

Deconstructing Derrida: Review of "Structure, Sign and Discourse in the Human Sciences"

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The first impulse a reader is likely to have upon starting to read chapter 10 is to close the book in dismay and disgust. The sentences appear to become increasingly entangled, to lead nowhere, and ultimately to add up to nothing. However, Derrida's spectacular success in the academic world requires an explanation. A philosophic detection of Derrida's text must assume that words have meaning and that he has a purpose in mind, as much as he attempts to camouflage it. (My own comments are presented as questions or are in parenthesis.)

Derrida sets up the scene for this text right away in the quote from Montaigne: "We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things" (278). His focus is directed inward, at the workings of our minds, away from the objects our minds are supposed to interpret. The need for an interpretation of interpretation implies a paradox, because the "higher" interpretation also needs to be interpreted by an even "higher" interpretation that also needs to be interpreted, and so on to infinity. The quote already prepares the reader for a self-conscious, torturously abstract reading.

DECONSTRUCTING STRUCTURE AND SIGN TO MAKE ROOM FOR PLAY

Derrida begins his text with a reference to a recent event in the history of the concept of structure, but immediately retreats to question the use of the word "event." He is concerned that the word "event" is too loaded with meaning. Why is this a problem? Because the function of thinking about structure is to reduce the notion of events. Why is it so? Because thinking about structure must be abstract and exclude concretes such as events. Still, Derrida wants to report on something that happened, which is relevant to the concept of structure, so he allows the event to be admitted into the discussion, provided it is enclosed in quotation marks, as a word and not an actual event. The event is now identified as that of "rupture" and "redoubling." Of what? The reader will not find out until the end of the essay: "The appearance of a new structure, of an original system, always comes about--and this is the very condition of its structural specificity--by a rupture with its past, its origin, and its cause" (290). Then this is what has recently happened in the history of the concept of structure: a nascent structure is struggling to be born out of the old one, and it collides with the old structure--its origin and cause. The reader, however, is still in the beginning of the essay and has no clue what the rupture is about.

Back in the beginning of the essay, Derrida proceeds to talk about the center of a structure, which controls the structure by orienting and organizing it. Derrida admits that an unorganized structure is unconceivable and that a structure without a center is unthinkable, but he contends that the center delimits and diminishes the possible play within the structure. Play, then, is whatever goes against the organization and coherence of the structure. Derrida now points out the paradox that the center of the structure must be both inside and outside the structure. It must be a part of the structure, but also independent of it, in order to control it. Derrida appears to delight in refuting the Law of Identity. He exclaims that since the center is both inside and outside the structure, “the center is not the center” (279). Nevertheless, he continues to write about the center, confident that it can exist and function while not being itself. So much for Aristotle in Derrida’s esteem.

Next Derrida surveys the entire history of the concept of structure, up to the recent, still-mysterious, rupture, as a series of substituting one center for another. Never was there a structure without a center, full of nothing but play. What types of centers were there so far? Derrida names a few: essence, existence, substance, subject, consciousness, God, man. The structure, then, is not just any structure, but a structure of concepts, that is, philosophy, with one central concept that controls it. According to Derrida, the event of the rupture occurred when there was a disruption in the series of substituting one center for another. (In plain English, there was a disruption in the process of changing the central concept of the prevalent philosophy.) This disruption occurred when the very idea of the structurality of the structure became the subject of somebody’s thought. (Somebody, probably a philosopher, was rethinking the very notion of the center and then there was no new center to substitute the old one.) However, according to Derrida, a center cannot substitute itself, it cannot be repeated. The old center could not stay and there was no new one. Then, for the first time in the history of structure, “it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center.” Instead, “an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play” (280). In the absence of a center, play finally had its chance. What does play consist of? Derrida describes how, once there was no center, language invaded the scene and everything became discourse. (Instead of a structure of concepts, philosophy, there was only a collection of signs, language.) The signified became indistinguishable from the signifier, and the play became “a play of signification.” Signs, that is, words, could have any meaning, in a boundless, infinite play.

In a half-hearted admission of historical events, Derrida points out several individuals who contributed to the historical elimination of the center (who must have been the ones to rethink the notion of the center.) Nietzsche’s critique of the concepts of “being” and “truth”; Freud’s critique of self-presence, consciousness, self-identity, and the subject himself; and finally, Heidegger’s radical destruction of metaphysics. Still, Derrida stops short of embracing Nihilism. He admits that it is impossible to destroy a concept without using it. It is impossible to pronounce a proposition without using the form, the logic, and the postulations of what it attempts to contest. He points

out that signs must signify something. Once the signified is eliminated, the very notion of signs must be rejected as well. The endless, boundless play is over.

