

## Geoffrey Bennington's

### *Scatter 1*

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Geoffrey Bennington. *Scatter 1: The Politics of Politics in Foucault, Heidegger, and Derrida*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016. 294 pages.

#### **SCATTER**

Geoffrey Bennington's recently published book is an (un)dignified attempt to go on *reading* in the face of the terrifying time that we dare call ours. I say "(un)dignified" in the wake of Bennington's fresh and original work on the very concept of dignity, which picks up on Derrida's largely unthematized use of the idiom "worthy of the name" (*digne du nom*) by relating it explicitly to a kind of indignity or unworthiness that haunts and compromises the Kantian regulative Idea from which this idiom seems to be indissociable in Derrida's writings. As what Bennington calls "a measured deconstructive retrieval of the concept of *dignity*" is what allows a "more general rereading of politics (including the politics of reading)," and as this retrieval brings or "introduces a certain indignity into dignity itself," Bennington's own reading, then, is *itself* marked by the very (in)dignity it so persuasively thematizes

(267–268).<sup>1</sup> This (in)dignity at the heart of the deconstruction of the Kantian regulative Idea – which for Bennington is deconstruction *tout court* – offers, argues Bennington, “enormous advantages for any attempt to think about politics”:

Once the teleologism of the Idea is interrupted, the (nihilistic) temptation is simply to refuse and denounce all teleology and its associated concepts (such as the much-maligned concept of “progress”). This is the aporia of all materialisms and explains why they either go “base” or else dialectical. The thought of *différance* and the trace, however (and only some such thought) allows us to escape the either/or that this implies [...]. The demi-dignity of the *telos* that is preserved in such a thinking, the more especially in its elaborated “autoimmune” form, allows for a qualified use of concepts such as “progress” while factoring in to that use the necessary possibility of regressions of all sorts. It also allows for an unconditional affirmation of the unconditional as the arrival of the event “itself,” as the “passive” decision that can no longer be ascribed to any sovereign whatsoever. (280)

What Bennington here calls the “‘autoimmune’ form” of the “demi-dignity of the *telos*” is helpfully described by the slogan for which he is famous: “*the end is the end*,” by which he means the end “in both senses of that word, so that the end (*telos*) of whatever Idea we are talking about is the end (death) of the same Idea” (246). Bennington’s favorite example of this complicated Kantian setup comes from Kant himself: the image of a graveyard on the sign of an inn humorously called “The Perpetual Peace”: perpetual peace which not accidentally is for Kant “the only rational goal for politics,” a goal or regulative Idea which sinisterly seems to “bring death along with it” in its very fulfillment, compromising itself (and its supposed unconditional and infinite dignity, what Kant calls *Würde*) in the process (246). This

allows Bennington to claim that “the best place to be is *somewhere short* of the apparent telos,” signaling a necessary interruption of teleology by means of a *scatter* which gives Bennington’s work its title and which he defines as “the affirmation of multiply interruptive *eskhata*, short of any *telos*” – apparently relying on Derrida’s hypothesis of a difference between eschatology and teleology, however constant the risk of this difference “being effaced in the most fragile and slight insubstantiality” (247, 243). This interruption of the dignity of the Kantian regulative Idea and its explicit teleology affects politics in general, including what Bennington calls a “politics of reading” in its necessarily interrupted (in)dignity:

This structure affects not only ethical and political situations but also our understanding of what Heidegger still figures as hermeneutics and interpretation and that I suggested instead we simply call *reading*: *reading is the deconstruction of interpretation* whereby it is, repeatedly, interrupted short of interpretative fulfillment, and affirmatively so. Reading falls short of the goal of hermeneutics not by *failing to be* hermeneutics but by *succeeding in not being* hermeneutics. (247)

