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Politics of Deconstruction was originally published in German in 2011 under the title *Jacques Derrida zur Einführung* © 2011, Junius Verlag, Hamburg.

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free, archival-quality paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lüdemann, Susanne, 1960– author.

[*Jacques Derrida zur Einführung*. English]

Politics of deconstruction : a new introduction to Jacques Derrida / Susanne Lüdemann ; translated by Erik Butler.

pages cm

“Originally published in German in 2011 under the title *Jacques Derrida zur Einführung*.”

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8047-8412-2 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8047-8413-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Derrida, Jacques. 2. Deconstruction. 3. Criticism. I. Title.

B2430.D484L83613 2014

194—dc23

20140085

ISBN 978-0-8047-9302-5 (electronic)

POLITICS OF DECONSTRUCTION

A New Introduction to Jacques Derrida

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Translated by Erik Butler

STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA

I dedicate the American edition of this book to my former colleagues and students at the University of Chicago, where most of it was written, and especially to those who participated in my graduate class on Derrida in winter 2011.

Contents

Preface: Derrida's Legacy

First Approach: Generations, Genealogies, Translations, and Contexts

Second Approach: The Metaphysics of Presence and the Deconstruction of Logocentrism

Third Approach: There Are "Undeconstructibles" (Are There?)

Fourth Approach: Deconstruction and Democracy

Epilogue: Deconstruction in America / America in Deconstruction

Appendix: Biography of Jacques Derrida

Notes

Selected Bibliography

Preface: Derrida's Legacy

It is one thing to determine and describe the opinions of philosophers. It is an entirely different thing to talk through [durchsprechen] with them what they are saying, and that means, that of which they speak.

—Martin Heidegger, “What is Philosophy?”

We must begin *wherever we are*. . . . *Wherever we are*: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be.¹

When he died in Paris in October 2004, the philosopher Jacques Derrida was a kind of media star. Auditors from all over the world flocked to his lectures and crowded the halls of the École Normale Supérieure, and later those of the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. When he spoke on matters such as the “politics of friendship” or “questions of responsibility,” a battery of devices recorded his every word. Derrida, whose writings have been translated into forty languages, held guest-professorships and lectured across the globe, received honorary degrees from twenty-five universities, and gave countless interviews on philosophy and current events. Two films were made about him, which presented the avid public with a portrait of both the thinker and the man himself, in private life.

For a philosopher—even one as prolific as Derrida—such publicity is unusual. The time has passed when philosophy played a leading role in the public sphere. Today, a lot of people are more likely to seek answers to the “big questions” from biology or the neurosciences. Moreover, Derrida’s celebrity stands in inverse relation to the difficulty his texts present. While “deconstruction” became a fashionable label for theoretical works in the 1980s and 1990s, few people actually bothered reading the texts that received this appellation. Indeed, the attention the media paid to the reception of Derrida’s writings often proved a hindrance inasmuch as they gave rise, especially in Germany and the United States, to dismissals of the philosopher as a charlatan and of his concerns as so many rhetorical obfuscations; needless to say, discounting Derrida in this way spared his critics the effort of actually reading what he had written.

The book at hand is *not* meant as a substitute for reading Derrida’s texts. Such an intention would be misplaced for at least two reasons: to begin with, the body of texts that appeared under the name “Jacques Derrida” is too vast to be discussed and commented—much less summed up—in an introductory work. It includes, depending how one reckons, between twenty-five and forty books, several collections of essays, and countless lectures and articles; and that calculation leaves aside the thousands of pages of unpublished material housed at the Critical Theory Archive of the University of California at Irvine. Moreover, the subject itself makes a synoptic account impossible. Once one has taken to heart the lesson of *reading* that deconstruction offers—a lesson that constitutes the project above all else—one cannot consider a commentary to provide an adequate substitute, no matter how knowledgeable, learned, and consecrated by academic authority it may be. After Derrida, one should not presume to reformulate what an author has already said (or intended to say) in a more concise, systematic, or clear manner; attempting to do so can only occur at the price of misrecognizing and betraying the object of commentary (cf. below, 2.3).

Accordingly, this slim volume is not meant to replace other introductory works, which have their own merits and rights. Instead, it seeks to provide the reader with a means of finding his or her own way into Derrida’s work—by retracing the points of entry that the author herself has found over the years. These modes of approach are *ways among others*—paths of one particular reading marked by the contingencies of academic and personal history. If it is true that reading means finding “the signifying structure that critical reading should produce”² in the first place (see below, 2.2), then

other way of proceeding even exists. Of course, the book was not written without consideration those for whom it is intended. Above all, it is addressed to students of the humanities, as well as parties within and outside the academy interested in philosophy and politics, who desire “guidance”—explanations of concepts, preconditions, and historical and thematic contexts that are not self-evident. This study seeks to strike a balance between determining and describing “opinions,” on the one hand, and “talking them through,” on the other.

In keeping with Derrida’s insights, such discussion involves “writing-” or “working through” in the Freudian sense—a mode of inheritance that entails appropriating and passing along what has been handed down. Despite his reputation as a “nihilist” and a “destroyer of tradition,” Derrida repeatedly emphasized that we are the heirs of a philosophical and political tradition for which we must assume responsibility. However, he also stressed that the legacy cannot simply be taken as a self-evident matter; it is inherently heterogeneous, contradictory, and divided. “An inheritance is never gathered together,” one reads in *Specters of Marx* (1994),

it is never one with itself. Its presumed unity, if there is one, can consist only in the *injunction to reaffirm by choosing*. “One must choose” means one must filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out several different possibles that inhabit the same injunction. [. . .] *If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it. We would be affected by it as by a cause—natural or genetic. One always inherits from a secret—which says “read me, will you ever be able to do so?”*³

The same holds for Derrida’s legacy—an immense corpus of texts that do not yield the unity of a book (or the book-as-an-integrated-whole, an *oeuvre*). Derrida’s writings expound, vary, and abandon themes, which are then taken up in other books and lectures, where they are treated again, further modified, and considered in a new light. In this way, a footnote provides the point of departure for another text, a preface points to a book yet to be written. Such experimentation with textual form “possesses” a “method” only insofar as it actively negates the classical conception of philosophy as a series of deductive steps leading to the recognition and demonstration of the truth (for reasons that will be discussed).

Derrida’s work does not yield a system of theses that one might reconstruct in keeping with the logic of a development from point A to point B. Rather, it resembles an open network of references and correspondences—a “fabric of traces”⁴ in a space of writing and thinking where readings overlap, motifs echo each other, and lines of interpretation intersect, change direction, and then diverge. In a certain sense, this space of writing and thinking occupies the space of the tradition whose inheritance Derrida understood himself to be, into which he inscribed his own works—above all, by a process of reading. For Derrida, *reading* (*reading as inheriting*, and *inheriting* as transformative transmission) represents philosophical praxis *tout court*. For this reason, the book at hand considers it essential to explain what *reading*, in the deconstructive sense of the word, means. It lies in the nature of the matter (insofar as the author of this book follows the deconstructive project) that this can only occur through *reading*, and this is why the following offers more exemplary readings of texts than attempts to summarize them (i.e., write about or “describe” “opinions”).

At the same time, the study represents a compromise with classical, propaedeutic form inasmuch as it respects chronology. After an introductory chapter on the philosophical-historical preconditions of deconstruction, the readings follow, for the most part, the sequence in which Derrida’s texts were written or published. Proceeding in this fashion makes it possible to discern a certain succession of themes and a shift in focus. Derrida’s writings up to the 1980s are devoted above all to the concepts of the sign, writing, text, and difference, which are *displaced* in order to deconstruct the metaphysics of presence. The texts of the late 1980s until Derrida’s death, on the other hand, more frequently address ethical and political topics, which are explored in conjunction with the undeconstructible premises of deconstruction (cf. [Third Approach](#)). How and why the critique of language is inseparable from ethi-

—how and why the deconstruction of ontology connects with the project of thinking a “democracy come”—will also be our concern.

