## DERRIDA'S RESPONSE TO MULHALL

Simon Glendinning: Thank you Stephen for that fascinating read-
ing of the opening of the *Investigations*. I don't know how you
want to play this Professor Derrida?
Jacques Derrida: It is difficult! I won't go back to my 'problem'
with Wittgenstein. Perhaps one day I will 'solve' it in some way,
but not today. To begin with let me just say that I think one of the
most important things in your paper, Stephen, was to do with the
problem of 'inheriting language'. And I think I was in full agree-
ment with everything you said on that point. On the question of
'ordinary language' on the other hand – which is, I think, the
central issue in your discussion – I am still suspicious. However,
when I say I am suspicious of this concept it is not because I think
that there is *something else* than ordinary language. I am suspicious
of the *opposition* between ordinary/extraordinary language. What
I am trying to do is to find – and I think this is close to the
Wittgenstein that you presented – the production of the extraor-
dinary *within* the ordinary, and the way the ordinary is, as you put
it, 'vulnerable' to or not 'immune' to what we understand as
extraordinary.

   In a minute I will try to develop this a little further with respect
to Austin, and from the point of view of another text by Austin.
But first, I would just like to add a word or two to what you said
about Wittgenstein's shopping scene. Don't you think that what
Wittgenstein is describing here (and the scene is not so 'ordi-
nary', as you rightly said) is a sort of 'machinery' or 'technique'?
Not simply a 'mental operation', but an operation – Wittgenstein
speaks of 'operating with words' – perhaps like a computer. To me
what this description highlights is the installation of a certain
'technology', *through iterability*, within our mental operations. So
what you call 'magical' here, attributing magical powers to the
sheer fact of iterability, these magical powers are simply the tech-
nology which is implied in arithmetic, in calculation, in grammar,
in semantics, and so on. So I was struck by the technological
aspect of this description. As if Wittgenstein was describing this
series of operations as machine-like operations within the inner
life, a description which would imply that a certain '*techne*' is
already at work *within* the so-called 'private' or 'inner' sphere of
mental operations.

   Of course, now more than ever we can be tempted by the

model of the computer when we try to analyze what we are doing when we speak and we count. It seems that, like computers, we are just 'running', like a mechanism. But, in the 'running' supposed by iterability, '*techne*' is not simply opposed to the possibility of a non-mechanical decision. Indeed it is its very chance. A chance that therefore entails the greatest risk, even the menace of 'radical evil'. Otherwise, that of which it is the chance would not be 'the leap' beyond knowledge I spoke of in the last session but just a programmed effect implying a predictability or a pure know-how, which would be the annihilation of every responsibility.

But back to Austin. I do not remember exactly, but I am sure I did say that his reference to the ordinary had metaphysical origins. However, I do not think that what I had in mind was simply the reference to ordinary language. For me *there is only ordinary language* – philosophy too is 'ordinary language'. But, since there is no opposed term here, since 'there is only ordinary language', this concept is empty. The reference is to something which is simply an open space for transformation. Thus it is on the question of the delimitation of 'ordinary language' that the issue of 'metaphysics' and 'metaphysical origins' arises.

Let me develop this very briefly by recalling Austin's text 'A Plea for Excuses' which I re-read recently – it is a wonderful text. The status of his title is particularly interesting and difficult to establish. Is he simply mentioning his subject matter, or is he also already using these words? The very beginning of this paper goes like this: 'The subject of this paper, *Excuses*, is one not to be treated but only to be introduced within such limits' (Austin 1979, p. 175). Which means that, at the beginning, he is apologizing for not treating the 'subject' of his lecture. So 'a plea for excuses' is also a description of what he is going to do, no less than the subject of a possible lecture. So how does this title function? Is it the description of a coming lecture, of a philosophical discourse on excuses, or simply the description of what this man is doing; namely, apologizing? I apologize, please excuse me, I won't be able to address the question of excuses.

Well, it is in this text, with this title, that he says he wants to insist that 'ordinary language' is not the 'last word' but is the 'first word' (*ibid.*, p. 185). It is not the last word because, he says, 'it can everywhere be supplemented and improved upon, and superseded' (*ibid.*). It can be replaced – but he adds: 'Only remember, it *is* the *first* word' (*ibid.*). So it is not the last word but it is the first word. What does that mean? In the beginning there is ordinary

language – then we can, of course, supersede, improve, supplement it through a number of extraordinary languages, such as, for instance, the use of this title, 'A Plea for Excuses', which is not an 'ordinary' use of language. (Indeed, a title is never 'ordinary' ordinary language.) So this subtlety, this irony, is part of an 'ordinary language' which can always be supplanted by an extraordinary use. That is why we are to remember that it is only the first word. But now we are on a very trembling limit. On the one hand, Austin accepts that ordinary language is never pure: it can be open to substitution, artificiality, mechanicity, quotation, and so forth. On the other hand, however, when he says it is the 'first word', then with the temptation to keep to this, to maintain the purity of ordinary language, at least as the first word, then he is close to being a metaphysician. Or, again, here we have a temptation towards a delimitation of the ordinary which is 'metaphysical'. (Finally, let me just note that it is in this extraordinary and wonderfully ironic text that Austin adds a footnote to his remarks about ordinary language not being 'the last word': 'And forget, for once and for a while, that other curious question "Is it true?"' (*ibid.*, p. 185n))

Simon Glendinning: I would like to come back to this idea that there is only ordinary language, because I think something of what Stephen was saying was sympathetic to this claim. Isn't he saying that the ordinary is that which constantly invites or incites a distinctive 'metaphysical' interpretation? And that contrast is one which, it seems to me, is very important in the arguments about possibility and impossibility which you sketched earlier today. For unless it is to be the same thing which is possible and impossible we need a contrast here. Don't we want to say that the conditions which makes some *x*, let us say 'meaning', *possible* in actuality is at the same time what makes it *impossible* as the kind of pure ideality which we, as 'metaphysicians' as it were, are constantly tempted to suppose? So we do have a contrast built into your argument there. And it seems essential to it, because otherwise we are left with no room to distinguish something like 'meaning' in actuality from an impossible 'metaphysical' ideal. Let me put this to you. Yes, there is only ordinary language, but this is a language which constantly invites its own misunderstanding or idealization into some kind of ideally pure structure. We now have just the kind of contrast that Stephen was looking for between ordinary language and a metaphysical interpretation.

Jacques Derrida: I don't know if I am answering your question,

but if I never use the concept of ordinary language in my name – I just quote it or borrow it – it is because I do not see a radical and necessary opposition (and I am not against oppositions and distinctions as such) between the ordinary and the extraordinary. This does not mean that, for me, all language is 'simply' ordinary. While I think there is nothing else but ordinary language, I also think that there are miracles, that what I said about the impossible implies the constant call for the extraordinary. Take, for example, trusting someone, believing someone. This is part of the most ordinary experience of language. When I speak to someone and say 'Believe me', that is part of everyday language. And yet in this 'Believe me' there is a call for the most extraordinary. To trust someone, to believe, is an act of faith which is totally heterogeneous to proof, totally heterogeneous to perception. It is the emergence, the appearance in language, of something which resists anything simply ordinary. So, while I am not against distinctions, I cannot rely on the concept of 'ordinary language'.

Simon Glendinning: Thank you. And that is all we have time for I am afraid. In closing I would just like to thank all the participants who have made today so interesting and enjoyable, and of course a special thanks to Jacques Derrida for his most generous and stimulating contributions to the day's discussions.

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