

2015

Derrida's Objection To The Metaphysical Tradition

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Recommended Citation

Wheat, Christopher A., "Derrida's Objection To The Metaphysical Tradition" (2015). *CMC Senior Theses*. Paper 1188.
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Claremont McKenna College

Derrida's Objection to the Metaphysical Tradition

Submitted to

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And

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By

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For

Senior Thesis

Spring 2015

4/27/15

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Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Professor Kreines for his generous assistance in my thesis and initial research of deconstruction, and for helping to nurture my interest in philosophy over the course of my college career. I would also like to thank Professor Rajczi, Professor Schroeder, Professor Kind, Professor Kincaid, and Professor Gaitskill. In addition to my professors, my friends and family have supported and influenced me in ways I could never begin to repay them for, and hope that this thesis is only a small reflection of what they have taught me.

Abstract

Derrida's deconstruction of the philosophic tradition shows us not only the importance of pursuit of knowledge, but also the importance of questioning the assumptions on which such a pursuit is based. He argues that the metaphysical tradition is built from the privileging of the logos (speech, thought, and logic,) over it's opposite, and while Derrida does not object to the societal results of such a privileging, he questions why we allow ourselves to make such an assumption in the investigation of the origin event, and in the nature of reality.

I chose to study deconstruction because through the course of my studies at Claremont I found myself raising similar objections to the philosophic tradition, and have a great interest in the arts and culture resulting from deconstructionist philosophy. Through my study I've learned to better examine not only the reasons for my own interest in philosophy and the arts, but the importance (or un-importance) of such a pursuit. I believe Derrida's work could be important in teaching us the absurdity of sacred pursuit, and the importance of finding said sacredness in everything.

Introduction:

Jacque Derrida's work on deconstruction brings into question the legitimacy of the tradition of western metaphysics. He argues that the metaphysical tradition is rooted in logic, speech, and thought, or what he defines as the "logocentric tradition." The metaphysical tradition he argues, privileges these logocentric ideas above their opposites, and from such thinking it both unnecessarily creates dualistic oppositions, for example, separations between true and false, male and female, or presence and absence, and then privileges one of these two new oppositions above the other.

Derrida attempts to prove that not only is it absurd to attempt to privilege one of these two oppositions (in the case of metaphysics, most often the privileging of presence over absence,) but also that the logocentric attempts to meaningfully define such terms, absence and presence, being and non-being, or meaning and non-meaning, are equally absurd. Because the western philosophic tradition has constructed this kind of logocentric structure, he claims it is forced to define two terms individually, instead of seeing that they are inherently interdependent. I will examine whether Derrida successfully deconstructs the concept of the metaphysical tradition, and, if so, what ramifications his objection has for the continuation of philosophy outside such a tradition.

I will denote oppositions with a strike through as represented in *Of Grammatology* by Heidegger and Derrida, for example, "Being" and "~~Being~~," as opposed to "Being," and "Non-Being." While it is impossible to operate outside the logocentric tradition even in deconstruction, this kind of notation shows the

acknowledgement of the biases of such a system, and reminds us of the perennial self-questioning that must accompany the self-privileging inherent to the philosophic tradition. Derrida says of Heidegger's representation:

“Heidegger crosses out the word “Being,” and lets both deletion and word stand. It is inaccurate to use the word “Being,” here, for the differentiation of a “concept” of Being has already slipped away from the precomprehended question of Being. Yet it is necessary to use the word, since language cannot do more.¹

The repeated use of such a concept does not then reflect a deconstructive view alone, but is rather a borrowed concept meant only to show *différance*. Despite this attempt, Derrida recognizes that even Heidegger, and his own attempts, still must be represented linguistically, and thus within the same system.

The Metaphysical Tradition:

Before objecting to the idea of metaphysical progress, Derrida first must define the metaphysical and western philosophical tradition to which he objects, from the logocentric roots of Aristotle and Plato to modernism.

However, before even situating the history of the metaphysical tradition, Derrida must first trace the origins and importance of certain terms within metaphysics that he believes have been wrongly used throughout the history of western philosophy.

¹ Jacques Derrida *Of Grammatology* xv

² Grenz, Stanley *A Primer on Postmodernism* 141

Différance:

“Différance” is Derrida’s way of objecting to or breaking from the structure of the phonetic system. Rather than use the singular meaning of difference, “différance” comes from the French word “différer,” and encompasses both “to differ,” and “to break from,” allowing Derrida to cross between phonetic/linguistic and metaphysical arguments without requiring a new terminology. (Spivak *Of Grammatology* xliii)

Logocentrism:

Derrida believes that the foundation of western language, and of the western philosophical tradition is what he refers to as “logocentric” or the privileging of “speech” as opposed to “writing.”² Logos he argues, comes from logic, speech, and thought, and he traces the importance of such a tradition from the earliest western philosophers to the modernists.

