

# ***A Logos of Difference: The Kantian Roots of Derrida's Deconstructive Thinking***

**Andrea Margaret Hurst**

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Supervisor  
Dr. Friedrich Paul Cilliers

Co-Supervisor  
Prof. Bert Olivier

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## Summary

This study concerns a contemporary articulation of the age-old limit/possibility (truth/scepticism) contest in Western metaphysics. Traditional 'either/or' logic advises that scepticism is a necessary consequence of the assailability of truth; hence the concerted effort in the history of philosophy to preserve the possibility of truth against any flicker of uncertainty.

Here, it is argued that contemporary thinking sees the possibility of 'absolute' truth lose its ground. However, a concomitant shift to a '*logos* of difference' averts the consequence of scepticism. Thus, the justification for this study could be articulated in terms of the imperative, if a cardinal moment in contemporary thought is to be sustained, to understand this shift in *logos*, work through its implications and learn to live with its effects. In this respect, an attempt is made throughout to situate and interpret Derrida's 'deconstructive thinking' as exemplar.

Derrida's thinking finds roots (not without signs of insurrection) in Kant's 'Copernican revolution,' construed as the first shift towards the contemporary *logos* in question. Here, Kant refuted the postulate of an independent 'world' by demonstrating that 'reality' was the result of a cognitive order imposed on what 'exists' by the rational subject. Knowledge, therefore, depended not on matching statements with pre-existing 'things,' but on knowing the 'rules' that determined how an object had to be if it was to be known at all. Kant maintained that certain, objective knowledge was possible, due to the completeness and universality of the forms of intuition and the categories of the understanding.

Kant's 'Copernican revolution' provided the opening for a second shift inaugurated by the so-called 'linguistic turn.' Here, thinkers contested what Kant took for granted; namely that 'constitutive interpretations' (cognitions/concepts) formed a 'reality' independently of language. The basic premise underpinning the 'linguistic turn,' therefore, is that language (signification) and 'reality' are inseparable.

Henceforth, the possibility of final, enduring 'constitutive interpretations' whose 'truth,' in principle, is discoverable, depends on whether or not the language which mediates human rationality can form a complete and universal system. This question resurrects the very limit/possibility debate (in the form of a structuralism/postmodernism stand-off) that Kant thought he had resolved in mediating between rationalist and empiricist extremes. In contemporary terms, philosophers who, bound by either/or logic, wish to avoid the sceptical trap of 'anything goes' postmodernism, must assume that language (signification) can form a complete and universal system. However, in his deconstructive readings of Husserl, Saussure and 'structuralism,' Derrida demonstrates the untenability of this assumption. At the same time, he shows that the sceptical 'alternative' may be avoided by recognising the limitations of 'either/or' logic. Again, Derrida's thinking may be traced to Kant's; this time to his analysis of the 'first antinomy.' In accordance with Kant's analysis here of what is ultimately the logic of 'complex systems' (Cilliers), Derrida offers a '*logos* of difference,' which skirts the strictures of structuralism while avoiding the trap of postmodern scepticism by accommodating *both* moments of limit *and* possibility in an indissoluble interplay.

## Key Words

*Logos*, *différance*, Kant, reality, Derrida, Husserl, Saussure, antinomies, structuralism, postmodernism.

## Opsomming

Hierdie studie het te make met 'n kontemporêre artikulering van die eeu-oue grens/ moontlikheid (waarheid/skeptisisme) stryd in Westerse metafisika. Tradisionele 'òf/òf' logika suggereer dat skeptisisme 'n onontwykbare konsekwensie is van die aanvegbaarheid van waarheid; vandaar die berekende poging in die geskiedenis van die filosofie om die moontlikheid van waarheid teen enige sweem van onsekerheid te beskerm.

Hier word geargumenteer dat kontemporêre denke getuie is van die vervaging van die moontlikheid van 'absolute' waarheid. 'n Gepaardgaande verskuiwing na 'n *logos* van differensie' voorkom egter die konsekwensie van skeptisisme. Die regverdiging vir hierdie studie sou dus geartikuleer kon word in terme van die imperatief, indien 'n kardinale moment in kontemporêre denke gehandhaaf wou word, om hierdie verskuiwing van *logos* te verstaan, die implikasies daarvan deur te werk en te leer hoe om met die gevolge daarvan saam te leef. In hierdie opsig word 'n poging aangewend om deurgaans Derrida se dekonstruktiewe denke as eksemplaar te situeer en te interpreteer.

Die wortels van Derrida se denke word (weliswaar nie sonder tekens van opstandigheid nie) in Kant se 'Kopernikaanse revolusie' opgespoor, wat as die eerste verskuiwing in die rigting van die kontemporêre *logos* wat hier ter sprake is, verstaan word. Kant het naamlik die postulaat van 'n onafhanklike 'wêreld' weerlê deur te demonstree dat 'werklikheid' die resultaat was van 'n kognitiewe orde wat deur die rasonale subjek voorgeskryf word aan wat 'bestaan.' Kennis was dus nie daarvan afhanklik om stellings met voorafbestaande 'dinge' te vergelyk nie, maar was gebaseer op 'n bekendheid met die 'reëls' wat bepaal hoe 'n objek moes wees om hoegenaamd geken te kan word. Kant was oortuig dat sekere, objektiewe kennis moontlik was op grond van die volledigheid en universaliteit van die aanskouingsvorms en die kategorieë van die verstand.

Kant se 'Kopernikaanse revolusie' het die opening geskep vir 'n tweede verskuiwing, wat 'n aanvang geneem het met die sogenaamde 'taalwending.' Hierdie wending het beteken dat verteenwoordigende denkers Kant se aanname bevraagteken het, naamlik dat 'konstitutiewe interpretasies' (waarnemings/ begrippe) 'n 'werklikheid' onafhanklik van taal sou daarstel. Die basiese uitgangspunt van die 'taalwending' is dus dat taal (betekenis) en werklikheid onskeibaar is.

Voortaan sou die vraag, of die taal wat menslike rasionaliteit bemiddel 'n volledige, universele sisteem kan vorm, die moontlikheid bepaal van finale, blywende 'konstitutiewe interpretasies,' waarvan die 'waarheid' in beginsel ontdekbaar is. Hierdie vraag lei tot die herlewing van dieselfde grens/ moontlikheid debat (in die vorm van 'n strukturalisme/ postmodernisme dooie punt) wat Kant volgens sy mening opgelos of bygelê het deur tussen rasionalistiese en empiristiese uiterstes te bemiddel. In kontemporêre terme moet filosofe wat, gebind deur 'òf/òf' logika, die skeptiese lokval van 'enigiets is moontlik'-postmodernisme wil vermy, aanvaar dat taal (betekenis/ betekening) 'n volledige en universele sisteem kan vorm. In sy dekonstruktiewe interpretasies van Husserl, Saussure en 'strukturalisme' demonstree Derrida egter die onhoudbaarheid van hierdie aanname. Terselfdertyd toon hy aan dat die skeptiese 'alternatief' geneutraliseer kan word deur die beperkinge van 'òf/òf' logika te besef. Weereens kan Derrida se denke nagespeur word tot by Kant; hierdie keer na sy analise van die 'eerste antinomie.' In ooreenstemming met Kant se analise van wat as die logika van 'komplekse sisteme' (Cilliers) beskryf kan word, bied Derrida 'n *logos* van differensie' wat die striktuur van strukturalisme omseil terwyl die lokval van postmoderne skeptisisme eweneens vermy word deur *sowel* grens *as* moontlikheid in 'n onlosmaaklike wisselspel te akkommodeer.

## Sleutelwoorde

*Logos, différance, Kant, werklikheid, Derrida, Husserl, Saussure, antinomieë, strukturalisme, postmodernisme.*



## On Two Kinds of Laughter

(On Two Kinds of Laughter)

Those who consider the Devil to be a partisan of Evil and angels to be warriors for Good accept the demagoguery of the angels. Things are clearly more complicated.

Angels are partisans not of Good, but of divine creation. The Devil, on the other hand, denies all rational meaning to God's world.

World domination, as everyone knows, is divided between demons and angels. But the good of the world does not require the latter to gain precedence over the former (as I thought when I was young); all it needs is a certain equilibrium of power. If there is too much uncontested meaning on earth (the reign of the angels), man collapses under the burden; if the world loses all its meaning (the reign of the demons), life is every bit as impossible.

Things deprived suddenly of their putative meaning, the place assigned them in the ostensible order of things (a Moscow trained Marxist who believes in horoscopes), make us laugh. Initially, therefore, laughter is the province of the Devil. It has a certain malice to it (things have turned out differently from the way they tried to seem), but a certain beneficent relief as well (things are looser than they seemed, we have a greater latitude in living with them, their gravity does not oppress us).

The first time an angel heard the Devil's laughter, he was horrified. It was in the middle of a feast with a lot of people around, and one after the other they joined in the Devil's laughter. It was terribly contagious. The angel was all too aware the laughter was aimed against God and the wonder of his works. He knew he had to act fast, but felt weak and defenseless. And unable to fabricate anything of his own, he simply turned his enemy's tactics against him. He opened his mouth and let out a wobbly, breathy sound in the upper reaches of his vocal register (much like the sound Gabrielle and Michelle produced in the streets of the little town on the Riviera) and endowed it with the opposite meaning. Whereas the Devil's laughter pointed up the meaninglessness of things, the angel's shout rejoiced in how rationally organized, well conceived, beautiful, good, and sensible everything on earth was.

There they stood, Devil and angel, face to face, mouths open, both making more or less the same sound, but each expressing himself in a unique timbre – absolute opposites. And seeing the laughing angel, the Devil laughed all the harder, all the louder, all the more openly, because the laughing angel was infinitely laughable.

Laughable laughter is cataclysmic. And even so, the angels have gained something by it. They have tricked us all with their semantic hoax. Their imitation laughter and its original (the Devil's) have the same name. People nowadays do not even realise that one and the same external phenomenon embraces two completely contradictory internal attitudes. There are two kinds of laughter, and we lack the words to distinguish them.

From: *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (Kundera 1983:61-62)

# Introduction

## 1. The Problem of Limit and Possibility<sup>1</sup>

David Hume (1711-76) called scepticism “a malady which can never be radically cured, but must return upon us at every moment, however we may chase it away... Carelessness and inattention alone can afford us any remedy.”

(Norris 1982:xii)

In a sentence or two, Hume throws into sharp focus a seemingly incorrigible metaphysical problem; one as old, perhaps, as philosophy itself: the problem, that is, of how to *contain* the heady power of infinite possibility once it is suspected that the genie is out of the lamp. That is, once philosophy, possessed by radical doubt, intoxicated by the possibility that all may be other than it seems, believes anything to be possible. Hume, it seems, had scant faith in philosophy’s power to return the genie to the lamp and confine it there, suggesting that any claim to have achieved such ‘closure,’ to use Derrida’s term (Critchley 1992:61), is an illusion derived from a certain lack of reflective penetration; or in alternative psychoanalytic terms, perhaps, from a certain repression of ‘play’ in theoretical discourse, born of a desire for ‘metaphysical security.’

Indeed, until recently at least, the history of metaphysics, as the relentless pursuit of ‘absolute’ truth, first principles, or final foundations, reveals how rarely thinkers have heeded the counsel implicit in Hume’s words; namely that as much as it is intolerable, so a state of doubt or uncertainty is interminable, incurable. Such a repression, or heedlessness, is by no means criticised lightly, for it is born of a fundamentally human desire for security which is hard to shake.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, coupled with an ‘either/or’ logic, it would seem that there are only two alternatives. That is, it would seem that ‘absolute’ scepticism is a necessary consequence of the assailability of ‘absolute’ truth. The history of Western metaphysics, thus, shows a concerted effort to preserve its own ‘unshakeability;’ to preserve the possibility of truth against the slightest murmur of uncertainty.

Modern metaphysics, by all accounts, is characterised by a particularly concerted effort to posit a final cure for the intolerable madness of doubting. As Descombes (1980:1) remarks:

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<sup>1</sup> This section is a modified version of the introduction to an article ‘Sign and Subject: Subjectivity After Poststructuralism,’ which appeared in the *South African Journal of Philosophy* (Hurst 1998:112-114).

<sup>2</sup> I use this term deliberately to evoke Derrida’s use of ‘solicitation,’ which, as Bass (Derrida 1982:16; Translator’s Note 18) points out, ‘derives from an Old Latin expression meaning to shake the whole, to make something tremble in its entirety.’ This term is intended to allude to the necessity of shaking the edifice of Western metaphysics, *without* causing its destruction; that is, the necessity to re-think certain key terms, without the means to dismiss them entirely and start afresh.

According to the most considerable authorities, for once in agreement – Hegel and Heidegger for example – the pursuit of a truth that has the character of absolute certainty marks the inauguration of modern philosophy.

There are questions, however; murmurs, that have pressed for attention, as much in relatively recent years as they did for Hume in the past. What happens to thinking in general when the realisation dawns that a final cure for the intolerable madness of doubting is not yet found; and, more fundamentally, that such final, ‘absolute’ truth *cannot be found* because the capacity for ‘closure’ upon which it depends, cannot survive the incursion of language into thinking about thinking? What happens when, as a result of the so-called ‘linguistic turn,’ theory reverberates with importunate echoes, from all quarters, of a ‘decentring’ rupture (Derrida 1978b:280) in the philosophical discourses of the West, or the ‘end of philosophy’ (Descombes, 1988:136). What happens, in other words, when philosophy is confronted with its failure to capture the quarry and secure it? Is thinking simply doomed to drift without compass or rudder amidst the flotsam and jetsam of an ‘anything goes’ mentality?

It hardly seems credible that a long tradition of arduous philosophical debate about the ‘world’<sup>3</sup> and our place in it should, in the end, be left to such aimless wandering. Norris (1982:xii) rightly reminds us that the way of madness lies in acting consistently on the presupposition of incurable doubt or indeed its obverse, the ‘freeplay’ of boundless or infinite possibility. Here, then, in the wake of the so-called ‘linguistic turn,’ one of the most fundamental problems of Western metaphysics re-emerges: namely, the nature of the relationship between the two opposing poles of limit (or certainty) and possibility (or doubt).

In the broadest of terms, the contemporary scene of the debate between limit and possibility can be represented as a conflict between a modernist/structuralist approach to understanding the ‘world’ and our place in it and an opposing postmodernist sensibility. Viewed as a conflict in which one side or the other must win out in the end, or is assumed to have won already, this opposition adds little of note to the dynamics or movement of philosophical thinking. The scene of the release and capture of thinking (doubt in the name of certainty) as it has played itself out in the history of Western metaphysics/philosophy has consistently played to an audience hungry for the gratification of a triumphant recapture of the fugitive.

The possibility of ‘absolute’ truth has lost its ground, however, and by virtue of the either/or logic, which has governed theoretical discourse, the way seems open to an ‘anything goes’ postmodernism. Yet, in its cynical or ‘anything goes’ variety, postmodernism’s championing of a mere reversal of roles (the rise to power/absolute ascendancy of the escaped), does nothing to shift the

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<sup>3</sup> The inverted commas here will be explained at a later stage in connection with my use of the ambiguous and multivocal terms ‘world’ and ‘reality.’

logical or discursive ground on which the scene of the debate is re-enacted, but implicitly buys into the same adversarial logic which underpins its modernist counterpart.

In contrast, as I hope to demonstrate, Derrida's 'deconstructive thinking'<sup>4</sup> represents a genuine twist in the plot; a revision of the very terrain on which the scene is played out to the extent that, as a scene of mortal conflict, it no longer has theoretical or practical import. To put it briefly, deconstructive thinking affirms that the possibility of 'absolute' truth has lost its ground. However, concomitantly, it represents a shift according to which a traditional either/or *logos* is replaced by an alternative pattern of thinking exhibiting the general form of a simultaneous 'both/and.' Hence, this new *logos* – which, for reasons which will unfold in the pages to come, could be called a '*logos* of difference' – averts shipwreck on either the *scylla* of excessive 'modernist' rigidity, or the *charybdis* of 'freeplay' postmodernism.

The justification for this study could be articulated in terms of the imperative – if a cardinal moment in contemporary thought is to be sustained, and if philosophy is to brave the uncertain horizons with due caution – to understand this different *logos*, this *logos* of difference, work through its implications and learn to live with its effects. Throughout the text I have made an attempt to situate and interpret Derrida's deconstructive thinking as exemplar in the activity of thinking and re-thinking a *logos* of difference. The question I have asked is to some extent, or in some sense, a historical one, devoted to the question of how Derrida's philosophy uncovered the demise of 'absolute' truth (thought of as a movement of limit or 'closure') and the insufficiency of either/or logic. Having situated Derrida's philosophy in a particular historical context, rooted (not without certain signs of insurrection) in Kant's 'Copernican revolution,' I turn my attention to Derrida's account of what is to take the place of either/or logic. Here again, the roots of Derrida's thinking may be traced back to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, albeit this time to a different analysis; namely that of his first antinomy of pure reason.

## 2. An Outline of the Overall Argument

It would be fair to say that in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant, perhaps unintentionally, made the first move to effect the crucial 'opening' of philosophy to a *logos* of difference. His 'Copernican revolution' forms a starting-point from which, as one of the many routes through complex terrain, a line may be extended to Derrida's '*différance*.' In the first two chapters of this text, therefore, I offer an

exposition of Kant's 'Copernican revolution,' in which I describe how he revised prevailing notions of the relationship between the supposedly external, objective 'world' (thought of as an independently existing, verifiable object of knowledge, whether ideal or empirical) and the thinking or 'knowing' subject, by upsetting the traditional priority of 'world' over thought. Kant demonstrated conclusively, I think, that 'world' and thought are always already an irreducible composite; a composite that I shall henceforth refer to as 'human reality' or simply 'reality.'

For Kant, then, once the postulate of an independent, external 'world' is done away with, the rational subject (and not an independent realm of Platonic 'Forms,' nor empirically accessible objects) becomes the privileged source of meaning, knowledge, or truth (cf. Heidegger 1977:128), by imposing a stable, conceptual order on the chaotic sensory realm. Here, in accordance with the so called 'consciousness paradigm,' the concepts 'reality,' 'object of knowledge,' or 'thing' designate not something external to and independent of consciousness, but rather something akin to a Husserlian 'being-for-consciousness.' Hence, the nature (but not the existence) of objective 'reality' depends on human consciousness; that is, no longer conceived as something exterior to the knowing subject, it becomes something represented or interpreted by the subject. It is precisely this interpretative activity that I wish to emphasise by using the phrase 'constitutive interpretation' as a synonym for Kant's 'constitutive judgement.'

While providing the basis for it, Kant's 'Copernican revolution' itself does not effect the shift in *logos* at issue here. Although, for Kant, 'reality' became a function of human thought, he maintained that absolute truth about 'reality' was possible, due to the supposed universality and stability of the rational processes that underlie the 'constitutive interpretations' made by rational beings. Kant believed that the basis of rational thought and, thus, 'constitutive interpretation' (namely, the 'forms of intuition' – space and time – and the 'categories of the understanding') formed a complete, closed, systemic whole, universally the same for all those who functioned as fully rational beings. Thus, the Kantian position is still caught up in what Derrida (1976:49; and elsewhere) has called the 'metaphysics of presence.' To prepare the way for what is to come in Part Two, and as a broad Adornian 'key' (Buck-Morss 1979:97) to situate and compare Derrida's deconstructive readings of both Husserl and Saussure, I make use here of Derrida's notion of 'closure,' which, in both a temporal and a spatial sense, is closely associated

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<sup>4</sup> Derrida himself, and numerous commentators are emphatic that deconstructive thinking is not a method or formula of any kind, nor even a 'theory' in the traditional sense of the word (See e.g. Derrida 1982:4; 1978a:273 Norris 1987:19; Caputo 1997:46). Yet, at the same time, there is, broadly speaking, a *logos*, which directs its activity, enabling one to recognise when an activity is deconstructive, to speak of it as a 'theoretical' approach, and to distinguish it from other theoretical approaches. Hence, while decidedly not formulaic there is such a 'thing' as deconstructive practice. I have, all things considered, opted to use the term 'deconstructive thinking' instead of deconstruction, to accommodate this emphasis on activity or practice rather than formula.

with the so-called ‘consciousness paradigm’<sup>5</sup> and the ‘metaphysics of presence.’ The move of privileging one side of a binary opposition and reducing the other, on which ‘closure’ depends, is clarified further through recourse to Henry Staten’s reading of Aristotle’s conception of the opposition between form and matter. Here, the binary opposition ‘form/formless’ provides an overall framework within which the ‘closure’ of the ‘metaphysics of presence’ may be understood.

Although a critique of Kant’s quest for certainty comes into play after the so-called ‘linguistic turn,’ it should be noted that his fusion of thought and object nevertheless provided the opening for the shift toward a *logos* of difference, inaugurated by the ‘linguistic turn,’ which added a temporal dimension to Kant’s conception of rationality. In the second part of this dissertation, I enter the broad terrain of the philosophy of language. However, I make no attempt to traverse this expanse in its entirety. Rather, I attempt to frame an understanding of the nature and the effects of the ‘linguistic turn’ by showing how it is articulated or appropriated in Derrida’s thinking through his deconstructive readings of both Husserl and Saussure, and, in turn by offering a brief account of the reception of Derrida’s thinking.

To begin with, in chapter three, I step back a pace or two with a sketch of the phenomenological underpinnings on the basis of which Husserl’s theory of signification, as an attempt to effect ‘closure’ in the temporal sense, must be understood. Here, Husserl posits the full presence to itself of a fully self-aware consciousness as a fixed centre or point of origin that is the source of ‘sense’ (meaning, ‘eidetic structures,’ concepts, signifieds, ‘things,’ and so on). Secondly, he insists that language or signification remains wholly outside of this ‘constituting ego’ or ‘consciousness’ by ‘reducing’ (suppressing or ostensibly eliminating) any hint of ‘spatialisation’ or re-presentation at this point of origin.

In other words, Husserl, too, accepted what Kant seems to have taken for granted; namely that the ‘object/thought’ composite formed a ‘reality’ independent of and prior to language, which, in turn, existed as a pool of more or less convenient labels for concepts. It is only if one considers language to be merely a system of names for ‘constitutive interpretations,’ or concepts, that are independently conceived in an originating consciousness, that such a ‘reality,’ can be considered to endure as a ‘closed system’ untouched by the exigencies of linguistic representation (signs). However, if signs and concepts (‘reality’) are inseparable – and this is the basic premise underpinning the ‘linguistic turn’ – then it is necessary to re-think the possibility of final, enduring concepts whose ‘truth,’ at least in principle, is discoverable outside of language.

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<sup>5</sup> Briefly, the ‘consciousness paradigm’ refers to the notion that a universal subjective consciousness, external to and independent of language, forms the matrix wherein all ‘reality’ is constituted.

In his deconstruction of Husserl's theory of signification, examined in chapter four, Derrida shows that one cannot rid consciousness or the 'constituting ego' of signification, because there is an irrevocable 'spatialisation' at the very so-called *point* or *moment* of origin that is 'consciousness.' Hence, Husserl's theory of signification is used as a foil to offset Derrida's contention that there is no consciousness outside of signification. In confirmation, Derrida draws on certain 'progressive' elements in Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, which, despite deep internal contradictions, provides a necessary 'spatial' corrective to Husserl's 'closure' in the temporal sense. In chapter five, then, I turn to Derrida's work on Saussure's linguistic theory. Saussure offers a conception of language as a system with multiple components, all of which have no inherent qualities, but are constituted by their relations of difference. Thus, according to Derrida, Saussure correctly insists on the 'spatiality' of interpretation or conceptuality.

Derrida's work on 'spatiality' here amounts to a re-formulation, in linguistic terms, of Kant's insight that there is no conceivable 'thing-in-itself' outside of our constitutive interpretations. In a 'nutshell,' the 'linguistic turn' may be captured in Derrida's (1976:158) notorious statement, translated as 'there is nothing outside of the text' or 'there is no outside text.' Although I shall reiterate this throughout, perhaps it is judicious to point out here that just as Kant's 'Copernican revolution' left room for an inconceivable existence outside of the network of interpretations we call 'reality,' so Derrida's contention amounts *not* to the claim that all that *is*, is in language, but rather that all that can be signified, all that is conceivable, comprehensible, objective, formed, identified (all that can be defined as 'thing') is unavoidably linguistically articulated. In short, there is no 'reality' outside of language; 'constitutive interpretations' are always already unavoidably articulated in a language, or by means of signs of some kind.

Such a linguistic articulation of 'reality' implies that if truth is possible, it must be found in the nature of this 'text' within which we are inexorably trapped. In other words, 'truth' must be regarded as a function of the way in which the linguistic system (or system of signification in general) operates. However, as it stands in Saussure's text, and as it is taken up by the structuralists that follow his line of thinking, a 'spatial' conception of signification remains ambivalent in relation to the 'consciousness paradigm' it has helped to debunk at another level. In his efforts to secure meaning, Saussure strove to keep the conception of language (as the exemplary system of signification) within the bounds of what I shall later refer to (following Cilliers 1998a:3) as a 'complicated system' – described as a system that has fixed relations of difference, and consequently, discernible boundaries, and for this reason can guarantee certainty. Yet, this implies that it is possible to 'objectify' language, or to view it from the point of view of an outsider (a 'transcendental Ego,' perhaps). Thus, in relation to linguistics, 'closure' in a spatial sense becomes contradictory, for the very 'spatiality' of the linguistic system confirms the inescapability of signification in consciousness, while, paradoxically, the notion of a closed system

implies an external consciousness outside of the very system it cannot escape. In other words, Saussure and the structuralists effected an ambivalent 'closure' in the spatial sense, creating a new dogma in need of deconstructive thinking.

In chapter six, therefore, using Derrida's analysis of structure in his essay *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences*<sup>6</sup> as a 'key,' I argue that structuralism (as a kind of modernism) represents the idea of a 'centred structure,' which Derrida has shown to be incoherent. Derrida's question, then, concerns how to retain what is valuable about Saussure's linguistics while avoiding the tangles it has created. To this end, Derrida insists on the need to think of structure differently; that is, in terms of what he calls 'structurality' or 'play.' Here, I offer an exposition of Derrida's essay *Différance* (1982:1-27) as an example of what he means by the need to include 'structurality' in the thinking of structure. An emphasis on 'structurality' is common to all that is subsumed under the aegis of postmodernism. However, the consequence of a none-too-careful critique of structuralism, or an appropriation of Derrida's arguments that bends them into the service of a conception of language as an open-ended non-system in which meanings remain effervescent, is often an unsustainable lapse into 'freeplay' postmodernism. In short, accepting that 'constitutive interpretations' are themselves linguistically interpreted leads to divergent theoretical (or anti-theoretical) projects, based on different interpretations of the practice of interpretation, which, in turn, arise out of divergent conceptions of the functioning of language. Consequently, diametrically opposite, and equally unpalatable, modes of interpreting interpretations have been derived from the work of the philosophers of the 'linguistic turn' (of which Derrida is but one); namely, one which insists upon the possibility of 'absolute' truth, and another which resorts to 'absolute' scepticism.

This resurfacing of the problematic relation between *limit* on the one hand (represented in linguistic terms by structuralism), and *possibility* on the other (represented by an overzealous and irresponsible postmodernist interpretation of Saussurean linguistics), is the problematic that Derrida is at pains to unmask as being spurious. Indeed, 'rivers of ink'<sup>7</sup> still flow in defence of his position against those who would set deconstructive thinking firmly on either bank. Yet, if his deconstructive activities are underpinned by anything, it is the insight that accepting a linguistically constituted 'reality' is *neither* simply to resolve the problem of limit and possibility in the direction of possibility, *nor* simply to appeal to a dogmatic faith in the inherent stability of meaning, which could not be anything but regressive. To reinforce this interpretation, I refer briefly to examples from Derrida's texts that indicate his injunction to read the two moments of structure and 'structurality' in our interpretations *together*. That is to think differently, or according to a different *logos*.

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<sup>6</sup> This essay is subsequently referred to as *Structure, Sign and Play*.



In the third part of this text, I aim to show that a deconstructive approach turns on the insight that the very nature of language disavows any of the kind of polarisation described earlier. In the final chapter, then, I attempt to conceptualise deconstructive thinking as a third theoretical option which does not buy into an oppositional either/or *logos* but rests on a different *logos*, which enables it to accommodate both structural and postmodern insights simultaneously. In other words, it is 'axiomatic' to deconstructive thinking that to deny the rigidity of a philosophical approach determined to establish 'closure' (absolutely stable structures of meaning, or final truth), is *not* automatically to resort to its binary opposite; namely, absolute 'freeplay' of possibility. That is, rather than choosing between the 'closure' represented by Husserl and Saussure, albeit in different terms, and its radical opposite represented by 'freeplay' postmodernism, deconstructive thinking accommodates both in a tensional relationship wherein each undermines the priority of the other in an indissoluble interplay. Deconstructive thinking, thus, may be seen as a way of thinking that remains permanently in the tension field between limit and possibility; that is, in that very tension field, which, I believe, is rightly called philosophy.

Interestingly enough, far from being *postmodern*, the grounds for Derrida's refusal to choose between limit and possibility are, in fact, Kantian. Hence my attempt to conceptualise deconstructive thinking in terms of a different *logos* begins with a note on the paradoxical or circular nature of meaning in language, or signification in general, which suggests a return to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, specifically to his thinking on the first antinomy of pure reason. Here, following Copjec (1994) in particular, I argue that the polarisation of theoretical discourse under the banners of structuralist rigidity and postmodernist 'freeplay' reflects a re-emergence (isomorphically, in linguistic terms) of the very limit/possibility problematic that Kant thought he had solved once and for all in his analysis of the first antinomy. In essence, the problem in contemporary terms is this: while language since Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1964) cannot be viewed as a totality, it nevertheless seems necessary to do precisely this in order to achieve a final pronouncement on the nature of meaning (is it absolutely stable in principle, or does it proliferate senselessly?). Further, assuming the apparent necessity of an either/or choice between these two conceptions of meaning leaves us with no clear way out of this circle. However, the antinomial conflicts that arise when considering the ultimate nature of language (meaning) are directly parallel to the antinomial conflicts that Kant outlined concerning the ultimate nature of the 'world' as a totality. Hence, Kant's analysis and proposed resolution of the antinomy into which 'pure' reason was inevitably forced in its effort to pronounce definitively on the ultimate nature of the 'world,' provides a key to understanding the resolution of the similar contemporary problematic.

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<sup>7</sup> This borrowed metaphor whose source, I confess, eludes me, is nevertheless irresistible. (Due apologies for the neglect.)

In the second part of the chapter, I focus on Kant's first antinomy. Kant argued here that equally plausible arguments could be constructed for both the finitude and the infinity of the 'world.' In other words, there seemed to be no rational basis for a decisive choice between the two contentions. However, Kant went on to argue that this either/or choice, characteristic of genuine or 'analytical' contradictions, was not the only alternative in play here, nor, indeed was it the proper one, since he had discovered a fault in the very way that the dilemma had been posed. He argued that the very possibility of deriving, with equal plausibility, both a thesis and an antithesis from the same premise indicated that the premise itself may be false. In this case, according to Kant, the false premise took the form of an implicit assumption, underpinning both thesis and antithesis; namely that the 'world' *could* be known as a totality. Having already demonstrated the falsity of this assumption by means of his 'Copernican revolution,' he could legitimately dismiss each of the 'opposing' contentions as lacking. For this reason, he argued, they do not form a genuine contradiction in which the truth of one claim guarantees the falsity of its opposite. Instead, they formed a 'contrary' opposition or 'dialectical' contradiction in which, importantly, denial of the thesis did not constrain us to accept the antithesis, or *vice versa*. Thus, in relation to the ultimate nature of the 'world' Kant's counsel was to deny that the 'world' is finite, *without* making further pronouncements on its status. In other words, he insisted that the question of the ultimate nature of the 'world' remained indeterminate or (we could say) 'undecidable.'

Thus, an investigation of Kant's distinction between analytical and dialectical contradictions, in his analysis of the first antinomy, leads to the insight that while the former, which presuppose the possibility of viewing a system in its totality, display a simple either/or structure, the latter, in cases where the possibility of such a totality becomes problematic, are characterised by a logical form inherent to which is the notion of undecidability that unavoidably disrupts an either/or structure.

It is significant that this undecidable status may be generalised to apply to the ultimate nature of any system that cannot be viewed as a totality. The antinomical conflicts in philosophical disciplines, and particularly in the philosophy of language, between structuralism and 'freeplay' postmodernism suggest that language, or signification in general, may be thought of as just such an open-ended system, and, within this system, such open-endedness is characteristic of each of the binary oppositions that constitute language as a system of differences.

This text, as a whole, turns on the thesis that deconstructive thinking may find roots in two aspects of Kant's first *Critique* (1781); namely his 'Copernican revolution,' which demonstrated that 'reality' is interpreted; and his analysis of the first antinomy, which outlined the contrary or 'dialectical' logic of systems that cannot be 'closed' or viewed in their totality. Yet, such an appropriation is not without a critical element made possible by insights generated by the 'linguistic turn.' In order to clarify this, in the final part of the chapter, I have made use of a distinction between 'complex' and 'complicated' systems introduced to me by Paul Cilliers (1998a:3-5). Briefly, the difference rests on

whether a system consisting of many elements or components can be viewed as a complete system in which elements are involved in fixed relations (in which case it is merely complicated), or whether it should be viewed as an open-ended, and therefore historical, system in which elements enter into diverse and flexible relations (in which case it can be described as complex).

Specifically, to begin with, this distinction is used to explain how Kant thought he could preserve epistemological certainty in spite of the open-endedness of the phenomenal or objective realm of constitutive interpretations by insisting on strict boundaries between the knowable (or decidable), the conceivable (but undecidable), and the inconceivable (or 'noumenal'). For Kant, the noumenal realm (the realm of the 'thing- in-itself') was strictly incomprehensible because it fell outside of the limits of our capacity for knowledge. He argued that this was not the case, however, with the realm of objective 'reality.' Here Kant acknowledged that the 'world' as a complex system of subjectively produced phenomena and objects was never final; that is, it could not be viewed as a totality, and for this reason, claims about its nature *as a whole* belonged to the order of strict undecidability. However, he argued that knowledge of 'reality' (the objective 'world') depended *not* on knowing it as a whole, but on knowing the 'rules' according to which it was produced, which corresponded to synthetic *a priori* judgements. In other words, phenomena and objects can be produced indefinitely, and we, as finite beings, have no means to measure the 'complete' extent of their (possible) 'being' in space or time. However, for Kant, phenomena and objects could only ever be produced according to a specific set of 'rules' (the forms of intuition and the categories of the understanding). Here, we could claim knowledge of the essential nature of reality for the simple reason that it conformed to the supposedly absolute, *a priori*, and universal conditions of the possibility of human experience. It was the rationally determined completeness of this set of 'rules' (in other words, its characterisation as a complicated system) that, for Kant, ensured certainty about the objective 'world.'

It is precisely the possibility of this completeness that, from the point of view of philosophy after the 'linguistic turn,' deconstructive thinking questions. The final part of the chapter deals firstly with the way in which deconstructive thinking (at least implicitly) appropriates the insights of both Kant's 'Copernican revolution' and his analysis of the first antinomy, and at the same time, makes possible a critique which mobilises the latter against certain presuppositions inherent to the former. Here, I argue that Derrida's insistence that there is no conceptual representation outside of language, and hence, 'nothing outside of the text,' is consonant with Kant's claim that there was nothing intelligible outside of conceptual representation ('reality'), reflected in his demarcation between the noumenal and the phenomenal. In short, for Derrida, Kant's categories are linguistically articulated. Further, the linguistic turn has demonstrated that the very order of signification in which all is trapped itself forms a complex system. Hence, from this point of view, it is argued that human rationality (human powers of

representation or interpretation), and therefore the 'reality' which, in turn, depends on it, must be conceptualised as a complex system.

Derrida, thus, offers a critique, from the perspective of thinking after the 'linguistic turn,' of Kant's assumption that the human rational faculty can be 'objectified' or viewed in its totality as 'merely' a complicated system, from a point of view outside of this system. Consequently, the rules according to which rational beings constitute 'reality' cannot be thought of in terms of the fixity, finality or completeness that is characteristic of complicated systems. Rather, they too must obey the logic of complex systems. Consequently, from the point of view of philosophy after the 'linguistic turn,' 'reality' is best characterised by the logic of complex systems as outlined by Kant in his analysis of the antinomies, inherent to which is the notion of undecidability. This logic or '*logos*' may be described as a both/and *logos* because the undecidability pertaining to priority within a binary opposition (in a complex system) obliges us to accommodate the paradoxical possibility of a thing or state of affairs being predicated simultaneously on both a particular quality and its opposite.

In the end, deconstructive thinking may be seen as a reformulation and modification of the insights provided by Kant's 'Copernican revolution' in a way that takes language into account. What this means, ultimately, is that knowledge, truth, or certainty have to be rethought, or thought differently, according to a different *logos*; namely the inclusive *logos* of open-ended systems, rather than the adversarial *logos* of closed systems. In short, Kant's categories are subject to *différance*.

In the second place, therefore, I return to Derrida's texts in the hope of emphasising the necessity, propounded and reiterated by Derrida, of thinking the condition of the possibility of conceptuality (meaning, 'reality') in terms of the co-constitutive effects of two opposite 'economies' of *différance*; namely a 'respectable' economy of 'difference and deferral,' which includes some measure of faith in the attainability of meaning, knowledge, and 'truth,' *as well as*, a 'disreputable' 'general economy' in which deferral of meaning remains permanent. I conclude with a brief retrospective and evaluative glance at some of the exigencies and choices that directed the course of this study.

### **3. A Note on Methodology**

As even a brief glance at the history of philosophy should demonstrate, the scene of release and re-capture, scepticism and certainty, possibility and limit, is re-enacted periodically, and there are, it seems, as many angles of incidence into this problematic relationship as there are philosophers. It may be detected, for example, in Heraclitus's (Melchert 1991:17-18) fascination with the unity of things different, expressed in his well known saying: 'Upon those who step into the same rivers, flow other and yet other waters.' In other words, in the discrepancy between a conceptual view, which posits the river as one, and an empirical view, which emphasises continual change, Heraclitus expresses the age-

old problem of the one and the many that gripped the so-called 'pre-Socratic' philosophers and remained their legacy. In a different sense, Kant's discussion of the limit/possibility problematic in relation to the rationalists and the empiricists in the *Critique of Pure Reason*,<sup>8</sup> led to his positing of the 'noumenal' as the realm of possibility, in contrast to the phenomenal/objective, which, he thought, could be circumscribed by certain rational limits. Consider also the tensions articulated regarding the relationship between 'Being and Becoming' in their various guises from Plato through Baudelaire (Harvey 1989:10), to modernism and postmodernism (in which there is an acknowledgement of transience and a corresponding endeavour, respectively, either to find a stabilising moment, myth, or ground within the flux, or to celebrate ephemerality and transience.). The list, indeed, is too extensive to recount. It could expand to include, for example: Nietzsche's (1967:33-41) metaphorical use of Apollo and Dionysus; the analysis of the sublime in Burke and Kant (Crowther 1993:116-117; 137); Heidegger's analysis of dread (1978:228-235); Freud's well known distinction between the unconscious and the conscious; contemporary debates on structure and chaos, and so on.

Given that the problematic relationship between limit and possibility, in various guises, seems to have permeated the very fabric of Western philosophical discourse, what intellectual justification can be offered for any particular point of entry into the debate? Perhaps the most justifiable point of entry into any debate, with an eye to the movement or dynamics of intellectual activity, is that point at which a fundamental shift occurs in the terms of the debate. In other words, it is that point at which the ground shifts, a pattern of thinking or *logos* begins to break apart under the stresses and strains created by the widening fissures of internal inconsistencies and omissions, and a 'new' (re-newed) *logos* rises to the surface.

Perhaps a word on the use of the term *logos* is required here. According to Melchert (1991:19-20), the term *logos* has a richness of meaning that cannot be translated directly into English. While *logos* 'refers first of all to the spoken word,' it also gives rise to associated meanings; namely, as Melchert lists them, 'message, discourse, thought, rationale, argument, pattern, structure.' Given the hindsight of Derrida's hard-hitting critique of the one-sidedness of an emphasis on the spoken word, and the associations that it engenders, one should perhaps be wary of using this term in association with a way of thinking that chafes against the constraints of traditional logic. Nevertheless, such a different way of thinking is still a pattern; it has a rationale and a structure. In short, it is still a *logos*. Using it against

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<sup>8</sup> Kant (1964:284), argued here, for example, that the 'limits' proposed by the rationalists offered a gratifying, but illusory sense of security against the 'restlessness' of inductive or 'empirical' reasoning which remained open to possibility or inconclusive. In his words: 'In the conception of an absolute first, moreover – the possibility of which it does not enquire into – it is highly gratified to find a firmly-established point of departure for its attempts at theory; while in the restless and continuous ascent from the conditioned to the condition, always with one foot in the air, it can find no satisfaction.'

itself, in the context of this text, then, represents an attempt to restore to *logos* and all of its associations, the ambivalence or duality that rightfully belongs to rationality.

The notion of 'new' or (re-newed) *logos* is not to imply that intellectual activity is necessarily construed as the kind of 'progress,' which assumes that the truth is in the future. In fact one of the outcomes of the analysis to come is the notion that the status of 'truth' from the point of view of humanity remains strictly undecidable. Thus, intellectual 'progress' could be seen here simply as movement, change – or perhaps as a development of increasing 'complexification' as Lyotard (1991:1-7) seems to think, without any notion of where or whether such development will end. I prefer to think of it as the more or less satisfactory intellectual coming to terms with the new insights and cultural practices (from the arts and sciences, through technology and education, to politics) that accompany every successive age. Clearly the present dissertation is an attempt at such a coming to terms, without – I might add – any quasi-Hegelian expectations of 'synthesis.'

While this dissertation represents an attempt to come to terms with the different *logos* instantiated by deconstructive thinking by following a strand of its genesis, beginning with Kant's 'Copernican revolution' and tracing a path to Derrida's deconstructive thinking, its very construction reflects the *logos* already appropriated, its legitimacy already accepted and put into practice, however tentatively, implicitly or unexpectedly.

This text, for example, treads a precarious line between an approach that is strategic and thematic, and one that is, in a certain sense, historical and narrative. In other words, a historical line is drawn, a 'story' told, with full awareness that this narrative is constructed from a certain limited point-of-view, by means of limited resources, in order to make a specific point. At the same time, the various specific readings offered within this narrative, must be seen as particular, Adornian conceptual 'keys' with which to unlock aspects of the complex relations between various elements or concepts.

