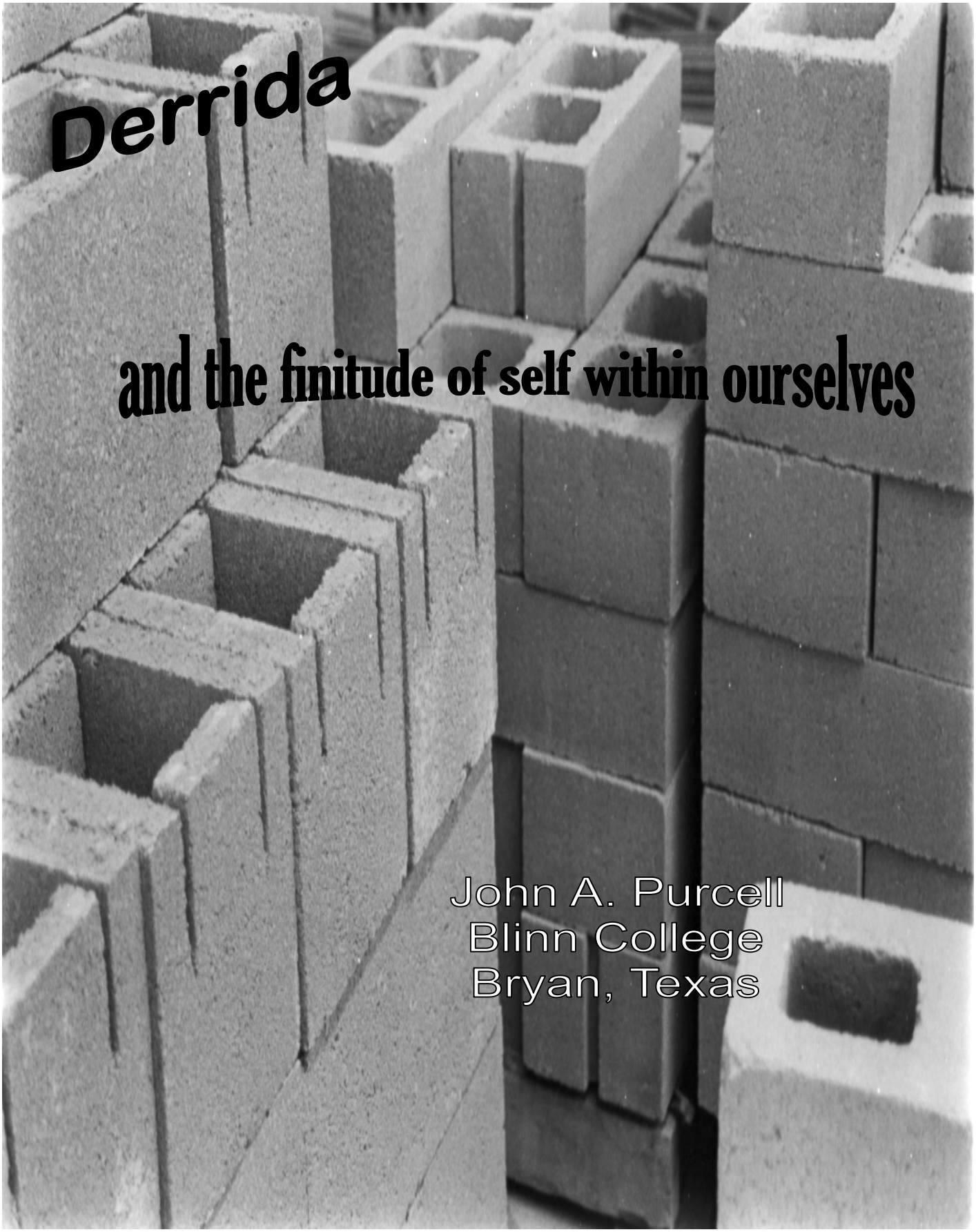

Derrida

and the finitude of self within ourselves

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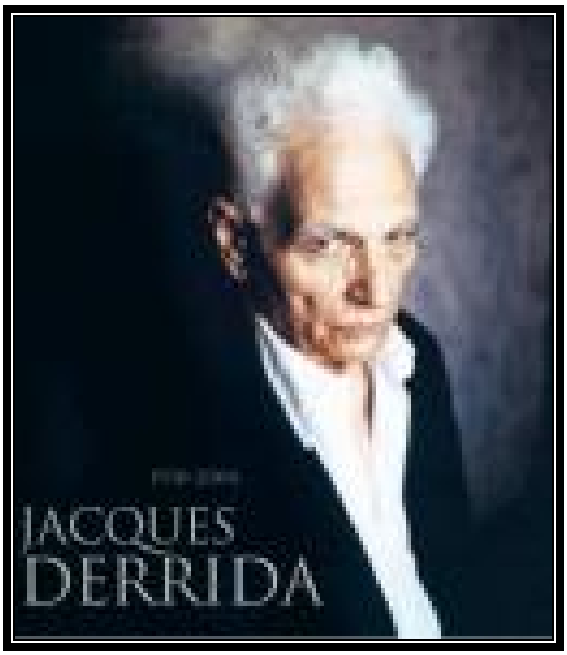
Abstract

