the Faculties," together with remarks made in "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils" and "The University Without Condition". I argue that this account of responsibility, while sharing some characteristics with Derrida's later theorizations, enacts an inheritance of Kant and places an emphasis on community that is unique in Derrida's oeuvre.

Keywords: Derrida, Kant, responsibility, university, community.

Resumen: En este artículo se examina la propuesta de Derrida de una nueva comprensión de la responsabilidad en la universidad, tal como aparece en "Mochlos, o El conflicto de las facultades", en "Las pupilas de la Universidad. El principio de razón y la idea de la Universidad", y en "La universidad sin condición". Se defiende que esta descripción de la responsabilidad, aunque comparte algunas características con las últimas teorizaciones de Derrida, manifiesta una herencia kantiana y pone el énfasis en la comunidad, lo que es único en su obra.

Palabras clave: Derrida, Kant, responsabilidad, Universidad, comunidad.

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What are our responsibilities as professors in the contemporary university? For what are we responsible, and to whom? Answers to these questions are likely to be different depending on the particular institutional situation in which we find ourselves. I imagine that most of us would agree we are responsible to many different parties, including to our students, our colleagues, as well as to administrators and governing bodies, both inside and outside of our institution, and sometimes to sources of funding that make our positions possible. And to each of these groups, the content of our responsibilities will no doubt differ in turn. But even before we arrive at answers to these questions, we might also ask ourselves exactly what we understand responsibility to mean. Do we know what we mean when we say we are responsible? Even if we think we know what it means, could this meaning be something we question? What could it mean to be responsible as a professor in the contemporary university, before we determine for what and to whom we are responsible? And prior even to this question, might we also not question just who this “we” invoked is, and if there is such a thing as the “contemporary university”? How can we know that there is a stable body that we refer to when we say “we,” or that there is a meaningful entity we can name “professors in the contemporary university”?

It is with questions such as these that Jacques Derrida begins “Mochlos, or The Conflict of the Faculties,” an essay he first delivered as a lecture in April 1980 at Columbia University, on the occasion of receiving an honorary doctorate on the centenary of the founding of the university’s Graduate School¹. “Mochlos” has received some attention in Derrida scholarship, most notably in the collection *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties*, containing papers from a 1987 conference at the University of Alabama that took the essay as one of its starting points². But “Mochlos” does not, to my

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1. Jacques Derrida, “Mochlos, or The Conflict of the Faculties,” in Jacques Derrida, *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 83-112.
 2. Richard Rand, ed., *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992). Dawne McCance, “The Architecture of Institution,”

knowledge, feature prominently in any accounts exploring Derrida's understanding of responsibility. Scholars more commonly focus on the aporetic conception of responsibility developed in Derrida's later works, perhaps most famously in *The Gift of Death*, where it is articulated as an impossible ethical concept³. Such a focus is warranted, since it is in the later works that responsibility receives its most sustained treatment. Indeed, the general title for Derrida's seminars from 1991-2003 was "Questions of Responsibility"⁴. As a result, responsibility comes to be theorized by Derrida both in its own right and as the connecting thread linking the ethical and political concepts and phenomena analyzed at length across these years — secrecy, testimony, hospitality, perjury, forgiveness, the death penalty, and sovereignty are all examined under responsibility's light. If one wants to understand what Derrida means by responsibility, the later work thus seems the right place to go. Nevertheless, as I aim to demonstrate in this essay, the earlier account

in Dawne McCance, *Medusa's Ear: University Foundings from Kant to Chora L* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 27-46 provides a detailed reading of Kant's *The Conflict of the Faculties* that is both guided by "Mochlos" and functions as a guide to "Mochlos". While McCance does mention responsibility, this topic is not the focus of her essay.

3. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008). Examples of accounts of Derrida on responsibility that focus on his later works include François Raffoul, "Derrida: The Impossible Origins of Responsibility," in François Raffoul, *The Origins of Responsibility* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 282-299; Kas Saghafi, "'Ça me regarde'": Regarding Responsibility in Derrida," in Kas Saghafi, *Apparitions—Of Derrida's Other* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 50-61; Nicole Anderson, *Derrida: Ethics Under Erasure* (New York: Continuum, 2012); Madeleine Fagan, "Jacques Derrida: The Impossibility of Responsibility," in Madeleine Fagan, *Ethics and Politics After Poststructuralism: Levinas, Derrida and Nancy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 70-98. Closer to my concerns in this essay is Peter P. Trifonas, "Technologies of Reason: Academic Responsibility Beyond the Principle of Reason as the Metaphysical Foundation of the University," in Peter P. Trifonas, *The Ethics of Writing: Derrida, Deconstruction, and Pedagogy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 89-133, which discusses academic responsibility through a reading of Derrida's "The Principle of Reason" (a text I discuss below). However, throughout his analysis Trifonas too relies on the concept of responsibility coming from Derrida's later work.
4. Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign Volume I* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), x.

in “Mochlos,” together with related remarks from two other texts on education, articulates an original conception of responsibility, and analyzing this conception expands our understanding of what responsibility can mean in Derrida’s work.