Derrida’s definition of the elevation of “speech” above “writing” originates in Heidegger’s conception of “being”. Heidegger links “being” to the continuity of consciousness through time. He situates speech as consciousness expressed in a single (immediate) point in time, as opposed to writing, which is meant to express continued consciousness over multiple points. Logocentrism as Derrida defines it privileges the

² Grenz, Stanley *A Primer on Postmodernism* 141

search for consciousness within a single point in time, referred to as “presence,” as opposed to consciousness across continuing points in time.³

The logos creates a privileging of the transcendental signifier, “word,” “reason,” or in the theological tradition “God,” as of greater metaphysical importance than other words within the system it creates. However, Derrida will argue that any such transcendental “Word,” must necessarily lie beyond the linguistic system that it draws its name from, objecting to how the metaphysical tradition attempts to simultaneously grant it this extra-lingual power, while keeping it within such a system. This self-privileging or “question-begging,” is what Derrida argues creates the logocentric tradition.

Logocentrism in the Philosophical Tradition

Derrida argues that logocentrism has foundations as far back as Aristotle. Aristotle’s definition, “spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words,” (*De interpretatione* 1, 16a, 3) shows an early example of the subjugation of writing to the spoken word, and because of the lineage of philosophy and western language from these traditions, we might even consider the logos, or logic, the basic tenant of rational conversation and society. (Powell, 33). Derrida says of the tradition stemming from Aristotle, “All the

³ Later we will see one potential objection to this definition: writing may necessarily represent the same single period of time, as Heidegger and later Derrida will argue that we are necessarily only experiencing a single point in time at any given moment.

metaphysical determinations of truth...are more or less immediately inseparable from the instance of the logos.” (Of Grammatology 11)

Though Derrida often interchanges various words from the same roots of logos, in the case of Aristotle, “spoken words,” with either “thought” or “logic,” he does so to show that the logocentric origins of these terms are given privilege over their counterparts, (be it written words or non-logical thought,) in the history of western philosophy. In regards to the philosophic tradition, we will consider any of these words with roots in the logos to be interchangeable for the purpose of illustrating the bias of the logocentric system. A deconstruction of the phonetic division of these words would reveal that such a separation is actually only a means of concealing the self-privileging nature of this tradition, granting power from one definition to another (for example, speech⁴ giving definitional power to thought, or vice versa.)

Rather than attempting to define the necessary terms “being” or “presence” outside the logocentric tradition of western philosophy, Derrida argues that western philosophy grants itself the power to simultaneously define and pursue these terms. By defining “presence” as something outside the metaphysical tradition, we (the western metaphysical tradition) are actually simultaneously defining it as both inside and outside such a system by virtue of naming it at all, as nothing truly outside the logocentric tradition could be comprehended by speech, thought, or reason.

⁴ Derrida expands the notion of speech from what might be traditionally considered “spoken shared language,” to any form of communicable thought within a moment (as opposed to writing, which we will later define as communicable thought over a series of moments.)

For this objection to the self-privileging language of philosophy, Derrida adopts parts of Heidegger's questions regarding the limitations of "being" in *Being and Time*. Heidegger first posits that "being" is a momentary rather than continuous state, best defined as "presence," or the transcendent existence of this "being outside the tradition," within a defined time and space. Derrida reiterates that the concept of "being" (in this case "being outside the tradition,") should be separate from the linguistic ties of the word being itself, rather than *being* defined simultaneously within and outside the trappings its linguistic counterpart. He says, "Following the order of questions inaugurated by *Being and Time* and radicalizing the questions of Husserlian phenomenology, that this breakthrough does not belong to science itself...a rupture between the originary meaning of being and the word, between meaning and voice."⁵

In establishing that such a dualistic tradition exists, Derrida first traces the logocentric line of thought from Plato's works, to Christian Theology and certain (western) Deist traditions, to Descartes, Rousseau, and other Modernist philosophy.

