

Impossible God: Derrida's Theology (Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology)

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IMPOSSIBLE GOD Impossible God introduces Derrida's theology for a new generation interested in Derrida's writings and in the future of theology, and clarifies Derrida's theology for those already familiar with his writings. Derrida's theological concerns are now widely recognised but *Impossible God* shows how Derrida's theology takes its shape from his earliest writings on Edmund Husserl and from explorations into Husserl's unpublished manuscripts on time and theology. Rayment-Pickard argues that Derrida goes beyond the nihilism of the 'death of God' and the denials of negative theology to affirm a theology of God's 'impossibility'. Derrida's 'impossible God' is not another God of the philosophers but a powerful deity capable of wakening us into faith, ethical responsibility and love. Showing how central theology has been to Derrida's philosophy since the beginning of his career, *Impossible God* presents an accessible study of a neglected area of Derrida's writing which students of philosophy and theology will find invaluable. *Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology* Series Editors: Martin Warner, University of Warwick, UK Keith Vanhoozer, Trinity International University, USA *Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology* is an interdisciplinary series exploring new opportunities in the dialogue between philosophy and theology that go beyond more traditional 'faith and reason' debates and take account of the contemporary reshaping of intellectual boundaries. For much of the modern era, the relation of philosophy and theology has been conceived in terms of antagonism or subordination but recent intellectual developments hold out considerable potential for a renewed dialogue in which philosophy and theology have common cause for revisioning their respective identities, reconceiving their relationship, and combining their resources. This series explores constructively for the 21st century the resources available for engaging with those forms of enquiry, experience and sensibility that theology has historically sought to address. Drawing together new writing and research from leading international scholars in the field, this high profile research series will offer an important contribution to contemporary research across the interdisciplinary perspectives relating theology and philosophy. Also in this series: **Divine Knowledge A Kierkegaardian Perspective on Christian Education** David Willows **Kierkegaard, Language and the Reality of God** Steven Shakespeare *Impossible God Derrida's Theology* ; ; ; ; HUGH RAYMENT-PICKARD Only *pure absence* ; not the absence of this or that, but the absence of everything in which all presence is announced ; can *inspire*. (WD, p. 8) ; ; ; ; ; First published 2003 by Ashgate Publishing Published 2018 by Routledge 2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN 52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017 *Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business* Copyright ; Hugh Rayment-Pickard 2003 The author has asserted his moral right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any

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Questioning Ethics. Contemporary Debates in Philosophy, Routledge, London, 1998.
 LGThe Law of Genre, in D. Attridge, ed., *Acts of Literature*, Routledge, London, 1992.
 LILimited Inc abc, ed. Gerald Graff, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1988.
 LOLiving On: Border Lines, in G. Hartman, ed., *Deconstruction and Criticism*,
 Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1979.
 MMargins of Philosophy, tr. Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982.
 MemMmoires for Paul de Man, tr. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, Kevin
 Newmark and Peggy Kamuf, Columbia University Press, New York, 1989 (revised edition).
 OGOf Grammatology, tr. Gayatri Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1976.
 ONOn The Name, ed. Thomas Dutoit, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1993.
 OSOf Spirit: Heidegger and the Question, tr. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, University of
 Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989.
 PCThe Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond, tr. Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press,
 Chicago, 1987.
 ParParages, Editions Galil e, Paris, 1986.
 PFThe Politics of Friendship, tr. George Collins, Verso, London, 1997.
 PoiPoints; Interviews 1974/1994, tr. P. Kamuf et al., Stanford University Press,
 Stanford, 1995.
 PosPositions, tr. Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981.
 ProLe probl me de la gen se dans la philosophie de Husserl, Presses Universitaires de
 France, Paris, 1990.
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 RDRemarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism, in S. Critchley et al., eds,
Deconstruction and Pragmatism, Routledge, London, 1996.
 SSign;ponge/Signsponge [bilingual edition], tr. Richard Rand, Columbia University Press, New
 York, 1984.
 SMSpecters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International, tr. Peggy
 Kamuf, Routledge, New York, 1994.
 SPSpeech and Phenomena and other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs, tr. David B. Allison,
 Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1973.
 TPThe Truth in Painting, tr. G. Bennington and Ian McLeod, University of Chicago Press, Chicago,
 1987.
 TS;I have a Taste for the Secret, in J. Derrida and M. Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*,
 Polity, Oxford, 2001.
 TT;The Time of Thesis: Punctuations, in Alan Montefiore, ed., *Philosophy in France
 Today*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983.
 UG;Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce, tr. Tina Kendall and Shari
 Benstock, in Derek Attridge, ed., *Acts of Literature*, Routledge, London, 1992.
 WDWriting and Difference, tr. Alan Bass, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1978. **Texts by
 Edmund Husserl**
 CEThe Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, tr. David Carr, Northwestern
 University Press, Evanston, 1970.
 CMCartesian Meditations, tr. Dorian Cairns, Martinus Nijhoff, Dordrecht, 1960.
 EJExperience and Judgement, tr. J. Churchill and Karl Ameriks, Northwestern University Press,
 Evanston, 1973.
 IdIIdeas; General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology, tr. W.R. Boyce Gibson, George Allen
 and Unwin, New York, 1931.
 IdIIdeas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy (Second Book), tr.
 R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer, Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1989.
 PIOn the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893/1917), tr. J.B. Brough,
 Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1991.
 PLThe Paris Lectures, tr. P. Koestenbaum, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1975. **Texts by Martin
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BP *Beiträge zur Philosophie (vom Ereignis)*, Gesamtausgabe Band 65, III Abteilung:

Unveröffentlichte Abhandlungen, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt, 1989.

BT *Being and Time*, tr. Edward Robinson and John Macquarrie, Harper and Row, New York, 1982.

HC *History of The Concept of Time*, tr. Theodore Kisiel, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1992.

For Liz, Henry and Alexandra [Chapter 1 Death, Impossibility, Theology: the Theme of Derrida's Philosophy](#)

Truth is not a value one can renounce. (TS, p. 10) *one thinks one is seeing themes in the very spot where the nonthemey that which cannot become a theme, the very thing that has no meaning, is ceaselessly re-marking itself- that is, disappearing.* (D, p. 251) **Simplicity and Complexity**; I would like to write to you so simply, so simply, so simply; writes Derrida in *The Post Card* (PC, p. 11). Those who have ever tried reading one of Derrida's books may emit a hollow laugh at this moment. Not only is Derrida's writing far from simple, it has become legendary for its complexity and difficulty. Many potential readers must have been discouraged and put off at the outset. Others have found in Derrida's difficult style a ready-made excuse for dismissing his writings without taking them seriously at all. Clearly such summary dismissals will not lead to an understanding of Derrida's work; rather we must ask the question of the meaning of Derrida's complexity: what does the *difficulty* of Derrida's writing reveal about his philosophical ideas? What *function* does this difficulty serve? Some have treated Derrida's complexity with cynicism. There's a joke about two students at the end of one of Derrida's lectures. One says to the other, "That lecture must have been brilliant; I didn't understand a word of it!" Another joke runs: "If Derrida makes sense, you haven't understood him." Among British academics particularly, Derrida's complexity is often taken to be pretentious, an attempt to substitute the convoluted for the profound. The philosopher Barry Smith, writing to *The Times* on behalf of a number of his colleagues, wrote that Derrida's works "employ a written style that defies comprehension. When the effort is made to penetrate it, it becomes clear that, where coherent assertions are being made at all, these are either false or trivial." For others, particularly the enthusiasts of deconstruction in departments of literary studies, Derrida's complexity is taken to be a poetic virtue, a sign that his texts are rich in meaning and nuance. Indeed Derrida has numerous imitators eager to outdo him in literary invention. Peggy Kamuf's Introduction to *A Derrida Reader* is set out as a conversation which is, she says, "not exactly a dialogue; but a typographical interchange; the back and forth of more than one voice; requiring the convention of blank intervals across the page. These, in turn, could be thought of as the slats of a Venetian blind, or a jalousie, which partially obstructs the view." This introduction is at least as difficult to understand as anything that follows in the anthology. For us, in this volume, the question of Derrida's complexity is a valuable point of entry into his philosophy. If we can understand why Derrida's texts are so difficult, we will begin to understand what his philosophy is attempting to achieve. But first of all we need to filter out a number of general reasons for the difficulty of his texts. This will enable us to identify the important and essential reason for Derrida's complex writing. In part, Derrida is "difficult" because he assumes an audience of professional philosophers who can comfortably understand his constant reference to the philosophical tradition. This is further complicated by his meticulous textual approach. Generally speaking Derrida likes to make detailed readings of specific texts. This demands not only a general philosophical knowledge, but also a good grasp of the texts under discussion. For example, a really thorough reading of Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena* requires us also to have ready to hand a copy of Husserl's *Logical Investigations*. Reading Derrida is demanding work and the difficulty of this task is not simply the result of wilful obscurantism. A further general complication is Derrida's use of specially designed terms and concepts. Most philosophers are striving to say something new, and this often leads to the creation of neologisms. Neologisms are particularly necessary when philosophers attempt to make a break with tradition and are forced to abandon or alter the traditional vocabulary of philosophy. This was certainly true of both Husserl and Heidegger, Derrida's precursors. Husserl