1. ENGAGING KANT’S LEGACY

As with virtually all of Derrida’s writings, “Mochlos, or The Conflict of the Faculties” unfolds as the reading of another text, which in this case is signaled in the essay’s title, since its central focus is on Kant’s *The Conflict of the Faculties*⁵. Kant’s text is one of Derrida’s primary points of reference in several essays on education that he writes in the early 1980s, providing an understanding of the university that Derrida maintains influenced the debates preceding the establishment of the University of Berlin in 1810, which in turn became the model for modern research universities across Europe, North America, and elsewhere in the world. Returning to Kant’s essay is thus not only of historical interest to Derrida, but of relevance to the structure of universities today. One of Kant’s concerns in *The Conflict* is to clearly demarcate the responsibilities of professors in the university. Kant argues that the professors in the higher faculties—theology, law, and medicine—should be responsible to the State, since they directly serve its interests by training and certifying professionals who will promote for each of its citizens “the *eternal* well-being of each, then his *civil* well-being as a member of society, and finally his *physical* well-being (a long life and health)”⁶. By contrast, the lower faculty of philosophy (by which Kant refers to all of the arts and sciences, although he sometimes uses it in a narrower sense approximating our contemporary understanding) is concerned only with the search for truth, and so should be responsible only to the dictates of reason, free from all State interference, either directly or via the higher faculties, insofar as the latter are

5. Immanuel Kant, “The Conflict of the Faculties,” in Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 233-327.

6. *Ibidem*, 250.

answerable to the State. “So the philosophy faculty, because it must answer for the truth of the teachings it is to adopt or even allow, must be conceived as free and subject only to laws given by reason, not by the government”⁷.

Kant’s position on the responsibilities of the different faculties was motivated at least in part by his having been the subject of a royal proclamation, issued just a few years earlier, condemning the publication of *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*⁸. As Derrida points out, the charge from King Friedrich Wilhelm II, in a communication signed by the Minister for Religion, Johann Christoph von Woellner, which Kant reproduces in the “Preface” to *The Conflict*, was one of irresponsibility, both in terms of Kant’s duty as a teacher of youth and as a subject of the sovereign. Kant’s claim that professors such as himself in the lower faculty have responsibility only towards truth and reason is thus a response to this charge. It is these conditions framing Kant’s discussion of responsibility that are of initial interest to Derrida, who speaks of a nostalgia one might feel when reading Kant’s text in which the lines of responsibility seem clearly drawn: “a debate on the topics of teaching, knowledge, and philosophy could at least be posed in terms of responsibility.... and a common code could guarantee, at least on faith, a minimum of translatability for any possible discourse in such a context”⁹.

Derrida thus presents Kant’s claims as being situated in a common discourse, where the meaning of responsibility was determined and its lines demarcated, which enabled Kant to engage in a debate on the role that State power should play in questions of education and knowledge. Derrida then goes on to question whether today, by contrast, such a debate is even possible. Derrida doubts not whether we could reach a consensus on the topic of responsibility in the university, but whether “we could say ‘we’ and debate together, in a

7. *Ibidem*, 255.

8. Immanuel Kant, “Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason”, in Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39-215. For an account of the circumstances and details of the royal proclamation, see the Translator’s Introduction to this text, especially pp. 41-48.

9. Jacques Derrida, *Mochlos*, 87.

common language, about the general forms of responsibility in this area”¹⁰. That is, Derrida suggests that today there does not exist the minimal conditions of commonality and agreement necessary — a well-formed “we” — to even discuss the issue.

If Derrida is right about this lack of a common language, how are “we” —whatever this may mean— to understand talk of responsibility in today’s university? Derrida advances three “hypotheses” that respond to this question, between which he suggests “one hesitates”. The first is to “treat responsibility as a precisely academic theme”¹¹. This is to speak of responsibility as a thing of the past, perhaps to be celebrated for what it was, but which is no longer relevant to the present of the university institution. The second is to speak of responsibility as “a tradition to be reaffirmed”¹² in the university. This is to claim that even though certain transformations might have occurred since the time that an older conception of responsibility was operative, there have not been radical changes in the structures that constitute the university, and so such a conception still remains open to us to use. Finally, the third hypothesis is that

the notion of responsibility would have to be re-elaborated within an entirely novel problematic. In the relations of the university to society, in the production, structure, archiving, and transmission of knowledges and technologies..., in the very idea of knowledge and truth, lies the advent of something entirely other¹³.

Such a new concept of responsibility would neither remain a merely academic theme, nor simply reaffirm a responsibility from times past. Rather, it would be constituted by a new understanding that breaks with what precedes it by reimagining the structures and relations in which the university finds itself.

10. *Ibidem*.

11. *Ibidem*, 89.

12. *Ibidem*.

13. *Ibidem*.

One might guess that out of these three hypotheses Derrida is most sympathetic to the third. However, while this is indeed the case, even as Derrida goes on to elaborate a new understanding of responsibility, he does not do so by completely or cleanly breaking from past conceptions. Otherwise put, we should read Derrida's claim that "one hesitates" between these three hypotheses on responsibility also as a self-description—in a certain manner Derrida himself hesitates between them in the analyses that follow. To avoid such hesitation and attempt to affirm only the third hypothesis would fall into a trap that he diagnosed as waylaying others such as Foucault and Lévi-Strauss¹⁴. Derrida's charge against such thinkers is that they believe it is enough to simply reject traditional metaphysical concepts, only to have them reappear at the heart of their theorizing. Instead, while Derrida suggests that the way forward lies in thinking responsibility "as no longer passing, in the last instance, through an ego, the 'I think,' intention, the subject, the ideal of decidability"¹⁵, in "Mochlos" this way passes through a reading of Kant. Derrida thus tells his audience that he will "try to translate *The Conflict of the Faculties* in part,... so as to recognize its points of untranslatability, by which I mean anything that no longer reaches us and remains outside the usage of our era". By doing so, he hopes to produce "what perhaps exceeds this dialectical rationality itself; and the un-translatability we experience will perhaps signal the university's inability to comprehend itself in the purity of its inside"¹⁶. Derrida thus promises to read Kant's essay with an eye to that in it which no longer speaks to us (its points of untranslatability, corresponding to the first hypothesis), which will also imply, even though he does not state it here, those parts which are still relevant today (the second hypothesis). By doing so, Derrida hopes to provoke an experience of the university that exceeds

