

# The concept of Deconstruction in Philosophy with Special Reference to Jacques Derrida and Heidegger



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## Abstract

Jacques Derrida was one of the most well known twentieth century philosophers. Deconstruction by its very nature defies institutionalization in an authoritative definition. The concept was first outlined by Derrida in *Of Grammatology* where he explored the interplay between language and the construction of meaning. Deconstruction is therefore a means of interrogating the relationship between the two. There are many different terms that Derrida employs to describe what he considers to be the fundamental ways of thinking of the Western philosophical tradition. These include: logocentrism, phallogocentrism, and perhaps most famously, the metaphysics of presence, but also often simply 'metaphysics'. The idea of deconstruction is therefore concerned with countering the idea of a transcendental origin or natural referent. It refutes the notion that it is possible to transgress the institution in order to discover something beyond — the existence of an independent origin. Derrida's enduring references to the metaphysics of presence borrows heavily from the work of Heidegger.

**Keywords:** Deconstruction, Language, Construction of Meaning, Logocentrism, Phallogocentrism, Metaphysics of Presence, Transcendental Origin, Heidegger.

## Introduction

Deconstruction is the philosophical theory of criticism that seeks to expose alleged deep seated contradictions in a work by delving below its surface meaning. Deconstruction arose partially in reaction to the literary theories of structuralism, which has posited that when words are understood within the context of a society of readers, then one could point to the specific meaning of a text. The deconstructionists disagreed with it. They argued that there was not one possible meaning for a text but multiple and contradictory meanings. In fact they argued, underlying a text is the subtext, which is a set of values that must be identified and evaluated to see if the text is contrary in nature and therefore, in the profoundest sense, without meaning. Deconstructionists thus contend that not only are the traditional 'readings' of the texts in the established literary canon false but also the teaching of the students on this subject is equally flawed. A deconstructionist regards a text of meaning and ultimately dismisses the values of anything it touches. In other words, deconstruction reduces the meaning of a work to nothingness. Deconstruction is a strategy whereby a text's key terms and concepts are made to appear paradoxical or self – undermining, thus rendering their meaning undecided and so making the overall meaning of the text nonsense. Deconstruction has at least two aspects: literary and philosophical. The literary aspect concerns the textual interpretation, where invention is essential to finding hidden alternative meanings in the text. The philosophical aspect concerns the main target of deconstruction: the "metaphysics of presence," or simply metaphysics. Starting from Heideggerian point of view, Derrida argues that metaphysics affects the whole of philosophy from Plato onwards. Metaphysics creates dualistic oppositions and installs a hierarchy that unfortunately privileges one term of each dichotomy.

## Aim of the Study

In this article attempt has been made to focus the related issues of Deconstruction in philosophy.

## Review of Literature

Jacques Derrida's 1967 book *Of Grammatology* (Spivak trans. John Hopkins Press, 1976) introduced the majority of ideas influential

within deconstruction. Derrida published a number of other works directly relevant to the concept of deconstruction. Books showing deconstruction in action or defining it more completely include *Difference, Speech and Phenomena* (trans. Allison, Evanston: Northwestern University Press), and *Writing and Difference* (trans. Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). In *Force of Law (The Mystical Foundation of Authority* in Cornell et al (eds)) Derrida concedes that deconstruction is 'impossible'. The 'happening' of deconstruction is not going to lead to a determinate outcome. It will not reveal the one true meaning of justice that can be embodied in law. Heidegger's *Being and Time*, (John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, trans. New York: Harper, 1962) also discusses his concept of *Destruktion*. We can also refer the following for the same topic - "*Deconstruction Theory*", Stanford Presidential Lectures and Symposia in the Humanities and Arts. 1995. Retrieved 8 September 2017, "Deconstruction"- Encyclopedia Britannica, Retrieved 8 September 2017, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed), Crichtley, Simon (2014), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. ISBN 9780748689323, Retrieved 8 September 2017, *The Derrida Dictionary*, Wortham, Simon Morgan, Continuum, 2010. ISBN 378-1-847-06526-1, *A Derrida Dictionary*, Lucy, Niall (2004), Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing. ISBN 1405137517, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, Culler Jonathan, Cornell University Press, 1982, ISBN 978-0-8014-1322-3.

