All the contributors to this remarkable volume converge in the thought that Derrida’s thinking is fundamentally queer.¹ The very queerness of queer, the energy that on almost every page here has the adjective go verbal, the queering of queer in what Calvin Thomas calls “queerance” rather than “queerness,” is irresistibly brought up and brought on by the thought of the trace and of différance.² Différance just is queer, just is queering. And just as différance is nothing, no thing at all, but an indefinite process with no possible end or determinate product, the perpetual differing and deferring of any thing or outcome whatsoever, so queering queers and will queer again, endlessly. This almost limpid thought that affirms queer as the very différance of différance can give an almost jubilant tone to some of the essays here: it’s almost too good to be true, as though we could finally wake up from the ongoing nightmare of staightlined, straightlaced repressive orthopedic normalizing heteronormativity and greet, as the new dawn heralded by Jacques Derrida, the prospect of the neverending ongoing queering of queer.

This is itself a queer thing to think, but it is certainly not simply false, not just a false dawn. Derrida himself comes fairly close to affirming it himself in an essay on J. Hillis Miller entitled

¹ [Note: Bennington’s postface was written in 2010 and refers to an earlier version of this volume, which has been slightly altered. —Ed.]
“Justices,” quoted from here by Nicholas Royle. Though elliptical, a passage from this essay provides all the materials we might need to confirm the “limpid thought” that sees différance as very queer. Almost like a fable, this passage provides a highly condensed version of deconstructive thinking, from the disruption of ontology to the prospect of an ethics, to justice itself, the whole fantastic story finally appearing explicitly under the sign of queer. “To be is to be queer,” says Derrida, glossing Miller’s Hopkins, no less, like another slogan to add to the deconstructive t-shirt, the best slogan, perhaps, the most in-your-face, superseding previous favorites such as “Infinite différance is finite,” “There is nothing outside the text,” “To be is to inherit,” and even “In the beginning was the telephone.” “To be is to be queer” would then be the slogan of all deconstructive slogans, capitalizing all deconstructive energy in its splendid pithyness, sheer queer, just queer.

Here’s some context for that potential slogan. Derrida is following Miller looking at Hopkins’s notions of, among others, “inscape” and “selftaste.” These lead to a thought of a singularity that is in a certain sense unspeakable, unpresentable in language (just because it is singular):

Each unique and irreplaceable time, a singularity exceeds the generality of the language. It thus overflows the language. The singular says itself, but it says itself as “unspeakable.” What is strange and “queer” here is that all this comes down to an experience and, in Hopkins own words, to a sort of theory of the queer, if not to the impossible uncanniness of a “queer theory.” (J 238)

I’ll return in a moment to the “impossible uncanniness of a ‘queer theory,’” and also pursue this quotation into its immediately following moment, where “queer” will be linked (by Hopkins) to vice. Let’s stick for the moment to this more “ontological” or even

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“onto-theological” moment, to which Derrida returns just a little later in the piece. In the case of Hopkins, the singularity that is being spoken as unspeakable in terms of “inscape” or “selftaste” is drawn in part from Duns Scotus’s notion of *haecceitas*, and the concomitant thought of the “univocity of being”: that doctrine states that God “is” in the same sense that we “are,” and Derrida goes on to develop this in the direction of a kind of singular solitude of God:

It is thus that Hopkins describes at the same time his solitude and the unspeakable singularity of this selftaste on the basis of which all the same he speaks, addresses himself to another, and gives to be shared just that, the unshareable of his own taste. This radical solitude, the isolation or the insularity he analyzes belongs to the tradition of the *ultima solitudo* of Duns Scotus. […] [This question] is borne by this doctrine of the univocity of being according to which the word being has the same sense for God and for his creatures. God is God, therefore God is alone, alone in being God, and he is alone as we are alone, and each time the word *being*, the copula *to be* in “he is alone” and “we are alone,” has the same sense. Being is there univocal, and that is why, by analogy, we understand the solitude of God; he is alone like us, which pains us very much, and that is why we love him. We do not love him (this is at least the hypothesis I am risking for the fun of it) because he is a sovereign and all powerful father, generous and formidable, giving and forgiving. We love him because he is alone, the poor fellow, the loneliest of all beings, and thus as vulnerable, in his divinity, as an abandoned child. This is not necessarily Christian thinking, as you might well suspect, even if it could become so, for example, for a Catholic like Hopkins, although it is not exactly his argument or his language here. This solitude of the unique, at once ineffable, abandoned, and vulnerable, mute as a child, is also what we imagine with regard to all those we love, friends and lovers. It is here that arises the “queer,” the properly onto-theological dimension of which I will specify in a moment, but also perhaps its excess, in prayer, over onto-theology. (J 238-9)”