A word about what is *not* treated on the following pages is in order. Among Derrida’s “main works, this includes *Glas* (1974), his engagement with Hegel and Jean Genet, and two books that contribute to (the critique of) aesthetics and the philosophy of the body: *Truth in Painting* (1978) and *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* (2000). Likewise, Derrida’s discussion of Husserl, the focus of his first publications, is treated only in passing. Finally, the matter of deconstruction and psychoanalysis would have deserved a chapter of its own, as would the topic of deconstruction and literature (even though attention is paid to the significance of both for situating deconstruction in the contemporary theoretical landscape). The omissions stem from limitations of space, as well as from personal decisions that deem some matters more directly relevant than others. Among the different possibilities inhering in Derrida’s injunction, I have given preference to those that seem more likely than others to have an effect extending beyond the borders of the academy—those that entail changes in our ways of thinking and acting. In this, I follow Derrida’s own articulation of the role of deconstruction, which

would like, in order to be consistent with itself, not to remain enclosed in purely speculative, theoretical, academic discourses but rather . . . to aspire to something more consequential, to *change* things and to intervene in an efficient and responsible, though always, of course, very mediated way, not only in the profession but in what one calls the *cit *, the *polis*, and more generally the world.⁵

Whether this, after the author’s death, will prove possible, depends most of all on the readiness of those who have survived Derrida to *inherit* from him, read his writings, work through them, critique them, and reaffirm his legacy *by choosing*.

Even if such a decision, in the final instance, must be undertaken independently, an introduction may still help one to find “one’s own way.” The undertaking is not easy, especially from my own German perspective. In Germany, the university system never paid much heed to structuralism, poststructuralism, or psychoanalysis. In Germany as well as in the US, linguists read everyone but Saussure, psychologists read everyone but Freud, and academic philosophers have never been able to make much of Derrida (among other reasons, because of omissions practiced by their colleagues in the aforementioned fields). Not much has changed since I was a student in the 1980s—the buzz in the media surrounding Derrida as a public intellectual, now as then, amounts to deafness and resistance to the matters that concerned him.

It reflects my own interpretation when I describe the reasons underlying deconstruction as the attempt to find a responsible form of philosophizing “after Auschwitz,” to paraphrase Theodor W. Adorno. Derrida does not explicitly voice this intention anywhere in his work (except, perhaps, somewhere in his unedited papers), and he never mentioned Adorno more than in passing (and that, according to reliable sources, mainly in the late, still-unpublished seminars). The differences between Adorno and Derrida are, of course, significant. In a word, Adorno views the “nonidentical” as an unredeemed or unreconciled form of identity; for Derrida—who refers to it by the name *diff rance*—it represents a form of auto-affection that, while irreducible, must be affirmed. All the same, it is no accident that a form of connectivity exists between Critical Theory and deconstruction: for both projects seek to explore the consequences of twentieth-century (European) catastrophe. That is, both projects seek to *assume this inheritance—especially this inheritance—in view of a future which nothing of the like should occur again*.

We are not free to reject this responsibility. Indeed, as Derrida says, we are responsible to past and future alike, whether we wish to be and whether we know it, or not. It is this condition of obligation that makes it necessary to read. And so, wherever we are, we must begin there. Somewhere, wherever we are: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be—for example, in this one, here.

First Approach: Generations, Genealogies, Translations, and Contexts

I believe that this difficulty with belonging, one would almost say of identification, affects the whole of Jacques Derrida's oeuvre, and it seems to me that 'the deconstruction of the proper' is the very thought of this, its thinking affection.¹

1.1 From the "Three-H Generation" to the "Three Masters of Suspicion"

Jacques Derrida was born July 15, 1930, in El-Biar, near Algiers. His parents were assimilated Sephardic Jews, which inscribed the question of belonging into his life in multiple ways. Having grown up French among Arabs, and Jewish among Maghreb Muslims, Derrida first arrived in Paris at the age of twenty-two, shortly before the Algerian War of Independence; as a French Algerian (*coûlé noir*—"blackfoot" in colloquial parlance), he did not belong to the establishment there, either. Even when he had achieved worldwide fame, Derrida's position in the French university system remained relatively modest, although ultimately this was due more to his controversial philosophical theses than to his origins. Before relocating to Paris, Derrida—who did not know Hebrew and never attended a yeshiva—experienced his connection to Judaism primarily through anti-Semitic ascription from without. Under the Vichy regime, Algerian Jews had lost their French citizenship, and Jewish children had been turned away from schools (as one principal explained: "French culture is not made for little Jews"²). Perhaps it is not unwarranted to see in these biographical facts an important motif of Derrida's thought, which can be designated—in an initial, summary fashion—as a *thinking difference* in all its forms.

Derrida came to Paris in 1952 as a student at the *École Normale Supérieure*, where he also taught from 1965 until 1984. The Parisian philosophical landscape was shaped by the so-called "Three-Generation"—that is, French disciples and interpreters of Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger. At the time, the dominant orientations in philosophy were existentialism (Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus), French phenomenology (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur), and structuralism (Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology and Jacques Lacan's structural psychoanalysis). Politically, engagement with the Algerian War and Stalinist Communism set the tone of the day. Subsequently, especially in the 1960s, a transition occurred from the "Three-H Generation" to the "three masters of suspicion": Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. This shift is associated with the emergence of what has come to be known as poststructuralism, a grouping that includes—besides Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, and others—Jacques Derrida himself. (To be sure, such classifications are not easy: one may rightfully hesitate to call Ricoeur a phenomenologist, and Lacan is every bit as much a "poststructuralist" as he is a "structuralist"—or maybe neither. Roland Barthes, who is counted among poststructuralists in standard reference works, understood himself as a structuralist. Many teachers and fellow travelers of Derrida and his contemporaries—for example, Maurice Blanchot—defy such categorization altogether.)

It is remarkable that the "triumvirates" of French philosophy uses to count its generations consist exclusively of German-language thinkers. However, this in no way means that French philosophy of the twentieth century lacks originality and independence. Rather, it is in France that the most important consequences of the grand philosophical projects of modernity—from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* to Nietzsche's "transvaluation of all values," Heidegger's fundamental ontology, and Freud's metapsychology—have been drawn. After the Second World War, French philosophers took up radical ways of thinking about modernity that began in Germany and were interrupted—to lasting effect—by National Socialism, and they followed them through to the

“postmodern” consequences. Post-war German philosophy, on the other hand, produced Frankfurt School Critical Theory, which drew chiefly on Hegel and Marx, until, in the mid-1980s, readings of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Freud from France introduced changes to the intellectual horizon.

It is significant, for the productive appropriation of the German “triumvirate” that occurred in France, that the most important texts often were not readily accessible. In some cases, they had only recently been translated (the first French edition of *Phenomenology of Spirit* appeared in 1947; the first complete translation of *Being and Time* did not come out until the 1980s). In other cases, key works had not been published at all—for example, many writings by Husserl. Instead of having complete editions laden with the interpretations of academic authorities, French readers dealt with a quarry of fragments, partial translations, manuscripts, and works in the German original; inevitably, differences of culture and language were inscribed in the fabric of every translation.

Derrida’s path through this multi-faceted intellectual and political landscape did not follow a straight line. His first years in Paris were also shaped by profound personal crises. The only constant from the beginning, was a rejection of Sartre’s existentialism, from which Heidegger had also distanced himself in the *Letter on Humanism* (addressed to the French philosopher and Germanist Jean Beaufret in 1946). The *Letter* marks a decisive date for the intellectual debate in France, because it not only includes a self-interpretation (Heidegger’s account of his so-called *turn [Kehre]* in the 1930s) but also, immediately “after Auschwitz,” initiated the discussion on humanism. Beaufret had asked Heidegger whether, after what had happened, it was still possible to find a new sense for the term. Heidegger responded by roundly critiquing humanism as an essentially metaphysical enterprise that, because of its built-in limitations, missed the “essence” of human existence. His reply was also directed against Sartre, who, in a polemical piece from the previous year—*Is Existentialism a Humanism?*—had unequivocally answered his own question in the affirmative. This debate stands at the origin of much talk—which has been as popular as it has been mistaken—about the “end of man” and the “death of the subject” (most often attributed to Foucault). In Germany, the discourse had contributed to characterizations of French poststructuralism not only as anti-humanist but as anti-human (i.e., as irrationalist and hostile to Enlightenment).

Among other things, this introduction means to combat such simplifications—at least as far as Derrida is concerned. For the most part, they result from imprecise readings (when they are not pretext to avoid the work of reading altogether). In a lecture entitled “Finis Hominis”—delivered in April 1968, against the background of Parisian student riots, failed peace negotiations in Vietnam, and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.—Derrida brought philosophy and politics together when he took up the humanism debate and distanced himself from both Sartre and Heidegger. This talk also renders idle another allegation often leveled against Derrida—that deconstruction is “aestheticizing” and therefore apolitical. As we will see later on, nothing could be more mistaken.

Derrida’s first writings were devoted to Heidegger’s teacher, Edmund Husserl. In his 1953 dissertation, *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl’s Philosophy*, Derrida translated Appendix III of Husserl’s late work, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, and provided an introduction considerably longer than the primary text.³ In 1967, Derrida published *Speech and Phenomena: An Essay on the Problem of the Sign in Husserl’s Philosophy*. This work articulates the critique of phonocentrism, logocentrism, and presence to which *Of Grammatology* (which appeared the same year and remains Derrida’s best-known book) opposes a “science of writing.” Two essays on Husserl from the same time warrant mention as well: “‘Genesis and Structure’ and Phenomenology” and “Form and Meaning: A Note on the Phenomenology of Language.”