Kant's analysis of the first antinomy, for example, will be read outside of the general context of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, and specifically in terms of its power to disrupt traditional Aristotelian logic. The relations between structuralism, postmodernism and deconstructive thinking will be read in terms of a specific framework (that is, in terms of a particular analysis of structure) with an open awareness of the specificity of this approach. Lacanian and psychoanalytic explanations may be appropriated in an *ad hoc* manner without necessarily buying into the truth claims of psychoanalysis in general. At a different level, Lacan and Derrida, sometimes open adversaries, will be brought into 'constellation.' These are by no means thought to be definitive readings and do not exhaust the possible ways in which a complex field of relations may be framed for understanding.

Moreover, the inherent metaphoricity of language and the futility, barrenness and indeed pure foolishness of any attempt to 'purify' writing of such supposedly 'obfuscating contamination' is recognised. Following Derrida's (1987:415) insistence that it is only within the covering/uncovering

activity of metaphor that truth may reveal itself momentarily, this thesis is written in a style which makes unashamed, indeed unavoidable, use of metaphor.

To justify such conceptual and stylistic practices in terms of a contemporary philosophical standpoint is, at least in part, precisely what I aim to achieve here, at least at the level of exposition or content – if less so at the level of practice, where the context of the production of this particular text demands the predominance of what one could call the mode of the ‘epistemic.’ In spite of this ‘epistemic’ exigency, like all texts, this one too constitutes a ‘constellation’ of sorts, where different layers, in their interweaving, are continuous reminders of a power inherent in any text to become uncontrollable, unmanageable, inexhaustible. Yet, for all this, there is an equal *hubris*, or perhaps merely delusion, in any absolute acquiescence to such inexhaustibility, and in a refusal, therefore, to set certain provisional limits, or in the attempt to control inexhaustibility by imposing absolute limits. For the very attempt to treat the field of study either exhaustively on the one hand, or definitively on the other is, in effect, to strive for the very ‘God-like’ totality or ‘closure’ whose possibility is overtly denied here.

## Excursus

In *White Mythology* (1974:7-9) Derrida invokes a borrowed-again metaphor for metaphor, the '*usure*' of a coin, to uncover the double agency of metaphor as that which both hides and reveals – or to gesture towards two different modes of language use, namely an epistemic-dominant and a poetic-dominant. '*Usure*' denotes both '*using up*' (deterioration or wearing away through usage) and '*usury*' (the acquisition of too much interest). In the first, epistemic-dominant sense, it would be as if in use, over time, the *particular* symbolic value etched into a coin (the stamp of royalty, a crest, a promise of payment) were to be worn away, until all that remained was the original metal. But never again simply a metal disc; '*money*,' rather, stripped of all nationality, all particular value; money still thought to be palpable, graspable, in its *abstract* purity, and immeasurable value. In the same way, a metaphor becomes an abstract idea; the historical particularity of the specific event of its '*coining*' rubbed away with use. A metaphor is thus made abstract, purified and taken for the single, universal *truth*, its metaphorical status forgotten.

In a different, poetic-dominant sense it would be as if in the circulation of exchange, a coin (into which is etched a particular symbolic value) accrues interest. And as if, in wearing down with age, it accrues disproportionate surplus value, accumulating an antique's peculiar promise of inestimable value. So too, a metaphor. Never '*being*' itself, but standing in for '*being*,' susceptible to usury, exploitation, proliferating interpretations. In the circulation of linguistic exchange (in the free appropriation of discipline-specific terms and their decontextualization in the transfer from one discipline to another) a metaphor becomes layered, and becomes laden, overburdened, with the weight of over-significance. It promises great value. Yet in the capitalising, in the accumulation of each era's different interpretations, in the endless slippage of meaning, the promise is used up, worn out, emptied. The powerful clarity of the first illumination fades in the glare of too many lanterns and the metaphor loses the sharp contours of its effigy. Muddied, contaminated, faded, worn out; meaning too little in meaning too much.

It is a mistake, to think that these two manners of metaphor's manifestation, revealing and concealing, could ever be separated, or purified of the trace of their respective other. These are not two modes of knowing, hierarchically arranged. Nor do they exist side by side, equally able to reach a '*truth*' on their own terms. Rather, each always already contaminates the other by mutual implication. There is a simultaneous illumination and hiding, purification and pollution of the '*epistemic*' and the '*mythic*.' The sharply delineated is always under threat from (and indeed periodically overthrown by) that which is left out or repressed: the shadows at the periphery of the sharply demarcated '*epistemic*' beam. Meaning can never be closed, and '*being*' can never finally be captured and set under glass, because to '*know*' is always already not to '*be*.'

But the epistemic also makes itself felt in the mythic when the over-familiar and excessively multivocal, is subjected to a rigorous archaeological tracing through time-generated layers of meaning (traces) – Freud's metaphor of a Rome built and rebuilt many times. And the epistemic makes itself felt in the mythic in a resistance to interpretative proliferation – a sense in which some interpretations miss the mark: are irresponsible, insensitive, one-sided, too narrow, or too wide. '*Play*' must end, even if momentarily, temporarily, intermittently, deceptively, for meaning to begin.



## Part One: Kant's 'Copernican Revolution'

### Chapter One: Preparing the Way for Kant's 'Copernican Revolution'

#### 1. The Problem With Defining 'Reality'

Given its historical passage through a myriad of philosophical tributaries to the 'polluted' waters of the present, special care ought to be taken concerning any attempt to use the term 'reality' to articulate some or other notion of what *is* in actuality. Although any attempt to extract a working definition of 'reality' will, without doubt, be a violation of sorts, in the mode of the 'epistemic' (the predominant mode of 'the thesis'), this kind of violation claims a certain obvious necessity. Reluctance to embark on an extended historical journey compels me to make a wilful attempt to restrict a certain polysemy and strictly to delimit the sense in which I use the term. This proves to be somewhat complicated. The traditional denotative meaning of 'reality' is supplied by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Thompson: 1995:1143) as 'what is real or existent or underlies appearances.' This definition implies that 'reality' is that which endures; that is, it exists independently of particular or personal interpretations or appropriations and, consequently, can be inter-subjectively confirmed. Such a notion of an enduring 'reality' behind appearances seems to take two forms. One rejects what is evident to sensory perception as a measure of 'reality' due to its transience in growth and decay, and seeks an enduring 'reality' at a different level in the abstract stability of systems of rational principles, laws or axioms. In diametric opposition, the other more 'common sense' view of 'reality' construes it as being no different from the (inter-subjectively confirmed) evidence of everyday sensory perception since there is thought to be an underlying set of laws for change, which accords endurance and predictability to the sensory realm. Yet paradoxically, in the context of Kant's critical philosophy and the later 'linguistic turn,' this traditional notion of reality, as that ultimate nature of the world which underlies mere appearance, *has become self-contradictory*. Beginning with Kant's 'Copernican revolution,' as shall be demonstrated in more detail in due course, the meaning of 'reality' has, to a large extent, gravitated away from its traditional denotative meaning, and towards its polar opposite; namely 'interpretation' or 'representation.' Kant's doctrine of 'Transcendental Idealism' explicated in his *Critique of Pure Reason* of 1781 (second, revised edition, 1787), asserts that

...everything intuited in space and time – all objects of a possible experience, are nothing but phenomena, that is, mere representations; and that these, as presented to us – as extended bodies, or as series of changes – have no self-subsistent existence apart from *human thought*.

(Kant 1964:296; my emphasis)

In other words, Kant's critical philosophy subverted a more traditional conception of reality as that which exists independently of the way in which we (rational humans) perceive or comprehend it. Instead, he proposed that what is real to us is such only in relation to these very subjective capacities of perception and comprehension. Without wishing to pre-empt a more detailed discussion of Kant's position (for which the phrase 'Copernican revolution' stands as shorthand), it would be as well to announce my intention to take Kant at his word, and to accommodate this metaphoric sliding at the outset. Thus, as a working definition, I shall take 'reality' to denote the ultimate nature of the 'world' *in so far* as we (rational beings) are capable of experiencing or knowing it.<sup>9</sup>

This definition, in itself, of course, does not answer much. Instead it provides the impetus for further questioning; for it remains to be established how, and in what sense, we see ourselves as capable of experiencing or knowing reality. The 'linguistic turn,' for example, forces philosophy to reconsider some rather complex and perplexing questions, not the least of which is the question whether we have a shared 'reality' or individually different 'realities.' Perhaps this question is formulated in a way that immediately starts the investigation off on the wrong foot. It may be more plausible to ask in what sense we can have a shared 'reality' and different 'realities' simultaneously.

One way of addressing this problematic, an 'angle of incidence' into it, so to speak, is to place the 'linguistic turn' in a certain (limited) historical context of ontological and epistemological debate about the nature of 'reality' and our capacity to ascertain the truth about it. To this end, I have taken Kant's critical philosophy as a pivotal precursor to a deconstructive way of 'thinking through' the 'event' of the

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<sup>9</sup> In view of the fact that both of the terms 'world' and 'reality' have been used in different and sometimes overlapping senses that are difficult to disentangle, I should like to emphasise that 'world' is used here in the way that Husserl (1970:21) and Kant use it to point to a unity which, given the outcome of Kant's 'Copernican revolution,' is strictly speaking not accessible to human experience, but must be presupposed in the empirical perception of objects. On the other hand, 'reality' is used sense of one's appropriation of the world (cf. Sacks 1986:17; Bollnow 1967). Hence, while 'reality' is thought of as the always already interpreted or organised composite of objects and relations accessible to subjects, 'world' connotes independence but, therefore, also inaccessibility. The use of these terms throughout this text must be understood as one in which they are placed 'under erasure' by means of a Derridean strategy whose sense and justification will emerge more fully in the unfolding of this text. I have appropriated Derrida's strategy of a persistent use of typographical markers (here, marks of 'erasure' in the form of inverted commas) to reactivate the reader's awareness of the metaphoricity of certain crucial traditional terms; that is, the power invested in them as part of language to reveal and conceal meaning simultaneously. The consequence of this strategy is that any purported fullness or 'closure' of meaning is placed 'under erasure,' put into question, or 'solicited' (1982:16), while at the same time, allowing it to retain some sense of a given, traditionally recognised meaning that cannot simply be circumvented or cast aside at will. In the phrase '*différance* (is)' (1982:6), for example, Derrida places the word 'is' under erasure, reminding his readers of the ambivalent status of *différance* with regard to the categories of being and non-being. Thus (is), erased or bracketed in this way, designates that which cannot conform to the ordinary logic of either/or on which traditional metaphysics turns. In other words, the typographical marker gestures towards that which is entirely other to this logic; namely a situation of simultaneous neither/nor or correspondingly, both/and.

'linguistic turn.' Against the historical backdrop of 'rationalism' and 'empiricism,' philosophical notions of what constitutes knowable reality have been formed and re-formed. First when Kant's (1964:12) self-proclaimed 'Copernican revolution' entered the arena of ontological and epistemological debate, and more recently with a second shift towards the field of language. As a result of these two pivotal 'events,' philosophical thinking about the nature of 'reality' has shifted to the extent that 'reality,' as I have defined it, has come to signify something increasingly complex and differentiated. In what follows, I shall touch upon the kind of thinking against which Kant reacted as a means of situating what forms the primary focus of the discussion; namely, the effects on a philosophical conception of 'reality' firstly of Kant's 'Copernican revolution,' and secondly of the 'linguistic turn' that seems to follow in its wake.

## 2. 'Reality' and the Rationalist/Empiricist Dilemma

To know what questions we may reasonably propose, is in itself a strong evidence of sagacity and intelligence. For if a question be in itself absurd and unsusceptible of a rational answer, it is attended with the danger – not to mention the shame that falls upon the person who proposes it – of seducing the unguarded listener into making absurd answers, and we are presented with the ridiculous spectacle of one (as the ancients said) "milking the he-goat, and the other holding a sieve."

(Kant 1964: 67)

The point at which Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* entered the philosophical fray was marked, in his view (1964: 281-282), by philosophy's attempt to lay claim to a foundational (and thus superior) status *vis-à-vis* other disciplines or fields of knowledge, by virtue of its power to provide sure solutions to some of humankind's most ardently pursued questions. These Kant (291) listed as:

...whether the world has existed from all eternity or had a beginning – whether it is infinitely extended, or enclosed within certain limits – whether anything in the world is simple, or whether everything must be capable of infinite divisibility – whether freedom can originate phenomena, or whether everything is absolutely dependent on the laws and order of nature – and, finally, whether there exists a being that is completely unconditioned and necessary, or whether the existence of everything is conditioned and consequently dependent on something external to itself, and therefore in its own nature contingent.

However, according to Kant (281) these philosophical aspirations were beset with the perplexing and embarrassing dilemma of 'opposite and contradictory conclusions,' none of which seemed to be within reason's power either to confirm or refute with any lasting conviction. Kant (283) set this

dilemma out as a conflict between two seemingly opposite philosophical approaches to the problem of knowledge; namely ‘dogmatism’ (or what today would be referred to as ‘rationalism’) and ‘empiricism.’<sup>10</sup>

### **i. The Rationalist Standpoint**

In general, rationalism encompasses some form of the belief that genuine (absolutely certain) objective knowledge about the physical world can be arrived at purely through intellectual intuition (cf. Blackburn 1994:119; 318-319). This epistemological claim is subtended by an ontology that construes external ‘reality’ as being diametrically opposed to a more ‘common sense’ view of what is real. That is, instead of taking ‘reality’ to be what we perceive via our senses, it is thought of as a ‘higher,’ more abstract, less transient or changeable, rationally ordered unity, existing not independently of a disembodied reason, but wholly independently of an embodied subject. In other words, in relation to a conception of reason that emphasises what in it is universally the same, the human mind is said to be equipped right from the start with the means to acquire and justify knowledge of the world without the aid of the senses. An accurate description of the world, accordingly, is thought to be a matter of gaining access intuitively (through the use of reason, according to the criteria of clarity and distinctness) to innate or *a priori* truths, axioms, or rational principles, from which conclusions about the physical world can be deduced. In Kant’s (1964:283) terminology, this would amount to the belief that through reason alone, without the constraints of possible experience, we are able to accord ourselves direct, *a priori* access to what is ‘unconditioned’ – that is, the self-subsistent, primal source(s) and guarantor(s) of all that is – from which we can then go on to derive the ‘conditioned.’ As he put it, ‘we can exhibit completely *a priori* the entire chain of conditions, and understand the derivation of the conditioned – beginning from the unconditioned.’ These conclusions about the ‘conditioned’ are considered to be endowed, thus, with the qualities of necessity and universality, and therefore, of absolute certainty. Consequently, rationalists attest to the possibility of describing the ultimate nature of the world as it *is*, and not merely as it appears in sense perception or in the circumscribed experience of a particular subject (cf. Scruton 1982:14). Indeed, in order to grasp the essential reality or structure of the world as it is, we are obliged to cast aside the vagaries of individual perspective, and assume, as it were, ‘a view from nowhere,’ to use Thomas Nagel’s phrase (Blackburn 254). In short, as Scruton (1982:14) puts it, ‘rationalism derives all knowledge from the exercise of reason, and purports to give an absolute description of the world, uncontaminated by the experience of any observer.’ We have access to the

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<sup>10</sup> As Blackburn (1994:318) points out, in practice this stark polarization is an oversimplification of a far more complex situation. Here, however, as I see it, Kant’s primary goal was not to provide an intricate historical account of the overlapping positions of various individual philosophers, but to lift out the bare logical structures of two general patterns of thinking in order to demonstrate the spuriousness of their commonly held first premise.

ultimate nature of the world, in this view, through our capacity (which we do not always or automatically use) to participate in universal reason.

## ii. Empiricism Against Rationalism

A general criticism of rationalism from an empiricist standpoint may be understood in terms of Leibniz's analytic/synthetic distinction, or in Hume's terms, the distinction between 'relations of ideas' and 'matters of fact,' and the corresponding assertion that knowledge claims (judgements, propositions) take the form of either one or the other of these (Palmer 1988:197; Melchert 1991:365). If a judgement is analytic then its negation is self-contradictory. Such judgements are thus necessarily true. Further, all analytic judgements may be known as true *a priori*, that is, without reference to experience. On the other hand, a judgement is synthetic when it is informative, or when the predicate is not already contained in the subject. In this case, such judgements are not necessarily true, since their negation does not entail self-contradiction and their opposite is quite possible. Here, verification is *a posteriori*; it depends on appeal to experience.

In light of this distinction, Hume, and we could say empiricists generally, charged rationalists with the logical error of assuming that we can *deduce* synthetic conclusions from analytic premises. Instead, Hume dismissed all analytic propositions as entirely self-referential and uninformative. As Palmer (1988:197) puts it:

He said that they are all TAUTOLOGICAL, that is, they are all redundant, repetitive, merely verbal truths which provide no new information about the world, only information about the meaning of words. Thus, given the conventions of the English language, it is certainly true that "all sisters are siblings," but saying this tells one nothing about any particular sister that wasn't already known by calling her a sister in the first place.

Hume insisted that reason, as the source of 'analytical' truth only, merely offered knowledge about the logical structures of our own languages, or more broadly, the logical relations within a system of ideas. Accordingly, for him, and again empiricists generally, reason operated merely within the formal realm of pure, *a priori* principles of thinking; that is, within what is left if we abstract from understanding all conditions and circumstances of its application. As Meiklejohn (See Kant 1964:63; Translator's Note 1) explains it: "The *matter* employed in syllogisms is used for the sake of example only; all forms of syllogisms might be expressed in signs.' Consequently, while reason could offer rigorous critique of synthetic claims in terms of logical consistency and so on, it had nothing further to say about the truth of their content. Reason, for example, could adjudicate synthetic propositions of the 'if...then' variety, but its power of adjudication remained closed within this hypothetical realm and did not extend to the verification of statements about actual empirical events, conditions or objects. In

other words, according to empiricists, whether a logically coherent, formal system of relations was in fact descriptive of the objective world could not be ascertained by reason alone, but required experiential validation (cf. Reichenbach 1962:114).

As opposed to rationalism, therefore, empiricism is generally marked by an attempt to ground objective knowledge primarily or even purely in sensory experience. Empiricists posit a notion of the mind as initially a *tabula rasa* (Locke) upon which sensation is said to imprint the psychic materials from which (through abstraction or generalisation) concepts or ideas are fashioned and knowledge derived. Hence, the quintessential empiricist slogan: ‘there is nothing in the intellect that was not previously in the senses’ (Blackburn 1994:119). Thus, in relation to an empirical subjectivity which emphasises the embodied subject as the locus upon which the external world makes itself felt, the external world is conceived of as already objectively ‘there’ as it ‘is,’ without any constitutive input from the experiencing subject. Such a world, existing independently of the subject, is thought to be accessible to the subject via the sensory impressions it occasions. Thus, from a general empiricist point of view, the world as external is a material world (rather than one that is rational or abstract), existing independently of the embodied subject, but accessible only by virtue of this embodiment.<sup>11</sup>

If this is the case, the most we can hope for regarding verification of objective knowledge are generalisations and probabilities based on extensive experience. For this reason, empiricism cannot offer truth in any absolute sense, and must always entertain the possibility of doubt (cf. Reichenbach 1962:43).

### **iii. Kant’s Evaluation of Rationalism**

‘Dogmatism’ or rationalism, according to Kant (1964:283-284), certainly had the advantage over empiricism of supposing a ‘firmly-established point of departure for its attempts at theory.’ In purporting to verify, through reason alone, the world’s finitude, the soul’s indestructibility, moral freedom, and the existence of a supreme being, rationalism seemed to have the capacity to provide stable and certain supports for many of the ‘foundation stones of morality and religion.’ In terms of the limit/possibility debate set out earlier, it is clear that rationalism (in its intended outcome, at least) weighs heavily on the side of limit. Synthetic knowledge, knowledge about the particularities of the ‘conditioned,’ or the objective world, is seen as bounded within, deduced from, and guaranteed by, the limits imposed by the ‘unconditioned’ to which we have *a priori* or intuitive access. Thus, rationalism’s appeal lies in its supposed power to put a definitive end to the ‘regress of conditions,’ or regressive

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<sup>11</sup> There are exceptions to this, notably Berkeley’s subjective idealism (Solomon 1986:98). Here it is argued that while experience must form the basis of knowledge, we experience nothing but our own ideas, or the contents of consciousness.

chain of cause and effect, according to which we understand the world, by positing an intuitively knowable ‘unconditioned’ (or self-subsistent ‘first cause’) from which all else can be deduced.

However, in Kant’s view (281), such foundational certainty was gained spuriously. It harboured the mistaken assumption that pure reason *could*, in fact, give content to knowledge, outside the constraints of possible experience. In his words (29):

The light dove cleaving in free flight the thin air, whose resistance it feels, might imagine that her movements would be far more free and rapid in airless space. Just in the same way did Plato, abandoning the world of sense because of the narrow limits it sets to the understanding, venture upon the wings of ideas beyond it, into the void space of pure intellect. He did not reflect that he made no real progress by all his efforts; for he met with no resistance which might serve him for a support, as it were, whereon to rest, and on which he might apply his powers, in order to let the intellect acquire momentum for its progress.

Thus, Kant agreed with the empiricists that (paradoxically)<sup>12</sup> in the realm of pure reason ‘everything is equally possible as long as formal contradiction is avoided’ (Melchert 1991: 368). Consequently, pure reason, operating outside the constraints placed on it by experience, lead only to the illusion of certain knowledge about the world (Scruton 1982:21). Thus Kant held that the rationalist approach had the contradictory effect of inducing us to make knowledge claims about the objective world which exceeded our very capacity to know, and for which, therefore, we had no dependable means of verification. This meant that Kant accepted the empiricist stance, in opposition to the rationalists, that ‘there can be no explanation of *a priori* knowledge which divorces the object known from the perspective of the knower’ (Scruton 1982:19). Using Hume’s scepticism as a foil, the *Analytic* begins by accepting the empiricists’ general criticism of rationalism. As Scruton (1982:19-20) articulates it:

Kant was sceptical of all attempts to claim that we can have *a priori* knowledge of some timeless, spaceless world of the thing-in-itself (any object defined without reference to the possible experience of an observer). Such an absolute conception of the object of knowledge is senseless, Kant argues, since it can be given only by employing concepts from which every element of meaning has been refined away.

In other words, if there is to be *a priori* knowledge at all, for Kant, it must be *a priori* knowledge, not of the ‘world’ as it supposedly *is*, independent of all human perspective, but of ‘reality’ as we can experience it (that is, the ordinary ‘reality’ of spatio-temporal objects).

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<sup>12</sup> The paradox is that while speculative reason supposedly can provide certain knowledge of the ‘unconditioned’ by means of which it is able to set ‘limits’ for religion, morality and so on, it may only do so by presuming *limitless* access to ‘being’ in its entirety. In other words, in order to set limits at all, reason must assume a scope that is limitless in its reach; a view from nowhere/everywhere; or the power of perspective-free knowledge.

#### iv. Kant's Evaluation of Empiricism

Kant (1964:284-386) saw it as his task in *The Critique of Pure Reason* to moderate the pretensions of rationalism; to 'check the presumption of a reason which mistakes its true destination, which boasts of its insight and its knowledge, just where all insight and knowledge cease to exist' (285). Empiricism, he held, offered a powerful means to this end. However, as he was quick to point out, this held true only if empiricists were to rest content with restricting their own knowledge claims to the field of possible experience. This unfortunately did not prove to be the case. Empiricism, as he saw it, not content merely to check the excesses of rationalism, but in turn making knowledge claims which reached beyond the domain in which it was able to find an 'objective basis' (286), had itself fallen into the same speculative trap as its dogmatic counterpart. In overstepping its limits, empiricism had itself become dogmatic. A case in point would be the subjective idealism of 'empiricist' Berkeley (cf. Solomon 1986:98), with its appeal to perpetual divine 'perception' as guarantee of the continued existence of the objective world. In a different sense, Hume too would be guilty of this charge, according to Kant, by prematurely resorting to radical scepticism.

In other words, as Kant (284) explained it, the basic tenet of empiricism (that knowledge outside of the limits of possible experience is impossible) compelled us to accept that empirically verifiable knowledge of the 'unconditioned' was unattainable, since this would require a step beyond the very conditions of the possibility of knowledge. This left empiricism in a situation in which, according to its own doctrine, it could not have anything verifiable to say at all about the 'unconditioned.' In Kant's (284) words, empiricism

...can give no answer to our question respecting the conditions of its synthesis – except such as must be supplemented by another question, and so on to infinity. According to it, we must rise from a given beginning to one still higher; every part conducts us to a still smaller one; every event is preceded by another event which is its cause; and the conditions of existence rest always upon other and still higher conditions and find neither end nor basis in some self-subsistent thing as the primal being.

In plainer terms, unlike the rationalists who conceived of knowledge as unfolding deductively from secure *a priori* foundations, empiricists, having dismissed reason as a source of knowledge about the world, had to rely on sensory evidence. Thus they argued that knowledge was acquired in precisely the opposite direction. This, however, proved to be equally problematic in Kant's view, leading to such problems as inherent uncertainty, solipsism and ultimately radical scepticism. Beginning with the conditioned, empiricists made attempts to determine the series of its conditions retroactively. Ultimately, however, it is always the case that at some point in the regress, one cannot go further by this



means, and the end-point is not a certainty but a question. In other words, empirical questioning always points to the possibility of something beyond the last answer to a question; hence its quest for knowledge is always uncertain or plastic. For this reason, its very founding principle (that knowledge begins with experience) prohibits definitive judgements about infinity or limitlessness. To take a simple example: experience of the separability of matter, may lead us to pose the question of further divisibility and the limits of such divisibility. We may discover, through observation and experiment, the divisibility of substances into molecules, atoms, quarks, and so on. However, to the question of whether the latest discovery is as far as the process of divisibility can go, the answer can never be certain.

This, for Kant reflected the general form of the difficulty with pure empiricism. Beginning from experience and working back would never lead to the 'truth' (certainty of any kind), but only to more questions. Empiricism, thus, contained nothing to suggest a definitive end to the regress of conditions and, therefore, provided no guard against infinite possibility. At the same time, it provided no justification for the confident assumption of infinite possibility. The unavoidable logical conclusion of purely empirical tenets was absolute doubt. Kant found that the problem with empiricism in practice was that, finding the aforementioned four propositions of dogmatic rationalism (concerning the world, the soul, freedom and God) unacceptable, empiricists declared not merely the falsity of each (as would be consistent with the empirical conclusion of uncertainty), but went further to proclaim the truth of its absolute opposite. In so doing, they made the very kind of positive (if opposite) claims about the 'unconditioned' already disqualified by empiricism's own basic principle. On the basis of his method of analysis,<sup>13</sup> for example, Hume consigned such knowledge claims as 'there is a self to which various impressions belong,' or 'the world is causally ordered' to the waste-bin of 'sophistry and illusion,' for they were neither analytically true, nor verifiable *a posteriori* in accordance with any corresponding impressions or sense data. As will be discussed in more detail later, in relation to Kant's *Dialectic* (and whether this did justice to Hume or not is arguable), Kant read Hume (as the quintessential empiricist) to be insisting, here, not merely that we had no acceptable means of showing that these propositions, and others like them, were true, but to be making directly opposite claims such as that the world was *not* necessarily causally ordered, or that there was *no* self at all. Kant would have argued, for example, that just as empiricism provided no justification for believing that if A caused B today, and had done so regularly in the past, it would *necessarily* do so tomorrow, so it provided no justification for believing that causality was *not* a necessary feature of the objective world.

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<sup>13</sup> Using the analytic/synthetic distinction discussed earlier, Hume devised a clear-cut 'method' of judging the truth of knowledge claims. Making such judgements, he claimed, involved first establishing whether the claim under consideration was analytic (that is, true by definition). If not, it would be necessary to establish whether it was synthetic (verifiable through observation). If it was neither of these, then, in his view, the claim was simply nonsense (Palmer 1988:199).

A second difficulty with Humean empiricism, for Kant, concerned the problem of solipsism (or what Husserl would later term ‘psychologism,’ 1967:16; 22), which marked the gateway to a position of radical scepticism (Scruton 1982:13-17). According to Scruton (14), Hume’s empiricism made it impossible to separate knowledge from the ‘subjective condition of the knower,’ since all that we had access to (all that we could observe) were our own subjective impressions or sense data. As Scruton (16) puts it, ‘the only experience that can confirm anything for me is my experience.’ There seemed little reason to be sceptical concerning the subjective sphere, or ‘the sphere of consciousness’ (13). In other words, a person’s present mental states could be said to have the character of immediate certainty. Personal experiences, in Scruton’s words (16), ‘are as they seem and seem as they are, for here ‘seeming’ is all that there is.’ However, as Hume acceded, the objective world *could* be other than it seemed to any particular rational subject (13). In other words, it was possible that an individual could be mistaken concerning a judgement about the objective world. Yet, the very fact that judgements could be understood as mistaken (and often, given more information, the nature and origin of a mistake could be found), suggested a ‘correct’ perspective, against which a particular judgement could be measured. Thus, the sceptical question (or the problem of objective knowledge) refers to whether anyone can be sure that what they take to be the ‘correct’ perspective on the world, which is still a description from a personal point of view, really is an accurate description of the world as it *is*. As formulated by Scruton (13), the sceptical problem is this:

I can have knowledge of the world as it *seems*, since that is merely knowledge of my present perceptions, memories, thoughts and feelings. But can I have knowledge of the world that is *not* just knowledge of how it seems? To put the question in slightly more general form: can I have knowledge of the world which is not just knowledge of my own point of view?

Hume’s empiricism could not offer a satisfactory means to answer this question in the affirmative. At most, he could allow that:

When I claim to have knowledge of objects existing externally to my perceptions, all I can really mean is that those perceptions exhibit a kind of constancy and coherence which generates the (illusory) idea of independence.

(Scruton: 16-17)

Admittedly, this extreme epistemological perspectivism is mitigated by Hume’s claim that the ‘constant conjunction’ of certain experiences gave rise to ideas like causality or the self (despite the fact that no assignable ‘impression’ corresponded to them). By pointing out that such ‘constant conjunction’ led, by way of association, to the ‘custom’ or ‘habit’ of thinking of, or anticipating certain experiences in terms of causality, the self or substantiality, he introduced a communal or inter-

subjective moment that surpassed the merely subjective (solipsistic) perspective, and can thus arguably be seen as paving the way for Kant's notion of a commonly human rationality. In the end, however, all that Hume can allow is that we (inter-subjectively) may describe the world in a particular way at present, but we cannot ever be sure that it is an accurate account or description of how the world really is. The most that empiricism can allow is generalisation from past experience, which always leaves room for doubt (as evidenced by the development of scientific theories). As Kant evidently saw it, such habits, even if communal, were not sufficient to dissolve the spectre of an unpredictable experiential world – a firmer structure was needed, otherwise one would have to admit that new experiences could lead to new customs or habits, and hence an unforeseeable rationality. Kant, it seems, was unwilling to face the notion of a plastic rationality in this sense.

#### v. **Kant's Diagnosis of the Problem Underlying the Rationalist/Empiricist Dilemma**

The discrepancies to be found in both rationalism and empiricism formed the background to Kant's critical philosophy – which he saw not as an attempt to enter the debate in order to verify one side or the other, but as a twofold attempt to bring to light the very conditions of the possibility of such a debate occurring at all. The details of this limit/possibility problematic, cast in terms of the *logic* of the rationalist/empiricist dilemma, form the subject matter of that part of *The Critique* labelled the *Dialectic*. The *Dialectic* deals with reason (in its rationalist or empiricist guise) in its pretensions to knowledge beyond the very conditions that made knowledge possible. Here, Kant (1964:291) argued that the rationalist/empiricist dilemma struck a false note; that the possibility of deducing opposite conclusions from the same premises concerning the world as an external, objective totality, pointed to some kind of error. Since he did not detect errors in the deductive form of the various arguments put forward by either rationalists or empiricists, he concluded that the error was to be found in the content of the arguments, or in the premises. Thus, he suggested that we look to false premises for the cause of our failure to decide either way between the opposing answers given by rationalism and empiricism in response to our most ardently pursued questions.

What he discovered was that the problem lay fundamentally in precisely that which was taken for granted by *both* sides. That is, Kant (291) argued that the shared, but false, presupposition of a sharp separation of subject and object; the concomitant belief in a 'world' (whether ideal or material) that was external to the subject, self-subsistent, and conceivable as a totality; and the corresponding conception of 'knowledge as *adaequatio*' (Staten 1985:33), supported both the rationalist conclusion of absolute

certainty as well as the empiricist conclusion of absolute doubt.<sup>14</sup> In short, Kant (291) held that what obstructed our way to a clear sense of what could be known with certainty was an unproblematic notion of ‘ultimate reality’ – an obstinate assumption ‘that there exists a real object corresponding and adequate to’ our idea (‘given nowhere else than in thought’) of ‘the absolutely unconditioned totality of the synthesis of phenomena.’<sup>15</sup>

On this basis, according to Kant, both rationalists and empiricists wrongly assumed that true pronouncements regarding the ultimate nature of the world considered in its totality *could* be made. This taken for granted, the focus of critical attention and polemics centred on whether the ultimate nature of the ‘world’ was fundamentally rational/ideal or material/sensory. In other words, the question here directed itself to whether ‘true pronouncements’ about the nature of the world, the self, freedom and God, were attainable through purely rational means (in which case they were directly or intuitively knowable, and secure foundations for theory could be offered), or through purely empirical means (in which case the infinite regress of conditions dispelled all hope of any such foundational limits).

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<sup>14</sup> The notion of an independent world goes hand in hand with what is well known as the ‘correspondence theory of truth,’ that is, the notion that knowledge and that which is known are distinctly separable, and that truth is a matter of finding an irrevocable correspondence between them (cf. Staten 1985:33). As Staten (33) puts it: ‘The ideal of knowledge as *adaequatio* is precisely that knowledge must be of what *is*, in itself; knowledge cannot manufacture its objects according to whim but must adjust itself to the structure of what subsists independently of the cognitive act.’

<sup>15</sup> Put this way, the idea of a totality may seem inapplicable to empiricism, given that empiricism is bound to an endless regress of conditions. However, this assumption of totality is implicit in the empiricists’ claim to have access to the ultimate nature of the ‘world,’ as expressed in their certainty that this ‘world’ as a whole is infinite.

## Chapter Two: Kant's 'Copernican Revolution:' 'Reality' as Always Already Interpreted

### 1. The Aims of Kant's 'Copernican Revolution'

What Kant named his 'Copernican revolution' stands as shorthand for the theoretical groundwork upon which he based his evaluation of – and proposed solution to – the rationalist/empiricist dilemma.<sup>16</sup> Kant believed that intellectual progress beyond this dilemma could not take place until (in line with his investigation into the conditions of the possibility of human knowledge of an objective world) he revised their commonly held premise of strict subject/object separability (which, incidentally corresponds with a widely held 'common sense' view of the relation between subject and object). This premise resulted in what Norris (1982:4) describes as a conspicuous failure

...to discover any necessary link between the laws of thought (or deductive logic) and the nature of real-life events and experience. Thought seemed condemned to a prison-house of reason, endlessly rehearsing its own suppositions but unable to connect them with the world at large. Sensory evidence was no more reliable than ideas like that of cause-and-effect, the 'logic' of which merely reflected or complied with the processes of thought.

Thus, Kant's laying of groundwork, which formed the general problematic of that part of *The Critique* labelled the *Analytic*, took the form of an attempt to refute the premise of strict subject/object (or embodied subject/the 'world' as it *is*) separability, and to offer a different conception of this relationship. In the process, Kant's proposed solution to the rationalist/empiricist dilemma inaugurated a highly significant philosophical shift, involving a novel switch in our conception of the objective world or 'reality.' In his words (1964:12):

We here propose to do just what COPERNICUS did in attempting to explain the celestial movements. When he found that he could make no progress by assuming that all the heavenly bodies revolved around the spectator, he reversed the process, and tried the experiment of assuming that the spectator revolves, while the stars remained at rest. We may make the same experiment with regard to the intuition of objects.

Kant's aim here was to find a way to explain how, despite the power of certain Humean insights, we could know with certainty that the objective world really was as it appeared to us. Or to put it differently, his aim was to explain how individuals could be certain that when they described personal experiences of objects, they were also describing the objective world (Scruton 1982:18). Following Hume's line of thinking, such knowledge about the objective world (synthetic knowledge) that was true

universally or necessarily (that is, true *a priori*, or without reference to that world) seemed like a contradiction. In other words, synthetic propositions of unquestionable truth seemed impossible. Yet, it was precisely truths such as these that Kant required in order to refute Hume's sceptical conclusions, and to replace them with objective knowledge that had the certainty or indubitability that in his view, deserved the title of knowledge. For Kant, such truths did not seem difficult to come by. He saw the propositions of Euclidean geometry as quintessential examples of what he called synthetic *a priori* truths. In other words, they were examples of non-analytic propositions (that is, propositions about the world) that were verifiable *a priori*, or without recourse to experience. He claimed that these propositions about the spatial relations that obtained in the objective world were synthetic. There was nothing, for example, in the definition of a triangle that necessitated the conclusion that all of its angles added up to 180 degrees. Yet, according to Kant, we did not need experience of actual spatial relations to confirm such propositions. Their truth seems inescapable without the benefit of experiential confirmation. Indeed, experience was likely to mislead us here due to human inaccuracies in measurement. Kant (1964:33) also drew attention to other instances of non-analytic propositions that seemed to be true *a priori*. He insisted, for example, that arithmetic concepts such as the sum of 5 and 7 contained no concept of the product of such a union, and for this reason could not be thought of as purely analytic. Yet their truth seemed guaranteed *a priori*. Scruton (1982:20) outlines more of these propositions as follows: "Every event has a cause;" "The world consists of enduring objects which exist independently of me;" "All discoverable objects are in space and time."

Kant felt that he did not have to argue for the very possibility of propositions about the world that were not verifiable by recourse to experience, but seemed to be true *a priori*. On the contrary, in his view there was plenty of evidence that they indeed were possible. In fact, as Reichenbach (1962:40) puts it: 'Kant is so convinced that geometry provides the proof of a synthetic *a priori* that he asks not whether there is one, but rather how is a synthetic *a priori* possible?'<sup>17</sup>

The importance of establishing the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgements was that they could demonstrate the connection between reason and the objective world – they would enable Kant to demonstrate that reason was 'capable of discovering general properties of physical objects' (Reichenbach 1962:43). That is, reason (which was the only source of certainty) appeared capable of

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<sup>16</sup> The *Analytic*, as theoretical groundwork, thus appears sequentially before the arguments laid out in the *Dialectic*.

<sup>17</sup> In the light of later discoveries related to non-Euclidean geometries, Reichenbach is highly critical of Kant's assumption of the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgements. I shall return to this criticism in due course, suffice it to say here that I do not accept that the discovery of non-Euclidean geometries is as devastating to Kant's articulation of synthetic *a priori* principles as Reichenbach suggests. That is, his criticism points toward the need for modification rather than dissolution.

synthetic truth, or alternatively, there were certain synthetic statements that had the character of universality or inescapability.

Kant's work in the *Analytic* involved a detailed explanation of his proposed solution to the problem of objective knowledge (or to the problem of *how* synthetic *a priori* judgements were possible). In a nutshell, his 'Copernican revolution' required us to see that 'reality' could not, in fact, be taken for granted as self-subsistent or external to the 'knowing subject.' It suggested that objective reality did not appear as such outside of our own representations, and, as we shall see, representations of representations. Rather, it was inherently dependent upon our own mental activity, as rational beings. As Norris puts it (1982:4): Kant insisted that it was

...impossible for consciousness to grasp or "know" the world in the direct unmediated form despaired of by Hume and the sceptics. Knowledge was a product of the human mind, the operations of which could only *interpret* the world...

Or, again, as Staten (1985:33) argues:

Philosophy aims at knowledge of what is true. This formula may be redundant, since knowledge by definition cannot be of what is false (though it may be of *the fact that* something is false). But still, knowledge is one thing and that which is known is another, and the question of how to forge an ironclad link between the two cannot be disposed of by a definition. *If* we have knowledge, then what we know is true; but everything hangs on that if, and the only way we have of checking it out is by examining the matter we seek to know. Now, however, when we go back and look at the thing itself over again to verify our previous judgment, all we get is a new set of judgments. The paradox is that what *is* independently of our experience only becomes accessible to us in *experience*, and the experience is not the same as the thing of which it is the experience. We believe that trees and rocks and so on exist when no one is sensing them, but we can have no experience of this unexperienced existence. We can never have the satisfaction of saying to the skeptic, "you see – there it is, even when you are not looking at it." So even the most resolute realist must admit that objects are by their very nature objects of knowledge only in the experience of subjects, and this is why "empiricism" so easily becomes a kind of idealism.

Kant argued, thus, that there were certain propositions about the humanly experienced objective world ('reality') that had to hold necessarily *because* they were the very conditions of the possibility of humans experiencing an objective 'reality' at all. For example, the propositions that the world was extended in space, or ordered in terms of irreversible succession in time, were propositions that described the way objective reality had to be if it was to be experienced at all. These conditions were internal to the structures of the human mind, or bound to the processes of human mental functioning, rather than qualities of a world existing externally to the human mind. In other words, synthetic *a priori* judgements were of subjective origin; they were conditions superimposed on human experience by the rational mind. And, in Kant's view, as Reichenbach (1962:46) points out: 'We should not be astonished that every experience will confirm them, because we cannot acquire experience without them.'

In effect, then, while Kant granted that all we could know were our impressions, he insisted that these impressions (in existing at all) already presupposed certain *a priori* conditions, and that these conditions could be delineated with absolute certainty through rational reflection. Thus, knowledge about the conditions of the possibility of personal experience (which has the attribute of certainty) corresponded with knowledge of the conditions of the possibility of objective 'reality.' In Scruton's words (1982:18), '...in describing my experience I am referring to an ordered perspective on an independent world.'

If asked whether this was the only rationally ordered perspective available to us, Kant would have answered in the affirmative. It may not be the only ordered perspective available to 'being' in general (i.e. he seems to have left open the possibility that there could be other ways of being sentient), but because of the way a rational mind had been structured, it was the only perspective available to *us*, not so much as humans, but as rational beings. Thus, Kant could say that one interpretation and not another would prove to be the 'correct' one because it rested on formal capacities inherent in our minds that were the very conditions of the possibility of experience of an objective 'reality.' That is, if one did not (or could not) interpret the world in a specific way, universally shared among rational beings, or according to fixed principles, then one did not have true experience of an objective 'reality' at all. Only one way of interpreting would be both rationally consistent and descriptive of objective 'reality.' I cannot, for example, deliberately interpret a wall as insubstantial and expect my interpretation to describe the true state of affairs in the objective world. Similarly, as will be demonstrated later concerning the case of Dr. P. (Sacks 1986), losing any of the *a priori* capacities for perception or understanding (in this case, through physical degeneration of certain areas in the brain), results in the loss of a shared objective 'reality.'