“Queer”, then, is singular, a kind of absolute singular that is both
the ground for an ontology and for its undoing, and leads directly to our slogan:

One could demonstrate, although I won’t have the time to do so here, that this doctrine of the univocity of being is the ultimate origin and the very experience of absolute solitude that we were speaking of a moment ago. It is the origin of what is queer in the inscape but also in being. To be is to be queer. (J 290)

To be is to be queer because to be is to be singular: which then pushes “queer” beyond or outside of “being” itself, beyond the copula if not exactly beyond copulation. If to be is to be queer, then being “itself” is queer, “is” already queer, being as being-queer queers its own pitch as being, being queers being in an oddness, singularity, queerness without “-ness,” just queer.

Whence what Derrida earlier refers to as “the impossible uncanniness of a queer theory”: if queer has to do with singularity, and a singularity before or beyond being, then queer cannot really be the object of a theory strictly speaking. Queer theory queers theory, renders it uncanny, just by “being” queer. And this too leads to the thought that if queer does not give rise to theory, maybe we do better to look in the direction of ethics to think queer. Nothing would be a more common move today, in the wake of an often cursory reading of Lévinas, than to think that a kind of collapse or failing of ontology should open a dimension it is extraordinarily tempting to call “ethical.” And it is certainly not by chance that Derrida’s whole essay on Hillis Miller should be written under the title “Justices.” The thought would be that the same queer singularity that undoes ontology and renders theory impossible opens at least the possibility of justice.

In Hopkins, this sequence involves a move from an intrinsic virtue of singularity to its intrinsic becoming-vice. As quoted by Derrida quoting Miller, Hopkins says, “Now, it is the virtue of design, pattern, or inscape to be distinctive and it is the vice of distinctiveness to become queer. This vice I cannot have escaped” (quoted J 238). Singularity (here as inscape) “is” distinctive: let’s say differential. Différance opens the field of singularity. But singularity is intrinsically singular, odd, queer. There seems to be a seamless
transition between the distinctive and the queer, an inevitability that Hopkins figures as vice, a becoming-vice of virtue or a falling of virtue into vice. Let’s say (this is not in fact quite how Derrida puts it in “Justices”), following the lead of Éamonn Dunne’s essay here, that the “virtue” of singularity (distinctiveness) becomes perverted, or perverts itself into the “queer.” This principle of perversion, which drives Hopkins to think of a virtue turning vicious, becoming a vice, flows directly from the logic of queering. And this same principle, under the name of an essential pervertibility, is a fundamental operator of what in deconstruction comes to occupy the place traditionally known in philosophy as “ethics.” That this flows directly from the kind of failing or ruin of onto-theology that is named by différance is not difficult to see, in that this principle of pervertibility is really a kind of extension of the deconstructive operator most familiar from “Signature Event Context” or “The Purveyor of Truth” as “necessary-possibility-that-not.” For a letter to be able to arrive at its destination, it must, necessarily, be possible for it not to arrive; for a speech-act in general to have a chance of being “felicitous,” it must, necessarily, be possible for it to misfire. And, in a famous further step, this “necessarily-possibly-not” continues to affect (“torment with a kind of inner drift”) even the most apparently successful cases of letters arriving or speech acts being felicitous. As is pretty well understood now, I think, this inclusion of “possibly-not” in “necessary” inserts the contingent into the transcendental such that conditions of possibility are transformed into being simultaneously conditions of impossibility. What is sometimes still less understood is that this necessary possibility of failure is being affirmed as a positive condition for the possibility of any imaginable success.