However, this introductory chapter concerns not Husserl, but Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Freud whose projects Derrida inherited in *methodological* terms. (Later, Derrida turned away from Husserl

altogether; of phenomenological authors, only Emmanuel Levinas remained important to him.⁴) In addition, structuralism and the “linguistic turn” provide immediate preconditions for the poststructuralist critique of the sign. The selection is not arbitrary. While incomplete, it permits us, in brief traits, to sketch the intellectual horizons of deconstruction, both as a *philosophical project* and as a *practice of reading*. Against this background, a paradigm shift occurred in the second half of the nineteenth- and the first half of the twentieth centuries. Stated summarily, it may be characterized as a change from thinking in terms of identity to thinking along lines of difference, a move from thinking about sameness to thinking in terms of the other, and reorientation away from the primacy of consciousness toward the primacy of language. The shift occurred as a radical self-critique within the philosophical tradition. Its most conspicuous symptom is a somewhat apocalyptic tone—the end of a world and history (Hegel), the end of philosophy (Heidegger), the end of man (Nietzsche, Heidegger), the death of God (Nietzsche), the death of the subject (Foucault), and the death of the author (Barthes). The break is evident when one compares Hegel, the last systematic philosopher (for whom the end of history was synonymous with its fulfillment), and Nietzsche, the first diagnostician of the “rise of nihilism.”

Ever since Nietzsche, the philosophical tradition that began with Plato and Aristotle has no longer been understood as a historical progression leading to a final system of knowledge and insight, but as a problematic inheritance whose ontological and epistemological value stands to be questioned. In the years surrounding 1900, representative words of debate are the “transvaluation of all values” (Nietzsche), “crisis of the spirit” (Valéry), linguistic crisis, “crisis of the European sciences” (Husserl), and “decline of the West” (Spengler). The reasons for the heightened sense of collapse are too numerous to be discussed here. Political events, wars (above all, the First World War), economic disaster, and the development of modern mass society play as great a role as what Max Weber (among others) diagnosed as the increasing rationalization and “disenchantment” of the world. In what follows, we must limit ourselves to the self-critique of philosophical thinking relevant to Derrida.

1.2 The “Destruction of the History of Ontology” and Dasein as “In-Between” (Heidegger)

Derrida first used the term “deconstruction” in the book that made him famous: *Of Grammatology*. Although he observes that the word already existed in the French language, it was rarely used. Derrida employed it to translate two other concepts: first, Heidegger’s program calling for the “destruction” of the history of ontology, and, second, Freud’s concept of “dissociation.” Thereby, he invoked two very different predecessors, whose very different concepts his project simultaneously combines and interprets. We shall begin with the first.

In *Being and Time* (1926), Heidegger had declared the “task” of undertaking the “destruction of the history of ontology.” Since Aristotle, Heidegger wrote, ontology—a term comprised of two Greek words: *on* (“being,” the present participle of *einai* [“to be”]) and *logos* (“reasoning,” “word,” “speech”)—has been understood to concern *beings* alone. Therefore, he argues, philosophical tradition has missed—and obscured—the question of the sense of Being itself. For Aristotle, ontology represents “first philosophy” (*prote philosophia*) or “theological science” (*episteme theologike*). Elsewhere, Aristotle calls ontology “general metaphysics,” which he defines as follows:

There is a kind of science whose remit is being *qua* being and the things pertaining to that which is *per se*. This science is not the same as any of the departmental disciplines. For none of these latter engages in this *general* speculation about that which is *per se* that which is. Rather, they delimit some section of what is and study its accidental features (a prime example is mathematics). We

however, are investigating principles and fundamental causes, and these must evidently pertain *per se* to a kind of nature.⁵

Thus, ontology or metaphysics represents the most general of intellectual disciplines. It does not

investigate a specific realm of Being (as, for example, biology and physics do—or, more recently, psychology and sociology); instead, it explores the attributes characterizing all that exists, insofar as it exists. For Aristotle, these attributes include “substance,” “quantity,” “quality,” “relation,” “where,” “when,” “having,” “doing,” and “being-affected” (the so-called “categories,” or, in Latin, “predicates”). However, Being itself does not represent a category, since the concept of mere existence counts as *empty*. For Aristotle and the entire tradition that follows after him, the concept of Being adds nothing. Whatever we imagine, we picture as already existing. In this way, Being is implicit in beings, but it cannot be separated from them nor can it stand on its own. Linguistic usage reflects that it only represents the copula (“link”) of judgment—something connecting the subject of a sentence and its predicate. If I say, “The sky is blue,” “Socrates is a human being,” or “Deconstruction is a philosophical method,” all these sentences have the form: A (subject) *is* B (predicate). The existence of the subjects (“sky,” “Socrates,” “deconstruction”) is expressed—it lies in the tiny word “is”—but only has the function of tying together A and B. An utterance of the type “A is” (“The sky is,” “Socrates is”) would, in a standard, ontological conception, be either meaningless or superfluous since it expresses nothing that is not already contained in A. In this view, referring to something as existing and referring to it as something in existence mean the same thing, even if what is being referred to no longer exists (like Socrates, who has died) or does not, in fact, exist yet (like the sky tomorrow): past and future are modalities of Being conceived in terms of the present.

Here, Heidegger stresses that the “sense of Being” should by no means count as something as self-evident as metaphysical tradition claims. His philosophy does not address beings as beings, but focuses instead on what “is”—the unthought basis of Being that the occidental tradition does not explore, yet which determines our understanding of beings. Heidegger calls his project in *Being and Time* “fundamental ontology”; it represents the attempt to get behind ontology as the supposed first philosophy and to uncover its preconditions. This uncovering requires “destruction”—not wholesale annihilation, but rather, following the Latin verb *destruere*, the act of undoing or taking-apart—the patient removal of layers of philosophical inheritance, back to pre-Socratic fundamentals:

If the question of Being is to have its own history made transparent, then this hardened tradition must be loosened up, and the concealments which it has brought about must be dissolved. We understand this task as one in which *by taking the question of Being as our clue* we are to destroy the traditional content of ancient ontology until we arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being—the ways which have guided us ever since.

In thus demonstrating the origin of our basic ontological concepts by an investigation in which their “birth certificate” is displayed, we have nothing to do with a vicious relativizing of ontological standpoints. But this destruction is just as far from having the *negative* sense of shaking off the ontological tradition. We must, on the contrary, stake out the *positive* possibilities of that tradition, and this means keeping it within its *limits*; and these in turn are given factually in the way the question is formulated at the time, and in the way the possible field for investigation is thus bounded off. On its negative side, this destruction does not relate itself toward the past; its criticism is aimed at “today” and at the prevalent way of treating the history of ontology. . . . But to bury the past in nullity [*Nichtigkeit*] is not the purpose of this destruction; its aim is *positive*; its negative function remains unexpressed and indirect.⁶

This de-struction brings to light the implicit pre-understanding of Being as *presence*, which privileges the here-and-now (in linguistic terms, the “present tense”). In keeping with this pre-understanding, the philosophical tradition has always understood the Being of what exists in terms of availability and objectivity. All that is, is conceived as a mass of things that are, in substance, identical with themselves—entities that somehow are, were, or will be available in the world. The ways we think and depend so deeply on such a pre-understanding that it never becomes apparent how a certain *interpretation* of Being already underlies them. It seems that what is, is waiting there for us—“automatically,” as it were. The sky, a desk, deconstruction—they just are. They may be blue, wood, and difficult to understand, but no reasonable doubt seems possible that they are already parts of our surroundings—and that we, too, are available (or, to employ Heidegger’s

terminology, “present-at-hand” [*vorhanden*]) as a kind of thing ourselves. Indeed, the philosophical tradition, up to Hegel, conceived of the human being—the subject—as a substance identical with itself. This substance thinks and is therefore not simply a thing among others; rather, it encounters objects (and other subjects) in the world. All the same, it is still conceived as a substance (*res cogitans*, as Descartes put it), which assures itself of its own presence in the world and that of its objects by thinking. Many names have been given to this “thing that thinks” in the course of history—“subject,” “spirit,” “consciousness,” “soul,” “ego,” “self,” “person”—but in ontological terms, it has always been conceived as something whose being, explicitly or implicitly, has retained the meaning of presence and availability.⁷

Heidegger’s “destruction” of the traditional understanding of Being begins precisely here. Heidegger remarks that what exists in “subjectlike” fashion, when it understands itself as present-at-hand, fundamentally misses its own, intrinsic way of being. For this reason, he avoids concepts like “subject” and “ego” and uses the term *Dasein* (literally: *being there*) instead. Above all, *Dasein* is the kind of being that we are “each one of us,” and therefore the Being of this being is “always mine” (*meines*). It is not “always mine” in the sense of my being present-at-hand to me and others, however, but in such a way that the “for-the-sake-of-which” of my being is this being itself.