At one point during the documentary *Derrida*, the subject in question, the French-Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), states “Deconstruction is already at work within the work.” With that, he gets to the heart of the concept of postmodern thought, that the disassembling of boundaries and limits of text begins the moment a work, a thought, a speech, or text (all of these are texts, Derrida points out) is created, and this disassembling enables the closer examination of the parts of said text in order to understand that text’s meaning, and then deconstruction necessitates the reassembling of those parts. Through this process, it needs to be understood that the reconstructed text is now different from its previous textual form, and as such, any continued attempts to interpret this particular text will continue to change its meaning and shape, and that any ultimate, finite meaning is ultimately unattainable and therefore infinite.

This paper examines the concept of finitude as explored in some of the writings of Jacques Derrida, in particular how he contemplates the limits and meanings of the texts of our lives. In his view, all people are texts; we are constantly creating ourselves as texts, and as such, we present ourselves within self-imposed limits; however, postmodern thought teaches us to never rely on superficial understanding due to the creation of deeper meanings that lie beneath the surfaces we present as human texts. We set boundaries for ourselves, and thus limit ourselves in terms of expression, meaning, and understanding. But all is in flux in the postmodern schema. Through his work, Derrida is always examining degrees of perception; consequently, this paper examines his probing beneath and beyond the limits – the finitude - of our hands, the biography of our lives, of our deaths, and of our future.



At one point during the documentary *Derrida* (Dick & Kofman, 2002), the subject in question, the French-Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida, states "Deconstruction is already at work within the work." With that, he gets to the heart of the concept of postmodern thought, that the disassembling of boundaries and limits of text begins the moment a work, a thought, a speech or text (all of these are texts, Derrida points out) is created, and this disassembling enables the closer examination of the parts of a text in order to understand that text's meaning, and then deconstruction necessitates the reassembling of those parts. In this process, it needs to be understood that the reconstructed text is now different from its previous textual form, and as such, any continued attempts to interpret this particular text will continue to change its meaning and shape, and that any ultimate, finite meaning is ultimately unattainable and therefore infinite.

This is the maddening manner in which Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) presents his arguments. Many of his critics have branded his work as incomprehensible while lauding the originality of his thought (Morris, 2003; Hartman, 1981). Despite this apparent contradiction, Derrida has probably been the most consistent thinker of postmodernism for the last forty years. In contemplating his life in the film *Derrida*, he compares the painstaking work of the biographer who is attempting to be able to tell the whole story of a philosopher's life to that of a student, but the biographer cannot reveal nearly as much about his subject as the student who rigorously examines one single paragraph of that philosopher's writing. Understanding requires effort, and Derrida apparently did everything in his power to not necessarily obfuscate his meaning, but to encode meaning in a dense narrative that definitely required slow, meditative, concentrated effort. In true postmodernist methodology, by continually going back and forth within Derrida's texts, the reader will keep uncovering new meanings, revealing deeper understandings as he or she progresses through the text of that person's life and work.

In much the same manner, Derrida attacks the limits on life that we set upon ourselves. While still using language as his tool (Derrida maintains that language is, at best, a tool for us to use as we explore meaning), he expounds on how we impose limits on self-identity in relation to its role in cultural identity. For example, Derrida states that "people who fight for their identity must pay attention to the fact that identity is not the self-identity of a thing…but implies a difference within identity"(Caputo, 1997, 13). In other words, cultural identity is, by its very nature, going to be different from an individual's identity. This is not excluding oneself from the culture, but is the process of identifying the identity within its context, such as noting that this glass I hold is one of many like it, but they are not all exactly the same; there are differences between each even though they are all part of the same set. When discussing this in relationship with the events in relation to the situation in Northern Ireland in 1979, Watkin uses Derrida's argument of identity to recognize the voices within the conflict, even those voices not heard because their absence makes them that much more important to the resolution of the conflict (2002, 220).

