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Hermeneutic and Deconstructive Conceptions of Language

There is at least one thing in common between philosophical hermeneutics and deconstructivism, namely, that both of them advocate the philosophical program of overcoming metaphysics. They diverge fundamentally, however, regarding the notions of metaphysics which they entertain and this occurs in close connection with their divergent conceptions of language. On these grounds they elaborate their radically different approaches to our philosophical tradition, yet both of them accomplish a kind of mutation of the Heideggerian *Destruction*. In that respect, hermeneutics and deconstructivism are characterized, respectively, by interpretation with a view to hypothetical meaning and deconstruction of meaning.

A first glimpse at what is involved in these different notions of metaphysics and language uncovers a number of important points. According to Gadamer, metaphysics does not constitute a language on its own. There is no such thing as the ‘language of metaphysics’, rather, “there is only a metaphysically thought out coinage of concepts that have been lifted from living speech.”¹ Metaphysics is brought out in a conceptuality that has been separated from its context and thereby “... has lost its original sense as grounded in the experience of being.”² Words are meaningful always with respect to a context, a situation or an experience of being. What is metaphysical then refers to an emptying out of meaning. Such loss of meaning occurs due to a thoughtless application of some ready-to-hand conceptuality transmitted by our tradition to a situation which would call for its own expression. One can see that this Gadamerian notion of metaphysics does not so much point to some feature of language (whether it is a certain conceptuality, grammar or even logic) but rather, it speaks of a situation where language usage is alienated. Such a notion posits, on the other hand, a demand to find the right word in a given situation, the demand of appropriating language to make it adequate. *It does not invite us to work out some new linguistic*

¹ Gadamer, Hans-Georg: “Destruction und Dekonstruktion”, in *Hermeneutik II: Wahrheit und Methode.*

Ergänzungen. Tübingen, 1986, p. 366. Wherever translators are not indicated, translations into English are mine.

² Ibid.

tool or discursive strategy, but rather it calls upon us to be open and participate in a dialogue with the tradition as well as with each other. Indeed, when Gadamer speaks about the Heideggerian notion of *Destruktion*, he understands it as an effort to set free the naming force, the capacity ‘to name’ inherent in language. What Gadamer has in mind is *living or vivid language*.

The supposition of a language of metaphysics would involve some sense of restriction regarding the reach of language. In Gadamer’s view, however, language is unconstrained and universal, with no outer limit set to it. As he says: “*Language is not a delimited realm of the speakable, over against which other realms that are unspeakable might stand. Rather, language is all-encompassing. There is nothing that is fundamentally excluded from being said, to the extent that our act of meaning intends it... Every dialogue has an inner infinity and no end.*”³

In contrast to the Gadamerian notion of metaphysics, Derrida suspects a “methodically and historically common interest” at work behind metaphysical conceptuality *and* a certain “habit of thinking”. In other words, for Derrida, the essence of metaphysics lies not only in the alienation of conceptuality but above all in a certain mode of discursivity. Accordingly, the overcoming of metaphysics is not accomplished as long as it aims at the *Abbau* of hardened ontological conceptuality and the logic built on it. For the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, ‘*Destruktion*’ meant just that. His program was 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.”⁴ It was to lead back to an originary experience of Being whereby the possibility of a new understanding of Being could be attained.

This new program brought out about a possible disclosure of a *historically given meaning* (of Being) for which the Heideggerian notion of originary experience wants to prepare. Derrida, in contrast, suspects a trace of the metaphysics of presence in the very conception of an *experience projecting a possible meaning*. Thus what is needed in his view is not the setting free of language in its potency, but rather, it is *the very tendency of logos to project meaning inherent in spoken language that must be subjected to a deconstruction*. The metaphysical strategies of thinking are those aiming at meaning and understanding. According to Derrida, it is the source of *logos* which

³ Gadamer, H.-G.: “Man and Language”, in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Trans. & ed. by David E. Linge. University of California Press, 1977. p. 67.

⁴ Heidegger, M.: *Being and Time*. Tr. by J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1962. p. 44.

is at the same time the source of meaning or sense. Thus it comes about that he applies the collective designation of '*logocentrism*' to the thought-strategies in question.