#### Discussion

Jacques Derrida was one of the most well known twentieth century philosophers. He was also one of the most prolific. Distancing himself from the various philosophical movements and traditions that preceded him on the French intellectual scene, he developed a strategy called "deconstruction" in the mid 1960s. Although not purely negative, deconstruction is primarily concerned with something tantamount to a critique of the Western philosophical tradition. Deconstruction is generally presented via an analysis of specific texts. It seeks to expose, and then to subvert, the various binary oppositions that undergird our dominant ways of thinking—presence/absence, speech/writing, and so forth. Deconstruction by its very nature defies institutionalization in an authoritative definition. The concept was first outlined by Derrida in *Of Grammatology* where he explored the interplay between language and the construction of meaning. From this early work, and later works in which he has attempted to explain deconstruction to others, most notably the *Letter to a Japanese Friend*, it is possible to provide a basic explanation of what deconstruction is commonly understood to mean. Three key features emerge from Derrida's work as making deconstruction possible. These are, first, the inherent desire to have a centre, or focal point, to structure understanding (logocentrism); second, the reduction of meaning to set definitions that are committed to writing (nothing beyond the text); and, finally, how the reduction of meaning to writing captures opposition within that

concept itself (*différance*). These three features found the possibility of deconstruction as an on-going process of questioning the accepted basis of meaning. While the concept initially arose in the context of language, it is equally applicable to the study of law. Derrida considered deconstruction to be a 'problematization of the foundation of law, morality and politics'.<sup>1</sup> For him it was both 'foreseeable and desirable that studies of deconstructive style should culminate in the problematic of law and justice.'<sup>2</sup> Deconstruction is therefore a means of interrogating the relationship between the two. There are many different terms that Derrida employs to describe what he considers to be the fundamental ways of thinking of the Western philosophical tradition. These include: logocentrism, phallogocentrism, and perhaps most famously, the metaphysics of presence, but also often simply 'metaphysics'. These terms all have slightly different meanings. Logocentrism emphasises the privileged role that *logos*, or speech, has been accorded in the Western tradition. Phallogocentrism points towards the patriarchal significance of this privileging. Derrida's enduring references to the metaphysics of presence borrows heavily from the work of Heidegger. Heidegger insists that Western philosophy has consistently privileged that which *is*, or that which appears, and has forgotten to pay any attention to the condition for that appearance. In other words, presence itself is privileged, rather than that which allows presence to be possible at all - and also impossible. Heidegger's concept of *Destruktion* is also closely related to *Abbau* or dismantling. Derrida uses the word deconstruction to capture both German terms.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger says that the purpose of *Destruktion* is to "arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being—the ways which have guided us ever since"<sup>3</sup>. This is the double gesture referred to above, one that takes apart the European traditions and in so doing finds the basic understanding of Being beneath its surface. This goal separates *Destruktion* from deconstruction, not because deconstruction is purely negative, but because it has no fixed endpoint or goal. Deconstruction is always an on-going process because the constantly shifting nature of language means that no final meaning or interpretation of a text is possible. Subsequent ages, grounded in a different language and different ways of life, will always see something different in a text as they deconstruct it in the context of the realities with which they live. What is meant by "the written word", for example, has already evolved substantially since Derrida wrote "*Plato's Pharmacy*" due to the explosion in electronic media. All deconstruction can reveal are temporary and more or less adequate truths, not more primordial or deeper ones. For Heidegger, on the other hand, the "primordial experiences" of Being revealed through *Destruktion* result in a single interpretation that offers a more authentic alternative to philosophy's misunderstanding of the temporality and historicity of human existence.

Temporality and historicity are essential components of *Dasein*, Heidegger's term for human existence, because it is "thrown projection", that is, an entity necessarily oriented toward an unknown future, but always based on a past for which it is not itself fully responsible and which it can never fully know. Time, then, is not only a category of experience as in Kant, but the very core of our existence. As beings in a present moment are defined in terms of a past that creates our possibilities and a future into which we project them. On a larger scale, this temporality of *Dasein* is what creates history; our ability to project forward and interpret backwards not only the circumstances of our lives, but also those of the entire social world to which we belong. For Heidegger, *Destruktion* of the traditions in that social world can lead us back to a past that can be re-interpreted in ways that reveal the deeper understanding of Being hidden in the earliest texts of the European tradition; it can offer ways to project a different, more authentic future for *Dasein* based on the new way of seeing the past.