Recognizing language as a tool of the voice, we also need to recognize the limits this tool possesses. This is perhaps the greatest consistency throughout Derrida's career;

he constantly returned to the theme of language as a limited and limitless tool, one that has been used to marginalize and suppress the voices of "women, children, animals and slaves" (McKenna, 2002). Language has the ability to reflect on itself and create new meanings from the meanings with which it begins. The problem with understanding language, or understanding itself, is that meaning is dependent on its context (Stephens, 1991) The is the postmodernist tactic; a limited tool seeking limitlessness. Derrida considered hands in this regard. Acknowledging that he had never been one to be happy with his physical appearance (*Derrida*, 2002), he nonetheless considered his hands to be the most expressive part of his being, and that they, like words, are constantly moving and reaching out to grasp and be grasped (Derrida, 1973, 1976). In his view, our hands are yet another extension of our desire for immortality (Derrida, 2000), a theme he first explored in the introduction to his translation of Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry* (1978; first published 1962).

As such, Derrida has always, it seems, been concerned with the concept of finitude and its relational applications to human life and thought. And when it comes down to limits – the ultimate finitude – no theme recurred more often than that of death itself. Even though language itself is concerned with finitude, being confined within its linguistic and semantic limits, the subject of death and the border crossing between life and death became a dominant theme in Derrida's later writings (Calarco, 2002; Bradley, 2002; Watkin, 2002). Mieszkowski (2005) points out that much of Derrida's insight into finitude comes from his relationship with Hegel. In addition, Derrida's ongoing discussion of the Heideggerian view of the *Dasein,* the condition of being a human being (Calarco, 2002), explores the relationships between limits, borders, and crossing these borders between truth, life, and death. Especially in his book *Aporias: Dying – Awaiting (One Another at) the Limits of Truth* (1993), Derrida expresses his views on death and borders, the state of aporia (that there is no longer any problem), and that being in a "place of aporia is a point of *non*-passage, and absolute exposure" will overcome the fear of crossing borders such as life into death, thus rendering "possible an impossible passage" (Calarco, 2002).

This is a difficult concept to comprehend. Derrida goes so far as to ask a seemingly impossible question at the beginning of *Aporias,* "Is my death possible?" (p. 21) As Calarco points out, the words "my death" are substitutable by the reader placing himself in Derrida's position, thereby making this experience singular and intimate (p. 19). It is through the postmodern method that an individual can literally transubstantiate himself/herself with Derrida, becoming a participant-observer of border crossings, much as language itself is seen by Derrida and other post-modernists (such as Hegel) as having the ability to transgress itself (Mieszkowski, 2005). This is a border crossing, a pushing past of the limits of finitude. Through an author's postmodern inspection of a text, the reader becomes an observer who becomes a participant in the author's inspection. Applying Derrida's conception that we are all text creators, that our lives are texts of our own authorship, we come inside the limits, the finitude, of our lives and begin to look outside of those limits, and cross borders we once considered impassable.

Our lives, then, are an event, which is consistent through the works of Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida, the last of whom argues that a true event is unforeseeable, a surprise that suspends a person's comprehension, but yet is thus experienced at both

internal and external levels (Derrida, 2003). This transformation of the impossible underlines the possibilities that Derrida portrays in *Aporias* when analyzing how a person feels and reacts toward death (1993). This is how Derrida challenges his readers/students, by pushing at the "edges of experience" (Morris, 2003), that his books will spring "leaks" at those edges of the reader's experience. In the parlance of contemporary education, Derrida is taking a postmodern approach in describing the process of thinking outside the box: teaching in new, innovative ways.

And so we are challenged to be continuously working on ourselves, that our lives are to be a work in progress. Although it seems that postmodernists who support this philosophic approach have been said to "enjoy chaos in all its forms" (Payne, 2000), this is actually a very structured, painstaking discipline. If anything, Jacques Derrida has taught us not only how to look and think about things occurring around us, he has also taught us how to look and think about the things occurring within us. As we live we are creating a text that others will observe and attempt to comprehend, even as we ourselves are doing the same to ourselves; simultaneously, one observes and comprehends the other as well, thereby ensuring an infinite dialogue between living texts.

Finally – a paradoxical word to use when discussing Derrida – one begins to imagine crossing the frontiers, the borders between now and then, then and now, now and the future, then and the future. Time is a boundary that can be crossed if we can convince ourselves that it is possible. The impossible can be possible, the finite can become infinite; this is the Derridaean challenge before us. Even if we find the language as challenging as the task before us, the process will enrich us as we embark on the passage across our self-imposed boundaries that have withheld us from understandings never before understood.

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