

*Cybernetic Revelation* explores the dual philosophical histories of deconstruction and artificial intelligence, tracing the development of concepts like “logos” and the notion of modeling the mind technologically from pre-history to contemporary thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek and Steven Pinker. The writing is clear and accessible throughout, yet the text probes deeply into major philosophers seen by *JD Casten* as “conceptual engineers.”

6” x 9” x 1¼” – 772 pages

Order a copy for \$17 at Amazon.com, or download the entire PDF.

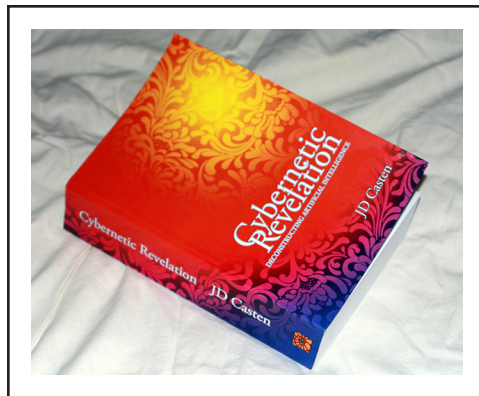
PDF copy freely available at:

<http://casten.postegoism.net>

© 2012 JD Casten  
(free to share)

ISBN: 978-0-9854802-0-2

Post Egoism Media  
Eugene, Oregon, USA  
[www.postegoism.net](http://www.postegoism.net)



## Chapter 22

# Derrida

## The Subject of Deconstruction

### SITUATING THE FUTURE

Jacques Derrida's (1930 - 2004) philosophy does not lend itself to a simplified characterization, much because it draws upon a diverse range of ideas from the history of philosophy, and complicates these ideas even further. More than the a-methodological, a-systematic, and a-structural "Critical Theory" that we saw with the Frankfurt School philosophers Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, but also in a questioning, negative orientation towards its varied subject matter (and influenced by Adorno's "negative dialectics" as well), Derrida's writing probes the writings of other writers—with him often writing, as he has entitled one of his many books, in the *Margins of Philosophy*. And this re-reading of the past and opening it up to an incalculable future, this pivotal event can be seen in more than one of the terms he has developed, but very much so in one which is especially associated with his philosophical movement: "Deconstruction." For beyond the meaning of "taking apart," the word, "deconstruction" can be divided, with the morphemes leading back to Latin roots comprising of: "de" meaning

“of, concerning, about,” and “from, away from, down from, out of,” but also “to depart, withdraw from”—“con” meaning “with”—and the Latin “struō” meaning “pile up, arrange; build, erect”—hence de-con-struction is both “about” construction and “departing” construction—and both “of” and “against” the history such arises from. It is in this way that “deconstruction” is a more subtle term than “postmodernism,” as the latter term seems to suggest an unqualified break with the past, and as being something other than historical. In a way, deconstruction has not yet overcome history, it is always already on the way out of being determined by history, progressively reforming the ideas of history, if not rebelling against them, yet with a conservationist bent that maintains a respect for the past even while overturning its imbalances, anarchically, in favor of justice.

“Deconstruction” is not a strategy, an operation, or a way of reading—perhaps no more than a soul is. And in many ways, Derrida treats the term as if it were as complex as a human being: are we as human beings not in a constant flux between being shaped by our past, as we negotiate our (im)possible futures? The term “deconstruction” could also be said to name the subject: naming subjectivity itself. But the subject and subjectivity are seen here, not in a full plenitude of self-presence—not a consciousness that is hooked up to a Logos of absolute knowledge handed down by Western philosophy. No, here subjectivity is temporal: its intentions, never fully worked out in advance other than in a possibly over-determined destiny projected from one’s past into the future.

Because much of this book heretofore has been preoccupied with the history of Western philosophy, we will not need to re-tread the entirety of ground in order to situate and contextualize Derrida’s writings... but placing his work relative to a couple of 20<sup>th</sup> century French thinkers, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Michel Foucault (1926-1984) should help.

## DE SAUSSURE: STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES

As just seen, the term “deconstruction” relates to the word “structure” (via the Latin word “struō”)—and such is no accident, as Derrida was part of an intellectual scene that developed around the issues raised by “structuralism”—a set of ideas that was advanced by many “continental” philosophers (western European philosophers outside of Britain), especially in 20<sup>th</sup> century France. This school of thought arose through the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, a French structural linguist, who argued that words were not to be defined by some sort of higher essence or form (much like the logical forms sought by thinkers from Plato to the early Wittgenstein), but rather by the relation of words to each other; relations that are both “synchronic” (the static array of words seen with semantic webs and grammar rules: language, or “langue” understood abstractly) and “diachronic” (the dynamic changes in language over history, not to be confused with specific instances of language or “parole.”)