Whereas an animal, a tree, and other entities simply *are* and do not pose the question of which possibilities inhabit them (indeed, they are not even able to pose this question), *Dasein* is distinguished by the fact that it asks for the “sense of Being”—above all for the sense of its “ownmost being. According to Heidegger, such Being and meaning are never simply given; in essence, they are potentiality, openness, projection, and possibility. Therefore, *Dasein* can never be understood ontologically as an “instance or special case of some genus of entities that are present-at-hand.”⁸ Nevertheless, Heidegger says that the “essence” of *Dasein* lies in “existence,”⁹ what he means does not coincide with the traditional concept of existence as comprised of objects present-at-hand. Later, to avoid misunderstanding and to emphasize the differences between his own philosophy and French existentialism—Sartre’s magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*, had appeared in 1943—Heidegger wrote *Ek-sistenz* instead of *Existenz*. (Derrida’s neographism *différance*, in lieu of *différence* [see Chapter 2], may have followed this precedent.) In the *Letter on Humanism* (1954), Heidegger cautiously referred Jean Beaufret to what he had written in *Being and Time*—“the ‘essence’ of *Dasein* lies in its existence”—and he put “essence” in quotes to signal its problematic status.¹⁰

The literal meaning of the word “existence,” which comes from Latin, is “standing out” or “standing outside.” The way Heidegger writes the term emphasizes the eccentric condition of *Dasein*—its indeterminacy and “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*) into an unknown present and future. In contrast to an animal, *Dasein* can “win” or “lose”¹¹ itself because of the “innate” lack of direction in its Being. *Dasein* has, as its “ownmost possibility” (*eigenste Möglichkeit*),¹² an authentic relationship to Being, but it can also fall short of realizing this potential and lapse into the boundless falsehood that Heidegger calls “the They” (*das Man*) and “idle talk” (*Gerede*)—what “everybody says” in keeping with prevailing opinions and prejudices. Heidegger counts the whole of modern science as “idle talk” insofar as it remains stuck in the traditional conception of Being. Neither psychology nor biology nor anthropology has considered man, *Dasein*, in terms other than those of the passed-down categories of something that exists as present-at-hand—whether as the subject of acts of reason or feelings, as a thinking life form, or as the creature of God.¹³ How, then, is Heidegger’s analysis of *Dasein* different from what is offered by these sciences?

Heidegger does not see *Dasein* as determined by categories, but through what he terms *existentialia*. They include “being-in-the-world” (*in-der-Welt-sein*), “situatedness” (or “state/condition,” *Befindlichkeit*), “understanding” (*Verstand*), “discourse” (or “speech,” *Rede*), “fallenness

(*Verfallenheit*), “anxiety” (or “dread,” *Angst*), and “care” (or “concern,” *Sorge*). *Existentialia* are not attributes belonging to Dasein as matters present-at-hand. Rather, they are forms in which Dasein realizes itself. It is readily apparent that this list contains what classical subject-philosophy considers accidents (that, is non-essential properties). *Understanding* and *discourse* can, if need be, correspond to terms of the Aristotelian definition of human being as *zoon logon echon*—the life form that thinks and speaks. However, Heidegger assigns them a different meaning altogether, and *situatedness*, *fallenness*, *anxiety*, and *care* represent something markedly different from what the tradition preceding him proposed as essential qualities of human beings. Heidegger explicitly states that these concepts should not be understood in a colloquial sense; rather, he insists that the terminology derive strictly from the basic structure of Dasein. It cannot be denied that affect comes into play, which the philosophical tradition has considered to be comprised of secondary phenomena—and chiefly disruptive ones, which restrict the capacity for insight and moral judgment. Heidegger, however—and in contrast to his predecessors—emphasizes the world-disclosing function of situatedness (or, as he puts it elsewhere, “being attuned” [*Gestimmtheit*]). Situatedness provides the basis for the way Dasein refers to itself and the world, and it is impossible to abstract it from this material state of being. Likewise, understanding and discourse (as the articulation of understanding) are never value-free or neutral: they signify determinate understanding and definite discourse, which are bound up with the sum of Dasein’s relations to the world of which it forms a part.

Moreover, Heidegger employs the *existentialia* to understand Dasein in terms of its temporality—that is, in terms of *historicity*. Dasein is

- “always already” thrown into a world that was there before it came into being; it is, as a matter of course, situated within the transmission of culture,
- “ahead of itself” in that it *understands* the world and seizes or rejects the possibilities it offers,
- “among” all that is within the world, that is, among the things and human beings that give it immediate points of orientation.

Heidegger sees the “being of Dasein,” which he denominates “care” or “concern” (*Sorge*), in the unity of these three temporal dimensions, and he defines “care/concern,” in his personal idiom, as “ahead-of-itself-already-being-in (a world) as Being-alongside (beings encountered within-the-world) (*Sich-vorweg-schon-sein-in [der Welt] als Sein-bei [innerweltlich] begegnendem Seienden*).”¹⁴ In the moment of care or concern, Dasein is no longer primarily determined by presence. Rather, as the dimension of what is at hand, presence belongs to the dimension of *fallenness*, where Dasein becomes oblivious and goes missing among the things of the world. Dasein’s ability to exist “authentically,” on the other hand, is determined by the future, toward which Dasein projects itself, and from which it comes toward itself. Insofar as this future only ends in the moment of death, Dasein is *always* its own future; it is *always* still pending and, for this reason, *never* a “fulfilled” presence identical with itself.

“It is essential to the basic constitution of Dasein that it comprises continuous incompleteness (*eine ständige Unabgeschlossenheit*).”¹⁵ This refers, on the one hand, to all that lives—whatever comes into being (is born) and ceases to be; yet in contrast to an animal or plant, Dasein *knows* about its futurity—and that means, above all, that it also knows about its mortality. As the “utmost not-yet,” death is also something not present-at-hand; instead, it stands in the offing for Dasein, which finds its relation to death in the condition of anxiety (*Befindlichkeit der Angst*).¹⁶ In anxiety (before imminent death), Dasein experiences that the impossibility of its own existence represents its utmost condition of being. For Heidegger, therefore, the essence of Dasein is determined by death; it is “being-until-death”:

In anticipation [of the possibility of death] Dasein can first make certain of its ownmost Being in its totality—a totality which is not to be outstripped. Therefore the evidential character which belongs to the immediate givenness of Experiences, of the “I,” or consciousness, must necessarily lag behind the certainty which anticipation includes.¹⁷

The question of the “sense of Being” also arises out of this “anticipation” of (literally, “running ahead into” [*vorlaufen in*]) the possibility of death, out of Dasein’s encounter with the possibility of not being. This encounter brings Dasein, which is seized by anxiety, back to the bare fact of its “ownmost isolated thrownness.”¹⁸ Likewise, the dimensions of present and past are disclosed to Dasein only with reference to the future. Coming back to itself from running ahead into the possibility of death, Dasein becomes cognizant of the finite temporality that constitutes it. It discovers itself as already being—and always having been—in the world, as being kept in suspense between thrownness and projection, birth and death, past and future. “The ‘between’ which relates to birth and death already lies *in the Being* of Dasein. [. . .] Thrownness and that Being towards death in which one either flees it or anticipates it, form a unity; and in this unity birth and death are ‘connected’ in a manner characteristic of Dasein. As care, Dasein is the ‘between.’”¹⁹

As such a “between,” however, Dasein is incontrovertibly nonidentical; it differs from itself. Being of this kind never can coincide with itself in the experience of full self-presence and identity. Heidegger’s “destruction” of the history of ontology leads beyond the conceptions of subject and consciousness in classical philosophy. This is where Derrida’s thought connects with his predecessor’s.

