

Jacques

# DERRIDA

**GREAT THINKERS**

CHRISTOPHER WATKIN

Foreword by Merold Westphal

“Philosopher Stanley Fish once declared, ‘Deconstruction is dead in the same way that Freudianism is dead. . . . It is everywhere.’ Christopher Watkin’s remarkable book explains better than any other the nature of Derrida’s program and the reasons for its persistence. Watkin corrects misunderstandings and caricatures. Derrida is easy to dismiss when one takes a few of his thoughts out of context. But a great deal of importance must be highlighted. The author engages in a biblical and Reformed critique, one that ‘hold[s] fast what is good,’ while identifying its evils (1 Thess. 5:21–22). Complete with helpful diagrams, the book is a tour de force. I wish I had possessed it while in graduate school.”

—**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

“The Reformed community has long sought to stage a dialogue between Jacques Derrida and Karl Barth, but no one before Christopher Watkin has ever considered initiating a dialogue between Derrida and Barth’s Reformed critic Cornelius Van Til. Watkin explains Derrida’s fundamental ideas very clearly; more, he shows Calvinists some things that might be gained if they read Derrida with sympathy. Not least of all, the Bible might disclose more of its meaning.”

—**Kevin Hart**, Edwin B. Kyle Professor of Christian Studies, University of Virginia

“Chris Watkin has done what I thought was impossible. He has explained Derrida’s deconstruction with lucidity, brevity, and charity. Not only that: he has imagined what it would be like for Cornelius Van Til to go toe-to-toe with Derrida in a discussion about language, logic, and the Logos made flesh, all of which figure prominently in John 1:1–18. And if that were not enough, he has done it in just over a hundred pages. Readers who want to know what all the fuss over postmodernity is about would do

well to consult this book. It is an excellent beginning to this new Great Thinkers series.”

—**Kevin J. Vanhoozer**, Research Professor of Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

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—**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

“When I was beginning my studies of theology and philosophy during the 1950s and ’60s, I profited enormously from P&R’s *Modern Thinkers Series*. Here were relatively short books on important philosophers and theologians such as Nietzsche, Dewey, Van Til, Barth, and Bultmann, by scholars of Reformed conviction such as Clark, Van Riessen, Ridderbos, Polman, and Zuidema. These books did not merely summarize the work of these thinkers; they were serious critical interactions. Today, P&R is resuming and updating the series, now called *Great Thinkers*. The new books, on people such as Aquinas, Hume, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault, are written by scholars who are experts on these writers. As before, these books

are short—around 100 pages. They set forth accurately the views of the thinkers under consideration, and they enter into constructive dialogue, governed by biblical and Reformed convictions. I look forward to the release of all the books being planned and to the good influence they will have on the next generation of philosophers and theologians.”

—**John M. Frame**, Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

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DERRIDA

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**DERRIDA**

Christopher Watkin

  
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To Alison, who waits more graciously,  
reads more patiently, and comments more lovingly than I;  
and to Benjamin, to add to your bottom shelf.



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## SERIES INTRODUCTION

Amid the rise and fall of nations and civilizations, the influence of a few great minds has been profound. Some of these remain relatively obscure even as their thought shapes our world; others have become household names. As we engage our cultural and social contexts as ambassadors and witnesses for Christ, we must identify and test against the Word those thinkers who have so singularly formed the present age.

The Great Thinkers series is designed to meet the need for critically assessing the seminal thoughts of these thinkers. Great Thinkers hosts a colorful roster of authors analyzing primary source material against a background of historical contextual issues, and providing rich theological assessment and response from a Reformed perspective.

Each author was invited to meet a threefold goal, so that each Great Thinkers volume is, first, *academically informed*. The brevity of Great Thinkers volumes sets a premium on each author's command of the subject matter and on the secondary discussions that have shaped each thinker's influence. Our authors identify the most influential features of their thinkers'

work and address them with precision and insight. Second, the series maintains a high standard of *biblical and theological faithfulness*. Each volume stands on an epistemic commitment to the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), and is thereby equipped for fruitful critical engagement. Finally, Great Thinkers texts are *accessible*, not burdened with jargon or unnecessarily difficult vocabulary. The goal is to inform and equip the reader as effectively as possible through clear writing, relevant analysis, and incisive, constructive critique. My hope is that this series will distinguish itself by striking with biblical faithfulness and the riches of Reformed tradition at the central nerves of culture, cultural history, and intellectual heritage.

Bryce Craig, president of P&R Publishing, deserves hearty thanks for his initiative and encouragement in setting the series in motion and seeing it through. Many thanks as well to P&R’s director of academic development, John Hughes, who assumed, with cool efficiency, nearly every role on the production side of each volume. The Rev. Mark Moser carried much of the burden in the initial design of the series, acquisitions, and editing of the first several volumes. And the expert participation of Amanda Martin, P&R’s editorial director, was essential at every turn. I have long admired P&R Publishing’s commitment, steadfast now for over eighty-five years, to publishing excellent books promoting biblical understanding and cultural awareness, especially in the area of Christian apologetics. Sincere thanks to P&R, to these fine brothers and sisters, and to several others not mentioned here for the opportunity to serve as editor of the Great Thinkers series.

Nathan D. Shannon  
Seoul, Korea

## FOREWORD

If the categorical imperative for civil conversation is “Listen before you speak,” the law for philosophical evaluation is “Understand before you critique.” More than almost any other major twentieth-century thinker, Jacques Derrida has been abused by critics who ignore both formulations of the ethics of intellectual debate.

For that reason, it seems to me that the first chapter of this book is the most important. It takes the most basic concepts of Derridean deconstruction—such as logocentrism, phonocentrism, “there is nothing outside the text,” writing, presence, *différance*, and metaphysics—and gives accessible and, I believe, accurate accounts of what Derrida was trying to say. Of course, no two Derrida scholars will interpret him in exactly the same way, and there may be quibbles about this or that formulation. But Chris Watkin has set for himself the proper criterion: will those sympathetic to Derrida accept these interpretations? I think he has passed this test with room to spare and has earned the right to proceed to *explicate* the more substantive parts of Derrida’s thought (ethics, politics,

and theology) and, very importantly, to proceed to *evaluate* his thought as a whole.

Derrida doesn't like to call deconstruction a theory, but I'm afraid he gives us one despite himself. It is a theory about the finitude of language and meaning, its inherent incompleteness and indeterminacy. Derrida presupposes an essentially Hegelian holism. Everything particular is part of a larger whole, and it has its meaning and its being only as part of that whole. It can neither be nor be understood all by itself. "There is no atom" (*Poi*, 137). Thus, to say, "*There is nothing outside of the text*" (*OG*, 158, Derrida's emphasis) is to say that "there is nothing outside of context" (*LI*, 136).

Of course, like so many other post-Hegelian thinkers, Derrida is a holist without the whole. As if meditating on 1 Corinthians 13:9, "For we know [only] in part," he understands our finitude to mean that our meanings always presuppose some total context that we never actually possess, since we are not God. Here is a significant overlap. The atheist author of deconstruction thinks that we are not God. Curiously enough, theistic interpreters of Derrida, such as Watkin and me, are more than a little inclined to agree. It is true that Derrida does not employ the Creator-creature distinction as one between two levels of reality. But he constantly employs the concept of God in some form in order to remind us that we are not absolute, self-grounding, the embodiment of all Goodness, and the thinkers of all Truth.