developed a bewildering lexicon of terms to describe the various aspects and procedures of his phenomenological method. Heidegger not only created one set of concepts at the beginning of his career with *Being and Time*, but went on to create a further range of terms to express his later philosophy of language. In similar fashion Derrida has coined terms like 'the trace', 'arche-writing', 'dissemination', and most famously 'différance'; to create a language for his philosophy of deconstruction. Beyond these incidental obstacles, we encounter the complexity that arises specifically because of the philosophical task that Derrida sets himself. We may separate this complexity into two closely interrelated aspects: a structural complexity that arises because of the way Derrida believes language functions; and a conceptual complexity that arises as he tries to indicate the unstable, paradoxical and impossible character of all foundational ideas and realities. These two aspects properly belong together, but it is useful to consider them separately for a moment. The structural complexity of language results from the instability of language itself, which never permits a merely 'simple' expression of ideas. Derrida is not saying that language lacks structure, but that the structures of language are fluid and without definite centres or fixed boundaries. Rudolphe Gasché has coined the term 'structural infinity' to describe this condition (see p. 14 below). Derrida tries to be faithful to the structural infinity of language by acknowledging the plurivocal character of words and the dynamic interrelations of elements within a text. But more than this, he tries to exploit the structural characteristics of language to produce a philosophical effect. In fact this is precisely how deconstruction works, by exposing or laying bare the structural complexity of language, a complexity which constantly frustrates 'simple' claims to truth, meaning or reality. Yet in laying bare the conditions of language, Derrida is also trying to say or show something about 'truth' and 'reality'. Here we enter an area of extreme paradox. The deconstruction of language as the medium for the expression of truth would seem to deny Derrida any basis for articulating a definite message. On many occasions he says that it is 'impossible' to say what deconstruction is or what it means. However, even to say that it is 'impossible' is to say *something*. Indeed Derrida writes a great deal *about* deconstruction and the difficulty of saying anything about it. So there is within his writing the need to *speak about* what deconstruction does, to *show* the outcome of his philosophical efforts. His need to-speak-about-the-difficulty-of-speaking forces Derrida to adopt a complex and twisted philosophical language. The attempt to say the unsayable takes Derrida to a zone of fundamental questioning, where philosophical language doubles and redoubles back upon itself. What Derrida tries to show is that language itself always assumes its 'other', that which cannot properly be named or thought. If he is right, this would mean that the possibility of truth depends upon the possibility of non-truth: the possibility of God depends upon God's impossibility. At points in his writing Derrida uses the symbol of the cross, an X or chiasmus, the image of a self-erasing sign, to indicate the self-cancelling nature of all claims to truth. Not only do Derrida's investigations push language to its breaking-point; they push philosophy to its limits. But is philosophy at the limits still philosophy? Or has it been taken to the point where it becomes theology? Or is this perhaps the moment where we pass over the extreme boundaries of both philosophy and theology into a pre-philosophical, pre-theological area of inquiry that properly belongs to neither discipline? Some people would indeed argue that this dimension of self-questioning is so primitive that it is prior to any particular academic or cultural discipline. Others would claim that such questioning must belong to philosophy, as the science of sciences, the grand inquisitor of all claims to truth. Still others would make the (arguably) more unsettling claim that this zone is necessarily theological, since the claims of theology are always foundational, indeed must always be foundational, as the question of God must, by definition, always be the first and last in any inquiry into origins. To say that there was something prior to God would be to say that God was not God. **Deconstruction and Truth** One of the things that is often casually said about Derrida is that he wants to overturn the idea of truth in favour of complete relativism. This 'myth' about Derrida is extremely misleading. He certainly challenges a particular *metaphysics* of Truth, truth with a capital T, but his whole philosophy is undertaken in the name of

another way of thinking about truth, a truth *that takes account of* the undecidability of language, in fact the truth *of* the undecidability of language. As Derrida puts it, the disappearance of truth as presence, the withdrawal of the present origin of presence, is the condition of all (manifestations of) truth. Nontruth is the truth. Nonpresence is presence. Difference, the disappearance of any originary presence, is at *once* the condition of possibility *and* the condition of the impossibility of truth. (D, p. 168) Derrida has expressed exasperation at those who have depicted him as a frivolous non-cognitivist with no concern for truth or contexts. Writing in *Limited Inc.*, he says: "Once again (and this probably makes a thousand times I have had to repeat this, but when will it finally be heard, and why this resistance?) as I understand it the text does not suspend reference to history, to the world, to reality" (LI, p. 137). Later he writes:

Since the deconstructionist is supposed not to believe in truth, stability, or the unity of meaning, in intention or "meaning-to-say", how can he demand of us that we read *him* with pertinence, precision, rigour? How can he demand that his own text be interpreted correctly? How can he accuse anyone else of having misunderstood, simplified, deformed it, etc? The answer is simple enough: this definition of the deconstructionist is *false* (that's right: false, not true) and feeble; it supposes a bad (that's right: bad, not good) and feeble reading of texts, first of all mine, which therefore must finally be read or reread. Then perhaps it will be understood that the value of truth (and all those values associated with it) is never contested or destroyed in my writings, but only reinscribed in more powerful, larger, more stratified contexts. (Ibid., p. 146) So the deconstruction of a metaphysics of truth does not close off the possibility of truth understood in another way, understood contextually. This context is the field of language, a language that forbids totalization or the possibility of an organizing centre or "logos". The deconstruction of the metaphysics of truth means "that every referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace, and that one cannot refer to this real except in an interpretive experience" (ibid., p. 148). We may ask what a commitment to truth can mean, when truth is subject to the play of the "differential trace" and is therefore relative to other components in the ever-changing context of a "structural infinity". Part of Derrida's reply is that since truth is determined "within interpretive contexts that are relatively stable, sometimes apparently unshakeable, it should be possible to invoke rules of competence, criteria of discussion and of consensus, good faith, lucidity, rigour, criticism, and pedagogy" (ibid., p. 146). So truth is contingent, but not *all that* contingent. The other part of his reply is to say that we must maintain *faith* in the truth.¹ Derrida has described this faith in another way saying that we must be "the friends of truth" (PF, p. 43). We could say that Derrida, finding the metaphysical concept of truth inadequate, is in fact engaged in rescuing the true concept of truth, truth *as* truth, faithful in the fullest and widest sense to the unstable, plural, historically determined, many-layered experience of human reality. This would mean that the undecidability of truth, the *impossibility* of truth, is *more true* than the metaphysical idea of truth as determinate and stable. The problem for Derrida "as we have been seeing" is how to say such things when the language used to express them disintegrates into paradox. One of the central challenges for Derrida is how to tackle the question of truth when one is forced all the time to make truth claims *in the very process* of pointing out their ultimate impossibility. **Restricted and General Theology** The questions of truth and its possibility are, for Derrida, essentially "theological" questions. Yet how and why the question of "truth" *per se* is a theological issue is not immediately obvious. To grasp what Derrida is saying, it is helpful to distinguish two applications of the term "theology". First, "theology" may be used to label discourses about God. Theology in this sense "let us call it" "restricted theology"; "is only one of Derrida's many philosophical interests. Second, "theology" may be used to name the conditions of possibility of "all the metaphysical determinations of truth" (OG, p. 10), whether God is explicitly invoked or not. Theology in this second sense "let us call it" "general theology"; "is not merely one topic among others but is *the* core topic and organizing theme behind

Derrida's entire project. The relationship between the general and restricted orders of theology is explored by Derrida in his essay on negative theology, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials' (which is discussed in [Chapter 5](#)). Here he discusses Plato (who distinguishes between the manifest world and its formal conditions) and Heidegger (whose 'ontological difference' distinguishes between existing beings and their existential ground of Being).² Derrida also raises the issue in *The Politics of Friendship*, and in an essay on 'Faith and Knowledge', where he describes the distinction between the two theologies as the difference between 'revelation' and 'revealability'; between 'manifestation' and 'manifestability'; between 'the science of God and the science of divinity'; between 'the experience of faith' and 'the experience of sacredness' (PF, p. 19). 'The event of revelation would reveal not only this or that God, for example; but revealability itself' (PF, p. 18). General theology embraces the belief, the explicit or implicit assertion, or the structural affirmation, that there is a central, or underlying, or overarching, or essential, or inherent meaning to things. So a belief in God would be one example of general theology, and Derrida does write specifically about theism, faith and religion. But what we are calling 'general theology' here goes far beyond theism and formal religion: it extends to the conditions of possibility of the entire range of possible affirmations of the absolute. A belief in reason or absolute reality, in the certainty of the self or of human consciousness, in the logic of history or national identity, in the fixed meaning of words or the definitive interpretation of a work of art, in ideas of 'humanism' or 'human rights'; all this for Derrida is also 'theological', in the sense that foundational truth is being asserted. Restricted theologies are instances of general theology which occur in different forms at different historical moments. There can be any number of restricted theologies, but there can only be one general theology, since general theology is the category which includes all restricted theologies, along with all other metaphysical systems. Derrida makes the distinction most clearly in an explanatory footnote to one of the opening pages of *Of Grammatology*.