Here, objective reality becomes 'our shared, human reality;' that is, not the 'world' as it 'is' in itself, but the 'reality' we represent to ourselves as fully functioning rational beings. Thus, according to Kant, what was 'real' for us was always already an appearance, representation or interpretation; and no other 'reality' behind such appearances was ever capable of apprehension by us, since such a so-called 'reality' would not, by definition, meet the conditions of the possibility of being a reality at all.

Crucially, Kant's 'Copernican revolution' effected an about-turn with respect to epistemological certainty. Instead of assuming that truth was obtained when ideas or notions conformed to an external world, Kant held that we could be certain about, or know the truth of, only that aspect of existence that conformed to our pre-existing, inherent perceptual, synthetic, and cognitive capacities. This, in turn, left open the possibility of a realm of existence that was entirely inaccessible to us. Here, Kant introduced another dimension into the problematic; namely that of the so-called 'thing-in-itself.' By way of explanation, one might turn to the notion of 'foreclosure,' borrowed for these purposes from Freud and Lacan. 'Foreclosure' denotes that which absolutely exceeds our capacity to know, to make sense of,



or to make intelligible or meaningful. It is that to which we have no direct access, ever. This is not to say, however, that what is foreclosed to us does not have real effects. (Benvenuto & Kennedy 1986:148-153). In short, for Kant, there was an ‘existence’ or ‘being’ outside of our subjective capacities, about which we could never have anything conclusive to say. For him, precisely because it depended on the ‘subjective condition of the knower’ (Scruton 1982:14), ‘reality’ was the domain in which knowledge was possible. Existence or ‘being’ in its totality, on the other hand, exceeded our capacity for definitive pronouncement. The essence, then, of Kant’s ‘Copernican revolution’ is captured in the following statement by Scruton (1982:18; my added emphasis): ‘objects do not depend for their *existence* on my perceiving them; but their *nature* is determined by the fact that they *can* be perceived.’

## 2. Criticism of Kant’s Position (a Preview)

Before discussing the framework of Kant’s ‘Copernican revolution’ in more detail, I should like to touch upon the criticism levelled at him by Reichenbach (1962) in the light of historical developments in mathematics and science. Needless to say, by means of his ‘Copernican revolution’ Kant made some crucially important and controversial claims. The first was that objective ‘reality’ was the way it was for us because its very character depended on the interaction between what ‘existed’ (the thing-in-itself) and our inherent receptive and interpretative capacities as rational beings. The second was that these capacities corresponded with the principles of Newtonian physics and Euclidean geometry. Thirdly, he claimed to have outlined the *complete* set of inherent receptive and interpretative capacities. That is, he saw those capacities that corresponded with the principles of Newtonian physics and Euclidean geometry as all that were available to rational beings, and thus, as universally and absolutely descriptive of objective reality. This, in turn, implied that objective ‘reality’ would always be the same for humans because our inherent receptive and interpretative capacities could not change without also changing our very nature as rational beings.

Reichenbach (1962) sees the discovery of non-Euclidean geometries as fatal to Kant’s assumption of the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgements; as, therefore, vitiating his ‘Copernican revolution’ and ultimately (presumably) as a vindication of Hume’s scepticism or radical empiricism. The question raised by Reichenbach concerned whether Kant had been accurate to insist that *the structure of human rationality* played an irreducible role in constituting the physical structure of the human environment. By arguing that Kant’s views depended on his articulation of the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgements, and by demonstrating the flaws in this articulation, Reichenbach (140-141) advocates a wholesale return to an empiricist view, insisting that it is the ‘*physical structure of the environment in which human beings live*’ that conditions human reason (that is, reason is merely a habit of thinking brought about by repeated observation and practice).

According to Reichenbach (43) the purpose of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was to establish reason as 'the source of synthetic a priori knowledge and thus to establish as a necessary truth, on a philosophical ground, the mathematics and physics of his day.' This argument depended on the age-old interpretation of geometry that posited it as 'both a product of reason and descriptive of the physical world' (141). This dual nature of geometry, then, was thought to stand as proof of the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgements. In other words, it was thought to demonstrate Kant's contention that through access to the rational 'rules' according to which we imposed order or structure on the chaotic manifold, we could grasp the nature of the 'physical world,' and that the 'analytic' universality of this very *subjectivity* secured objective knowledge.

As Reichenbach (46) points out, this means that '...no experience can ever disprove the a-priori principles.' That is, whatever observations are made will *always* satisfy these principles, and contradictions would have to be put down to observational errors or interference and so on. Yet, according to Reichenbach (48-49), developments in mathematics and science have indeed contradicted certain principles that Kant stipulated as *a priori*. In his words (125):

The principles which Kant had considered to be indispensable to science and nonanalytic in their nature have been recognised as holding only to a limited degree. Important laws of classical physics were found to apply only to phenomena occurring in our ordinary environment. For astronomical and for submicroscopic dimensions they had to be replaced by laws of the new physics, and this fact alone makes it obvious that they were empirical laws and not laws forced on us by reason itself.

Reichenbach (129) argues, for example, that as a result of the development of non-Euclidean geometries, there is a plurality of equivalently coherent or consistent geometrical systems. Faced with a choice of geometrical systems, reason cannot stipulate which of them is the geometry of the physical world. The answer to this question is left to empirical observation, that is, to a process of measurement. One could, for example, measure the triangle created by three mountain-tops to see whether or not the measurements conformed to Euclidean principles. Reichenbach (130-131) goes on to describe the insurmountable difficulties associated with empirical measurement on this scale, which guarantees that we can *never be sure* which geometrical system (if any) really matches the structure of the 'reality' that is out there. From this, he (139) concludes that mathematics is purely analytical, governed by 'if-then' considerations, leading from axioms to theorems, and the application of mathematics to physical reality, including physical geometry, leads us into the empirical realm where principles are subject to correction by further experience.

Thus, Reichenbach (44) believes that had Kant been privy to more recent developments in mathematics and physics, he is likely to have abandoned his 'Copernican revolution.' Against what Kant argued for in his 'Copernican revolution,' Reichenbach claims that there exists a structured real world 'out there,' which is independent of, and pre-exists, our 'rationality.' This structured world, he

argues, that is there first, conditions our imagination and determines the concepts we grow up to accept. As he puts it (140): ‘To imagine geometrical relations visually means to imagine the experiences which we would have if we lived in a world where those relations hold.’ According to Reichenbach, what Kant thought of as rational law, was actually the result of the conditioning of human imagination by the physical structure of the environment in which human beings lived. Hence, he argues that if we happened to exist in another dimension (where space was curved, for example), we would be conditioned to see ‘things’ in a different way (curved triangles and irregular space, for example). As he puts it (140):

Euclidean geometry is the geometry of our physical environment; no wonder that our visual conceptions have become adjusted to this environment and thus follow Euclidean rules. Should we ever live in an environment whose geometrical structure is noticeably different from Euclidean geometry, we would get adjusted to the new environment and learn to see non-Euclidean triangles and laws in the same way that we now see Euclidean structures.

In response to Reichenbach’s claims here, however, one is driven in full circle back to Kant, for surely Kant could counter that it is precisely *because* our rationality is structured in a certain way that we do not, in fact, exist in another dimension where, in our everyday dealings, we could comfortably take for granted such phenomena as curved space, or time that runs backwards, or triangles whose angles do not add up to 180 degrees. Further, in support of the principle, if not the content, of Kant’s ‘Copernican revolution,’ from the point of view of a *logos* of difference, one could counter that even if we *see* irregular *space* in another dimension, we would still be seeing, and seeing depends on a disposition to be spatial – thus, a different kind of space, or space in another dimension is nevertheless still *space*. Similarly, even if we existed in a dimension that ‘conditioned’ us to accept spontaneous generation, or irregular time, it is nevertheless still in *time*. Along with Kant, one could still argue that there is no such thing as a human ‘rationality’ or human experience that can do without ‘spatiality’ and ‘temporality.’ These are still synthetic *a priori* judgements, although they may no longer be restricted to a specific content. In other words, there seems to be a difference between the notion of spatiality as a *formal* condition of the possibility of objective experience, which is empty and general (and complex), and the notion of spatial relations that are specifically Euclidean in character. That is, there seems to be a difference between saying that the objective world is necessarily spatial and saying that the angles of a triangle must add up to 180 degrees.

It seems, then, that Kant’s philosophy must be viewed as a product of his own time where ‘rational truth,’ which had the character of universality and necessity, was considered to be superior to ‘empirical truth’ which depended on generalisation based on a great number of instances. In other words, Kant, like many around him seemed to be driven by what ultimately turned out to be a *quest* for

certainty. Kant's quest for certainty led him to make an illegitimate shift from form to content – or to import a particular content into the form of *a priori* judgements and hold that up as absolute.

Thus, Reichenbach's qualms concerning Kant's articulation of the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgements are not without cause, particularly insofar as Kant thought he could attribute absolute content to them. His criticism of Kant certainly demonstrates the fruitlessness of Kant's attempt to absolutise knowledge in the light of the historical developments in science. Yet despite the value of this criticism, it would seem to me, that Reichenbach's reversion to empiricism (142) risks missing what is valuable about Kant's articulation of synthetic *a priori* judgements, and consequently hazards an unsustainable 'empirical determinism.' I should immediately add, however, that Reichenbach (141) himself is not unequivocal about this, since he sees it as the amended task of reason to '*free ourselves from any kind of rules to which we have been conditioned through experience and tradition,*' which suggests that understanding may indeed play a role in conditioning the imagination.

I would not be inclined to dismiss the insights of Kant's 'Copernican revolution' out of hand. I feel that there remains scope in the basic insights of Kant's 'Copernican revolution' concerning the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgements – albeit with certain modifications which take into account developments in mathematics and science – for a model by which to understand the relationships between the physical world, our apprehension, comprehension and constitution of a reality, and what remains outside of the realm of knowledge.

Derrida's articulation of a '*logos of difference*' may be the 'key' to reconciling the basic insights of Kant's 'Copernican revolution' with Reichenbach's criticism. What a *logos of difference* offers, characteristically, is the means to resist a choice between two positions; namely one which favours a subjective constitution of 'reality' and another which insists that the physical structure of the environment conditions human reason. In short, deconstructive thinking may offer a way to conceive of the relationship between these positions, not in terms of the dominance of one or the other, but in terms of a reciprocal relation between the two. Hence, as I hope to show in the course of this study, even if Euclidean geometry fails as proof of the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgements, this failure does not signify the dissolution of Kant's 'Copernican revolution' itself, as Reichenbach would have it. However, it does point to a certain failing (or narrowness) in Kant's conception of human rationality.

In other words, I see the most critical problem in neither the first nor the second of the claims outlined above.<sup>18</sup> Rather, it lies with the third, which reflects Kant's thinking as caught up in what Derrida (1976:49) has termed the 'metaphysics of presence' and thus, paradoxically, shows up a certain

blindness to the operation of the very logic uncovered in the *Dialectic*. This blindness (as Derrida's deconstructive thinking brings to light) could be attributed to Kant's failure to take language seriously as an open-ended, complex system. Consequently, I believe that a 'quantum leap' into the world of deconstructive thinking and the corresponding development of an alternative *logos* in the realm of human rationality should provide us with the means to understand the limitations of Kant's system without vitiating the crucially important insights concerning the notion of the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgements. There seems to be an interesting circularity here, where the very deconstructive *logos* of which (as I hope to show) Kant's arguments in the *Dialectic* can be seen as a precursor, can be turned back in criticism of his starting point in the *Analytic*. However, before such criticism can be given its full due, much remains to be done. In order to trace at least one of the strands in the genesis and elaboration of such a *logos*, it seems necessary to begin with a more detailed account of Kant's 'Copernican revolution.'

### 3. The Framework of Kant's 'Copernican Revolution'

In order to understand the basic framework of Kant's 'Copernican revolution' (1964:62-64), it is worth recalling his well-known maxim (62): 'Thoughts without content are void; intuitions without conceptions, blind.' In other words, for Kant all cognition of an objective world had as the condition of its possibility, the operations of two clearly distinct faculties of the mind. These he referred to as the faculty of intuition on the one hand, and the faculty of the understanding, on the other. It is important to note from the outset that Kant may have separated the operations of these faculties for the sake of exposition, but he persistently reiterated that neither could operate independently of the other, nor assume the function of the other, nor claim preference over the other, if a truly *knowable* objective reality, was to be secured. Rather, as he put it (63): 'In no other way than from the united operation of both, can knowledge arise.' And again (62):

Intuition and conceptions constitute, therefore, the elements of all our knowledge, so that neither conceptions without an intuition in some way corresponding to them, nor intuition without conceptions, can afford us a cognition.

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<sup>18</sup> In light of examples from the field of neurology, such as the case of Dr. P. to which I shall refer in due course, the first of Kant's claims seems convincing. Reichenbach himself would not dismiss this claim. His question concerns not the interaction itself, but rather the *priority* of reason or the 'world' in this interaction. In light of developments in mathematics and science, one could agree with Reichenbach that Kant's second claim may be dismissed.

By means of the formal dimensions of our faculties, for example, we may be able to represent to ourselves such things as we have never seen (imaginary places, fantastical creatures, and the like), but these cannot become the objects of knowledge if they lack the requisite sensory content. By the same token, forms of intuition (or sensation) alone cannot provide us with an intelligible objective reality.

Given the above distinctions between understanding and intuition, Kant could be interpreted as having posited a two-part division between a formal, spontaneous, productive faculty, on the one hand, which made intelligible the sensory contents provided by a receptive, intuitive faculty, on the other. This is certainly not inaccurate, but it tells only part of the story, and, in fact, fails to accommodate the complexities involved in Kant's thinking here. One of the difficulties with aligning the division between these two faculties with a strict form/content division is the fact that 'empirical intuition' is itself already productive. In other words, that which is achieved through 'empirical intuition' (a phenomenon), is already partly the result of the productive activity of certain *a priori*, formal capacities; namely space and time.<sup>19</sup>

As a result, there is an ambivalence here as to where the 'form/content' division actually lies, which goes hand in hand with certain terminological confusions. Sometimes Kant seems to have referred to the form/content divisions *within* the faculty of intuition, in which case he could be seen to have: offered a broad definition of cognition as a product of the co-operation of form and content (62); distinguished between the formal and the sensuous dimensions of an intuition; and referred to intuition as 'a mode of cognition' (72), or as 'sensuous cognition' (62) in which sensory content was arranged under the formal conceptions of space and time – also, incidentally, referred to as the 'a priori cognitions ...which make a synthetical cognition of external objects possible' (89). On the other hand, he also insisted that the faculty of intuition as a *whole* provided merely the blind contents to be cognised, or thought, by the formal conceptions of the understanding. Here, for instance, he (78) suggested that while the operations of intuition and synthesis were required by cognition, they did not themselves produce a cognition 'in the "proper" meaning of the term' (78), this being the task of the pure conceptions of the understanding.

A second difficulty associated with a two-part division between the faculties is the ambivalence of 'synthesis,' bound up with its intermediate position between intuition and understanding. On one hand, Kant (62) insisted that it was through the faculty of intuition that 'an object is given to us.' Implicitly, this had to include the act of 'synthesis' (as a formal condition of the possibility of an object appearing at all), for an object as given was always already a composite and relational entity. Kant (78) also attributed to 'synthesis' the blindness more characteristic of intuition. In spite of this, however, he (93)

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<sup>19</sup> In view of historical developments in mathematics and science cited by Reichenbach (1962), it is perhaps more accurate to speak of mental capacities for spatiality and temporality which do not necessarily imply Euclidian articulation.

unequivocally placed it under the faculty of the understanding, referring to it as an ‘act of the understanding.’

In view of these difficulties, it seems more useful to follow an approach suggested by Kant’s (78) division of the process by which cognition of an intelligible, objective ‘reality’ may be achieved into three mental operations; one of which was subsumed under the faculty of intuition (sensibility), and two (arguably) under the faculty of understanding (intelligibility). The first operation produced a diversity of phenomena; the second involved the synthesis or conjunction of this diversity; the third, finally, was a matter of reducing the blind synthesis to conceptions of the understanding.<sup>20</sup> Further, as we shall see later, viewing this three-part representation of the process of cognition as classically dialectical,<sup>21</sup> as I propose to do, has the advantage of accommodating simultaneously both the form/content division between the two faculties, and the form/content division within the faculty of intuition itself.

Before turning to a more detailed explication of such a view, it should be noted that, according to Kant, all three operations could accommodate both an empirical (content- or matter-related) and a pure (formal) dimension. In Kant’s words (62): ‘They are empirical, when sensation (which presupposes the actual presence of the object) is contained in them; and pure, when no sensation is mixed with the representation.’ Thus, for Kant, the pure/formal dimension existed *a priori* in the mind as an absolutely necessary set of capacities, antecedent to all actual intuition or conceptual cognition (54). That is, it existed as the condition of possibility upon which empirical, *a posteriori* (particular, diverse, actual, content-filled) intuitions or cognitions were predicated.

A mathematical analogy, borrowed from Melchert (1991:379-380) – albeit slightly modified in its application – offers a useful means to clarify the ‘united operation’ of these formal and empirical dimensions. Here, the formal dimensions (namely; the forms of pure intuition, the pure synthetic functioning of the imagination, and the pure categories of the understanding) may be compared with algebraic functions such as  $X^2$ , which cannot arrive at a product without some kind of content to act upon. That is,  $X^2$  on its own remains a formal capacity-to-structure, empty, and unable to produce anything until it is coupled with a number of some kind, together with which it arrives at a product. Similarly, the formal dimension of each of Kant’s mental operations existed as an *a priori* mental capacity, consisting in the formal condition of the possibility, respectively, of ‘empirical intuition,’ ‘objective synthesis’ and ‘cognition’ (or what I would prefer to call ‘constitutive judgement’ or ‘constitutive interpretation’). This formal dimension, thus, for Kant, could produce nothing in the way of knowledge until coupled with some kind of sensory content or matter.

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<sup>20</sup> To clarify the distinctions, as well as the connections between these operations, I shall presently make use of a telling example from the world of neurology.

Accordingly, insofar as attaining a constitutive judgement/interpretation, or an objective 'reality' was concerned, the primordial mental operation (which Kant called 'empirical intuition') involved the coincidence of sensation and the formal conditions of the possibility of intuition at all; namely space and time. The products or objects of 'empirical intuitions' were spatially and temporally ordered 'representations,' 'appearances,' or what Kant called 'phenomena' (Kant 41; 78; 89).

Sensation was somewhat ambiguously described by Kant (41) as: 'The effect of an object upon the faculty of representation, so far as we are affected by the said object.' Bearing in mind that, for Kant, the 'said object,' as it was in itself, was essentially foreclosed to us, the most we could say about this supposed object was that it was necessarily postulated as 'there' because it had real effects – felt as resistance to the human will to use its faculty of representation freely.

Kant (41) described the forms of pure intuition as 'that which effects that the content of the phenomenon can be arranged under certain relations.' All objects as phenomena, he claimed, necessarily had to correspond with the forms of space and time, because it was only through such correspondence 'that they can be phenomena at all; that is, can be empirically intuited and given' (91). Further, these forms 'under which alone objects can be intuited, must in fact exist, as a formal basis for them, *a priori* in the mind' (91).

'Empirical intuition,' therefore, had to assume the effects, in the form of sensory stimuli, of something to which we had no unmediated access; that is, something which could never be perceived in a 'raw' state, unmediated by the forms of time and space, which were the conditions of the very possibility of sensory perception or intuition itself. In other words, whatever it was that was 'out there' had real sensory effects (i.e. we perceived it), only insofar as something in it regularly conformed to the rationally imposed conditions of space and time under which perception was possible at all; that is, under which the 'said object' could affect us at all. Space and time, thus, reflected the internal limits of a human (or rational) capacity for perception, and were not necessarily supposed 'properties' of an external thing-in-itself. That is, for Kant, the so-called 'thing-in-itself' may have encompassed dimensions other than space and time, which did not affect us at all. However, we had no way of ascertaining anything about this one way or another, given the impossibility of our ever stepping outside of the spatio-temporal limits of our own intuitive/rational functioning (54-57).

All phenomena, Kant (41) claimed, as products of 'empirical intuition,' consisted in a 'manifold content' provided by sensation (sensory stimuli) which was always already arranged in terms of the formal relations of space and time. Thus, they appear as objectively real, as existing. However, they were as yet undetermined (41). Thus, according to Kant (78; 80; 96), the products of empirical intuition (*phenomena*) appeared as a diverse 'manifold;' that is, as discrete, unrelated, abstract entities, as opposed

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<sup>21</sup> In the Hegelian sense. See Descombes (1980:10) on the shifting connotations of the word 'dialectic.'



to concrete and particular *objects*.<sup>22</sup> In other words, they did not appear as composite ‘everyday’ objects, internally conjoined and embedded in a recognisable, *relational* field of other objects. This required something that could not be presupposed in ‘empirical intuition’ itself, but had to be found beyond the sensory in a spontaneous, *a priori*, synthetic operation, subsumed under the faculty of understanding. In short, an intelligible objectivity, properly speaking, first required a mental act of ‘synthesis’ or conjunction. In Kant’s words (93):

But the conjunction (*conjunctio*) of a manifold in intuition never can be given us by the senses; it cannot therefore be contained in the pure form of sensuous intuition, for it is a spontaneous act of the faculty of representation. And as we must, to distinguish it from sensibility, entitle this faculty *understanding*, so all conjunction – whether conscious or unconscious, be it of the manifold in intuition, sensuous or non-sensuous, or of several conceptions – is an act of the understanding. To this act we shall give the general appellation of *synthesis*, thereby to indicate, at the same time, that we cannot represent anything as conjoined in the object without having previously conjoined it ourselves.

The capacity for synthesis described the primary or basic unifying or relational function of the understanding. It was, according to Kant (1964:78), the ‘first requisite for the production of a cognition,’ albeit in a still ‘crude and confused’ form. The operation of ‘synthesis’ in its empirical application involved the coincidence of phenomena (as content) and a formal capacity for ‘synthesis’ (as the condition of the possibility of the inter-relatedness by means of which phenomena become what one could properly call ‘everyday objects’). Here again, the distinction between form and content was brought into play, and in a classically dialectical move, phenomena (as the already formed contents of primary ‘empirical intuitions’) became the contents to be formed by a ‘higher,’ more advanced, more complex function; namely the synthetic functioning of the imagination. The products of this operation were the ‘things’ or ‘objects’ of our everyday objective reality.

It is important to note that the formal capacity for ‘synthesis’ presupposed and depended on a stable reference point which one could term, among other equivalent expressions, the ‘Transcendental Ego.’<sup>23</sup> In other words, for Kant, underlying the ability to intuit and to judge was the ability to relate phenomena as well as conceptions not only to each other, but also, importantly, to the self. In his words (1964:79):

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<sup>22</sup> While phenomena may be ‘abstract’ in the sense that they remain outside of the relational field within which objects proper emerge, they should not, for this reason, be seen as unreal in any sense. ‘Concrete,’ thus, is used throughout to indicate ‘objectivity’ or an ‘objective reality’ in opposition to an ‘abstract reality’ of formal shapes and patterns, but it is not intended here to set into play an opposition between real and unreal.

<sup>23</sup> Some of these may be listed as: a ‘unity of consciousness;’ a ‘transcendental unity of self-consciousness;’ ‘transcendental unity of apperception;’ and ‘cogito’ or the ‘I think’ (Strauss 1982:136).

The same function which gives unity to the different representations in a judgement gives also unity to the mere synthesis of different representations in an intuition; and this unity we call the pure conception of the understanding.

Thus, synthesis (as a general capacity to relate) makes no sense in a realm of pure relativity. In other words, I can understand one thing as standing in relation to another, only because I can relate each to the particular, and stable standpoint of my own point of view. That is, it is only *because* I can relate phenomena and conceptions to myself, that I can also relate them to each other.<sup>24</sup>

The dialectical process does not end here, for the products of this ‘synthesis’ in themselves are not yet intelligible. According to Kant (78), ‘synthesis’ was ‘the mere operation of the imagination – a blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we should have no cognition whatever, but of the working of which we are seldom even conscious.’ ‘Synthesis,’ thus, for Kant (78), was merely a process of collecting, uniting or conjoining phenomenal elements (formal shapes and patterns) in order to provide the analytical aspect of the understanding with a certain content to act upon.

In other words, while ‘synthesis’ had to be presupposed in the production of an intelligible reality, attaining such a reality required a function or capacity that could not be presupposed in ‘synthesis’ itself, but again had to be found beyond it, this time in a third, *a priori* capacity for analysis, also subsumed under the faculty of understanding. As Kant (78) put it, ‘to reduce this synthesis to conceptions, is a function of the understanding, by means of which we attain to cognition, [or knowledge; cf. Kant 1978:112] in the proper meaning of the term.’ Kant (1964:93) pointed out here that while it may seem as if synthesis and analysis were direct opposites, analysis must always presuppose synthesis. In his words,

... where the understanding has not previously conjoined, it cannot dissect or analyse, because only as conjoined by it, must that which is to be analysed have been given to our faculty of representation.

In short, in a third dialectical move, the products of ‘synthesis’ – the *already formed* contents of ‘empirical intuitions,’ conjoined – became the contents finally to be formed by the analytical function of the understanding.

In his division between ‘transcendental aesthetic’ and ‘transcendental logic,’ Kant himself reinforced the notion of a two-part division between the faculties of intuition and understanding. Without doubt, both faculties could operate independently; one providing unintelligible content or matter, and the other contributing free-floating ideas. As Kant (1964:89) put it, ‘categories do not represent the conditions under which objects are given to us in intuition; objects can appear to us

without necessarily connecting themselves with these.’ But, as Kant (1978:93) pointed out, since the understanding could not intuit anything, and the senses could not think anything, it was only through their union that knowledge could be achieved. Thus, if we wished to demarcate the realm of objective knowledge and limit the pretensions of pure reason (that attempted to extend pure logic beyond its capacity) then it became imperative to find a way to bridge the two.

Here he would have to show that the faculty of the understanding was capable of more than pure reason (or in Hume’s terms, merely analytical truths or relations of ideas). He would have to show that the rational mind contributed to the very shape and intelligibility of the everyday objective world, and that without this contribution, such a world would not be possible at all. Kant claimed to have provided such a union or bridge by means of his notion of ‘transcendental logic;’ that is, ‘logic’ insofar as it refers to the objective world.<sup>25</sup>

In order to delineate what he meant by ‘transcendental logic,’ Kant (1964:63-70) distinguished it from other forms of thinking, which he considered illegitimate as far as genuine knowledge was concerned. The first distinction he made (1964:63-64) – upon which the division of the field of ‘logic’ into analytic and dialectic was based – concerned the difference between general or universal logic and what he referred to, somewhat cryptically (see Meiklejohn in Kant 1964:63; Translator’s Note 1), as the ‘logic’ of the particular use of the understanding. The particular *use* of the understanding seems to refer to the adherence to an *organon*,<sup>26</sup> that is, adherence to the laws of ‘correct’ thinking, produced ‘in the schools’ (of rationalism or empiricism, for example), about ‘a particular class of objects’ *as defined by* this or that so-called science. Kant seems to have seen this use of the understanding as parasitic upon general logic, and as harbouring the temptation to misapplication. In his words (1964:68),

...general logic, which is merely a canon of judgment, has been employed as an organon for the actual production, or rather for the semblance of production of objective assertions, and has thus been grossly misapplied.

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<sup>24</sup> It is important to note here (in view of later criticism from the point of view of deconstructive thinking) that an intelligible objective world, for Kant, *starts out* from the presupposition of a fixed, centred ego.

<sup>25</sup> It is perhaps debatable whether the term ‘logic’ still applies here. Meiklejohn (Kant 1964:63), the translator of this edition, has the following to say: ‘It may be noted here, that what Kant calls Transcendental Logic is properly not logic at all, but a division of metaphysics. For his Categories contain matter – as regards thought at least. Take, for example, the category of *Existence*. These categories, no doubt, are the forms of the matter given us by experience. They are, according to Kant, not derived from experience, but purely *a priori*. But logic is concerned exclusively about the form of thought, and has nothing to do with this or that conception, whether *a priori* or *a posteriori*.’

<sup>26</sup> In the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Thompson 1995:961) organon is defined as ‘a means of reasoning or system of logic.’

In other words, he seems to be referring here to the kind of rationalist thinking that sought to derive synthetic conclusions from analytic premises.<sup>27</sup> He saw in such use of pure reason (or pure logic) the attempt to provide a semblance of truth regarding claims about objects, without the benefit of the kind of rigorous critique he himself had undertaken, and thus without certain or legitimate grounds of justification. This illegitimate use of pure reason to make assertions about the objective world, for Kant, merely led to illusion – hence the appellation ‘dialectic.’ Again, in his words (1964:69-69):

Now it may be taken as a safe and useful warning, that general logic, considered as an organon, must always be a logic of illusion, that is, be dialectical, for, as it teaches us nothing whatever respecting the content of our cognitions, but merely the formal conditions of their accordance with the understanding, do not relate to and are quite indifferent in respect of objects, any attempt to employ it as an instrument (organon) in order to extend and enlarge the range of our knowledge must end in mere prating...

Kant’s aim with this first distinction, it seems, was to distinguish what he called ‘general logic’ from any of the various disciplinary uses to which the understanding had been put, and to consider instead what in it was basic or elemental, and general or universal. He characterised general logic, broadly, as analytic and abstract. In his words (68), it ‘resolves the whole formal business of understanding and reason into its elements and exhibits them as principles of all logical judging of our cognitions.’ General logic, thus, concerned the absolutely necessary laws of thought, without regard for actual, particular objects. As he (65) put it:

General logic... makes abstraction of all content of cognition, that is, of all relation of cognition to its object and regards only the logical form in the relation of cognitions to each other, that is, the form of thought in general.

Kant (1964:64) made a further distinction *within* the realm of general logic between ‘pure logic’ or ‘logic proper’ and what he termed ‘applied logic’ (meant in a specific idiosyncratic, Kantian sense, as should become clear presently).<sup>28</sup> Pure logic, as involving the necessary and *a priori* laws or conditions of the possibility of thinking at all, was merely formal. It processed our representations in the same way, according to the same laws of deduction, regardless of their origins; that is, regardless of whether they were *a priori* or empirical in origin. It had nothing whatsoever to do with the content or matter to which thought was applied; nor with any empirical conditions under which thinking occurred. In pure logic, according to Kant (1964:64),

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<sup>27</sup> This should be distinguished from Kant’s own project that sought the *a priori* basis of certain synthetic judgements.

<sup>28</sup> This distinction seems to correspond to the more familiar distinction between deductive and inductive reasoning.

...we abstract all the empirical conditions under which the understanding is exercised; for example, the influence of the senses, the play of the fantasy or imagination, the laws of the memory, the force of habit, of inclination, etc., consequently also, the sources of prejudice...

Thus, general logic could only ever be hypothetical. It was able to make logically valid claims about how objects must be made intelligible *if* they were to exist. But it said nothing about whether the existence of these objects was indeed possible at all. In other words, 'pure logic' did not furnish us with truth in the sense of correspondence to an object, but only truth in the negative sense of formal non-contradiction.

In diametric opposition, what Kant called 'applied logic' (or what, today, we would place under the aegis of the social sciences, such as psychology) dealt with the general 'laws of the use of the understanding under empirical conditions' or 'under certain circumstances of its application' (1964:64), such as those listed above. 'Applied logic' (as inductive) aimed at the generalisable, in the sense that it applied to the operation of the understanding without taking account of the particularity of individual subjects or objects. In Kant's (65) words, 'applied logic'

... is a representation of the understanding, and of the rules of its necessary employment *in concreto*, that is to say, under the accidental conditions of the subject, which may either hinder or promote this employment, and which are all given only empirically. Thus applied logic treats of attention, its impediments and consequences, of the origin of error, of the state of doubt, hesitation, conviction, etc., and to it is related pure general logic in the same way that pure morality... is related to practical ethics...

For Kant, then, 'applied logic' could never offer absolute certainty, dependent as it was on what he (65) called 'empirical and psychological principles.'<sup>29</sup>

Thus, neither aspect of general logic, taken alone, seemed capable of offering a satisfactory solution to the problem of objective knowledge. Pure logic could offer absolute certainty but no objective reference, while 'applied' logic could offer an objective reference, but no certainty. For Kant, therefore, to solve the problem of objective knowledge, a new kind of logic was required which could claim both certainty as well as objective reference. In other words, there was a need for a logic that obeyed the laws of formal truth as regards the cognition of objects. Kant had shown that space and time were the fundamental conditions of the possibility of an objective 'reality' being present, appearing, or being represented. He also accepted that the form of the understanding (of thinking) consisted in the unified operation of various modes of judgement. The task of 'transcendental logic' was to delineate a mediate ground between representations (as contents) and judgements (as form).

This took the form of what Kant called the categories of the understanding. In Kant's words (1964:65), this other logic,

...which should comprise merely the laws of pure thought (of an object), would of course exclude all those cognitions which were of empirical content. This kind of logic would also examine the origin of our cognitions of objects, so far as that origin cannot be attributed to the objects themselves...

Kant (1964:79) thus embarked on a process of reflection according to which he came up with the twelve rational capacities, under the four heads of 'quantity,' 'quality,' 'relation' and 'modality,' that he thought had to be presupposed as *a priori* conditions of the possibility of experiencing an intelligible, objective world. The category of causality, for example, could be deduced from the impossibility of an intelligible world without repeatability and irreversibility. Or notions such as essence and contingency, similarity and difference, persistence and change could give rise to the categories of substance and accident. Bear in mind, as Melchert (1991:379) points out, that when Kant described the faculty of understanding as consisting in 'categories' or 'concepts,' he referred not to particular, content-filled *notions* such as 'chair' or 'bookshelf,' but rather to general, abstract, mental *capacities* to structure in thought (or to think) an otherwise unintelligible objective synthesis or perceptual field.<sup>30</sup> Thus the 'categories of the understanding' remained empty, general and abstract 'forms of thought,' functions, mental capacities, or dispositions to learn until 'some intuition either pure (as in geometry) or empirical (as in physics)' provided the particular contents which enabled us to specify objects (Melchert 1991:379-380). In short, the operation of cognition (of making an objective world intelligible), involved the coincidence of 'synthesis' (as content) and a formal, analytical capacity for application of the 'categories.'

To sum up very briefly, for Kant, making a 'constitutive judgement,' that is, attaining or constituting an intelligible 'reality,' involved the following three operations: producing phenomena at a primary level through the combined and simultaneous operation of sensation and the forms of intuition; conjoining these phenomena into everyday objects through 'synthesis;' and finally, making everyday objects intelligible by applying the categories of the understanding.

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<sup>29</sup> Kant (1978:114) would have placed the methodology of Aristotle's search for fundamental concepts of the understanding in this category. Aristotle's concepts, he claimed, were derived haphazardly and inductively from experience, without any guiding logic which could underwrite with any certainty their completeness and their purity or fundamentality.

<sup>30</sup> In an effort to counter the ambiguity of the term 'concept,' I shall refer to the mental capacities to structure the discrete series of phenomena as 'the categories of the understanding,' and I shall use the term 'concept' to refer to specific content-filled notions (or classes of objects).

#### 4. The Case of Dr. P.

Perhaps the most striking confirmation of the main thrust of Kant's 'Copernican revolution' may be found in the field of contemporary neurology, since it is here that we face the wonder and terror of humanity thrust out of the comfortable medium of its existence (our 'reality') as a fish is out of water. Perhaps it is only when things go wrong that we can recognise the very constructedness of what we tend to take for granted as having an 'obviously' independent existence. Although there are many examples that could serve to demonstrate the involvement of mental capacities in the constitution of an objective reality,<sup>31</sup> one example seems particularly apposite here, since it also pertains directly to Kant's (1964:62) insight into the necessary *synthetic unity* of intuition and understanding if we are to attain an intelligible, objective reality; that is, the blindness of intuition without understanding and the emptiness of thought without the contents provided by intuition.

In his book *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, Oliver Sacks (1986:7-21) describes his neurological examination of a musician (Dr. P.) who, while there was nothing physically wrong with his eyesight, began to make sometimes ludicrous errors of judgement in relation to visual objects – including the mistake reflected in the title of the book. An extensive battery of tests established for Sacks (17) that, as a result of 'a degenerative process in the visual parts of his brain,' Dr. P., who could 'see' perfectly well, functioned increasingly without the capacity to make constitutive judgements/interpretations in the visual domain.<sup>32</sup> In short, as his disorder progressed, Dr. P. was increasingly unable to relate the elements he saw to each other or to himself; thus, becoming less and less able to constitute a coherent, everyday visual reality.

As a result, at least insofar as vision was concerned, Dr. P. receded further and further into an abstract, never familiar, visual disarray. The following short descriptions – chosen, incidentally, as the most striking of a whole array of similar occurrences – convey a sense of what this might have been like. The first is an interview between Dr. Sacks and Dr. P. (Sacks:13):

'What is this?' I asked, holding up a glove.

'May I examine it?' he asked, and, taking it from me, he proceeded to examine it as he had examined the geometrical shapes.

'A continuous surface,' he announced at last, 'infolded on itself. It appears to have' – he hesitated – 'five outpouchings, if this is the word.'

'Yes,' I said cautiously. 'You have given me a description. Now tell me what it is.'

'A container of some sort?'

'Yes,' I said, 'and what would it contain?'

'It would contain its contents!' said Dr P., with a laugh.

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<sup>31</sup> Autism springs to mind, as well as certain drug-induced states of hyper-reality or hallucination.

<sup>32</sup> It should be emphasised that Dr. P. retained normal functioning in the other four sensory domains, and these, to some extent, took over where visual processing failed.

'There are many possibilities. It could be a change-purse, for example for coins of five sizes. It could...'

I interrupted the barmy flow. 'Does it not look familiar? Do you think it might contain, might fit, a part of your body?'

No light of recognition dawned on his face.<sup>33</sup>

The second relates to an observation by Sacks (16) upon noticing that Dr. P. was an accomplished painter. Through his painting, Dr. P. had inadvertently produced a striking, graphic representation of the kind of world which, with the advance of his disease, gradually encroached upon his visual reality. On the walls of his house, a series of his paintings, hung in chronological order, stood as testimony to his apparent 'artistic development' from a naturalistic and realistic style, through non-representational art, to complete abstraction.<sup>34</sup> Although it is a moot point whether Dr. P.'s stylistic development was *initially* intentional or whether it was, as Sacks (16) suspects, evidence of 'the pathology advancing – advancing towards a profound visual agnosia, in which all powers of representation and imagery, all sense of the concrete, all sense of reality, were being destroyed' – in the advanced stages of his disease, Dr. P. could only have painted what he actually saw.

What is profoundly striking here is the power this image of a series of paintings has to evoke for us a sense of the kind of visual (un)reality engendered by the gradual decline and eventual absence of the mental capacities necessary for constructing the unified and continuous visual field we associate with our 'everyday' objective 'reality.' Importantly, here was obviously not an external failure (somehow) on the part of a 'reality' out there to be what it usually 'is,' but rather, an internal failure of mental functioning. This reflects the essence of Kant's 'Copernican revolution,' namely, the insight that a coherent and intelligible objective reality is unavoidably a representation or product of the 'fully functioning' rational subject.

It is more than this observation, however, that makes Dr. P.'s case so interesting. For, here, no doubt due to the late onset of his disease, this failure of mental functioning was only partial; the result of degeneration only in a specific part of his brain which left certain areas of mental functioning operating normally. The case of Dr. P., then, (along with others like it) affords neurologists the opportunity to investigate empirically what in Kant's lifetime could only have been theoretical; for we ordinarily experience 'reality' as always already the end result of the simultaneous and combined functioning of intuition and understanding (unless, of course, something goes wrong as it did with Dr.

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<sup>33</sup> In a footnote, Sacks (1986:13) mentions that Dr. P. did, in the end, come to recognise the item as a glove when he happened, by chance, to get the thing on his hand. Here Sacks remarks on the similarity between this incident and the *modus operandi* of another patient, similarly afflicted, who could recognise objects through use.

<sup>34</sup> Sacks (16) distinguishes between abstract art, in which the concrete is entirely ousted, and non-representational art such as cubism, which reflects as he puts it 'a greater sensitivity to all the structural elements of line, boundary, contour – an almost Picasso-like power to see, and equally depict, those abstract organisations embedded in, and normally lost in, the concrete.'



P.). Thus, as a preamble to the further developments inaugurated by the 'linguistic turn,' reflection on some of the details of this case may help to clarify certain distinctions made by Kant, and serve to indicate where his thinking may be pushed a little further.

In Kantian language, it would seem that Dr. P. retained the capacity for both 'empirical intuition' and 'pure understanding,' but suffered a failure of conjunction or 'synthesis.' Dr. P. could 'see;' that is, his visual apparatus was not physically impaired. If Kant was correct in claiming that space and time were the conditions of the possibility of sensory perception itself, then we are compelled to presuppose that, in being able to see at all, Dr. P. could impose temporal and spatial dimensions on the manifold of sensory stimuli affecting his visual apparatus. In other words, he ought to have been capable of the kind of 'empirical intuition' that produced visual phenomena. This, indeed, according to Sacks (11), presented him with no special difficulty. Dr. P. could unerringly perceive abstract shapes and patterns (the 'Platonic solids,' for example). He could also, it seems, identify stylised, or formally and schematically represented figures (such as the 'royalty' cards in a pack of ordinary playing cards, and cartoons), by making use of isolated key features or 'obvious markers' such as 'Churchill's cigar, Schnozzle's nose' and Einstein's 'characteristic hair and moustache' (Sacks 11-12). In Kantian language, then, we could readily admit that, in visual terms, Dr. P. retained a 'phenomenal' reality.

Yet, Dr. P. lived in a world in which these phenomenal shapes and patterns remained abstract; that is, disconnected from each other and from himself. Without such obvious markers as those just described, his ability to identify people failed utterly. According to Sacks (15) Dr. P.'s power to visualise 'faces and scenes ...visual narratives and drama' was 'profoundly impaired, almost absent.' He failed wholly, for instance, to identify various facial expressions of real people, and indeed, seldom could recognise a face at all; not even supposedly familiar ones, including his own. As Sacks (12) comments: 'By and large, he recognised nobody: neither his family, nor his colleagues, nor his pupils, nor himself.'