14. Jacques Derrida, "Cogito and the History of Madness", in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 31-63; Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

15. Jacques Derrida, *Mochlos*, 91.

16. *Ibidem*, 92-93.

a coherent self-understanding based on the model of a sovereign subject. That is, through his reading of Kant Derrida seeks to bring about something altogether new (the third hypothesis).

2. RESPONSIBILITY TO COMMUNITIES TO COME

Derrida then proceeds with this reading, beginning with an outline of the ways that Kant defines the borders of the university in the Introduction of *The Conflict*, dividing its inside from its outside. This provides Derrida with one point of difference to today, for while Kant keeps parts of this boundary clearly delimited, Derrida suggests that this is no longer possible. Whereas for Kant external organizations that conduct research such as scientific societies pose no threat to the university, today such entities have so multiplied because of State and corporate support that they now rival the university as centers of knowledge, as well as at times penetrating it within. Derrida then turns to another category on the outside that Kant has more difficulty keeping at bay. This is the “members of the *intelligentsia*” or “*businesspeople* or technicians of learning”¹⁷ who for Kant consist of the professionals trained by the higher faculties—those pastors, magistrates, and doctors employed by the State and now working in society. The threat that this group poses to the university is that with some measure of education, they take it upon themselves to make judgments in matters of knowledge and truth, as happened, for example, in the censorship of Kant’s *Religion*.

As we have seen, Kant thinks that such a power of judgment properly belongs to the faculty of philosophy, which prompts him to request that the State ensure that all such judgments emanating from these professionals be submitted to the lower faculty for review. Derrida notes that such a system of censorship by philosophy

has the appearance and would have the reality of a most odious tyranny if (1) the power that judges and decides here were not defined by a respectful and responsible service to *truth*, and

17. Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict*, 247-248.

if (2) it had not been stripped, from the beginning and by its structure, of all executive power, all means of coercion¹⁸.

These two stipulations —that the faculty of philosophy remain guided by truth and that they lack any power to enforce their claims— are thus key. They justify Kant’s call for those outside of philosophy to withhold their judgments, since as employees of the State they have coercive power, as well as allowing those inside philosophy to judge, since they lack the power to enforce the conclusions they reach.

It is at this point that Derrida’s presentation of *The Conflict* departs from what appears to be a faithful commentary and shifts into a more deconstructive mode. Derrida argues that this separation protecting the lower faculty from the influence of those trained by the higher faculties now working in government is premised upon two kinds of responsibility, one concerning truth and one concerning action, between which lies “an indivisible and rigorously uncrossable line”. And this division of responsibility is in turn grounded in a division in language, which, importing terminology from speech act theory, Derrida describes as a distinction “between two languages, that of truth and that of action, that of theoretical statements and that of performatives (especially of commands)”. This distinction, Derrida suggests, is ultimately untenable, for “it is language that opens the passage to all parasiting and simulacra.... This force of parasiting inhabits, first of all, so-called natural language, and is common to both the university and its outside”¹⁹.

Derrida does not here justify this claim about language, but one can find such justification by turning to earlier analyses, for example in “Signature, Event, Context,” where he argues that there is a necessary contamination between constative and performative speech acts²⁰. According to this argument, it would be impossible for a whole class of statements, for example, those made by the faculty

18. Jacques Derrida, *Mochlos*, 97.

19. *Ibidem*, 98.

20. Jacques Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context,” in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 307-330.

of philosophy in their investigations, to remain purely theoretical. Such statements carry with them the possibility of performative force. This contamination suggests that philosophy's evaluations of the judgments of the representatives of the State cannot be guaranteed to be free of coercive power, challenging the innocence to which Kant appeals to justify philosophy's freedom from control. Now as Derrida notes, Kant tries to control this inherent undecidability in language by limiting the scope of academic discourse to its own sphere. In the defense of *Religion* articulated in his reply to the Sovereign, Kant argues that his book "is not at all suitable for the public: to them it is an unintelligible, closed book, only a debate among scholars of the faculty, of which the people take no notice"²¹. That is, Kant suggests that scholarly discourse remains within the university as, in Derrida's words, a kind of "quasi-private language"²². This is in tension, however, with Kant's emphasis on philosophical language being "a rational, universal, and unequivocal discourse"²³. Derrida's charge is that Kant wants philosophical language to be both universal and particular, at the same time.

One can imagine how this tension uncovered within Kant's text might lay the groundwork for a full deconstruction of *The Conflict*, where its implications are spun out to cause the whole Kantian model of the university to shake. Interestingly, however, Derrida does not continue down this path, and instead uses the introduction of the performative as a lever to pivot in a different direction. Taking temporary leave of Kant's text, Derrida turns his attention to the present, and notes that there are currently debates on the performative power of language, debates which contain interpretative statements that

are neither simply theoretico-constative nor simply performative. This is so because *the* performative does not exist: there are various performatives, and there are antagonistic or parasitical

21. Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict*, 241. Cited on Jacques Derrida, *Mochlos*, 99.