Plato:

Plato presents the origins of what Derrida will later claim is the "logocentric tradition." Plato's conception of knowledge as presented in his dialogue, *The Phaedo*, in which the soul is present in "true being,"⁶ categorizes true knowledge (as opposed

⁵ Derrida *Of Grammatology* 22

⁶ Nicholson, Graeme *Plato's Phaedrus: Philosophy of Love* 80

to the unreliable “knowledge” of the senses, which is more akin to a strong feeling,) as recognition of pre-existing concepts embedded within our souls. He claims that the body distracts us from this knowledge in various ways, be it hunger, or sexual desires, or needs for safety or wealth, which all taint our ability to have an objective understanding of something. Because of this bodily interference, Socrates (or Plato) claims we cannot gain true knowledge except by ignoring our bodies and operating from pure logic alone, saying, “So long as we keep to the body and our soul is contaminated with this imperfection, there is no chance of our ever attaining satisfactorily to our object, which we assert to be truth.”⁷

To understand this true knowledge, Plato argues we can only use logic or reasoning, unhindered by physical considerations. The roots of this internal logic he argues is the immortal soul, with ancient inclinations to truth that pre-date our physical bodies. Plato says that certain “forms,” or categories of essential truths, are not actually newly gained knowledge, but rather spark a recognition within our souls that convince us not only of the “strong feeling” knowledge of the senses, but also of a higher, more absolute, divine knowledge. In *Derrida and Deconstruction*, Hugh Silverman analyses both Derrida’s and Plato’s understanding of logos and the soul, and elucidates on the logos based analysis of phonetic and metaphysical discourse that we will see echoed in Derrida’s deconstructing of the metaphysical tradition. Silverman says, “For Plato even the philosophical writing⁸ is tertiary and derivative.

⁷ Plato *Phaedo* 66b

⁸ Here “philosophical writing” is used as an alternative to the lower, regular writing in much the way Derrida uses writing and arche-writing. Plato instead would refer to it as “writing willing to be subservient to truth,” (in which we might also substitute “the

It gives way to the logos that is written in the soul, which in turn responds to that excess beyond being – the good – which engenders the ideas in logos.”⁹ However,

While Plato, and later the western philosophical tradition, sees this logos as an essential part of “good” or “philosophical” writing (which Derrida does not object to,) Derrida will question the necessity of such writing, or even the possibility of any objective declaration regarding the existence of such “good” writing.

Christian Theology:

Derrida argues that Christian and other western Deistic theology comes from the same logocentric privileging as earlier works of Socrates or Plato. Though the logos is not as immediately present in religion as it is in the philosophic tradition, the western religious traditions make use of “God” and “Being” as the basis for further signifiers in much the way that Plato does of pure logic and the immortal soul. Though the logos may take the form of an almighty creator in Christianity, it fulfills the same central role to the religious or philosophical tradition as logos does in the Platonic works, and in later modernist philosophical works. A passage of the gospel of John translates roughly to, in various yet similar meanings, “the word,” “reason,” or “knowledge,” each stemming from logos. It reads: “In the beginning was Reason, and Reason was with god, and Reason was God.”¹⁰ Without the mentioning of physical

word,” “logos,” or “god” in many ways for truth,) and non-philosophical writing to be its dialectic opposite.

⁹ Silverman, Hugh *Derrida and Deconstruction* 14

¹⁰ (John 1:1)

bodies, the privileging of the inner-self (knowledge or reason) over bodily concerns as the origin point of existence seems to mirror both the Platonic conception of logic as central to being, and Descartes' later elevation of the self (the "I") to such a position. However, whether we substitute "the word," or "reason," or "knowledge," the clear dominance of the logos within Christianity shows the positioning of western religions within the logocentric tradition that Derrida plans to reject.

While the relevance of the western religious tradition may not have an impact on the metaphysical standing of logocentrism, more than past Platonic ideals the Christian tradition has a foothold in the shape and moral authority within western society. Even when operating outside the structure of government, religion is placed in a position of heightened power in regards to interpreting issues regarding the logocentric tradition, or in other words, is often given the task of (or takes the task upon itself) of interpreting the "Word" or "Reason," and translating it from a metaphysical argument into the realm of social and personal growth. However, whereas the western religious tradition is concerned with the interpretation of such a logocentric position as the "Word" within society, the modernist philosophy of Descartes and Rousseau are more concerned with the construction of the logocentric system with the self as the root of exploration.

Descartes:

Descartes reiterates the problem of logocentrism in his argument for the cogito. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy* Descartes attempts what might be

considered a deconstruction of the tradition to that point, or a breaking down of our assumptions of knowledge, and then he attempts to rebuild what can be known for sure. However, in rebuilding our knowledge, Descartes derives much of his arguments regarding “Being” from the existence of the self, rebuilding the world outwardly from our (his) own consciousness. The famous representation of such an argument, though not included in the cogito itself, “*cogito, ergo sum,*” translates roughly to “I think, therefore I am.” This further highlights the importance of the self in the logocentric condition in orienting the nature of being or reality around it. Even in the textual order of the statement, “*I think, therefore I am,*” the “I” is privileged, as opposed to beginning with the question of “Being” (am vs. am not,) and from the proof of such a “Being” working backwards to prove the existence of the “I.” Descartes’ argument in fact gives the “I” the power to determine its own standing in relation to the question of being in the second half.