But why does Derrida regard the projection of meaning or sense as metaphysical? The answer, from one perspective, lies in a double argument in *Of Grammatology*. On the one hand, Derrida claims to have detected a theory of signification in the tradition according to which the signifier is always regarded of a lower ontological rank than that which is signified. His example is from Aristotle, who in *De Interpretatione* says the following: "Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words."⁵ In Derrida's reading the reason behind this Aristotelian ranking of signifiers is that the *phone* or sound which produces the first symbol of experience stands in an *essential and immediate* relation with the soul. In spoken language a *phonic substance*, a 'presence for itself', emerges in the act of "hearing and understanding itself while speaking". This phonic substance, according to *Of Grammatology*, appears as if it were a non-external, non-worldly, non-contingent signifier. Thus speech is defined by presence. As Derrida says, speech is "present to itself, to its signified, to the other, [it is] the very condition of the theme of presence in general".⁶ From this, he concludes that, "the formal essence of the signified is *presence* and the privilege of its proximity to the logos as *phone* is the privilege of presence."⁷

These claims seem to say the following: there is a phonic substance in *logos*. Due to the ancients' preference for that which is present and immediate they chose *logos* as their starting point. In beginning this way, a theory of signification appeared which postulated the distinction between signifier and signified. Finally, in virtue of its immediacy (through *phone*), they regarded *logos* as the primary signifier and ranked writing as the secondary one. Thus, from early on in the Western tradition, there has been a preference for speech or *logos* as opposed to writing or *gramma*, and it has been so because of the preference for that which is present and immediate. The written word is regarded as a secondary symbol of the primary symbol of spoken word only within a metaphysics of presence.

⁵ Aristotle: *De interpretatione*. I, 16a 3.

⁶ Derrida, Jacques.: *Of Grammatology*. Tr. by G. C. Spivak. Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976. p. 8.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 18.

The positive version of the argument is based on the conception of the sign as such and is best exhibited by the Heideggerian mark of the crossed out Being. In this mark Derrida recognizes the crossing out of the presence of a signified that is nevertheless readable. This would be a sign that refers to nothing beyond, to nothing signified. The readable absence of a transcendental signified leads to a primary sense of writing that consists exclusively in a play of signifiers without referring to any meaning or reality beyond itself. As Derrida puts it in his *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discussion of Humanities*, "...because of the absence of some kind of center or origin, everything becomes discursive, ... that is, a system in which the central, original or transcendental signified is never absolutely present outside of a given system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified stretches the field and play of signification into infinity."⁸ The collapse of the reference between the signifier and the signified constitutes the Derridian notion of *écriture*.

If we now return to our question, "why does Derrida regard the projection of meaning or sense as metaphysical?", a possible answer might be the following. The very notion of meaning is a consequence of a conception of language in which words, whether spoken or written, are signs standing for some transcendental referent. However, there seems to be an alternative conception of language in the form of the *écriture* in which the signifier always already functions as the signified, that is, where reference made by a signifier is always to some other signifier. This constitutes the endless play of signification and thus the previous conception of language appears to be a construction on the ground of a theory of signification which is, in its turn, based on a metaphysics of presence. From this perspective, such a theory does constant violence to the more original flux of the semiotic field. Meaning is metaphysical insofar as it is a postulated construction following a prior *flight to the logoi*.

In the previous part of my paper I was trying to make more transparent Derrida's central charge against *logos*. In what follows I will attempt to formulate some reasons why I am hesitant to accept *écriture* as a quasi or negative ontology. I will do this by counterposing the deconstructivist critique of *logos* with some of the relevant aspects of the hermeneutic notion of language.

⁸ Derrida, J., quoted in Béla Bacsó: "Remarks on Hermeneutics and Deconstructivism", in *Határpontok*. Budapest: T-Twins, 1994. p. 24.

Derrida appears to be a critic of the traditional theory of signification. However, his critique does not come from outside but rather from within such theory; indeed, it points towards a radical semiotics. He comes to regard spoken language and phonetic writing, ‘in a word’, the entire western conception of language, as a disguise for a primary writing. He says that, “Language in its origin and its end could be only a moment ... one kind of writing”. Writing in the sense of *écriture* is claimed to include and comprehend language. Whatever comes to be written in *écriture* is the very movement or *kinesis* of language in its origin, an origin that constantly hides and erases itself – this is the picture given by *Of Grammatology*.⁹ At a fundamental level, in this manner everything becomes regarded as a text.

However, doesn’t the Derridian deconstruction as a critique of the traditional theory of signification remain within the framework of such a theory? For, according to Derrida’s argument, the problem here lies not in the fact that language is conceived as a system of signs or signifiers, but rather in the fact that signification functions differently from the way it was supposed earlier. What he criticizes is the fact that such a theory was not radical enough. Language remains a system of signification for Derrida, even if this system excludes the notion of the transcendental signified. From this perspective then, in spite of our earlier claim in which Derrida appeared as a critic of the theory of signification, he remains nevertheless an advocate of a conception of language that is a system of signification. The problem with such a conception is that it seems to introduce several reductions with respect to the nature of language that *narrow or disregard the potentialities inherent in language*.