There is a Kantian/epistemic aspect to Derrida's holism as well as a Hegelian/ontological dimension. The Kantian thesis expresses the fact that Derrida has taken the hermeneutical turn. If it is objected that "being must always already be conceptualized" (*WD*, 74), that is, guided by some *a priori* presuppositions, in order to speak as Derrida does, he grants the point immediately. Deconstruction is an interpretation, but so are the objections and alternatives to it. We live in what Paul Ricoeur



calls “the conflict of interpretations,” and no one should be more fully aware of this fact than theologians with the slightest knowledge of the history of Christian theology. Our cognition has the form of interpretation, of construal, of seeing something as something, and interpretation is never without presuppositions or perspectives that are vulnerable to revision or replacement.<sup>1</sup> We do not “see” the real directly, but through the lenses of *a priori* assumptions that always embody the limits of our location and often express the biases of our race, gender, class, party, or denomination. Or, to put the latter point theologically, sin often shapes our interpretations in ways that we work hard not to notice (Rom. 1:18).<sup>2</sup> We are not only *finite*; we are *fallen*.

The Hegelian theme is the ontological background for the semantic/epistemic thesis: “*The thing itself is a sign*” (OG, 49). It is not just words, sentences, concepts, or theories that point beyond themselves to a larger context on which they are dependent; it is such things as computers, cabbages, and compost piles that, in their being as well as in their meaning, belong to a larger system of reality. By analogy with *ecosystem*, we could speak of their *ontosystems*.

Perhaps you’ve heard of the homiletics professor who always hammered away on the notion that “a text without a context is a pretext.” Derrida’s theory of meaning and being, and thus of knowledge and truth, could be expressed in this formula: “Any individual in the world,<sup>3</sup> linguistic or extralinguistic, without its

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer speaks of traditions as playing this role, and Michel Foucault gives the part to social practices. On Gadamer, see my analysis in *Whose Interpretation? Which Community? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

2. I have developed this theme in relation to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Theism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998).

3. Emphasis on “in the world.” As an atheist, Derrida does not take God to be a real individual.

context is like an emperor without clothes.” This suggests that, in spite of Derrida, deconstruction is a kind of method, telling us how to proceed: “Look for the context, uncover the presuppositions, discover what can and cannot be seen from that perspective; in short, find the clothes that fit the emperor and give him whatever human grandeur he deserves, but not more. For we have seen that he is not God.”

The term *deconstruction* is often applied to Derrida’s substantive ethical, political, and theological views. This can be misleading insofar as it suggests that his deepest convictions about the good and the real are somehow entailed by his semantic and epistemic commitments (as discussed in chapter 1). In my view, this is true only in a very limited, formal sense. Deconstruction as a general theory does place constraints on the metaclaims that we can make about our ethics, our politics, and our theology. Watkin has nicely expressed this at the end of chapter 2:

Derrida is always against resting on our ethical or political laurels, thinking that we have all the knotty problems solved and all the loose ends tied up and that there is no more hard thinking to do. He is against following established rules and conventions without considering on each occasion whether those rules or conventions are themselves just. He is always against authority setting itself up as unimpeachable or natural, and he incessantly exposes its contingent or artificial origins.

In other words, deconstruction is a warning against treating our meanings as completely clear and our truths as *The Truth*.

Derrida’s most succinct expression of this conclusion is in “Force of Law,” where he argues that we should never simply identify the law with justice, or, to put it a bit differently, never identify *our* laws with *The Law*. One could build a rather strong case for such a thesis from the Prophets, Jesus, and Paul. No?

But if deconstructive theory requires us to acknowledge the finitude rather than the finality, the penultimacy rather than the ultimacy, of our theories and practices, I cannot see how it requires the substantive commitments of Derrida in ethics, politics, or religion. It tells us that American Republicans, American Democrats, and even French leftists like himself should be more humble about their ethics and their politics than they usually are. But it does not tell us which, if any, of these traditions we should adopt. All are prejudiced (in the sense of being guided by presuppositions that are not self-evident and are located within perspectives that are not all-seeing) and have come short of godlike, absolute knowing.

This does not require an “anything goes” kind of relativism, according to which all views are equally good (or bad, as Buddhists and the ancient skeptics would say). It seems to me that the situation is something like this:

(1) Our theories and practices are indeed relative to the historically conditioned and particular contexts by which they are supported and that they in turn support.

(2) Christians need not be afraid to acknowledge this. After all, we are relative, and only God is absolute. Biblical revelation does not transubstantiate us from human into divine thinkers and agents. Our understanding of that revelation is always a human interpretation, contested by other interpretations. We try to be open to the Holy Spirit, but unlike thinkers such as Spinoza and Hegel, we do not claim that human thought at its best is the Holy Spirit and that our interpretations are somehow divine.

(3) This does not preclude our thinking that some ethics, politics, or theology is “the best obtainable version of the truth.”<sup>4</sup>

4. This is the formula that Woodward and Bernstein developed out of their Watergate experience as the proper goal for journalists. Obviously, if you have a better source, you may well get a better version—but not necessarily. Slavery, Jim Crow, and apartheid all rested in large measure on appeals to Scripture.

Nietzsche, for example, is a radical perspectivist, but he does not think that Christianity or Platonism are just as good as his “will to power” philosophy.

(4) It does mean that the attempt to argue that this version of ethics, politics, or theology is the best available version will be very difficult. The premises and the criteria to which one might appeal are themselves matters in dispute.

(5) We could therefore say that every worldview is a matter of faith. What Ricoeur calls “the conflict of interpretations” is also the conflict of competing faiths—not in the sense of a specifically religious faith, but in the fairly common sense in which we say that beliefs and practices are matters of faith when they cannot be justified by some neutral, objective, universally acknowledged “view from nowhere.” Derrida himself says, “I don’t know, one has to believe . . .”<sup>5</sup>

In fact, I believe Derrida could (and in effect does) affirm all five of these points, and I see no reason why a Christian should not as well.

I’m suggesting that there are three elements to Derrida’s thought: deconstruction as a general theory of meaning, his ethical and political views, and his theology, that is, his atheism. In his mind and in his writings, they are found together, but there is no logical or conceptual connection among them. Each of the three could be consistently held without either of the other two. If this is true, then each needs to be evaluated on its own terms and not condemned as guilty by association with either of the other two dimensions. The unconscionably inaccurate readings that Derrida has too often received seem to stem from the need to discredit the theory of language and meaning in order to

5. *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 129 (Derrida’s ellipsis). He links this idea to the difference between believing and seeing (p. 1), as if meditating on John 20:26–29.

protect oneself and one's readers from either the politics or the theology or both. A more careful reading, such as the one that follows, shows that this approach is not only irresponsible but unnecessary.

I have argued elsewhere that Christians can be helped to recapture the critique of religion found in Jesus and the Prophets by reading three famous atheists: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.<sup>6</sup> In similar fashion, Christians might benefit from a conversation with Derrida. I have suggested that deconstruction can be read as an extended meditation on the claim that we are not God. Christians, who share this belief with Derrida, might gain important insights by listening to the way in which, through a different lens and from a different location, he makes the point.

The monograph that follows is a fine map for such an exploration.

Merold Westphal  
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6. See note 2 above.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book came about in a curious way. I am grateful to Charlie Butler and Graham Shearer for indulging me in correspondence on Derrida and then drawing my attention to this series; to Ted Turnau for formal introductions to the folks at P&R; to series editors Nathan Shannon and Mark Moser, and to P&R's director of academic development, John Hughes, for their exemplary encouragement of the project and their help through all its stages; and to those who have read some or all of the manuscript and offered comments along the way, including Bradley Green, Graham and Charlie (again), and Alison. I am very grateful to my father, Kenneth Watkin, for scrupulous and humorous copy-editing and for reminding me that only contortionists can fold their hands. I would not have been able to write this at all, had I not been granted gracious indulgence by my wife, Alison; my admiration and love for you are combined with heartfelt thanks. Since becoming a Christian at the age of fifteen and striking out in philosophy at around twenty, I have sought an opportunity to explore Derrida's thought from a biblical point of view. I am grateful that God has now granted me that opportunity and, in the process, has shown me a little more of his vast love (Eph. 3:14–21) and wisdom (Col. 2:1–3).

