In *Derrida, Responsibility and Politics*, Morag Patrick takes up again the academic imperative of speaking to Derrida’s politics. Derrida’s presence on the terrain of philosophy has left many commentators uneasy concerning how his philosophical works relate to the problems of ethics and politics. Patrick’s book enters into this debate, first by sketching out some primary interpretations and then offering her own account, largely in opposition to what has gone on before. There are even times in the book when Derrida (whose thoughts the book is designed to disclose more clearly) becomes lost in these debates.

Many commentators have labelled Derrida as a nihilist, believing that he is arguing against all forms of intelligibility, agency and justice. Deconstruction would then lead to undecidability, blindness and paralysis. It is therefore the very antithesis of politics. But, according to Patrick, Derrida’s deconstructive strategies have the opposite goal, which is to open up opportunities of thought and alternative futures by attacking the givenness of dominant ways of understanding ethics, politics, and the world.

Patrick’s account stresses the concept of text in Derrida’s writings. Text here does not simply mean written words. As Patrick emphasizes, text refers to “all possible referents” (page 131). Deconstruction is thus political because it is a
transformative practice which questions “our protocols of reading” (page 19). This questioning is connected to Derrida’s general “interrogation of philosophical authority” (page 33) which considers what it means for someone to have a position (political, ethical, or otherwise).

As Patrick points out, one of the persistent themes in Derrida’s writings is his attempt to undermine the reassurances that frequently arise from our ways of understanding ourselves and of reading the world. In ethical and political discourses these reassurances take the form of justification and authority. For Derrida, what is “ultimate” must remain a secret, must remain beyond (but nonetheless assumed by) our modes of understanding (page 63).

Questioning is a crucial aspect of Derrida’s politics. According to Patrick, Derrida is highly critical of those who ask questions “hypocritically,” meaning that their very asking of the question is tied to the answers they already want to give. They do not ask questions so much as use questions to introduce their solutions. Derrida, in contrast, encourages an openness to questioning. As Patrick writes, “for Derrida the project of overcoming or incorporating metaphysics must be repeated indefinitely” (page 51). There is no already existing end to questioning.

Patrick places Derrida’s politics and ethics closest to the work of Levinas. For Levinas, it is from our regard for the other that we create a moral order in which responsibility makes sense. According to Patrick, however, Derrida criticizes Levinas for presupposing the very thing that this relationship creates, which is that the other is also a human being (page 101). Derrida, on the other hand, questions the givenness of this other as a particular kind of other. According to Patrick, therefore, Derrida is engaged in rethinking the nature of responsibility in a way that “can no longer be reduced to that which is assumed by the autonomous moral agent” (page 105). While decentering the human subject as the sole moral agent has lead some
deconstructionists to expand the moral terrain, Patrick does not do so. The moral
terrain remains a human terrain.

Undecidability is another central concept for Patrick’s understanding of
Derrida’s political strategies. Undecidability does not mean people cannot make
decisions. Instead, undecidability refers to the inability of any system of justifications
to justify itself. One implication that Patrick draws for politics, is that people ought
to relate to each other differently, specifically because “inventiveness of a
deconstructive writing aspires to make itself responsive and open to the other”
(page 138).

This undecidability not only grounds a deconstructionist version of
toleration, it also grounds human freedom. According to Patrick, “the instant of the
decision” secures responsibility while at the same time removing the decision itself
from the closed systems of knowledge. With the freedom arising from human
decisions and the uncertainty of our knowledge, the future becomes the crucial site
of transformative politics. It is here that readers ought to look for Derrida’s politics.

At the end of the book, the reader may be left wondering whether Derrida is
offering a somewhat obscured variant of an existential politics. Unfortunately, after
offering her account of Derrida’s politics, Patrick does not step back to reflect on her
own conclusions or possible criticisms of those conclusions from other readers. The
book ends once Derrida has been saved from his critics and a way out has been
created. Perhaps this ending is sufficient insofar as many commentators simply
reject him, often for very poor reasons. However, while the book establishes that
Derrida’s writings have a political significance, the discussion of their importance is
barely begun. Given Derrida’s place in contemporary philosophical debates, the
implications of his writings for political and ethical concerns are clearly important.

*Derrida, Responsibility and Politics* is far from the final answer to these concerns.