In the 'Afterword' to *Limited Inc.*, Derrida suggests that metaphysics can be defined as:

"The enterprise of returning 'strategically', 'ideally', to an origin or to a priority thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just one metaphysical gesture among others, it is the metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent"<sup>4</sup>.

Derrida takes as his starting point the assertion that modern Western philosophy is characterized by and constructed around an inherent desire to place meaning at the centre of presence. Put simply, what this means is that philosophy is driven by a desire for the certainty associated with the existence of an absolute truth, or an objective meaning that makes sense of our place in the world. Derrida terms this desire 'logocentrism'. Its effect is the placing of one particular term or concept, such as justice, at the centre of all efforts at theorizing or interrogating meaning. The term becomes the core around which meaning is constructed, the reference point that determines all subsequent knowledge. Derrida highlights how logocentrism assumes the existence of set and stable meanings that exist to be discovered. The way in which this term—the *logos*—is made known is language, the translation into words of a concept or a way of thinking. This is described as the 'metaphysics of presence'—the way in which we make present the objects of our thought.<sup>5</sup> The *logos* represents nature, which is something different from the instituted form embodied in language or in text. Crucial therefore is the idea of a rigid separation of the origin of meaning (the abstract

idea of justice, for example) and the institutionalization of that meaning in 'writing' (or law).

For Derrida, it is this logocentrism, and the idea of the exteriority of meaning, that opens up the possibility of deconstruction. He examines how the natural 'origin' of meaning and its 'institution' in writing cannot be so easily separated. Rather than nature (justice) and institution (law) existing independently of each other, Derrida suggests that nature itself is constructed only with reference to the institution. So rather than law being a direct embodiment of justice, how we understand both justice and law is determined by the interplay between the two. This is a rejection of the rigid separation that makes the quest for certainty possible — of the very idea that justice exists as a prior objective standard to be discovered. By reading law as reflecting or embodying the natural origin of justice, what is ignored or concealed are all the other possible interpretations of justice that are not embodied or encapsulated in the law. In this way writing defines nature, as well as reflecting it.

The idea of deconstruction is therefore concerned with countering the idea of a transcendental origin or natural referent. It refutes the notion that it is possible to transgress the institution in order to discover something beyond — the existence of an independent origin. This idea is famously encapsulated in the phrase 'There is nothing outside of the text',<sup>6</sup> which is often used to summarise Derrida's work. For Derrida the origin does not exist independently of its institution, but exists only 'through its functioning within a classification and therefore within a system of differences...'<sup>7</sup> In his own words, Derrida terms this phenomenon '*différance*'<sup>8</sup>, and it is this idea that forms the basis of deconstruction. *Différance* refers to the fact that meaning cannot be regarded as fixed or static, but is constantly evolving. It arises from the constant process of negotiation between competing concepts. Rather than pursuing the truth of a natural origin, what deconstruction requires is the interrogation of these competing interpretations that combine to produce meaning. The act of institution—or writing —itself captures this constant competition between the differing possible interpretations of meaning within the institution. The effect of the translation of thought into language is therefore to inscribe *différance* into the structure of meaning. It simultaneously embodies the desired meaning as intended by the author, and the constraints placed on that meaning through the act of interpretation of the text. In this regard, meaning is defined equally by what is included in the institution and what is not. At any one time, one concept will be dominant over the other, thus excluding the other. However while the idea of exclusion suggest the absence of any presence of that which is excluded, in fact that which is instituted depends for its existence on what has been excluded. The two exist in a relationship of hierarchy in which one will always be dominant over the other. The dominant concept is the one that manages to legitimate itself as the reflection of the natural order thereby squeezing out competing interpretations that remain trapped as the excluded trace within the dominant meaning.