The point to be made here, is that attaining the recognisable, objective 'everyday visual reality' – which is, at least to some extent (despite individual variations in perceptual style), common to all healthy human beings – requires more than the healthy functioning of our organs of sensory perception. In other words, 'objective reality,' as opposed to 'phenomenal reality,' requires something more than sensory intuition in space and time; some further capacity to see 'how things stand in relation to one another and oneself' (Sacks 17). In Kantian terms, acting by itself, the faculty of intuition is blind. If we are to make phenomena intelligible, concrete, particular, or recognisable (if we are to recognise a glove as a glove), intuition must operate in conjunction with understanding in both its 'integrative' or 'synthetic,' as well as its 'analytic' capacity.

Dr. P.'s case is complicated by the fact that the onset of his disease occurred in later life, after normal visual judgement had been possible. As a result of this, he possessed previously formed concepts, or 'notions' concerning visual objects, which he still retained and which informed his

discourse, although they were no longer filled with any kind of perceptual content. In other words, conceptually speaking, he knew what a glove, for example, was, although he no longer could recognise one immediately when it was presented to him visually. He could also describe the glove in terms of certain formal relations – ‘a continuous surface...infolded on itself’ (Sacks 13). These capacities, along with the very possibility of discourse at all about visual objects, suggest that the analytical aspect of his faculty of understanding remained intact. That is, in formal terms, Dr. P. could think – the forms of thought were operational in his mind, but they were empty of visual content. This aspect of Dr. P.’s situation demonstrates the powerlessness of the faculty of the understanding to know an objective reality when faced with the dearth of empirical content. Even if we can categorise and classify etc. to a high degree of complexity, this abstract, formal, analytical, mechanical process is not enough to account for understanding ‘reality.’ Processing at this level remains schematic, mechanical, analytic, and diachronic.

Dr. P. was capable of ‘empirical intuition’ (of seeing phenomena or discrete elements of reality). He could also, in some instances, but not all, analyse these in terms of the ‘pure categories of the understanding’ to match them up with pre-formed concepts. Nevertheless, in spite of these abilities, he no longer had any grasp of ‘everyday’ visual reality. As Sacks (13-14) points out:

Dr. P. ...functioned precisely as a machine functions. It wasn’t merely that he displayed the same indifference to the visual world as a computer but – even more strikingly – he construed the world as a computer construes it, by means of key features and schematic relationships. The scheme might be identified – in an ‘identiti-kit’ way – without the reality being grasped at all.

Anyone with experience of proof-reading a text that has been electronically scanned should have a clear appreciation of this. A scanner translates text elements from print to electronic format according to the best match it can find with its pre-programmed ‘key features.’ Yet, having no sensitivity to the relationships between these elements (which produce meaning, analogous to an intelligible objective reality when considering vision), it regularly makes ‘sometimes ludicrous’ errors in relation to meaning. It could, for example, translate a double ‘l’ in the middle of a word as the numeral ‘11,’ or produce the letter ‘m’ from a double ‘r,’ rendering certain words incomprehensible.

The foregoing analysis suggests that at best the purely analytical aspect of the understanding mirrors the functioning of a machine, and that it is the capacity for ‘synthesis’ that separates human mental functioning from that of a machine. Interestingly, this seems to confirm Kant’s insight that while the faculties of intuition and understanding may operate separately to some extent, without the capacity for synthesis, we can have neither what could be called a human rationality, nor an intelligible objective ‘reality.’ Recall that Kant (1978:112) ties ‘pure synthesis’ to the ‘pure concept of the

understanding,' or in alternative terms, the 'transcendental unity of apperception' – that is, the 'I think' – and that this pure synthetic unity, for him, underpins the synthesis of phenomena in intuition.

Kant thought he could purify the 'I think' of all contextual aspects (e.g. social, cultural, psychological), and reduce it to a purely formal or mechanical interpretative functioning, which, if used correctly, would produce precisely the same cognitions (or knowledge) no matter who was thinking, nor when and where. Thus, he believed that the defining characteristic of a rational (read 'fully human') being was the ability to interpret, structure or give form to sensory content in a way that was universally the same for all rational beings. In other words, individuals participated in the structuring of a common 'reality' only insofar as they possessed and made proper use of the *a priori* mental capacities common to all rational beings. In this view, those unwilling or unable to make proper use of these did not structure a 'reality,' but were lost to a different world of fantasy, illusion, physical disorder (as in the case of Dr. P. and others like him) or madness. For Kant, then, while it was not possible to check the 'truth' or accuracy of our concepts in terms of any match between concepts and the 'things-in-themselves,' we could know for certain that our concepts were an accurate reflection of reality when there was universal agreement regarding our constitutive judgements.

In spite of the criticism levelled at Kant, not least for his quest for certainty, the case of Dr. P. lends credence to his 'Copernican revolution' in so far as he claimed that for the rational subject, 'reality' was necessarily always already *interpreted*. Norris (1982:4) up Kant's position neatly:

Knowledge was a product of the human mind, the operations of which could only *interpret* the world... But these very operations, according to Kant, were so deeply vested in human understanding that they offered a new foundation for philosophy. Henceforth philosophy must concern itself not with a delusory quest for 'the real' but with precisely those deep regularities – or *a priori* truths – that constitute human understanding.

## 5. 'Closure' and the 'Metaphysics of Presence'

Briefly re-stated, Kant's 'Copernican revolution' amounted to a re-evaluation of the relationship between subject and 'object,' which, in consequence, demonstrated that the nature (although, importantly, not the existence) of objective 'reality' was bound up with our inherent capacities as human (rational) beings. In other words, for Kant, attaining an objective 'reality' was neither a matter of gaining access to an external 'ideality' through rational reflection, nor one of passively receiving, through sensation, what was already 'out there.' Objective 'reality' as 'representation' or 'appearance,' for him, was the result of active interpretation. Alternatively put, an intelligible objective 'reality' depended, for Kant, on 'human thought;' that is, on the ability not only to give objective form or structure to a chaotic manifold of sense impressions through synthesis, but also to make sense of objects through analysis. Thus, in demonstrating that what we call objective 'reality' is always already

interpreted actively by the rational subject, his ‘Copernican revolution’ represents a radical philosophical shift away from the traditional notion of an independent, external world to the notion of a subjectively constituted ‘reality.’

It is important, however, not to lose sight of the complexity of the relation between ‘reality’ and the Kantian ‘thing-in-itself.’ That is, for Kant (1964:187), there was indeed a ‘something’ (a ‘Being,’ an ‘existent’) ‘out there,’ that human or rational beings, bound within the spatio-temporal limitations of our own rationally organised, interpretative faculties, simply had no access to. As he put it (187):

It may be true that there are intelligible existences to which our faculty of sensuous intuition has no relation, and cannot be applied, but our conceptions of the understanding, as mere forms of thought for our sensuous intuition, do not extend to these. What, therefore, we call noumenon, must be understood by us as such in a *negative* sense.

Thus, for Kant, the fact that rational beings were not passive observers of an existing external ‘world,’ but played an active part in constituting a human ‘reality,’ did not mean that we were the constitutive creators of ‘existence’ itself. Dr. P., for example, will still trip over a ‘table’ he cannot interpret or constitute as such. In other words, when one thinks of a constituting subject, or of constitutive interpretations, one should not think of a subject that *creates* the Kantian ‘thing-in-itself’ (or the Lacanian ‘Real’ or Heidegger’s ‘Being’). Rather, one should think of a subject that creates a ‘reality’ by interpreting what is ‘there.’

Correspondingly, Kant would not have been concerned about the possibility of verifying ‘constitutive judgements’ or ‘constitutive interpretations’ in terms of some match with a pre-existing, self-subsistent ‘world.’ Rather, truth would be a function of universal agreement of constitutive interpretation or conception. Doubts about the possibility of such universality would probably not have troubled him unduly, since he believed that in postulating a closed, rationally ordered or grounded system or structure (the forms of intuition and the categories of the understanding) as the condition of the possibility of all ‘reality,’ he could bring philosophical speculation to a conclusion (Critchley 1992:63). Kant’s move to close philosophy finally, to utter philosophy’s final word, repeats the leitmotif of what Derrida (1976:49; and elsewhere) calls the ‘metaphysics of presence.’

The ‘metaphysics of presence’ is, for Derrida, given his conception of philosophy, an impossible metaphysics. For Derrida, according to Critchley (1992:64), the very possibility of philosophy, in a non-traditional sense, emerges *in the tension between* the limits created by ‘closure’ and the play of opening. These are the terms in which Derrida articulates what all philosophy inevitably comes face to face with, and ultimately must face; namely the impossibility of finding a home – or the absence of a place on either side of the conceptual pair ‘closure/opening’ – for homecoming is philosophy’s disappearance. Central to any ‘project of truth,’ (any attempt, that is, to come to a final truth, an absolute beginning, a

firm ground, etc.), is a concern for *certainty*, understood as uncovering what is definite, enduring and unchanging (repeatable as the same) about the objects of our knowledge (Staten 1985:38). In other words, if philosophy emerges only in the tension between structure and play, self and other, world and earth, discipline and transgression, the presentable and the sublime, etc., then any ‘project of truth,’ which has to ‘reduce’<sup>35</sup> all that does not fit within its parameters, represents the ‘closure’ of philosophy. Inevitably, then, the ‘closure’ of philosophy must participate in the paradox underlying every attempt to do the impossible.<sup>36</sup>

There are two ways of being caught up in the metaphysics of presence, aligned with the distinction Critchley (1992:61) makes between two senses of the word ‘closure.’ In his words:

Spatially, closure is that which encompasses and encloses all the co-ordinates or constituent parts appertaining to a given, finite territory; this can be better understood if one thinks of the spatial closure described by the circumference of a circle or the enclosure of an area through the construction of a fence, frontier, or fosse.

This first, spatial sense of the word ‘closure’ (the sense in which Kant was caught up in a movement of ‘closure’) accommodates the notion of a structural network or system characterised by fixed internal relations and definite boundaries. Moreover, neither an internal centre, nor a starting point is a necessary feature of such a system. Thus, in a spatial conception of ‘closure’ the temporal dimension (which includes the questions of origin, history and the ‘deferral’ of meaning) is deemed secondary to the spatial. As we shall see later, a spatially closed system corresponds to what Cilliers (1998:3-5) calls a ‘complicated system’ in contradistinction to what he describes as ‘complex systems’ which include both spatial and temporal moments as equally necessary. In short, ‘closure’ in the spatial sense refers to the conception of a structure or system in which the interrelated elements are governed by universally fixed laws or rules. A philosophical system such as Kant’s, in which a closed system is posited as the condition of the possibility of all ‘reality,’ reflects an attempt to effect the ‘closure’ of philosophy in a spatial sense.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, Critchley (1992:61) describes ‘closure’ in a different temporal sense as ‘the activity or process of bringing something to its conclusion, completion, or end.’<sup>38</sup> Critchley is quick to

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<sup>35</sup> I shall use this word throughout in the Derridian sense of a denial, glossing over, leaving out, repressing, thinking away, or ignoring that which does not fit into a set of relations, structure, system or ‘economy.’

<sup>36</sup> That is, the paradox of philosophy’s attempt to close itself, via philosophy, which emerges only in the tension between ‘closure’ and opening.

<sup>37</sup> Importantly, as Derrida has pointed out (1978b:278-279), such a ‘closed structure’ does not escape being ‘centred,’ for its ‘closure’ depends on the possibility of an external point of reference or ‘centre’ that controls, governs, and limits the structure. That is, this centre has the authority to determine the rules that govern the system and delineate the boundaries that enclose it. I shall discuss Derrida’s criticism of this concept of a ‘centred structure’ in due course.

<sup>38</sup> This is the sense in which, as will be discussed presently, Husserl was caught up in a movement of ‘closure.’

point out here one must be careful to distinguish ‘closure’ as ‘the activity of bringing something to its end’ from the concept of end. In relation to the idea of metaphysical ‘closure,’ the importance of this distinction is brought out by Kant’s analysis of time (1964: 252-253). Time, for Kant (252) was in itself a series (the ‘formal condition of all series,’ in fact). Therefore, in relation to a given present, we had to make an *a priori* distinction between what he called the ‘*antecedentia*’ (past time), and the ‘*consequentia*’ (future time). A given point in time, Kant (253) argued, was conditioned by past time only; meaning that the very possibility of the present moment depended on the time that had elapsed, and not in any way on the time to come. In its quest for certainty or ‘truth’ (i.e. ‘closure’) reason necessarily demanded a totality of conditions (some ending of the series of receding conditions) but did not demand (necessarily) a totality of consequences. Thus, as he put it: ‘The transcendental idea of the absolute totality of the series of the conditions of a given conditioned, relates merely to all past time.’ In other words, for Kant, the very concept of the present moment depended necessarily only on the givenness of the whole of past time (that is, on an ‘origin’) as the condition of the given moment. As he put it (252), we necessarily think of a

...given time completely elapsed up to a given moment, although that time is not determinable by us. But as regards time future, which is not the condition of arriving at the present, in order to conceive it; it is quite indifferent whether we consider future time as ceasing at some point [even at this instant], or as prolonging itself to infinity.

In other words, the temporal sense of ‘closure’ does not signify the end of philosophy as a ceasing to be, nor a ceasing to be productive, but rather the (often desired, if impossible) grounding of its metaphysical activities in an absolute beginning. It implies the power to privilege a fixed, primordial point of origin – what might be called a ‘transcendental signified’ (Derrida 1976:49)<sup>39</sup> – in relation to which all else is derivative or secondary, in relation to which ‘relation’ itself (as ‘difference’) is reduced.

Whether understood temporally or spatially, what is important about ‘closure’ is its postulation as a *limit* of some sort (Critchley 1992:63). Moreover, in Critchley’s words here: ‘When the limit has been drawn, one not only sees the delimited area inside the closure; one has also delimited the outside of the closure, the *outré-clôture*.’ ‘closure’ depends on the possibility of making the move that reserves the privilege of the ‘inside’ for one pole of the space/time ‘binary,’ while reducing its opposite to the secondary, derivative status of the ‘outside.’

Thus, while Kant’s closed system of forms of intuition and categories of the understanding reflects ‘closure’ in a spatial sense, in what follows, I shall argue that Husserl’s phenomenological approach repeats a tendency – that takes its cue from Aristotle’s conception of ‘form’ – to favour

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<sup>39</sup> Derrida (1976:49) describes the ‘transcendental signified’ as that which: ‘...at one time or another would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign.’ Here he identifies ‘...logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence as the exigent, powerful, systematic and irrepressible desire for such a signified.’

‘closure’ in the temporal sense outlined here. On the other hand, criticism of this tendency from a Saussurean or structuralist point of view swings too far in the Kantian direction, again privileging ‘closure’ in a spatial sense. However, these are tensions that occur *within* the ambit of ‘closure’ as a movement of limitation, that is, within the ‘metaphysics of presence,’ and for this reason, they share certain presuppositions or philosophical commitments, which repeat ‘the opposition between form and matter – which inaugurates Western metaphysics’ (Derrida: 1973:6). Given the sustained function of this opposition in Husserl’s work, it warrants more attention; hence the following brief, but valuable detour.

## 6. Aristotle and Traditional Metaphysical ‘Projects of Truth’

Henry Staten (1985:5-9) offers an illuminating angle of incidence into the problematic of ‘closure’ and its deconstruction, tying the metaphysical ‘projects of truth’ characteristic of Western philosophy in general to an Aristotelian approach. Aristotle’s conception of ‘form,’ which makes the move of privileging and reduction upon which ‘closure’ depends regarding the conceptual pair ‘form/formless,’ provides an overall framework within which Husserl’s phenomenological approach, along with Western metaphysics in general, has laboured. Allison (in Derrida 1973:xxxix) notes that this overall framework can be described in a certain sense as ‘theological.’ In his words:

What invests the world with order and substance is ultimately something transcendent to that order: the Divine, the One, the principle of intelligibility, the unconditioned. Now it is precisely this kind of theological status that the concept of meaning – interpreted as ideality or absolute identity – had enjoyed in the history of Western thought, and particularly when the account turns to problems of knowledge and signification. Despite the impurity of language and communication, the possibility of an ideal and identical meaning has always been held out, whether as pure form, *eidos*, idea, ideal, or as absolute referent in the form of an ideal content of signification, what Derrida calls elsewhere a ‘transcendental signified’.

According to Staten (1985:5-9), Aristotle’s concept of ‘form’ is offered as a means to separate out at all levels what is certain, definite and unchanging from what is indefinite or formless. Staten (5-6) observes that Aristotle assembled into a framework the basic concepts that we use to ‘think the relation of words to thought and thought to things through the mediation of ideality as form.’ In other words, for Aristotle, ‘form’ or *eidos* guaranteed the ‘...equivalence of *logos* (verbal expression, especially the “formula of essence”), *noésis* (thought), and *ousia* (... “entity”)...’

Thus, ‘form’ separated the indefinite flux of pure matter from ‘entity’ or ‘thing,’ which is matter brought into definite actuality or being. In other words, as Staten (6) puts it: ‘Only when joined with form does matter become an individual, knowable existent, a this-here of a definite kind.’ ‘Form’ then, as Staten (6) observes, quoting a point made by Owens, was the ultimate cause of the actuality of an

entity, and is therefore in a certain sense ‘the thing itself.’ This ‘ontological principle of form’ seems to bring *ousia* close to Husserl’s ‘thing,’ which is an enduring ideal object rather than the changing sensuous matter of ordinary perception.

More than this, for Aristotle, ‘form’ was also the root of a thing’s knowability. If it is ‘form’ that arrests the material flux, enmeshes it in something *definite* and individual, then ‘form’ makes possible a thing’s knowability. Knowability would be defined here as an awareness of the identity of a thing as the same – that is, its tendency not to be like anything else or everything else (Staten 8). Thus, for Aristotle (Staten 6) ‘form’ causes not only ‘the being of the concrete individual entity,’ but also its ‘abstractable intelligible content’ (its species or essence). In short, ‘the sensible thing is itself unthinkable except in relation to the intelligible form.’ Thus, ‘form’ can also be said to separate out that in thinking which is formless (unintelligible, indefinite, unconnected, illogical, vague) from that which has logical form; that which obeys the principle of non-contradiction;<sup>40</sup> defined as the principle that something cannot be itself and not itself at the same time. In formal terms, this means ‘it is not the case that (p and not-p)’ (Blackburn 264). Finally, ‘form’ separates out in language the formless (nonsense, gibberish, equivocality of sense<sup>41</sup>) from the formed (definite meaning directly linking word to thought and thing). As Staten (7) explains it, in the formula ‘S is p,’ the copula ‘is’ ‘marks the relation of language to what is outside language’ (that is, the presence of the entity or thing). In other words, the term ‘is,’ as Staten puts it (7-8; my emphasis),

...is the linguistic passageway between *form* as what is knowable and speakable and *form* as the presence of the entity. Though it is still a word, the “is” seems to be the thinnest membrane, offering almost no distortion of the being it brings to expression...

Thus, Staten (8) argues that: the principle of non-contradiction

...tells us the most general and unyielding constraint that is laid down by being upon the language that speaks and the thought that thinks being. Entity [as definite] is preeminently one and indivisible; this means that the logos that declares its being must also be one and indivisible, and so must the act of mind that grasps this logos...The principle of contradiction is thus the expression in logical terms of the ontological principle of form.

In short, as Staten (6) suggests, ‘form’ is simultaneously the cause of the entity or ‘concrete individual’ (*ousia*), of its being knowable or intelligible, and of its being definable or expressible as such, in a ‘logos or verbal formula.’ The concept of ‘form,’ as Staten (9) notes, is inseparable from unity (a

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<sup>40</sup> Staten (1985:8) refers to this as ‘the principle of contradiction.’ I have elected to replace this with what I think is the more common usage.

<sup>41</sup> As Staten (1985:9) points out, Aristotle did not deny the use of one word in more than one sense, but he insisted that the senses associated with different uses were singular and distinguishable from one another.



*definite* thing with definite boundaries, or an essence) and self-identity (*re-cognisable* as the *same*, as different from all or any others, and *re-peatable* as the same over time, or *enduring*).

As Staten (7) points out, what is significant here, from the point of view of what is to come in Derrida's thinking, is that 'the crucial boundary for Aristotle and for philosophy generally does not pass between thought and thing or between word and thing *but, within each of these, between form and formlessness or indefiniteness.*' In other words, there is a line maintained in Western philosophy that separates 'being according to the logos' from the indeterminate. For Derrida 'the full weight of this separation comes to rest' on the copula '*is,*' as the 'thinnest of membranes' (Staten 8) which makes possible the clear, certain, apodictic expression of being; which enables, that is, the 'truth' about being to be told.

Derrida (Staten 13-14) questions not the equivalence of language, thought, and things, but rather the basis of their certainty as participation in *form-as-presence*. That is, he contests the idea that by means of 'form', 'being' in general (things, thought and language) is unified and self-identical as opposed to indeterminate, and consequently that it is essentially ideal rather than material. This means that a challenge to certainty, would require a challenge to the idea of '*form-as-presence,*' that is, 'form' as the guarantee of a unified and self-identical being. It is precisely Derrida's aim, through a patient and persistent critique of the great texts of the Western tradition, to bring to light an unsettling and upsetting non-presence in the very 'form' of 'form' itself, and subsequently to think the equivalence of language, thought and thing in terms of 'form-' (which can no longer strictly be called form) as *différance*.

Derrida's challenge to 'form-as-presence' manifests itself repeatedly and consistently across a wide variety of themes, but it is in his critique of Husserl that the pattern underlying and tying together all of these deconstructive challenges is first worked out. Hence, this critique forms one of the key texts by means of which Derrida appropriates and articulates what is commonly referred to as the 'linguistic turn.'

## Part Two: The ‘Linguistic Turn’

### Chapter Three: Husserl and ‘Closure’ in the Temporal Sense

#### 1. Introduction: The ‘Linguistic Turn’

Kant’s fusion of thought and object in his ‘Copernican revolution’ provided the opening for a new shift inaugurated by the so-called ‘linguistic turn.’ The ‘linguistic turn,’ thus, may be seen as the second movement in a general philosophical shift away from the ‘closure’ implied by a quest for ‘absolute truth’ towards representation or interpretation, marking the end of the reign of absolute limit, and the opening of possibility. Thus, it signifies the ‘end,’ in the sense of a ceasing to be productive, of philosophy or metaphysics, construed as a ‘project of truth.’

Absent from Kant’s first *Critique* was an explicit account of the way that language could affect the problem of objective knowledge. Here, rational subjects, as the privileged source of meaning, knowledge or truth, were said to impose a stable, conceptual order on the chaotic sensory realm, presumably making it intelligible or meaningful to themselves, and subsequently conveying this understanding to others, using language as a means to express and represent it. In all likelihood, then, Kant would have supported a general tendency to maintain the separation of language and mind, and the priority of the conceptual over the linguistic, in order to preserve the immediacy of ‘reality’ (in the form of a unity of thought and object of knowledge) to consciousness. Thus, while Kant saw the conceptual realm (the realm of constitutive interpretation) as representational, (as representations of representations; Kant 1964:73) such ‘representation’ remained internal to consciousness. On the other hand, re-presentation in language, for those philosophers caught within the ‘metaphysics of presence,’ implied a certain ‘material detour,’ which distanced consciousness from itself, or disrupted its self-presence or immediate access to its own (representational) ‘reality,’ pointing to a non-presence or absence of the actuality or ‘reality’ re-presented. For this reason, the conceptual realm as always already a sensibility/intelligibility composite, or in Husserl’s sense, a ‘being-for-consciousness,’ would have been accorded priority above linguistic re-presentation, as the foundational realm of truth. In other words, Kant’s notion of ‘reality’ as always already interpreted seems to rest comfortably enough with a traditionally Western ‘referential’ conception of language, which, notably, in a post-Kantian framework cannot refer to the relation between sign and independent ‘world,’ but between sign and ‘reality’ as always already a sensibility/intelligibility composite. Here, language as the subordinate term is subjected to the supposed autonomy of consciousness. Thus, the ‘metaphysics of presence’ depends on ‘submitting the sign to thought,’ as Derrida (1978:281) puts it.

The 'linguistic turn' in the broadest of terms represents the questioning, disrupting or unsettling of this privilege of thought over language. Making the 'linguistic turn' involves, in the first place, the realisation that human thought has no pure existence, independent or outside of the materiality of language. In other words, while Kant's notion of the world as interpretation or 'representation' saw 'reality' and mind as inseparable, it did not encompass the further claim, inaugurated by the 'linguistic turn,' that mind and 'signs' similarly could not be separated. Further, the 'linguistic turn' involves the recognition that language is no passive, pure or transparent instrument of 'expression.' Rather, signs act as mediating prisms through which the world as understood must be refracted. Moreover, language is a mediator with its own structural and operational demands, which seem to defy attempts to articulate or connect words with specific meanings in any conclusive, necessary or final way, rendering language capable at once of both illuminating clarity and opaque distortion. Staten (1985:xv), for example, describes Derrida's notion of language as '...a quasi material medium that is worked not by fitting words to the requisite meanings but by attentiveness to the way the words as words (sounds, shapes, associative echoes) will allow themselves to be fitted together.'<sup>42</sup> In short, not only is the objective world of 'constitutive interpretations' always already the representation of representations (Kant 1964:73), and thus twice removed from a supposedly independent external world, but 'constitutive interpretations' themselves are subject to linguistic mediation. What is finally accessible to us as 'reality,' as I hope to show here, consists in nothing more than layer upon layer of interpretation.

Rather than attempt a positive account of this linguistic 'rupture' of the 'metaphysics of presence' (Derrida 1978:278), as if it could be reduced to a specific institution and history,<sup>43</sup> it seems preferable to allow the lineaments of the 'linguistic turn' to show themselves in the thinking of one of its most incisive protagonists. As a philosopher whose vision extends beyond the bounds of (but not wholly outside of) metaphysical 'closure' of any kind, Jacques Derrida focuses attention precisely on the moments of failure whenever complete 'closure' announces itself. The most general formulation of his line of argumentation is as follows: 'closure' *depends on* the power to make the move of privileging and reduction. If it can be shown that this move, either way, is illegitimate – that either the spatial or the temporal is always and necessarily contaminated from the start by its opposite – then the very possibility of 'closure' itself becomes problematic.

Thus, in his readings of Husserl and Saussure, for example, Derrida shows that just as the spatial, in the form of re-presentation and repetition, always already contaminates what Husserl strenuously attempts to disengage from it (the pure 'living present' of being-for-consciousness), so the temporal

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<sup>42</sup> This represents the gist of the stand off between logic and rhetoric, or meaning defined as a pure, context-independent transparency between word and thing, and meaning as contextual that Garver (1973:xxii) elaborates on in his preface to Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena* (1973).

always already contaminates a structuralist attempt (guided by Saussure's model of language) to reduce all experience to a fixed set of relations. In these, among other readings of various philosophers of the Western tradition, Derrida pays minute attention to the moments of opening, violation, breakthrough or inconsistency, which occur within any attempt to say philosophy's last word. By this means, Derrida demonstrates time and again that what was strictly preserved as 'inside' is already exposed to contamination from the supposedly excluded 'outside.' In so doing, as I hope to show ultimately, Derrida reactivates the tension that is philosophy.

A comprehensive treatment of this would require a journey of epic length and breadth. Instead, for various reasons, I have elected to concentrate on some moments in Derrida's deconstructive analyses of Husserl and Saussure. The inconsistencies that emerge in the thinking of Husserl and Saussure have precisely to do with the attempts to theorise language within the 'metaphysics of presence,' which manifests itself in the so called 'consciousness paradigm,' that is, in the attempt to maintain a separation of language (in its material aspects, at least) and mind or consciousness in an effort to preserve the supposedly non-material conceptual realm as a foundational realm of truth. These analyses are exemplary in relation to the Derridean allegation that any 'project of truth' either ignores language or misunderstands its role in meaning production; that is, it misconstrues the relation between logic and rhetoric (cf. Garver 1973:xxii).

Hence, the justification for this choice, lies in Derrida's (1973:5; 9) contention that the theoretical commitments of Husserl's phenomenology repeat (are, indeed the epitome of) what is axiomatic to the 'consciousness paradigm' that he criticises, as well as in his contention that Saussure's linguistic theory, while exhibiting a greater receptivity to difference than Husserl's theory of signification, ultimately does not escape the conscious paradigm that it serves to undermine. Thus, it is in response to the paradigm within which Husserl and Saussure (along with Kant) were caught that Derrida's appropriation and articulation of 'linguistic turn' emerges as a gateway to an alternative '*logos*.' In other words, crucially, Derrida's own insights concerning signification, and his own (non)conception of *différance*, emerge out of his deconstructive analysis of thinkers such as Husserl and Saussure. In short, to get to *différance* it is first necessary to do what thinkers such as Husserl and Saussure did (Derrida 1973:82), since their insights initiate a process that, taken to its logical consequences, *must* end with *différance*.

Derrida demonstrates this in many ways in his deconstructive reading of Husserl's theory of signification throughout *Speech and Phenomena* (1973). For the sake of brevity, however, I shall concentrate on the motif of the temporal and its inevitable contamination by the spatial. It is here also that Saussure and the structuralists command Derrida's attention, for in his *Course in General Linguistics*

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<sup>43</sup> The 'linguistic turn' may, for example, be articulated in other ways, such as in terms of a study of Wittgenstein's rejection of his earlier work in the *Tractatus* (cf. Garver 1973:xix-xxii; Staten 1985:xvii; 3).

(Saussure 1974), Saussure made a decisive critical breakthrough in relation to the ‘consciousness paradigm’ by arguing, famously, that there are no positive signs, only relations of difference (117). In other words, Saussure appears to offer a necessary spatial corrective to Husserl’s temporal ‘closure.’ Yet, according to Derrida (1981a:18), Saussure undermined this critical breakthrough by maintaining a strict distinction between signifier and signified. This distinction re-imports the notion of a ‘transcendental signified’ and consequently cannot avoid the very commitments to a ‘metaphysics of presence’ that Saussure’s breakthrough initially seemed to undermine.

Thus, Derrida points out the inconsistencies attached to any project of truth (or attempt at ‘closure’) which privileges either the temporal or the spatial and reduces the other. He does not simply leave it here, however. He also offers an alternative way of thinking which must accommodate, in thing, thought and language, the spatial within the temporal and the temporal within the spatial – that is, what he calls the ‘becoming space of time’ and the ‘becoming time of space’ (1982:8). This, however, is the subject of the following chapters which pay attention to ‘opening’ of the ‘play’ of possibility as a result of Derrida’s appropriation of the ‘linguistic turn’ (cf. Staten 1985:3; Caputo 1997:36-42), and the introduction of an alternative *logos* of difference. Before this line of argumentation may be clarified and elaborated, however, a patient reconstruction, or ‘working through,’ of at least some of the moments in Derrida’s deconstructive readings of both Husserl and Saussure on ‘signification’ will prove to be indispensable. In turn, making sense of Derrida’s reading of Husserl’s theory of signification requires at least a brief backward glance at some of its phenomenological underpinnings. It is to this task that the immediately following sections shall be devoted.

## 2. Husserl’s ‘Principle of Principles:’ Truth as Presence

No theory we can conceive can mislead us in regard to the principle of all principles: that every primordial dator Intuition is a source of authority (Rechtsquelle) for knowledge, that whatever presents itself in “intuition” in primordial form (as it were in its bodily reality), is simply to be accepted as it gives itself out to be, though only within the limits in which it then presents itself. Let our insight grasp this fact that the theory itself in its turn could not derive its truth except from primordial data. Every statement which does nothing more than give expression to such data through merely unfolding their meaning and adjusting it accurately is thus really...an absolute beginning, called in a genuine sense to provide foundations, a principium.

(Husserl: 1967:92)

Derrida (1973:5) describes Husserl’s ‘principle of principles,’ or, that which is the ‘source and guarantee of all value,’ as ‘...the *present* or *presence* of sense to a full and primordial intuition.’ As Allison (1973:xxxii) unpacks it, Derrida is suggesting here that Husserl has always interpreted ‘being’ as *presence*, in a twofold sense. In Allison’s words,

...something *is* insofar as it presents itself or is capable of presenting itself to a subject – as the present object (*ob-jectum*) of a sensible intuition or as an objectivity presented to thought. Second, we say that a subject (*sub-jectum*) or self in general *is* only insofar as it is self-present, present to itself in the immediacy of a conscious act.

Although it is implied in Allison's words, for present purposes it is necessary to draw out a little more strongly the 'temporal' dimension of Husserl's 'principle of principles' which emphasises the primordially of the 'living present' as a stratum of pure duration which guarantees the permanence (repeatability as the same) of that which is immediately present to consciousness. In short, Husserl's 'principle of principles,' and by extension the commitments underlying the 'metaphysics of presence,' invoke the self-evidence of the simultaneous 'here and now' as the 'source and guarantee of all value.' This presents us with a constellation of interrelated theoretical commitments which I shall elaborate on in the following terms: firstly the notion that 'being' is 'being-for-consciousness,' secondly a return to the 'things themselves' as the presuppositionless beginning of philosophy, and finally the privileging of logic above rhetoric or ideas before language in the so called 'referential model' of language.

### 3. 'Being' is 'Being-for-Consciousness'

Husserl's 'principle of principles' meant that he came into conflict with Kant regarding the nature of the subject/object relationship. Husserl seems to have read Kant's 'Copernican revolution' as being accurate as far as it went, but as stopping short of its revolutionary potential (Lauer 1965a:32). According to Lauer here, Husserl applauded Kant's attempt to escape the 'Humean dilemma' by positing a transcendental subjectivity; that is, a subjectivity that contributes actively to its own experiences (Husserl 1967:15; 17-18; 21). In Husserl's reading, however, Kant subverted his own efforts to bring subject and object together by postulating the existence of 'unexperienced being' or a 'thing-in-itself' (Koestenbaum 1970:xiv). Recall that for Kant, the very possibility of sensation at all, as well as the undeniable repeatability of experience, forced us to postulate the existence of a relatively constant 'something' to which our sensory apparatus responded. In spite of its undeniable 'being,' however, the 'thing-in-itself' remained utterly external to conscious experience. For Kant, we could never gain access to it as it 'was,' but only as we were able to represent it via the means available to us as rational beings. In other words, if, in the event of some world-wide calamity, our means of representation suffered a generalised loss (if all humans experienced something along the lines of what happened to Dr. P., for instance), the 'thing-in-itself' would presumably not be affected, even though our 'reality' would be profoundly different. Husserl objected to what he saw here as the unacceptable 'ontological bifurcation of being,' in Koestenbaum's words (1970:xiv), or re-emergence of a mind/matter dualism. In short, Husserl believed that Kant was profoundly right in positing subjectivity as the condition of the possibility of 'reality' and, therefore, of all knowledge. However, he criticised

him for destroying ‘the purity of this subjectivity by his concession to transcendence under the guise of the “thing-in-itself”’ (Lauer 1965a:32), which would pin epistemological certainty (impossibly) on the mere postulation of the repeatability-as-the-same of a ‘being’ wholly external to consciousness. As Husserl would have seen it, then, Kant could not provide a rational account of all being or a means to know being in all of its manifestations. Instead, he restricted knowledge to a certain kind of being (the ‘being’ of objective ‘reality’) for which he could offer his formal axiomatic system as grounds for certainty.

In Husserl’s view, this formal axiomatic system posed further problems. In positing such a system, Kant had illegitimately objectified the ‘mind,’ thinking of it as being conceivable in the form of a finite totality. For Husserl (1967:15; 17-18), the ‘transcendental Ego’ could not be reduced or objectified, because objectification meant stepping away from it and looking at it from the outside. However, the means to look at the transcendental Ego was always only the transcendental Ego itself. In other words, for Husserl, the transcendental Ego was the irreducible source of all experience. It could not step outside of itself, to objectify itself. For this reason, it was not possible to make an exhaustive list of formal categories pre-existing experience. The categorial structure of experience was to be found in experience itself. Husserl’s (1967:16-18; 23) objection, here, stemmed from his distinction between the ‘positive science’ of psychology – which involves self-reflection or self-comprehension insofar as the ‘inner life’ or ‘inner experience’ of the soul was examined in order to be described – and ‘transcendental phenomenology,’ which moved beyond the reaches of psychology to an awareness of the *absolute* (universal and shared) character of the ‘transcendental Ego.’ In Husserl’s words (1967:17-18):

Continuing this self-reflexion, I now also become aware that my own phenomenologically self-contained essence can be posited in an *absolute* sense, as I am the Ego who invests the being of the world which I so constantly speak about with existential validity...the world is no longer given to me in advance, its validity that of a simple existent, ...henceforth it is exclusively my Ego that is given... given purely as that which has being in itself, in itself experiences a world, confirms the same, and so forth.

Thus, in opposition to what he saw as Kant’s dualism, Husserl proposed that all being, in whatever form, was internal to consciousness; that is, accessible only within or through consciousness. Consequently, he strove to provide a method (termed phenomenological) for ‘reducing’ all objectivity to subjectivity, in this way guaranteeing its certainty (Norris 1982:43). Yet, as Staten (1985:33) argues phenomenology could not simply dispense with the subject/object relation altogether in favour of a pure subjectivity. Hence his aim to provide a philosophy which, as Norris (1982:43) puts it, would deny ‘any resort to mere subjectivism, even while appealing to the “transcendental ego” (or reflective self-awareness) as an ultimate guarantee’ (cf. Husserl 1967:22).

It is here, according to Staten (1985:34), that Husserl puts to work the concept of ‘intentionality.’ According to Husserl, (1967:25), more than merely the awareness that ‘every consciousness is a consciousness-of,’ intentionality pointed to the essential unity of consciousness, it meant that subject and object were co-constitutive. In other words, just as an object could not appear except through experience, ‘so there is no experience without an object of which it is the experience’ (Staten 1985:34). In alternative terms, as Koestenbaum (1970:xxvii) confirms: ‘To be is to be the object to a subject *and* the subject for an object *at the same time...*’ For Husserl, thus, the notion of a pure subject was empty or meaningless. Husserl’s insistence that all being is internal to consciousness, or being is ‘being-for-consciousness,’ raises the question of how it would be possible to have an objectivity that is ‘capable of being known or experienced as identically the same [‘definite, unvarying and “repeatable”’ (Staten 1985:38)] for different subjects, who cannot share identically the same real (*reell*) sensory contents’ (Staten 1985:36). In Husserl’s words (1967:25; my emphasis):

But one must question the different categories of objects in their pure objectivity as objects of possible consciousness, and question back to the essential configurations of possible “manifolds” to be synthetically connected, through which an object of the relevant category can alone be known as *the same*, that is, as that which can be known through experiences of very differing description...

A ‘psychologistic’ account of knowledge relies on the assumption that objects, thought of simply as ‘ready-made,’ are reproduced via sensations in the individual psyche in the form of impressions (Husserl 1967:24; Staten 1985:35). Sensations, according to Husserl, as ‘real,’ temporal, contingent, and particular, could not provide the grounds to account for the sense in which an object ‘retains its identity as the same object’ (Staten 1985:36) over time or intersubjectively. The ‘real’ content of my present consciousness, for example, the sensations that I experience now – from what Husserl (1967:101-106) would call the ‘natural standpoint,’ – are different from any that I will experience at any other time from precisely the same position. Moreover, it would be equally true that no other subject could experience precisely the same sensations as I do, even assuming exactly the same perspective. A psychologistic account of knowledge, thus, cannot avoid Hume’s sceptical conclusions. To avoid such Humean relativism Husserl sought to account for the conception of an object as a cohesive unit in the face of multiple, various and changing actual perceptions via the notion of ‘intentionality;’ that is, ‘as an instance of egological constitution’ (Koestenbaum 1970:xxxi). As evidence for the legitimacy of this move, Koestenbaum (1970:xxxi-xxxiii) cites the following examples:

Kant’s example of a house is another one which gives evidence for the view that what we experience is not merely ‘there,’ ‘before us,’ but is constituted and intended by us. I conceive of a house as *one* object, whose parts have specific and invariant geometric relationships. This unity of relationships is inferred or constructed; it is not given in immediate experience. I perceive only one room at a time – and only one part of it, and a distorted one at that. My total visual record of the



house that I have just inspected is akin to the succession of frames on a film. The frames are 'adjacent.' It requires an act of subjective synthesis to reconstruct them into the 'real' house, which turns out to be more a conceptual object than a perceived one. It must never be forgotten, of course, that the intention is rarely conscious: it is automatic, passive, unconscious, and anonymous.  
(Koestenbaum xxxi)

A perception, even if it is continuous and unchanging, is nonetheless composite in that it is made up of time intervals. Two appearances may be similar in all respects; but the fact that they are apprehended at different times means that their unity is also a matter of subjective decision, constitution and intention, not of pure givenness. To ascribe both of the appearances that occur at different intervals in time to one and the same object is an act of subjective synthesis. An object is not merely what we synthesize it to be within the rather narrow stretch of the present, but we add to our present experiences of an object the reminiscences of the past and the anticipations of the future. An object is not only its present: it carries a past with it... Above all, an object is what it is in virtue of predictions that we make about its behavior in the future. This totality of past, present, and future coheres as one object through an act of egological constitution, through an intention.  
(Koestenbaum xxxii)

More pervasive than any particular objective unity is the unity of the perceiver. Kant referred to a similar aspect of constitution as the transcendental unity of apperception. Husserl refers to it, somewhat ambiguously as the transcendental Ego. We have a multiplicity of experiences in space and time. Not only are these multiplicities organised into specific and individual objects, but the totality of that experience is organised into *one* totality, and finally into one totality that is perceived by one continuous ego. The unity of the ego is interrupted by sleep, split by memory-lapses, shredded by the spatio-temporal flux, and torn by conflicting values, loyalties, attitudes, and emotions. In the face of these pulverising threats, the ego retains its unremitting sense of unity and integrity. This unity of the ego is one of the most fundamental acts of constitution, and hence of intentionality.  
(Koestenbaum xxxiii)

Thus, the 'problem of immanence' (Staten 36) – or the problem of the 'objectivity of the object' – is resolved, in Husserl's view, by distinguishing the transcendent or ideal object intended, from the immanent sensory contents of perception (Husserl 1976:255-264; cf. Staten 32-38). In other words, to maintain the objectivity of the object – that is, its distance from the individual psychological or sensing subject, and therefore its capacity to be 'repeated as identically the same by different subjects' (Staten 32) – Husserl argued that its identity must be ideal. Husserl (1967:262) referred to this 'ideal identity' (or *noema*) as an identity of 'meaning' or 'sense,' rather than of sensation. In his words (1967:260-261):

The tree plain and simple can burn away, resolve itself into its chemical elements, and so forth. But the meaning – the meaning of *this* perception, something that belongs necessarily to its essence – cannot burn away; it has no chemical elements, no forces, no real properties.