# INTRODUCTION

*Although Van Til outlined the terms of a methodology, far more needs to be done with actual arguments, both their form and content. How does one conduct an argument with an adherent of deconstruction?<sup>1</sup>*

*You must go on, I can't go on. I'll go on.<sup>2</sup>*

## **Why Derrida Matters Today**

As I walked down the stairs after lunch, I reflected on what had been one of my more eventful encounters in a Cambridge college dining hall. What I had just experienced seemed to be well summarized by the exclamation of Job, “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you” (Job 42:5 NIV). My conversation with an elderly gentleman had started predictably

1. William Edgar, introduction to *Christian Apologetics*, by Cornelius Van Til (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 15.

2. Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels by Samuel Beckett: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 414.

enough, with the usual polite opening questions about the state of our respective research, but it was when I made some general comment on a piece I was writing at the time on Derrida that I sensed that the tone of the conversation had changed. The gentleman was still impeccably polite and courteous, but the words that stuck with me from the conversation we conducted over the second half of the meat course and a delicious custard pudding were “intellectual terrorism” and “intention to bring down the whole edifice of rational inquiry and academia.” Before we parted, he promised to send me a piece he had written explaining at greater length why Derrida was a dangerous charlatan, and I promised that I would read it. I had of course heard, previous to that encounter, of the infamous “Derrida affair” at Cambridge in 1992, with its indignant letters to the *Times* (London), petitions of fellows, and what, by Cambridge standards, was a veritable popular revolution against the awarding of an honorary degree to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. I had heard all the stories, but, like the stunned, unsuspecting neighbors of the serial killer interviewed on the nightly news, I never thought that I would experience that sort of thing firsthand.

If I had told my antipathetic lunch partner that one day I would write a book on Derrida and Christianity, I fear we might never have reached the end of the delicious tart and custard. If the views of the readers of this book are even half as polarized as some of the opinions I encountered as a graduate student (I remember one exasperated lecturer insisting in a graduate seminar on Derrida that “of course he’s a real philosopher, for G\*d’s sake”), then I certainly have my work cut out. To write on one controversial subject may be regarded as misfortune; to write on two at the same time looks like foolhardiness, for most readers who are sympathetic to Derrida will probably not like Reformed Christianity, and most Reformed Christian readers will probably not like Derrida.



I write this book neither to praise Derrida nor to bury him. The evangelical and Reformed reception of Derrida has too often followed Mark Antony's verdict on the dead Caesar: "The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones." I hope that my book has avoided this rather ungracious approach to eulogy. Nevertheless, given the controversy that still surrounds Derrida's thought, a word of justification is required for his inclusion in a series of volumes on "Great Thinkers."

Derrida was the author or coauthor of at least seventy books, held professorships in Paris and the University of California, Irvine, and received honorary doctorates at many more universities (including Cambridge: the petition failed in the end), but that says very little about the scope of his influence. It is only slightly more illuminating to point out that there are now at least eighty-six book-length studies with "Derrida and . . ." in the title, including *Derrida and Antiquity*, *Derrida and Autobiography*, *Derrida and the Writing of the Body*, *Derrida and the Future of Literature*, *Derrida and Religion*, *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities*, *Derrida and Legal Philosophy*, *Derrida and Feminism*, *Derrida and Queer Theory*, and *Derrida and Democracy*. According to Derrida's friend and collaborator Geoffrey Bennington, his work has been translated into a dozen languages.<sup>3</sup> The dust jacket of Christopher Norris's *Derrida* describes him as "undoubtedly the single most influential figure in current Anglo-American literary theory."<sup>4</sup> Writing in the *New York Times* in 1998, Dinitia Smith referred to Derrida as "perhaps the world's most famous philosopher—if not the only famous philosopher."<sup>5</sup> Leslie Hill, one of Derrida's most astute and sure-footed commentators, describes his writing

3. Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 358.

4. Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

5. Dinitia Smith, "Philosopher Gamely in Defense of his Ideas," *New York Times*,

as simply “one of the essential events in the history of modern thought,”<sup>6</sup> part of “a remarkably creative generation who collectively, within twenty years or so, radically changed the whole philosophical and theoretical landscape both in France and elsewhere.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, piling up quotations like this will neither convince the skeptical nor inform the interested, and neither of these constituencies, I suspect, would wish me to waste any more time before getting down to discussing Derrida in detail.

### The Structure and Approach of This Book

The first half of this book will seek to set out, as succinctly and clearly as possible, some of the most important aspects of Derrida’s writing on metaphysics, ethics/politics, and theology. This first part will necessarily be schematic and reductive, and any readers who find that unacceptable are welcome to begin reading Derrida in the original French for themselves, for any translation, interpretation, or summary of any length is to some extent a betrayal of complexity. What I offer can be thought of as a map of some important aspects of Derrida’s thinking. Every map greatly simplifies the territory it represents, but every map is also useful in some situations and for some ends. The map of the London Tube system is a derisory representation of relative geographical locations, but it serves very well the purpose of helping people navigate from station to station. Providing we do not confuse it with the territory it describes, it is very helpful indeed.

The second half of the book will seek to evaluate Derrida’s

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May 30, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/30/arts/philosopher-gamely-in-defense-of-his-ideas.html> (accessed January 7, 2016).

6. Leslie Hill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), viii.

7. *Ibid.*, 3.

thought in these three areas from the viewpoint of a Reformed, and specifically Van Tilian, position. My aim is neither to dash off a Reformed “takedown” of Derrida nor simply to suggest that he is much closer to Reformed Christianity than many have thought. My intention is to evaluate Derrida’s positions in the light of biblical doctrines that, I will argue, most often take him by surprise and cut across both the objects of his critique and his own ideas. It avails us little to criticize Derrida for not being a Reformed theologian, or, for that matter, to criticize Reformed theology for not being deconstruction. To do so would be like critiquing a baseball player for not scoring touchdowns, or accusing a square of not being circular. Derrida is not a failed Reformed theologian, and Reformed theology is not deficient deconstruction. It is therefore my intention to let both deconstruction and Reformed theology speak in their own terms, bringing with them their own assumptions, and to seek to draw distinctions and comparisons between the two in a way that is, as far as possible, fair to what both Derrida and the Bible actually say. My aim is to provide Christians with a way of understanding Derrida that does justice both to his own thinking in its own terms, and to the Bible in its.

Although I hope my analyses and interpretations will stand for themselves, I perhaps owe the reader at the outset some explanation of my methodology. First, I write as a Christian for a Christian publishing house. Second, I start with the assumption that one must earn the right to critique a position by understanding it and being able to express it in a way that its adherents will be happy to own and endorse as correct. It is the important principle of *audi alteram partem*: listen to the other side. In terms of understanding a philosopher’s writing, this means that until we have understood not only what position someone holds, but also the reasons why he holds it—or, in other words, why that person finds his position attractive—we

have not yet understood it. If it makes no sense to us why Derrida would say something or why, looking at the world through his eyes, it would be an important or good thing to say, we need to keep reading and thinking some more before we open our mouths or pick up our pens to pass comment on him. I ask Christian readers not to leap into criticisms of Derrida's positions before they have walked a mile in his shoes and before they have understood why those positions are appealing and attractive to him. Likewise, I ask readers of this book who are sympathetic to Derrida, but hostile to a Reformed Christian position, to extend the reciprocal courtesy. Some readers may become a little frustrated that I do not get down to critiquing Derrida until the second half of the book. As it happens, this is a constraint of the Great Thinkers series, but I embrace it enthusiastically because it allows us to obtain a clear idea of what Derrida is saying in his own terms before we begin discussing how it relates to Reformed Christianity.

