IRWLE

The Indian Review of World Literature in English

ISSN: 0974-097X • Vol. 22, No. 1 • January 2026

Aporia as Method: The Logic of Deconstruction through Derrida's Impossible Passages

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Abstract

This essay conceptualizes aporia not as a contingent conceptual impasse but as the quasi-transcendental structure that underwrites and conditions the operative logic of deconstruction, rendering meaning, decision, justice, and futurity simultaneously possible and impossible. Recasting the classical philosophical notion of aporia as a solvable enigma, the study elucidates Derrida's reconfiguration of aporetic nonpassage as the limit-experience in which law, justice, and responsibility are exposed to their own constitutive impossibility. Deconstruction functions as a "method without method," a rigorous, non-formalizable practice grounded in sustained fidelity to textual and conceptual undecidability. The analysis of "impossible passages," between law and justice, rule and decision, presence and the *à-venir*, reveals that these impasses are not failures of reason but generative sites through which ethical responsibility and political judgment are inaugurated. To

think or write deconstructively is to inhabit aporia as a perpetual condition of exposure to the unforeseeable other: a mode of vigilance that resists closure while demanding decisions without the assurance of normative ground.

Keywords: aporia, deconstruction, différance, trace, justice, law, undecidability, quasi-transcendental, impossible passage, responsibility

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Deconstruction has too often been construed as a nihilistic enterprise of semantic dissolution, a gesture of unrestrained interpretive relativism that undermines meaning, truth, and responsibility. Such readings efface the rigor of Derrida's project, which neither repudiates meaning nor celebrates indeterminacy, instead interrogates the constitutive fault lines through which discourses articulate and undo themselves. Aporia does not signify a contingent difficulty to be overcome by methodological refinement, it designates the quasi-transcendental structure that simultaneously conditions and destabilizes the very possibility of meaning, decision, and justice. By tracing Derrida's reconceptualization of aporetic nonpassage, in its entanglement with différance, the trace, and the interminable passage between law and justice, rule and decision, presence and the *à-venir*, the analysis explains deconstruction as a "method without method," whose intellectual rigor inheres in its sustained fidelity to the experience of undecidability. Deconstruction is not the negation of reason but its permanent exposure to what exceeds reason's jurisdiction. Aporia emerges as the locus of this exposure, the threshold at which conceptual determination confronts its own impossibility, and where ethical responsibility and futurity become thinkable only through the ordeal of the impossible.

Aporia as the Condition of Deconstruction

Deconstruction, as a philosophical and critical practice, has frequently been subject to reductive and often polemical misreadings, especially as a form of radical negation or as an invitation to interpretive free play. Such distortions

suggest that deconstruction seeks either to annihilate meaning or to license an arbitrary proliferation of readings, thus dissolving all claims to determinacy and coherence. However, the reception misrepresents Derrida's project, which does not abandon meaning but rigorously exposes the structural limits and internal tensions that make meaning possible and precarious. Derrida responds: "What deconstruction is not? everything of course! What is deconstruction? nothing of course! I have no simple and formalizable response to this question. All my essays are attempts to have it out with this formidable question. ... Deconstruction is not a demolition or a destruction" (Derrida, "Letter" 3). Deconstruction is not a doctrine of skepticism or nihilism, but a methodological orientation toward texts and concepts that foregrounds their constitutive instabilities. Rather than positing an external skepticism, deconstruction operates immanently. It traces the ways in which a discourse both depends on and is undermined by its own conceptual architecture. The hallmark of Derridean analysis is its attention to the fault lines within philosophical, literary, and political texts, those junctures where the apparent unity of a concept fractures under the pressure of its own exclusions, hierarchies, and rhetorical strategies. Deconstruction reveals that meaning is not simply present but is always mediated by difference, deferral, and repetition, making it both possible and subject to displacement. Aporia emerges as a significant proposition in deconstruction, naming the structural impasse where a discourse confronts irreducible tensions. Aporetic points are not accidental flaws to be corrected by better conceptual tools. They are the conditions under which meaning is produced and exposed to its own limits. To mistake deconstruction for negation is to ignore that Derrida's analyses presuppose the necessity of meaning, reference, and conceptual rigor. Otherwise, there would be nothing to deconstruct. Deconstruction is not the celebration of indeterminacy but the rigorous exposition of the ways in which determinacy is always haunted by what it cannot fully master.