After beginning, “I think,” the later half seems to be defined by thinking, whether it is to be named “am,” or “being,” or otherwise. Derrida will later object to this self-privileging ability of the “I”, but he does believe that the self-privileging “I,” and the accompanying metaphysics of presence and specifically self-presence (which we might understand as a reinterpreted Cogito, saying of presence, “*I in this moment think, therefore in this moment I exist.*”) is a core component of the western philosophical tradition. Descartes’ influence on the other early and later modernists shows that not only is logocentrism present in the history of the metaphysical tradition, but it is also present in the current philosophic and societal landscape.

Rousseau

Rousseau believes in a binary system that fits within the logocentric tradition established by Aristotle and Plato, however, he adapts the argument of a metaphysical binary to a more societal focus, creating a binary of nature and culture. Rousseau says of the natural state: ““Before art had moulded our behaviour, and taught our passions to speak an artificial language, our morals were rude but natural; and the different ways in which we behaved proclaimed at the first glance the difference of our dispositions.” (Discourse on the Arts and Sciences 4) We might draw some parallels to a kind of “noble savage” ideology; however, Rousseau does not attribute a greater moral compass to the savage, but rather a simpler mode of interaction. He goes on to say, “Human nature was not at bottom better then than now; but men found their security in the ease with which they could see through one another, and this advantage, of which we no longer feel the value, prevented their having many vices.”¹¹ This means not necessarily that the natural state produces a smaller sum total of vice or greater amount of virtue, but rather that the range of possible vices and virtues is restricted to a more animalistic type of interaction.

He attributes only two natural states to people, *amour de soi*, self-love, and *pitie* best translated as sympathy or empathy, in the desire not to hurt others.¹² These two states do not rely on rationality, but are rather the ingrained sentiments of all people, mirroring Plato’s thoughts on true knowledge being remembered in the soul rather than

¹¹ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* 4

¹² Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *Discourse on Inequality*

learned. Rousseau believes that in gaining civilization, people are taught to interact in complex ways that distract from this true knowledge, similar to Plato's description of the knowledge of the senses.

This attribution of rationality only to society is similar to the logocentric tradition, however, the addition of the non-rational state of nature gives Rousseau's binary something the rest of the tradition does not have: it appears possible that someone could see both the state of nature and the effects of society, thus granting them the objective ability to judge "Being," and "Being." While Derrida does not state that it is impossible for something to both exist in the categories of "presence," and "absence," or "Being," and "Being," all people who attempt to work within the philosophic tradition necessarily are already members of the category, "Being." In Rousseau's model, it is possible one could transition between the two states by removing themselves from society or the state of nature, thus gaining both perspectives at the same time.

However for Rousseau the abuse of writing is a political one rather than metaphysical, as he believes governing bodies use language as a means of control, whereas in the state of nature language is free flowing and not bound by the necessity to convey complex social goals. Continuing to place himself within the logocentric tradition, Rousseau believes writing serves as a supplement to speech, because a language without a speech component does not serve any social function. In this way he constructs the "supplement" in much the same way Derrida uses the "signifier".

Derrida says of Rousseau's theory of the supplement:

The universal writing of science would thus be absolute alienation. The autonomy of the representer becomes absurd...In it supplementarity is accomplished, that is to say emptied...The supplement comes in the place of a

lapse, a nonsignified or a nonrepresented, a nonpresence. There is no present before it, It is not preceding by anything but itself, that is to say by another ((304)) supplement. The supplement is always the supplement of a supplement.¹³

This “self-writing” acts as a form of simultaneously social and non-social language, in which the writer and receiver are the same. The cyclical nature of the writing is what Rousseau means in saying the supplement is always the supplement of a supplement, any attempt to precede the writing with some other level of language is met with another preceding space where such language would have to be defined, filled by another supplement, the self-definition.

Derrida’s Objection:

In her book *Research in Phenomenology*, Irene Harvey interprets the initial question of Derrida’s objection to the metaphysical tradition as, “is philosophic discourse ruled?” from which Derrida will draw the further question, “can philosophic discourse provide its own rules?”¹⁴ He claims that the philosophic discourse is unable to simultaneously govern itself and provide the metaphysical rules of its governing. Derrida argues that the metaphysical tradition has historically ignored this initial problem, and instead used the transcendental signified, “God,” or “Word,” not as a legitimate course of philosophical exploration, but rather as a self-

¹³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 303

¹⁴ Harvey, Irene, *Research in Phenomenology* 115

privileging loophole to escape the problem of transcending the binary linguistic system.

Rather than continue in the tradition of such a self-privileging object, Gentz says of Derrida's objection, "(Derrida's) primary goal is to divest us of logocentrism by showing the impossibility of drawing a clear line between reality and our linguistic representations."¹⁵ Having traced the veins of logocentrism from the earliest roots of western philosophy to modernism, Derrida will object to two main assumptions: the assumption of the linearity of the origin event, and the assumption of the phonetic system that philosophy operates in.