After *audi alteram partem*, my second guiding principle is that, within the created order, there is nothing that is completely and exhaustively good, nor anything that is utterly and unremittingly evil. Only God is good (Luke 18:19), and even the worst aspects of his originally good but fallen creation retain a dim flicker of goodness. This gives the Christian a particular predisposition, not only toward Derrida, but toward all aspects of every culture: we expect to find both good and bad there. It gives the Christian cultural critic, I would suggest, an unusual openness and curiosity.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, some of the secondary literature on deconstruction seems to assume that in order to write well on Derrida we must

8. This point is made by Tim Keller in the series of lectures *Preaching Christ in a Postmodern World*, available at <https://itunes.apple.com/au/itunes-u/preaching-christ-in-postmodern/id378879885?mt=10#> (accessed January 16, 2016).

write like Derrida. This is silly. It is just as silly as saying that, in order to write well about Shakespeare, we have to pepper our prose with the occasional *prithiee* and *forsooth* and compose our thoughts in blank verse. Derrida's style has caused much frustration and controversy among some of his readers, and he has his reasons for writing as he does, some of which I shall seek to explain below. In order to show what those reasons are, however, or in order to explain his thought more generally, trying to imitate his idiom would prove to be more of a hindrance than a help.



# ABBREVIATIONS

## Works by Derrida

AL	<i>Acts of Literature</i>
AR	<i>Acts of Religion</i>
C	“Circumfession”
DCP	<i>Debates in Continental Philosophy: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers</i>
DI	“Declarations of Independence”
DN	<i>Deconstruction in a Nutshell</i>
FL	“Force of Law”
FT	“Following Theory”
FWT	<i>For What Tomorrow—A Dialogue</i>
GD	<i>The Gift of Death</i>
GT	<i>Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money</i>
HJR	“Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility”
LI	<i>Limited Inc</i>
LJF	“Letter to a Japanese Friend”
MP	<i>Margins of Philosophy</i>
MPdM	<i>Mémoires: For Paul de Man</i>
MS	“Marx and Sons”

OG	<i>Of Grammatology</i>
OTN	<i>On the Name</i>
PF	<i>Politics of Friendship</i>
PG	<i>The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy</i>
Poi	<i>Points . . . : Interviews, 1974–1994</i>
Pos	<i>Positions</i>
R	<i>Rogues: Two Essays on Reason</i>
S	<i>Signéponge/Signsponge</i>
SP	<i>Speech and Phenomena</i>
TOJ	“The Time Is Out of Joint”
TS	<i>A Taste for the Secret</i>
TSI	“This Strange Institution Called Literature”
TTP	“The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations”
WD	<i>Writing and Difference</i>

### **Other Works**

AGG	John Frame, <i>Apologetics to the Glory of God</i>
CTE	Cornelius Van Til, <i>Christian Theistic Ethics</i>
CVT	John Frame, <i>Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought</i>
DCL	John Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Christian Life</i>
DF	Cornelius Van Til, <i>The Defense of the Faith</i> (4th ed.)
DG	John Frame, <i>The Doctrine of God</i>
DKG	John Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God</i>
HWPT	John Frame, <i>A History of Western Philosophy and Theology</i>
ICG	Cornelius Van Til, <i>The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel</i>
IST	Cornelius Van Til, <i>Introduction to Systematic Theology</i>



# PART 1

## DERRIDA'S THOUGHT

The danger of starting the discussion of a philosopher's thought with biographical detail is that it becomes a quick and easy lens through which the work is read and explained. None of us would be content to have everything we say reduced to our biography along the lines of "You are only saying that because, when you were six, such and such happened to you." In an interview, Derrida shows his discomfort with this sort of biographical tyranny:

Ah, you want me to say things like "I-was-born-in-El Biar-on-the-outskirts-of-Algiers-in-a-petit-bourgeois-family-of-assimilated-Jews-but . . ." Is that really necessary? I can't do it. You will have to help me. (*Poi*, 119–20)

However, it would also be a mistake to swing to the opposite extreme and think that Derrida's books just fell from the sky and had no personal, historical, and social context. So a few words of biographical introduction will, I hope, help to situate some of the discussion that follows.

Jackie Élie Derrida, named after child silent-movie star Jackie Coogan,<sup>1</sup> was born on July 15, 1930, in the city of El Biar in Algeria, which was officially part of France at the time.<sup>2</sup> During the Nazi-sympathizing French Vichy regime of 1940–44, although the young Derrida was top of his class, he was forbidden, as a Jew, from enjoying the privilege of raising the French flag, an honor usually given to the star pupil. In 1942 he ran afoul of the anti-Jewish quotas imposed in Algerian schools and was expelled. Derrida's later description of himself at the time as "a little black and very Arab Jew" (C, 58) highlights his marginality in European society at the time. By the time of the 1968 student riots, when universities were occupied, barricades were built in the streets of Paris, and then-President de Gaulle was brought to the brink of resignation, Derrida was teaching at the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure*, Rue d'Ulm, and he took an active, though marginal and at times uneasy, role in the demonstrations, marches, committees, and communes of "May '68," admitting later that he was no *soixante-huitard* ("sixty-eighter").<sup>3</sup> Although his academic reputation grew with the publication of three seminal texts in 1967, "as far as dominant Catholic metropolitan French culture was concerned, Derrida was an outsider several times over,"<sup>4</sup> and his renown grew among English-speaking scholars more rapidly than it did in his native France, a trend that continues to this day.

1. Benoît Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 13.

2. After 1848, Algeria was no longer a French colony, as many biographies of Derrida mistakenly suggest, but was officially divided into three *départements* (administrative districts) under the oversight of the French Interior Ministry.

3. Peeters, *Derrida*, 197.

4. Leslie Hill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6.

# 1

## WHAT IS DECONSTRUCTION?

### **Not Meaninglessness but Openness**

During my undergraduate days, I used to have my hair cut at Carmelo, a friendly barbershop on Jesus Lane in Cambridge. It was one of those old-style barbers that still sport the red-and-white-striped pole over the door. One morning, walking down Jesus Lane on my way to lectures, I saw that some scaffolding had been erected overnight outside Carmelo, so that work could be carried out on the structure of the building. The scaffolding, as it happened, was covered with a plastic sheath with those same diagonal red and white stripes, presumably so that absentminded students would be saved from bumping into the steel poles when they returned to college in the early hours of the morning. So now there were two sets of diagonal, red and white stripes side by side. One set of stripes meant something like “come in here and have your hair cut,” and the other meant “watch out, don’t bang into this.” There was nothing so unusual in that.

In the to-and-fro of daily life, we do not find these different meanings for the same red and white stripes particularly

confusing. We do not see laborers taking their tools into the nearest barbers expecting to do a day's work, and we do not see people lining up at worksites for a short back and sides. We understand the meaning of the red and white stripes in terms of the context in which we meet them. In fact, if we come to think of it, there is nothing to stop diagonal red and white stripes from taking on a further and completely unrelated meaning in the future, and nothing to stop this new meaning from becoming the primary sense that most people associate with the stripes. The logo for a new and dominant multinational corporation, perhaps, or the signature design of a particular fashion label, may become the primary association for those same stripes. In a similar way, the rainbow flag over the past decades has become associated, in the minds of most people, with the gay pride movement.