22. Jacques Derrida, *Mochlos*, 98.

23. *Ibidem*, 99.

attempts to interpret the performative power of language, to police it and use it, to invest it performatively²⁴.

The claim here is that statements uttered in these debates work in both registers at once, both constatively asserting truths and performatively policing discourse. For Derrida, this means they imply both “a philosophy and a politics,” with the latter including “a political concept of the university community”. Derrida then immediately describes this as being a “symptomatic form today of a political implication that has, however, been at work, from time immemorial”²⁵.

What follows is a general description of this political implication, out of which emerges a new understanding of responsibility in the university. The scope here is broad. Going beyond statements “for which we have to take politico-administrative responsibility”²⁶—decisions about funding, organizing teaching and research, the granting of degrees, and the work of evaluation, all of which fall more easily under the category of performatives—Derrida ascribes performativity to all discursive acts within the university. Every act of interpretation undertaken by faculty in the university, in addition to its constative aspiration of claiming a truth about what it interprets, at the same time makes a performative call for an institutional model that would make this interpretation possible. This model could be one already in existence or one still to come, and such a model involves two levels — a community of interpreters gathered around the text, and a larger societal structure within which this community resides. Both would be solicited.

Derrida continues by then generalizing this structure to any text at all, with text understood in the broad sense that he has theorized across his writings. With every text comes the injunction to interpret, and this “gives rise to undecidability and the double bind, both opens and closes, that is, upon an overdetermination

24. *Ibidem*, 100.

25. *Ibidem*.

26. *Ibidem*.

that cannot be mastered”. This implies that any single interpretation is never final, and so the interpreter’s “performance will in its turn construct one or several models of community.... These are his responsibilities”²⁷. That is, because of undecidability, each interpretation solicits future interpretations, which will also be caught up in this structure, calling for further communities of interpretation in turn. To work in a university is thus to be inscribed as a member of a long chain of interpretations, each time responding to a past by calling forth a community of interpreters who will respond in the future, as well as affirming a broader societal structure within which this community resides. At each stage, one will thus be responsible for deciding how to interpret and what shape should be taken by the community to come. This decision cannot be made once and for all, but is passed on to that future community to respond to for themselves. And so on²⁸.

This understanding of responsibility has much in common with the one Derrida develops later in his work. In particular, central to both is the notion of undecidability, which makes responsibility possible—it is because undecidability haunts every interpretation, or, in what the later work tends to focus on, every decision, that we are called to be responsible in the first place—and impossible, in the sense of never being fully achievable. Another commonality across Derrida’s theorizations is that this undecidability also works to divorce responsibility from any guarantee of the good. Just as responsibility in Derrida’s later work will always be haunted by the possibility of danger and threat, of appropriation by forces that one wishes to keep at bay, in “Mochlos” Derrida notes that “this operation... is the moment for every imaginable ruse and strategic ploy”²⁹. The call for a community to come cannot be made so as to

27. *Ibidem*, 101.

28. In addition to articulating an understanding of responsibility, these pages from “Mochlos” also shed light on Derrida’s understanding of foundations. I discuss this aspect of “Mochlos” in a broader analysis of the concept of foundation across Derrida’s writings on education in Samir Haddad, “Fundaciones Políticas y el Derecho a la Filosofía,” in *Escenas de Escritura: Sobre Filosofía y Literatura*, ed. Cristóbal Olivares Molina (Santiago de Chile: Pólvora, 2020), 127-152.

29. Jacques Derrida, *Mochlos*, 101.

foreclose that community from taking a shape that we might not desire. It is always open to the possibility of perversion.

However, there are two important differences between the account of responsibility given in “Mochlos” and those found in Derrida’s later work. The first concerns Derrida’s invocation of community. “Community” is a word that Derrida generally avoids—indeed, in *Politics of Friendship* he goes so far as to claim state “I have never been able to write [the word ‘community’], on my own initiative and in my name, as it were”³⁰. While “Mochlos” demonstrates that this is an exaggeration³¹, it is the case that whether it be in the responsibility generated by upping-the-ante on the Kantian conception of duty in “Passions: An Oblique Offering,” or in the responsibility at work in the call to make a just decision in “Force of Law: On ‘The Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” or in the responsibility to the wholly other arising from Derrida’s reading of Kierkegaard’s reading of the story of Abraham and Isaac in *The Gift of Death*, each time Derrida explores this notion in his later writings it is figured very much in the framework of an isolated individual, alone as he or she faces an impossible decision³². This is in part due to the starting points of those analyses—in “Passions” and *The Gift of Death*, the texts Derrida is engaging themselves operate within the horizon of individual action³³. Derrida’s intervention into these

30. Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* (New York: Verso, 1997), 305.

31. Also, as Geoffrey Bennington points out in his essay “Forever Friends,” in Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 110-127, Derrida does in fact write community in his own name early in his career when speaking of the “community of the question” at the beginning of *Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas*, in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79-153.

32. Jacques Derrida, “Passions: An Oblique Offering,” in Jacques Derrida, *On the Name* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 3-34; Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: On ‘The Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 230-298; Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*.

33. While in its second half “Force of Law” engages Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence,” in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume I, 1913-1926* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 236-252, the aporetic analysis of responsibility in this essay arises mostly in the articulations of the three aporias of law and justice, which unfold through a logical analysis on Derrida’s part rather than through a textual interpretation. Here, then, the focus on the individual is more clearly Derrida’s own.

texts is to introduce or amplify the work of an other on the scene, but this other is the provocation for, never a potential partner in, the taking on of responsibility.