Why is Derrida concerned about saving the distinction between the sign and what it signifies? Because “we cannot do without the concept of the sign, for we cannot give up this metaphysical complicity without also giving up the critique we are directing against this complicity” (281). Like Prometheus, who was not allowed to die so that the eagle could keep eating his liver, the sign has to be kept in existence in order to keep being critiqued. The ugly face of Deconstruction finally shows itself. Derrida is characteristically blunt about the paradox that the metaphysical reduction of the sign needs what it is reducing. He goes further to say that Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger could destroy each other only because they worked within an inherited system of metaphysics. They inherited enough of what to destroy.

INCEST, MYTH, AND MUSIC IN THE DISCOURSE OF THE HUMAN SCIENCES

At this point, Derrida asks: “What is the relevance of this formal scheme when we turn to what are called the ‘human sciences’?” (282) (Indeed, how can philosophy and language be relevant to the human sciences once they are deconstructed?) Derrida brings up ethnology as the human science that can benefit from his discussion in part one. He draws out a parallel between the history of ethnology and the history of the concept of structure. Ethnology emerged as a science when European culture lost its ethnocentric notion of itself--when the central idea in Western culture, ethnocentrism, lost its control over Western culture. The critique of European ethnocentrism coincided with the destruction of the inherited metaphysics by Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger. Ethnology is caught up in a similar paradox as the metaphysics of deconstruction. It depends on that which it seeks to destroy. It originated in Europe and uses European concepts, but it attempts to destroy the notion of European ethnocentrism. There is no escaping the paradox: “The ethnologist accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he denounces them” (282). This deterministic conclusion should be sufficient to invalidate ethnology as a science, but Derrida defies this paradox and continues to write about ethnology.

At this point Derrida brings up the opposition between nature and culture, which is an ancient philosophical issue. He uses the ethnological writings of Claude Levi-Strauss as an example of the study of this opposition. Levi-Strauss discovered a scandalous paradox inherent in the nature/culture opposition. The taboo on incest, as Levi-Strauss observed, was both natural and cultural: It was a universal taboo, not particular to a specific culture, but still a part of each culture. The problem, obviously, is not with the taboo on incest, but with Levi-Strauss’s interpretation of its universality as “natural.” As Will Thomas observed in [his essay](#), the natural and the universal are not synonymous. Still, Derrida uses this “paradox” in order to commend Levi-Strauss for continuing to use the nature/culture opposition in his ethnological studies while criticizing its inherent paradox. This is an example of deconstruction, which must

continue to use what it is deconstructing. The “scandal” of this paradox is like a storm in a teacup, but it is sufficient for Derrida to require that the nature/culture opposition be questioned. Derrida proceeds to claim that once the opposition between nature and culture is questioned, there is no way to separate nature and culture, and they become indistinguishable. Another successful deconstruction has taken place. At this point, Derrida proceeds to search for the origin, or originator, of language. In a conglomeration of linguistic musings, he hypothesizes that if there was such an originator, he must be a myth, because he would be “the absolute origin of his own discourse and supposedly would construct it ‘out of nothing’” (285). However, Derrida admitted before that signs could not exist independently of what they signify. The logical conclusion would be that language did not come into existence out of nothing, but was preceded by the concepts it was about to name. In Objectivist terms, man developed a conceptual capacity before he developed language. Nevertheless, Derrida continues to use Levi-Strauss’s writings to explain that language was preceded and created by mythology. He describes mythology as a structure with no center, that is, no origin or cause. But wasn’t “center” defined before as an overruling concept, which mythology certainly has? In an application of the deconstructing play, the meaning of the word “center” has shifted to “origin.” The origin of mythology is indeed unknown, which qualifies it as a center-less structure. Similarly, the musical works of the archaic societies studied by Levi-Strauss have no known composers, so music qualifies as a center-less structure as well. In another shift of the meaning of “origin,” Derrida quotes Levi-Strauss’s claim that the audience of a musical performance is like “a silent performer,” so the origin of the music is indeterminate. It is in the conductor, the performers, and the audience, everywhere and nowhere. The reader may think that mythology and music still have an overruling concept, they have a meaning, but once they are defined as center-less, their meaning is doomed to be deconstructed as well: “Music and mythology bring man face to face with potential objects of which only the shadows are actualized” (287).