Aporia is not a momentary blockage or a contingent difficulty that might be resolved by more information or refined concepts. It is an enduring condition that structures the very possibility of conceptual discourse. Fritsch recognizes aporia as quasi-transcendental: “Aporia is not a logical contradiction, but a structure of the ‘double bind’ or of ‘auto-immunity’...It is a quasi-transcendental condition of possibility that is at the same time a condition of impossibility” (Fritsch 34). It names the structural relation between heterogeneous terms, law and justice, hospitality and exclusion, responsibility and calculability, on which the intelligibility of these concepts depends. The quasi-transcendental character means that aporia is neither a logical contradiction nor an empirical obstacle, but a condition that both enables and disables the phenomena in question.

Aporia is an impasse: “The nonpassage, the impasse or aporia, stems from the fact that there is no limit. There is not yet or there is no longer a border to cross, no opposition between two sides: the limit is too porous, permeable, and indeterminate. ... I proposed to define the aporetic as a non-road. From this point of view, the aporia would be an experience of the non-passage” (Derrida, *Aporias* 20, 14). Derrida’s analyses of justice, for instance, demonstrate how the demand for justice is both necessary and impossible to fulfill within any given legal framework. Legal norms are, in principle, calculable and programmable, but justice appears as an incalculable demand that exceeds any existing rule, requiring responsiveness to singular situations that cannot be fully anticipated in advance. From this perspective, aporia arises because a decision worthy of the name must be at once faithful to the rule and open to the singular, simultaneously calculable and incalculable. “Law (droit) is not justice. Law is the element of calculation, and it is just that there be law, but justice is incalculable, it requires us to calculate with the incalculable; and aporetic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary, of justice, that is to say of moments in which the decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule” (Derrida, “Force” 947). No meta-rule can prescribe how to negotiate this tension. Any

attempt to resolve it by privileging one pole absolutely, either blind adherence to rules or unbounded responsiveness, destroys what the decision seeks to honor.

Aporia functions in Derrida's work as a "method without method," a guiding orientation that cannot be reduced to a set of transferable procedures. Derrida explains: "I do not have a method. ... A method is a technique, a procedure, a way of controlling. ... If I had a method, I would be a functionary of my own writing" (Derrida, *A Taste* 4). Attempts to codify deconstruction as a method in the conventional sense miss its radical character, which consists in a sustained fidelity to aporetic structures as they appear in particular texts, institutions, and concepts. Deconstruction is rigorous, but its rigor is not procedural. It consists in attending to the singular economy of each text, not in applying a pre-existing algorithm. Deconstruction is the lived experience of the impossible: "The 'impossible' is not a logical contradiction, but a promise... Deconstruction is the experience of the impossible. ... The impossible is what we love, what we desire, what we are waiting for" (Caputo, *The Prayers* 3). The impossibility of a method is itself an aporetic condition: deconstruction begins where conceptual mastery fails, at the point where a discourse must acknowledge that its own resources are insufficient to ground what it nevertheless cannot dispense with. At these aporetic junctures, the conceptual apparatus finds itself compelled to rely on figures, appeals, or exclusions that it cannot justify on its own terms. Derrida's work lingers at these thresholds, not to paralyze thought, but to let the implication of the aporia become explicit. The concept is structurally exposed to what exceeds it, to an alterity it cannot domesticate. "Impossible passages" in Derrida's work are not metaphors but operative logics that describe the structural impossibility of traversing certain thresholds without betraying what is at stake. The passage from law to justice is both necessary and impossible: necessary because without it there would be no justice, impossible because no rule can fully determine, in advance, the singular claim it must encounter. The decision is thus caught in a logic of the "impossible":

it must decide where no rule suffices, and yet it cannot dispense with rules. Deconstruction traces this logic not to paralyze decision, but to expose the irreducible risk and exposure that constitute responsibility as such.