Spanning just about three hundred pages somewhat evenly divided into six chapters and an appendix containing Derrida’s hitherto unpublished notes on dignity, *Scatter I* takes rhetoric and politics as its guiding thread and patiently walks the reader through Foucault’s development of the concept of *parrhēsia* and the rhetorical sacrifice it entails in his recently published last three seminars from 1982–84 (ch. 1); Heidegger’s rehabilitation of rhetorical *doxa* throughout the 1920 lecture courses, culminating in the ontological “fork” that *doxa* introduces in the 1931 *The Essence of Truth* course (ch. 2); Heidegger’s mid-1930s political fanaticism and its relation to a rhetorical undecidability and blindness of the moment (*Augen-blick*) (ch. 3); Kierkegaard’s mad, foolish and stupid *øjeblik* and its Heideggerian temporality (ch. 4); Heidegger’s turn (*Kehre*) in the 1936–38 *Contributions to Philosophy*

and the ontological danger of a non-decision brought about by a radicalization of rhetorical *doxa* (ch. 5); and finally, Derrida's newly published notes on (demi)dignity and its relation to the Kantian Idea and the Benningtonian *politics of politics* (ch. 6). It should be noted that Bennington duly considers the thought of other philosophers such as Arendt, Gadamer and Nancy as well as a wide range of secondary literature texts from authors such as Kisiel, Fried, Dreyfus, Mulhall, Pöggeler, Faye, Ferraris, Naas and others.

### THE POLITICS OF POLITICS

While aware of the calamitous state in which politics – American and otherwise – currently finds itself, Bennington is able, with substantial help from Heidegger and Derrida, to provide a deconstructive alternative for thinking about politics without either moralistically denouncing its chaotic mess or simply acquiescing to it. Bennington tells us from the very start that this gesture entails first recognizing the very thing that makes politics politics. Rhetoric, Bennington argues, proves to be inextricably linked to the political so that all teleological attempts to purify politics from rhetoric are of a piece with, to use Bennington's words, “the death drive that perhaps defines philosophy as such,” since to erase political rhetoric – what political philosophy “wants to get out of” and “put an end to” – would be to annihilate politics altogether (4). This interruption of the *end* of teleology that teases out an irreducible dimension of political rhetoric in politics – its game, “rules,” tricks, sophistry, demagogy, party politics, “what in Washington is called playing politics and in Paris *la politique politicienne*” – is what Bennington calls the *politics of politics*, bringing to center stage a rhetorical element usually thought to be extrinsic and unessential to the political but which, as Bennington convincingly shows, is “coextensive with politics from the start” (4). Politics itself, writes Bennington, is “coterminous” with *logos* and the “possibilities of distortion and deceit that are usually, moralistically, associated with sophistry and rhetoric” (4–5). Explicitly with Aristotle in mind – and more especially Heidegger's readings of Aristotle from the 1920s – Bennington's starting point for thinking

about politics (and *its* politics) is to ground the *zōon politikon* in the *zōon logon echon* (or the *zōon rhetorikon echon*, as he calls it) so that understanding the political entails grasping *logos* and the rhetorical “complex self-referentiality or recursivity” that flows from it (5). This is why the book claims to *scatter* any political self-righteousness or teleologism, the very substance of which is to minimize – in fact, “*sacrifice*,” as Foucault says – the irreducible undecidability which belongs to what makes *logos logos* (and the political the political): the necessary possibility of *pseudos* and deception that our self-righteous age so readily dismisses as mere politician’s talk, empty rhetoric or sophistry but that Bennington, in the wake of Heidegger’s *Destruktion* and Derrida’s deconstruction, takes up seriously as part and parcel of the political as such.