1. The rejection of the origin event

Derrida rejects the idea that metaphysics has the power to meaningfully separate or define terms through oppositions. This ability he says, must necessarily come from a separation of terms in the origin event, which he believes is mistakenly understood within the logocentric tradition to be a linear event. He shows a deconstructionist account of how the traditional understanding of the origin event already assumes a kind of logocentrism, in that it fails to establish the terms and premises on which it makes its conjectures. Without proving these terms first, Derrida would argue that the metaphysical tradition is incapable of naming the origin event as a sufficient starting point for situating the rest of our notions of "Being" vs "~~Being~~".

¹⁵ Gentz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* 148

The origin event, by which we mean a point at which we first attempt to define consciousness or being as opposed to ~~being~~, is addressed by many names in the western philosophical tradition, all of which Derrida equates to the usage of the term God, or other all-knowing or all-encompassing attempts at self-presence. Such an origin event is traditionally interpreted within a linear concept of time: there is a pre and post event, a before and after, or a moment in which the event occurs. However, a phonetic analysis of this interpretation of the event as having a “before” or “after,” reveals that, in attempting to explain the event itself, we are already using terms that could not be defined without first using the event as a root definition. This assumption treats the event as though it is no different than any other event situated after the origin event, as though the event itself has no bearing on the nature of “Being.” But because the origin event necessarily is the first possible usage of “Being,” in a way that encompasses not only space but also time, the very concept of a “before” could not possibly exist “prior” to such an event happening. In attempting to define the origin event without resorting to self-privileging terms, Derrida creates new, self-erasing terminology, in an attempt to provide an outside reference point for our own logocentric tradition.

To provide an alternative description of this an origin event, Derrida describes the creation of “Being,” and “Non-Being,” as happening simultaneously. Rather than attempting to define something by what it is not within the realm of existence, for example, “an apple is a ‘not-everything that is not apple,’” Derrida situates all of these definitions as the “trace,” and gives definitional power to this trace with an “arche-trace.” He defines this trace as a reflection of the origin event, or all of what is

considered reality within the western metaphysical tradition. He then situates this in opposition to an “arche-trace,” or the definition of the origin event itself, which is not bound by our binary conception of time and space. This arche-trace might be known as the opposite of the trace within a binary understanding of such an event, for example: the time before the origin event, but he reiterates that once we have established the existence of a trace, then the trace becomes sufficient to produce further evidence of the trace (for example, if there is an apple we can then define orange as not an apple, etc.) and so the arche-trace is not needed as a literal phenomena in the same way that the trace is, but rather only as a definitional necessity to understand the idea of a trace within the logocentric system. In this way it becomes self-erasing, in that there is no need for an ~~arche-trace~~ to situate it, and in fact there is no need for the existence of an arche-trace at all, allowing us to escape the binary system of definitions for the purpose of deconstruction. He says of this erasure:

“The value of the transcendental arche [origin] must make it necessity felt before letting itself be erased. The concept of the arche-trace must comply with both that necessity and that erasure.”¹⁶

Derrida argues that within our linguistic system, like the metaphysical argument for definitional codependence, no term, be it trace or arche-trace, being or non-being, etc., could exist without the existence of the other, as their definitions are

¹⁶ Derrida *Of Grammatology* xviii

co-dependent¹⁷. He argues that were we to define any term, for example “ball,” without situating an opposing term (a “non-ball,”) we would produce a word that is not meaningless, as we could still interpret the object known as “ball,” in tactile and non-lingual ways, but rather a word of relative absurdity or uselessness, given the uselessness of language to express it at all.

Derrida argues that the philosophical tradition does not have sufficient definitional power to save language from absurdity because it has not situated an “arche-writing” to be used in the same way as the “arche-trace.” When defined without such an opposition, Derrida argues that the individual words carry only a lower “meaning,” similar to what Plato describes as the lower “knowledge,” or strong feeling, which he refers to as “vulgar writing,” to which he says we cannot attribute any larger metaphysical meaning. He says of the necessity for such a separation of writing: “An arche-writing...which I continue to call writing only because it essentially communicates with the vulgar concept of writing. The latter could not have imposed itself historically except by the dissimulation of the arche-writing”¹⁸

Using the arche-writing only as a means of expressing his objection while still within the same binary system, Derrida argues not for the existence of such an arche-writing or writing, but rather argues that if we are to assume the definitional power of language we must necessarily also assume a balancing, self-erasing, opposition. He poses this question to the modernist philosophers that their conclusions regarding the nature of the “trace,” and claims that rather than create an oppositional term to give

¹⁷ Illustrated by the use of being and non-being as opposed to being and ~~being~~, which is used to symbolically escape the trappings of the binary linguistic system

¹⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 56

weight to our current assumptions, we should understand that our system is based on an inherently logocentric, self-defining argument.