In classical philosophical traditions, aporia designates a puzzle or impasse, a point at which reasoning encounters a difficulty that may be resolved through conceptual clarification or dialectical synthesis. Such a conception treats aporia as a contingent obstacle, a momentary blockage that can be overcome by more rigorous thinking or the application of a superior method. Derrida's reconfiguration of aporia, however, disrupts the classical understanding. Beardsworth notes, for Derrida, an aporia is not a logical contradiction to be dialectically resolved, but "an undecidable which cannot be resolved by the logic of identity" (Beardsworth 5). Aporia is not something to be resolved or transcended. It is not a puzzle awaiting a solution, but an experience of the impossible that structures the very possibility of meaning, decision, and experience. Derrida distinguishes this from a simple "problem," describing it as: "The halting of the path. ... But the aporia can also be... the event of a coming or of a future advent which no longer has the form of the movement that consists in passing, traversing, or transiting. ... The 'impossible' is not the opposite of the possible, it is the figure of the real" (Derrida *Aporias* 12, 20).

Aporia names a structural limit than a temporary failure of reasoning. Where classical problem-solving seeks to eliminate contradiction and restore conceptual coherence, Derrida insists that certain aporias are irreducible, constitutive of the phenomena in question. The relation between law and justice cannot be reconciled by appeal to a higher principle. "Justice is an experience of the impossible," asserting that a demand for justice that does not experience aporia would have no chance of being a true call for justice; thus, "the aporia is not a paralysis, but a passage" (Derrida, "Force" 244). Derrida's project is not aimed at dissolving aporias but at sustaining attention to them. To encounter an aporia is not to face a deficiency but to

confront the limit where discourse must acknowledge its own exposure to what exceeds it. This "experience of the aporia... is the condition of possibility of a decision" (Beardsworth 5). The experience of the impossible is thus not a failure of thought but the condition under which thought becomes responsible.

Derrida's concept of différance is essential to Derrida's reconfiguration of aporia. Différance names the movement of spacing and deferral that underlies all meaning, the process by which signifiers differ from one another and are deferred in their reference. The movement is not a technical detail of semiotics but a structural condition that inscribes aporia at the heart of meaning itself. "[T]he movement of signification is possible only if each so-called 'present' element... is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element" (Derrida, *Margins* 13). Différance is not a linguistic phenomenon but a temporal structure. It names the "structural necessity that meaning is always deferred." (Lucy 27). It is "not an accident that befalls language; it is the condition of language" (Lucy 27). The movement of différance is inscribed in temporality itself: every present moment is always already deferred, marked by the trace of what has passed and the anticipation of what is to come.

Hägglund locates the movement as a condition of temporality, stating that "the structure of the trace, or... the structure of différance, is the structure of time" (23). Temporal structure means that meaning is never fully present but is always mediated by difference, making it both possible and subject to displacement. The "'impossibility' of presence is not a negative limit; it is the positive condition of time" (Hägglund 23). Derrida's analysis reconfigures aporia as a temporal and structural limit than a contingent puzzle. The impossibility of full presence is not something to be overcome but the very condition under which meaning is produced. To encounter différance is to confront the aporia of meaning itself, the structural impossibil-

ity of a pure, self-identical origin. The reconfiguration is central to Derrida's critique of metaphysics and his rethinking of the conditions of possibility for experience.