We have seen that in Derrida’s view, the very notion of meaning together with the discursive strategies aimed at acquiring meaning are to be deconstructed because meaning appears for him as a transcendental signified that is postulated on the ground of a metaphysics of presence. In a similar fashion, the naming capacity of words is also criticized because words supposedly function as signifiers of that which is meant. Within the semiotic frame of thought, meaning is something to which a sign refers, where in the very act of referring a transcendental signified is postulated which in turn involves a notion of presence. One might wonder, however, *whether this semiotic notion of meaning does justice to what we call meaning*. Isn’t it the case, rather, that *the Derridian charge of logocentrism applies only to the referential concept of language, to the logic*

⁹ Derrida, J.: *Of Grammatology*. *op. cit.* p. 8.

of apophansis, and not to every notion of logos? For it is precisely a postulated presence within reference that is criticized by deconstructivism. Thus the reduction discernable in the notion of meaning as transcendental referent is due to the semiotic approach.

In philosophical hermeneutics' dialogical conception of language, the word, strictly speaking, is neither a sign nor an element of the system of signs constituting language. In fact, the very effort to examine first the functional elements of language in the hope of reconstructing it afterwards (from 'below', as it were) is already an abstraction from the living wholeness of the phenomenon of language. Such an approach always has something instrumental about it, thereby inevitably losing track of the phenomenon itself. In a primary sense one does not come across such linguistic 'things' as a word or a proposition. Rather, they are always already embedded in a motivational context from which they obtain their meaning.¹⁰ What is meant comes to expression in words; but what becomes so expressed never entirely succeeds in capturing the meaning behind the words uttered. There is always a residue of meaning that remains unsaid when we say something and, conversely, we do not understand what has been said without taking into account the context that remains unsaid. The hermeneutic notion of the word considers it within the entirety of what is involved in speaking, writing or reading. This infinite dimension of the word is indicated by Gadamer when he refers to language as dialogue. People converse with each other just as the soul does with itself in thinking. Since dialogue is always about something, it is primarily the subject matter that governs the communicative act. Thus, in saying, writing, reading or listening to utterances the hermeneutic attention falls on what is said or meant by the words, and only in cases of disturbances in communication do we return to the instrumental function of linguistic devices, such as the actual word or sentence and the textuality of a text in general. Strictly speaking, the phenomenon of the word is misconceived if it is regarded as a sign or signifier.

In addition, within the context of dialogical rationality, what is meant in a linguistic act has nothing to do with a metaphysical notion of hypostasized meaning. The subject matter of dialogue is 'there' in a sense which encompasses being absent as well as being present. In general, hermeneutics recognizes the Heideggerian insight that *Wesen* is not the property of presence in

¹⁰ See Grondin, J.: *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Tr.by J. Weinsheimer. New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Press, 1994. p. 118.

present objects, but in its temporalizing sense, means *An-Wesen* to come-to-presence, relative to a *Verwesen*, 'decay'. As emphatically stressed in the literature of philosophical hermeneutics, the word can never be taken as the absolute presence of meaning; the difference between word and meaning is irreducible.¹¹

Working on the boundary of philosophy and literature, Derrida attempts to loosen up the supposedly 'logocentric' philosophical tradition, and the way he wishes to achieve this is through eliminating the notion of the '*Sache selbst*' ('thing itself'). Within the domain of *écriture* all notions of truth come to be dissolved in the utter discursivity of the semiotic field. Such discursivity stands forth only by way of an exclusion of every reference to or bearing on Being, and this through emancipating textuality from its meaning relations. In fact, deconstructivism adopts such a radical perspectivism that it virtually and constantly eliminates the very particularity of the perspective. Pushing the finitude of *logos* to its extreme, it comes to claim the quasi-ontological notion of absolute textuality.