In extending the argument from the trace to the logocentric tradition, Derrida equates the trace to the signifier. Without ever implying a sign itself, the metaphysical tradition uses signifiers to imply other signifiers, in much the same way that Derrida says the trace is explained without the proper use of a balancing arche-trace definition. He says of the signifier and trace:

“From then on, to wrench the concept of the trace from the classical scheme, which would derive it from a presence or from an originary nontrace and which would make of it an empirical mark, one must indeed speak of an originary trace or arche-trace. Yet we know that that concept destroys its name and that, if all begins with the trace, there is above all no originary trace.”¹⁹

In the same way that the trace denotes a further trace, and the arche-trace is needed only definitionally, the signifier denotes another signifier once it has been defined. However, in using the word “signifier” at all, we must have a referential “sign” that it is derived from, lest the signifier becomes no more than an absurd concept. Regardless of the potential usefulness of the signifier in absence of the sign, the necessity of such a sign to define the signifier is what Derrida considers the point of contention on which the phonetic system is mistakenly built.

2. The Phonetic Rejection

¹⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 61

“Within this logos, the original and essential link to the phoné has never been broken.”²⁰

Much like the sign and the signifier, the phonetic system must have a reference point outside the system to retain definitional power. While the origin event serves as such a reference point within the philosophical tradition, Derrida argues that the logocentric approach misuses this point. He claims that the metaphysical tradition simultaneously claims “being” as a word within the science of phonetics, and as a pre-logocentric concept. Rather than combining these two terms within the same word (which is necessarily within the phonetic system,) Derrida argues that we should denote reference points outside the phonetic system with a strikethrough, better illustrating opposition. By doing so Derrida also attempts to break the logocentric tradition of speech as definitionally privileged over writing (and by extension philosophy,) and to break from the tradition’s pursuit of presence through such a logocentric phonetic system.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida equates metaphysics with the pursuit of being or presence. Metaphysics attempts to do this through separating being from non-being, and in doing so defining it through absence. He says, “...the history of metaphysics is the history of determining being as presence... its adventure merges with that of logocentrism, and...it is produced wholly as a reduction of the trace.”²¹ In addition to defining metaphysics as the pursuit of being or presence, Derrida calls into

²⁰ Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 11

²¹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 97

question metaphysics' ability to be self-regulating in its pursuit of presence. He believes that metaphysics is a discipline that is simultaneously governing itself and creating its own rules as necessary for the pursuit of presence, making the entire system self-privileging.

He elucidates on the issue of "being" or "presence" as self-privileging by situating the western philosophical tradition within the idea of self-presence. Derrida accuses the philosophical tradition of using self-presence, or God, as a symptom of philosophy's logocentrism, saying:

"Within its most general form, the mastery of presence acquires a sort of infinite assurance...Self-presence is not disturbed by the divine origin of these axioms...God is the name and the element of that which makes possible an absolutely pure and absolutely self-present self-knowledge. From Descartes to Hegel and in spite of all the differences that separate the different places and moments in the structure of that epoch, God's infinite understanding is the other name for the logos as self-presence."²²

In this use of "God" or a "self-presence," the philosophical tradition breaks the dualistic structure of signifier and signified. The idea of such a "God" constitutes a "self-signifying presence," which appears to "beg the question." Derrida argues that rather than address the root question, whether a sign can lead to a non-signified, the western philosophical tradition has invented its own term that transcends the limitations of the linguistic system in place.

3. Preempting the Counter-Objection of "Going from Yin to Yang"

²² Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 97-98

Though the objection to the metaphysical tradition illustrates the absurdity of privileging “presence” over “absence,” it does not advocate a shift of privileging within the dualistic structure, but rather a systematic shift away from such a structure (or the recognition of the non-existence of such a system.) In her book, *Derrida*, Christina Howells interprets Derrida’s argument as not only an undoing of the privileging of presence over non-presence, but also a reorganization of the entire system which promotes privileging one of two oppositions. She says:

“He is not proposing a simple reversal of structuralist preoccupations in which the balanced would be redressed...this would merely perpetuate the inadequacies of the binary model. His aim is far more radical: to evolve new concepts or models that would escape the traditional system of metaphysical oppositions.”²³

Howells shows us that Derrida does not attempt to re-prioritize within the binary model, for example, ask us not to prioritize “being” over “~~being~~,” or “presence” over “~~presence~~,” but instead asks us to question the ideas of privilege and opposition as a whole. While any attempt to interpret “presence” from within the system of “being” is necessarily biased, a switch to operating under the assumption of “~~being~~” would be of equal bias. Any attempt to increase the level of objective understanding while operating within such a system would require oscillating between states of “being” and “~~being~~.” Even in a case in which a thing could simultaneously occupy both states, the question would then become, does knowledge

²³ Howells, Christina, *Derrida* 33

of non-privilege privilege itself as much as either side originally would have? However, Derrida is not concerned with attempting to answer the question of privilege with such a system, and instead asks us to question the original assumptions that lead us to believe such a system is in place to begin with.