Trace and Non-origin

Trace is the mark of what is absent, the sign of the impossibility of a pure, self-identical origin. Derrida declares that "the trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general," which paradoxically "amounts to saying that there is no absolute origin of sense in general" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 65). Every sign is marked by the trace of what it is not, by the difference and deferral that constitute its meaning. It means that there is no pure beginning. "The trace is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 156). Trace is not an absence but a structural condition that makes meaning possible. Gasché provides a technical explanation of "quasi-transcendental" infrastructure, noting that the trace is the "'origin' of the distinction between presence and absence, but an origin that is not itself present" (188). The "arche-trace" "effaces itself in the very moment of producing the difference," a structure that effectively "destroys the very possibility of a simple origin" (Gasché 188). "Absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely," leading to the aporetic conclusion that "the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it. The center is not the center" (Derrida, *Writing* 280). To encounter the trace is to confront the aporia of meaning itself. The impossibility of a pure beginning is not something to be overcome but the very condition under which meaning is produced and exposed to its own limits.

Deconstruction as Passage Through the Impossible

In Derrida's philosophical lexicon, "passage" does not signify a simple transition or a linear movement from one point to another. Passage is conceived as a movement that resists synthesis. Derrida explores the etymology of

aporia, from the Greek *a-poros*, meaning "without passage," to redefine the term: "What is an aporia? … It is a non-passage. The halting of the path. … But the aporia can also be… the event of a coming or of a future advent which no longer has the form of the movement that consists in passing, traversing, or transiting" (Derrida, *Aporias* 12, 20). Derrida's notion of passage is deeply intertwined with his critique of metaphysics. Passage is not a movement toward completion but an experience of the impossible. "The passage is a movement of the trace… but this passage is not a homogeneity. … It is a passage that does not pass" (Derrida, *Writing* 291).

Derrida's conception of passage is aporetic. Bennington elucidates this by highlighting the double meaning of the French word *pas*, which signifies both a "step" and a "negation." Bennington explains that "the *pas* is both a step and a negation (not). … The passage is therefore always an impasse" (Bennington and Derrida 23). "To pass is to experience the impasse," meaning there is "no crossing without the experience of the aporia" (23). Impossibility of passage is not a failure of movement but the very condition under which movement becomes possible. Derrida's reconfiguration of passage as a movement without synthesis challenges the classical philosophical ideal of progress. Passage is understood as a traversal that is marked by the impossibility of a final completion, a movement that is both necessary and structurally forbidden.

Impossible passage is a movement that must be undertaken but cannot be completed, a traversal that is both necessary and structurally forbidden. "The impossible is what must be done. … The impossible is the only thing that can happen. … Deconstruction is the passage through the impossible" (Caputo, *The Prayers* 32). This notion is not a metaphor but an operative logic that structures Derrida's analyses of key concepts such as justice and responsibility. Derrida connects responsibility to endurance, stating: "It is

necessary to endure the experience of the impossible: the only one that can open onto the future. ... If I only do what I can do, I do not do anything" (Derrida, *The Other* 41-45).

Impossible passage is not a contingent limitation but a structural feature of the phenomena in question. For example, the passage from law to justice is both necessary and impossible. A just decision must go through the "ordeal of the undecidable," for a decision that avoids this would be the "programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process" (Derrida, *Force* 252). The decision is caught in a logic of the "impossible." It must decide where no rule suffices, and yet it cannot dispense with rules. Deconstruction traces this logic not to paralyze decision, but to expose the irreducible risk that constitutes responsibility. The necessity of crossing where crossing is structurally forbidden is central to Derrida's critique of metaphysics. As Caputo notes, deconstruction is quite literally a "passion for the impossible" (*The Prayers* 32). Impossible passage is not a sign of incompleteness but the very condition under which meaning, decision, and responsibility become possible. Derrida's reconfiguration of passage as an impossible movement challenges the classical philosophical ideal of progress, replacing it with a traversal marked by the impossibility of a final completion.