By contrast, we have just seen that the responsibility in “Mochlos” is in an important sense shared with other members of the university community. Or, more accurately, it is in the sharing of responsibility that new communities within the university come into existence. This too can be traced to starting point of Derrida’s analysis, insofar as *The Conflict* is concerned with the university faculties as collectives, as well as to the occasion for Derrida’s address—having just been granted an honorary doctorate and thus inducted into a collective university body, talk of community is eminently appropriate. Derrida’s invocation of community also constitutes a response to the situation he diagnosed at the beginning of his essay, when he claimed that there lacks a common code that would form a stable “we” which could ground any debate on the meaning of responsibility in the university. The conception of responsibility put forward here suggests that faculty in the university are responsible for constituting such “we’s” through their acts of interpretation. This conception does not require a preexisting “we” to get underway—every time that it is articulated, as, for example, in Derrida’s essay itself, it is called forth.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that, even as this emphasis on community marks a different place for alterity within responsibility, it does not mean that the other as it appears in the later work has no place in this account. The undecidability at work in university responsibility will always mean that there is an irreducible dimension of alterity in play which eludes the grasp of a subject, whether we understand this subject to be an individual or a collective. In this sense this earlier conception of responsibility remains faithful to Derrida’s injunction, cited above, to no longer pass “in the last instance, through an ego, the ‘I think,’ intention, the subject, the ideal of decidability”³⁴.

34. Jacques Derrida, *Mochlos*, 91.

The invocation of community is thus unique in Derrida's writings on responsibility. Additionally, there is a second feature distinguishing the responsibility in "Mochlos" from Derrida's later theorizations. This is found in the suggestion Derrida makes as his analysis continues that "today the minimal responsibility and in any case the most interesting one, the most novel and strongest responsibility, for someone belonging to a research or teaching institution, is perhaps to make such a political implication, its system and its aporias, as clear and thematic as possible". Derrida acknowledges that in speaking of clarity and thematization he is appealing to "the most classical of norms"³⁵, thus connecting the new understanding of responsibility developed here with that of Kant, since the ideal of clarity is consistent with the latter's insistence that the faculty of philosophy remain responsible to truth and reason. In this way we are reminded that Derrida's theorization is done through his reading of Kant — not only is the work of the performative that he first reads into Kant's account taken up and placed at the center of responsibility, but the need to respond to the demands of truth and reason, through their association with the requirement of clarity, is also carried forward.

3. RESPONDING FOR THE CALL OF REASON

Beyond invoking the need for clarity and thematization, "Mochlos" does not say more regarding this response to the demands of truth and reason. However, this theme is taken up in another essay, "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils"³⁶, delivered just a few years later in 1983 as the inaugural lecture for Derrida's installation in the Andrew D. White Professor-at-large chair at Cornell University. Here we learn more about what

35. *Ibidem*, 102. This norm is distinct from another classical norm that comes to be associated with responsibility in Derrida's later work, that of the emancipatory ideal, invoked for example in Jacques Derrida, *Force of Law*, 258.

36. Jacques Derrida, "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils," in Jacques Derrida, *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 129-155.

responsibility might mean today through Derrida's analysis of the principle of reason, which he proposes lies at the foundation of the university. Derrida notes that this claim of foundation is consistent with the Kantian model, even as his reading initially focuses more on Leibniz's conception of the principle, via Heidegger's interpretation. Following Heidegger, Derrida emphasizes that we must respond to the call of the principle of reason, meaning we are faced with "a question of responsibility". Articulating what this response might mean, Derrida first distinguishes responding *to* the principle of reason from responding *for* the principle of reason. To respond *to* the principle "is to render reason, to explain effects through their causes, rationally, it is also to ground, to justify, to account for on the basis of principles (*arche*) or roots (*riza*)"³⁷. This would be a traditional response. By contrast, to respond "*for* the principle of reason (and thus for the university), to answer *for* this call, to raise questions about the origin or ground of the principle of foundation (*Der Satz vom Grund*), is not simply to obey it or to respond *in the face of* this principle"³⁸.

Derrida pursues what the second option might involve today by introducing and analyzing the distinction between "end-oriented [*finalisé*]" and "basic" or "fundamental" research in the university. "End-oriented' research is research that is programmed, focused, organized in an authoritarian fashion *in view of* its utilization"³⁹. "Basic" research would be divorced from all such ends, having as its sole concern be "knowledge, truth, the disinterested exercise of reason, under the sole authority of the principle of reason"⁴⁰. Basic research is thus the province of the faculty of philosophy as Kant understood it, with end-oriented research lying outside of its domain, and keeping the two separate would be essential in maintaining the

37. *Ibidem*, 137.

38. *Ibidem*. For an interpretation on what it would mean to respond for the principle of reason, taking its lead from Derrida's essay but moving in a different, if compatible direction, see Rodolphe Gasché, "Answering for Reason," in Rodolphe Gasché, *Inventions of Difference: on Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 107-128.

39. Jacques Derrida, *The Principle*, 141.

40. *Ibidem*, 142.

purity of philosophy. Similar to what we saw in “Mochlos,” it is such purity that Derrida calls into question. He does so by arguing that today forces outside the university, primarily the military, fund basic research across the disciplines, from the hard sciences to the humanities, because in the future there may always appear ends for which this research might be used, even if at present these ends are unknown. All basic research thus has the potential to be end-oriented, and indeed is increasingly funded as such.