Of the “synchronic” aspect of language, de Saussure goes so far as to suggest that certain types of this are materialized in the brain:

“Outside the context of discourse, words having something in common are associated together in memory. In this way they form groups, the members of which may be related in various ways. For instance the word *enseignement* (‘teaching’) will automatically evoke a host of other words: *enseigner* (‘to teach’), *reseigner* (‘to inform’), etc., or *armement* (‘armament’), *changement* (‘change’), etc., or *éducation* (‘education’), *apprentissage* (‘apprenticeship’). All these words have something or other linking them.

This Kind of connexion between words is of quite a different order. It is not based on linear sequence. It is a connexion in the brain. Such connexions are part of that accumulated store which is the form language takes in an individual’s brain. We shall call these *associative relations*” (Ferdinand

de Saussure, Roy Harris (trans.), *Course in General Linguistics*, Open Court: Chicago (1997), pp. 121-122).

This “automatic” evocation of other words and the “connections” in the brain is a subject of our studies into artificial intelligence and cognitive science, esp. concerning “spreading activation” with neural networks. De Saussure saw the rules of grammar as also being synchronic too, as they are an abstract way of looking at language, much like dissecting an organism and making a taxonomy of its parts and how they inter-relate. Such is opposed to the “diachronic” aspect of language: how language changes over time (as studied with the etymological history of words—where a Latin word like “video” will shift in meaning from “I see” to “I understand”—and will be further changed in contemporary English, to be associated with “television,” etc.)

Over the course of his studies, de Saussure maintained something resembling *forms* or *essences*, called “signifieds.” A “signified” would be the meaning of a word, where a “signifier” would be the physical manifestation of word—the spoken phonetic sounds, or the written marks. However, unlike previous thinkers, who would suggest that signifieds have meaning in themselves—a sort of intellectual nucleus of a word, that atomically contains meaning—de Saussure suggested that both signifieds and signifiers are defined in *relation* to each other, much like juxtaposing the colors red and green will make them pop out, for their contrast. Hence a *signified* for “dog” is defined in relation to other signifieds, like “canine,” “beagle,” “cat,” etc, while the *signifier* “dog” is related to words like “fog,” “bog,” “dig,” and “dot.” However, it would appear that we have no way of connecting the two planes of differentiation: how do we connect the signifiers to the signifieds? Would onomatopoeias like “bark” or “meow” work to connect the two? Even onomatopoeias have different spellings and pronunciations in different languages! De Saussure simply claims:

“the essential function of a language as an institution is precisely to maintain these series of differences in parallel” (de Saussure, p. 119).

“to say that in a language everything is negative holds only for signification and signal considered separately. The moment we consider the sign as a whole, we encounter something which is positive in its own domain. A linguistic system is a series of phonetic differences matched with a series of conceptual differences” (de Saussure, p. 118).

Diving into what de Saussure means, Derrida finds that it is with one’s *intended articulation* that the two realms of signifier and signified are welded together. It is with the conscious presence of one’s speech, through individual speech acts, that the two realms, which are completely defined in the negative, without positive terms, are fused into positive signs. It is the very sentient being of consciousness that bridges meaning as content, and language as form. And it is in this way that we can see how important speech is, as it gives de Saussure’s signs meaning: so that we are not, according to him, continually roaming from word to word, and endlessly trying to reconstruct contexts in order to be understood (although such *is* the case, when trying to explain something that another does not quite yet understand).

## WRITING FRAMES SPEECH

Derrida’s take on de Saussure’s parallel linguistic realms could be construed as a question: how is it even possible for this mysterious conscious being in the process of a speech act, to “fuse” the signifier and signified? Time and again, throughout the history of philosophy, up to and beyond 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers, and including de Saussure himself, the meaning buck stops with conscious thought and speech and possibly a transcendental signified

(like God or Being as Word or the Logos). But this really doesn't explain anything: it suggests that meaning is as mysterious as consciousness itself: subjectivity. As we claimed before, subjectivity itself, with each of our own personal perspectives, is shaped by a history, personal / cultural, and biological / environmental. It is by framing this subjectivity, by looking at the context of speech acts, and what shapes them, that we can begin to go beyond the mystery of consciousness and subjectivity, and begin to situate meaning as a post-structural, if not a scientific, phenomena. We do not need to look only to a person's intent to understand meaning: we can look to contexts—and with the context of all of a person's history, singular univocal intent can begin to break down as well, into a plurality of meanings beyond intent.