The *noema* does not claim the status of a spatio-temporal object. In Staten's words (38), it

...has the peculiar characteristic that in order to be fully identical with itself, it cannot be identical with any of its spatiotemporal embodiments in signs. The "thought" or "proposition" embodied in

a statement or symbolic notation is, as Husserl says, a “free ideality” which is, in itself, neither in time nor in space, yet by virtue of being nowhere and notime is capable of being anywhere, anytime, repeatable as the same by any rational subject... The nowhere-ness of the ideal object is its absolute possibility of presence.

Thus, the *noema* may be objective in the sense that it is at a distance from the sensing psyche, but it is nevertheless always present to, and in no way external to, the conscious, unified, constituting, intending ego. In other words, as Staten (1985:37-38) puts it, the *noema*

...has being only in the sense that it has a definite and definable identity, and that this identity is capable of being reexperienced in any number of intentional acts and by any number of intentional subjects.

To sum up briefly, Husserl accepted the outcome of Kant’s ‘Copernican revolution,’ namely the subjective constitution of objective ‘reality.’ Yet, at the same time, he rejected the coterminous postulation of ‘reality’ as a representation or interpretation of ‘something’ existing outside of it, as well as Kant’s conception of the faculty of interpretation as a ‘formal self-contained system of axiomatic truths’ (Norris 1982:45). Intentionality expresses Husserl’s rejection of the necessity to posit an ‘existence’ external to consciousness – either Kant’s unexperienced noumenal realm or psychologism’s everyday, external, objective world, accessible via the senses (Koestenbaum xxix-xxx; Staten 34). Thus, in Staten’s words (34):

Husserl argued that there must be an interpretative or constitutive activity of consciousness, aimed at a purely ideal objectivity, if we are to have a truly accurate description of perceptual consciousness.

#### **4. A Return to the ‘Things Themselves:’ The Phenomenological Method**

In line with this, and in opposition to Kant’s formalism, Husserl articulated his ‘principle of principles’ in a call to return to the original self-evidence of ‘the things themselves’ (the ‘Sachen selbst’). These ‘things themselves,’ in this sense, were not restricted to physical objects but accommodated anything presented to consciousness. Koestenbaum (1970:xix) lists the following examples: a chair, a star, a law of nature – gravitation – a headache, the sense of impending doom, the law of contradiction, the square root of ‘-1,’ the idea of nothingness. For Husserl (1967:92), thus,

every primordial dator [given] Intuition is a source of authority... for knowledge...whatever presents itself in “intuition” in primordial form... is simply to be accepted as it gives itself out to be [as self-evident].

This meant that knowledge (read as an awareness of the essential structure of things as they appear to consciousness) could never be *formal* in the sense of proceeding from a fixed, 'ready-made,' self-evident, set of axiomatic, Kantian categories. In other words, it could never proceed from theory to thing. Rather, theory was valid only insofar as its statements could give transparent 'expression' to the primordial given intuition. This 'expressive' kind of statement, rather than those formal axioms of which the edifices of metaphysical theories were composed, could claim the status of an absolute beginning; could provide absolute theoretical foundations (a *principium*). Truth required a return to an original intuition or constitutive *activity* of consciousness that was untainted by any theoretical or metaphysical prejudice (Husserl 1976:27-29).<sup>44</sup>

What was ordinarily given to consciousness, however, according to Husserl, was found already 'clad' (Staten 1985:39-40). In other words, the *eidos* which was the phenomenological object of knowledge had an origin and a history; an original insight initially came into being in an individual consciousness, and was subsequently 'elaborated and accumulated by consciousness' (Staten 40) with the help of language. In this way, the original insight was covered over by interpretations that had accumulated over time. Thus, for Husserl (1967:27), simply to accept the world as it appears, 'already shaped by previous experience and by language and tradition' (Staten 40), or to take certain theoretical (logical or mathematical, for example) concepts and operations as self-evident, was unreflectively to acquiesce to mere habit or to the mechanical manipulation of a body of knowledge according to 'blind technique' (Staten 39).

In Husserl's (1967:27) view, this unreflective manipulation of traditional ideas and practices could lead to all manner of ellipsis, equivocation and confusion, leaving epistemology precariously without ground. Indeed, he insisted that a

...philosophy with problematic foundations, with paradoxes which arise from the obscurity of the fundamental concepts, is no philosophy, it contradicts its very meaning as philosophy.

For Husserl, the only way we could arrive at the kind of truly evident and presuppositionless description which could provide a completely secure grounding for knowledge, was through a backwards gaze towards the original '...creative movement of insight by means of which the self-evident form is first constituted' (Staten 39-40). Accordingly, for Husserl, the analysis of experiences, stripped bare of all prejudicial commitments stemming from practice, science, philosophy, language,

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<sup>44</sup> Derrida (1973:5) notes the irony here. In his words, 'distrust of metaphysical presuppositions is already presented as the condition for an authentic "theory of knowledge," as if the project of a theory of knowledge, even when it has freed itself by the "critique" of such and such speculative system, did not belong at the outset to the history of metaphysics. Is not the idea of knowledge and of the theory of knowledge in itself metaphysical?'

and common sense, had to become the ‘presuppositionless beginning of philosophy’ (Koestenbaum 1970:xii; xxi). Thus, according to Staten (40), phenomenology aims to ‘get underneath this accumulation or “sedimentation” in order to discover what the object *is* prior to being given *form* by some interpretation or other’ (emphasis added), or again: ‘Phenomenological insight demands that we peel off the layers of interpretative form in which the world comes clothed for us, in order to return to the most primitive moments in which things spring into being for consciousness.’ Phenomenological analysis, therefore, aiming at knowledge in the sense of uncovering the pure, phenomenological essences or *eidetic* structures of things as they appeared to consciousness, would begin with what is ‘given’ to consciousness and proceed from there towards the *eidōs* (Husserl 1967:12).

In practical terms, this meant that from the given, the ‘*eidōs*,’ as the proper object of phenomenological analysis, could be attained via a successive series of what Husserl (1967:11) called ‘reductions’ (cf. Bocheński 1969:137-138). The first of these, which Husserl (1967:107-111;171) termed *epoche* or ‘bracketing,’ involved setting aside, or suspending judgement concerning everything that stems from the ‘natural standpoint;’ that is (171),

...the natural world, physical and psychological, all individual objectivities which are constituted through the functional activities of consciousness in valuation and practice...all varieties of cultural expression, works of the technical and of the fine arts, of the sciences also... aesthetic and practical values...realities of such kinds as state, moral custom, law religion.

Further, in Husserl’s (1967:178) terms:

If we wish to construct a phenomenology as a *pure descriptive theory of the essential nature of the immanent formations of Consciousness*, ...we must exclude from this limited field everything that is transcendently individual, therefore also *all the transcendent essences*...

In other words, following the *epoche*, an *eidetic reduction* is carried out in which not only the particularity, as well as the actuality, but also the ‘general’ or ‘transcendent’ essences of the ‘things’ in question (as specified within the domain of this or that ‘positive science’) are ‘bracketed,’ to the point where only that which is absolutely essential to its description remains. This reduction, according to Husserl (1967:177-178) would include the reduction of

...“thing”, “spatial shape”, “movement”, “colour of a thing”, and so forth; also “man”, “human feeling”, “soul”, and “psychical experience” (experience in the psychological sense), “person”, “quality of character”, and the like...

Thus, as Staten (1985:39) puts it:

Eventually, from the pre-given protoforms of mute experience we derive the highest or most general logical forms or forms of ideality, which are the forms of any possible world (among which is the actual world). This whole range of objects, from the tacitly encountered material object to the highest conceptual forms of ideality, is transcendent with respect to the multiplicity of mental acts which take them as objects.

In Husserl's later works, this 'eidetic reduction' is accompanied by a 'transcendental reduction' (Bochenski 1969:138) in which, according to Koestenbaum (1970:xxii), 'the focus can retreat even further from the objects (*cogitata*), behind the acts (*cogitationes*), and rest on the ego itself (*ego*).' At this point, Koestenbaum continues, 'we understand and experience the true source of knowledge and constitution: the transcendental Ego.' In other words, we see that all that remains of the object is subjective intentionality.

Staten (1985:41) offers a succinct summary of Husserl's phenomenological method:

...the phenomenological reduction which suspends the question of the object-as-such in order to focus reflection on the noematic idealities (objects-as-known) and to unveil the transcendental subjectivity in which these idealities are constituted emerges as a way of unfolding the totality of the ideal possibilities which are given in the objective world, a way of allowing the fullness of possible consciousness to emerge as the mirror of the fullness of actual and possible being. Thus, transcendently speaking, there is no "outside of consciousness," since any possible being has an objective sense that can be intentionally achieved by consciousness.

## 5. Ideas Before Language: The Referential Model of Language.

Fundamental to Husserl's phenomenological method, is the idea that authentic knowledge is arrived at through original intuition of the 'sense' ('ideal meaning' or *eidetic* structures)<sup>45</sup> of things. In other words, the originating consciousness must have grasped the *eidetic* structure of a phenomenon (an intentional object) in a primal act of intuition. Thus, according to Husserl, meaning was 'fulfilled' or complete in the full presence of the intended object to the intending subject (Staten 1985:44). However, while this original moment of insight may have occurred in the 'mental space' of the originating consciousness, the *eidetic* structure grasped in this way transcended the merely psychological. It was essentially ideal, universal and atemporal, as well as accessible to any rational being. In other words, the *eidetic* structure of a thing persisted as a possibility beyond the life span of any particular consciousness, and whether or not it was tugged into the grasp of any such consciousness.

Husserl's belief in the possibility of an 'ideal meaning' available independently of the context of any particular consciousness underpins a philosophy of language (in whose obdurate grip the Western tradition in general largely was caught) that almost invariably 'uses logic rather than discourse as the

ultimate criterion for meaning' (Garver: 1973:xiii). Garver (x) describes logic, broadly, as the formal study of absurdities or contradictions in complex linguistic expressions, isolated from the context of their use. In contrast, rhetoric may be thought of as a general study of the appropriate (or otherwise) *use* of linguistic expressions in various contexts. Unlike logic, which has to do with pure form, rhetoric according to Garver (xviii) 'implies an emphasis on *interpretation* (as opposed to conception).' In other words, meanings emerge less from formal relations than from the particular contexts or specific circumstances in which words are interpreted or in which their use makes sense.

Garver (xi) points out that the question of the relative priority of logic and rhetoric, which is, for him, 'the central issue of philosophy of language, the issue around which all other issues revolve and to which they all return,' has returned to centre stage in the wake of, among others, Wittgenstein's rejection of certain tenets of his earlier *Tractatus* and Derrida's critique of Husserl. In questioning the intelligibility of a theory of signification in which logical considerations govern the meaning of words, Derrida's thinking finds a place among those philosophies that have emphasised the rhetorical as a more encompassing field 'within which the logical aspects of meaning must find a specialized and restricted niche' (Garver xviii). Garver (xviii) includes among these the 'ideas of operational definitions and coordinating definitions in science and of recursive definitions in mathematics.' He adds here that instead of explaining the exact meaning of the expressions they are used to define these definitions 'present effective criteria for the use of those expressions.' Thus, he concludes that: 'definitions of this sort present rhetorical rather than logical considerations as governing the "meaning" of words and that this should raise the question whether operational definitions provide the proper form for *all* explanations of meaning.'

Derrida's critique of Husserl is also an attack on the whole tradition that, despite individual differences among philosophers, is characterised by a common philosophy of language in which logic is said to condition or ground the meaning of signs. Therefore, before turning to a more specific treatment of Derrida's deconstructive reading of Husserl's theory of signification, it is worth outlining some of the general features of this tradition. A clear articulation of such a traditional philosophy of language, also sometimes referred to as the 'referential model,' may be found in Wittgenstein's early 'picture theory of meaning' which saw as analogous the relationships between model and situation on the one hand, and language and 'reality' on the other (Blackburn 1994:288; 400-401; Staten 1985:68-69). In other words, just as the structure of a model duplicated that of the situation it reproduced, and elements in the model corresponded to, or referred directly and necessarily to, counterparts in the

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<sup>45</sup> I use these terms interchangeably. Husserl (1967:11) defines an '*eidetic*' science as that which is 'directed upon the universal in its original intuitability,' and he offers the example of the contrast between the 'factual experience' of 'numbers on the abacus' and the 'original intuitability' of numbers in their 'pure generality.'

situation, so, it was said, the structure of language similarly mirrored the structure of the conceptual realm or 'reality' it referred to.

This model of language assumes a differentiation, but necessary connection, between a 'reality' external to language on the one hand, and the language we use to express our understanding of this 'reality' on the other. It is worth bearing in mind here that there have been long-standing debates as to the exact nature of the 'proper objects of linguistic referral' (Norris 1989:54). As Norris suggests here, referral does not entail a simplistic assertion of a one-to-one correspondence between word and object. Such 'objects' could be construed as variously as 'sense-data, real-world objects or facts, or states of affairs;' and one could add Kant's 'constitutive interpretations' or Husserl's 'sense' to this list. In spite of this discrepancy, what such referential models have in common, is the belief that the veracity of statements can be tested according to how well they match a 'reality' construed as independent of, as well as external to and prior to language.

Taking into account the validity of a Kantian conception of 'reality' as conceptual, such models turn on a sharp polarity between an immediately self-present consciousness, and language (as representation), in which language is the subordinate term in relation to a supposedly autonomous consciousness. In other words, understanding here is considered to be antecedent to the words and sentences we eventually construct in order to articulate it. Accordingly, we would not need language to understand the world; we would merely need it as an instrument to express or communicate such an understanding. Hence, it is taken for granted here, as Garver (1973:xi) puts it: 'that the ideas represented by our linguistic signs already stand in logical relations to one another before we have signs to represent them' or (Garver xiii) 'that linguistic meaning belongs to an abstract realm where logical criteria predominate.' Thus, philosophy of language in the Western tradition generally remained committed to the notion of a stable, universally recognisable 'reality,' constituted and made intelligible by universally identical rational activities that somehow operated outside the 'defiles' of language. Accordingly, these extra-linguistic concepts or meanings were thought to remain essentially the same from context to context and, at least in principle, graspable by other rational beings in undistorted form.

Traditional philosophies of language commonly assume that 'the primary purpose of language is epistemological (Garver 1973:xiii). They assume that 'there is only one sort of fully meaningful sentence, namely, those which describe the world' (Garver xix). That is, the only fully meaningful sentences are said to be predicative statements of the type 'S is p.' In other words, they assume that the sign-system as the duplication of a logically organised 'reality' is conditioned by such a 'reality.' Thus, unaffected in its essence by wordplay, 'reality' limits the play of meaning in language, or grounds it, enabling a strict adjudication of truth claims in relation to a (supposedly) determinable or natural correspondence between sign and 'reality.' On this account, it would be taken for granted that, as

Norris (1989:81) puts it, ‘meaning inheres in the letter;’ the word, that is, would have a literal meaning, verifiable in terms of its identity with an external ‘reality.’ The meaning of a word (at least potentially and ideally) was said to be grounded or fixed by the ‘original meaning’ of the ‘reality’ it stands for. In other words, regardless of the name given to a referent, its supposedly real meaning remains inherently graspable in itself. This seems to be exemplified in Juliet’s (Shakespeare 1951:912) familiar observation:

That which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet.

In this view, different names in different languages can be accounted for in terms of equivalence. Another language would simply be a different, but structurally equivalent linguistic model of the world, a different way of doing the same thing. If this were the case, as Culler (1976:21) points out, translation from one language to another would present little difficulty in principle. Here, essentially the same meaning could be expressed or represented by different words.

In short, referential models of language encompass the belief that elements of ‘reality,’ however they may have been construed, are logically related and meaningful, before and independently of the signs that represent them, and are originally and immediately present to a rational subject – in turn characterised by an extra-linguistic consciousness or self-presence – who uses the linguistic order unproblematically, consciously, and intentionally to refer to this extra-linguistic ‘reality.’

## **6. The Prioritisation of the Temporal in the Referential Model**

Assuming, firstly, that certainty can be reached if we are able to posit a fixed point or centre in relation to which all else may be measured, and secondly, the validity of Kant’s argument concerning the irrelevance of future time for certainty, then it would seem quite conceivable that, while remaining an open-ended system (in relation to the future meanings of words), the present meanings of words could be determined with certainty. In other words, since future meanings could be viewed as irrelevant to the verifiability of meaning, granting the open-endedness of language, here, does not have any effect on the stability of meaning. Thus, it is thought that language may be systematised; it could be the object of ‘genuinely’ scientific study.

Here, it would be argued that the meanings of words, or (more generally) signs, may well shift, but changes in meaning would be conditioned by what went before (in the form of a modification, correction, or refinement, in reaction to an event). Hence, it would seem possible to trace all meanings and shifts in meaning back to a point of origin (arising out of the need to name a new event, condition or thing). Viewed in this way, it seems quite possible to posit an etymological totality (of past history) for each word



in a language and thus to determine meaning systematically by tracing the etymologies of words. Hence, the historical, comparative, taxonomical, and organisational activities with which, according to Saussure (1964:4), linguistics had busied itself, were predicated upon the assumed possibility of tracing language (each word or the language as a whole) back to its point of origin (ideally or logically, if not practically). Advocates of a referential model of language would assume that each word has an inherent meaning (which may change over time, but which, nevertheless is independent of its particular context of application or syntactical relations).

This model turns on the separation of concepts and signs, that is, the separation of human understanding (as timeless) and linguistic or semiotic ‘expression’ or acts of communication (as temporal). In other words, pre-existing, simple, eternal (timeless) concepts/conceptual objects subsumed under the rules of a fixed logic, which does not vary according to circumstance, are necessary before we can have a language. Language, then, would be the attempt to *articulate* these eternal concepts in a particular set of circumstances. Common to referential models of language, in Garver’s words (1973:xiii),

...is the view that signs represent ideas and that an idea is something that can stand in semantic contrast or contradiction to another idea – and can be seen to stand in such contrast or contradiction without reference to contexts of communication

As Garver (xiii) notes, if material, spatio-temporal, and context-bound signs represent timeless ideas, then a sign must be a completely different thing from what it signifies (the referent). One of the consequences of this separation of language and concepts into two independent domains is that articulation of ‘timeless’ concepts may become distorted or confused over time. However, it is assumed, at least in principle, that if a word is used outlandishly or problematically, such erroneous use can be demonstrated, in terms of the appropriate meanings that condition it, which, in turn, are grounded in the totality of successive past meanings. Hence, on the one hand, endless attempts to return to the pure ideas themselves (a fascination with etymologies), and on the other a constant drive to refine or hone (purify) articulation in order to align it more closely with the ‘truth.’

## 7. Husserl’s Theory of Signification

Husserl’s theory of signification is a paradigm example of a traditional referential model of signification, which prioritises the temporal above relations of difference. For Husserl (Derrida 1973:60) the *telos* of meaning is its full presence to consciousness. A completely fulfilled meaning, or ‘sense’ is that which is *present*, both in the sense of fully evident to perception or intuition, and as immediately present in the selfsame moment. Derrida (1973:62) argues that ‘within philosophy there is

no possible objection concerning this privilege of the present-now; ...it is evidence itself, *conscious* thought itself, it governs every possible concept of truth and sense.<sup>46</sup> He adds that if we question this privilege accorded to the 'transcendental signified,' we question the very possibility of an absolute and secure ground for discourse. Hence, the strenuous efforts made by the 'philosophers of presence' to confirm this privilege by excluding from it anything that might threaten to undermine the *telos* of meaning as presence.

The notion of a purely perceived *eidetic* structure activated in an originating consciousness posed a problem for Husserl. While 'sense' could be achieved prior to any linguistic articulation, a primary insight trapped in the empirical consciousness of a particular subjectivity did not amount to knowledge. To claim the status of knowledge, insight required intersubjective confirmation. For this reason, primary insight had to be, firstly, shared or expressed, and secondly, preserved over time. Husserl saw in language the means of 'expression' and preservation necessary for intersubjectively validated insight, or knowledge. In Derrida's words (1973:80),

...Husserl continually thought that scientific truth, i.e. absolutely ideal objects, can be found only in statements and that not only spoken language but inscription as well was indispensable for the constitution of ideal objects, that is, objects capable of being transmitted and repeated as the same...

Thus Husserl argued that the 'sense' of a thing could either be achieved initially and originally by a particular consciousness (pure perception or intuition), or, alternatively, after the fact, by the 'original reactivation' of a 'sense' already activated by another and committed to a 'preserving' linguistic tradition (a return, via signification, to pure perception or intuition).

Despite its acknowledged necessity as a means of 'expression' and preservation, Husserl remained highly ambivalent about language, viewing it in terms of what Derrida (1981b:97) has called a *pharmakon*; both poison and cure. While he accepted that the only means to 'expression' and preservation of ideal meaning was in the form of linguistic signs, he distrusted what he saw as the tendency to allow these signs to stand in the place of and interfere with 'genuine' thinking, and thus to lure the unwary into passive acceptance of the accumulated meanings handed down within a tradition. For Husserl, this kind of 'habitual response,' at a distance from the primal intuition in which *eidetic* structures were grasped, amounted to the failure of thinking. It left thinking complacent, uncritical, and vulnerable to incoherence and distortion. Thus, he drew a fundamental distinction between two kinds of thinking; namely, the kind that remained 'empty' or 'purely symbolic' (the kind that manipulated signs without insight, or used information without understanding it), and that which achieved the 'fulfilment' of meaning. Correspondingly, while acknowledging throughout their unavoidable

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<sup>46</sup> 'Philosophy' here is read as the Western philosophical tradition in general.

'interweaving' in practice, he drew the distinction between two ways in which signs could function, namely, indicatively and expressively.<sup>47</sup>

Husserl thus outlined the relationship between perception and representation (or signification) in terms of a multi-tiered hierarchy (cf. Derrida 1973:17-22). The most primordial level consisted in a directly perceivable or intuitable 'pre-expressive stratum of lived experience or sense' (1973:19). This was the stratum of pure, unified, definite ideal objects, the 'things themselves.' Corresponding to Aristotle's *ousia*, this stratum consisted of that which was presented to consciousness. Just as Aristotle posited an intimate relation between the actuality of the pure object and its abstractable intelligible content, or its 'essence,' so Husserl (cf. Derrida 1973:80) insisted that the perceiving subject (the 'protogeometer,' is Derrida's example derived from Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry* 1978c) 'must produce the pure ideality [*eidetic* structure, ideal meaning, identity, or essence] of the pure [geometrical] object in thought.' In other words, an act of pure thought (*noésis*) created the 'ideality' of 'sense.'<sup>48</sup>

This meant that the identity (or meaning) of 'sense,' in some way, had to be '*incarnated*' or constituted in thought (Derrida 1973:80), which brought Husserl to the role of language. According to Husserl, this stratum of 'sense' received 'expression' and 'meaning' (*Bedeutung*) through language; or more specifically *verbal* language commanded by logic. One could say that 'sense' covered 'the whole noematic sphere right down to its nonexpressive stratum' (Derrida 1973:19), and that 'meaning' referred to the ideal, logical content of verbal 'expression.' According to Derrida (1973:18), meaning here can be defined as a

... "want to say," ...in the sense that a speaking subject, "expressing himself," as Husserl says, "about something," *means* or *wants to say* ...something and that an expression likewise means or "wants to say" something.

Thus, an expressive sign was the kind one could call 'meaningful' because, animated by conscious intention, it conveyed or incarnated 'sense.' In sum, expressive signification, as the incarnation of 'sense' in speech, acted as an exact, unproductive, transparent linguistic medium, which conveyed 'sense' in the form of logical meaning.

To return to Aristotle's terminology, if language is to tell the truth about being, it cannot be 'formless.' That is, its 'essence' or 'sense' cannot include that which in signification is indeterminate or contingent; that which might upset the principle of non-contradiction. Hence, between the thinking and the expressing of being there must be an irreducible bond or unity. For this reason, the language

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<sup>47</sup> As we shall see later, in order to account for the possibility of meaningful thought in the absence of the intentional object or 'sense,' Husserl was constrained to add a function, balanced, in a sense, between the two. This he referred to as signitive intention (Staten 1985:45).

that speaks the 'truth' of being cannot have an empirical (indeterminate, contingent) 'body.' Can language meet these requirements? Husserl claimed that it could, on condition that the essence of language was restricted to the spoken word, where materiality seemed to vanish in the expressive act. It is important to stress right from the outset that Husserl, here, was not concerned with 'the voice' as it is heard in the speaking out aloud of ordinary conversation between people. What for him, was essential to the voice, its phenomenological 'sense,' did not include its materiality in actual sound, but the 'phonic' element in the 'silence' of an intra-subjective monologue, or a talking to oneself.

In such 'expression,' it seems as if, as Derrida (1973:77) puts it, 'the signified, which is always ideal by essence, the "expressed" *Bedeutung*, is immediately present in the act of expression.' In other words, '...because the phenomenological body of the signifier [the silent 'phonic' element] seems to fade away (become transparent) the very moment it is produced... it seems already to belong to the element of ideality.'

The designation '*meaningful* sign' presupposes the possibility of a different kind of signification, which is *not* meaningful, or which is merely 'indicative.' The difference here, which ostensibly provides Husserl with justification for adding a final tier to his hierarchy, is one of function. As Derrida (1973:20) puts it: 'One and the same phenomenon may be apprehended as an 'expression' [spoken] or as an 'indication,' a discursive or nondiscursive sign depending on the intentional experience ... which animates it.' In other words, for Husserl there existed signs that were not animated by conscious intention, and therefore did not convey 'sense.' These signs, by themselves 'signified' emptily, waiting for an animating intention to give them full signifying value, or meaning. Examples of such 'indicative signs' include images, material objects such as falling leaves, marks, and gestures. 'indication' is, in Allison's (1973:xxxiv) words,

...a movement of *empirical* association. One sensible sign stands for something else; a mark, a note, an object makes us pass from something present to thought to something that is only anticipated or expected. There is no meaning-content present in indication; there is only an empty *signifier* and nothing that is *signified*. That is yet to come, it is yet to be presented.

Husserl saw the connection between ideal meanings and the indicative system of signs as accidental or contingent. No doubt he would have held that these signs were instituted or accorded their place in the linguistic system as a matter of convention, and could be recognised and repeated as the same through contingent similarities and differences between them at a material or sensuous level. Yet for Husserl, this sign-system, taken by itself, was meaningless or empty. At best, the indicative system acted as a kind of storehouse of signs, added to in accordance with the dictates of contingent

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<sup>48</sup> It is worth noting that this is a condensed re-statement of Husserl's phenomenological method of eidetic reduction.

need and maintained by habit. Combinations of indicative signs provided linguistic formulae as receptacles for the ideal meanings achieved by intuition, making it possible to accumulate them in a communal tradition, and thus making them potentially available to others. This sign-system, however, left 'thinking' in a predicament. Linguistic 'embodiment' was, as Staten (1973:43) articulates it, 'necessary in order for ideality to be freed from the contingency of any particular empirical subject, so that it may remain permanently available, as a "virtuality."' However, because the linguistic formulae were only material receptacles for the ideal meanings or 'sense,' such 'idealities' were not logically identical with them or equivalent to them. Thus, in Husserl's view (Staten 1973:43), to recoup the ideal meanings merely indicated or pointed to by the indicative sign combinations, it was necessary to pass beyond the indicative to the

corresponding *activity* of meaning-constitution, an activity which "reactivates" the primal self-giveness of the *selbst-da* in the mode of full conscious presence which it had for its originator...

Hence, 'indicative' signs could be transformed into 'expressive' signs when what was merely pointed to became present to consciousness in an *act* of original reproduction of the primal intuition (Staten 1973:45). In other words, for Husserl, meaning occurred when the material sign became an understood sign in a sense-giving act. In short: 'By means of this written inscription, one can always repeat the original sense, that is, the act of *pure thought* which created the "ideality" of sense' (Derrida 1973:81).

Yet, Husserl also saw within the moment of 'indication' (or writing) the potential for crisis where meaning or 'sense' could be lost or 'forgotten.' With the thickening 'sedimentation' of historical tradition (presuppositions, habits, prejudices) it would become increasingly difficult to reactivate the 'original' presence of the 'ideality' to consciousness (Derrida 1973:81). In sum, as Derrida (1973:81) puts it:

To reactivate writing is to reawaken an expression in an indication, a word in the body of a letter, which, as a symbol that may always remain empty, bears the threat of crisis in itself.

## Chapter Four: Derrida's Deconstruction of Husserl's Theory of Signification

### 1. Introduction

Derrida's *Speech and phenomena* is a text in the multifaceted sense of a complex and finely interwoven fabric of *written* argumentation.<sup>49</sup> Moreover it is a folded fabric of multiple layers; it does many things at many levels. It is a text out of which I intend to pull threads; an act that will wreak havoc on the fabric. The pulled threads with which I weave this new text are fewer and rougher, and will make a scratchier and rather threadbare garment. What justification can there be for doing such damage? Perhaps there is some small justification for this in relation to the aim of the present study which is to outline the overall 'pattern' of a movement towards a new way of thinking in general; a task that does not require an intricate unravelling and reweaving of every fibre and fibril along the way.

As I see it, my task here is two-fold. Primarily, I wish to offer an account of Derrida's demonstration of the ultimate failure of Husserl's attempt to reduce spatiality (and its constellation of associated terms: relation, difference, non-identity, irreducible division, irreducible complexity) in the 'form' of thing, thought and language, and his corresponding attempt to preserve the privilege of the 'purely' temporal; that is, the 'pure' present and 'pure' presence in the form of that which is unified, self-identical and therefore unavoidably spontaneous. I also wish to highlight the way in which Husserl opened a hand to Derrida's *différance*, while tightening his fist around 'presence.' What I wish to show by this means is that by taking the step that Husserl consistently refused, Derrida offers not just the criticism of this or that argument or presupposition, but a critique of a way of being philosophical, out of which the emergence of a wholly different way of thinking is inevitable. This is what I see as the shift, inaugurated in general by the so-called 'linguistic turn,' towards a *logos* of difference.

### 2. Husserl's Failure to Reduce Spatiality

#### i. A Brief Overview

In the following excerpt, Derrida (1973: 6-7; emphasis added) offers something of a route (or threads which I shall gratefully and guiltily pull) through the complex argumentation on which his critique of Husserl's theory of signs in *Speech and Phenomena* turns.

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<sup>49</sup> Derrida's emphasis on writing derives from its close association with what he calls *différance*, which underpins his deconstructive approach. This will be discussed more fully in the pages to come.

Let us note only, in order here to specify our intention, that phenomenology seems to us tormented, if not contested from within, by its own descriptions of the movement of *temporalization* and of the constitution of *intersubjectivity*. At the heart of what ties together these two decisive moments of description we recognize an *irreducible nonpresence* as having a constituting value, and with it a nonlife, a nonpresence or nonself-belonging of the living present, an ineradicable nonprimordially. The names which it assumes only render more palpable the resistance to the form of *presence*.

To establish and maintain the radical discontinuity between intuitive presentation and symbolic representation, as a guarantee of epistemological certainty, Husserl had to depend on the idea that perception (intuitive presentation) of a unified and self-identical 'sense' took place in an instant.<sup>50</sup> For unless this were so, the 'sense' of a thing would have to include as irreducibly co-constitutive, that which was non-present (past memories or future expectations); that is, symbolic representations. In other words, as Derrida (1973:60) argues, it is only if the present is an instant, a 'punctual now' that it can exclude signification absolutely and assure Husserl's 'principle of principles' as the general possibility of 'nonsignification' (that is, the possibility of a pure presentation of 'sense' to consciousness, uncontaminated by any form of re-presentation).

Thus, in Husserl's theory of signification 'closure' in a temporal sense<sup>51</sup> was attempted on the assumption that there was a pure object or 'thing' which was unified or definite; that the eidetic structure of the thing (its ideal meaning, 'sense,' or essence) was produced in thought; that the transparency of the 'phenomenological voice' made possible the transmission of sense; and finally, that writing, albeit with certain risks attached, preserved 'sense' for an epistemological tradition. In turn, all of this depended on the assumption that a unified 'thing' had to appear in the immediate instant of pure auto-affection, and remain as a permanent, enduring 'ideality.'

Derrida's deconstruction, here, works to undermine the assumption that philosophy has its source in the possibility of pure presence, in the two-fold sense of *pure presentation* in a unified *present*. Derrida (1973:61) notes that 'the whole of Husserl's argumentation is threatened in its very principle' if it is possible to demonstrate that all of the concepts supposedly capturing the purity of a unified

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<sup>50</sup> Without wishing to interrupt the argument, this dense sentence requires some unpacking. Unity refers to the 'essence' of a thing, its definiteness, boundedness and indivisibility, and thus its capacity to appear in its full presence to consciousness, ostensibly in isolation from anything outside of it. Further, to be self-identical, a thing is required to be re-cognisable or repeatable as the same in spite of the empirical passage of time. Since that which is characterised by pure unity has no relation to any outside, its constitution or manifestation must be generated out of a source-point or beginning that is absolutely internal. This is what Derrida refers to as the notion of supposedly 'pure' auto-affection. Auto-affection relates to the notion of '*creatio ex nihilo*,' that is, the activity of creating out of nothing but itself. Thus, in auto-affection, the relation with an outside is denied since that which affects itself, in this way giving rise to something else, has no need for something outside of itself to affect it (Derrida 1973:82).

presence ('the punctuality of the instant' and the *simple* 'present of self-presence,' or pure presentation), are originally and necessarily contaminated, or rather, co-constituted by precisely what traditional metaphysics has always tried to exclude. That these threats to Husserl's argumentation are ultimately impossible to ward off is precisely what Derrida sets out to demonstrate.

Briefly, what follows concerns two threads pulled from the interwoven text of Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena*. The first of these concerns the 'movement of temporalization.' More precisely, it concerns Derrida's insight that to reduce or exclude the spatial from the temporal, is to reduce the temporal (impossibly) to something that is not strictly time. That is, it is to reduce the temporal to the paradox of the eternal instant. Neither the unity of a 'living present' in which things are manifest as eternal essences, nor a present instant in isolation can accommodate the movement of time as experienced. Since dissociation is the condition for any unity, or unifying moment as such, the present is never the unity of an enduring 'living present.' Nor, however, is it an isolated instant. Rather, time experienced is neither of these, but a succession of interconnected moments. Thus in its very interconnection, in the span of connected moments, time, to be itself, must include an irreducible spatial element.

The second of the threads pulled here concerns the idea that the very concepts Husserl's 'closure' worked to preserve by reducing any form of relation between pure self-present consciousness and an 'outside,' are always already, and necessarily internally inhabited, or indeed constituted by such a relation to an 'outside.' Husserl's reduction of the spatial at one level (in reducing 'indication' and privileging the phenomenological 'voice' as pure 'auto-affection') simply highlights the irreducibility of the spatial at a deeper level (at the level of 'pure' auto-affection itself). Here, at the heart of the concepts of 'expression' 'auto-affection' and 'self-identity' that supposedly preserve pure presence is found an 'opening' or 'gap' (a relation with absence), which implies the 'spatiality' of relation (Derrida, in Caputo 1997:13-14). This is because auto-affection implies an 'affection' of something 'by itself' which is unthinkable unless there is some 'division' within the thing concerned – otherwise how could 'it' 'affect itself?' Pure spontaneity is hence a self-deconstructive notion. The self-identity of a thing is never more than a 'way of being different from itself,' which 'implies a difference within identity.'

Thus, through an exposition of what Derrida highlights as central here, I aim to show in what sense he ultimately finds unintelligible Husserl's reduction of the spatial (in the sense of relation and therefore of difference, representation, 'alterity,' otherness and so on) in the name of a pure living present. In other words, Husserl's attempt at metaphysical 'closure,' in the temporal sense of 'closure'

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<sup>51</sup> As mentioned earlier, 'closure' in the temporal sense refers to the power, through privileging 'form' and reducing its opposite, to ground truth in an absolute beginning, to privilege a fixed, primordial point of origin in relation to which all else is derivative; in relation to which 'relation' itself as difference, 'alterity,' or representation, is reduced.



outlined earlier – that is, his insistent return to presence, calling that which threatens to introduce the spatial into the pure sphere of the ‘living present’ merely ‘a modification of presentation’ (Derrida 1973:9) – ensures that he remains a participant in the paradoxes, (aporias)<sup>52</sup> underlying every attempt to do the impossible.

**ii. The Undermining of the Purity of (A)Temporal Presence in Husserl’s *Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness***

Husserl (Derrida 1973:65) was resolute that perception was of a radically different order from any form of non-perception. He argued that perception in the ‘punctual now’ was ‘the “primal form” of consciousness’ (Derrida 1973:63); or that it was the locus of the active, living self. In Palmer’s words (1988:341), ‘lived time is always experienced as an eternal “now;”’ To act is to act now and never ‘then’ (be it earlier or later). Yet, according to Derrida (1973:61; 65), Husserl also recognised that no ‘now’ could be isolated as a pure instant, as irreducibly simple. As Staten (1985:11) explains it, following Kant, Husserl was aware that if the present ‘now’ were conceived as a punctual instant, and if each punctual ‘now’ dropped out of consciousness the moment it was succeeded by another, there could be no coherent account of experience as such; since the condition of the possibility of presentation of even the simplest of phenomena, say a short series of numbers, was its unity with preceding representations. Instead, according to Derrida (1973:63), in his *Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* and elsewhere, Husserl viewed the ‘punctual present’ as caught up in a ‘flow of time’ which, as Derrida (1973:62) puts it ‘cannot be split into self-sufficient parts or phases.’ Instead, ‘the presence of the perceived present can appear as such only inasmuch as it is *continuously compounded* with a nonpresence and nonperception’ (Derrida 1973:64). In other words, for Husserl, the very presence of the ‘now’ had no ‘sense’ without the intimate involvement of moments that guaranteed some kind of continuity in thought and action; that is, a moment immediately past (primary memory or retention), as well as a moment immediately to come (anticipation or protention). These in turn were compounded by moments at a further remove from the ‘now;’ associated with modes of representation such as images and signs. These were the more distant past of secondary memories, and the near future of expectations. Again, these were compounded by moments at an even greater remove; namely history (experienced as theoretical) and the distant future (experienced as mystery). Finally, beyond the bounds of the experientable, lay eternity (cf. Palmer 1988:341).

Derrida (1973:64) points out that the non-perceptions of retention and protention ‘are neither added to, nor do they merely occasionally accompany, the actually perceived now. They are essentially and indispensably involved in its possibility.’ What interests him particularly here is the manner in

which Husserl dealt with this complication. Husserl did not accept the consequences of the impossibility of drawing a radical distinction between presentation (perception as a punctual now) and representation (retention), and, at the same time, maintaining a coherent theory of experience. Rather, according to Derrida (1973:62), he argued that the spreading of time across a series of interdependent phases was nevertheless essentially explainable in terms of present perception as an absolute beginning or ‘source point.’ In other words: ‘Despite all the complexity of its structures, temporality has a nondisplaceable center, an eye or living core, the punctuality of the real now.’ Husserl then argued that retention was still part of this ‘living core’ – it was still a present perception (i.e. that the immediate past was perceived directly as the present in its continuity). In other words, he diversified the ‘sense’ of present perception to include retention, and drew the radical distinction between perception (pure presentation) and re-presentation at a further remove, between retention and secondary memory, which had its source in the imagination.

Here one is confronted with a pattern that will become familiar. Husserl’s own text held out the possibility of going the way of *différance*. As Derrida (1973:61) notes, Husserl’s analysis of *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* is ‘incomparably well adapted’ to an explanation of the ‘now’ as irreducibly complex. Yet, as Husserl opened the door with one hand, he slammed it shut with the other, and it remained for Derrida to draw out the tensions provoked by this move, and to highlight the radical consequences of re-opening the door. That is, it remained for Derrida to follow the logic of Husserl’s text to where it lead – to the irreducible complexity of *différance*, and to the conflict ‘between philosophy which is always a philosophy of presence and a meditation on nonpresence which is not performe its contrary or necessarily a meditation on a negative absence...’ (Derrida 1973:63).

As Derrida (1973:67) sees it, the tension created by Husserl’s move is one of trying to unite two incompatible stances; namely to accommodate a *continuity* between perception and retention, while still fulfilling the demands of certainty, which require a *separation* between pure presentation and re-presentation, and, therefore, the ‘pure’ auto-affectation of the moment of presentation.

If the ‘living now’ is conceived as the ‘source point’ of a flow that includes moments of non-perception, it must be thought of in a state of *continuity* with such moments. This continuity would allow a relation with retention and protention to condition perception. In other words, the nature of what is perceived in the present moment will be affected, modified, or tempered by what went before and what is to come. This implies that the ‘present’ is not a pure and simple point of origin for constitution, but is itself constituted from a non-presence that is equally ‘primordial.’<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Norris (1982:49) points out that *aporia* ‘derives from the Greek word meaning “unpassable path.”’

<sup>53</sup> Note the necessity of placing this term ‘under erasure’ as explained in the introduction (Page 17, Note 9).

On the other hand, certainty demands that perception (pure presentation) be necessarily separable from, *independent of* and *prior to* representation. In other words, every 'now' insofar as it is spontaneous, should not be 'created' by some preceding source, should not be a being (a produced object), and in turn should create nothing, that is, not even another now. Each new now should create itself. As Derrida (1973:67) puts it: 'The source of *certitude* in general is in the *primordial* character of the living now.' To meet the demands of certainty, therefore, it is necessary to maintain a sharp distinction between pure presentation (perception), as primordial, and re-presentation as secondary. To maintain the primordially of presentation, while taking due cognisance of the necessity of the continuity between perception and retention, it was essential for Husserl 'to keep retention in the sphere of primordial certitude and to shift the frontier between the primordial and the nonprimordial' (Derrida 1973:67). Importantly, this meant that Husserl had to draw the dividing line that separated presentation from re-presentation *not* between the pure present and the non-present, but rather between two forms of *non-presence*.

The difference between retention and reproduction, between primary and secondary memory, is not the radical difference that Husserl wanted between perception and nonperception; it is rather a difference between two modifications of nonperception. Whatever the phenomenological difference between these two modifications may be... it only serves to separate two ways of relating to the irreducible nonpresence of another now.

(Derrida 1973:65)

As Derrida (1973:64) argues, even if Husserl insisted that retention was still a perception, then this is a unique case 'of a perceiving in which the perceived is not a present, but a past existing as a modification of the present.' This, however, means that a form of non-presence can be primordial. Thus, as Derrida (1973:64-65) argues here, to include retention in the sphere of interiority does not provide the solution Husserl sought.