#### KILLING RHETORIC: FOUCAULT’S SACRIFICE

The book begins by turning to the necessarily complex relation among philosophy, politics and rhetoric as staged in Michel Foucault’s only recently published Collège de France lecture courses from the last three years of his life: “The Hermeneutics of the Subject” (1982), “The Government of Self and Others” (1983) and “The Courage of Truth” (1984). Here, Bennington finds Foucault guilty of the same philosophical error motivating his impasse with Derrida in the 1960s and ’70s and subsequently prompting him somewhat shockingly to denounce and renounce rhetoric altogether in the early ’80s: ignoring one of the main teachings of Heidegger, Foucault seems to be blind, argues Bennington echoing Derrida, to the always-already situatedness of his own discursive practice whereby he ends up not only describing the object of his analysis but also endorsing the very object he is then less critically analyzing than ventriloquizing or being ventriloquized by. This blindness to the conditions of possibility allowing him to read texts belonging to what he considers a different and bygone episteme, his own access to which he is thus unable to account for, is what commits Foucault to what Bennington calls “the fudging of the enunciative position, whereby Foucault has to borrow his resources from his object without explaining how he does so” (45). Bennington

then explains how this overall blind spot in Foucault's thinking leads him to adopt a "particular Platonic configuration" as concerns the relations among philosophy, politics and rhetoric:

In a slightly different configuration of the same problem, here Foucault's analysis of a particular configuration, a particular "ontology of veridiction," namely Plato's, means placing that configuration at enough of an analytical distance to treat it as a "fiction": but that setup is then complicated and indeed compromised when the analyzing discourse (Foucault's own) adopts, as it were, and no longer as fiction at all but as the very truth it is declaring, just that particular Platonic configuration. (44)

The aforementioned "ontology of veridiction" that Foucault both describes and endorses has to do with Plato's way of speaking the truth about beings by way of an exclusion of rhetoric from the affairs of the dialectical philosopher who must, as Foucault's Plato solemnly does himself in his trip to counsel the tyrant Dionysios at Syracuse, "tell truth to power" in and through what Foucault initially and somewhat bizarrely describes as the "nonrhetorical rhetoric" known by the name *parrhēsia* – after which Bennington's first chapter is entitled (17, 34–35). But, as Bennington traces Foucault's two (problematic) stages according to which *parrhēsia* moves away from the public domain of Pericles's speeches to enter the private residence of Plato's sovereign, any sign of rhetoric – nonrhetorical as it always supposedly was – will be erased from Plato's (and by extension Foucault's own) counseling intervention in politics, giving rise to a relation between philosophy and rhetoric which "is resolutely one of exclusion and opposition" as Bennington paraphrases Foucault only *apparently* paraphrasing – but really affirming – Plato in turn.

The crux of Bennington's argument in this chapter thus lies in the deconstruction of "the solitary philosopher" with a "bullhorn" in hands – a direct allusion to the cover image of Foucault's *Fearless Speech*

but also an indirect jab at Žižek, Badiou and others – saying “nothing but the truth, so help me God” in a sacrificial and heroic manner: what is “sacrificed” in order for the absolutely sincere truth-telling of *parrhēsia* to arise is nothing less than rhetoric, the exclusion of which the Platonic-Foucauldian philosopher needs to have the courage to enact. Were rhetoric (with all the possibilities of deception it entails) to be an integral part of politics – as Bennington thinks it is – the Platonic-Foucauldian gesture would be a dogmatic failure of thought unresponsive to what Bennington rather poetically names “the call of reading,” the responsibility of which “is carried by the rhythms of history, time, and language, *immer schon*” (46).

#### PSEUDO-MYSTERY

Taking this *immer schon* very seriously is what allows Bennington to dive into Heidegger for the remaining five chapters of the book. The second chapter takes its departure from a curious moment in section 73 of Heidegger’s 1929–30 lecture course *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (GA 29/30: 488/337). Glossing Derrida in *The Beast and the Sovereign II*, who finds it amusing that Heidegger here should both confess to having been deceived about the subject of deception in *Being and Time* and try immediately after to exculpate himself by citing only the places in *Being and Time* where he was *not* a victim of that deception (about deception), Bennington pursues the motif of deception in relation to *logos* (and by extension to rhetoric and politics) in Heidegger’s writings from the 1920s and ’30s, primarily – but also in the very late 1963 “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking.” Going as far back as the 1919 *Kriegsnotsemester* course, Bennington identifies two separate, somewhat antagonistic threads running through Heidegger’s early writings. On the one hand, Heidegger stresses that any experience of the world is always already within the realm of language (and by extension of rhetoric, politics and deception) – so that Theodore Kisiel, whom Bennington quotes, should want to say that “immediate experience [...] is already textured like a language”<sup>2</sup> when explaining the *es weltet* passage from