An example of a plurality of meanings beyond what a person thinks they are intending can be seen with Freudian slips; and in fact, so much of Freudian interpretation depends on the notion of unconscious meaning—we say more than we think we are saying. Such a plurality of meanings can go beyond Freudian animal instinct, as turns of phrase, idioms, etc, betray the culture one is brought up in, as much as it does a person's specific intent (we can “psychoanalyze” culture as well). Such is not to claim that present intent does not exist, but that intent is constructed by much more than our subjective will (or rather, our subjective will itself is in large part determined by our histories: personal / cultural, and biological / environmental). There are implications in what people say: words used always imply shared contexts; contexts that can change and render those same words as something quite different than they were once thought to be. Some might suggest that this changeability means anything could mean anything, and hence we should be free to mean whatever we want and not care about grammar, proper language usage etc. But this would be to ignore the robust multiplicity of historical connections and contexts that all public language use brings with it. We are not talking so much about a de-stabilization of language with Derrida and deconstruction, but

more about a re-situation or re-contextualizing of language, which sweeps the foundation of signifieds / essences and intention out the door, in favor of a stratification of contexts and differential connections. The floor may be an illusion, but we have a variety of safety wires keeping us tied to an even deeper, more robust, stability.

So given that meaning is shaped by context... the painting situated both by a literal and metaphorical frame, we see Derrida time and again preoccupied by what shapes a given subject by lying on the border forming it. Hence *Margins of Philosophy*, and essays like “Living On Border Lines,” and the notion of the “Parergon” (which means “frame”). Such is not to look outside the frame, to some “other,” to define the “atomic” subject, but rather to look at the frame and framework itself, to see how lines give shape to “color.” (And this can be seen as visually illustrated by one of Derrida’s evident artist favorites, Valerio Adami, who painted with precise lines, and colors... interestingly, Adami evolved as a painter and began to use cross-hatching as well for fleshy depth—indicating a way of seeing the one might argue challenges the Derridian emphasis on lines and differences—the gestalt Dalmatian recognized in a image of black dots without lines challenges the line as being the visually defining aspect: traces recognized without delineated difference).

As opposed to the self-presence of meaning in speech, Derrida investigates writing—again both literally and metaphorically. Writing seems to be meaningful outside the presence of an articulate subject. How could this be if meaning is dependent on the self-present subject? Because context is not lost... we can still understand what is written in the same way we understand all language. And while closely reading western philosophers, Derrida often finds that while they extol the virtues of speech as the anchor of meaning, these same philosophers denigrate writing, as a sinful supplement to writing: much like Plato condemning our worldly experience as a poor copy of intellectual reality. But upon closer reading, Derrida deconstructs these same writings, e.g. demonstrating that the evil outcast and inferior copy found with writing, actually precedes



speech, in a sort of arche-writing—a writing more primordial than speech—writing as metaphor for technology.

As we saw with Heidegger, technology is immediately understood as the use of tools. But technology is also a way of understanding things technologically. DNA is hardly a screwdriver, but it is a way of understanding things in a technical sense—a sense beyond mere mechanics, but instead mechanics coupled with information, forces, etc. In his book *Of Grammatology*, Derrida cites de Saussure (here directly quoted):

“Thus although writing is in itself not part of the internal system of the language, it is impossible to ignore this way in which the language is constantly represented. We must be aware of its utility, its defects and its dangers” (de Saussure, p. 24).

Derrida notes:

“Writing would thus have the exteriority that one attributes to utensils; to what is even an imperfect tool and a dangerous, almost maleficent, technique” (Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (trans.), *Of Grammatology*, The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore (1997), p. 23).

To see writing almost literally as a tool, can be to see writing as technology, at least metaphorically. And such is what Derrida does with his concept of arche-writing. We may clothe ourselves with fig leaves to cover our naked “intent,” yet one might say we were not potentially naked until the invention of clothing. If we are to see tools as emblematic of technology, and that we are shaped in technological ways (DNA, the mechanics of our bodies, the techniques we have learned from culture and from personal experience), we can then see how arche-writing, prior to speech, could be said to shape it too. The supplemental tool used to copy original intent is also the technology that structures that original intent:

“There is no longer a simple origin. For what is reflected is split *in itself* and not only as an addition to itself of its image. The reflection, the image, the double, splits what it doubles. The origin of the speculation becomes a difference. What can look at itself is not one; and the law of the addition of the origin to its representation, of thing to its image, is that one plus one makes at least three. The historical usurpation and theoretical oddity that install the image within the rights of reality are determined as the *forgetting* of a simple origin” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp. 36-37).

In fact, Derrida cites de Saussure again (directly quoted):

“A language is a system of signs expressing ideas, and hence comparable to writing, the deaf-and-dumb alphabet, symbolic rites, forms of politeness, military signals, and so on. It is simply the most important of such systems” (De Saussure, p. 15).