Derrida's textual strategies, interruption, delay, recursion, are signification to his reconfiguration of passage as an impossible movement. Writing, for Derrida, is not a simple transmission of meaning but a performative enactment of the aporia. Derrida's writing is "not a description of a state of affairs but a performative operation" designed to put into practice a "general displacement of the system" (Derrida, *Positions* 41). Aporetic structure of passage is not described but enacted in the very form of Derrida's writing. These strategies are operative logics rather than stylistic flourishes. "Derrida's writing is designed to force the reader to experience the aporia," and the text's "interruptions and delays are not stylistic defects but the very mode of the argument's existence" (Culler 136). The recursive nature of Derrida's

syntax “prevents linear consumption,” effectively ensuring that the “writing performs the delay (différance) that it thematizes” (Hobson 9). Performative aporia, Derrida notes, “will not have been a book” (Derrida, *Dissemination* 3). By doing so, he produces a space of “undecidability” that refuses to be mastered by a reading seeking a final, stable meaning. Recursive structure enacts the impossibility of a final completion, the movement that is always already interrupted by the very conditions that make it possible. Performative enactment is central to Derrida’s critique of metaphysics and his rethinking of the conditions of possibility for meaning and experience.

Aporia as Method

Deconstruction resists all attempts at procedural formalization. It is not a method in the conventional sense, not a set of rules or steps that can be universally applied across texts or domains. “Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one. Especially if the technical or pedagogical signification of this term is accented. ... It is not a tool to be used, nor a technique to be applied” (Derrida “Letter” 3-4). Instead, deconstruction operates as a strategy, a flexible, context-sensitive orientation that attends to the specific limits and aporias inscribed within a given text or concept. Derrida suggests that rather than a method, deconstruction is a “strategy, or a stratagem” necessitated by the “endless analysis” required by the structural nature of language (Derrida, *Positions* 42). Derrida’s rejection of method is not a gesture of arbitrariness, but a commitment to the irreducible singularity of each textual event. Deconstruction cannot be reduced to a method because it questions the very foundation of method itself, functioning instead as an “infrastructure that accounts for the possibility and impossibility of such rules” (Gasché 123).

The absence of a fixed method means that deconstruction does not offer a formula for “how to deconstruct.” There is no algorithm, no sequence of steps that would guarantee the uncovering of aporia. Deconstruction con-

sists in an attentiveness to textual limits, a sustained engagement with the points at which a discourse encounters its own structural impossibilities. Each text configures its own aporias differently, and the deconstructive reader must respond to these singularities with a corresponding singularity of approach. Deconstruction is not a method among others, but a way of being with texts, a fidelity to their limits and their impossibilities.

Deconstruction is marked by a distinctive mode of reading, one that seeks out the "impossible passages" within texts, the thresholds, margins, and supplements where texts contradict their own conditions. Derrida describes this as an "exorbitant" path of reading that aims at a "relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 158). The deconstructive reader is attentive to the points at which a text's own logic unravels, where its governing distinctions, hierarchies, and exclusions begin to undermine themselves. These impossible passages are not accidental flaws or contingent difficulties, but structural features that make meaning possible and precarious. The "double science" of reading does not simply point out errors, but "follows the text's own logic to the point where that logic contradicts itself," seeking the "blind spot" where rhetoric and logic clash (Culler 213). This mode of reading is not a matter of imposing an external skepticism, but of following the text's own movements. A text's law can never be fully "booked" or perceived in the present; the reading must focus on the "supplement' that the text itself cannot master" (Derrida, *Dissemination* 63).

Deconstruction is not a project of resolving aporias, but of remaining within them. This fidelity to the impossible is an ethical commitment to the irreducible tensions that subtend meaning. "To endure the aporia is the condition of the decision" (Derrida, *Aporias* 32). Non-passage is not a negative limit, but the very place where an "event" or a genuine decision becomes possible. Caputo frames this as a "passion for the impossible," argu-

ing that it represents a faith in the coming of the "other" that cannot be programmed (*Deconstruction* xix). To remain within aporia is to accept that there is no standpoint of mastery. "Responsibility begins with the impossible" (Derrida, *The Other* 45). If we only do what is already possible or programmed, we are applying a rule rather than making a responsible choice. Commitment is not a matter of choosing between closure and chaos, but of accepting that responsibility begins where guarantees end, and that justice, if the word is to retain any force, must be sought precisely where it cannot be fully present.