As soon as we admit this continuity of the now and the not-now, perception and nonperception, in the zone of primordially common to primordial impression and primordial retention, we admit the other into the self-identity of the *Augenblick*; nonpresence and nonevidence are admitted into the *blink of the instant*. There is a duration to the blink...

(Derrida 1973:65)

Thus Derrida argues that the 'source point' or 'primordial impression,' out of which the movement of temporalisation is produced *is* already pure auto-affection. This may sound paradoxical unless it is said that, for him, auto-affection, as pure *self-relation*, presupposes an internal division or split in the thing that affects itself. That is, it presupposes the impossibility of something's absolute coincidence with itself. As he (1973:82) puts it:

Auto-affection is not a modality of experience that characterizes a being that would already be itself (autos). It produces sameness as self-relation within self-difference; it produces sameness as the nonidentical.

Therefore, essential to the concept of auto-affection, and thus to the idea of the present as source point, is a spatial or relational dimension.

In conclusion, Derrida's argues that 'sense' – perception in the 'punctual now,' 'the "primal form" of consciousness' (Derrida 1973:63), the locus of the active, living self – 'being temporal in nature, ...is never simply present; it is always already engaged in the "movement" of the "trace," that is, in the order of "signification"' (Derrida 1973:85). I shall elaborate on Derrida's notion of the 'trace' in due course. First, however, in order to bring this discussion to bear on the philosophy of language, a second, analogous theme in Husserl's theory of signification, and its deconstruction, should be considered.<sup>54</sup> In this case, Husserl tried to temporalise 'sense' by reducing 'indication' and privileging the voice as pure auto-affection. Derrida's deconstruction turns on the insight that the irreducible spatiality of auto-affection necessitates the conclusion that '*the temporalization of sense is, from the outset, a "spacing"*' (Derrida 1973:86).

### **iii. Undermining the Purity of Self-Presence ('Pure' Auto-Affection)**

Due to his commitment to preserving the possibility of absolute truth, Husserl was obliged to view the spatial (empirical or bodily) aspects of *thinking itself* (namely the signs that represent ideal meanings in the expression and preservation of 'sense') as mere contingent and inessential additions. 'Indicative signs,' which always include an obvious 'spatial reference,' that is, a 'worldly form' (Derrida 1973:76) in the actual utterance or written word, were easily and immediately reduced (that is, excluded from the privileged enclosure of 'truth'). On the other hand, as Derrida observes here, unlike that of non-phonetic or indicative signifiers, the 'sense' of the spoken word, for Husserl, apparently did not include a 'spatial reference.' 'Expressive signs' (spoken words) were supposedly purely temporal (Derrida 1973:83). That is, a spoken word, seeming to vanish in the very breath that is expired in the act of 'expression,' had no tangible or visible spatial body. The spoken word's perfection as an expressive medium, thus, was a function of its ideally absolute proximity or transparency to 'sense,' by virtue of its supposed non-existence in material terms.

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<sup>54</sup> Derrida (1973:68) notes that 'Husserl himself evoked the analogy between the relation with the *alter ego*, constituted within the absolute monad of the ego, and the relation with the other present, the past present, as constituted in the absolute actuality of the living present (*Cartesian Meditations*, § 52).'

However, as Derrida (1973:80) notes: ‘This proximity is broken when, instead of hearing myself speak, I see myself write or gesture.’ Thus, Husserl’s theory of signification repeats a general tendency in Western thinking to define language, in Derrida’s terms (1976:29; 1973:10), ‘in the last instance and in the irreducible simplicity of its essence as the unity of the *phonè*, the *glossa*, and the *logos*’ – that is, as a unified composite of sound (in the phenomenological rather than the empirical sense), meaning and ‘expression.’ In relation to this unified composite, the indicative system of signs (which included writing), was regarded as the mere representation of language as spoken. Here, if writing completed the constitution of ideal objects by making possible their preservation and therefore repetition as the same, it did so through phonetic writing, which would, as Derrida (1973:81) puts it, ‘fix, inscribe, record and incarnate an already prepared utterance.’<sup>55</sup> In relation to this unity, ‘writing would always be derivative, accidental, particular, exterior, doubling the signifier: phonetic. “Sign of a sign,” said Aristotle, Rousseau, and Hegel’ (Derrida 1976:29). Here we could, of course, add Husserl and Saussure. Writing, thus, for Husserl was a ‘body’ that meant something only if it was transformed into a pronouncement animated by an actual intention, if it was transformed into the ‘spiritual flesh’ of the spoken word (1973:81); that is, if its space was ‘temporalised.’

Yet, as Derrida notes (1973:80), paradoxically, the very perfection of the spoken word as an expressive medium gave Husserl the means to ‘consider the medium of expression as “unproductive” or “reflecting,”’<sup>56</sup> and therefore, inessential to ‘sense’ in general. In this he found grounds to reduce all language to a stratum of experience that is secondary to a more primordial, ‘pre-expressive’ stratum of sense. In other words, for Husserl, according to Derrida (1973:81) only the ideal meaning (in the ‘expression’) ‘is independent and primordial.’ ‘As such,’ Derrida continues, ‘it needs no signifier to be present to itself. Indeed it is as much in spite of its signifiers as thanks to them that it is awakened and maintained in life.’

Derrida (1973:80) asks how it is possible to

...understand this reduction of language when Husserl ...continually thought that scientific truth, i.e. absolutely ideal objects, can be found only in “statements” and that not only spoken language but *inscription* as well was indispensable for the constitution of ideal objects, that is, objects capable of being transmitted and repeated as the same...

Husserl’s ‘reduction of language’ turns on what Derrida calls the ‘complicity between voice and ideality’ (1973:77), or the ‘essential tie between... the phonic element ... and expression, taken as the logical character of a signifier that is *animated* in view of the ideal presence of a *Bedeutung* (itself related to an object)...’ (1973:76). According to Derrida (1973:77) the source of this apparent complicity was a function

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<sup>55</sup> As Derrida notes here (1973:81, note 6; cf. also 1976:32-33), Husserl did not take into account the difference between phonetic and non-phonetic writing, which would have disrupted his system.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Reflecting’ here would be used in the passive sense of ‘mirroring.’

of the capacity to hear oneself speak in the very moment of speaking, which seems to suggest that the signifier and the thought that animates it (that transforms it into a meaningful 'expression') remain in absolute proximity, without any need for thinking to hazard a detour through the deceptive indicative web.

Thus, according to Derrida, the primacy of speech (pure signification), which is also the primacy of presence, is based on the illusion that it takes place in an instant, in the apparent absence of the empirical world. Verbal 'expression,' then, (supposedly without hazarding a delay in the indicative or empirical exterior of self-presence) would have the capacity to *show* or demonstrate directly, and instantly, rather than merely to indicate or gesture towards, the ideal meaning or 'sense' connected to it (Derrida 1973:78). In Derrida's words:

It is implied in the very structure of speech that the speaker hears himself: both that he perceives the sensible forms of the phonemes and that he understands his own expressive intention.

In the course of his argument, Derrida shows that Husserl reduced the phenomenological voice to consciousness or self-presence itself; that is, the first to the second sense of hearing oneself speak. We have seen already that, according to Husserl's own analysis of time, presence was irreducibly bifurcated. Derrida contends, therefore, that this argument concerning presence extends to consciousness, and that the self-presence of 'hearing oneself speak' is pure auto-affection, and thus also a form of non-presence.

Derrida (1973:78) notes that 'hearing oneself speak' is a suspiciously *unique* instance of auto-affection. He explains that every other form of auto-affection must choose between two options. On the one hand, to retain some claim to universality, auto-affection must pass through what is outside the sphere of 'ownness' (the individual, particular subjectivity of psychologism). This movement of externality implies a loss of pure simplicity or individuality since 'what can look at itself is not one' (1976:36). For example, when *I see myself* (auto-affection associated with sight), reflected in a mirror perhaps, the empirical outside has already entered the field of this auto-affection and it is no longer 'pure.' This, however, means that others may see the 'object' that I see, and grounds for 'universality' (or at least intersubjectivity) are laid. Alternatively, without this 'detour' into the 'outside' of the empirical world, auto-affection must forego any claim to universality. Self-hatred, or self-fulfilment, for example, are the kinds of auto-affection that cannot be verified objectively.

According to Derrida (1973:79), the activity of 'hearing oneself speak,' as Husserl articulated it, is different, unique; and it is this claim to 'uniqueness,' no doubt, that aroused his suspicion. On the one hand, for Husserl, the subject could 'hear himself speak,' that is 'be affected by the signifier he produces,' without passing outside of the 'sphere of what is "his own."' Yet, on the other, this auto-affection of 'hearing oneself speak' nevertheless 'operates within the medium of universality; what appears as signified therein must be 'idealities' that are infinitely repeatable or transmissible as the same.'

Thus, Husserl reduced<sup>57</sup> the spatial from the voice by calling it pure auto-affection –when I hear myself, I am myself; when, instead, I see myself write or gesture, then I objectify myself, and the self-presence is broken. However, as Derrida has already pointed out, all auto-affection always already implies self-alienation. In other words, just as self-identification (or self-reflectiveness) implies that one no longer coincides with oneself, but to stands at a distance from oneself, so in affecting oneself in speech (in hearing yourself speak) one no longer coincides with one’s speaking self (cf. Derrida in Caputo 1997:13-14). In calling the act of hearing oneself speak pure auto-affection, Husserl cannot, without contradiction, deny the spatial (self-alienation or self-objectification) in the realm of the phenomenological voice, or consciousness itself. As Derrida puts it (1973:82): ‘As soon as it is admitted that auto-affection is the condition for self-presence, no pure transcendental reduction is possible.’

Derrida (1973:83) goes on to argue that Husserl could not elude the problem of auto-affection by falling back on a distinction between ‘expression’ as spatial and secondary, and a more primary ‘pure’ (non-spatial) perception ‘at the level... of pre-expressive experience, that is, the level of sense prior to *Bedeutung* and expression...’ He argues here that, despite Husserl’s attempts to insist on pure temporality at the level of ‘sense,’ one is equally unable to escape the spatialisation of self-relation at this level.

To begin with, Derrida (83) claims that according to Husserl,

...even before being expressed, sense is through and through temporal... the omnitemporality of ideal objects [their ‘pure’ duration in the form of an ability to be repeated infinitely as the same] is but a mode of temporality.

After a reduction of language in general (‘indication’ as well as ‘expression’), one would be left, presumably, with ‘pure thought;’ or pure intuition of the enduring and permanent ‘ideality of sense,’ persisting in the ‘living present,’ the pre-expressive stratum of the unified stream of life. Describing this inner ‘reality’ in an analysis of the thinking of Henri Bergson, Boche ski (1969:104) suggests that: ‘Far from being spatial or numerical, it actually endures, it even *is* pure duration and, therefore, is different from the space and time of natural science; it is a single, indivisible act, an impulse (*élan*) and a becoming, which cannot be measured.’ Thus pure conceptions would be purely temporal in the pre-expressive realm of the ‘living present,’ not in the metaphorical sense of ‘time’ which borrows from the empirical world, but in the ‘living’ sense of pure duration.

Apart from the critique levelled at the notion of an enduring and permanent, yet temporal, realm of ‘ideality’ from the point of view of Husserl’s own analysis of time as irreducibly complex, which Derrida discusses in detail (1973:82-87), it also seems that to reduce all spatial aspects of thinking in this way is to reduce conception as such. The infinite (a general designation for the totality of the ‘idealities’ that endure

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<sup>57</sup> In the sense of ‘abstracted’ or ‘thought away.’

in the unified stream of the 'living now,' in pure presence) *in itself* cannot be grasped in thought, for such grasping can only occur as a series of discrete acts (Bergson in Bocheński 1969:104). For this reason, the infinite can never exist in thought as a unity. That is, duration can only be *conceived* of as an endless concatenation of discrete, successive moments in time, or permanence as the endless repetition of a thing as the same. Thus, conception in essence is an irreducible spatialisation, in the form of a relation of one moment or thing to another. One cannot reduce the *movement* of temporalisation in conception, and thus, nor can one avoid the self-relation implicit in auto-affection. Therefore, on the one hand, Husserl insisted that the essence of certainty was conception completed in language. At the same time, he strove to purify conception, in the name of certainty, of the very spatiality that is its condition of possibility in the first place.

### 3. The Opening(s) of Différance in the Tensions and Aporias Created by Husserl's Theory of Signification

Within the framework of Husserl's (impossible) reduction of the spatial to the temporal, I have already, to some extent, described how *différance* emerges out of the very tensions and limits of his position. *Différance*, it seems, is uncovered at the very limits to which the internal logic of Husserl's arguments must be pushed. Thus, for example, Derrida (1973:22) notes the 'strange paradox' that Husserl delineated the essence of '*ex-pressiveness*' by suspending its relation to what Derrida emphasises as a *certain* outside; namely that of the empirical world. This emphasis is crucial because it brings to the fore Derrida's observation that Husserl's reduction cannot altogether eliminate relation (or spatiality) in 'expression.' In other words, in reducing 'expression' to its essence, Husserl highlighted or brought to light what was absolutely internal to 'expression,' and it turns out not to be pure presence, but rather the non-presence or bifurcation of a relation to an 'outside.' In other words, it brings to light the paradox that meaning seems to be purely expressive [externalising], at the very moment it, in Derrida's words (22), 'suspends its relation to an empirical outside...' Husserl's phenomenological commitments constrain him to describe objectivity – as external to the subject –

...from the standpoint of "interiority," or rather from a self-proximity, an ownness, which is not a simple *inside* but rather the intimate possibility of a relation to a beyond and to an outside in general. This is why the essence of intentional consciousness [as inherently and internally split] will only be revealed in the reduction of the totality of the existing world in general.

(Derrida 1973:32)

#### i. 'Indication' and 'Expression'



For Derrida (1973:20-22), Husserl's differentiation of 'expression' and 'indication' in terms of function alone brings us to the centre of a problem. The same signification (concatenation of signs), it seems, may have two *interwoven* functions. As he puts it: 'Indications may express something alongside of their indicative function if they also happen to fulfil a meaning.' Communicative speech, he says (22), always involves the interweaving of 'meaning' ('expression') with representation ('indication') for two reasons. Firstly, communicative speech, as necessarily externalised or ex-pressed, has an unavoidable material (sensory, bodily) side which points to, or represents, 'sense.' Secondly, as Derrida puts it (22), in conversation, 'expression *indicates* a content forever hidden from intuition, that is, from the lived experience of another.' In other words, the minute I express something, I am representing outside of myself what no other person can ever have direct access to – my lived experience. While Husserl may have argued that lived experience that was 'true' or had 'sense,' was in principle accessible to anyone, 'others' are nevertheless always obliged to re-create the 'sense' of my words for themselves, and cannot gain direct access to 'sense' simply by means of my 'expression.' Thus, in discourse, 'indication' is unavoidable. As Derrida (20) puts it: 'We know already *in fact* that the discursive sign, and consequently the meaning, is *always* involved, always *caught up* in an indicative system.' Every production of an 'expression' – that is, externalisation of 'sense' – is an act of communication, even if unintended, in which 'indication' is implied. As Derrida (21) points out, however, the reverse is not true, which may tempt us to view 'indication' as the genus of which the expressive sign is a species. In his words (21): 'The general system of signification then would be coextensive with the system of indication.'

It seems then that, on the one hand, Husserl did indeed view the general relation between signs and 'sense' as one of representation. Yet, he immediately made the classical move of privileging and reduction, by insisting that the highest form of representation is the most transparent. That is, he immediately added that the manner of representation varied from opaque distortion to pure transparency respectively, depending on whether signs functioned indicatively or expressively. Paradoxically, therefore – given that representation (that is, signification) operates at the level of 'indication' as well as 'expression' – Husserl's prior commitment to presence predisposed him to devalue signification. Yet, Husserl has only *apparently* resolved the problem of keeping perception free of representation by making the initial distinction between 'expression' and 'indication' and attempting to reduce 'indication' (to set it aside as extrinsic and empirical). 'Indicative functions, sometimes of another kind, continually reappear further on, and getting rid of them will be an infinite task' (Derrida 1973:27).

According to Derrida, then, this articulation of the relation between 'expression' (a transparent medium which conveys perception) and representation (images and signs that stand for expressions), opened Husserl to crucial questions which he succeeded (apparently) in circumventing by means of the classical manoeuvre of Western metaphysics; namely, the delineation of a privileged interior space from

a secondary, inessential exterior in his resolute and inaugural 'essential distinction' between 'expression' and 'indication.' Here Husserl attempted to preserve the interior space of the 'primary self-evidence of knowledge' in pure 'expression,' from any exterior, indicative or mediatory influence or interference (Norris 1982:47).

To do this, Derrida (1973:21-22) observes, Husserl had to demonstrate that while in 'real' (dialogical) conversation this conclusion seemed unavoidable, 'expression' could not be subsumed under a more general concept of 'indication.' For Husserl, in Derrida's words (21): 'this *de facto* necessity of entanglement...must not...cut off the possibility of a rigorous distinction of essence.' In other words, he had to demonstrate that 'meaning' was also possible where 'expression' was no longer interwoven with 'indication' (Derrida 22). Pure 'expression,' Husserl suggested, took place not in ordinary conversation, but in the silence of an internal monologue, the solitary self silently addressing itself. In Derrida's words (22), 'we have to find the unshaken purity of expression in a language without communication, in speech as monologue, in the completely muted voice of the "solitary mental life."' "

However, this ideal of language as a transparent, undistorting means of 'expression,' embodied in Husserl's theory of signification left us with another *aporia*. The very system which was deemed essential for the completion of sense (in the sense that it gave a persisting existence to the linguistic 'expression' of an 'ideality,' which made the activity of "original reproduction" possible for a historical tradition), was also, as mere representation of 'expression' (that is, a copy of spoken language or 'meaning' which was itself exceeded by the interiority of 'sense'), seen as not only derivative, secondary and thus inessential, but positively harmful in its power to dissimulate, distort, equivocate and act as an opiate to authentic thinking.

One of the first things that Derrida notes in *Speech and Phenomena* (1973:7; 23-26) is that in spite of the fact that Husserl saw the general relation between 'sense' and signs as one of signification or representation, he did not ask the question concerning the nature of signification in general. In other words, from Husserl's point of departure, signification could just as well have been conceived as a unitary concept and considered in its essence, before it was divided into two kinds. Instead, Husserl evaded this option by immediately making the distinction between 'expression' and 'indication,' which enabled him to preserve the primary self-evidence of the living present while accounting for the persisting existence of an 'ideality,' stored in a linguistic formula which made the activity of 'original reproduction' possible. According to Derrida (1973:7), Husserl continued to put 'out of play,' or postpone 'from one end of his itinerary to the other, all explicit meditation on the essence of language *in general*,' because of his prior commitment to preserve the 'living present,' or the 'primary self-evidence of knowledge.' Nevertheless, the question returns to haunt him at every turn. As Derrida (1973:60) points out, although Husserl insisted that perception ("intuitive acts and contents") and signification

(‘signitive acts and contents’) were irreducibly different, he consistently admitted the possibility of an ‘interweaving’ of the two, which, Derrida notes, ‘provokes questions.’

The question of such ‘interweaving’ is raised the moment that Husserl made an attempt to elaborate on and justify his distinction between ‘indication’ and ‘expression’ by reducing all forms of ‘indication’ to the exterior of ‘self-evident truth,’ that is, to a secondary status (inessential, empirical) in relation to pure perception, which belonged to the ideal realm of the ‘living present,’ or ‘primary self-evidence.’ Again, according to Derrida (1973:29) Husserl’s definition of ‘indication’ in general<sup>58</sup> was so broad as to suggest the *possibility* of considering ‘indication’ as a genus which subtends the ‘interweaving’ of two species; namely, *Hinweis* (indicative allusion) and *Beweis* (‘deductive, evident, apodictic demonstration’). In other words, it would seem to suggest, as Derrida (1973:29) puts it, that:

Motivations linking together lived experiences [the particular, contingent or empirical], as well as *acts* which grasp necessary and evident idealities and ideal objectivities, may belong to the contingent and empirical order of “nonevident” indication.

Again, Husserl did not pursue the option of contemplating ‘indication’ in general, but in order to preserve the interiority of self-evidence, eluded it by making an immediate distinction between ‘indication’ ‘proper,’ or ‘*in the strict sense*’ (1973:29) and demonstration, which, for him, could not be of a kind. In other words, Husserl’s purpose here was to establish that the kind of motivation which ‘unites the contents of ideal objects in evident demonstration’ was not of the same order as ‘indication,’ which was merely empirical, and for this reason could not ever attain a comparable certainty. Thus, Husserl had to modify or restrict ‘indication’ in general to fit his prior metaphysical commitments.

While Derrida questions the philosophical legitimacy of this move of evasion through division, he is careful to note that one *could* read Husserl’s refusal to ‘presuppose the essential unity of the sign’ (1973:25) in a counter-traditional (that is non-referential) sense. This, along with other moments in Husserl’s text (25) signify points of crisis where Husserl’s thinking could have gone in another direction, where it could even have anticipated Derrida’s own project. However, despite these moments, there remains a countervailing metaphysical flavour to Husserl’s thinking. In other words, what Derrida points out here is that *given what was already evident in Husserl’s texts*, Husserl might just as convincingly have made a different move, had his metaphysical commitment to presence not been so binding/blinding.

It is here that one catches a glimpse of the opening of ‘*différance*’ within the (en)closure of Husserl’s phenomenology. Yet, it is important to note, for the sake of understanding Derrida’s own

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<sup>58</sup> The essence or ‘unity’ of ‘indication,’ according to Derrida’s (1973:28) paraphrase of Husserl’s definition, is ‘a certain “motivation” (*Motivierung*): it is what moves something such as a “thinking being” to *pass* by thought from something to something else.’

project, that he points to the illegitimacy of Husserl's move, *without* himself subscribing to the opposite postulation of the essential unity of the term 'signification,' or, one could legitimately add, 'indication.' This opposing move would merely repeat the very (classical) assumption of the primacy of logic over signification that Husserl explicitly assumed, and that Derrida ultimately aims to debunk (1973:24-25). Derrida considers the possibility that signification may be conceptualised neither as primordially split into two kinds, nor as a unified term, both of which 'raise the question of the sign to an ontological plane' (1973:24). He suggests instead, that signification may elude the very strictures of a theory of knowledge, whose demand that theoretical 'truth' take only the form of 'S is p' (Derrida 1973:73) sanctions the question 'what *is* signification?'<sup>59</sup>

## ii. **The Emergence of Différance and the Undermining of Presence in the Redundancy of the 'Meaningful Sign'**

The transformation of the 'merely indicative' sign into the 'expressive' sign marks another of the moments, as Derrida points out, at which Husserl's theory of signification turns upon itself, so to speak, or self-deconstructs.

At the level of 'sense' in his hierarchical theory of signification, Husserl makes a distinction between the thought that produces meaning, and pure perception (intuition or cognition) of the things themselves. As Staten (1985:45) puts it, 'the sense-giving act by which marks become meaningful differs from the ensouling apprehension of sensational contents in perception of objects.' However, it seems that as far as the fulfilment of 'meaning' is concerned, this distinction was initially put on hold, since, for Husserl fulfilment of meaning, required that the two were brought together. For Husserl (Staten 1985:44), just as at the symbolic level alone (thinking that works only at the level of signs), thinking was empty or meaningless, so too was pure perception of sensational contents, at the level of pure sensuousness, characterised by meaninglessness. According to Staten (1985:44):

Being in the actual presence of an object and recognizing it as just the sort of object that it is, is the telos or fulfillment of the intentionality of thought. "Meaning" is therefore, for Husserl *completed* in knowledge, in the presence of an object intended before a consciousness that intends it, according to the intellectual form which is the shape of the intention and thus of the object as given to this intention.

Nevertheless, despite the complicity, here, of object cognition and the 'sense-giving act,' Husserl was aware of a complication. He recognised (in Kantian fashion) that because thought and cognition were not quite the same, the object did not have to be given in order to be thought (Derrida 1973:90).

In other words, he was aware that meaning could occur even when there was no actual object to fulfil the intention. He resolved this complication by suggesting that thought could be meaningful in the absence of actual objects *only because* in principle it pointed toward objects. In other words, thoughts could be meaningful when they obeyed the formal requirement of being meaningful – which involved the demand that they included the *form*, if not the actuality – or even the possibility, of relation to an object. For example, ‘square circle’ or ‘golden mountain’ had meaning, whereas ‘green is where’ did not (Derrida 1973:92).

In effect this means that an object could be ‘meant’ in a formal way, without full meaning, apart from its being presented in intuition. For Husserl, for example, if you had never visited Rome, you could ‘intend’ or ‘mean’ Rome in an empty way, filling it in later once you had been there. This is how an intention could become ‘fulfilled,’ and, thus, fully meaningful. As Staten (1985:45) notes, this interval of ‘signitive intention’ between intention and fulfilment, which could extend indefinitely, was ‘delicately balanced.’ As ‘signitive’ it occurred in the absence of the object intended, but because it was directed toward possible objects (that is, toward the realm of ‘meaning’) it still moved in the realm of ‘ideality.’

In this way, Husserl assumed that he could solve the problem of how to account for the observable ‘reality’ of thought’s independence from the intentional object (that is, its ability to function meaningfully in the absence of this object) *without* giving up his commitment to the fulfilment of meaning in the presence of the intended object. In Staten’s words (1985:45-46):

With the distinction between the meaning intention which functions signitively and the sense-perception or “intuition” that fulfills it, Husserl can retain both the freedom of thought, which must be able to function in the absence of the object it thinks about, and the teleological determination of the essence of thought, even when it is only signitive, *as relation to an object*.

There are two things of note here. Firstly, as Staten (1985:47) puts it, ‘...once the object meant is present, we no longer see the unique and distinctive character of “meaning” as rigorously distinguishable from “object intuition.”’ If it is so that meaning can only be itself (as complete and fulfilled) in the presence of the intentional object, then there seems to be little use for the notion of a meaning-bearing sign as opposed to a mere indicator which points to the meaningful intentional object to come. In other words, following Husserl’s initial definition of meaning we would have to assume that there are only two options. On the one hand, where the meaningful intentional objects are absent from consciousness, all we have are the indications that mark their absence and herald their return. On the other hand, we may be graced with the simple presence of meaningful intentional objects. This,

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<sup>59</sup> I shall discuss the question raised by Derrida of submitting ‘signification’ to an ontology in more detail in the later exposition of his (non) concept ‘*differance*,’ where a similar illegitimacy pertains to the question ‘what *is differance*?’

then, puts into question the worth of Husserl's 'expressive' or 'meaning-bearing' sign, and concomitantly the very distinction between 'expression' and 'indication,' on which the whole edifice of his theory of signification rests.

Secondly, what is important to note here, is the way in which Husserl arrived at the brink of *différance* in the slippage from an initial complicity between meaning and object to a decisive distinction between them. In what Derrida calls the 'formalist moment' of Husserl's argumentation he opened the hand that could emancipate 'meaning' from object intuition. Yet, at the same time, Husserl closed the fist that effaced this emancipation (Derrida 1973:90). In other words, he separated meaning or 'sense' from object fulfilment, but immediately reunited them via the notion of truth. As Derrida (1973:98) puts it: 'One can well *speak* in saying "The circle is square"; one speaks *well*, however, in saying that it is not.' For Husserl, according to Derrida (1973:99),

...meaning waits upon truth: it is determined beforehand, *a priori*, in its essence, as relation to an object, and makes sense only insofar as its grammatical form tolerates the possibility of a relation with the object.

Derrida argues (1973:92) that given what already appears in Husserl's text, we do not have to draw the conclusions about the nature of signification that Husserl did. 'Following the logic and necessity of Husserl's own distinctions,' he argues here,

we may be tempted to maintain not only that meaning does not imply the intuition of the object but that it *essentially excludes it*. That is, the essence of meaning is precisely its ability to function in the absence of the object meant, simply by animating the body of a signifier.

In other words, we may be tempted to think that: 'It belongs to the original structure of expression to be able to dispense with the full presence of the object aimed at by intuition' (1973:90). Thus, what Derrida questions here is the underlying metaphysical commitment to the unity of thing and thought in 'form-as-presence' that motivated Husserl to put the distinction between thought and object intuition on hold in the first place, and that conditioned his subsequent attempts to argue all complications back to this initial complicity.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The concepts that Husserl made use of in order to preserve the possibility of absolute truth by temporalising the spatial; namely, the pure presence both of the present moment, and of auto-affection in solitary mental life, are always already shot through with the very difference (relation, alterity, distance), or 'spacing' that he tried to eliminate. Derrida's deconstructive reading demonstrates the

irreducibility of such ‘spacing,’ which he describes in terms of the conventionally instituted ‘trace’ (1976:46-47):

The instituted ‘trace’ cannot be thought without thinking the retention of difference within a structure of reference where difference appears *as such* and thus permits a certain liberty of variations among the full terms. The absence of *another* here-and-now, of another transcendental present, of *another* origin of the world appearing as such, presenting itself as irreducible absence within the presence of the ‘trace’...

Taking the irreducibility of ‘spacing’ or ‘the ‘trace’” into account has the consequence of denying any pure presence of ‘ideality’ or meaning, for any concept would always already depend on precisely what is nonpresent. Here one could draw a link between Derrida’s deconstruction of Husserl’s theory of signification and Saussure’s efforts to accommodate ‘spacing’ in a theory of signification. Derrida (1981:18) points out that in at least two respects Saussure’s linguistics made a decisive critical breakthrough in relation to the ‘consciousness paradigm’ – within which philosophers such as Kant and Husserl, remained committed to the notion of a stable, universally recognisable reality, constituted and made intelligible by universally identical mental activity that somehow operated outside of the ‘defiles’ of language. The first of these consisted in the theoretical fuel Saussurean linguistics supplied for a denial of the separation of concept (mind) and language. Here, denying the division between signifier (language) and signified (ideal meaning) in the sign, implies that thought and language cannot be separated (Saussure 1964:111-113). Hence, language becomes irreducibly a part of ‘constitutive interpretations.’ In the second place, Saussure’s linguistics offered the means to temper the prioritisation of the temporal (etymological) dimension of meaning production in the referential model of language, by positing an alternative, structural model, which prioritised space. This involved emphasising the *formal* and the *differential* characteristics of language. As Derrida argues here, Saussure’s reduction of the phonè (Saussure 1964:9), and his well known insistence that there are no positive signs, only relations of difference (1964:120) offers the means to posit a necessary ‘spatial’ or ‘structural’ corrective to Husserl’s temporal ‘closure.’

## Chapter Five: Saussure and a ‘Spatial’ Corrective to Husserl’s ‘Temporal Closure’

### 1. Introduction

Derrida acknowledges the undeniable importance of Saussure’s contribution to the movement of philosophy towards a linguistic interpretation of ‘reality’ (that is, to his articulation of the ‘linguistic turn’ in terms of the necessity of *différance*) However, one should remain well aware that if there exists a path from Saussure to *différance* at all, it is by no means direct. On the contrary, Saussure’s linguistic theory, outlined in the only text we have to go by,<sup>60</sup> namely his *Course in General Linguistics* (1974), is fraught with tensions between critical insights on the one hand, and traditional metaphysical commitments that undermine these insights, on the other.

At *one and the same time*, according to Derrida (1981:18), Saussure made a crucial critical breakthrough by emphasising the differential (spatial) nature of signification, *and* contradicted the movement of this critical breakthrough through a form/matter distinction that supposedly assured the privilege of speech above writing. Here, according to Derrida (1976:29) Saussure repeated what was common to all ‘referential models;’ namely, the assumption that language was an irreducible unity of sound, logical meaning and expression, in relation to which writing was merely a secondary copy; that is, ‘derivative, accidental, particular, exterior, doubling the signifier’ (Derrida 1976:29). Saussure’s privileging of speech saw to it that, despite, and in contradiction to, his critical breakthrough, he in fact maintained a strict distinction between sign and concept, ‘inherent even in the opposition signifier/signified’ (Derrida 1981:19). This distinction cannot but re-import the notion of a ‘transcendental signified’ (Derrida 1981:19), and consequently cannot avoid the very commitments to a ‘metaphysics of presence’ (that is, the very separation of mind and language) that Saussure’s breakthrough initially seemed to undermine. In this way, according to Derrida (1981:18), Saussurean semiology played a ‘double role,’ which, given Saussure’s metaphysical commitments, was not resolved in his text, but drew his discourse in opposing and contradictory directions: one opening up the possibility to be ‘decisively critical’ of Western metaphysics and the other decisively closing off this possibility.

I shall not offer an extensive reconstruction of Derrida’s minutely detailed deconstructive analyses of Saussure’s text. Rather, my principal aim is to offer an angle of incidence into Derrida’s

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<sup>60</sup> In a certain sense, when dealing with the text of Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics*, one ought to remain aware that one is using his name as a symbol of sorts, since it seems that he (perhaps justifiably) did not have the confidence of his subsequent admirers to set down his insights himself in the form of a book.



general observation that, despite profound contradictions and tensions, Saussure initiated a movement or shift away from a Husserlian position, which privileged 'presence,' placing discourse about signification on a new footing from which it could not comfortably retreat. As Derrida (1976:27-73) shows in detail, Saussure's own text denied the very radicality of this shift every step of the way, but could do so only on pain of contradiction. In this 'showing' Derrida again underlines the irreducibility of 'spacing' in the structure of thinking itself.

## 2. To Mean is Not to Be: the Unity of Signifier and Signified

A fixed, formal relationship between 'thing' or concept and its structurally similar correlate in language, exemplified by the 'common-sense' process of pointing and naming (Saussure 1964:16), has to assume the possibility of an inherently meaningful, extra-linguistic reality, necessarily universally the same for all rational beings, attached to and represented by self-contained linguistic terms. The stability of these attachments is then thought to be guaranteed by some kind of 'natural bond' between such linguistic terms and the 'meaningful' reality external to and pre-existing them. This, however, is precisely what cannot be assumed. As Culler (1976:21-22) suggests, another language is not simply a different system of names for equivalent ideas. Rather, learning another language entails coming to grips with differences in the way in which the world is understood. Culler (1976:21-22) offers the following examples:

The French 'aimer' does not go directly into English; one must choose between 'to like' and 'to love'. 'Démarrer' includes in a single idea the English signifieds of 'moving off' and 'accelerating'. English 'to know' covers the area of two French signifieds, 'connaître' and 'savoir'. The English concepts of a 'wicked man' or of a 'pet' have no real counterparts in French. Or again, what English calls 'light blue' and 'dark blue' and treats as two shades of a single colour are in Russian two distinct primary colours.

These examples demonstrate, as Culler points out here, that a language cannot simply be a system of nomenclature for pre-existing concepts. Rather, it is a means by which humans organise their world; a means by which we articulate concepts, define them, give them 'form,' or bring them into being. Furthermore, this activity is impossible without the use of signs. In Saussure's words (1964:111; my emphasis): 'Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of *signs* we would be unable to make a *clear-cut, consistent* distinction between two ideas.' This, as we have seen, is one of the rocks upon which Husserl's theory of signification foundered. According to Derrida (1976:27), Husserl's theory of signification had to cover over the contradiction of acknowledging the necessity of signification (including writing) to complete and preserve 'sense' – thus constituting the basis for science and history – while at the same time attempting to reduce it out of the picture

altogether in the name of certainty. In short, the very 'form' that is thought ('sense') depends on a capacity for endurance or consistent repetition over time, which is only possible by means of signs.

Saussure's (1964:66-67) suggestion that words were not just names, but were 'signs,' accommodated this insight. Here, the 'sign' as a 'double entity,' consisting of signifier and signified, served to express not the correspondence between an extra-linguistic reality and a name, but rather the unity of what he initially called a 'concept' and a 'word-image' (Saussure 1964:12), or 'sound-image.'<sup>61</sup> Saussure (1964:67) subsequently exchanged the terms 'concept' and 'sound-image' for 'signified' and 'signifier' respectively. These new terms, he claimed, had the advantage of unambiguously indicating their interdependence; that is, the valuelessness of one without the other (Saussure 1964:67; Benveniste 1971:35).

To clarify the irreducible unity of signifier and signified in the sign, or its character as 'thought-sound,' Saussure (1964: 112-113) used the metaphor of a wave created through the combined effects of atmospheric pressure and water. Alternatively, he (1964:113) suggested that the sign may be thought of as analogous to a sheet of paper:

...thought is the front and sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time; likewise in language [except in an abstract sense], one can neither divide sound from thought nor thought from sound.

Thus, according to Derrida (1981:18), against the Western tradition (of which Husserl's complete 'reduction' of language or the signifier is the epitome), Saussurean semiology insisted on the unity of signifier and signified; on the fact that they are 'the two sides of one and the same production.' This insight has highly significant consequences, since it implies that *understanding* itself is a linguistic phenomenon; that thought or 'consciousness' has no independent existence outside of language; that language is 'logically, ontologically and genetically prior to experience, and modifies experience...' (Koestenbaum 1970:xii).

Saussure's insistence on the unity of signifier and signified suggests that to assume it is possible to grasp reality in its 'unmediated' state, in order to ascertain the quality of the fit between language and reality, is to forget about the impossibility of ever standing outside of language – for 'grasping reality' is itself inherently and unavoidably a linguistic phenomenon or activity. We cannot gain access to a meaningful reality outside of our own power to articulate it in language. Thus, Saussure's insight suggests that there is no such thing as the so-called 'transcendental signified,' which would stand as stable guarantor of the veracity of our interpretations. Our representations of representations (i.e.

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<sup>61</sup> It is important to note that Saussure (1964:12) saw both 'concept' and 'sound image' as 'psychological' entities, which did not refer respectively to particular instances of a concept, nor to particular intonations or vocalisations of a word.

objects as ‘thought’) are by nature already worded. This means that if ‘meaning-production’ is an integral part of making ‘constitutive interpretations,’ then we are obliged always to approach objective reality through the mediation of language as the site of the production of meaning.

Saussurean linguistics inaugurated, thus, a radical split or division, not between name and an independent but accessible referent (‘concept,’ ‘reality,’ ‘thing,’ or ‘presence-to-consciousness’), but rather between ‘sign’ (word and concept together) and an incomprehensible order outside of linguistic interpretation. Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, I believe, can clarify this point considerably. However, an exposition that would give it its due will take me too far outside the limited compass of this study. While, for this reason, I shall be obliged to remain satisfied with a few cursory remarks, these should serve in the role of, at least, preliminary clarification.<sup>62</sup> Lacan explained the relationship between ‘meaning’ and ‘Being’ by means of two concepts; namely ‘alienation’ and ‘aphinisis.’ Both of these serve to express *a different aspect* of the distance between ‘meaning’ and ‘Being,’ attendant upon the acquisition of language. The relationship between the two may be articulated as follows: ‘alienation,’ the more primary according to Lacan (1981:210), condemns the subject (or meaning, or ‘definable’ conceptual identity in general) to appear only in the Symbolic Order (the order of language). This Order is constituted by a division between signifier and signified,<sup>63</sup> which operates in terms of an interplay between identification and ‘aphinisis.’ In Lacan’s words:

Alienation...condemns the subject to appearing only in that division which, it seems to me, I have just articulated sufficiently by saying that, if it appears on one side as meaning, produced by the signifier, it appears on the other as aphinisis.

Thus, ‘alienation’ can be thought of as being associated with a primary *foreclosure* of what Lacan has named the ‘Real,’ while ‘aphinisis’ may be associated with the *repression* of a certain potential for meaning into a realm of latency or the ‘unconscious.’

To elaborate a little, according to Lacan, entry into the ‘Symbolic Order’ (the order of meaning, representation or interpretation) through the use of language, suggested in the first place, a primary

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<sup>62</sup> With the hindsight acquired by a study of Kant’s analysis of the Antinomies of Pure Reason, and its translation into different conceptual tools (namely, the distinction between complex and complicated systems offered by Cilliers; 1998a:3-5), it will become possible to point to the close relationship between Lacan’s and Derrida’s appropriation of Kantian insights. Thus, a Kantian based explanation of the distinctions between the inconceivable, the conceivable but undecidable, and the knowable or decidable, will show strong structural resemblance to Lacan’s distinctions between the ‘Real’ (the inconceivable) and the Symbolic Order of meaning; and within this order, the division between the latent realm of the unconscious (the undecidable) and the conscious realm of identification (the knowable). However, it will be important to keep in mind that Lacan, like Derrida, does not appropriate this Kantian structure without a critical element, which questions the possibility of a sharp dividing line in the Symbolic Order between the knowable and the undecidable. But, to repeat a familiar Derridian strategy of deferral, ‘we are not there yet.’

<sup>63</sup> Bearing in mind that this division is never absolute, final, or stable for Lacan, which means that every signified also acts as a signifier in a chain of signification.

foreclosure of the extra-linguistic order of the 'Real,' described in terms of a full, 'oceanic' state in which the subject in its infancy was unable to comprehend its body as having limited contours, or as being separate from the world around it (cf. Eagleton 1985:163-170; Silverman 1983:149-193). In the operation referred to by Lacan (1981:210) as 'alienation,' a sharp and irreversible separation of the subject from such a state of 'lack of lack' or immediacy with 'Being' in the 'Real' accompanied the first *meaningful* word (or 'binary signifier').<sup>64</sup> 'Alienation' thus refers to a primary loss of immediacy with 'Being' (that is, in corresponding Saussurean terms, loss of the so-called extra-linguistic 'referent'), which marks the inauguration of a self/other relationship that incorporates desire as the life-long quest to reclaim an original fullness; the (always illusory) satisfaction of which, incidentally, Lacan associated with psychosis. In short, for Lacan, the very process of understanding, of constructing an identifiable, meaningful, intelligible 'reality,' constituted a rational subject in opposition to 'Being,' irreversibly alienating or distancing such a subject from it.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, meaning itself becomes part of language and does not coincide with an external 'thing' or 'Being.' What is lost, then, is the (Kantian) notion of a stable, intelligible or meaningful 'reality,' as a kind of intermediate realm of cognitively structured perceptions, existing between two poles: namely, the inchoate flux of the manifold on the one hand; and on the other, language as a free-floating pool of markers or labels. What emerges instead is a bipartite division between two different orders. The first is an inaccessible and inexpressible order – variously referred to as: the Kantian realm of 'things in themselves' (the response to which could be associated with the 'sublime' in an aesthetic context); Heidegger's 'Being;' or Lacan's order of 'the Real.' This is the order associated with what one could call 'the impossible absolute;' that is, with absolute completeness or infinity (impossibly) conceived of as a whole, full identification, stability, and finality. The second is the incomplete (finite, if indefinite),<sup>66</sup> unstable, provisional, spatio-temporal, but, at least potentially, accessible order of language.