Derrida writes:

“Speech thus draws from this stock of writing, noted or not, that language is” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.53).

Such is to say that the origin of meaning is not found in simple self-presence of consciousness and univocal intent—but is found in a plurality of technologies that precede any such articulation, and through the example of writing, can operate without such presence. This “univocal speech” vs. “plural writing” is also illustrated by Derrida with his single work *Speech and Phenomena* as compared to the many essays found in his work *Writing and Difference*. This pair of books suggests a polarity between not only speech and writing, but between phenomena and difference. This is a bit troubling though, as it may suggest (as do some scientific thinkers) that phenomenal consciousness itself, subjectivity, the color green, etc, are epiphenomenal appearances created by formal-physical reality (it is not

clear which of Aristotle's four causes would make the appearance of green). Such colored light flooding through the cracks suggests that a robot *might* be sentient... this is discussed at greater length in later chapters of this book.

## THE COPY BEFORE THE ORIGINAL?

Derrida seems to be articulating a new logic, where the copy precedes the original. But it is not so much that the copy precedes the original, but that the original itself is repeatable, it has "iterability." In order to be iterable, to be repeatable, the original must contain the seeds of some sort of difference within itself, between what it is, and its copy. That implied difference, is a difference non-the-less. The simple unity of subjective soul can be split across at least five senses of the body; the spoken word often carries a plurality of meanings beyond conscious intent; Descartes' God as singular pinnacle of perfection grounding reality has the complexity of that reality already within; Plato's Good as the highest of forms is also a form among forms—and for Derrida:

"Difference is [...] the formation of form" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 63).

In a later essay simply titled, "*Différance*," Derrida expands upon the concept and makes it temporal as well as spatial. The word "différance" plays on a French ambiguity between what in English would be "Difference" and "Deference." Hence we could be talking not only about the sort of difference between words that define them, but a constant temporal deferring from one word to another in time. When defining a word, using the dictionary, we always come across more words, which could be defined using the same dictionary, and so on ad infinitum. One may recall the arguments of the ancient skeptics (in chapter 5), that nothing is true in itself or in relation to anything else (as their relativity stance suggested

that things are different from varied perspectives—hence not true in themselves—and that if one isn't to have an infinite regress in arguing, dogmatic assumptions must be made). Derrida seems to flip skepticism on its head, reversing its critique of all claims to knowledge, and showing that its strictures form the very structure of “reasonable” discourse. Nothing is “relative,” but everything is relative *to* everything else—there are no positive terms to anchor the system of knowledge. But again, such does not result in chaos, but rather, simply undermines the certainty of a simple foundation, in favor of complex coherence; much like the shift in some 20<sup>th</sup> century analytic philosophers towards pragmatism, where a correspondence theory of truth is given up in favor of a coherence theory of truth (cp. Donald Davidson, W.V. Quine, and Richard Rorty). Propositions are not true because they mirror the world, and represent it, but rather, because they cohere with other propositions: propositions do not represent the world, they are about it. In the same way, words are not defined by essences that they share with the world (as with the early Wittgenstein's logical forms)—but rather are defined by the endless web of associations and contexts.

Derrida does not limit himself to the concept of “différance” in his essay though, as he must account for the connections found... those associations that tie, e.g., words together. For this, he uses the word “trace”:

“The two apparently different values of *différance* are tied together in Freudian theory: to differ as discernibility, distinction, separation, diastem, *spacing*; and to defer as detour, relay, reserve, *temporization*.

1. The concepts of trace (*Spur*), of breaching (*Bahnung*), and of the forces of breaching from the *Project [for a Scientific Psychology]* on, are inseparable from the concept of difference. The origin of memory, and of the psyche as (conscious or unconscious) memory in general, can be described only by taking into account the difference between

breaches. Freud says so overtly. There is no breach without difference and no difference without trace.

2. All the differences in the production of unconscious traces and in the processes of inscription (*Niederschrift*) can also be interpreted as moments of *différance*, in the sense of putting into reserve. According to a schema that never ceased to guide Freud's thought, the movement of the trace is described as an effort of life to protect itself by *deferring* the dangerous investment, by constituting a reserve (*Vorrat*). And all the oppositions that furrow Freudian thought relate each of his concepts one to another as moments of detour in the economy of *différance*" (Jacques Derrida, Alan Bass (trans.), *Margins of Philosophy*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago (1986), p. 18).

Moreover:

"The alterity of the 'unconscious' makes us concerned not with the horizons of the modified—past or future—presents, but with a 'past' that has never been present, and which will never be, whose future to come will never be a *production* or a reproduction in the form of presence. Therefore the concept of the trace is incompatible with the concept of retention, of the becoming past of what has been present. One cannot think the trace—and therefore, *différance*—on the basis of the present or of the presence of the present" (Derrida, *Margins*, p. 21).