We can say, therefore, that the meaning of diagonal red and white stripes is open: in the future, those stripes could, in theory at least, mean any number of things of which today we have no inkling. This does not mean the diagonal red and white stripes are meaningless. Far from it; they have a set of contextual meanings that is open and in principle infinitely expandable in the future. We know what they mean now, but we don't know how those meanings will change or what new meanings will overshadow them in the future. Finally, if someone were to insist that we tell them what red and white stripes mean by themselves, outside of any context, we would have to reply that the question is misguided. Diagonal red and white stripes do not mean anything "in themselves"; their meaning only becomes clear within, and is determined by, a particular context, and contexts change.

This little example helps us understand the misguided nature of one of the persistent myths peddled about Derrida: that he thinks language is meaningless. Language, for Derrida, is not meaningless; its meanings are open in the sense that we cannot

today close down the meaning of any word or sign, such that we have exhaustively explored its context and can be utterly confident it can't possibly mean anything but what we think it means, nor can we be sure it will not accrue new primary meanings in the future. There is no way to preserve meanings in aspic, no way to short-circuit context and petrify particular meanings, preserving them from the shifting sands of time. Furthermore, context is functionally infinite: the context of an utterance can never be completely exhausted. Where do I draw the line in determining, for example, the relevant context of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? And even if I can answer that question to my own satisfaction, I can never be sure that some new piece of contextual information will not arise that radically alters the way in which we understand the play. For these two reasons, context is always open.

### **Logocentrism and Phonocentrism**

Despite the necessity and unmasterability of context, the Western tradition has almost always tended to act as if context were not open in this way and as if meanings and concepts could be completely and exhaustively present in the words that signify them, as if diagonal red and white stripes meant something in themselves. It is this delusion that Derrida calls "logocentrism"—a way of thinking about things that would "support the determination of the being of the entity as presence" (OG, 12). In other words, it imagines that what something is (red and white stripes, dogs, cats, human beings, or the meaning of the words in a sentence) is completely present in the thing itself, not dependent on anything outside of it. To think logocentrically is to affirm that there can be pure being in little atomized parcels and pure meaning outside any context whatever. When he critiques logocentrism, Derrida has in mind something like the Forms or Ideas of Plato, perfect and unblemished realities that

exist apart from this world in a “heavenly place” (Greek: *topos ouranios*) outside all particular contexts, and of which everything in this world is an imperfect and shadowy copy.

Allied to this logocentric illusion that meaning can be free of all context, Derrida discerns another prejudice in the Western tradition, one that sees spoken language as immediate and authentic, and written language as distant and second-best. This is phonocentrism, an “absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning” (*OG*, 12). In other words, phonocentrism considers meaning to be fully present in spoken language in a way that it is not present in writing. Spoken language is considered immediate because it comes straight out of the body with no mediating technology such as pencil, paper, written linguistic signs, or a computer keyboard. We think of speech as original and writing as secondary, as written-down speech. One of Derrida’s major references for this idea is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, in a short, little-known, posthumously published piece entitled “Pronunciation,” insists that “writing serves only as a supplement to speech” and that “the art of writing is nothing but a mediated representation of thought” (cited in *OG*, 144). What is more, writing for Rousseau is a “dangerous supplement” because it puts a distance between the author and his or her meaning.

### **“There Is Nothing Outside the Text”**

With logocentrism and phonocentrism under our belt, let’s dive in now to our first passage from Derrida’s writing, which contains perhaps the most famous one-liner in all his work. It shows us how he tries to correct the illusions of logocentrism and phonocentrism: “There is nothing outside the text.” It is a statement that is frequently misunderstood, and so it is worth spending some time unpacking it. For those unfamiliar with Derrida’s

writing, the passage may seem rather daunting, but we will take it slowly, and I will explain it bit by bit:

If reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general. That is why the methodological considerations that we risk applying here to an example are closely dependent on general propositions that we have elaborated above; as regards the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified. There is nothing outside of the text. (OG, 158)

Let's start with the final sentence and work backwards. In French, it reads "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (literalistically: "there is no outside-text"). We should notice four things about the phrase:

1. It is a play on "hors-texte," which, as well as meaning (without the hyphen) "outside the text," is a noun in its own right. An *hors-texte* is a frontispiece or a book plate, a piece (usually a reproduction of a painting, a photograph, an engraving, or a facsimile) inserted right at the beginning of a book, which serves to illustrate or explain the book's main subject, guiding our reading of it by pointing to one of its salient moments or showing us something that the author (or perhaps the publisher) wants to draw our attention to.<sup>5</sup> Coming outside the text proper, it has

5. It is not, as James K. A. Smith suggests, "the buffer of blank pages at the beginning and the end of a book, the sheets that are without text." See James K. A. Smith,

a certain authority or objectivity that the text itself cannot have in relation to itself (in rather the same way that the testimony of an “independent” witness carries more weight in a court of law than the testimony of the accused). The *hors-texte* comes bound together with the book, but is not part of the book proper, coming as it does before the contents page. So one thing Derrida is saying in this little phrase is that the circulation of meanings in which we find ourselves has no cheat sheet; nothing stands outside and over above the meanings that circulate in and around us to give us a hint of what the “real meaning of it all” is.

2. Such a cheat sheet, or authoritative guide to meaning, is what Derrida calls in this passage a “transcendental signified.” Derrida is taking the term “signified” from the early twentieth-century Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and his important distinction between “signifier” and “signified.” For Saussure, a signifier is a sound-image, a series of sounds that, to take Saussure’s own example, form the word “tree” in a particular language. A signified is the concept that corresponds to that sound-image, i.e., the idea of a tree. A transcendental signified would be a concept that does not defer its meaning to any other signifieds, but stands, as Derrida says in this passage, “outside of language” in pure self-sufficiency and isolation. As opposed to all other signifieds that in turn become signifiers to define other signifieds, the transcendental signified is necessary “for the difference between signifier and signified to be somewhere absolute and irreducible” (OG, 20). “Transcendental” means that it provides the condition of possibility for meaning in general, because without at least one thing the



meaning of which is outside language and utterly fixed (for example: God), meanings are not anchored to anything stable. Derrida says that “the sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth” (OG, 14), because the way in which the West has traditionally thought about meaning requires God as its condition of possibility.