In *Positions* Derrida explains how the first task of deconstruction is to overturn the hierarchy. This is necessary to highlight the 'conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition'.<sup>9</sup> It emphasizes the dominance of one particular way of thinking over others, and belies the idea of fixed meaning, overturning, and therefore exposing, the existence of the binary and destabilizing previously fixed categories of understanding. However this is only the first stage. Derrida emphasizes how to remain in this phase is to remain within the oppositional structure, allowing the hierarchy to re-establish itself. If deconstruction is limited to the simple inversion of binaries, then inquiry remains trapped 'within the closed field of these oppositions'.<sup>10</sup> What this means is that instead of making any real change to structural conditions, what is happening is simply swapping the positions of dominant and subordinate, allowing the same conditions to persist. In order to move beyond this dynamic, and to break open the structure itself, a second stage is necessary. This second stage is where the indeterminate element of deconstruction becomes visible. Rather than resting with the inversion of the binaries, and by extension accepting a different manifestation of fixed meaning, the second phase requires us to step outside the oppositions, to remain in search of new meanings, not by repeating ideas but by analyzing how ideas are framed, how arguments are made. Speaking at the Villanova Roundtable, Derrida described this as searching for the 'tensions, the contradictions, the heterogeneity within [the] corpus'.<sup>11</sup> It is only through this element of endless analysis, criticism and deconstruction that we can prevent existing structures of dominance from reasserting themselves.

In this context, deconstruction is concerned not with the discovery of 'truth' or of distilling correct conclusions, but rather with the process of questioning itself. It is a process characterized by uncertainty and indeterminacy. For this reason, Derrida explains, deconstruction is not a 'method', and it cannot be transformed into one.<sup>12</sup> One cannot 'apply' deconstruction to test a hypothesis or to support an argument. Rather it is an ongoing process of interrogation concerned with the structure of meaning itself. As explained in '*Letter to a Japanese Friend*', for Derrida deconstruction is neither analysis nor critique. It is not done with a particular aim. It is not a search for a 'simple element' or 'indissoluble origin'. The consequence of this is that its value is not linked to any subsequent reconstruction. As discussed above, it does not exist to take apart one structure to replace it with another, but exists simply to reveal the inner logic of that structure so as better to understand it. This has led to the charge that deconstruction is insufficiently concerned with questions of justice and ethics. Derrida is clear, however, that although deconstruction is not primarily concerned with advocacy or activism, nor is it nihilistic or anarchic. It does not reject the need for law and institutions, but rather seeks to work within those structures to reveal new possibilities. It consists of dismantling not institutions themselves, but rather 'structures within institutions that have become too

rigid, or are dogmatic or which work as an obstacle to future research'<sup>13</sup>. Deconstruction is therefore an affirmative force that opens up possibilities that have been suppressed by virtue of the dominance of one particular way of conceptualizing justice.

Thus deconstruction is not an act or an operation. Rather, it is something that happens, something that takes place. It takes place everywhere. It does not require deliberation or consciousness, but rather its potential exists within our structures of meaning. It is interested in exploring and revealing the internal logic of ideas and meaning. It is concerned with opening up these structures and revealing the way in which our understanding of foundational concepts is constructed. This is internal to meaning itself and not dependent on external factors. What this suggests is that the possibility of deconstruction exists within the structure of meaning itself, within the structure of *differance*, and is not something to be found and applied from the outside. It is primarily concerned with understanding ideas, not with their application. Derrida, like many other contemporary European theorists, is preoccupied with undermining the oppositional tendencies that have befallen much of the Western philosophical tradition. In fact, dualisms are the basic concept of deconstruction, for without these hierarchies and orders of subordination it would be left with nowhere to intervene. Deconstruction is parasitic in that rather than espousing yet another grand narrative, or theory about the nature of the world in which we partake, it restricts itself to distorting already existing narratives, and to revealing the dualistic hierarchies they conceal. While Derrida's claims to being someone who speaks solely in the margins of philosophy can be contested, it is important to take these claims into account. Deconstruction is, somewhat infamously, the philosophy that says nothing. To the extent that it can be suggested that Derrida's concerns are often philosophical, they are clearly not phenomenological and nor are they ontological.