Derrida suggests there is something "unthinkable" (Derrida, *Margins*, p. 19) in both *différance* and the trace—that is, we will never be able to grasp it in an instant of comprehension. But possibly, as with learning any language, we may become *familiar* with the concepts, as Derrida himself seems to be. With Derrida's own critique of past (and contemporary) thinkers elevating speech over writing, one might ask why *différance* gets an essay title, and the

“trace” doesn’t even get second billing. It seems that in an effort to counter past thinkers’ embracing “identity” in its atomic self, the self-same meaning found in an absolute transcendental signified, Derrida has emphasized *différance* in relation to everything else—but there are flip-sides to *différance* too: namely the trace, and the “judge.” Whether or not there are differences at all without a judge (as with some sort of “un-cut qualitative continuum”) is unknowable—when we have a judge, we have differences, and *possibly* these differences precede any subjective judgment. Certainly, as soon as we have a judge, we have a difference between the judge and judged. Perhaps judges and differences co-dependently originate (as when a person becomes a parent only in relation to having a child). But speculating on what “exists” before (subjective) judgment is possible is just that: speculation.

I put “exists” in scare quotes (and Derrida often uses scare quotes, many terms are not exact, or must be used with qualifications—further differentiating beyond the singular words used)—“exists” is in quotation marks, because in a way *différance* could be said not to exist, just as the line separating one thing from another does not have physical existence. The difference between what is an atom, in physics, and what is not an atom is not a space—but something like a line of demarcation. True, modern quantum physics sees the shape of an atom determined by a “probability cloud” (sometimes spherical, but not an absolute shell)—yet there is a shape, and one can say that any shape requires a zone of differentiation, if not a razor-thin line. This is not space itself, but spacing. And with the temporal aspect of *différance*, there is a deferral. Immediately, what these two aspects create in opposition to themselves, at least linguistically, is the presence of consciousness in the now: being here now—or Heidegger’s *Dasein* (“being there”). Such is not an accident, as both Derrida and Heidegger studied Edmund Husserl—who used a method of “bracketing” to eliminate worldly contexts, in order to get at the subjective experience of pure consciousness. Heidegger went on to situate this consciousness in relation to ob-

jects in the world with notions such as equipment present at hand, etc, and situated the poetic presence of consciousness within technological enframing. Derrida goes further... he's concerned almost exclusively with what Husserl was at pains to exclude: the context which situates consciousness.

But again, like some scientists and philosophers of mind, such seems to indicate that subjective consciousness is epiphenomenal, if it really exists at all (albeit formed by differential structures, rather than some sort of “wet-ware” in the brain). And again, as with the Freudian unconscious (and Derrida looks towards much more primordial motivations than Freud did)—there is more to our subjective experience and our talking about it, than we can know. Moreover, we never “know” anything in an instant. “You can only learn what you already *almost* know” (a spin on a Sufi saying). Sure, there may be a point, where we know something we did not know before, but such knowledge is usually cumulative, with new knowledge situated in relation to past knowledge. And some of that prior knowledge itself may be hard-wired in our brains, after millennia of evolution.

How far back need we go for a simple origin? Some physicists claim that the big-bang arose out of a primordial differentiation in an original singularity (not to be confused with the technological singularity that has been hypothesized as when artificial intelligent agents design even more intelligent entities at an accelerating rate: an event horizon past which we cannot even begin to imagine). I'm not sure if Derrida wrote on the cosmological singularity, but my guess is that he would throw his hat to the “multiple-big-bangs” theory ring with an infinite past without origin. Or at least a complex origin with the seeds of our vast cosmos already implicit within that single point: a big bang that did not occur with Plato's “image of time.”

## FOUCAULT: THE OTHER HISTORY

Cosmology aside, for the most part heretofore we have been focusing on the immediate, or rather the mediation of differences—a general concern with the infinitely small, beyond microscopic spacing between atoms of meaning—the spacing that creates meaning in language, often smaller in scope than propositions: working at the level of words, and even morphemes (and for Derrida, even with letters, such as his concern with words that add an “r” with a “+r” like “trace” or “trait”—see his essay “+ r (Into the Bargain)” in Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Bennington & Ian McLeod (trans.), *The Truth in Painting*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago (1987). Such is to zoom in on the local (cp. close reading), and make generalizations (cp. wide ranging theory). Language can operate on broader levels too.