3. “Text” in this phrase does not just mean “words written down in a book,” as if Derrida were saying that “words are the only things that exist.” “What I call ‘text,’” he insists, “implies all the structures called ‘real,’ ‘economic,’ ‘historical,’ socio-institutional, in short: all possible referents” (LI, 148). It is a web of meanings that includes, but is not limited to, the meanings of words on a page. Notice also that when Derrida mentions “writing” in our passage, he specifies “in the sense that we give here to that word” and talks about “writing in general.” This “writing in general” is what he elsewhere calls “*arche-writing*,” and the next section of this chapter will be given over to explaining in some detail what it means. For now, let us be content to understand it as describing all meaning, whether in written texts or in our lives more broadly: meanings are always differential (defined in terms of what they are not) and deferred (calling upon other meanings in their own definitions). So rather than saying that Derrida means “there is nothing outside language,” it is closer to the mark (but not sufficient) to say “there is nothing outside of context” (LI, 136). On a number of occasions, Derrida expresses exasperation with those who persist in interpreting him to be claiming that there is nothing outside language:

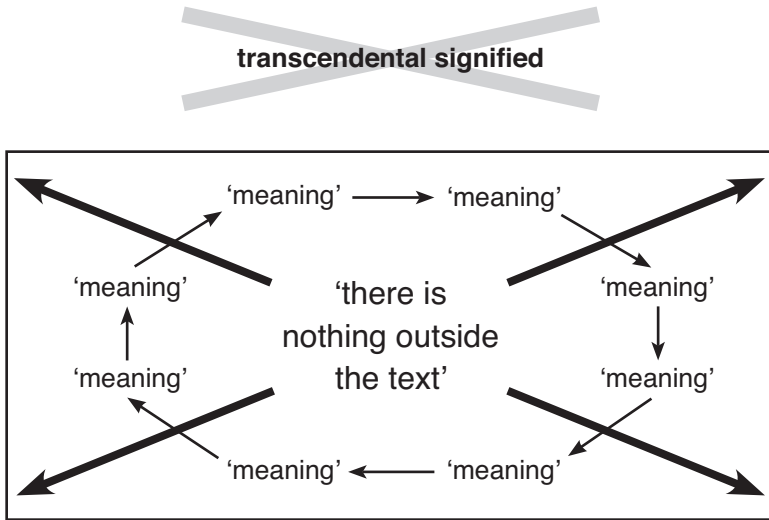
I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language,

that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the 'other' and the 'other of language.' (DCP, 154)

Just what that "other" is, we shall find out in the section on ethics below.

4. Finally, we need to note the particular philosophical baggage carried by the innocuous-looking words "there is" (in French, *il y a*). Within the tradition in which Derrida is working, "il y a" is the translation of "es gibt" in Heidegger's German, and when Heidegger says "there is" he means something more than you or I intend by those words in casual, everyday conversation. For Heidegger, the world offers itself or is given to our consciousness ("es gibt" is from the verb *geben*, "to give"). Take the example of the cup of coffee on the desk in front of me. It is a collection of atoms, but when I see it, I can't help experiencing it *as* a cup of coffee, with all the cultural connotations that brings with it for human beings (drinkable, warm, stimulant, etc.). Or take the high-pitched noise outside. I can't help experiencing it *as* an ambulance siren, again with all the cultural baggage and associations that brings for an early twenty-first-century Westerner. This "as-structure of being" is pointing out that our concepts and meanings make sense of the world for us: I do not see confusing shapes, but cups of coffee; I do not hear disorienting sounds, but sirens, bells, and whistles. Reality is "given" to my consciousness, already packaged *as* familiar concepts. So the "there is" of "there is nothing outside the text" could be glossed as "Nothing is present to my consciousness as what it is outside the text," and to expand both "there is" and "text" at

once: “Nothing is present to my consciousness as what it is in a way that is outside the differential play of meanings.”



**Fig. 1.1. There Is Nothing Outside the Text**

The importance of this idea of generalized text, for Derrida, is that rather than there being a Platonic “heavenly place” where the buck stops for meaning, every signified becomes in turn a signifier defining the meaning of other signifieds, and the merry-go-round never stops.

## Différance

I suggested above that “there is nothing outside the text” is a necessary way of thinking about meaning for Derrida if we are to avoid what he identifies as the myth of logocentrism. Derrida seeks to expose the myth of phonocentrism (the idea that meaning is fully present in spoken language in a way it is not in writing) by showing that all meaning, not just the meaning of

written texts, is never completely present to itself. He has a number of different terms for this condition of non-self-presence, each term with a different slant on the idea. I will try to explain it here in terms of “différance,” a French term coined by Derrida. We must understand it if we are to grasp his deconstruction of metaphysics.

First, let us consider what the metaphysics is that Derrida is deconstructing. Western metaphysics, he argues, is distinguished by two main tendencies. First, it is structured in terms of a series of binary oppositions. In each case, one of the two terms in the opposition is privileged over the other: presence/absence, natural/artificial, literal/metaphorical, original/copy, inside/outside, real/imaginary, soul/body, identity/difference, man/woman, human/animal, heterosexuality/other sexualities. Derrida does not have a problem, on an everyday level, with the idea of oppositions as such, nor with the idea that we can make distinctions between things (he is quite happy to do so himself). He has two problems, however, with binary oppositions like those listed above. The first one is that things are not only distinguished, but also hierarchized, with one of them being privileged above the other. This hierarchy leads to exploitation and oppression, as we shall see in the section on ethics below. The second problem is that the oppositions rely on an ideal of purity according to which the privileged element of each opposition can exist by itself, that its meaning can be fully present without needing to refer to the underprivileged element, which deconstruction seeks to point out is simply not the case. What sense is there in “the natural,” for example, if there is no “artificial”? Or how can there be an “inside” if there is no “outside”? In each case, the privileged term does not exist in splendid isolation, but relies on the underprivileged term to make it what it is.

The second tendency that characterizes Western metaphysics for Derrida is that it is a “metaphysics of presence.” The

“presence” referred to here is the idea that (1) the meaning of a signified is fully present in its signifier, rather than being deferred or scattered among plural signifiers, and (2) the meaning of signs is fully and exhaustively present to what Derrida calls an “absolute logos,” one who knows perfectly, whom Derrida identifies as God (OG, 13). In other words, the West has taken as its blueprint for human knowledge the perfect and immediate knowledge of God, and so “the age of the sign is essentially theological” (OG, 14). We can see here echoes of Nietzsche, who affirms that “I am afraid that we have not got rid of God because we still have faith in grammar.”<sup>6</sup> We think that our language gives us direct and unmediated access to the world, that it makes the essence of things present to us, but for Nietzsche it does no such thing; it gives us access only to our own human concepts and to the figures of speech inherent in language itself:

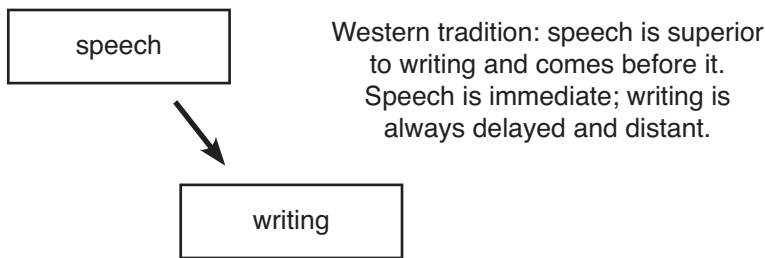
The “thing in itself” (for that is what pure truth, without consequences, would be) is quite incomprehensible to the creators of language and not at all worth aiming for. One designates only the relations of things to man, and to express them one calls on the boldest metaphors. . . . What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 170.

their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.<sup>7</sup>

Derrida uses a similar image of coins ground down to a smooth surface in his discussion of Anatole France in *Margins of Philosophy*, where he concurs with Nietzsche that “philosophy would be this process of metaphorization which gets carried away” (*MP*, 211).

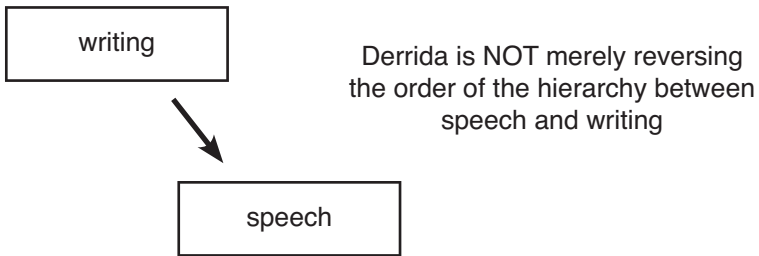
In his seminal work *Of Grammatology*, Derrida wants to show, therefore, that meaning is not what we think it is: “To make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words ‘proximity,’ ‘immediacy,’ ‘presence’ . . . is my final intention in this book” (*OG*, 70). In order to understand how he goes about doing this, let’s take again the example of speech and writing and consider Derrida’s deconstruction of it with the aid of a series of diagrams. We begin with the traditional Western understanding, according to which the meaning of speech is immediate and present, and writing is distant and imperfect. We can represent this idea by speech being to the left of writing (i.e., before it) and above writing (i.e., privileged over it).