The “ethical-and-political” consequences of this are immense, and consist in precisely the logic of pervertibility I was just mentioning, and that still requires of us, I think, a good deal of reflection. Here, for example, is how Derrida lays it out in Adieu

à Emmanuel Lévinas:

In the deployment of justice, one can no longer discern between fidelity to one’s word and the perjury of false witness, and before that between one betrayal and another betrayal, always more than one betrayal. One would then need, with all required analytic prudence, to respect the quality, modality and situation of failures in this sworn faith, this “original word of honor” before all oaths. But these differences would never erase the trace of this originary perjury. […] The agency that opens both ethics and justice is here in a situation of quasi-transcendental originary—even pre-originary—perjury. One could call it ontological given that it welds the ethical to everything that exceeds and betrays it (ontology, precisely, synchrony, totality, the State, the political, etc.). One might even see in it an irrepressible evil or a radical perversion, were it not for the fact that ill will can initially be absent from it and that its possibility, at least the haunting of its possibility, if some pervertibility were not also the condition of the Good, of Justice, of Love, of Faith, etc. And of perfectibility.

This spectral “possibility” is not, however, the abstraction of a liminary pervertibility. It would, rather, be the impossibility of controlling, deciding, determining a limit, the impossibility of situating, so as to settle oneself on it—of situating by criteria, norms and rules, the threshold that separates pervertibility from perversion.

This impossibility is necessary [il la faut]. This threshold must not be at the disposal of a general knowledge or a rule-bound technique. It must exceed every rule-bound procedure in order to open itself to the very thing that always runs the risk of becoming perverted (the Good, Justice, Love, Faith,—and perfectibility, etc.). This is necessary, we must have this possible hospitality to the worst for good hospitality to have its chance, the chance of letting the other arrive, the yes of the other no less than the yes to the other.7

The sequence seems clear, then, from the queering of any discourse of Being by *différance*, to the ensuing necessary-possibility-of-not, and the affirmation of that principle as the positive condition of the ethical as such. Justice just is queer; or at least: there is no chance of justice without what we are here calling queering.

At which point, we might be tempted to stop and say, agreeing with all the papers in this volume: QED. Case closed. Not only is there some more or less tangential or fragile link between Derrida and queer theory; in fact Derrida lays out the logic of queer, beyond any “impossible” theory, so powerfully that queer is, as it were, maximally queered. Whence, as I mentioned, a certain jubilant tone in some of these essays: as Calvin Thomas is kind enough deliberately to misquote me as saying: deconstruction is the queerest of discourses imaginable.

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All of which is true and important, but leaves out the extent to which this is also all about sex. Queering in the radical sense I have been laying out so far, one might suspect, might always be subtly re-straightening the queer in the very gesture of supposedly queering it: nothing to complain about if “queer” turns out to be the very (im)possibility of Justice, no less, the thought would go, we’ll take that, but we might still want our queer to be queering what it was out to queer in the first place, namely, a specific “heteronormative” discourse about sex and sexuality. In fact, as many of these essays document at some length, there is plenty of queering in this sense too in Derrida’s texts, from the Genet column of *Glas*, through the “Envois” of *The Post Card*, to “Circumfession.” Indeed, as is at least implicit in more than one essay here, the very “definition” of *différance* is implicated just here, as differing from (as queering, then) the philosophical way with difference summed up by Hegel in the greater *Logic*, in a passage picked out by Derrida as crucial in

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**Positions**, but read in detail only in *Glas* in precisely the context of the deconstruction of a sexual difference construed in dialectical terms. The deconstruction of sexual difference is, as it were, the test case for establishing that *différance* is thinkable, and resists all dialectical resolution. The deconstructive refusal of *metaphysical* “homosexuality” (i.e. the determination of sexual difference as necessarily oppositional, therefore contradictory and therefore sublatable) in the name of the pluralizing scatter of queer *différance*, is an absolute crux of the deconstruction of phallogocentrism, and communicates, always differentially of course, with the generalized queering we have been describing, and that the contributors to this volume bring out so well.