the 1919 course. But on the other hand, Bennington argues, Heidegger still wants, as in section 7A of *Being and Time* for instance, to posit an “innocence [...] of mere perception, aisthesis” or “a kind of originary honesty of phenomena” prior to language and its necessary possibility of deception (58–59). As Bennington sees it, Heidegger needs to make this gesture in order to keep at bay the ruinously deceptive, rhetorical possibilities of what gives this chapter its title: *pseudos*.

Bennington tracks Heidegger’s usage of this term and finds that its proper place is housed not only in *logos* – which is not as primordial as what Heidegger calls “the simple disclosing in *aisthēsis-noein*” (ga 19: 183/125) – but more especially in *doxa*, which leads him to follow Heidegger’s retrieval of *doxa* in the 1924 *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy* course. Here, Bennington argues that Heidegger “both recognizes and to a certain extent then minimizes the importance of rhetoric” (70). As much progress as Heidegger makes by placing speaking with one another as the basis of the political, Bennington seems to find it troubling that Heidegger is so committed to denying a *technē*-status to rhetoric – “somewhat against the letter of Aristotle’s text” – which allows Heidegger to distinguish neatly between rhetoric and the *technē* of sophistry (70). Bennington’s subtle point here is that Heidegger passes over an undecidability in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* “where an internal difference is not linguistically marked” (73). This undifferentiated difference comes from Aristotle himself, who writes:

But there is a difference [between Rhetoric and Dialectic]: in Rhetoric, one who acts in accordance with sound argument and one who acts in accordance with purpose, are both called rhetoricians; but in Dialectic it is the purpose that makes the sophist, the dialectician being one whose arguments rest, not on purpose but on the faculty. (*Rhetoric* 1355b 18)<sup>5</sup>

Thus, “somewhat contra Heidegger,” Bennington explains that Aristotle does not differentiate a “good” rhetoric from a “bad” rhetoric as clearly as Heidegger (as well as Plato and Foucault with their “good”

and “bad” *parrhēsia*) would have him do. As Bennington says, “true” (dynamic) rhetoric and “bogus” (proairetic and therefore technical) rhetoric are called by the same name and thus are not in fact so easy to tell apart [...] and this uncertainty is precisely an essential part of what rhetoric is” (73). This uncertainty shows up most saliently in *doxa*, “where the equiprimordial status of truth and untruth will show up and where we might want to clarify further the relationship between *alētheia* and the *pseudos* (76).

It is at this point that Bennington turns to Heidegger’s reading of *doxa* in Plato’s *Theaetetus* in the 1931 *The Essence of Truth* course. Here, Bennington finds Heidegger giving *doxa* an ontological status – and not merely an ontic one as *Being and Time*’s doxal notion of “idle talk” – according to which *doxa*’s either-or fork (what people say is *either* true *or* false, this ambiguous and wishy-washy either-or being what makes *doxa doxa*) is now bifurcating being itself into either true being or false being. This leads Bennington to argue that *doxa* here forces Heidegger to pull what was only a derivative, secondary and epiphenomenal *pseudo*-deception of *logos* and rhetoric back to that putatively more primordial phenomenal level of *both* the disclosure of *alētheia* (*aisthēsis-noein*) and the concealment thereof (*agnoein*). Recognizing this allows Bennington first to complicate Heidegger’s distinction between a purely phenomenal “good” concealment and a merely rhetorical “bad” one and, secondly, to hollow out the “good” concealed mystery by infecting it with the “bad” one. This, Bennington argues, is a direct consequence of a *pseudos* becoming so “originary” (his quotation marks) that it makes tremble the very originary-derivative binary, allowing Bennington to see a pseudo-mystery in the mystery, a “mystery that is then no longer quite a mystery” (81).