After stating that the mythological discourse has no center, Derrida leaps to the conclusion that the philosophical or epistemological requirements of a center appear as no more than a historical illusion. Philosophy never had a real center, only an illusionary one, because it depends on language, which depends on mythology, which never had a center. Again, Derrida recoils from the inevitable Nihilism of this conclusion. He prefers to leave open the question of the relationship between philosophy and mythology, so that philosophy may still have a center. He acknowledges that the possibility that philosophy never had a center is a problem that cannot be dismissed, because it may become a fault within the philosophical realm. Such a fault, however, is a species of Empiricism, a doctrine that Derrida obviously holds in great disregard. Derrida is concerned that Empiricism is a menace to the discourse he attempts to formulate here. (No doubt, Empiricism is like the child in the story “The Emperor’s New Clothes” who exclaims that the Emperor is naked—that Derrida’s discourse has no basis in reality.) Derrida wants to save philosophy for the same purpose he wanted to save the sign: for endless deconstruction. He stresses that it is impossible to actually turn the page on philosophy. Even “transphilosophical” concepts that attempt to go beyond philosophy can only amount to reading

philosophers in a certain way. There is nothing to be studied beyond philosophy. (And there will be nothing left to study once philosophy is completely deconstructed.)

Derrida proceeds to deconstruct Empiricism, the one philosophy he will not miss. He attempts to invalidate the Empiricist critique of Levi-Strauss's ethnological theories. Levi-Strauss was criticized for not conducting an exhaustive inventory of South American myths before proceeding to write about South American mythology. He defended himself by claiming that a linguist can decipher a grammar from only a few sentences and does not need to collect all the sentences of a language. Derrida obviously agrees with him. However, grammar and mythology are not analogous. Each myth is unique and can add more to the study of mythology, whereas all the sentences in a language use the same grammar, so only a sample of sentences is needed for the study of grammar. However, this is empirical evidence, which Derrida disregards. He uses Levi-Strauss's example of the study of grammar to prove that "totalization" is both useless and impossible. It is useless and impossible to encompass the totality of language in order to study its grammar. In the absence of totalization, what emerges is "nontotalization," which is again defined as "play." This time, it is language, not structure that loses its coherence to "play." However, the play remains the same: words can now have any meaning.

THE EVENT OF THE RUPTURE

Finally, after some more linguistic musings, the event of rupture which was introduced in the beginning of the essay is defined: "The appearance of a new structure, of an original system, always comes about--and this is the very condition of its structural specificity--by a rupture with its past, its origin, and its cause" (291). Derrida is still uncomfortable with the notion of historical events, because "the internal originality of the structure, compels a neutralization of time and history" (291). The nascent structure must be independent of the event of rupture that brought it about. One must "set aside all the facts" in order "to recapture the specificity of a structure" (292). The new structure, i.e., new philosophy, must be purely abstract and free of the concrete realm. Events must be set aside too, but Derrida would have had no reason to write his essay if there never was an event of rupture in the history of the concept of structure.

In the conclusion of his essay, Derrida observes that there are two ways to interpret structure, sign, and play. One seeks to decipher a truth or an origin, and avoids play. The other affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism. The first way was dominant throughout human history. The second way is only emerging now. What is there for man beyond man and humanism? Derrida contends that presently we are only catching a glimpse of what he means, which is still "unnamable," "formless," "nonspecies." Nevertheless, he concludes his essay with an affirmation of play. Play must supersede the alternatives of presence and absence. There is no need to be concerned with the absence of a center, or of origin. Levi-Strauss, in his study of archaic societies, brought play to light, but he still yearned for an ethic of presence, an ethic of nostalgia for origins. Rousseau also exhibited sadness, negativity, nostalgia, and guilt about the lost or impossible origin. Only Nietzsche could interpret the

absence of a center as the presence of a non-center, rather than be concerned with the loss of the center. Only Nietzsche could affirm a world of play, “a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin” (292). Derrida leaves no doubt as to his position when he indicates that Nietzsche pointed the way. He reproaches those who cannot face the inevitable birth of the world of play. Play is possible, if only we can forego our need for truth. If only we can forego our terror of the monstrosity that emerges as the new center-less, formless structure makes its appearance. It is possible, then, to have a philosophy without concepts, without orientation, and without coherence. It is possible to keep deconstructing philosophy, language, or anything and still be safe in the world of play.