1.3 The De-centering of the Subject and the Critique of Moral Values (Freud, Nietzsche)

As we have noted, “deconstruction” *translates* not only Heidegger’s “destruction,” but also Freud’s concept of “dissociation” (*Dissoziation*, from the Latin verb meaning “to separate/split”). Unlike “the unconscious” or “repression,” this notion is not particularly prominent in Freud’s work. It was coined by the French psychiatrist Pierre Janet (1859–1947), for whom it designated the (pathological) disintegration and fragmentation of consciousness. (Thus, Freud’s term “dissociation” is already a translation, which Derrida translates back into French.) Freud employs the concept only in his *Study on Hysteria* (1895). In his later writings, he prefers the terms “breaking-up of the ego (*Aufsplitterung des Ich*), “ego-split” (*Ichspaltung*), or “division of consciousness” (*Bewusstseinspaltung*)—among other reasons, because he wishes to highlight differences between his own understanding of psychic processes and the ideas of French psychiatry. There is no need to go into the details of the history of the notion. What is important is that Derrida, under the rubric of dissociation, refers to Freud’s model for the psychic apparatus; in so doing, he gestures toward psychoanalysis as another way to move beyond the conceptions of consciousness that underlie traditional philosophy. Psychoanalysis, although it does not belong to philosophical tradition, is no less significant to deconstruction than its philosophical inheritance, properly speaking.

For Freud, the “breaking-up” or “splitting” of the ego results from so-called defense-processes—repression (*Verdrängung*), disavowal (*Verleugnung*), negation (*Verneinung*), and foreclosure (*Verwerfung*)—through which the ego banishes ideas, thoughts, and wishes (especially those with sexual or aggressive content) that are incompatible with its conscious self-image. Freud observes these mechanisms at work in the mentally ill, but he leaves no room for doubt that they are also a normal component of psychic life. Therefore, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the splitting (disassociation) of the psyche into conscious and unconscious parts is not an illness to be eliminated through therapy; rather, it is constitutive for the genesis of the subject, which *must* repress certain drives and desires (for Freud, these are, above all, the Oedipal wishes of childhood) in order to meet the demands of culture and reality. The neurotic, then, is not necessarily someone who represses “more” than others, but someone who represses particularly “badly”: unmastered conflicts originating in the neurotic’s childhood assume the form of psychic and somatic symptoms in adult life. Freud observes that the “offshoots of the unconscious” also find expression in the verbal slips and dreams

“normal” people. In this model of the psyche as a site of conflict, the ego is only one of several instances. Freud characterizes it as a “poor creature owing service to three masters and consequently menaced by three dangers: from the external world, from the libido of the id, and from the severity of the super-ego.”²⁰ As a “frontier-creature” between three sources of danger, the ego occupies a space “in-between”—the “actual seat of anxiety.”²¹ It “represents what can be called prudence and reason and is to a great extent conscious (if not entirely so); at the same time, however, the ego forms only a small part of otherwise unknown and unconscious psychic life, “more or less as the germinal disc rests upon the ovum,”²² without fully experiencing or understanding its surroundings.

For all philosophy that equates psychic life with self-awareness (that is to say, for every philosophical system until Hegel), it is impossible to admit unconscious phenomena. The unconscious psychic events should infiltrate the ego behind its back, so to speak, influence its decisions, and restrict its (supposed) autonomy amounts to a grave affront to mankind’s self-image. Freud himself remarked as much when he qualified his discovery as one of the three great injuries to human narcissism that have occurred in history. These affronts are Copernicus’s *cosmological* vision, Darwin’s *biological* theory, and Freud’s own *psychological* notions.²³ All three insults to received ideas have had a *decentering* effect. With Copernicus, the earth is removed from the center of the universe; Darwin deprives man of his special place in creation; and Freud makes consciousness an epiphenomenon of the psyche. As Freud writes, the ego is “not master in its own house,” even though it deceives itself through the narcissistic illusion it maintains by affirming “I think.” We will encounter the Freudian movement of *decentering* in the works of Derrida, who challenges the (self-)deception of logocentrism and Eurocentrism in his works.

Freud was not a philosopher. He wanted psychoanalysis to be accepted as a strict science (as is evident when he compared himself to Copernicus and Darwin). His *decentering* of the subject was anticipated not by Heidegger, who was twenty-three years his junior, but by Nietzsche and, to a lesser extent, by Schopenhauer.²⁴ To Freud’s own list of theories that contested man’s self-image, we should therefore add the *philosophical* inquiries of Nietzsche, whose “guesses and intuitions,” Freud wrote, “often agree in the most astonishing way with the laborious findings of psychoanalysis.” Even more than Heidegger and Freud, Nietzsche stands for the “end of metaphysics”—not just the “death of God” he famously announced, but the death of the human subject, as well. Nietzsche’s genealogical critique of reason anticipates deconstruction in many ways. “When I analyze the procedure that is expressed in the sentence, ‘I think,’” Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*,

I find a whole series of daring assertions that would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to prove; for example, that it is *I* who think (1), that there must necessarily be something that thinks (2), that thinking is an activity and operation on the part of a being who is thought of as a cause (3), that there is an “ego” (4), and, finally, that it is already determined what is to be designated by thinking (5)—that I *know* what thinking is (6).²⁶

Here, in abbreviated and condensed form, Nietzsche casts doubt on an array of basic philosophical concepts: consciousness (1), substance (2), causality (3), the subject (4), the referentiality of language (5), and knowledge/insight (6). Nietzsche denies that the little sentence, “I think,” rests upon a secure foundation or possesses any degree of certainty; instead, its basis is provided by “daring assertions” and “the superstitions of logicians.” In opposition, he sets forth “a small terse fact”:

namely, that a thought comes when “it” wishes, and not when “I” wish, so that it is a falsification of the facts of the case to say that the subject “I” is the condition of the predicate “think.” *It* thinks; but that this “it” is precisely the famous old “ego” is, to put it mildly, only a supposition, an assertion, and assuredly not an “immediate certainty.”²⁷

Through the mediation of Georg Groddeck, this passage inspired Freud’s second model of the psyche, the apparatus, which posited the division of the mind into ego, id, and super-ego.

Nietzsche was also the first to have declared occidental culture’s loss of faith in its highest values.

“nihilism.” Absurdly, to this very day, he is often called a “nihilist” himself for supposedly being the *destroyer* (a criticism that, in the twentieth century, was also leveled at deconstruction and poststructuralism). For Nietzsche, however, “nihilism” is just as little a call to active demolition as Heidegger’s “destruction of metaphysics” or Derrida’s deconstruction. Instead, it represents, more than anything else, a diagnosis: Nietzsche is referring to the fact that “the highest values have devalued themselves.” Thereby, he sums up a condition of culture and history in which faith in the Christian God as the guarantor of truth and morality has vanished—to say nothing of the belief in universal morals and the objectivity of human knowledge. This diagnosis proposes to change the task of philosophy: instead of seeking to deduce the rules of morality and knowledge from universal principles, the questions it raises are historical—or, to use Nietzsche’s own term, *genealogical*. Nietzsche’s philosophical genealogy does not ask for an absolute *origin*, but for historical *background* and *provenance*, as well as for the psychological basis of values and their opposites. Thus, it is not concerned with determining how we can reliably and “objectively” discern good and evil, true and false, right and wrong, and so on (questions it abandons as unanswerable), but rather *how it happened* that we distinguish—and have distinguished—between good and evil, true and false, and so on, *in this way and not otherwise*.

The focus no longer falls on either side of a distinction or its ontological value, but is directed *toward the act of differentiation/distinction itself* as a way of *creating* values that is also, at the same time, a historically contingent operation. As Nietzsche puts it in the *Genealogy of Morals*:

We need a *critique* of moral values, *the value of these values themselves must first be called in question*—and for that there needed a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances in which they grew, under which they evolved and changed (morality as consequence, as symptom, as mask, as tartufferie, as illness, as misunderstanding; but also morality as cause, as remedy, as stimulant, as restraint, as poison), a knowledge of a kind that has never yet existed or even been desired.²⁸

The question concerning the “value of values” therefore already implies that “the Good,” “the True,” “the Beautiful,” and so on, do not have their value “in themselves” but are instead matters of value and judgment that have been established in a certain way, and not otherwise. Thus, for example, “the judgment ‘good’ did *not*,” according to Nietzsche,

originate with those to whom “goodness” was shown! Rather, it was “the good” themselves, that is to say, the noble, powerful, high-stationed and high-minded, who felt and established themselves and their actions as good, that is, of the first rank, in contradistinction to all the low, low-minded, common and plebeian. It was out of this *pathos of distance* that they first seized the right to create values and to coin names for values: what had they to do with utility! [. . .] (The lordly right of giving names extends so far that one should allow oneself to conceive the origin of language itself as an expression of power on the part of rulers: they say “this is this and this,” they seal every thing and event with a sound and, as it were, take possession of it.)²⁹

As later occurred in the works of Heidegger, the *form of judgment* itself is subject to scrutiny, even though Nietzsche shows less concern for the Being that undergoes judgment than for the performative power of the act of judging, which does not trade in representations of the world so much as it creates the world by making determinations about good and evil, truth and lie, light and shadow, value and its opposite in certain ways—and not differently.