Derrida’s predecessor and some time contemporary Michel Foucault, shared Derrida’s structuralism influence as well—but despite writing a bit on the subject of language, he was more concerned with the field of history. Such carries with it a wide scope, and although Foucault encourages small theories and local practices, and examined very specific phenomena, he also developed a vocabulary capable of far reach. For example, Foucault uses the term “episteme” not just to characterize the epistemology of a particular person, but rather as the knowledge worldview of a place and time. In his histories, *Madness and Civilization*, *The History of Sexuality*, *Discipline and Punish*, and even in the *Order of Things*, he goes to extreme lengths to recreate the details of worlds people lived in at certain times in history, and show how these histories were not a linear development, but a multi-dimensional intersection of different forms of power and resistances to power. Again, People saw things differently at different times (not a huge surprise to a relativist); they had different world views. And like etymological lineages of words, historical practices shifted over time as well; hence we see Freudian psychiatrist’s couches sprouting from the Catholic confessional booths.



Time and again, in history Foucault finds some sort of subjugation of the “other” (the mad, prisoners, etc.) but also finds that the “other” differentially structures the norm: these two, norm and other, are defined, much as with de Saussure’s differentiated words, in juxtaposed opposition; e.g. we define civilization in opposition to madness (and ironically treat the mad in an uncivilized manner throughout much of history). Such a concern with the “other” has a considerable 20<sup>th</sup> century history, and grew out of existentialism’s transformation of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. History was largely told as a story of the “masters” of society, the political triumphs of kings and such... and it wasn’t until the 20<sup>th</sup> century with Foucault (and others, as with Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*), that the story of the extraordinary “ordinary” lives of many began to be explored in respected detail by historians: what Hegel might call the slave’s perspective on history. One can see this immediately in the history of art: it isn’t until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with works by Jean Francis Millet, Vincent Van Gogh, etc. with the artistic movements of naturalism and realism, that the working class is finally and widely portrayed with a glory previously permitted only to the ruling class (and we should not forget the autobiographies by people like escaped slave Frederick Douglass as well).

Beyond Foucault’s investigations into the formation of the subject (often by state institutions), his older contemporary, the semi-otician Roland Barthes, ever ready to debunk symbolic *authority*, saw the *author* as such—and as something to overturn as well: e.g. with his essay “The Death of the Author” (1967). Such relates to Walter Benjamin’s task of erasing ones’ own subjective judgment and personality in order to let history speak for itself. Foucault however wanted the subjugated (the jailed, the insane, etc.) to have a voice in public—to tell their story in an unfiltered manner. This wouldn’t be an attempt to let chaos loose in a world of structure, to unleash the id without super-ego constraints, but rather to loosen the tensions that are subjugating the helpless in favor of a status quo that itself is at times insane, criminal, etc. Even though our very

identities are often socially constructed, or so it would seem, especially with copious examples demonstrating that our world views or “epistemes” have changed over the ages, Foucault struck a more subtle note than Barthes in his 1969 lecture, “What is an Author?” by examining the notion of the concept of “author.”

Foucault contrasted with Chomsky over the possibility of a human nature: Humans, for Foucault are shaped by histories to an incredible extent. Foucault could be criticized by Chomsky, as not taking our hard-wired biology as shaped by DNA and evolution into full account. But through concepts like “epistemes” and “discourses”—discourses are something like macro-Wittgensteinian language-games, as with institutionalized sets of practices: think the military and its standard operating procedures, the procedures of the legal system, medical practices, governmental bureaucracies, and the such—through well illustrating these concepts that emphasize the socially constructed peculiarity of perspectives, Foucault was able to show that much of who, for example, an author is, is largely a question of “who” that author’s culture and time is, but also what that culture determines as acceptable as an “author.” Authors speak the zeitgeist as much as speaking for themselves, largely because the zeitgeist determines who will be known as an “author”—there are more authors than are remembered by historical canons. The writer-author as ego is somewhere between a body speaking via unconscious Freudian meanings (expressions of the id) and the discourses of a super-ego institutional bureaucracy—Foucault’s celebrity intellectual image aside, he was as interested in ego-formation as much the other (id) / norm (super-ego) opposition.

It is with this metaphorical death of the author, that we can connect Foucault with Derrida. But through their studies of how history shapes us, and how language speaks us, rather than there being some untouchable aspect to meaning in conscious subjectivity, they were both on the track towards situating the creation of artificial intelligence, where machines might be en-webbed into the

same social fabric as we humans are: a machine might not be able to tap into the Logos, but it surely should be able to learn from history.

What Derrida and Foucault share is “relativism situated in contexts” which is not your typically understood relativism where “anything goes.” For Foucault, no context is absolute: following Nietzsche, we may share a perspective, but that perspective itself has a specific history about how it came to be; these perspectives are often shaped by governments and social practices, as well as the economic factors that Marx might point out (as with ideologies). Derrida’s focus is on language, when he says “There is nothing outside of the text” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.158)—he is saying there is nothing outside context—that there is a possibly endless deferring from one frame to another; as the earth loses its place as center of the universe, then the sun, etc, beyond even a universe with no center: a Copernican revolution without end.