Along the lines of Saussure's linguistics, Lacan accepted that the order of language was itself divided into two distinct yet inseparable orders. The first related to the order of 'meaning,' as Lacan (1981:210-211) called it, or the realm of conscious articulation and understanding of identity. The second related to the order of possible or interpretable 'being,' which encompassed the always-latent

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<sup>64</sup> Its counterpart, the so-called 'unary' signifier, by itself would not succeed in giving the speaking subject entry into the symbolic order. This structure is exemplified in the well-known 'Fort-da' episode described by Freud, which suggests that without the work of its binary opposite, a word remains unlimited in meaning and in effect meaningless (See Silverman 1983:167-171).

<sup>65</sup> This insight, applied to the subject's own 'being,' corresponds with Derrida's analysis of 'auto-affection' as an 'originary' self-alienation since Derrida claims that to coincide with yourself implies a state of 'muteness' (Derrida 1973: 70-87).

<sup>66</sup> As I shall explain in more detail later in relation to Kant's analysis of the first antinomy of pure reason, language, as a 'complex,' open-ended system should be conceived in analogous terms to the Kantian 'world' (or objective 'reality'), namely as being both finite and infinite together, or, more properly, as being neither of the two; thus, as being indefinite.

potential for meaning. Such 'being' in the unconscious (written in the lower case) is not to be conflated with 'Being' in the 'Real.' The distinction is subtle but important. Recall that 'Being' represents what is inconceivable; it is foreclosed to intelligibility, or in Derrida's (1982:20) terms, it is permanently 'deferred,' whereas 'being' is merely subject to repression, or a 'deferral' that is in principle reversible.<sup>67</sup>

In Lacan's terms, entry into the Symbolic Order, or the network of conscious signification or identification, is synonymous with the fading or repression of possible – but not actualised – meaning ('being') and the creation of an indeterminate unconscious realm within the rational subject, or, alternatively, a latent realm of potential meaning within the sign. Thus, Lacan (1981:210-211) argued that the subject and the unconscious (identity and its opposite) were created simultaneously as an effect of language use. In other words, this realm of the unconscious or 'latency' belonged to the symbolic order of language and was constituted anew in the repression of the full potential for signification whenever we were called upon to speak coherently (Eagleton 1985:169-172). In contrast to 'the foreclosed' – which can never enter consciousness and remains inexpressible or unspeakable (Benvenuto & Kennedy 1986:151-153) – this realm of latent meaning relates to that which *can* potentially be articulated. In other words, this latent realm of the signified ('being') represents connotations, associations, or potential modes of identity that *can* be precipitated out of an underlying realm of potentiality in the form of conscious, subjective or objective identity, with the proviso that they cannot do so all at once, or in their entirety. Due to the finitude of the human capacity for conceptuality, 'being' must remain, for the most part, of necessity submerged or latent, or subject to repression. It should be emphasised that the realisation of *full*, complete conscious signification requires an impossible immediacy with 'Being,' or an inhuman capacity to grasp infinity, which defies conception, since any act of conception must occur within spatio-temporal limits. As Johnson (1981:ix) puts it: '[t]o mean, in other words, is automatically not to be.'

### **3. There is Nothing Outside of the Text.**

Another way of articulating this would be to acknowledge with Derrida (1976:158) that 'there is nothing outside of the text.' Kant's supposed power to outline the complete set of categories, that is, to objectify the human rational faculty (and any rational being's supposed capacity to confirm this), exemplifies Derrida's (1978b:278-279) notion of a 'centred structure.' In a centred structure, that which has the power to objectify or circumscribe 'itself;' that is, the governing or controlling part of the structure, which can view it in its totality, must, remain outside of, or at a certain distance from, the

structure that it governs. This paradoxically external, but governing or controlling principle of the structure of inter-related 'rules' or categories of the understanding was, for Kant, the 'transcendental Ego' (the fully conscious, self present, rational ego). Hence, to outline the complete set of categories, the 'transcendental Ego,' paradoxically, must be capable of being outside of itself. It must be viewed, in a sense, as both human (caught within the finitude characteristic of its own spatio-temporal operations) and superhuman (capable of exceeding these spatio-temporal limits in order to objectify itself).

Yet, in his discussion of the second antinomy, Kant (1964:270) himself suggested that we cannot seek an answer to the question of the origin, or the essential nature, of the universal subject itself (that is, to the origin of the point of view of possible experience). To seek an answer to this, is immediately to attempt to reach beyond the conditions of the possibility of knowledge, since such an answer requires that we try to distance ourselves from, or objectify, or aspire to a position outside, the very spatio-temporal, linear, subjective point of view that is the condition for knowledge in the first place. Thus, as Husserl (1967:15; 17-18) rightly saw, if objectification meant stepping away from something and looking at it from the outside, this 'transcendental Ego' as the source of consciousness could not be objectified since the very means to look at the transcendental ego (the seat of human rationality) was always only ever the 'transcendental Ego' itself.

Making the 'linguistic turn' serves to confirm this stance. If the logic of Saussure's insight into the impossibility of an immediately accessible, independent, extra-linguistic reality were to extend to the realm of subjectivity, it would compel us to deny a 'transcendental signified' (in the form of a presence or consciousness) outside of language, which would serve as a privileged or ultimate point of reference for the sign 'I.' Thus, as Saussure (quoted in Derrida 1982:15) saw: 'language [which only consists of differences] is not a function of the speaking subject.' Rather, it seems that the subject is 'inscribed in language.' In other words, subjective identity, like the identity (or established meaning) of any other concept, does not exist beyond or prior to language, as Cartesian conceptions would have it, but is entirely constructed within it. Subjective identity may be viewed instead as an 'effect' or function of language (Derrida 1982:15), rather than something anterior to it.

Here, according to Derrida (1982:16), we are faced with a possible objection. It is certainly only possible for a subject to *speak* or, more accurately, *signify* ('generally by speech or other signs') by 'entering into' the differential linguistic or semiotic network; that is, even in creativity or transgression, by acquiescing to the prescriptions imposed by this network. In relation to subjectivity, one might, then, argue that it is certainly true in this sense that a subject cannot identify itself (know itself, be present to itself) without this network. In this case, it may seem quite acceptable to suggest that,

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<sup>67</sup> This, as will be discussed more fully in due course, alludes to the Freudian conception of 'repression' and the 'economy' of the relations between his 'reality' and 'pleasure' principles.

because of the play of linguistic or semiological *différance*, speaking or signifying subjects would surrender absolute self-presence (the ability absolutely to say what I mean and mean what I say), *insofar* as they use speech or signs to identify themselves (to posit self-identity, to 'know' themselves, to speak of themselves to others). However, the question that remains is whether there is a consciousness, a self, or an agent, *outside* of this play of differences, and anterior to it. As Derrida (1982:16) puts the question, '...can one not conceive of a presence, and of a presence to itself of the subject before speech or signs, a presence to itself of the subject in a silent and intuitive consciousness?' In short, is it not possible that there is a consciousness before the *différance* that constitutes language?

On the assumption of the possibility of consciousness before the 'spacing,' 'structurality,' or 'play' of differences in signification, Derrida (1982:16) asks how one would describe such consciousness. Traditionally, he suggests here, conscious in the final analysis has never been thought of in terms other than self-presence; that is, as a 'being-beside-itself.' In other words, consciousness in its traditionally 'full' sense has generally referred to self-reflection or self-perception as an awareness of the self as being aware. According to Derrida (1982:16): 'The privilege granted to consciousness therefore signifies the privilege granted to the present...' In other words, something may only have potential truth-value, *insofar* as it is fully present to a self-present consciousness.

Derrida argues that the way to question the absolute privilege of self-present consciousness as the 'form...of presence in general' (to 'de-limit' the 'closure' it imposes) is to recognise that the traditional description of consciousness already implies what he calls *différance*. Recall Derrida's (1973:82) discussion of auto-affection in which he demonstrates that if consciousness is self-consciousness, it implies an ability to reflect upon itself; that is, to step back from the self and look at it, as it were, from a place outside of itself. As Derrida (1976:36) has pointed out 'what can look at itself is not one.' Thus, if consciousness or presence is irreducibly split, then the present and 'all that is thought on the basis of presence,' is constituted by *différance*. In other words, *différance* (constitutes) the present 'as an "originary" and irreducibly nonsimple (and therefore, *stricto sensu* nonoriginary) synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protentions' (Derrida 1982:13). Thus a traditional view of consciousness is only possible on the *prior* assumption of *différance* as the 'form' of consciousness. Hence we find that even if consciousness is the 'form' of presence, *différance* is the 'form' of consciousness.

In sum, once a linguistic articulation of reality is acknowledged, there can be no ego external to the very structure within which the ego itself is produced (linguistically articulated categories) which could circumscribe that structure. Reason is obliged to 'understand' its own operations 'from within,' so to speak. That is, linguistically speaking, reason must understand itself within the limited, contextually bound, linear production of discourse. This is what Derrida (1976:158) seems to imply in his claim that there is 'nothing outside of the text.'

#### 4. Arbitrariness and The Problem of 'Truth'

What, then is the 'nature' of this text? Saussure's (67-70) conception of language in terms of a 'double entity,' which incorporates meaning into itself and leaves nothing intelligible outside of it,<sup>68</sup> raises a critical problem. The unity of signifier and signified implies that there is no 'transcendental signified' outside of language. It implies that 'reality' (in the form of concepts, *eidetic* structures, and so on) cannot have 'form' for us except insofar as it is always already worded. An irreducible, necessary bond between language and thought implies that where there is no language, there simply is no thought. If this is so, then the possibility of 'truth,' if such a possibility remains, must lie within language. In other words, if the meaning of a sign is established by repressing all but a particular connection between signifier and signified, then 'certainty' depends on the stability and endurance ('naturalness' or necessity) of a chosen connection.

This issue becomes highly problematic for any 'project of truth' when considered in tandem with Saussure's 'thesis of arbitrariness,' as Derrida (1976:44) calls it. For Saussure (1964:67-70) 'arbitrariness' relates to the idea that in signification, specific material sounds or marks are seen to be only conventionally related to concepts, unlike images which have a 'natural' (structurally equivalent) relationship with what they represent. While there may be a necessary relationship between an apple and its image, there is no such relationship between an apple and the string of marks 'a-p-p-l-e.' A foreigner who could understand the image at once, would have trouble understanding the string without first learning the necessary linguistic conventions. Thus, in employing the notion of arbitrariness, Saussure (1974:69) did not wish to imply that language simply submits to the whims and fancies of individuals who wish to establish their own associations between signifier and signified. In other words, this is not to say that 'meaning,' as the closest we can get to any 'reality' is wholly singular, bound only to the specific psychological association between signifier and signified in any particular individual.<sup>69</sup> Rather, arbitrariness relates to something of common knowledge; namely, that establishing the meaning of a term in the linguistic community is unmotivated. That is, the concept or signified is not bound by any 'natural' or necessary relationship to the succession of sounds which characterise the word or signifier associated with it. Any 'object of linguistic referral' (Norris 1989:54) could be represented just as well by any sequence of sounds. This is demonstrated empirically by the very

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<sup>68</sup> The fact that in order to make things intelligible, or to understand them, language is all we have access to, does not mean that the inarticulate order has no extra-linguistic effects, however. It simply means that language is the only means available to make these effects intelligible. See here, Benvenuto and Kennedy (1986:151-153) on the effects of the 'foreclosed' on the body.

<sup>69</sup> It is worth noting the Lacanian (1981:120) insight that language pre-exists individuals, and entry into the order of language (the 'Symbolic Order') demands a certain acquiescence or submission to its laws, and is accompanied by a concomitant loss of any absolute singularity or individuality. Here one could refer to Silverman's (1983:174-176) use of the Kaspar Hauser event to demonstrate this loss of individuality.



existence of different languages, where entirely different signifiers may be associated with 'essentially the same' signified; and, more tellingly, by the fact that the same signifier may be associated with a number of different signifieds.

In referential models of language, this notion of arbitrariness attaches itself to the relation between name and referent, leaving the distinction between language and the concept/reality/meaning composite intact. If words were mere names, such arbitrariness would be of no great import, for the meaning would remain intact no matter what label were to be attached, refined, or detached. However, once we become aware of the 'sign character' of language (i.e. the inaccessibility of an independently meaningful, and therefore universal, referent) then the notion of arbitrariness takes on new significance, with radical implications. Here we are obliged to accept that there is no rational order of necessity governing the association of word and meaning reconceived in terms of signifier and signified. In this case, one is faced with the problem of stabilising meaning: for in the absence of external referents (or 'transcendental signifieds'), how can there be any guarantee that the relation between signifier and signified remains stable or fixed, and that meanings remain intact from one context to the next? In short, once it becomes evident that the relation between signifier and signified is not natural or necessary, but wholly conventional or arbitrary, then the sign cannot assume a fixed, positive identity, and the signifier can take on an unlimited number of possible and equally valid meanings. If this is the case; if, in other words, the sign is not only cut loose from an independent, stable, referential anchor, but, as a consequence of the arbitrariness of the relation between signifier and signified, is also denied any inherently stable or necessary association between these orders, then the question arises as to how meaning is achieved at all (cf. Culler 1976:23). How is it possible to arrest, in any conclusive manner, what Lacan (1977:154) referred to as the 'incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier?' In short, Saussure's contention that the connections made between particular signifiers and signifieds are 'unmotivated,' calls into question the possibility of finding any guarantee for the veracity and endurance of such arbitrarily chosen connections.

This problem, however, has reached a point here that is far beyond anything that Saussure himself would have sanctioned. The 'opening' (in the unity of signifier and signified) that enables such a radical question concerning the possibility of truth to be asked is counteracted in Saussure's text by another move which aims in the opposite direction. Part of Derrida's work in *Of Grammatology* (1976:27-73) is to show that despite Saussure's (1964:111) insistence that thought as such was impossible without the help of *signs*, the radicality of his proposed unity of signifier and signified is subverted once it becomes clear that in order to preserve the certainty, 'naturalness,' or necessity of the bond between particular signifiers and signifieds, (words and meanings) he attempted to save the essence of language from anything that could actually be defined as a sign.

This 'process of subversion' began with an attempt to save speech from the influence of writing, on the one hand, and developed into an attempt to save 'language' from the material sign (including speech), on the other. Derrida (1976:27-73) addresses the many tensions and contradictions generated by Saussure's efforts here in minute detail. For my purposes, however, perhaps it is enough to point generally to some of the difficulties associated with Saussure's various distinctions between 'thought-sound' (language) or 'phonology,' 'phonetics,' 'acoustics,' and 'writing,' subtended by traditional form/matter and *physis/nomos* binaries.

These difficulties seem to arise from Saussure's attempt *simultaneously* (within the compass of a single text) to: 1) reduce writing by calling it a mere image (and hence 'natural' symbol) of speech; and yet denounce writing as a corrupting influence on speech, and hence, *not* a 'natural' image (which should be inherently non-corrupting); 2) proclaim the independence of speech from writing due to the phonè's 'more natural' relation to thought; 3) proclaim the independence of language (as thought-sound) from everyday speech, and thus, emphasise the arbitrary relation between speech and language; 4) proclaim the independence of language from any sound at all. Thus, it becomes exceedingly difficult to disentangle the relationships between 'language,' 'thought-sound' or 'phonology,' 'phonetics,' 'acoustics,' and 'writing.' Indeed, depending on his aims (to reduce writing, or to articulate the 'form' of language, for example), Saussure sometimes collapsed certain distinctions between these concepts and sometimes maintained them rigorously.

## 5. The Ambivalence of Saussure: Derrida's Deconstruction

### i. Saussure's Paradoxical Reduction and Denunciation of Writing

...it is the theoretician of the arbitrariness of the sign who reminds us of the supposedly *natural* order of privilege and subordination between linguistic and graphic signs.

Derrida (1976:35)

To elaborate, Saussure's attempt to 'reduce' writing as a mere image, and hence merely 'natural' symbol, of speech saw writing as a representational system, not essentially bound up with language, but rather as an 'external reflection of the reality of language' (Derrida 1976:45). Apart from the difficulty that Derrida (1976:45) notes, namely, that the phoneme is not imaginable, which makes it hard to see how it could be rendered graphically or visually in 'natural symbols,' Saussure was at least implicitly aware of the difficulty of this reduction.

This awareness is evident in his fear of writing's power to infiltrate speech and corrupt it, through, for example, the mispronunciation of words due to the visual image of their spelling (Saussure 1964:31). Saussure's concern about writing's alleged power to deform speech could not have arisen if

he had been secure about the naturalness of the relation between the two, for a natural relation cannot tolerate such corruption. Writing was also blamed for imperfectly or only partially reproducing phonemes (Derrida 1976:54), again suggesting that the relationship between speech and writing, far from being simply 'natural,' was an uncomfortable one. Moreover, Derrida (1976:45) argues that there is also explicit evidence in Saussure's text that he saw (spoken) language and writing as analogous but dissimilar sign systems among, and comparable with others. In other words, the acknowledged dissimilarity between the graphic and phonic sign systems makes it difficult to see how the one must be derived from and thus secondary to the other. As Derrida (1976:54) suggests, it would seem as if Saussure acknowledged that, '...the radical dissimilarity of the two elements – graphic and phonic – exclude[s] derivation...'

Hence, Saussure himself seems to have suggested that writing should not be viewed as a secondary system derived from speech; that is, the mere (natural) graphic representation of speech. Yet, either way, whether writing was reduced to a merely external representative of speech, or seen as another sign system altogether, Saussure's main aim here seems to have been to procure the independence of speech from writing due to the phonè's more 'natural' connection with language.

## ii. Difficulties Associated With Saussure's Privileging of Speech Over Writing

When he insisted on the helplessness of thought without *signs* (1964:111), Saussure was not willing to go so far as to proclaim the unity of content (or 'form' in the sense of 'ideal meaning') and 'matter,' or 'body,' which at this point, it seems, he associated only with writing. In Husserlian language, Saussure's insistence on a signifier/signified unity did not deny the reduction of 'indication,' but rejected the reduction of 'expression.' Thus, Saussure insisted on the inseparability of 'ideal meaning' and its abstract or 'nonmaterial' linguistic 'embodiment.' In other words, he insisted on the unity of language and mind, in a sense that left matter or materiality (here, in the form of graphic signs) out of the picture altogether.

Thus, like Husserl, when Saussure spoke of language, what he had in mind was language as *sound*.<sup>70</sup> For Saussure too, according to Derrida (1976:30) the self-present voice, was thought of as 'the immediate, natural, and direct signification of the meaning.'<sup>71</sup> In other words, according to Derrida (1976:31), when Saussure claimed that the word was already a constituted 'unity of sense and sound, of concept and voice, ...of the signified and the signifier,' he was suggesting that there was a natural bond

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<sup>70</sup> This is already a mixture of form and matter, as Derrida has demonstrated in his deconstruction of Husserl, in which he shows that the 'sound' or 'phonè' involved in 'hearing oneself speak' has a mediating materiality equal to that of real sound in ordinary speech.

<sup>71</sup> 'The meaning,' here, as Derrida (1976:30) notes, is also translatable as the 'signified,' 'concept,' or 'ideal object.'

between signified (concept or sense) and the phonic signifier, which made the 'phonic signifier' transparent to sense Derrida (1976:44). This is encapsulated in what he called 'thought-sound' (Saussure 1964:112).

In other words, it seems that when one 'speaks' (constitutes 'thought-sounds'), 'sense' is immediately apparent in the very articulation of these sounds in the mind. This is the supposedly irreducible and 'natural' bond between phonic linguistic expression and meaning. This supposed 'naturalness' of the relation between sound and sense, the inseparability of thought and its 'nonmaterial' linguistic 'embodiment,' together with the reduction of materiality to a secondary status, merely arbitrarily related to 'sense,' seems to serve as justification for the privileging of speech over writing. Yet, the form/matter distinction invoked in this analysis harbours a contradiction, for it must also, by the same token, reduce the material aspect of 'phonic expression;' namely speech itself.

### iii. The Independence of Language From Speech

It is impossible for sound alone, a material element, to belong to language. It is only a secondary thing, substance to be put to use...

(Saussure 1964:120)

According to Derrida (1976:53), things become even more interesting when Saussure has ostensibly reduced writing out of the picture in order (supposedly) to concentrate on the phonè as the sole object of linguistics. Here, in his attempt to grasp the essence of language, its 'form,' or its *formalisation*, in order to ensure that it remained in accord with his commitments to certainty,<sup>72</sup> a more radical side of Saussure's theory begins to emerge, in which ultimately sound itself is reduced. Saussure's reduction of the phonic substance occurred in two stages. The first of these involved the reduction of ordinary speech from the essence of language. In other words, this first reduction involved a distinction between everyday speech (*parole*) and language (*langue*) as 'thought-sound' (Saussure 1964:77). Here, in direct contradiction to the privilege he earlier accorded to speech, for which he made use of a form/matter distinction, Saussure used the very same distinction to suggest that language was a system independent of particular, context-bound, speakers.

Thus, when Saussure thought of language in terms of words described as 'thought-sounds,' he was thinking not of the real, material and particular intonation of the words spoken out aloud, but again, of something akin to Husserl's 'phenomenological voice.' This move was motivated by the desire to preserve the certainty or stability of the connections between signifiers and signifieds, which requires that thought-sounds be capable of conception in essential terms, above, beyond or apart from the

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<sup>72</sup> This is paradoxical, in view of what was later to be made of it.

vicissitudes of their use in particular contexts. To separate an 'enduring' language from everyday speech, Saussure had to insist that words as 'thought-sounds,' which stayed the same in spite of material variation, were part of a more basic, more encompassing order, which excluded the vagaries of accent.<sup>73</sup> Here, thus, Saussure had to disregard the materiality of the vocalised signifier in spite of the ease with which the significance for meaning of inflection, accent or pronunciation could be demonstrated, by merely changing the accent in any simple sentence.

At this point it seems as if arbitrariness, for Saussure, had also to pertain to the actual, specific sounds that were articulated as words, and materially vocalised on the breath, in ordinary conversation, as the objects of 'acoustics.' Presumably Saussure saw the arbitrariness of this relation in light of the possibility of intending the 'same' meaning (signified) by means of different actual sounds. In other words, he must have seen that despite a certain play in pronunciation, a signified could remain unchanged; that the extent to which a signifier may be pushed materially and yet still remain associated with the same signified, depended on the context of its occurrence. In the context of 'bread and soup,' in South African English, for example, 'soup' ('soop'), 'soep' and 'sop' would be accepted as different material vocalisations of the same signifier. Include a foreigner at the dinner table, and even 'sup,' 'serp,' or 'sip' may be understood.

Thus, Saussure was obliged to posit some kind of 'natural bond' between a more durable '*immaterial*' phonè and 'sense,' which accorded the 'phenomenological voice' (or 'thought-sound') a privileged position in relation to *both* speech and writing, since both the sonorous and the graphic 'bodies,' as purely material, were merely arbitrarily related to the signified. This should have prevented Saussure from maintaining a privilege of speech above writing. Yet, according to Saussure (Derrida 1976:37), writing, but not speech (somehow),

...is a mediation and the departure of the logos from itself. Without writing, the latter would remain in itself. Writing is the dissimulation of the natural, primary, and immediate presence of sense to the soul within the logos.

Thus, what first appears to be a radical insight concerning the unity of signifier and signified is in fact subverted by a form/matter (concept/materiality) distinction aimed at preserving 'language' from

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<sup>73</sup> The contradiction here is notable in Saussure's (1964:70) own insistence on the inseparability of a word and its material vocalisation: 'When I accent a syllable, for instance,' he argued, 'it seems that I am concentrating more than one significant element on the same point. But this is an illusion; the syllable and its accent constitute only one phonational act.'

contamination by the materiality of the sign, especially in the form of writing.<sup>74</sup> As Derrida (1976:40) notes, despite the radicality of his insistence on the unity of signifier and signified, this moment in Saussure's text harks back to the 'consciousness paradigm. In Derrida's words (1976:40):

The affirmation of the essential and "natural" bond between the *phonè* and the sense, the privilege accorded to an order of signifier (which then becomes the major signified of all other signifiers) depends expressly, and in contradiction to the other levels of the Saussurean discourse, upon a psychology of consciousness and of intuitive consciousness.

As for Husserl, true meaning for Saussure depended on the full presence of the concept in the clear evidence of consciousness, and that which removed the concept from such full presence to consciousness, or caused its detour (namely writing or other material forms of representation) was strictly to be excluded or reduced.

#### **iv. The Independence of Language From Sound**

The other side of Saussure comes to the fore in his principal affirmation according to which "the thing that constitutes language" is...unrelated to the phonic character of the linguistic sign"  
(Derrida 1976:43)

Yet, there is another movement in Saussure's text, which indicates forward to a more encompassing theory of signification. This movement is embedded in a second reduction, which, as Derrida (1976:53) notes, excludes 'sound and its "natural bond"...with meaning' from the essence of language.

Here, arbitrariness, for Saussure, pertained as much to the specific sounds that were articulated as words, in the mind – as objects of phonology and phonetics<sup>75</sup> – as to the actual sounds that were, after the fact, materially vocalised on the breath. If this were the case, it would seem that, like writing and speech, the phonological/phonetic materials too would be joined to sense in a wholly conventional manner. In other words, for Saussure, once a sense had been associated, conventionally or arbitrarily, with a particular sequence of sounds, it was only this act of 'joining,' and not any 'natural bond'

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<sup>74</sup> Derrida (1981a:23) notes that this subversion is inherent in the very formulation of the concept 'sign,' which keeps signifier and signified unified but distinct. Saussure stressed that the terms 'signifier' and 'signified' simultaneously incorporate 'the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole of which they are parts' (Saussure 1964:67). In other words, he was careful to indicate that signifier and signified remained both inseparable and yet distinct. One may be valueless without the other, but neither may the two terms become seamlessly fused. Yet, as Derrida points out, to speak of signifier and signified (even as a unity) in terms of that which represents or mediates as against that which is represented, is to adhere to a tradition which saw concepts as independent of the material means of their expression and preservation (i.e. language).

between sound and 'sense,' that marked, so to speak, a durable access route to the sense or meaning. That is, the conventionally chosen sequence of sounds – the phenomenological voice – would (somehow), despite the vagaries of material vocalisation, repeatedly, or better, unfailingly, and therefore necessarily or 'naturally,' bring to light the selfsame sense to which it was arbitrarily joined (cf. Saussure 1964:120-121). This conventional bond, somehow made 'natural,' then became, for Saussure, the source and guarantee of linguistic certainty.

To sum up Derrida's argument: when compared with phonetic writing which was said merely to copy spoken language, speech seems to have assumed the privilege of a more 'natural' relation with sense – a privilege that it is later denied in relation to thought-sound (language). Thus, Saussure, at a certain point, defined the linguistic object purely in terms of the 'spoken' word. Here, therefore, he went further than Husserl who believed he could reduce language altogether from 'pure' thinking. However, Saussure's almost violent prejudice against writing (Derrida 1976:34-41) and his strong focus on its dangers as unnatural and arbitrary in comparison with sound seemed to distract him from the inconsistencies attending his use of the form/matter distinction. The use of this distinction, which placed all material signifiers, phonic or non-phonic, on the same level, forced him to exclude from the essence of language precisely what had enabled him to exclude writing in the first place; namely speech. Thus, if Saussure were to include speech as part of 'language' he would be obliged also to include writing (as spacing, distance, mediation, difference, etc.) in language and – having already posited the unity of signifier and signified, of language and mind – therefore in mind. Saussure did not resolve this problematic relationship, but instead went on to reduce sound altogether from the essence of language. According to Derrida (1976:40), these various movements do not inform each other in Saussure's text, but stand side by side, creating a textual maze of tensions and contradictions.

## **6. A Way Out of the Tangle: Saussure's 'Thesis of Difference'**

One way out of the tangle, as Derrida (1976:43) suggests, is a return to the thinking of language 'short of' the metaphysical commitments that impel Saussure into this maze of his own making. Here one could consider a return to Saussure's insight into the unity of signifier and signified. This unity is, in fact, so irreducible that we may be tempted, as Derrida (1976:43) suggests, to think that all we have are signifiers leading only to other signifiers; that every signified is also always another signifier. In his words (1976:43): 'Writing is not the sign of a sign, except if one says it of all signs, which would be

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<sup>75</sup> The difference here seems to be that phonology pertains to the study of the mechanisms of production of a set of sounds within a particular language, and phonetics pertains to the study of the relationships between and evolution of these sounds in relation to historical events (Saussure 1964:33-34).

more profoundly true.’ Interestingly, Saussure himself, when he is not thinking about writing, provides the opening, by means of his second reduction of the *phonè*, to do just this:

The linguistic signifier...is not in essence phonic but incorporeal – constituted not by its material substance but the differences that separate its sound-image from all others...

(Saussure: 1964:118-119; Derrida 1976:53)

The idea or phonic substance that a sign contains is of less importance than the other signs that surround it.

(Saussure: 1964:120; Derrida 1976:53)

...in all cases, then, we discover not *ideas* given in advance but *values* emanating from the system. When we say that these values correspond to concepts, it is understood that these concepts are purely differential, not positively defined by their content but negatively determined by their relations with other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is that they are what the others are not.

(Saussure: Quoted in Culler 1976:26)

What Derrida picks up on here, is Saussure’s ultimate conception of language in terms of something unrelated to the notion of any ‘natural bond’ between sound and ‘sense.’ The essence of language becomes not something spoken, but something abstract, a system, involving the possibility of ‘codification;’ that is, the possibility of metaphor or representation, or signifiers standing for signifieds, which in their turn can operate as signifiers. Together with this, language, here, involves the capacity to constitute and operate within an articulated (joined) network of differential interrelationships (Derrida 1981a:21).

Importantly, then, what is essential to language (what initially was conceived of in terms of the ‘natural’ bond of ‘thought-sound’) has no inherent quality. As Derrida notes (1976:53): ‘By definition, difference is never in itself a sensible plenitude.’ If the essence of language is difference, then the faculty of constituting a language does not involve applying labels to fully present, pre-existing concepts. Rather, it involves instituting ‘a system of distinct signs’ taking into account the relations of difference that operate both at the paradigmatic, metaphoric, vertical level of the ‘code’ (of that which stands in the place of another), as well as at the syntagmatic, material, horizontal level of ‘articulation’ or joining (cf Saussure 1964:122-127).

## **7. Kant’s Space Analysis: Implications of the Rejection of a Temporal (Etymological) Model of Language in Favour of a Spatial Model.**

Derrida contends that, despite deep contradictions in Saussure’s thinking on language, he offered a necessary spatial corrective to Husserl’s theory. Importantly, Saussure emphasised that language had a



spatial dimension, which could not be overlooked. Words were not self-enclosed units of meaning (subject only to the temporal in the sense of a first meaning, which conditions the second and so on), but gained their meanings in a *relational* context. In short, meaning could be articulated only in spatial or structural terms. The implications of this, in relation to the ‘temporal’ (etymological) ‘referential model’ of language discussed earlier in connection with Husserl’s theory of signification, may be brought out by means of Kant’s (1964:252-253) analysis of space.

Because the components or parts of space existed ‘together at the same time,’ according to Kant, one could not make a distinction between *progressus* and *regressus* in an attempt to delineate the conditions of the possibility of a particular, defined area. In other words, in contrast to a temporal series where present time was conditioned by and subordinate to a more primordial ‘past time,’ as far as space was concerned, the parts were not subordinated, but co-ordinated to each other. This meant that one part of space (or particular area) could not be the condition of the possibility of the other; that is, one part could not be seen as more primordial than any other.

However, according to Kant (1964:253), since we were nevertheless constrained to apprehend space successively (one part added to another), such apprehension took place in time and, therefore, successively in a ‘series.’ In this series of aggregated spaces (centimetres in a meter, for example) – beginning with a given portion of space, those which continued to be added on formed the condition of the limits of the former. The apprehension of space, then, had to be regarded as a synthesis of the series of the conditions of a given conditioned. It differed from the apprehension of time, however, in that, as Kant (253) put it, ‘the side of the [spatially] conditioned is not in itself distinguishable from the side of the condition.’ In other words, there was no directionality of conditions as there was in relation to time. Importantly, as Kant pointed out, this meant that, ‘...one part of space is not given; but only limited, by and through another...’ For this reason, there were no particular, defined spaces in and of themselves. A space, to be such at all, had to presuppose the space all around it that formed the condition of its limitation. It is not difficult to apply the general terms of this analysis to a theory of signification that would view meaning in spatial terms.

## **8. A Spatial’ or ‘Differential’ Conception of Signification**

Following the form of Kant’s (1964:253) analysis of space, one could suggest that inasmuch as the meaning of a sign is not primordially given, but only limited by and through others, it is necessary to consider every limited sign as conditioned (that is, meaningful) only in so far as it presupposes some other sign(s) as the condition(s) of its limitation. In other words, just as a centimetre has value only as conditioned by the space around it, so signs have meaning only within the limits of the context created by other signs. Any sign, therefore, is shorthand for a set of relations. At every point, right back to its ‘point of

origin,' which as Derrida (1982:12) notes, can no longer be called 'originary,' a sign is situated within a network of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations which condition it (cf. Silverman 1983:106). Lacan's (Silverman 1983:167-171) linguistic explanation of the '*Fort/da*' game played by Freud's exemplary analysand highlights the sense in which one can say that the first word is not a language. Language, by nature, begins when the second word arises as the condition or limit of the first. Thus, according to Lacan, '*fort*' (gone) has no value or meaning except in relation to (at least) the conceivability of a thing's reappearance ('*da*'). Thus, in an infant's continuously shifting 'reality,' 'gone' has no value unless what has gone can be conceived of as retrievable. It seems to me, then, that an infant will not cry (here, an act which signals conception of the binary) over the loss of that which it cannot conceive of as retrievable.

Language, thus, in Derrida's terms, depends on a 'primary' spacing, which means that the meaning of a word has no absolute origin, for the 'first' sound, mark or gesture is only a 'sign' (that is, it only has meaning) in relation to the second, and the third and so on (cf. Descombes 1980:145). In a spatial conception of language, then, a sign can only have meaning in terms of relations of difference, and not in terms of a natural bond with a fully present pre-existing concept. This concurs with Saussure's insistence on the arbitrary or unmotivated nature of the sign; that is, his insistence that the relations between signifier and signified are arbitrarily or conventionally *instituted* (Derrida 1976:47). Hence, as Derrida (1982:10) has pointed out, due to the correlativity<sup>76</sup> of Saussure's theses of arbitrariness and difference, denial of any natural link between word and thing implies that meanings are only possible within a network of differential relationships.

As is implied in Cilliers's analysis of 'difference' in connection with systems of multiple components, the emphasis on the plural is crucial here. For, as Cilliers (1998b:3) asks, what would be the outcome of an attempt to describe a component of a system *only* in terms of its relationship of difference with one other component? In this case, in general terms, one could say that the first component differs from the second in being everything that the second is *not*. This, Cilliers points out, here, does not, of course, offer all that much in the way of a definition of the first component, since the description 'everything that the second component is *not*,' retains a boundlessness of possibility that does little to establish what the first component actually is. Hence, further constraints (in the form of other relations of difference, which indicate what else the first component is *not*) are needed if this component is to have a meaning that can be grasped and applied in any useful (or significant) way.<sup>77</sup> Cilliers (1998b:3) argues, then, that the possibility of delineating the meaning of a component of a

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<sup>76</sup> According to Derrida (1982:10), the inseparability between Saussure's thesis of arbitrariness and his thesis of difference *also* implies that: 'There can be arbitrariness only because the system of signs is constituted solely by the differences in terms, and not by their plenitude.'

<sup>77</sup> There is an interesting resonance, here, with Derrida's (1982) efforts in his essay *Différance* to 'constrain' or 'delineate' *différance* through a kind of 'negative theology.' It is, indeed, essential to bear in mind here that relations of difference specify all that a component of a system is *not*.

system with multiple components, in terms of a single relation of difference really remains hypothetical, since the components of such systems are inherently involved in many such constraining relationships of difference.

The crucial point to be made here confirms what Kant (1964:252-253) argued in his analysis of space; namely that what was possible or potential could be actualised only by means of constraints. In other words, a spatially organised component becomes that which it is, or it acquires 'form' or definition by means of the constraints imposed by its relations of difference with other components (Cilliers 1998b:3).

Drawing out some of the implications of Cilliers's analysis of difference, it is worthwhile emphasising here that, by the same token, possibility is also thereby (in its very actualisation) necessarily reduced. Thus, paradoxically, the selfsame reduction (or placing of constraints) that is necessary for a component's 'actualisation' (identity, form, definition) and hence its gain in 'significance' may also be responsible for its loss of significance. To make sense of this apparent paradox (or circularity) it is necessary to grasp that as far as generating (delineating) meaning is concerned, differential relationships operate in terms of a particular 'economy' suspended as a continuum between the limit-points of two impossibilities; absolute polysemy, as discussed above, and absolute univocality.

To elaborate, at the (impossible) limit-point of 'pure' possibility, there would be no differentiation at all between a component and any of the others in the system. In other words, without entering into any constraining relations of difference, a component would have the potential to mean everything.<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, at the opposite (and equally impossible) limit-point of complete meaning, differentiation would have become absolute; that is, a component of a system would have become absolutely different from everything. In other words, the sheer copiousness (number) of constraints placed on the component by differentiation would render it singular, or unique. Here one might recall Derrida's (1974:7-9) distinction between the 'poetic-dominant' and the 'epistemic-dominant' made via his metaphor of the 'usure' of a coin in *White Mythology*, where *both* too much meaning (in the mythic/poetic) *and* too much constraint (in the epistemic) point to a certain lack of 'signification.'

Between these two limit-points, the 'form' of a component takes shape, delineated – and endlessly revised if the system is complex – through a kind of 'negative theology,' by the differential relations that constitute each component. Fewer differential (constraining) relations give rise to greater multivalence, vagueness, diffuseness, open-endedness, or polysemy. A greater number of differential relations imply a 'fine tuning;' that is, finer and finer differentiation in a quest for univocality. (This is the way 'science' works.) Thus relations of difference are what determine the place of a component on

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<sup>78</sup> This situation, as I see it, describes the paralysis at the extreme of 'freeplay' postmodernism.

the continuum stretched between the limit-points of multivocality and univocality. If it is strongly constrained by many relations of difference, it becomes more specific in its meaning, and if it is weakly constrained due to fewer relations of difference, it remains broader in its meaning. This brings to mind Baumgarten's (Harries 1968:18-19) distinction between two modes of knowing, namely the 'sensible' or concrete which is rich in texture, but which sacrifices clarity and distinctness, and the 'understanding' which gains in clarity what it loses in richness.

In pragmatic terms, greater differentiation, or stronger constraints, up to a certain point, ensure that a component is more 'significant' or useful, in the sense that these constraints increase its explanatory power. However, this is true only up to a certain point. Tighter specification does not imply a greater usefulness (more pragmatic significance) in every context. Indeed, there is a certain point at which the tightness of a component's specification may cause it to exceed its usefulness or significance. That is, something becomes so rigidly defined that it is no longer useful (e.g. it no longer has much explanatory power). I have in mind here, for example, the contrast between an excessively general (or multivalent) term such as 'being' which is so encompassing as to be paradoxically 'empty' of significance or lacking in explanatory power, and an excessively particular or unique term which applies to a single and singular entity and can explain nothing else. Here one is reminded of the tale by Borges (Baudrillard 1996:75) in which a map is drawn in such detail that in size it covers the same expanse as the territory the cartographers set out to map. In a similar sense, a language that demanded absolute specificity would have to include as many different words as there are particular 'entities' to be described (as many different words as there are different leaves, snowflakes, grains of sand, stars, and so on).

In the play between diversity and singularity of meaning, this point beyond which differentiation increases usefulness, is *contextually determined*. This is not to imply that it is possible to take the whole context of semiotic influence into account when using language. As Kant's space analysis suggests, space is apprehended via a successive aggregation of spaces, and all space cannot be apprehended simultaneously as a whole. Correspondingly, in relation to language, Saussure (1964:70) drew on what he identified as the second primordial characteristic of language; namely, its linearity. Here, he drew a comparison between words (auditory signifiers) and visual signifiers (corporate logos, traffic signs and such like). Unlike visual signifiers, he argued, which can offer simultaneous multi-dimensional levels of meaning, auditory signifiers operate in the single dimension of time. Language, in other words, operates according to the succession of signifiers in a linear chain, and words have meaning only in relation to what precedes and follows them.

To say this, is to suggest that while the 'conventionality' or arbitrariness pertaining to the vertical relation between signifier and signified denies that meaning can inhere absolutely in individual units of signification, meaning could be achieved through a linear process of establishing horizontal relations of

difference between signs, operating simultaneously at the two levels of signifier and signified. In other words, if the signified has no inherent essence, but is an abstract category, which acquires an identity through its difference from other conceptual elements within a system, then it is subject to the interplay of play and resistance. How far, for example, can the concept 'green' be stretched towards blue or grey or yellow, for instance, until it is no longer 'green?' Similarly, at the material level of the signifier, such differential relationships are no less fundamental to the identity of a sign. To what extent, for example, can the material play of pronunciation, be pushed until a word is no longer the same word? Sometimes all that is necessary for a radical shift in what is signified is the slightest change in emphasis or accent; sometimes a signified survives a wide diversity in pronunciation. Lacan (1977a:153) puts it in a 'nutshell,'

...we can say that it is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning 'insists,' but that none of its elements 'consists' in the signification of which it is at the moment capable.

He (1977a:154) explains this by distinguishing between meaning produced diachronically or temporally along a horizontal, syntagmatic axis, which relates to the ordering of signifiers in a chain; and alternatively, meaning produced at the level of the relationship between signifier and signified. That is, meaning produced synchronically (in the moment of identification) along a vertical, associative (connotative) or paradigmatic axis (cf. Benvenuto & Kennedy 1986:114) – which he likens to the layered effect of 'several staves of a score' (1977a:154). Although distinct, both operate in conjunction to produce meaning. Thus, there is no such thing as a sign outside of the linear production of discourse. However, as Lacan pointed out here, the horizontal linearity of the production of discourse may be necessary to produce signification, but it is not sufficient. It is a mistake, for example, to think that a sentence is meaningless until the last word is appended. Moreover, the addition of words to sentences unfolding in discourse changes the meaning of the preceding words. Instead, there is meaning in unfinished sentences, and indeed, in single words, arising from what one could call 'anchoring points' beneath which are suspended a whole chain of connotations bound to relevant contexts (Lacan 1977a:154; Benvenuto & Kennedy 1986:114).