**Fig. 1.2. Speech Precedes Writing and Is More Immediate**

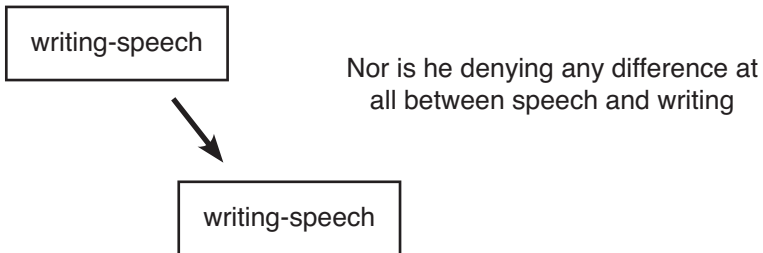
7. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche’s Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazale (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1970), 84.

Derrida has sometimes been wrongly understood simply to be reversing the hierarchy between the two terms, putting writing in the place of privilege over speech: “People who are in a bit too much of a hurry have thought that I wasn’t interested in the voice, just writing. Obviously, this is not true” (Poi, 140). Such a reversal would, to be sure, change the content of the hierarchy, but it would do nothing to challenge or disrupt the hierarchical structure itself. There would still be a privileged and an under-privileged term, which would need deconstructing.



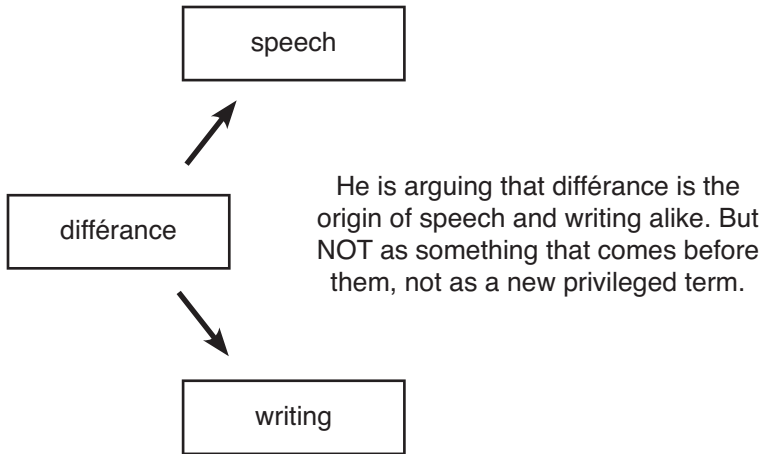
**Fig. 1.3. Derrida Is Not Merely Privileging Writing over Speech**

Nor does Derrida merely deny any difference whatever between the terms, as if “speech” and “writing” could be used interchangeably:



**Fig. 1.4. Derrida Is Not Denying Any Difference between Writing and Speech**

What Derrida claims instead is that “différance” (spelled “-ance,” a term I shall explain presently) is the origin of both speech and writing, but not something outside and separate from them:



**Fig. 1.5. Différance Does Not Precede Speech and Writing as Their Ground and Origin**

Différance does not precede the elements of the opposition it makes possible; it is their mode of existence, just as in traditional Western metaphysics presence itself does not precede that which is present, but rather is the way in which things appear to the godlike consciousness. It is important for us to grasp, therefore, that différance is not a thing in itself, as Derrida stresses:

What we note as différance will thus be the movement of play that “produces” (and not by something that is simply an activity) these differences, these effects of difference. This does not mean that the différance which produces differences is before them in a simple and in itself unmodified and indifferent present. Différance is the nonfull, nonsimple “origin”; it is the structured and differing origin of differences. (*SP*, 141)



It is also important to grasp that, just as for traditional metaphysics, presence is not just about language, but about the mode of existence of everything that there is (i.e., whatever exists exists in so far as it can be immediately present to my consciousness), so also for Derrida, *différance* is not just the condition of possibility for language, but for everything one experiences. We could think of presence and *différance* as the contrast, not between two things, but between two adverbs: according to traditional metaphysics, truth and meaning exist “presently,” but according to Derrida, they exist “*différently*.” *Différance* is not what there is, but how everything is:



*Différance* is not a concept that comes before speech and writing in time. It is their condition of possibility, and they exist not so much “within” *différance* but “as” *différance*. It is their mode of existence: their existence is one of differing in relation to themselves and to each other.

**Fig. 1.6. *Différance* Is the Mode of Existence of Both Speech and Writing**

A further point to make about this final diagram is that we do not first of all experience *différance* and then fill it with speech and writing—any more than we first experience presence and then fill it with things that are present. The condition of *différance* is retrojected from our experience of things that exist “*différently*.”

So then, for Derrida everything that exists exists “différently,” but what is *différance*? Derrida coined the term *différance* to indicate that “presence” is always different from itself and deferred with relation to itself. The French verb *différer* can mean both “to differ” and “to defer.” Furthermore, by changing the usual spelling of *différence* to *différance*, Derrida introduces a difference that is only discernible in writing, for the two spellings are pronounced identically. This is intended to challenge the idea that meaning is always completely present in speech, but dislocated and distant in writing: in this case the nuance is only discernible in the written form. Elsewhere Derrida calls *différance* an “arche-writing” (from the Greek *arche*, meaning “beginning” or “origin,” French: *archi-écriture*), which is the condition of non-self-presence from which both speech and writing are derived. Arche-writing is not the same as writing-as-opposed-to-speech, and *différance* is not the same as difference-as-opposed-to-identity; arche-writing is the condition of possibility both of speech and of writing (in other words, it makes them both possible in the first place), and *différance* is the condition of possibility both of difference and of identity.

*Différance*, then, is the condition of being according to which “there is no experience of *pure* presence, but only chains of differential marks” (*LI*, 10). In asserting that meaning is a function of difference rather than presence, Derrida is leaning once more on the insights of Saussure. For Saussure, a signifier signifies only because it is different and therefore distinct from other signifiers. We can identify the signifier “cat” within the system of language because it is different from “cot,” “bat,” “car” and so forth, and indeed because it is different from every other signifier in the language. Identity is derived from difference, rather than difference from identity (remember the binary opposites discussed above, one element of which cannot exist without the other). Similarly, the meaning of signifieds (concepts) is

also a function of their place in the whole system of language and their differences from other signifieds. A quick example will help us see how this works. Imagine an Englishwoman and Frenchwoman out for a stroll in the countryside one day. "Just look at that beautiful winding river" exclaims the former excitedly; "Oui, c'est un très beau fleuve," responds the latter. In deciding to use the English word "river," the first speaker had to make a decision about size. The English language differentiates bodies of flowing water in terms of their volume: a river is bigger than a stream, and a stream is bigger than a brook. But the second speaker had a different choice to make: the French language differentiates between water that flows directly into the sea ("un fleuve") or not ("une rivière"). In this example, English and French use different ways of dividing the raw material of reality into concepts, and in both languages the concepts are defined in terms of their differences from other neighboring concepts. No concept is an island entire unto itself, and in order to know its meaning one must know something of the system of which it is an element. In other words, its meaning is not fully present to it, for "no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present" (*Pos*, 26).