#### A DISQUIETING DIAGRAM

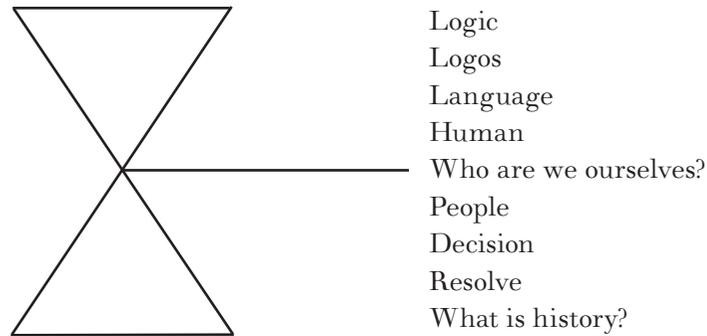
Transitioning into the third chapter, Bennington begins to relate the whole nexus of his problematic to the motifs of decision and struggle as present most saliently in Heidegger’s highly politically charged writings from the 1930s. It is rather striking to see Bennington’s development of

the problematic organically unfold towards these two motifs as if, and this is Bennington's suggestion, the undecidability of an "originary" *pseudos* in and of itself led Heidegger almost somnambulistically to speak about decision and struggle. Bennington succinctly summarizes the itinerary his argument has traversed thus far:

The motifs of struggle and decision [...] emerge from the logic that leads from a certain primacy of "rhetoric" as the hermeneutic of Dasein, via its central concept, *doxa*, and the co-originary of the truth and the *pseudos*, to a very fundamental ambiguity in the question of truth and thereby in the question of being itself. (105)

Bennington's provocative and, to my knowledge, entirely original suggestion, is thus twofold: (1) not only does *doxa* and the "originary" *pseudos* it entails have "a discreet hand in the collapse of the project of fundamental ontology itself" (69), (2) but also this co-originary of truth and untruth is the motivating source for Heidegger's *philosophical* (and not "merely" politico-partisan) obsession with the themes of decision and struggle. Carefully once more following Kisiel and his illuminating thought that formal indication, along with kairology (which Bennington has in mind perhaps when naming this chapter "*kairos*"), "will largely constitute the most essential, but largely unspoken, core of [*Being and Time*] itself,"<sup>4</sup> Bennington magisterially shows how the very concept of formal indication harbors within itself the corrosive work of *pseudos* insofar as it enjoins Dasein to wrench truth from *pseudos* by ontically and each time acting out the truth of *its* concrete existence – the ontological conditions for the possibility of which must be thus merely "indicated" by Heidegger as ontically indefinitely as possible – in what Heidegger calls the *Augenblick*, which Bennington wants to "think of as a moment of decision" (115). The only reason why Dasein – to quote Nancy's "Decision of Existence," from the Christian drift of which Bennington takes a *decisive* distance in this chapter – "must decide as to its existence, and do so always anew"<sup>5</sup> has to do with an antecedent dispersion of Dasein into public pseudo-interpretation and idle

pseudo-talk (what Bennington calls psittacism) of *das Man*, from out of which Dasein must resolutely break free so as to happen (*geschehen*) authentically as a *Mit-geschehen* of a historical people in its mission. Thus, as Bennington pursues this, it is not in fact too surprising that a deepening of the problem of *pseudos* – enacted by Heidegger’s reading of *doxa* in Plato’s *Theaetetus* in the 1931 *The Essence of Truth* course – should lead Heidegger to his fanatical (philosophical *and* political) decisionism of the mid 1930s, which becomes all the more urgent for him the more “originary” the *pseudos* becomes. Heidegger’s hourglass-type diagram (which Bennington reproduces in his book) from his 1934 *Logic as the Question Concerning the Essence of Language* course shows just how “uncomfortably close” Bennington’s “recapitulation of the argument” (as the one given above) is to Heidegger’s own graphic description of it (107):