It is worth stressing that the guiding distinctions, around which the West has organized its philosophical systems, never consist of two parts of the same value. One must, as Derrida puts it, “recognize that in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy.”³⁰ One of the two terms governs the other and stands above it: the true above the false, good above evil, light above shadow, being above nothing, right above wrong, spirit above body, reason above the senses, the signified above the signifier, identity above difference, man above woman, etc. The hierarchical relationship that governs a given pair of terms posits that one of the two parts is original and central, whereas the other is derivative and marginal. (Here, Being once again comes into play, as the centrality of privileged terms

is always interpreted as being ontologically more complete.) If the inaugural gesture of deconstruction entails reversing the hierarchy of such oppositions (above all, the one between voice and writing, cf. Chapter 2), Nietzsche already observes that both sides of a given distinction also communicate with each other in a subterranean fashion, so to speak. In genealogical terms, what *language* makes appear to be a matter of either/or does not really obtain:

For all the value that the true, the truthful, the selfless may deserve, it would still be possible that a higher and more fundamental value for life might have to be ascribed to deception, selfishness, and lust. It might even be possible that what constitutes the value of these good and revered things is precisely that they are insidiously related, tied to, and involved with these wicked, seeming opposite things—maybe even one with them in essence.³¹

Therefore, it is due only to our fundamental forgetting or repression of the *origin* of our value judgments that we have come to believe in oppositions between values as something absolute. By uncovering the source of value judgments, genealogy destroys belief—which it can do only because belief in the truth has long since undermined itself.

The *genealogical* or *archeological* gesture of uncovering forgotten origins and repressed pasts that one encounters, in different forms, in the works of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Freud, is also to be found in Derrida. It is no coincidence that this genealogical gesture connects with a new way of thinking about language that developed around 1900, to which we now turn in concluding our introductory chapter.

1.4 The Crisis of Language, the Linguistic Turn, and Structuralism (Saussure)

Already for Nietzsche, the search for the derivation of metaphysical concepts and values entails a thorough critique of language as the medium of insight and knowledge. Grammar, according to Nietzsche, structures our perception of reality. Because language offers us subjects and objects, actions and action, Being and Becoming, we believe that these things are also a natural part of reality, where in fact we only project grammatical categories and linguistic representations (including those of the “thing” itself) onto the outside world. “We set up a word at the point at which our ignorance begins, which we can see no further,” Nietzsche wrote in an unpublished aphorism from the 1880s, “e.g., the word ‘I,’ the word ‘do,’ the word ‘suffer’—these are perhaps the horizon of our knowledge, but not ‘truths.’”³² At the same time, Nietzsche also notes the inescapability of this linguistic and perspectival distortion: “We cease to think when we refuse to do so under the constraint of language; we barely reach the doubt that sees this limitation as a limitation. *Rational thought is interpretation according to a scheme that we cannot throw off,*”³³ he writes in the same passage. Along similar lines, Derrida observed some hundred years later in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”: “There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest.”³⁴

Language—in its grammatical structures and categories, as well as the systems of thought that are built upon them—is no longer conceived in terms of insight, knowledge, or the representation of the world, but as a kind of screen or filter that stands between its users and material reality, something that shapes our access to the world while distorting it at the same time. Since around 1900, the *linguistic skepticism* in evidence here has provided a key focus for philosophical and poetic reflection. Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Chandos Letter* provides a prime example. “In brief, this is my case: I have completely lost the ability to think or speak coherently about anything at all.” “I felt an inexplicable uneasiness in even pronouncing the words ‘spirit,’ ‘soul,’ or ‘body,’” the *Letter* continues, “for the abstract words which the tongue must enlist as a matter of course in order to bring out an opinion

disintegrate in my mouth like rotten mushrooms.”³⁵ Independent of contemporary philosophical and literary developments, Ferdinand de Saussure, who is generally considered the founder of structuralism, came to the same conclusion in his linguistic theory. All these events form part of the so-called “linguistic turn,” which occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century—a paradigm shift that affected the whole of the humanities and placed new emphasis on the phenomenon of language as a way not so much of depicting reality as of producing it.

Saussure himself demonstrated little interest in the consequences of his conception of language for philosophical epistemology. His aim was to establish linguistics as a positive science. However, the consequences of his theory for the humanities—ethnology, psychoanalysis, literary studies, and philosophy (including deconstruction)—were so fundamental that the basic ideas must be enumerated before we can proceed to a discussion of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (which critiques and expands on what Saussure began).

It is worth stressing that the originality of Saussure’s approach does not lie in his thesis that the linguistic sign is arbitrary. This idea is as old as thought about language itself and can already be found in Aristotle. “Spoken sounds,” we read in *De Interpretatione*,

Are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of—affections of the soul—are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses of—actual things—are also the same.³⁶

In Saussure’s terminology (which in turn connects with the lexicon of scholasticism), the “affections in the soul” (or mental representations) are called the *signified* (in a scholastic phrasing: *signatum*) and sounds and graphic marks are called the *signifier* (*signans*). What Aristotle and, after him, the scholastics formulated is a (indeed, *the*) classic *representational theory* of language; this conception of language continued, in different forms, until Hegel. According to this theory, what is signified (that is, mental representation) involves the natural depiction of objects, and these objects are the same for all people. Only in a second step is signified matter designated by signifiers (i.e., spoken and written words). In contrast to what is signified, signifiers are arbitrary, for different languages qualify the same idea (e.g., “tree”) by means of different combinations of sounds and letters (*Baum*, *arbor*, *arbr*, etc.). Signifieds are natural representations of things; verbal signifiers (spoken words) are artificial and conventional representations of signifieds. Signifiers in writing (letters), in turn, are artificial and conventional representations of verbal expressions and therefore “of the second order.” Such a graduated scheme of representations also establishes an ontological hierarchy inasmuch as, along with distance from the “things themselves,” the power of representation and, therefore, the quotient of “reality” diminishes, as it were: signifieds possess fullness, for they (supposedly) consist of pure linguistic impressions made by objects directly on the mind; spoken words involve a step away from direct reference to reality, but their proximity to mental representations, through the consciousness of the speaker who voices them, still assures relative accuracy; finally, written signs are “merely” signifiers of spoken words—signifiers of signifiers, that is—and, because they are cut off from the consciousness of the speaker, they stand at the farthest remove from the living, embodied truth of the speaker.

Aristotle—and the whole tradition after him—conceives of language in terms of *meaning* (the signified), *reference* (material objects), and, ultimately, *representation* (a sign standing for, and depicting, a thing). Because it is an arbitrary and conventional system of signs, language, as the *medium of access to the world*, is exposed to error and misinterpretation, but, because its users remain oriented in a reality they share with others through consciousness and intention, its fundamental reliability prevails. Still more: through the equation “one object for one representation for one signifier (per language),” it also seems assured that the divisions of language correspond to the division of things. While one can err and, at a distance, mistake a dog for a cat, or (as in the Greek

legend of the grapes of Zeuxis) confuse painted grapes for real ones, there can be no doubt that dogs, cats, grapes, and pictures of grapes really exist—and that these things exist fully as entities inherent different from one another and identical to themselves in terms of their fundamental essence. In the classical theory of language as representation, reference to reality—and therefore the “truthfulness” of language and the distinctions constituting it—is guaranteed.³⁷

Saussure’s linguistics intervenes at the decisive juncture of semiotics, epistemology, and ontology. As mentioned, this does not occur explicitly, but follows from his conception of the linguistic sign—or, more precisely, from the changed position of the *signified* within his theory. To state matters in summary fashion: *for Saussure, signifieds are parts of the linguistic sign—they are just as arbitrary and conventional as signifiers. In this view, they cease to be natural representations of things and become effects of signification instead. Consequently, Saussure questions language’s reference to reality in a more fundamental way than anyone before him.* The equation between one object and one representation loses its validity; as a result, the distinctions made in language no longer qualify as an adequate representation of “the order of things.” If, for classical theories of the sign, the identity of the individual sign was guaranteed by its reference to the signified (and thus, ultimately, by the self-identity of its referent in reality), for Saussure, the question is how the internal divisions of language (i.e., the differences between signifiers and signifieds alike) have come to be at all. His answer is that it has occurred through *articulation* (and not *representation*). This response seems straightforward but it requires some additional commentary insofar as the principle of *articulation* leads to the concept of language as a *system of differences* (and not identities). Herein lies the truly revolutionary aspect of Saussure’s linguistics.