Derrida and Foucault also share a fascination with the concept of the “other.” In contrast to the deferral of “différance” where meaning is always slipping into the future (and Derrida himself often enacts his theories in his writing practice—his meaning often seems to slip away in references to other writings (other authors and his own); he makes conscious use of a non-univocal plurality of meanings exploiting the economy of double-meanings; his work is hard to grasp in a moment, taking time to become familiar with; yet he aims for justice, so that his works will not be deconstructed in turn), the later Derrida was often concerned with opening one’s self up to an “impossible” incalculable future to come. There is an almost messianic reverence for the potential, not only for progress (an openness to political change), but an openness to something to come that is completely other. With the earlier Derrida, it as if his concepts were made in pursuit of the intangible—as if he were looking for a fabric by cutting it with scissors: *différance* as “spur” or blade that differentiates its target as it “looks” for it; always slicing material up in smaller pieces as if such would end in an understand-

ing of the whole cloth—an active looking with cataracts, always catching site of its aim through peripheral vision, yet blinded as soon as it tries to catch site straight on: blindness and insight. The later Derrida seems interested in a passive subject, waiting. Such is not to put a gender-marker on the early and later Derrida (with a “phallic” spur spear-heading *différance*, in contrast to a “lady in waiting” vaginally open to the advent of the future)—but continental philosophers have tended to gender-code their metaphysics, which can be seen as a problem. Derrida does address such issues, noting that the structuralist Freudian, Jacques Lacan’s own attempts at stabilizing meaning through speech (between earlier ubiquitous Freudian phallic symbols and Derrida’s later critical term “phall-logocentrism”) were connected with the privileged phallus. Here Derrida’s essays reference “style” and “taste”:

“In the question of style there is always the weight or *examen* of some pointed object. At times this object might be only a quill or a stylus. But it could just as easily been a stiletto, or even a rapier. Such objects might be used in vicious attack against what philosophy appeals to in the name of matter or matrix, an attack whose thrust could not but leave its mark, could not but inscribe there some imprint or form. But they might also be used as protection against the threat of such an attack, in order to keep it at a distance, to repel it—as one bends or recoils before its force, in flight, behind veils and sails (*des voiles*). But let us leave this elytron to float between the masculine and feminine” (Jacques Derrida, Barbara Harlow, trans., *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago (1979), pp. 37, 39).

“I have often been accused of writing things that are unnecessarily difficult, that could be simplified, and I have even been accused of doing it on purpose. I’d say that this accusation is just and unjust at the same time. It is unjust because I really do try to be clear; it’s not that I amuse my-

self multiplying obstacles to understanding; I can even be pedagogical—often too pedagogical, perhaps. But I have to admit that there is a demand in my writing for this excesses even with respect to what I myself can understand of what I say—the demand that a sort of opening, play, indetermina-tion be left, signifying hospitality to what is to come [*l'ave-nir*]: ‘One does not know what it means yet, one will have to start again, to return, to go on.’ And if there were time, it could be shown precisely how each text enacts a kind of opening—as the Bible puts it—of the place left vacant for who is to come [*pour qui va venir*], for the *arrivant*—maybe Elijah, maybe anyone at all. There has to be the possibility of someone’s still arriving; there has to be an *arrivant*, and consequently the table—the table of contents or the table of the community—has to mark an empty place for some-one absolutely indeterminate, for an *arrivant*—who may be called Messiah, but that’s another question” (Jacques Derrida & Maurizio Ferraris, Giacomo Donis (trans.), *A Taste for the Secret*, Polity: Cambridge (2001), p. 31).

## DECONSTRUCTION’S LIMITATIONS

As we saw Derrida’s interest in writing’s *oppositional relation* to speech, and his use of a single word that *combines two elements* (the difference and deferral of *différance*)—two strategies he employs often—one might be tempted to see him as a dialectician, concerned with overcoming opposition through a third term or category. And indeed some of Derrida’s terms seem to echo Hegel’s “aufheben,” or sublimation—even the word “deconstruction” itself. But this could be a mistake... Derrida tries to *overturn* what are perceived as violent hierarchies—more subtle than Foucault’s historically subjugated “others” in need of liberation—yet more deeply ingrained in western philosophies, languages, and customs. And although his single terms suggest a neither / nor + both / and—hence eluding any sort

of Sheffer Stroked law of non-contradiction (différance being prior to logic, truth, and being)—they do not resolve any oppositions, but rather play with them in un-decidable ways.