The hermeneutic notion of truth, in contrast, remains faithful not only to the finitude of *logos* in its attaining meaning, but also to the inner infinitude of dialogical language. What is immediately given is the in-between world of language; dialogical language takes place within an infinite space stretching between what has been said and what remains unsaid. According to Gadamer, "nothing that is said has its truth simply in itself, but refers instead backward and forward to what is unsaid. Every assertion is motivated ... and only when what is not said is understood along with what is said is an assertion understandable."¹² Although the hermeneutic *logos* cannot and does not make a claim to any sense of an absolute, it does nevertheless have a reach of meaning and truth. It is a participatory notion of truth that makes an appeal to the experience of sudden understanding in which meaning stands forth in the sense of *Anwesen*. Truth in a primary sense is by no means the 'truth of agreement' in propositional logic, even less a 'subjective act', as Derrida would probably bring up against hermeneutics. We do not give meaning to or impose a sense of truth on what has become understood, but rather it is much more an issue of coming across or finding truth as, in Gadamer's phrase, in the "suddenness of lightning-like illumination that makes everything visible in one stroke and yet is immediately swallowed up

¹¹ Ibid. p. 137.

¹² Gadamer, H.-G.: "Man and Language". *op. cit.* p. 67.

in darkness again”.¹³ Truth occurs to us whereby we participate in it. The event character of understanding and interpretation excludes in every sense the notion of an atemporal or identical meaning, whether of texts or of Being.

So far in my paper I have been trying to expose some aspects of Derrida’s charge against *logos* and demonstrate hermeneutic responses to several issues involved with it. In the following pages, I’ll try to formulate some kind of account of deconstructivism as it appears to me in the light of the previous considerations.

Deconstructivism supposedly represents a challenge to hermeneutics in that it declares having made a stand outside of dialogue; a claim, I must note, fundamentally unintelligible within the hermeneutical horizon insofar as it understands itself as having a universal dimension on the basis of the inner infinity of dialogical language. From a hermeneutic perspective, Derrida’s charge of ‘logocentrism’ against hermeneutics is due to a semiotic reduction, and thus a misconception, of the nature of language. Deconstructivism is admittedly a theory of ‘*critical reading*’ as opposed to the Gadamerian approach of questioning the being of language. Insofar as hermeneutics proves to have a notion of language that cannot be regarded as metaphysical, it shows that the charge of logocentrism against all kinds of rationality is *overambitious*. What from a hermeneutic perspective appears to be untenable is the quasi-ontological notion of textuality. As Gadamer has shown exhaustively in his *Text and Interpretation*, the concept of textuality can be arrived at only by beginning with the concept of interpretation. In other words, textuality is derivative of the phenomenon of language.

Accordingly, *to the extent of its apparent quasi-ontological claim the task of a destruction or loosening up of deconstructivism emerges*. The assertion that it has arrived at a field which precedes or even stands outside history, and thus supposes an ahistorical aspect, must be subjected to a critique based on the elaboration of the genealogy of semiotic theory itself. Without having the chance here to trace its emergence, one can unmistakably discern such features of deconstructivism as the deanthropomorphic tendency in modern science or the dehistoricization at work in the Enlightenment.

It is highly important, however, that the semiotic theory in the background of *écriture* enables Derrida to point out and put to work discursive strategies *other than* that of true dialogue

¹³ Gadamer, H.-G.: “Vom Anfang bei Heraklit”, in *Griechische Philosophie II. Gesammelte Werke*. Band 6, p. 232.

governed by the law of the subject matter. It would be futile and mistaken if one wanted to refute deconstructivism in its literary practice. The critique of deconstructivism, in my view, must aim at its supposed ontological relevance, but one must also consider and acknowledge its achievements within the hermeneutic horizon. As a countermove against the impatient urge to construct pseudo-meaning, deconstructivism is a practice against bad hermeneutics and therefore it is in the service of an authentic hermeneutics. In Gadamer's words, "whoever wants me to take deconstruction to heart and insists on *difference* stands at the beginning of a conversation, not at its end."¹⁴ If this is so, one can speak of a *relaxed deconstructivism* as opposed to its ambitious self-interpretation in making universal claims of ontological relevance.

Human nature and language, spoken as well as written, are so inseparable that "language is the real medium of human being", as Gadamer says. However, the quote continues, "... if we only see it in the realm that it alone fills out, the realm of human *being-together*, the realm of common understanding; a realm as indispensable to human life as the air we breathe."¹⁵ One must come to see language, suggests Gadamer, where it is alive, that is, in the realm of being-together, in conversation. Insofar as one doesn't attend to the being of language, that is, to dialogue, where language is at its best (as it were), one misunderstands its ontological status as well as its role in getting to know our human world and ourselves. Unless one pays heed to one's finitude embedded within the infinity of dialogue, to "the conversation that we are", one falls back upon one or the other form of metaphysical reflection and comes across only the ruins of a living language.

¹⁴ Gadamer, H.-G.: "Destruktion und Dekonstruktion", *op. cit.* p. 372.

¹⁵ Gadamer, H.-G.: "Man and Language", *op. cit.* p. 68.