Deconstruction, and particularly early deconstruction, functions by engaging in sustained analyses of particular texts. It is committed to the rigorous analysis of the literal meaning of a text, and yet also to finding within that meaning, perhaps in the neglected corners of the text (including the footnotes), internal problems that actually point towards alternative meanings. Deconstruction must hence establish a methodology that pays close attention to these apparently contradictory imperatives (sameness and difference) and a reading of any Derridean text can only reaffirm this dual aspect. Derrida speaks of the first aspect of this deconstructive strategy as being akin to a fidelity and a "desire to be faithful to the themes and audacities of a thinking"<sup>14</sup>. At the same time, however, deconstruction also famously borrows from Martin Heidegger's conception of a 'destructive retrieve' and seeks to open texts up to alternative and usually repressed meanings that reside at least partly outside of the metaphysical tradition (although always also partly betrothed to it). This more violent and transgressive aspect of deconstruction is illustrated by Derrida's consistent

exhortation to "invent in your own language if you can or want to hear mine; invent if you can or want to give my language to be understood"<sup>15</sup>. In suggesting that a faithful interpretation of him is one that goes beyond him, Derrida installs invention as a vitally important aspect of any deconstructive reading. He is prone to making enigmatic suggestions like "go there where you cannot go, to the impossible, it is indeed the only way of coming or going"<sup>16</sup>, and ultimately, the merit of a deconstructive reading consists in this creative contact with another text that cannot be characterised as either mere fidelity or as an absolute transgression, but rather which oscillates between these dual demands. The intriguing thing about deconstruction, however, is that despite the fact that Derrida's own interpretations of specific texts are quite radical, it is often difficult to pinpoint where the explanatory exegesis of a text ends and where the more violent aspect of deconstruction begins. Derrida is always reluctant to impose 'my text', 'your text' designations too conspicuously in his texts. This is partly because it is even problematic to speak of a 'work' of deconstruction, since deconstruction only highlights what was already revealed in the text itself. All of the elements of a deconstructive intervention reside in the "neglected cornerstones" of an already existing system<sup>17</sup>, and this equation is not altered in any significant way whether that 'system' be conceived of as metaphysics generally, which must contain its non-metaphysical track, or the writings of a specific thinker, which must also always testify to that which they are attempting to exclude<sup>18</sup>.

These are, of course, themes reflected upon at length by Derrida, and they have an immediate consequence on the meta-theoretical level. To the minimal extent that we can refer to Derrida's own arguments, it must be recognised that they are always intertwined with the arguments of whomever, or whatever, he seeks to deconstruct. For example, Derrida argues that his critique of the Husserlian 'now' moment is actually based upon resources within Husserl's own text which elide the self-presence that he was attempting to secure<sup>19</sup>. If Derrida's point is simply that Husserl's phenomenology holds within itself conclusions that Husserl failed to recognise, Derrida seems to be able to disavow any transcendental or ontological position. This is why he argues that his work occupies a place in the margins of philosophy, rather than simply being philosophy *per se*.

### Conclusion

Deconstruction contends that in any text, there are inevitably points of equivocation and 'undecidability' that betray any stable meaning that an author might seek to impose upon his or her text. The process of writing always reveals that which has been suppressed, covers over that which has been disclosed, and more generally breaches the very oppositions that are thought to sustain it. This is why Derrida's 'philosophy' is so textually based and it is also why his key terms are always changing, because depending upon who or what he is seeking to deconstruct, that point of equivocation will always be located in a different place. The deconstructive

strategy is to unmask these too-sedimented ways of thinking, and it operates on them especially through two steps—reversing dichotomies and attempting to corrupt the dichotomies themselves. The strategy also aims to show that there are undecidables, that is, something that cannot conform to either side of a dichotomy or opposition. Undecidability returns in later period of Derrida's reflection, when it is applied to reveal paradoxes involved in notions such as gift giving or hospitality, whose conditions of possibility are at the same time their conditions of impossibility. Because of this, it is undecidable whether authentic giving or hospitality are either possible or impossible. In this period, the founder of deconstruction turns his attention to ethical themes. In particular, the theme of responsibility to the other leads Derrida to leave the idea that responsibility is associated with a behavior publicly and rationally justifiable by general principles. Reflecting upon tales of Jewish tradition, he highlights the absolute singularity of responsibility to the other.

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