Aporia Without End

Derrida's idea of the future is bound to the aporetic structure of deconstruction. The "to come" (*l'à-venir*) is not a temporal extension or a future that can be anticipated, but a radical openness that resists all attempts at closure. Derrida distinguishes between the "future" (*le futur*) as a programmed timeline and the "to-come" as an unforeseeable event, noting that while the "future can be anticipated, predicted, programmed," the "to-come" refers to "someone who comes, whose arrival is totally unexpected... It is the opening of the future itself" (Derrida, *Specters* 168). This non-programmability is not a contingent limitation, but the very condition of possibility for the future. The "to-come" is not a "messianic promise of salvation," but the "undecidability of the future that makes every event possible" (Hägglund 19). Classical philosophical ideal of progress presupposes the possibility of arriving at a state of full presence. However, Derrida insists that a true future requires absolute unpredictability. The "coming of the other, the absolute arrivant, must not be anticipated," for if one can "calculate its trajectory, then it is not an event... it is not the future" (Derrida, *Rogues* 108). Aporia, in this context, is the condition under which the future becomes possible and precarious. Because openness remains structural, "it can bring both the best

and the worst; this risk is the condition of the future" (Hägglund 19). The future is not a simple extension of the present, but an experience of the impossible.

The non-programmability of the future has profound implications for Derrida's conception of responsibility. Responsibility is not a matter of fulfilling pre-established duties, but a response to what cannot be fully anticipated. "If I only do what is possible... I do not make a decision, I only deploy a program" (Derrida, *The Other* 45). Genuine responsibility "begins with the experience of the impossible" and must answer for itself "without the assurance of a norm" (45). Attridge connects this to the act of creative encounter, stating that responsibility "involves a suspension of established rules and a willingness to be changed by the encounter" (125). Responsibility is not a simple fulfillment of duties, but a response to the structural impossibility of a final completion. Thought is a matter of vigilance. For the writer or thinker, the duty is "to remain open to the event, to the singularity of the other that no program can exhaust" (Derrida, *Paper Machine* 77). To think is, fundamentally, "to welcome the unforeseeable" (Derrida, *Paper Machine* 77). Fidelity to the impossible is not a gesture of resignation, but an ethical commitment to the irreducible tensions that subtend meaning, decision, and experience.

Aporia is not an external obstacle to thought, but the inner logic of deconstruction. Impossible passages are not metaphors, but the sites where meaning, ethics, and decision emerge. Derrida's insistence that thought must risk what it cannot master is central to his critique of metaphysics. The classical philosophical ideal of progress and resolution presupposes the possibility of overcoming difference, reconciling contradiction, and arriving at a state of full presence. Derrida, however, insists that thought is always marked by the impossibility of a final completion, a movement that is both necessary and structurally forbidden. Deconstruction is not what avoids aporia. It is what dwells within it. The aporetic structure of deconstruction is

not a sign of incompleteness or failure, but the very condition under which meaning, ethics, and decision become possible and precarious. Derrida's reconfiguration of aporia as a structural condition is not a call for paralysis, but a demand for responsibility. To dwell within aporia is to accept that there is no standpoint beyond the aporia from which thought could survey and master it. The deconstructive reader does not seek to overcome the aporia, but to remain with it, to let it dislocate any pretension to closure while still insisting on the necessity of decisions made in its shadow. Deconstruction is not a method for resolving contradictions, but a strategy for attending to the impossible passages that make meaning possible and precarious. The commitment is not a matter of choosing between closure and chaos, but of accepting that responsibility begins where guarantees end, and that justice, if the word is to retain any force, must be sought precisely where it cannot be fully present.

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