

Performative Powerlessness – A Response to Simon Critchley¹

Jacques Derrida

To thank Simon, I am going to say at what point I find what he said just in the sense of rightness (*justesse*) and of justice. I must all the same recount a little story in which Simon is mixed up. After a long debate, direct, indirect, through intermediaries or not, Habermas and I promised each other – and I will return to the promise – to meet and discuss. And this promise was probably so overdetermined that we fell ill, one after the other. At the moment of the meeting, which had been set for two days at Axel Honneth's seminar – two or three days before, I fell ill. It was the first time in my life that I canceled a meeting of this kind. We set another date, another meeting, for two or three months later, and the day before, on the eve, there was Mrs. Habermas on the phone; Habermas was very sick, he had problems with his inner ear, and we had to cancel for a second time the meeting we had promised each other, one and the other.

But what I wanted to say above all, then, is that what reassured me in the prospect of this troubling subject was that Simon would be there. I told myself that he at least knows the two contexts and will open a discussion, and it is with this text that you have begun the discussion here in Paris. And so what reassured me was that I knew that Simon would be there, and that he would open and would probably clarify the discussion – which you have done, in my opinion, magnificently – and I hope that the occasion will present itself for us to renew this difficult debate.

About the debate, I would just like to say that – I am not going to repeat all that you have very well said to open the question – at the point where I am now, the point at which an agreement, a discussion, would appear possible in what you have reconstructed is at bottom – on both sides – to develop together this question of formal pragmatics, of performativity. The question or the logic of performativity could be a ground, at least potentially, of possible discussion, for all of the reasons you have evoked. But I would say, more and more now, in a way that is rather new for me, I am more and more suspicious, whatever its fecundity, its necessity may be, of the theory of performativity. Why? Let me explain. I am going to take a certain angle on this to come back to what you said in your intervention. I believe that this logic of performativity, so necessary, so new in Western and academic discourses, so fertile also, has a certain limit, which is not only the limit I have tried several times to mark in complicating this discourse in its Austinian-Searlian tradition. It is not only that. It is that everywhere a given ethical, juridical, political space is given to performative acts,

which is to say to languages which produce events, and which insofar as they produce events also give rise to institutions – a vast field. Each time, therefore, that we suppose that these performative languages, performative communications, produce events, then, to the same extent, they neutralize the event.

To put it another way, performativity for me is – I have this impression more and more – that which produces events, all institutions and acts in which responsibility is to be assumed; but it is also that which neutralizes the event, that is to say, what happens (*ce qui arrive*). Wherever there is the performative, whatever the form of communication, there is a context of legitimate, legitimizing, or legitimized convention that permits it to neutralize what happens, that is, the brute eventness of the arrivant (*l'événementialité brute de l'arrivant*). Put another way, if in a certain manner performativity encounters the event produced by language, it is also that which neutralizes the eventness of the event.

When you spoke of the empirical event, and the concrete act of language, I would say that it is exactly *that* which is too easily assimilated. That which unforeseeably affects us implies a retreat of all performative authority. At present I would claim that if there is performative authority, and consequently something of the event, of singularity, which is neutralized by the performative, then performativity always remains protective. And I suppose that at the same time the academic investment in the Western universities – where there is thinking, where things are happening – the investment in this theory of performativity, the investment in political theory (because the juridical is at work in the performative) has fertile, liberating effects, but also protectionist effects. I believe that a politics, as well as an ethics or a law, which regulates itself solely on performative power – the performative is a power – is not only a power, but also a legitimizing and legitimized power. And so, in a certain way, theories of the performative are always at the service of powers of legitimation, of legitimized or legitimizing powers. And consequently, in my view, the ethical must be exposed to a place where constative language as well as performative language is in the service of another language.

And there the question is posed of infinite responsibility. Habermas thinks that in the idea of infinite responsibility there is an ethical overload (*surcharge*), but the ethical overload has to be overwhelming (*surchargeant*), it overwhelms (*surcharge*), and the arrival of the other *is* the overload. One cannot eliminate the overload and control things by norms within discourse. When there are norms, it is finished, everything is done, everything follows from the norms. There is no more responsibility when there are norms. Thus, if one wants to normalize, to norm the ethical overload, it is finished, there is no more ethics. There is ethics precisely where I am in performative powerlessness.

It is at this point that I will say very, very quickly, much too quickly, naturally – since you have evoked Habermas's text on popular sovereignty, I would raise, I would distinguish, a thought of the unconditional, such as I have pursued here and there for a long time, and distinguish it from a thought of sovereignty. The two are very close, sovereignty and the unconditional. But there is an unconditional that is

without sovereignty, an unconditionality that is without power, while sovereignty, in its secularized theological legacy – sovereignty naturally, of God and the king of divine right, popular sovereignty, democratic sovereignty in Rousseau's sense – remains a theological legacy. And thus, to this inherited theological fantasy of sovereignty, I would oppose an unconditionality without power. And it is there, in this 'without power,' that I expose myself to the event, to the arrival of an event for which no performative is ready. For which no legitimating convention is provided. And it is to this arrival that the ethical question presents itself, that the call of the other, the arrival of the other, of an event, is a burden (*charge*), an infinite responsibility. This is not to say that I assume it myself. *I cannot assume responsibility*. I know simply that I cannot assume the responsibility that overwhelms me. I am infinitely overwhelmed as a finite being by a responsibility that cannot but be infinite – and impossible to assume. But at least I *think* this impossibility, and it is there that I *think* what my responsibility should be, which is to say, infinite. All the same, I cannot assume it. There, concerning responsibility, performativity is a luxury of authority. To be able to have the right and the power to produce the performative, there must naturally exist a right and a condition. If I provide these conditions, then it is finished.

(Simon Critchley: So, to return to the question of the other's decision in me, is this decision taken in the face of an event?)

This question of the decision of the other in me is an absurdity, it is inconceivable. As such, it has to be connected to that which I just said about the event – which undoes itself. The decision of the other in me means that the other who arrives to me is in some sense before me. It does not mean that I have someone in me, like a sort of little machine, a ventriloquist, who takes action in my place. It means that the decision itself corresponds to the other, and that I am myself only from this infinite responsibility which the other places in me. The other who is in me is greater than I. I can only gain access to my selfhood (*ipséité*), my egoity, etc., from this relation to the other in me, but the other in me can nevertheless not be incorporated or introjected – who is in me, greater than I. And this also happens through mourning, the experience of mourning from which I constitute myself, I establish myself. Thus, the decision comes to me: there it is, it is a thought, a simple decision, a decision that comes to me. I must take responsibility for the decision that comes to me. It comes to me (*Elle m'arrive. . .*).

(Translated by James Ingram)

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

1. These remarks were offered in response to the May 1999 presentation of the French version of Simon Critchley's "Remarks on Derrida and Habermas," in this issue. The translation has not sought to efface their improvised character. Thanks to Simon Critchley, Veronica Coleman, Kyra Holland, and Jacques Derrida for their invaluable assistance.