GA 38: 97/84, tm

**THE CLEAVAGE OF BEING**

At this point we are not far from the last step of Bennington’s argument. Coming now to Heidegger’s 1936–38 *Contributions to Philosophy*, Bennington finds Heidegger conceding that “many issues not mastered

in *Being and Time*” put us in the “danger of “misinterpreting *Being and Time* in this ‘existentiell-anthropological’ direction and of seeing the connections among resoluteness, truth, and Dasein on the basis of moral resolution instead of doing the *reverse* [umgekehrt]” (GA 65: 87/69). Bennington then begins to hone in on what exactly this turn (*Kehre*) entails:

So, because of the incomplete or unfulfilled nature of *Being and Time*, it lends itself, falsely, to a false but understandable, *Täuschung*-like, existentiell-anthropological-moral reading in what it says about the decision and about *Entschlossenheit*. If we do not go in for that reading, however, and more correctly read things *umgekehrt*, the other way around, then we have to think decision on a model quite different from that of choice and shift the motif of decision away from any existentiell level and into the heart of being itself. (223)

Putting the decision on an ontological level leads Heidegger, argues Bennington, to implode the firm foundations on which the ontic decision (including Heidegger’s) was once said to rest. What is now being undermined is not merely whether this or that decision was either right or wrong, but it is “the very possibility of decision as such” that is in danger and no longer guaranteed by an *Augenblick* (229). “Decision is originally about whether there is decision or non-decision” (GA 65: 102/80), as Bennington quotes Heidegger, stressing an irreducible either-or at the very heart of the possibility of decision. Linking this *either* decision *or* non-decision to how Heidegger defines decision in section 49 of the same *Beiträge* as “the eruptive fissure [or cleavage, *Klüftung*] of being” leads Bennington then to see a continuity between the *Beiträge* and the aforementioned ontological fork of the 1931 *The Essence of Truth* course and the problem of the *pseudos* and non-being in the 1924–25 *Plato’s Sophist* course:

What ensures that decision is always an either-or (with no third possibility of “indifference”), says Heidegger,

supposedly flows from the truth of being itself, namely that it is also not-being, that it is also nothing. It will be remembered from the 1924–1925 course on Plato’s *Sophist* and the 1931 *The Essence of Truth* that just this was the outcome of Plato’s grappling with the problem of the *pseudos* and indeed of the sophist more generally: it is now because of “insight into the belonging of nothingness to being” that “the either-or receive[s] its sharpness and its origin.” This means that decision as such now has to be grasped not “morally-anthropologically” [...] “but as the erupting fissure of being itself.” This *Klüftung* cannot fail to recall the “fork” from the end of the 1931 *Essence of Truth* course. (233)

Thus, Bennington seems to have found an internal logic of *pseudos* in Heidegger – dating as early as 1924, if not before – that foreshadows the explicit *Kehre*-break shortly following the political debacle of 1933–34. Any purity of an *Augenblick* is thus breached from within by the *pseudos* contaminating, always already, the *Augenblick* of decision (including and especially Heidegger’s own) with a necessarily possible blindness, madness, foolishness, stupidity, the *grösste Dummheit*, as Heidegger himself characterized his own involvement with National Socialism after the war. Bennington’s philosophically sound suggestion is that Heidegger’s own blindness to this blindness constitutive of even the most resolute and authentic decision is what leads Heidegger into the *grösste Dummheit* of his own in 1933–34, if only to start “seeing” it a bit more clearly from the *Beiträge* onwards.

## NOTES

- 1 I shall each time only provide parenthetical page numbers when quoting from Bennington's *Scatter I*.
- 2 Theodore Kisiel, *The Genesis of Heidegger's "Being and Time"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 24.
- 3 Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. J. H. Freese (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 3.
- 4 Kisiel, *Genesis*, 152.
- 5 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 115/87.