With the distinction between end-oriented and basic research called into question, at least three different features of Derrida’s new thinking of responsibility emerge. First, among the basic research coopted by outside forces, Derrida claims that “the concept of information or informatization is the most general operator here. It integrates the basic into the end-oriented [*finalisé*], the purely rational into the technical”⁴¹. This then leads him to claim that those studying “the informative and instrumental value of language today are necessarily led to the very limits of the principle of reason thus interpreted”, and that in interrogating these limits “they may attempt to define new responsibilities in the face of the university’s total subjection to the technologies of informatization”⁴². It is thus around the concept of “information” and its instrumentalization, in its connection to the principle of reason, that Derrida locates one new site of responsibility in the university today.

Second, in articulating this responsibility Derrida again has recourse to the language of community and he speaks here of “thinking” rather than “research,” “science,” or “philosophy,” since these other terms “are most often subjected to the unquestioned authority of the principle of reason”. At the same time, he insists that this “does not mean that thinking is ‘irrational.’ Such a community would interrogate the essence of reason and of the principle of reason” and then adds the further caveat that “It is not certain that such thinking can bring together a community or found an

41. *Ibidem*, 145. The editor of the English edition, Jan Plug, notes that “*informatisation*,” here rendered as “informatization,” can also be translated as “computerization”.

42. *Ibidem*, 146-147.

institution in the traditional sense of these words. It must rethink what is meant by community and institution”⁴³. This is to say that the responsibility invoked in “The Principle of Reason” would be a collective one, even as what is meant by such a collective needs to be rethought. In pursuing this rethinking we might return to what is proposed in “Mochlos” and read it as precisely an attempt to understand the terms “community” and “institution” differently. Also important here is the claim that the thinking thus pursued would not be “irrational”. It is not a matter of opposing or dismissing reason outright, but of displacing it from a narrow understanding in which it remains the essence of the modern university. As Derrida goes on to state, those who follow this path need not “give way to ‘irrationalism.’ They may continue to assume *within* the university, along with its memory and tradition, the imperative of professional rigor and competence”⁴⁴. It is thus through an engagement with the tradition of the university, in line with the standards of professional rigor and competence, that Derrida here calls for the responsible questioning of the principle of reason to take place.

Third, while supporting professional rigor, in discussing the new responsibility Derrida at the same time casts his eye on what he calls

the double question of ‘professions.’ First: does the university have as its essential mission that of producing professional competencies, which may sometimes be external to the university? Second: is the task of the university to ensure within itself ... the reproduction of professional competence by preparing for pedagogy and for research professors who have respect for a certain code?

Derrida notes that these are separate questions—he suggests that one can answer the first negatively and the second affirmatively—but claims that “the new responsibility of the ‘thinking’ of which we

43. *Ibidem*, 148.

44. *Ibidem*, 150.

are speaking cannot fail to be accompanied, at least, by a movement of suspicion, even of rejection with respect to the professionalization of the university in these two senses, and especially in the first”⁴⁵. The responsible thinking Derrida calls for thus should question both of these kinds of professionalization. However, even as he supports such suspicion, Derrida also points out that it carries with it a certain danger, namely that it can “result in reproducing a highly traditional politics of knowledge”⁴⁶. He goes on to argue that this is the path that Kant, Schelling, Nietzsche, and Heidegger take in their writings on the university, each in their own way. They each sought to preserve the mission of the university as separate from forces of professionalization, and as a result ended up “reconstituting powers of class, caste, or corporation”⁴⁷. Derrida does not have a definitive answer for how to avoid this danger, but he does call for vigilance in response, stating that his analysis defines “at best, some negative conditions, a ‘negative wisdom,’ as the Kant of *The Conflict of the Faculties* would say: preliminary cautions, protocols of vigilance for a new *Aufklärung*, what must be seen and kept in sight in a modern re-elaboration of this old problematic”⁴⁸.

“The Principle of Reason” thus provides further remarks on responsibility in the university that enrich the understanding proposed in “Mochlos.” Not only are certain sites of inquiry marked as sites of this new responsibility—the unstable distinction between end-oriented and basic research, the concept of information, and the university’s role in professionalization, both internal and external— but, as the last citation reminds us and as I have been stressing throughout, the analysis reinforces Derrida’s insistence that any development of such a new conception needs to be undertaken in conversation with the tradition, a tradition in which Kant occupies a central place. Even as Derrida advocates that we question the principle of reason that lies at the basis of the modern university, this questioning should never amount to a simple rejection or opposition

45. *Ibidem*, 151.

46. *Ibidem*.

47. *Ibidem*, 153.

48. *Ibidem*.

to reason. A much more complicated and unstable relation to reason is proposed, one which we will not determine once and for all, but are called to engage as we respond to the call of responsibility ourselves.

4. RESPONSIBILITY IN THE RIGHT TO SAY ANYTHING

I have argued that the understanding of responsibility in the university developed in “Mochlos” and “The Principle of Reason” involves calling forth communities to come while at the same time rethinking past conceptions of research, reason, and professionalization. That university responsibility would have these characteristics, so different from those found in the more famous theorization of responsibility developed across Derrida’s later work, is in large part due to the fact that these two essays enact a Kantian inheritance, taking on and transforming prominent features of *The Conflict of the Faculties*. Indeed, Kant is so important in Derrida’s conceiving of responsibility in the university that when he takes this topic up again in his late work, in “The University Without Condition”⁴⁹, the Kantian legacy is once more in play. This essay was first delivered as a lecture in 1999 at Stanford University, and it invokes many ideas that feature in writings from the final decade or so of Derrida’s life, such as the unconditional, sovereignty, autoimmunity, the event, and democracy to come. One might therefore expect that when Derrida here speaks of responsibility, he does so by relying on the conception developed in the same period. However, this is not the case, and as I will now show, much of what Derrida says here about responsibility in fact has more in common with the alternative conception that I have been investigating, precisely because he once again takes up the legacy of Kant.