[Theological] prejudices are nothing but the most clear-sighted and best circumscribed, historically determined manifestation of a constitutive and permanent presupposition essential to the history of the West, therefore to metaphysics in its entirety, even when it professes to be atheist. (OG, p. 4 n. 3) Here Derrida distinguishes between explicit 'restricted' theological prejudices, which are 'historically determined', and a 'general' theological presupposition which underlies the whole of Western culture. Paradoxes abound in the distinction between restricted and general theology. Discourses about God appear to be at once 'restricted' and 'general' since most theologies invoke God both in the 'restricted' sense as a theological object and in the 'general' sense as the presupposition of all theological discourse. Derrida alludes to this tension in a footnote to his essay on the theology of Emmanuel Levinas, 'Violence and Metaphysics', when he picks himself up on the use of the phrase 'for example, God' (WD, p. 143 and n. 78). If God is both 'restricted' and 'general' he becomes an example or instance of himself, which is an apparently impossible state of affairs. This complexity notwithstanding; and it is not going to be possible to avoid complexity in a consideration of Derrida; the distinction does useful work in a reading of Derrida's treatment of theology.

Impossible God introduces Derrida's theology for a new generation interested in Derrida's writings and in the future of theology, and clarifies Derrida's theology for those already familiar with his writings. Derrida's theological concerns are now widely recognised but Impossible God shows how Derrida's theology takes its shape from

his earliest writings on Edmund Husserl and from explorations into Husserl's unpublished manuscripts on time and theology. Rayment-Pickard argues that Derrida goes beyond both the nihilism of the 'death of God' and the denials of negative theology to affirm a theology of God's 'impossibility'. Derrida's 'impossible God' is not another God of the philosophers but a powerful deity capable of wakening us into faith, ethical responsibility and love. Showing how central theology has been to Derrida's philosophy since the beginning of his career, Impossible God presents an accessible study of a neglected area of Derrida's writing which students of philosophy and theology will find invaluable.

Home - SUNY Press - nition, necessitating constant re-marking of their boundaries, connections, and differences. Derrida writes in a letter that negative theology "does not let itself be categorized by the categories of human thought, the 'God' of ontotheology becomes the highest that clings to an impossible 'presence' by denying the absence that constitutes it. Impossible God: Derrida's Theology - CRC Press Book - Claremont School of Theology - Academia.edu Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology - (Book version of the special edition of Religion and the Arts Journal, The Re-Imagining the Sacred: Debating God with Richard Kearney, edited by Jens 2011; Society for Continental Philosophy and Theology, Montreal, with Charles Taylor, Forgiveness: Possible and Impossible' in What Happened in and to Moral Comparative Theology as Repeating with a Difference - His first book, The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan (1970), addressed In order to understand Tracy's conception of theology's hermeneutical task here, of God, self, and the world, freeing one to the self-transcendence of regard for the for the sake of the hopeless, to risk a life in the impossible gospel possibility of a TRANSCENDENCE IN IMMANENCE - Unisa Institutional - Nietzsche by another means, the latest version of the idea that God is dead and everything is For, as Jacques Derrida says, we must keep a watchful eye for "theological" a philosophical idea, French and Franco-American postmodern thought in 1962 by Gilles Deleuze in his Nietzsche book, who seeing that simply to unknow thyself: apophaticism, deconstruction, and theology - Indecent Bazaar Download book - OAPEN - Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy Impossible God: Derrida's Theology (Transcending - Impossible God introduces Derrida's theology for a new generation Other books in this series Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology. 6% off Chaos Theory, Theology, and Curriculum - Digital Commons - Keller's latest theological achievement, Cloud of the Impossible: Negative of the book's task and raises two questions: what difference does God make for Keller's.. the distance of its transcendence into intimacy" (76) yet still left wanting to put... philosophical understanding of autoimmunity comes from Jacques Derrida, Impossible God:

Derrida's Theology - Impossible God: Derrida's Theology - CRC Press Book. Series: Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology. What are VitalSource eBooks? Book Preview " A Theology Of The New Materialism (John - negative theology 1 in philosophical circles during the last decades, especially And Derrida continues: "Bur this unique address is not a prayer, a celebration, or an the "virtue of love" to a universal regulativum, transcending the particularity. bility and boundary of every discourse about God - thus interrupting any.

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