4. Objection to Derrida's Objection:

One potential point of contention to Derrida's objection is whether it is possible or viable to legitimately question the dualistic system of the philosophic tradition while admittedly operating within the same system.

The question of the possibility of such an act would imply that one half of a dualistic position can't conceptualize their opposite without first-hand knowledge, or in this case, that a logocentric system cannot conceptualize a non-logocentric position from within. Derrida agrees with this assertion, as a deconstruction of the logocentric system reveals that any attempt to define presence within such a system cannot find objective ground on which to begin such an argument. Any attempt to find such an objective standing is thwarted by the necessity of consciousness to make such an attempt. However, even to make this objection Derrida must still operate under the assumption of consciousness as the argument he objects to, as all things under the category of "Being," necessarily would. But because we are given the definitional tools to deconstruct our logocentric system without attempting to make a legitimate separation from it, we can examine the second part of the question as: what use is philosophy (the western philosophical tradition) given its own absurdity?

Metaphysics Given the Abandonment of the Metaphysical Tradition:

If we admit the absurdity of the metaphysical tradition's logocentric approach, we must now reconsider whether the search for presence is a valid goal for metaphysics, and if it is not, then we must consider what other goals might be valid reasons for continuing to do metaphysics, or if it is possible for the philosophical tradition to continue in any meaningful way at all. I will examine the nature of absurdity in metaphysics and its usefulness: whether the absurdity of an action negates its potential as a useful one, whether the objective or relative absurdity is the more relevant factor in judging the meaningfulness of an action, and whether an attempt at transcendence still holds any metaphysical relevance in light of transcendence's impossibility.

Absurd Actions and Their Potential Usefulness

The absurdity of a concept does not negate the potential of an absurd concept as useful, or as a form of play. However, in this case we must then first determine the definitions of usefulness and play, and whether they can be applied metaphysically or only practically. I propose that rather than look for usefulness in metaphysics, the pursuit of truth or knowledge, which does not escape the same logocentric tradition Derrida hopes to break us from, we examine how philosophy could be of use in pursuit of psychological betterment or societal advancement.

In purely physiological terms, human beings derive a number of important health benefits from non-productive or seemingly illogical actions. According to Marion Diamond, play, “improves memory and stimulates the growth of the cerebral cortex,” which she discovered in her early experiment with lab rats.²⁴ Her further research revealed that we might expect to see similar results in other animals, including humans.²⁵ This mirrors the recent developments proposed by Martha Nussbaum on the importance of play a human right. In her book, *Sex and Social Justice*, Nussbaum proposes play as a human right not only for children, but also as a fundamental expression of one’s experience of the trace. Described as the ability to “enjoy recreational activities,” we can interpret these non-motivated activities as only pure action for its own sake, or for the sake of self-expression.²⁶ The idea of play then takes on a similar role as the religious experience in the theological tradition, or study of the “I” in the philosophic tradition, in which the idea of consciousness attempts to examine itself within the trace. If the sociological or personal benefits of the absurd are considered, we might still find societal good in the science of metaphysics as a means of general improvement.

Looking not only at the personal benefits of play or absurdity, but also at the larger societal benefits, the study of philosophy might help to organize society in a way that promotes what we consider to be useful social values and interactions. Though we acknowledged that the logocentric tradition carries no larger metaphysical significance if it is not allowed to be self-privileging, we are unable to conceptualize

²⁴ Diamond, Marian “Response of the Brain to Enrichment” 1964

²⁵ Diamond, Marian “Response of the Brain to Enrichment” 2001

²⁶ Nussbaum, Martha, *Sex and Social Justice*, 42

a system that we both consider good, and that exists outside the logocentric tradition. To abandon these values on the basis of lack of metaphysical weight alone assumes that anything without transcendental significance does not have any usefulness, or in other words, that the kind of lower “meaning” or usefulness as described by Plato does not carry weight in the foundations of society. Whether or not this lower weight contains some value for the foundations of society depends on if society must be built on true transcendental meaning, or the lower form of meaning, and if Plato is correct in this binary scale, or if there is a scale of transcendence measured in relative importance rather than absolute.