This legacy is in play on the text’s very first page, when Derrida explains that the university without condition “demands and ought to be granted in principle, besides what is called academic

49. Jacques Derrida, “The University Without Condition,” in Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 202-237.

freedom, an *unconditional* freedom to question and to assert, or even, going still further, the right to say publicly all that is required by research, knowledge, and thought concerning the *truth*⁵⁰. This unconditional freedom demanded for the university is thus close to the view we saw Kant expressing in *The Conflict*, when he argues that in their pursuit of truth professors in the lower faculty should be free from all censorship and influence from the State. However, in “The University Without Condition” Derrida modifies Kant’s position in some key ways. The first is that Derrida states explicitly that the right he is asserting is to speak “publicly,” that is, beyond the confines of the university. Professors should thus be allowed to speak to a broader audience than just their students or members of their research communities, and there are to be no limits on what they say, other than the limit that their speech be relevant to the pursuit of truth. By contrast, as Derrida notes and as we have already seen, for Kant the discourse of the lower faculty should remain within the university and is not suitable to be shared with a broader public.

Second, while Derrida echoes Kant in naming “truth” as that which guides inquiry in the university, he describes the relation to truth as follows: “The university *professes* the truth, and that is its profession. It declares and promises an unlimited commitment to the truth”⁵¹. This builds on the previous point, since “to ‘profess’ means, in French as in English, *to declare openly, to declare publicly*.... The declaration of the one who professes is a *performative* declaration in some way.... It is indeed, in the strong sense of the word, an *engagement*, a commitment”⁵². This reinvigoration of the term “profess” takes up of the double question of professions raised in “The Principle of Reason,” proposing a new understanding of this term in contrast to the way it is traditionally used. And in this understanding we see echoes of “Mochlos,” in that professors are again presented as engaging in performative acts in addition to the constative statements privileged by Kant. These performatives name a

50. *Ibidem*, 202.

51. *Ibidem*.

52. *Ibidem*, 214.

commitment to one's task as a professor, and it is here that Derrida inscribes responsibility, when he describes this commitment, using the example of philosophy, as being "to pledge oneself, with a public promise, to devote oneself publicly, to give oneself over to philosophy, to bear witness, or even to fight for it. And what matters here is this promise, this pledge of responsibility"⁵³. To be a professor is thus to commit oneself publicly to the work one is researching and teaching, and it is here that Derrida locates one's responsibility in this role.

Now this performative of expressing a commitment to one's work and one's discipline is somewhat different from the performative named in "Mochlos," that which called for new communities to come into being. But we can join them together through recourse to the idea of an "*oeuvre*". Derrida introduces this term in "The University Without Condition" as following from the unconditional freedom of the university, since this freedom implies the right to ask critical questions "*affirmatively and performatively*, that is, by producing events (for example, by writing) and by giving rise to singular *oeuvres* (which up until now has not been the purview of either the classical or the modern Humanities)"⁵⁴. Later Derrida asks, "What happens not only when one takes into account the performative value of 'profession' but when one accepts that a professor produces *oeuvres* and not just knowledge or preknowledge?"⁵⁵. The performatives described in "Mochlos" provide an answer to this question — that professors produce *oeuvres* and not just knowledge means that we can understand their work precisely as having the potential to call forth new communities committed to the task of interpreting these *oeuvres*. When they profess professors thus express a commitment not just to their work, but also to a new academic community that may arise in response.

In these ways, through its inheritance of Kant, the responsibility evoked in "The University Without Condition" is consistent

53. *Ibidem*, 215. Responsibility is linked to this pledge again on Jacques Derrida, *The University*, 217 and 222.

54. *Ibidem*, 204.

55. *Ibidem*, 221.

with and builds on the understanding developed in “Mochlos” and “The Principle of Reason.” Kant’s privileging of free inquiry guided by truth and reason is taken up and transformed such that to be responsible in the university is to pursue truth through the act of publicly professing one’s commitment to one’s work, which also involves the creation of *oeuvres* and thereby calls forth future communities to come who will respond in turn to these *oeuvres*. Nonetheless, despite this continuity, there remains an important point of difference between this late 1990s exploration of university responsibility and those dating from the early 1980s. This difference emerges in a third feature that Derrida transforms in the Kantian legacy in “The University Without Condition,” which centers on the question of the power of professors. For Derrida, the unconditionality of the university deprives it of power, and this deprivation is different to the kind advocated by Kant. Recall that Kant sought to protect the university from state interference by maintaining that professors should have no power of coercion to enforce the critiques they make. This lack of power is endorsed by Kant as a means of defense. By contrast, Derrida argues that “by reason of its very impossibility, this unconditionality exposes as well the weakness or the vulnerability of the university. It exhibits its impotence, the fragility of its defenses against all the powers that command it, besiege it, and attempt to appropriate it”⁵⁶. The university’s lack of power for Derrida thus does not serve as its protection, but is what exposes it to all forms of attack and appropriation.