Derrida is often interested in the accidental vs. the intentional, errors vs. the correct way, the humorous vs. the serious, the contaminated vs. the pure, the faux vs. the true, the improper vs. the proper, and so on. Not that he enjoys a mess... but reality is usually more complicated than a neat theory can express. Much like Gödel's incompleteness theorem, Derrida often sees the inside of a neat theory as having some hinge which opens up to worlds of other possibilities that said theory cannot touch (e.g. how can meaning based on live speech make sense once the speaker has died?) The book is closed and inter-textuality opened, much like a Bible ended with the New Testament, yet extended indefinitely through the writings of the Cabala. The outside, the other, the different, etc, shapes and interpenetrates the inside, the self, the same, etc: there is no pure theory that can't be cracked or ruptured (metaphors for difference), showing traces in the subject matter of what that pure theory excludes. In so many theories there is a sort of yin-yang binary opposition irreducible to "oneness" where each side contains a bit of the other; yet too often the imbalance between the two is unjust. And the point of contact between the two—the point where reversal of the unjust hierarchy becomes possible in some sort of affirmative action—this hinge often occurs, for Derrida, when examining the marginal... footnotes, prefaces, ambiguities, and other places where "exceptions to the rule" of an ambitious theory, break down upon closer scrutiny—yet these supplemental materials do not destroy the theories when supplanting them, but rather expand and complicate the theories. Again, writing in the broader sense could be said to frame speech; yet speech still precedes writing in the narrower sense. Writing escapes the theory of meaning being present in conscious intent by showing that writing as difference (or writing as a supra-structure—the difference that creates structure) is necessary for intent to be formed—that accidental element turns out to be key.

Critique of Derrida can be difficult both if one does not understand him, and if one does. Deconstruction, as we have seen, revolves around the issue of justice—and it often seems aimed at striking a balance between asymmetrical components (a balance and equality which is implied by any affirmative action). The problem of consciousness being considered epiphenomenal has already been raised. Despite his own creativity, Derrida's theory does not focus much on the self-conscious freedom of subjective creativity. Foucault seems to suggest that we can only be free from social shackles and prejudices if we become cognisant of them: knowledge is power. And studying Derrida can make one much more aware of the biases of language and philosophy. Possibly Husserl survives here, as with some sort of negative theology: we become more aware of consciousness for becoming familiar with all that it is not.

However, Derrida does have a view on language intimately tied with difference, and that may be at odds with fuzzy logic. He suggests that while there is a play in the meaning of words within a delimited zone, fine differences between words are located near their borders. Some might argue that words get fuzzy at the borders, and shade into one another; Derrida does not—see Jacques Derrida, Samuel Weber (trans.), *Limited Inc.*, Northwestern University Press: Evanston, IL (2000). To illustrate the problem consider an example—imagine a child who knows only three color words: blue, red, and yellow. Where is green in this case? Blue? Yellow? It would appear that the language would be fuzzy *in application*: one would not know what to call a green spot, although it seems to be blue or yellow but not red. It would also seem to follow that Derrida needs not only a full breadth of a language refined enough to be exact, but must include any future vocabulary as well, for those borders between words to be fully distinct. People with a limited vocabulary cannot be as precise as people with a developed one; Derrida's theories seem to be focused on language itself, as fully developed, rather than on the limited use by individuals. Yes, we could say that a person uses language in a crude manner, and that society's lan-

guage could have been used to clarify what they were talking about, had they known it. The child says they see a “blue-yellow” spot, and we would know, with our more refined vocabulary, that it is “green.”

At a limit, there might be a word, eventually, for every singular experience: with no need for “iterability”—every experience being spatiotemporally unique and every word used only once. In this case, we can see iterability... the ability to lift a mark from one context and put it in another would entail that some experience would be similar—that the relation of words to experiences would mean that, although not identical, the meaning of a mark would be similar from one context to another (the contexts would be similar). Since we do not have a distinct word for every single experience, words become broader in scope: at its broadest, with a new-born baby, everything might be “mama.” What is being illustrated here is a distinction between language in itself, and language as it is experienced by a human being. A young human being may not have a full grasp on language, yet they are able to communicate. Derrida himself is quite articulate: possibly his theory of meaning really is self-referential, and applies only to people like him. Ironically, He doesn’t fully address the idiosyncratic experiences that people have: I can mean something slightly different by my use of words than you do, based on different experiences we have had with words. Yes, we share many contexts, but don’t share some others. In sidelining subjectivity as a source of meaning (meaning is not found in our self-present conscious intent), Derrida fails to account for the fact of personal histories shaping what people mean when they use words: examination should evidence that language is at least semi-private and at most only semi-public. Derrida’s deconstruction focuses more on public discourse, and hence misses something like half the picture of meaning.