Saussure’s point of departure is that both the sonic and ideational materials of language (potential signifiers and signifieds, that is) are initially present to human consciousness only as two amorphous masses without inherent divisions. A “chaotic mass of representations” is paired with an equally undifferentiated array of sounds that neither mean nor refer to anything by themselves. Only in the process of articulation—in French, *articuler* means both “to voice” and “to divide/distribute”—do recognizable signifiers and signifieds emerge. *Language as articulation does not stem from a pre-ordained presence (of meaning or of reality); rather, it is determined by a process of differentiation that produces identities only after the fact, as effects:*

The characteristic role of language with respect to thought is not to create a material, phonic means for expressing ideas but to serve as a link between thought and sound, under conditions that of necessity bring about the reciprocal delimitations of unit. Thought, chaotic by nature, has to become ordered in the process of its decomposition. Neither are thoughts given material form nor are sounds transformed into mental entities; the somewhat mysterious fact is rather that “thought-sound” implies division, and that language works out its units while taking shape between two shapeless masses. [. . .]

Language might be called the domain of articulations [. . .]. Each linguistic term is a member, an *articulus* in which an idea is fixed in a sound and a sound becomes the sign of an idea.³⁸

Therefore, it is impossible to treat language as “a naming-process only”—that is, as Saussure writes, as “a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names.”³⁹ This conception of language presumes “that readymade ideas exist before words.”⁴⁰ Instead, Saussure describes language as a system of *values* in which the meaning of the signs can only be determined through their differences from, and opposition to, other signs.

Saussure illustrates his claim by comparing words and money. To determine the value of a five-Euro bill, for example, one must not only know what quantity of another thing it can be exchanged for (bread, for instance); one must also compare it to a similar value in the same system (e.g., a one-Euro coin) or to a unit from another system (e.g., a five-dollar bill):

In the same way, a word can be exchanged for something dissimilar, an idea; besides, it can be compared with something of the same nature, another word. Its value is therefore not fixed so long as one simply states that it can be “exchanged” for a given

concept, i.e. that it has this or that signification: one must also compare it with similar values, with other words that stand in opposition to it. *Its content is really fixed only by the concurrence of everything that exists outside it.*⁴¹

Thus, the French *mouton* can have the same meaning as the English word *sheep*—the animal one finds on a meadow—but it cannot possess the same *value*. The same animal, when one encounters it in a stew, is no longer called “sheep,” but “mutton,” whereas French only has one word for both ideas. In more general terms:

Instead of pre-existing ideas then, we find in all the foregoing examples *values* emanating from the system. When they are said to correspond to concepts, it is understood that the concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. *Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not.* [. . .]

*Everything that has been said up to this point boils down to this: in language, there are only differences. Even more importantly, a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms.*⁴²

For Saussure, differences do not exist between pre-constituted identities. Rather, it is the other way around: identities only emerge retroactively, from the process of *articulation* of differences, and therefore they are never stable. With this principle, Saussure transformed linguistics into a field concerned with the *thinking of the non-identical*—a terrain where the humanities of the twentieth century were to meet up, whether they received their inspiration directly from Saussure and structuralism or not.

Despite the many divergences between Heidegger’s determination of Dasein as “between,” the psychoanalytic concept of the divided subject, Adorno’s negative dialectics, Levinas’s phenomenology of the Other, and Derrida’s radicalized thinking of *différance*—*all these projects share the common denominator of critiquing the principle of identity as the logical, ontological, cultural, and political norm of the ways we think and act.* In this critique, the “transvaluation of values” that Nietzsche predicted is taking place inasmuch as the side of classical distinctions privileged by tradition—identity over difference, the same over the other, presence over absence, position over negation, being over non-being, etc.—loses its preeminence and, as in Saussure’s linguistic theory, is made to appear dependent on its opposite. This is not just a matter of logical or academic games, but has eminent cultural and political consequences. If, today, it seems self-evident to us (or, at any rate, to some or many of us), that sexual identity does not follow from a preordained “essence” of Woman or Man, or that cultural identity is not rooted in the natural substance of the blood or national spirit, but that these and other identities, to the extent that they allow themselves to be stabilized at all, are inevitably suffused with differences—which constitute them and thereby reveal them to be internally divided and non-identical at their core—this has occurred thanks not least to the process of which Saussure forms an exemplary part. Deconstruction, whose specific features we will turn to in a moment, has also contributed to this process.

Before moving on, we should cast a brief glance at structuralism, which invokes Saussure as its founder. Saussure himself did not employ the expressions “structure” or “structuralism”; as mentioned, he spoke of language as a “system of differences.” However, one already finds in his works the idea that the differential—or, as it has increasingly been called since the 1930s, the “structural”—way of looking is not limited to verbal language. As a “social institution,” we read in the *Course*, language is comparable to other practices—for example, writing, sign language, symbols, rites, forms of courtesy, and military signals; in general, customs and conventions can be understood as sign systems. Thus, linguistics in the narrower sense forms part of a general science of signs, for which Saussure proposed the name *semiology*.⁴³ Structuralism takes up this mode of thinking and describes extra-linguistic objects as languages: systems of kinship (Claude Lévi-Strauss), the unconscious (Jacques Lacan), fashion, eating, and sports (Roland Barthes), common sense (Clifford

Geertz)—indeed, culture in its entirety comes under the lens. Thereby, the guiding principle remains Saussure's notion that a single phenomenon (e.g., the prohibition of incest, cross-cousin marriage, or certain table manners) can never be understood in isolation, but must be examined in terms of a *role or function in a system*, which theory has the task of recognizing and describing.

Since cultural systems are necessarily social, but essentially unconscious (a feature of language, Saussure already observed), it is not enough to ask the social actors about the “deep grammar” of a given practice—to inquire directly, that is, about the meaning of this or that phenomenon in particular. Instead, it is necessary to possess a special analytic means of investigation to “distill” the structure of the question. As far as these special means of investigation are concerned, structuralism is still guided by linguistics, and especially by phonology, which developed the method of the so-called “minimal pair analysis” in order to determine basic units of sound (or phonemes) that, within a given language, allow for the creation of meaning. In minimal pairs like “ban—man” or “house—mouse,” for example, the initial sounds (b/m and h/m) serve the sole purpose of *distinguishing* these words; such sounds mark points of differentiation, which establish the building blocks of meaning. Likewise, structuralists look for “minimal pairs of kinship,” “mythemes,” “vestemes,” etc., as basic units whose differential organization yields a socially valid ensemble. Thus, according to Roland Barthes, the structuralist method consists primarily of finding oppositions that organize a given cultural formation (e.g., habits of eating, ways of dressing, literary texts, rites, symphonies, and the like). This analytic tool for ascertaining oppositions that create meaning can also be employed on a larger scale: the raw and the cooked, nature and culture, “savage” and “civilized” ways of thinking, composure and affect—the series could be continued at will.

In the structuralist reduction of general *differentiality* to *pairs of opposition*, however, the binary scheme of metaphysics resurfaces. Often, it is difficult to determine the status of oppositional pairs in structural analyses: is it “only” a matter of guiding analytical distinctions, or are these distinctions ascribed ontological value? As for the concept of the sign itself that underlies the structuralist enterprise: does the distinction between signifier and signified not continue the history of metaphysics, too? Is this division desirable? Necessary? Inevitable? How, if we can no longer believe in the truthfulness of the distinctions we make, can we arrive at judgments at all? Will our experience be like that of Lord Chandos, for whom all linguistic distinctions “which the tongue must enlist as a matter of course in order to bring out an opinion” disintegrate in our mouths “like rotten mushrooms”? Is this the end of philosophy? Might we then, finally, learn how to live? With these questions in mind, we now turn to the writings of Derrida.

Second Approach: The Metaphysics of Presence and the Deconstruction of Logocentrism

I cannot explain what deconstruction is to me without putting matters in context. At the time that, under this title, I undertook my task, structuralism was predominant. Deconstruction staked out a position against structuralism. On the other hand, it was a time when scientific theories of language governed everything, references to linguistics, “all things are a language.” At the time—I am speaking of the 1960s—deconstruction began to take shape as . . . I wouldn’t say as “anti-structuralism,” but, all the same, taking a certain distance from structuralism and casting the authority of language into doubt.