Before we leave this example of rivers and streams, we can note that it also makes Nietzsche's point quite well. Which distinction gives us "the essence of the thing" or the ultimate truth of reality? Rivers/streams, or fleuves/rivières? According to which set of differences does language immediately and exhaustively give us the truth of the world? Are there really rivers and streams, but the benighted French are deluded into using the mistaken distinction of fleuve/rivière, or are our Gallic friends closer to the truth of things with their distinction? The answer, of course, is that neither set of differences gives us the necessary truth of things as they really are, such that we could say all other systems of differences are just wrong. The English language creates the

concepts of “rivers” and “streams”; it does not find them out there in the world and then decide to use them, and the same goes for the French “fleuves” and “rivières.” Indeed, any number of other systems of differences could be used to create a set of concepts that would be just as adequate for getting on with everyday life.

What does all this mean for Derrida’s deconstruction of metaphysics? Expressed starkly, it means: “There is no atom” (*Poi*, 137). That is, meaning and truth are never self-contained, but always rely on their difference from what they are not in order to be what they are. Nothing is ever fully present, because the idea of presence itself is an artificial construct derived from a more originary condition of *différance*: “Immediacy is derived,” and we must speak of “the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception” (*OG*, 157). Metaphysics is deconstructed when it is shown that its cherished concepts—presence, immediacy, speech—are not, after all, originary and cannot be defined or understood without that which they seek to brush under the carpet: absence, mediation, writing.

Before we leave this discussion of *différance*, it is important to make one final observation that will become crucial in the section on ethics. It is that, while Derrida sees the traditional language and concepts of Western metaphysics as an illusion, it is impossible to do away with them completely if we want to say anything intelligible at all. There is no alternative language ready and waiting to be dusted off and employed in the place of metaphysics, and so Derrida must perform the delicate task of deconstructing Western metaphysics from within Western metaphysics, not from some place outside of it (which would be a very metaphysical notion itself, something like Plato’s “divine realm” of the Forms [Greek: *topos ouranios*]). Derrida insists that “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” (*WD*, 354). So

deconstruction always pulls at metaphysics with one foot inside it, rather than critiquing it from the outside.

### **Deconstruction Is Not Just Another Way of Reading**

There is one further misunderstanding of Derrida's work that needs to be corrected before we can move on from this brief survey of his deconstruction of metaphysics. Deconstruction has not infrequently been understood as a method or a way of reading. This is not helped by the way it is often taught in seminars on literary theory: there are Marxist readings of texts, Freudian readings, feminist readings, queer readings, and deconstructive readings. But in the same way that Derrida is careful to say that *différance* is not some original concept or reality that precedes everything else, he also repeatedly insists that deconstruction is not a method or set of procedures that one can pull off the shelf and set to work on any old unsuspecting text:

I am wary of the idea of methods of reading. The laws of reading are determined by that particular text that is being read. This does not mean that we should simply abandon ourselves to the text, or represent and repeat it in a purely passive manner. It means that we must remain faithful, even if it implies a certain violence, to the injunctions of the text. These injunctions will differ from one text to the next so that one cannot prescribe one general method of reading. In this sense deconstruction is not a method. (*DCP*, 155)

Why is Derrida so resistant to deconstruction being understood as a method? Because a method brings the same set of tools to everything it encounters: it is a cookie-cutter approach to reading, a one-trick pony that is completely insensitive to

the particular text it is reading and just filters the text to find whatever it knew it was looking for before it started reading. With a method, you know what you're going to get. It exploits the text for its own purposes, rather than trying to understand the text in its own terms. This is what Derrida wants to avoid, and it is why he insists that "all sentences of the type 'deconstruction is X' or 'deconstruction is not X' *a priori* miss the point" (LJF, 275). This is also why Derrida keeps changing the terms in which he describes what he is doing: from "deconstruction" and "différance" to "supplementarity," "dissemination," "trace," "pharmakon," "hymen," and "iterability." Each of these terms, though it describes not unrelated moves, comes out of a particular context, out of a particular encounter with a specific text or author, and each term brings different connotations and inflections to Derrida's readings, connotations and inflections that are germane to the particular reading encounters in which they arise.

The changing vocabulary emphasizes that his aim is not to produce a "philosophy of X," (such as a philosophy of literature or a philosophy of science), bringing a preestablished set of static philosophical concepts to whatever he is reading and making every text that he meets fit that same Procrustean bed in a way that keeps his conceptual scheme unscathed and intact through all its encounters. This does not mean there are no tendencies at all in his work, as he points out in an interview:

I think there are some general rules, some procedures that can be transposed by analogy . . . but these rules are taken up in a text which is each time a unique element and which does not let itself be turned totally into a method. (*Poi*, 200)

Some critics have seen this terminological proliferation as an annoyance, as a lack of clarity or even as pretentious, but for

Derrida it is necessary in order to avoid slipping into methodological predictability. It is for this reason that he is uncomfortable with the term “deconstruction” being used as a general description of his thought (TTP, 44), and it is for this reason that the word “deconstructionism” is never used by Derrida himself. To reduce deconstruction to an ism alongside other isms is to set oneself against everything that Derrida claims about deconstruction.

When Derrida is pressed to define deconstruction—and he does so only with the greatest reluctance—he does so in a way that recalls the framing of *différance* as an adverb in the discussion above:

I have often had occasion to define deconstruction as that which is—far from a theory, a school, a method, even a discourse, still less a technique that can be appropriated—at bottom what happens or comes to pass. (TOJ, 17)

Deconstruction, then, is what happens: things deconstruct or, better, things exist deconstructively. As James K. A. Smith elegantly puts it, deconstruction “happens in the middle voice, as it were: *ça se déconstruit*; it deconstructs itself.”<sup>8</sup> So a deconstructive reading of a text, understood in its own terms, is doing nothing more than pointing out the deconstruction that the text was quite happily performing on itself before the reading came along, but that no one had noticed yet. Deconstruction brings nothing to the text apart from a careful, close reading—an analysis that, when it reads thinkers like Plato or Aristotle, “tries to find out how their thinking works or does not work” in order to “find the tensions, the contradictions, the heterogeneity within their own corpus” (DN, 9–10). This means that:

8. Smith, *Jacques Derrida*, 9.

Deconstruction is not an operation that supervenes afterwards, from the outside, one fine day. It is always already at work in the work. Since the destructive force of deconstruction is always already contained within the very architecture of the work, all one would finally have to do to be able to deconstruct, given this always already, is to do memory work. (MPdM, 73)

Furthermore, given that deconstruction points something out that was not previously noticed about how a given text trips over its own laces, it is not a dry and objective description of how things exist that leaves those same things just as it found them. "Deconstruction, I have insisted, is not neutral. It intervenes," Derrida asserts (*Pos*, 93). Far from being a detached exercise in reading, it is "a way of taking a position, in its work of analysis, concerning the political and institutional structures that make possible and govern our practices, our competencies, our performances."<sup>9</sup> So we find, as we turn now to consider the ethical and political import of deconstruction, that we have already been talking about ethics and politics all along. From the beginning, Derrida affirms, deconstruction "has done nothing but address" the problem of justice (*FL*, 935). In the next section, I will tease out this interventionist, position-taking dynamic of deconstruction and the ethics and politics to which it gives rise.

9. Jacques Derrida, "The Conflict of Faculties," in *Languages of Knowledge and of Inquiry*, ed. Michael Riffaterre (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), quoted in Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 156.