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“The impossible uncanniness of a queer theory” might still give us some pause, however, and does indeed sit a little uneasily across some of the essays in this volume. For even allowing the importance of the moment of sexual difference in the general shape of the argument, and its extension into species difference also interestingly explored in more than one of these essays, the formally triumphant quasi-transcendental arguments laid out here, however irrefutable they appear (and remain: no remotely convincing philosophical critique of Derrida has yet been advanced), still of course resolve nothing at all. The very singularity that is the basis for the queer form of this argument in fact guarantees that this lack of resolution, this sense of unfinished business, will remain the case, and just is part and parcel of its queerness. Just this is what leads Derrida, in the long quotation I gave from the Lévinas essay, to suggest that, as well as the general “pervertibility” argument, there was a specific undecidability between pervertibility and perversion that is part of the logic of pervertibility itself. Pervertibility as a positive general condition of ethics or politics, as the chance of Good or of Justice, prescribes *nothing* as to the specific cases in which one must judge as

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to the relation between that pervertibility and this situation where specific perversion may be welcomed or condemned. Saying that pervertibility is the chance of the Good does not mean that any given instance of pervertibility at work is good: saying that Justice depends on an originary perjury does not mean that specific acts of perjury are to be welcomed, and in fact puts much greater pressure than any philosophical ethics ever could on a singular responsibility for the truth. In a still more general way, saying (as Derrida does in “Faith and Knowledge,” for example) that without the possibility of radical evil there would be no possibility of the good does not of course amount to saying that radically evil acts are good. The singular case in its singularity may rely on those necessary possibilities, but in its singularity lays claim to our judgment each time, in the moment of decision that entails undecidability and is famously, after Kierkegaard, a moment of madness, a moment that no theory of the subject could ever take into account (see Politics of Friendship). It is because of that queer insistence on the persistence of the singular that any such (ethical-and-political) questions appear to have a history, for example, and are not simply absorbed into some transcendental realm. This historicity is of course made possible by the same quasi-transcendental logic we have been following, which maintains the historicity of that historicity by positing the singularity of its own cases as never entirely subsumable under the generality the logic also provides. The singular cases thus posited, we might say, are never quite just cases of the logic that opens the space, as it were, in which they can appear in their odd—queer—singularity. It is, I imagine, because of the residual but essential singularity of these cases that deconstruction also has regularly given rise to an anxiety as to its ethical or political credentials, or as to its reliability in guiding us to the appropriate judgments in ethical and political matters. This is why, we might assume, the triumphant affirmation of the queerness or queerance of

Derrida’s thought in these essays is also doubled by a certain anxiety that, quite properly (one might be tempted to say) haunts the potential euphoria of the endless queering of queer and provokes the need not just to identify cases and experience the queer undecidability of judgment in those cases, but to imagine that one’s responsibility to those cases might be better served by arranging them in some historical dimension or other. And just this would be the motivation for the need to confront the deconstructive account of queer with authoritative figures in the field whose credentials seem so impeccable—here most notably Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, and more or less anxiously or wishfully seek some ground of reconciliation with those figures. If only the quasi-transcendental rigor of Derrida’s thinking could be brought together with Foucault’s historicism, and especially with the mesmerically attractive notions of modernity and biopower, so the thought goes, then all would be for the best in the best of all realms of queer. This is not the place to show in detail why this dream cannot be fulfilled, although a re-read of “Cogito and the History of Madness,” “To do Justice to Freud,” and The Beast and the Sovereign is a salutary reminder of all the problems this would involve.  

As a form of shorthand for why Derrida will never be squared with Foucault (or Butler, whose rather extraordinary [mis-]treatment of Derrida’s Glas is here brought out so clearly and politely by Martin McQuillan), let us just say this in conclusion: text is not discourse. (This is in fact just another way of saying: to be is to be queer.) Once text is not discourse, then (this is the lesson of the end of the “Cogito…” piece) the possibility of reading becomes unavoidable, and reading plays mad havoc with all historicism (which is why Foucault has in fact nothing at all to say about it).


13. [See Martin McQuillan, “Practical Deconstruction’: A Note on Some Notes by Judith Butler,” in this volume. —Ed.]
This does not mean there is no reason to “do” something like history, but it does suggest that it would be incumbent on that history not to close off the very dimension of its own possibility that deconstruction brings out. And once text is not discourse, then at some point the performative dimension of discourse is exceeded by the coming of singularities the queerness of which is just that they cannot be performed, and entail a kind of radical passivity that makes all activism possible. The consequences of this, for so-called “identities” of all sorts, are, as they say, yet to come, perhaps the to-come “itself.” The thought of that to-come flows directly from the thought of différance, and is the queering of time itself. The future is queer.