Therefore, it astonishes and irritates me in equal measure every time that deconstruction (as commonly occurs) is equated with how should I put it?—“omnilingualism,” “panlingualism,” or “pantextualism.” Deconstruction starts with just the opposite. I begin by contesting the authority of linguistics, language, and logocentrism.¹

2.1 Speech and Writing (*Grammatology*)

In 1967, three books appeared simultaneously which established the philosophical program of deconstruction. The first is *Speech and Phenomena: An Essay on the Problem of the Sign in Husserl’s Philosophy*. The second is *Of Grammatology*, which remains—still today—Derrida’s best-known and possibly most important work. The third is *Writing and Difference*, a collection of essays in which Derrida engages critically with structuralism. Derrida followed these works with *Margins of Philosophy*, also a collection of essays, and *Dissemination*, a series of interrelated texts about Plato, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Philippe Sollers. These two books, which were published in France in 1972, elaborate the critique of logocentrism set forth in *Grammatology*.

Before we turn to the terms that are important for Derrida—phonocentrism, Eurocentrism, writing, trace, *différance*, and play—a few general observations are in order.

When one looks at the indexes of the aforementioned books, two things are immediately apparent. First, the program of deconstruction unfolds almost entirely in the form of *readings*. Deconstruction is both a philosophical project and a *practice of reading*. Second, these readings are not restricted to the canon of philosophy and related fields; just as often, they involve *literary* texts. Alongside essays on Plato, Hegel, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Freud, Saussure, J. L. Austin, Levinas, and others, Derrida analyzes the writings of Edmond Jabès, Antonin Artaud, Mallarmé, Maurice Blanchot, Paul Valéry, and Philippe Sollers. The latter half of *Grammatology* explores Rousseau, who wrote both theoretic and literary texts; for Derrida, the *Confessions* and *Émile* are just as important and rich in theoretic implications as is Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, the main object of analysis in *Grammatology*. This methodological combination—the significance of *reading* across lines of genre in deconstructive praxis—is, without a doubt, a key reason why Derrida’s works met with favorable reception among European and American scholars of literature before they were embraced by academic philosophers (a situation that still holds true in part). The institutional history of deconstruction illustrates how *reading*, in a sense requiring more detailed explication, is an altogether philosophical activity for Derrida—indeed, it may be said to represent *the* exemplary mode of philosophical engagement, period.

For Derrida—as for Nietzsche, and Heidegger before him—reading (which also means *writing* the reading one performs) entails the responsibility of engaging critically with metaphysical inheritance just as it cannot be viewed as a fixed acquisition, metaphysics cannot be rejected out of hand. No one with a similar degree of penetration or with greater frequency, has emphasized that we *are* inheritors of the past—that the foundation of our *Being*, here and today, does not rest secure in nature, but instead belongs to a tradition that we can as little deny as simply capitalize upon. This inheritance remains bequeathed to us, and we must draw on it, whether we want to or not (and whether we do so

knowingly or not). In contrast to Foucault and Deleuze—and in contradistinction, also, to the unbridled individualism of so-called “postmodernism”—Derrida always insisted that it is not enough to come up with new names, to assign new values to old concepts, or to declare the “end” of this or that (be it history, metaphysics, patriarchy, or anything else) in order to escape the *structure of the inheritance*. Derrida’s caveat from *Writing and Difference* cannot be repeated often enough: “We have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest.”²

This oppositional pairing of having to resign oneself (to the philosophical idiom that has been passed down—its syntax, lexicon, and the history of its operative distinctions) and wanting to put in question this same inheritance determines deconstructive reading (and writing) as an operation that is equally *genealogical* and *strategic*. It is *genealogical*, because—after Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Freud—it means uncovering the forgotten pre-history of a grand philosophical tradition and exposing its assumptions, the places where its blind spots lie. It is *strategic* because this is only possible by means of a double rhetorical gesture, which on the one hand *reverses* prevailing distinctions, and on the other (for a mere upending of received ideas is not enough) tries to displace key concepts in order to bring the text of tradition into motion in a specific way—opening it up and pushing it beyond itself. A look at *Grammatology* will illustrate this practice of reading.

Grammatology is still wholly classical in design: the first part, “Writing before the Letter,” outlines a theoretical position that is “put to the test”³ in the second part, “Nature, Culture, Writing” (even Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages* no longer counts, strictly speaking, as a “case study” and the “Age of Rousseau”—that is, the eighteenth century—turns out to be a threshold-moment for the modern crisis of writing). In the twentieth century, Derrida claims, the crisis of writing assumes the form of a return of the repressed: the return of writing which begins to abandon its inherited position as a “signifier of the second order” (i.e., its status as a derivative and inferior representation of spoken words) and, increasingly, comes to encompass the whole of linguistic activity. In this light the so-called *linguistic turn*, in the wake of which the humanities finally came to determine language the totality of their problematic horizon,⁴ itself represents nothing but a symptom of the return.

But what does it mean, when discussing the history of metaphysics and the determination of Being as presence, to speak of the “repression” of writing and its “return”? Despite the Freudian vocabulary he employs, Derrida makes it clear that it does not involve performing a psychoanalytic interpretation of philosophy.⁵ Indeed, psychoanalysis itself still belongs to the epoch of “logocentric oppression” even though, at the same time, it opens a way out.

We already have seen (cf. above, 1.4) that, for the metaphysical tradition since Aristotle, spoken words—which are proximate to meaning and to the intention of the speaker—count as primary signifiers, whereas writing has received the secondary and subordinate function of representing spoken words (that is, of being the signifier of other signifiers). It is this devaluation of writing with respect to speech and the voice that Derrida calls “repression.” Why, however, does he employ the “strong” word for a classification that seems purely technical—a pragmatic matter of classifying and ordering different forms of linguistic signs? In fact, repression does not simply mean pushing something aside or declaring it less important than other matters. On the contrary, it means defending against the offending matter and excluding it from consciousness because it poses a danger and threatens the integrity of the psyche. What is so menacing about writing that it must be repressed—shut out from what is thought to constitute the essence of language and locked into the cultural unconscious? Or, put somewhat differently: what consciousness, what claims, what cultural illusion

does this exclusion defend?

One answer may be found in Plato's *Phaedrus*:

SOCRATES: You know, Phaedrus, writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offsprings of painting stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever. When it has once been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it does not know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support.⁶

Writing, one can see, represents “fatherless” speech. In contrast to the spoken word, it can be separated from the body and the consciousness of its originator; without a master, it wanders alone through the world. It is impossible to foresee into whose hands it will fall and what effects it will produce without the assistance of its author. Since writing arrives without commentary or context, it is exposed to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. One can do what one wants with written words: the meaning dissolves into multiple, competing interpretations. What's more, writing—like painting—is suffused with false vitality. Its deceptive nature misleads the reader, who thinks he understands it as well as the spoken words it imitates. In fact, without the possibility of checking with the author himself, one can miss his intention by miles and not even notice. In fine, writing is afflicted with absence: absence of intentional consciousness, absence of objects, and absence of meaning.⁷

Of course, the perils inherent in writing are familiar to every literary scholar as the problem of “hermeneutic difference,” or, alternately, “hermeneutic distance.” Until approximately the middle of the twentieth century, philological methods of interpretation sought only to bridge this gap and, by reconstructing what the author originally intended, to reestablish the complete presence of meaning in the text by sublating the “false” vitality of the letters into the “true” life of the mind. However, behind this hierarchical order that sets the voice above writing, the presence of meaning above its absence, and the spirit above the letter, lies the unquestioned assumption that the spoken word really stands beyond all the deficiencies of writing—that *phone* (voice) and *logos* (reason, meaning) comprise a unity in which the absences and “defects” of writing are collected and transformed into so many presences.

What would it mean if it were revealed that the Western conception of language, based as it is on phono- and logocentrism, is an illusion? What if spoken words, like written ones, were not animated by the intention of speakers and, instead, lacked fullness and presence? What if spoken words were not signifiers of the signified but also signifiers of other signifiers and thus themselves a kind of “writing”? This is the claim set forward in *Grammatology*, which Derrida details in the book's first part. Writing (as what the Western understanding of language has “repressed”) turns out not to be what it has conventionally been taken for—a system of notation of secondary importance—but rather, in a sense that requires further explication, a feature of spoken language itself. Writing is “repressed” to uphold the illusions of logocentrism. Derrida first identified this structure in *Speech and Phenomena: An Essay on the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's Philosophy*. In the most basic terms, it involves a physiological state of affairs: when I speak, I hear myself speaking. I can hear my own voice, which issues from my mouth and, at the same time, passes back inside through the ear. Irrespective of the fact that others may be present and listening, my body always finds itself in a circuit closed upon itself. According to Husserl—who, on this point, stands in for a long philosophical tradition—speaking invariably consists of the intentional expression of meaning. This meaning (Saussure's signified) lies ready within consciousness and is then performed or realized in the act of speech; it exteriorizes itself by passing into the voice (articulate sounds, or signifiers). Inasmuch as I can hear myself speak, I always (seem to) revoke this exteriorization even as I perform it: I take the

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