Absurdity as a Binary versus Scale

The absurdity of metaphysics as a discipline does not preclude it from being productive or important for our society as a whole. While we might consider some actions of no importance in a traditionally binary scale of “important,” or “not important,” the use of such a scale at all must be considered in relation to the relative importance of whatever action it is being applied to. While an action may not be important within a certain context, to then affix that label permanently to it may halt positive future goals for society in which the action might be applied again. This lack of context violates the same lack of objectivity that Derrida believes the logocentric tradition does. However, if the absurdity of the action, in this case, the pursuit of metaphysics, violates objectivity in a way exactly parallel to the logocentric tradition, we can then ascribe the same lower importance to these actions as we would for the

trace itself. If we consider these parallel actions with a lower importance to still be “important,” then we can redeem the importance of philosophy as being equally important to society itself, regardless of the objective absurdity of such an importance. However, the binary system of importance necessitates that *all* things that are not of transcendental importance are of equal lower importance. If we have saved the lower importance from absurdity, then we must consider how to separate levels of importance within such a lower importance.

The separation of our conception of the lower importance from transcendent importance does not necessitate a relative scale of absurdity. The lower importance could still function within the binary system, and we might only sacrifice the idea of any true importance, thus not being able to ascribe true importance to anything, and slip closer to philosophical nihilism. To rescue the idea levels of importance without the idea of true importance, we would have to prove that Derrida’s new non-binary system is not simply a reduction to an atheistic, or physicalist (materialist) world view. Tracing Derrida’s own argument back from metaphysics to the literal, we can use a similar kind of definitional necessity in the case of importance. To rebuild our ability to grant importance, we can examine the way that Derrida rebuilds our ability to grant linguistic power to definitions. In acknowledging the need for an arche-trace, Derrida gives the trace a version of meaning again. Were we to imagine a similar “arche-importance,” or action of theoretical transcendent importance, we could then reorganize the remaining actions on a scale of lower importance drawing from other lower important actions (signifying one another,) much like the trace.

Usefulness of Attempts at Transcendence Given its Impossibility

Assuming that from this “arche-importance” we can establish a scale of importance, we then should consider if the attempt at transcendence is still within said scale, or if the action is exempted by the nature of it what it asymptotically strives towards.

Though the attempt at transcendence would need to be self-privileging to grant itself any extra weight within the scale of lower importance, it could be said to have a special relevance to the notion of the “I,” which itself attempts to be similarly self-privileging. The function served by the attempt at transcendence and the function served by deconstruction could be described as opposites, and yet the same in their attempt to break from the “lower-importance,” or the attempt to break from the trace.

Whereas play is the expression of the trace, an attempt at transcendence is the opposite, an exploration of absolute seriousness, of the logos asserting itself so powerfully as to claim not only existence for itself, but to leave nothing unclaimed, existent or non-existent. However, the trappings of the “I” make such an event (or even to conceive of such an event) impossible, in the same way that to conceive a non-logocentric position from deconstruction is impossible. Given this inability to escape the “I,” we can best attempt to understand “being,” by striving asymptotically towards presence, the furthering of logic to its highest ends, even with our knowledge of the impossibility of ever reaching a point of perfect knowledge. In this way we grant the attempt at transcendence no special weight within the scale of lower importance, but rather we grant it special weight in relation to the study of ourselves.

The striving for transcendence is not a metaphysically important action, but rather one that could be considered useful, even of some special circumstantial importance, in defining the “I,” to which we must grant these self-privileging powers to maintain our logocentric society.

Conclusion:

Derrida’s objections are concerned primarily with rejecting the logocentric approach, however, he doesn’t provide a valid counter-argument for alternative possible approaches, and in fact rejects the necessity of providing such a counter argument. The purpose of deconstruction is not to attempt to come to some new understanding regarding transcendence or the attempt at transcendence, but rather only to question the initial assumptions made in the western philosophical tradition. I would argue that Derrida succeeds in doing this (though it might be argued that questioning the logocentric tradition at all is necessarily a failure from within such a tradition,) but does not attempt to dissuade us of the notion of the logocentric tradition’s potential usefulness. In this case, it is left to those of us within the logocentric tradition to determine the definition of usefulness for ourselves, and to measure our own success against it in the most logical means that we can.

Because we are in many ways prisoners to a certain way of interpreting the world, having only the concept of the “I,” or consciousness, the rejection of the logocentric approach does not impact the way in which we must order our lives, but rather impacts the certainty with which we should address new questions.

Deconstruction should be considered not an indictment of our philosophical tradition, but rather a form of philosophical play, helping us to learn more about our own subjective experiences, and to discover more about the nature of the self and reality, while allowing us a brief interpretation of ourselves outside the logocentric tradition.

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