Derrida had already argued in “Mochlos” and “The Principle of Reason” that the university was vulnerable to its outside, but the ascription of unconditionality raises the stakes of this vulnerability considerably. It leads Derrida to ask if the university can “affirm an unconditional independence, can it claim a sort of *sovereignty* without ever risking the worst, namely... being forced to give up and capitulate without condition, to let itself be taken over and bought at any price?”⁵⁷. He suggests in response that what is needed is a new force of

56. *Ibidem*, 206.

57. *Ibidem*.

resistance and dissidence that will be linked to the deconstruction of the concept of sovereignty, and at the end of “The University Without Condition” he starts to explore what this might mean. There he invokes the idea of an “event” which would disrupt the boundaries of the performative. This puts a limit on any performative, since “the force of the event is always stronger than the force of a performative. In the face of what arrives to me... all performative force is overrun, exceeded, exposed”⁵⁸. That is, whatever a performative might seek to bring about can always be interrupted by an event that comes from elsewhere. For Derrida the responsible response to this fact is not to double down and reassert the integrity of the university, protecting it from such outside events, for such a move would seek to reinstate sovereign mastery. Rather, the event is something to be welcomed, for it is only through doing so we might resist traditional sovereignty. This means, however, that “the university without conditions is not situated necessarily or exclusively within the walls of what is today called the university. It is not necessarily, exclusively, exemplarily represented in the figure of the professor. It takes place, it seeks its place wherever this unconditionality can take shape”⁵⁹.

Thus, even as it is in many ways continuous with “Mochlos” and “The Principle of Reason,” by the end of “The University Without Condition” the idea of responsibility in the university is much less secure. In the earlier analysis, performative force is presented as powerful and productive, even as it is a power with limits, since it exceeds the control of any single individual. The introduction of the idea of the event calls this power into question. As professors our acts performatively call forth communities to come, but there is no assurance that such communities will come, or if they come that they will remain, and they may not reside within the university, at least as we recognize it today. Which is to not say that there is no such thing as “responsibility in the university,” but it remains a fragile notion, exposed to the uncertainty of a future that may transform it in ways yet unseen.

58. *Ibidem*, 235.

59. *Ibidem*, 236.

5. CONCLUSION

In this essay I have traced the development of an idea of responsibility across Derrida's writings on the university, arguing that it contains characteristics that distinguish it from the more famous understanding theorized in his late work. Having explored this idea, we might now want to ask how we might respond today to it, working some forty years or more after Derrida first issued his call for us to rethink responsibility in the university anew. Articulating such a response would require a further essay, and more, so I will instead simply conclude by making two brief remarks.

The first remark is to note that so many of the issues Derrida raises across the three texts I have discussed remain as pressing as ever. The call for an unconditional right to say anything in the pursuit of truth raised in "The University Without Condition" is an especially challenging thought today in universities in the country in which I teach, the United States, as the boundaries regarding what is considered acceptable speech in scholarship have shifted. Championing such a right appears to now be a minority position, at least in the public discourse. But I would also suggest that just as challenging as the content of this right, which others have also articulated, is Derrida's call to conceive of the unconditional university without recourse to sovereignty, together with his diagnosis of the situation of radical vulnerability this might place the university in. What such an institution might be, if it would even still be an institution, still needs to be thought. For their part, the claims of "The Principle of Reason" remain relevant with the increased corporatization of the contemporary university over these last few decades. Derrida's analyses in this essay of the ends of research, information, and professionalization are only partial and suggestive, but they serve as good reminders that these issues too still require a response. Further, Derrida's argument that these issues arise because of the inevitable relations that the university must have with particular entities on its outside is worth further attention, given that such entities encroach on the inside more and more. Because of this encroachment, it is perhaps even harder for us in the university to say "we" than it was

for Derrida —the forces from the outside more often divide us than unite us. For this reason, I find it compelling to pursue the central idea retrieved from “Mochlos,” that as professors in the university we have a responsibility to communities still to come, and in this way form new “we’s,” however fragile and open to interruption they may be. And in one sense we are already pursuing this idea —insofar as I am writing this essay, and you are reading it, we are forming a community of interpretation, seeking in the first instance to articulate the political implications of the performative force of Derrida’s university utterance as clearly as we can.

The second remark turns this analysis in a different direction. The reader may well have noted that the responsibility I have traced in this essay speaks to only one dimension of academic life, that of research. It is a responsibility that arises in our research and is directed towards other researchers. We might thus ask whether it must remain within this limit. In a different context, Jonathan Culler suggests that a related structure in Derrida’s work, that of counter-signing, could provide a model for an alternative way of teaching literature courses where “instead of demanding ‘sound’ interpretive essays, they encouraged students to invent more freely”⁶⁰. Following Culler, it might thus be possible to redeploy the responsibility of researchers into the domain of teaching. This would mean inviting our students to invent more freely by considering themselves to be members of communities responding to the works we read as well as to the words that we utter. We professors would have a responsibility towards students in what we assign and say, but students too would have a responsibility, to take up the words they read and hear, and write and speak about them in turn. And the same relations would hold for conversations among students themselves. If we follow this path further, a shift in the classroom might take place, where a community of learning also becomes a community of responsibility.

60. Jonathan Culler, “Derrida and Literary Studies,” in *Derrida and the Future of the Liberal Arts: Professions of Faith*, eds. Mary Caputi and Vincent J. Del Casino, Jr (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 80-92, 84.

Such brief remarks are of course far too brief. But, to repeat, there is far too much to say. So consider them to be promissory notes, to which I or others might respond.

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