This, then, is (at least in part) what it means to say that relations of difference structure a system that has many components, such as the linguistic system. And it is probably this kind of 'economy' of difference that Saussure had in mind in offering his famous dictum, since this 'economy,' while allowing for a very 'complicated' network of relations of meaning to be generated through differences, does not necessarily deny the possibility of 'closure' in a spatial sense. In other words, there may seem to be little as yet in the foregoing analysis that could conclusively deny the possibility of a certain simultaneity, and therefore the possibility that meaning relations are, in principle, stabilisable. This matter will be taken up again in the section on complex systems.

## 9. Conclusion: The Question of Truth

To sum up, it is worth reiterating that Saussure's importance lies not in having provided a complete, coherent theory which typifies the thinking of the 'linguistic turn.' Rather, it lies in two main critical breakthroughs, which, not without internal contradiction, make thinking of language in terms of referentiality uncomfortable. In the first place, the internal logic of Saussure's thinking on language forces us to accept that, as Norris (1982:4) puts it: 'our knowledge of the world is inextricably shaped and conditioned by the language that serves to represent it.' Secondly, his correlative theses of arbitrariness and difference lead to the conclusion that, in Norris' words (1982:4): 'Meanings are bound up, according to Saussure, in a system of relationship and difference that effectively determines our habits of thought and perception.'

Thus, one of the consequences for philosophy of this 'spatial' conception of language is the belief that the 'things' in the world that manifest themselves as a result of the synthetic activities of the human faculties of intuition and linguistically mediated understanding (the 'things' that constitute our 'reality,' in other words) are not intelligible in isolation, in themselves, or as positive entities, but only through their interrelations. That is, something must of necessity be explained or understood in terms of its location in the network or context of its differential relations with the other 'things' that 'influence' it, even if such 'influence' is construed in terms of dissimilarity. General, abstract patterns (or structures) are essential to understanding the local or particular.

Questions concerning the possibility of 'truth,' will henceforth have to be formulated in terms of whether or not the semiotic structures or relations of difference that produce meaning – 'the systems of code and convention which also enable us to classify and organise the chaotic flow of experience' (Norris 1982:5) – prove to be universal and stable. Since signs (and hence, concepts or 'reality') could only have conclusive meanings if semantic structures proved to be stable or universal, absolute certainty or conclusive meaning would be subject (primarily) to the demands of the second capacity for 'closure' discussed earlier. That is, it would be subject to the possibility of positing an absolute context (a systemic totality, with definite boundaries and a closed and stable ordering of the elements or relations) within which all signs, in relation to each other, could have stable, final meanings. Thus, it remains to turn to the question concerning the possibility of such stable structures.

## **Chapter Six: Structure/‘Structurality’ and the Limit/Possibility Problematic Again**

### **1. Introduction**

The ‘spatiality’ of language; that is, language as ‘differential’ or ‘structural,’ suggests that the degree to which rational beings share an intelligible objective world turns on the problematic issue of whether or not meaning (as structural, differential or relational) can be produced in a stable and conclusive manner. Can meaning be the same for all those who speak the same language and directly equivalent in relation to those who speak ‘other’ languages? In other words, do culturally different (yet nevertheless universally rational) beings from different linguistic backgrounds, always understand ‘objective reality’ in exactly the same way? Do you, as a rational being, interpret ‘the world’ exactly the way I do, or do such things as cultural practices, ideologies, taboos, education, theoretical constructs, personality traits, likes, dislikes, fears and so on, engender different emphases, selective interpretations and in the end, different (perhaps even incompatible) ‘constitutive interpretations’ or ‘realities?’ Do all individuals, even, unavoidably produce purely personal meanings, in effect finding themselves lost in an atomistic, radically particular, semantic free play?<sup>79</sup>

Answers to these questions do not appear to be clear-cut. Indeed, a ‘spatial’ conception of language has given rise to two opposing strategies, two ‘modes of interpretation of interpretation’ (Derrida 1978b:292); that is, two modes of conceptualising conceptuality itself. It has given rise to a conflict between, broadly speaking, what one could call modernists (including structuralists) who aim to stabilise or limit meaning production at all costs, and those ‘freeplay’ postmodernists (Norris 1990:134) who, in response to the problems engendered by this, wish to free it up absolutely in an infinite ‘freeplay’ of endless possibility. While I shall speak of these strategies separately in what is to follow, it is important to note that they are really caricatures, drawn diametrically apart to make a certain point. Indeed, it is one of the primary tasks of this text to argue the intrinsic impossibility of finding either of

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<sup>79</sup> As Bert Olivier remarked in conversation, one is reminded here of a Leibnizian monad minus the coordinating function of the ‘pre-established harmony.’

these positions unadulterated in any philosophical work.<sup>80</sup> Rather, a discourse that resorts under the banner of one is quite likely to be ‘contaminated’ with elements of the other, if sometimes unwittingly. Thus, it is probably more accurate to say that the conflict between structuralism (as a kind of modernism) and postmodernism is one of emphasis. Hence, the work of a particular theorist may be called ‘structuralist’ if the emphasis lies on an ideal of absolute limitation as opposed to a ‘freeplay’ of possibility, and ‘postmodernist’ if the opposite applies.

Alternatively, one may ask whether this question itself (in the form of an either/or choice) has not been set up in a way that unjustifiably limits the terms of the debate, since the two opposing solutions elicited in response to this question are equally problematic. A ‘structuralist’ solution, generally speaking, involves a reaction to the prioritisation of the temporal (etymological) understanding of meaning in the referential model, by positing an alternative *structural* model, which emphasises the irreducibility of spacing in language, and hence in thinking itself. In some quarters, however, Saussurean based recognition of the spatiality of language seems to have led to a concomitant neglect of its temporality. In its extreme form – repeating what is, for Derrida (1978b:278-279), an age-old conception of structure, which aims to effect or maintain ‘closure’ in the spatial sense outlined earlier (Critchley 1992:61) – such ‘structuralism’ aims to uncover cognitive or interpretative structures that are, at bottom, rigidly synchronic, ahistorical, static and universal. Thus, structuralist thinkers, tending to reify a Saussurean ‘spatialisation,’ bring into the arena a different dogma in need of deconstruction.

Criticism of structuralism, on the other hand – the consequence of apparently having to make an either/or choice between a structuralist or a postmodernist emphasis – seems to leave philosophy with no other option but an unpalatable lapse into a ‘freeplay’ mentality, which rejects both temporal and spatial models of language out of hand as involving the tyranny of ‘limit’ or ‘closure.’ There are, however, needless to say, severe problems with such an absolute postmodernist alternative, not least of which concerns the return of the spectre of scepticism and relativism. Thus, ultimately, as I hope to demonstrate here, there are indeed troubling inconsistencies attached to any ‘project of truth’ (‘closure’) which privileges either the temporal or the spatial and reduces the other. Yet, subscribing in

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<sup>80</sup> Indeed, there are many thinkers whom I would be tempted to label ‘poststructuralist’ – notwithstanding the disapproval it provokes from some of the very thinkers that I would subsume under its auspices (Derrida, Lyotard, and Lacan, for example) – who share a general pattern of thinking that refuses to draw structuralism and postmodernism apart. Aside from Derrida’s deconstructive thinking (explored in detail in this text), which is exemplary in this regard, Lyotard’s (1984:79) well-known formulation of the relation between modernism and postmodernism, expresses an analogous injunction to view ‘reality’ in terms of a constant, dynamic tension between ‘being’ and ‘becoming.’ Here, Lyotard insists that: ‘A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.’ I have discussed Lyotard’s position in more detail elsewhere (Hurst 1997:51-54). Similarly, Lacan’s theory of subjectification suspends the subject between two corresponding limit-points of psychosis (Hurst 1998).



consequence to the 'postmodern' alternative to 'closure' does not prove to be a viable alternative strategy for dealing with the question of the interpretation of interpretation either.

### **i. Two 'Interpretations of Interpretation:' Structuralism and Postmodernism**

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The **one** seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology – in other words, throughout his entire history – has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play.

(Derrida 1978b:292-293)

There are countless ways of framing the tension between structuralism and postmodernism, and without doubt, the relations between them warrant careful treatment if one is to make the claim that thinkers of this generation and those to come cannot claim to be 'relevant' (assuming the term does not strain under the burden of contemporary politics) unless they are willing to work through the implications of 'the deconstructive twist' in theory and practice. Yet, the very complexity of this field, in relation to the limits of the present text, demands a framework, angle, or 'key;' and even within such a limited framework, the terrain is complex. On pain of oversimplification, therefore, I must of necessity paint with broad brush-strokes. Thus, perhaps for reasons that also have much to do with aesthetics (the architectonics of a text) and practicality, I have made an attempt to frame this tension in relatively abstract terms, which fit in with the thematics already drawn upon in this text. Hence, I shall make use here of Derrida's (1978b:278-281) analysis of 'structure' and 'structurality' as a 'key' to 'unlock' the divergent general patterns of thinking underlying 'structuralisms,' and 'postmodernisms' in their various guises.

### **ii. Structure and 'Structurality:' Derrida's Definition of Structure**

I think one could comfortably agree with Aristotle that 'reality' obviously does not consist of 'pure' potentiality; this would simply amount to a kind of formless chaos. Rather, 'reality' as humanly experienced, at bottom involves some form of interplay between potentiality and limitation. In other words, for 'reality' to be for us at all, it must of necessity include the productive *and* limiting effects of structure (that is, tensional relationships or relations of difference). Without such tensional relationships, which circumscribe potentiality, giving unity or form to a set of elements, and *thus enabling* both a stability and a play of possible permutations, a 'reality' of any kind would not be conceivable at all (not even Baudrillard's 'hyper-reality'). Structure, seen in this way, becomes the condition of the

possibility of a human 'reality.' Philosophy in general, then, as the thinking of structure, is primarily the thinking of the relationship between what Nietzsche (1967:33-41) described as the 'Apollonian' forces of limitation (those which unify, circumscribe, create boundaries, hold elements together) and the disruptive 'Dionysian' forces of potentiality which strain against limits, threaten to break boundaries, or break elements apart.

In '*Structure, Sign and Play*' (1978b:278-293) Derrida refers to the 'structurality' of structure to bring out the implicit, if not hidden, Dionysian element in the word 'structure' as it stands; namely, the capacity contained within a set of elements in tensional relations for movement, change or reordering. In other words, 'structurality' refers to the possibility of varying the elements in a structure and the relations between them, setting off chain reactions, or ripple effects in a way reminiscent of Adorno's (1984:10; 105) concept of 'constellations.' Here forces of variable intensity between elements may be reinforced, reduced or even dissolved by the introduction, removal or reordering of elements. 'Structurality' thus refers to the capacity, inherent in structures, to evince a certain play of possible permutations (variations of the order of a set of things) which, in the playing, subtly or radically changes the 'nature' of the elements or relations involved. It is 'structurality,' one could argue, that is missing from Saussure's account of language as structured by relations of difference, and from subsequent attempts to generalise this 'economy' of difference to other theoretical fields under the banner of 'structuralism.'

## 2. Structuralism

Derrida (1978b:279) argues that the history of Western metaphysics has shown a bias or distortion in the thinking of structure, resulting in an unacknowledged contradiction in whose repression there is expressed the force of a desire for certitude.<sup>81</sup> He maintains (1978b:278) that it would be easy enough to demonstrate the existence of a specific conception of 'structure' that is as old as science and philosophy itself; and more than this, this conception so thoroughly permeates the 'soil' of ordinary language in the West, from its 'pre-Socratic' depths to the present, that it is inextricably bound up with Western philosophical thinking.

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<sup>81</sup> The anxiety that seems to permeate Western thought from its inception takes the form of a strong reluctance to tolerate the thought of an uncontrollable heterogeneity of irreducible elements; hence the need for an ontologically determined centre which can control, anchor and reduce heterogeneity. Traditionally, it is thought that anxiety can be mastered through the certitude generated by a stable centre. Yet, it is the very concept of a centre that generates the anxiety it is supposed to master. If humans were born to a pre-established incredulity regarding the notion of such a centre, we would probably not experience the need for the kind of 'metaphysical security' it ostensibly provides, and would not, consequently, experience the anxiety brought about by the threat of its possible absence.

According to Derrida the conception of structure which – until the advent of the ‘linguistic turn’ – held Western philosophy utterly in its thrall is one in which ‘structurality’ (or the potential for a play of permutations which changes the nature of the elements involved) had been reduced or repressed in order to feed a psychological desire for the certitude of final, stable (or ultimate) limits, or for what may be called ‘metaphysical security.’ In other words, such a desire drives the quest for first and last principles; the attempt to discover some or other entity beyond the everyday world of appearances which could serve as their ultimate point of origin or final goal, and thus could stand as the guarantee of a ‘true’ conception of reality.

In Western thinking, such stabilising limits are ostensibly achievable by attributing a centredness to the structure of ‘reality.’ This reflects a general conception of structure as that which must contain, in Derrida’s words (1978b:278), a ‘point of presence, a fixed origin,’ upon which all else is dependent, which would not only ‘orient, balance, and organize the structure,’ but more importantly, would ensure ‘that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure.’ The concept ‘structure,’ therefore, is reduced here to that of ‘centred structure’ (Derrida 1978b:279), which at its core, repeats three of the Western metaphysical tradition’s most basic, powerful and pervasive assumptions: namely, the assumption that reality is in some way a unity or consolidation of different elements (hence the attempt to discover a single theory, such as a unified field theory in science, that would encompass and integrate all others); the assumption that that upon which all else depends, endures without changing, beyond the flux of the everyday (Solomon 1986:112); and finally, the assumption that the centred structure of reality may be conceived ‘on the basis of a full presence which is beyond play’ (Derrida 1978b:279).

In other words, that upon which all else depends, can be conceived of as an entity (‘God’ or ‘Spirit’ or ‘Reason’ for example) external to and pre-existing the conceptual order, which, by virtue of its transcendental priority, can govern or control what appears in the conceptual order. Thus, for example, Kant attempted to heal the divide between reason and sensibility by showing that eternal, universal conceptual structures (the complete set of forms of intuition and categories of the understanding) were imposed on a chaotic manifold of sense data to produce experience. ‘Reality,’ for Kant, therefore, circumscribed or given form by the operation of a fixed rationality, universally present in beings of a certain kind, could be thought of as a unified system of interrelated intelligible objects, that was the same for all rational beings.

Generally, structuralists take this Kantian position as a starting point, although their focus has shifted to semantics. Following Saussure’s example, structural linguistics is characterised by an approach in which language is seen as a unified system of interrelated elements, and attempts are made to uncover the general laws or rules governing its operation, or its underlying ‘structure’ (De George & De George: 1972:xix). Structuralist linguists do not presuppose the possibility of seeing any particular

linguistic system as a complete and finalised whole. Rather, they assume the possibility of a position (a centre) outside all such systems (somehow) which would enable them to ascertain the complete and universal set of rules by which these systems supposedly operate. By applying such universal rules to differential relationships at the levels of concept as well as grammar (the levels of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations), Saussure thought he had discovered a way of fixing or stabilising the relationships between signifiers and signifieds in particular signs. In this way, for him, certainty could be guaranteed in semantics. Structural linguistics turns on the Kantian assumption that ultimately (human) rationality is universal. In other words, the basic ways in which – through linguistic constructions – such rationality structures that with which it comes into contact, to constitute a ‘reality,’ is supposedly common to all languages. Thus, ‘...if a common deep structure of languages can be unfolded, it may well help uncover the structure of the human mind’ (De George & De George: 1972:xx).

Structuralism, as a generalisation of this linguistic model of interpretation to other fields of theoretical discourse, represents a strenuous effort to accommodate the thinking of structure within the demands for truth and certainty imposed by the ‘metaphysics of presence.’ As Palmer (1988:388) puts it:

Structuralism is the view that the human mind is universal in that, everywhere and in every historical epoch, the mind is structured in such a way as to process its data in terms of certain general formulae which give meaning to those mental data.

According to De George & De George (1972:xi) the common thread running through various structuralist projects is the insistence that events and phenomena may be explained by universal ‘structures’ that account for them at a more basic level. Thus, what seem to be particular, unique, diverse, context-bound, changeable surface phenomena can be boiled down to general formulae or rules that circumscribe their deeper meaning. The theoretical or philosophical project, in this view, is one of uncovering the universal underlying patterns or structures that make our ‘reality’ finally intelligible. What is important here is the insistence that unlike the vicissitudes of surface phenomena, the underlying structures that govern their intelligibility do not change.

Marx (De George & De George 1972:xiii), for example, while insisting that thinking had a material basis in lived experience, went on to devise a theoretical model according to which the tandem development of thinking and human activity followed a fixed, if complicated, pattern of ‘structures, levels and dialectical interactions’ (De George & De George 1972:xv), which could be mapped out in terms of general laws, operating behind the scenes.

In a similar sense, in accordance with a structuralist moment in his psychoanalysis Freud (De George & De George 1972:xvi) suggested that universal psychic mechanisms (such as the ‘Oedipus-complex’) were in principle discoverable. In this sense, Freud could claim that the same underlying

psychic mechanisms determined mental activity. Differences in outward behaviour, ranging between what was considered to be 'normal' and 'pathological' could then be attributed to such intelligible criteria as differences in the degree to which such mechanisms were emotionally 'cathected' (filled with psychic energy) in different individuals.

In a different context, Lévi-Strauss (De George & De George 1972:xviii) argued that much of what was thought to be 'arbitrary and accidental' in social and cultural activity (such as 'language, cooking, dress, table manners, art, myths' and so on) could be reduced down to basic, universal structures of, for example, human sociability. In other words, he assumed that the basic or deep structure of a set of different activities within a given society would be the same for the whole set. Further, he argued that if we compared two different societies, there would be a basic, underlying similarity between them, such that '...if one could uncover the proper rules of transformation one, could transpose the one set of systems into the other set' (De George & De George 1972:xvii). Finally, supposing one could identify 'the deeper structure common to the deep structures of each of the systems,' one might claim to have revealed 'the structure of human nature itself.'

For art, literature, myth, religion, table manners are all ways of social expression, all are structured by similar unconscious processes of the human mind. If each of the different disciplines builds its models applicable to its type of phenomena and its level, each, if pushed far enough, should come to a similar common basis in the structuring mind of man.... This is the final goal of Lévi-Strauss' endeavour.

(De George & De George 1972:xxvi-xxvii)

Norris (1982:3) sums up the structuralist strategy by suggesting that structuralism encompasses the assumption

...that structures of meaning correspond to some deep-laid mental 'set' or pattern of mind which determines the limits of intelligibility. Theory... would be a search for invariant structures or formal universals which reflect the very nature of human intelligence. Literary texts (along with myths, music and other cultural artefacts) yield up their meaning to a mode of analysis possessed of a firm rationale because its sights are set on nothing less than a total explanation of human thought and culture.

### **3. A Rupture in the 'Structure:' Derrida's Critique of Structuralism**

In the opening lines of '*Structure, Sign and Play*,' Derrida (1978b:278) announces a rupture in the history of the concept structure; an event not sudden, but long in coming, and not attributable to any single thinker (1978b:280), but one which has broken into the philosophical arena by diverse routes. Derrida argues here that this rupture is the consequence of uncovering an incoherence or contradiction

(‘contradictory coherence’) in the very idea of a centred structure, and a consequent inability to find a satisfactory centre beyond the play of permutations.

For Derrida, the very setting up of this ‘primary’ binary opposition between ‘structure’ (limit) and ‘structurality’ (play), the valorisation of one of its poles, and repression of the other, enacts a contradiction at the very heart of Western metaphysics. As he argues (Derrida 1978b:279), in the traditional conception of structure as centred, the centre is conceived of as the point that is forbidden to participate in play. In other words, that which is at the centre cannot be interchanged with other elements, contents, terms in the structure in a play of possible permutations. It cannot ever participate in a reordering of elements, nor can it be removed, and, once established as centre, supposedly, no new centre can be introduced. The centre is by definition unique and irreplaceable. It occupies a unique position *vis à vis* the other elements in the structure, which cannot ever be filled by any other. The centre, thus, paradoxically is ‘that very thing within a structure which, while governing the structure, escapes structurality’ (Derrida 1978b:279). In other words, as Derrida (279) puts it, the contradiction is this:

The concept of a centred structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play.

What one is faced with here is a radical split within the structure between elements whose places in the structure may be subject to reordering or play, and a governing principle with which each element remains in a fixed, stable relationship. That is, the notion of a centred structure assumes (paradoxically) that a component’s relationships with other components can somehow have no effect on the force of its relationship with the centre. In other words, its changing relationships with other elements do not change what it essentially ‘is’ as determined in relation to the centre. Thus the notion of a centred structure has the form of an oxymoron. The elements of a structure can participate simultaneously, supposedly, in two mutually exclusive relationships (one subject to play, and the other to absolute fixity).

For Derrida, the problem with the notion of a centred structure lies in the status of the centre as *external* to the structure. In other words, on the one hand, that which permits and limits the *play of possibility* is, supposedly, itself a fixed (conceivable, explained, accounted for) entity beyond the play of differences. Alternatively, something outside the structure of intelligibility or knowable ‘reality,’ which is, therefore, unexplainable, supposedly explains or guarantees ‘truth’ or certainty in the intelligible realm. Given the spatio-temporal limits of rational beings, from whence the authority to draw the lines that delineate absolutely such an external centre? If there is no affirmative answer to this question, we are left with an unexplained guarantor of ‘truth,’ which, for truth to be preserved, has to be enforced merely ideologically (or neurotically repeated): hence, as Derrida notes (1978b:279) the *history* of exchange of one (unexplainable) centre for another, all the while that this very history (one centre replacing another) reveals the ineffability, perhaps the impossibility of the centre. In asking the ultimate eschatological or teleological question, has Western metaphysics been chasing shadows all along? Derrida would answer

in the affirmative. There simply is no metaphysical entity articulated in terms of presence (that is, objectively definable) to ground or provide absolute foundations for any theoretical discourse.

The 'decentring' rupture of the Western *episteme* (Derrida 1978b:278), which uncovers the contradiction at play in the reduction of 'structure' to the notion of structure as 'centred,' has been an 'event' of singular importance in the 'History' of Western philosophy. It is an 'event' which, according to Derrida (1978b:280) has forced the thinking of the 'structurality' of structure.

This does *not* mean that, for Derrida, the *necessity* of structure, in so far as it denotes limit or unity, for a coherent conception of 'reality' is in question here. What *is* in question, however, is the valorisation of a certain conception of structure, which privileges limit and represses 'structurality.' Derrida's aim in '*Structure, Sign and Play*,' is patently not, therefore, a matter of challenging the notion that 'reality' – insofar as it can be comprehended – *must* be understood in structural terms. It is more a matter of challenging a particular conception of structure, which sees it as fixed, if not by reason, then by 'God' or 'Spirit' or the 'transcendental Ego,' and so on. In other words, what Derrida takes issue with in Western philosophy is the way in which philosophers have traditionally interpreted and distorted or reduced the concept of structure in a vain effort to accommodate a desire for metaphysical certitude. In spite of such efforts, 'structurality,' he (1978b:278) points out, has always been at work in Western metaphysics, and the effects of this 'work' must be included in the thinking about thinking, rather than repressed.

#### 4. ***Différance*: Recognising Structurality**

In view of Derrida's deconstructive critiques of both Husserl and Saussure, such recognition of the 'structurality' of structure in linguistic terms means that language can no longer be thought of in terms of 'presence' or 'closure.' It cannot be thought of purely in Husserlian or 'referential' terms; that is, as a centred structure in the temporal sense, where a point of origin ('transcendental' rationality as the source of 'eidetic structures' or 'sense') acts as the 'starting-point' that conditions the symbolic or linguistic representations that follow, and to which all 're-presentations' may be referred in the last instance. Nor can language be thought of purely in Saussurean terms; that is, in terms of a centred structure in the spatial sense, where the power to posit fixed boundaries suggests a privileged position outside of the structure from which the boundaries can be guaranteed. Rather, according to Derrida, language, and therefore conceptuality itself must be interpreted in terms of the internal 'structurality' or 'play' he names *différance* (1982).

'What is *différance*?' To ask this question at all (or to ask it in this way, perhaps) is, as Derrida (1982:14) suggests, immediately and fundamentally to misunderstand what he means by *différance*, since

the very form of the question assumes the possibility of *différance* being present, having an essence or existence of some kind (1982:6). In asking this question, Derrida's observes (1982:15),

...we would have to conclude that *différance* has been derived, has happened, is to be mastered and governed on the basis of the point of a present being, which itself could be some thing, a form, a state, a power in the world to which all kinds of names might be given, a *what*, or a present being as a *subject*, a *who*.

In other words, the form of this question reveals a conceptuality that operates in terms of the very paradoxical notion of structure as 'centred' that Derrida is at pains to debunk. Yet, he (1982:6) is uncompromisingly resolute that '*...différance is not, does not exist, is not a present-being (on) in any form...*' *Différance*, he argues, having neither existence nor essence, cannot *be* in the full sense of 'being-present' that traditional Western metaphysical thinking has ascribed to the concept 'being.' As suggested by Saussure's 'thesis of difference,' according to Derrida (1982:11), concepts gain their value (identity or meaning), not in terms of essential present qualities, but only in terms of a 'systematic play' of differences from each other; that is, a 'play' with a certain 'systematicity' or 'perseverance in repetition.' Similarly, at the material level, a systematic play of difference between sounds and marks prevents the dissolution of signs into a formless phonic 'hiss' or alphabet soup.<sup>82</sup> It is precisely this 'systematic play' *itself* that is gestured toward by the word *différance*. Such a play, however, cannot be thought of as simply another concept among others. Difference 'itself' cannot be conceptualised or 'presented.' How, for example, might one present the difference between a tree and the sky? What actual content might such a difference itself 'contain?' According to Derrida, difference 'itself' is not a 'thing;' it is instead the very 'possibility of conceptuality' at all (1982:11), it 'is' the very ineffable 'activity' (to use words that no longer fully apply) that enables us to give content to, or define, 'things' by comparing them with other 'things.' Thus, if *différance* is not simply a concept (something definable), nor is it simply a word among others in the traditional sense of a faithful representation of an original present concept, which secures its re-presentability. Rather, thinking of *différance* means thinking in terms of a metaphorical code coined by Derrida to gesture towards, or stand in the place of, that which cannot ever be presented or re-presented (1982:5).

Because *différance* cannot be thought of in terms of presence, according to Derrida, *différance* equally cannot be thought in opposition to presence, in terms of non-being or absence. Thus, *différance* designates that which 'derives from no category of being, whether present or absent' (Derrida 1982:6). That is, when we speak of *différance*, there is (no)thing that can be established as 'being there' or 'not

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<sup>82</sup> Recall the Saussurean shift explicated earlier from an Aristotelian conception of form-as-presence to form-as-difference i.e. the 'form' of a component in a system as dependent on constraining relations of difference).



being there.’ For Derrida, *différance* is of an order entirely other than the traditional closed order of presence and absence (1982:6).

That ‘*différance is not*’ makes the thinking of *différance* ‘uneasy and uncomfortable’ (1982:12). We are confronted with the viability of conceptualising that which is not a concept in the full sense of the word, or of ‘presenting the unrepresentable’ (to use Lyotard’s paradoxical formulation; 1984:80-81). To get around this difficulty in his essay ‘*Différance*’ (1982), Derrida (1982:16) proceeds along the lines of something akin to negative theology; that is, he specifies everything that *différance* is not. Here, however, he is quick to point out the crucial limits of this analogy, instructive as it may be. For, while he wishes to argue that *différance* (‘spacing’ ‘structurality,’ ‘play’) is the condition of the possibility of conceptuality itself, it is by no means theological insofar as theology concerns itself with what he calls the value *arkh*, which, according to translator Alan Bass (in Derrida 1982:6; Translator’s Note 6), ‘combines the values of a founding principle and of government by a controlling principle.’ In other words, as Derrida has demonstrated in detail,<sup>83</sup> the *différance* that always and inevitably can be found at ‘play’ in the very attempts to articulate a founding principle in Western philosophy denies the possibility of finally establishing an entity (‘God,’ Transcendental Ego,’ or ‘Spirit,’ for example) that is external to and pre-exists the conceptual order, that can be articulated in terms of presence – albeit perhaps ‘a superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being’ (Derrida 1982:6) – and that can order the relations or control what appears in the conceptual order. By the same token, of course, the *différance* that replaces such a principle as the condition of the possibility of conceptuality cannot be thought of in these terms either. In short, *différance* as a non-entity subverts the traditional retrocessive quest in Western metaphysics for a ‘centred structure,’ characterised by ‘a transcendental principle which can be pinned down as such and can thereby govern a theoretical discourse’ (Bass in Derrida 1982:6; Translator’s Note 5).

Thus, Derrida’s aim is to ‘conceptualise’ the structure of the linguistic system, or any system of signification, for that matter, in terms of an *immanent* or internal ‘structurality’ or ‘play’ (a ‘scission and division’) *within* such a system, which permits the formation of elements. He (1982:8-9; my emphasis) points out that:

*In a conceptual system adhering to classical strictures, “différance” would be said to designate a constitutive, productive and originary causality, the process of scission and division which would produce or constitute different things or differences.*

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<sup>83</sup> In his deconstruction of Husserl’s theory of signification (Derrida 1973), for example, this is demonstrated in the ‘spatialisation’ that irreducibly bifurcates the present moment, and that denies the unity of the ego in auto-affectation. A similar point is made in his uncovering of the paradoxical nature of a centred structure (Derrida 1982), and, less explicitly, of the tensions generated by Saussure’s attempts to secure meaning in a ‘natural’ bond between sound and sense (Derrida 1976).

However, he states unequivocally and repeatedly that the thinking of *différance* in terms of the ‘classical strictures,’ which furnish us with such concepts as ‘constitutive,’ ‘productive,’ ‘originary,’ and ‘causality,’ is ultimately untenable. In other words, if *différance* is never presented as such but is nevertheless what makes presence possible, it is not to say that *différance* is strictly the *cause* of presence, since a prior or more primary presence is implied in the concept of cause. In alternative terms, *différance* may be the ‘form’ of consciousness (auto-affection), but this is not to say that *différance* exists before consciousness in the way that a cause pre-exists an effect.

In classical terms this does not make sense, for how can there be effects without a substantial cause? Derrida suggests that the way out of this ‘closure’ may be indicated by means of the ‘trace,’ which is neither effect nor cause, or, alternatively, both of these together. In other words, while ‘presence’ cannot be thought of as being before, or outside of, the ‘trace,’ the ‘trace,’ in turn, cannot be thought of as being outside of ‘presence.’ To put this reciprocal or circular formulation in semiological terms, Derrida (1982:11-12) argues that language as a system of differences has to be ‘there’ before *différance* can have effects. That is, the trace can never be isolated or abstracted from the linguistic system to which it is inherent. Yet, as he points out (1982:11): ‘Language, has not fallen from the sky.’ There has to be the possibility of the ‘trace’ (*différance*) before language can be established. Thus, according to Derrida: ‘Historically, the fact of *différance* always comes first.’ With caveats, therefore, covering the terms ‘constituted,’ ‘produced,’ ‘created,’ ‘movement,’ ‘historically,’ etc., which are therefore used ‘under erasure,’ Derrida (1982:12) stipulates that, *différance* is ‘the movement according to which language, or any code, any system of referral in general, is constituted “historically” as a weave of differences.’ Alternatively (1982:11):

What is written as *différance* will be the playing movement that “produces” – by means of something that is not simply an activity – these differences, these effects of difference.

Importantly, then, according to Derrida (1982:12), this reciprocal or circular formulation suggests that *différance* is ‘no more static than genetic,’ no more structural (atemporal) than historical (temporal). Nor, as Derrida emphasises here, is it any *less* so. Rather, Derrida (1982:12) describes *différance* as ‘the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences. Thus the name “origin” no longer suits it.’

Derrida (1982:16) concludes from the above discussion that

...one comes to posit presence – and, specifically, consciousness, the being beside itself of consciousness – no longer as the absolutely central form of Being but as a “determination” and as an “effect.” A determination or an effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but of *différance*...

Alternatively, Derrida can say in general that the present,

...is no longer what every reference refers to in the last instance; it becomes a function in a generalised referential structure. It is a trace, and a trace of the effacement of a trace.

This discussion, according to Derrida (1982:3; 6-7), brings into focus the difficulty of where to *begin* if one must of necessity think *différance* by means of the very conceptual framework it seems to escape. In other words, Derrida argues that (given its ambivalent or *aporetic* status in relation to metaphysical notions of genesis) *différance* questions the very notion of a beginning or origin in theoretical discourse. That is, *différance* questions the idea that there ought to be an 'absolute point of departure' for theory, in the form of 'principles, postulates, axioms, or definitions' upon which a line of rational argumentation is constructed. Further, according to Derrida (1982:7), *différance* questions the necessity of a *telos* to guide and orient a theoretical argument. In other words, *différance* compels theory to remain open-ended, open to new, unforeseen developments. If this is the case, then the thinking ('theorising') of *différance* itself, to be consistent, cannot assume the very theoretical form that it contests. In any case, while it could be done (as he has demonstrated by means of deconstructive analyses of Husserl and Saussure, to mention only two), in his essay *Différance*, Derrida (1982:3) seems less interested in tracing the linear history of an emergent '*logos*' or way of thinking than in articulating this *logos* as a general system which underpins all of these specific, historically orientated, theoretical 'interventions.' For these reasons, he (1982:7) opts here for a 'strategic' approach in the thinking of *différance*, by which he implies a kind of interlacing or interweaving of threads to form an irreducibly polysemic or multivalent and complex (1982:3) 'sheaf,' 'constellation,' or 'network' of 'sense.'<sup>84</sup> This makes for a certain amount of repetition in a reading or interpretation of this essay, which is not altogether a bad thing in view of the complexity and discomfort of attempting to grasp what is, in the end, a way of thinking proposed as an alternative to the tradition of either/or.

#### **i. The Semantic Analysis Subtending Derrida's Choice of the Neologism '*Différance*'**

In view of Derrida's 'strategic' approach, the task at hand, namely, of thinking through the possibility of 'play' in the interpretation of interpretation by means of Derrida's *différance* is suitably (although not necessarily) begun by means of a semantic analysis which offers a preliminary approximation of what Derrida hopes to achieve by his choice of this particular neologism (1982:7). Since the word 'difference,' according to Derrida (1982:8) does not do justice to the polysemy or

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<sup>84</sup> Note the transmutation of the Husserlian term ('sense').

multivalency of what he is trying to articulate, he found it necessary to coin a term which could, as he stipulates, refer simultaneously to the whole ‘constellation’ of meanings at once.’

Derrida (1982:7) finds an appropriate term in the Latin verb *differre*. He (1982:8) explains that the neologism ‘*différance*,’ derived from this root, reflects a necessary compensation for the loss of sense in translating the Latin *differre* into the French ‘*différer*,’ or the English ‘to differ.’ Unlike these words, the Latin *differre* has two distinct, if inter-related meanings (1982:7); namely difference and deferral.

## ii. Difference: ‘The Becoming-Space of Time’

Difference, the more common sense of *differre*, implies dissimilarity or ‘alterity,’ but it includes both the dissimilarity that means ‘to be not identical, to be other, discernible, etc.’ (1982:8), as well as the dissimilarity of polemics (that is, difference in the adversarial sense of, for example, differences of opinion). Moreover, in this sense of *differre*, ‘difference’ indicates somewhat more than static intervals, distances, or spaces between elements in a system. Derrida (1982:17) makes use of an analogy taken from Nietzsche to evoke a sense of the movement of *différance*, namely that of force. As he puts it:

Force itself is never present; it is only a play of differences and quantities. There would be no force in general without the difference between forces; and here the difference of quantity counts more than the content of the quantity, more than the absolute size itself.

Thus a fuller sense of this aspect of *différance* requires one to bring ‘difference’ to life, so to speak. In other words, according to Derrida, it is necessary to bring out a certain activity or dynamism in ‘difference’ (a distancing or spacing) as well as ‘a certain perseverance in repetition’<sup>85</sup> (that is, over time). By including the temporal in the sense of *différance*, we are brought closer to what Derrida (1982:8) calls ‘the very action of the verb *différer*, before it has even produced an effect constituted as something different or as *différence* (with an e).’ Yet, *différance* does not imply activity in the full sense of the word. Thus, the ‘a’ of *différance*, according to Derrida (1982:9), lends itself to the task of approximating some sense of *différance* in another important respect, since it is able to designate ‘something like the middle voice’ between activity and passivity. (In a similar sense, as he (1982:9) points out, resonance designates neither the act of resonating nor that which is resonated.) Thus, ‘what lets itself be designated *différance* is neither simply active [an agent or origin which causes or conditions effects] nor simply passive’ (the effect of the activity of some pre-existing agent). Rather, it is situated as an uncomfortable in-between.

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<sup>85</sup> There is no sense to the word different if the difference does not, in some sense, persevere – that is, if the difference itself or the differing is not to some degree the same over time.

If one could think of *différance* (or what Derrida also refers to as ‘the trace’) in a (pure) or abstract sense, it should be thought of in one sense as ‘the becoming space of time’ (Derrida 1982:13). Derrida (1973:60-69) has demonstrated the sense in which time necessarily becomes space in his crucial deconstruction of Husserl’s ‘principle of principles,’ against which he mobilised Husserl’s own *Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*. There he argued that non-presentation has as much of a claim to the status of ‘originary’ as has presentation (no more claim, that is, but no less either). This dual (and ultimately undecidable) claim to the status of ‘origin,’ however, puts the concept of ‘origin’ itself into question. As Derrida (1976:61) has argued:

The trace is not only the disappearance of origin – within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin. ...one must indeed speak of an originary trace or arche-trace. Yet we know that that concept destroys its name and that, if all begins with the trace, there is above all no originary trace.

Hence ‘origin’ is used here ‘under erasure.’ Recall that, according to Derrida, (1973:64-66) Husserl’s attempt to reduce retention to a form of presentation (perception) introduces an irreducible non-simplicity, a *spacing*, into presentation itself. Thus, when Derrida writes of *différance*, he is writing about this ‘spacing,’ this ‘becoming-space of time,’ that ‘contaminates’ the present moment in its essence, and hence, all that has been ‘thought on the basis of presence’ (‘thing,’ ‘sense,’ consciousness, pure perception etc.). In Derrida’s (1982:13) words:

An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or the subject. In constituting itself, in dividing itself dynamically, this interval is what might be called *spacing*, the becoming-space of time or the becoming time of space (*temporization*). And it is this constitution of the present, as an ‘originary’ and irreducibly nonsimple (and therefore, *stricto sensu* nonoriginary) synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protentions (to reproduce analogically and provisionally a phenomenological and transcendental language that soon will reveal itself to be inadequate), that I propose to call archi-writing, archi-trace, or *différance*. Which (is) (simultaneously) spacing (and) temporization.

### iii. Deferral: The Becoming-Time of Space

*Différance*, however, as Derrida (1982:13) suggests here, (is) (not) merely spacing or differentiation. This term is unsatisfactory for two reasons. Firstly, differentiation implies an original, unified, homogeneous whole that subsequently splits up into different parts; that is (thought in terms of something akin to cell division, perhaps), a presence that is ‘there’ before differentiation. Secondly, and more importantly, Derrida argues that this word obscures another sense of the Latin *differre*, which

implies what Derrida (1982:8) calls ‘temporalizing,’ or what could also be described as deferral. In his words here, this further sense implies

...the action of putting off until later, of taking into account, of taking account of time and of the forces in an operation that implies an economical calculation, a detour, a delay, a relay, a reserve, a representation...

Derrida, therefore, describes *différance*, not only in terms of the ‘becoming-space of time,’ but also in terms of the ‘becoming-time of space.’ In other words, every present element in a system such as the linguistic one – which, given the linguistic constitution of ‘reality,’ means every element of ‘reality’ – always faces the possibility of its modification (vitiation, corruption, devaluation, or, alternatively enlargement, reinforcement, affirmation, and so on) by other elements (past, present or future), and it carries the traces of these possibilities within it.

#### iv. Difference and Deferral: ‘Form’-as-*Différance*

To sum up, in Derrida’s words (1982:13; my interjections),

...each so-called ‘present’ element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element [*spacing, ‘the becoming space of time’*], and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element [*temporalizing, ‘the becoming time of space’*], this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not: what it absolutely is not, not even a past or a future as a modified present.

Bringing these two analyses (of difference and deferral) together, it becomes possible to offer an explanation of what it could mean to suggest that meaning in a complex system such as language is constituted by form-as-*différance*, that is by an interrelated spacing and temporalisation.<sup>86</sup>

Derrida’s analysis of the ‘becoming space of time’ suggests that what gives ‘form’ or meaning to any component of a system is not its inherent qualities, but the relations of difference that are possible within the system. What this suggests is that everything that has traditionally been thought of as being simply present is, in fact, ‘presentable,’ ‘identifiable,’ or given ‘form’ only by virtue of its differential relations with what is ‘other’ to its identity.<sup>87</sup> Thus, in its very ‘presentation,’ ‘identity,’ or ‘form,’ a present element retains the ‘traces’ of the differences that constitute it as the very present element it is. As he puts it elsewhere (1976:62):

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<sup>86</sup> It is worth noting the compatibility of this analysis with Lacan’s analysis of subjectification as discussed earlier (cf. also Hurst 1998).

<sup>87</sup> See Olivier’s (1993:254-255) discussion of a person’s ‘identity’ in these terms.

Without a retention in the minimal unit of temporal experience, without a trace retaining the other as other in the same, no difference would do its work and no meaning would appear.

However, there is more to the 'economy' of the linguistic system than this 'becoming space of time,' for the relations of difference that determine the meaning of a component do not remain static over time. For this reason, the intersection of differences and traces of differences that defines a particular component is never inherently fixed. The meaning of a component can be established contextually, as defined by a specific set of differential relations, but in a different context, other relations of difference can be brought to bear on it, and can modify (vitate, emphasise, add to) some of the previous differences. That is, (temporally or 'historically') new components, may, through ripple effects, shift emphases within the system and thereby change the status of (undermine, reinforce, override, and so on) even far removed components in distant parts of the system. Thus, in a new context, the place and value of any component within the system may change dramatically. In a system of signification, for example, the influence of new signs, and new relations of difference, may increase the constraints on the meaning of existing signs. On the other hand, loss of certain signs or constraining relationships may require others to 'do the work' of what has been lost, hence relaxing certain constraints on them and increasing their multivalency. The term 'real,' for example, means something radically different in a Platonic, as opposed to a 'common sense' context. Similar distinctions could be made concerning such terms as 'hardware' in the shift in context from praxis to computing, and so on.

The 'activity' or movement that enables such a 'spacing' and 'temporalising' (that is, *différance*) does not 'exist.' 'It' is never present, can never be exposed, or 'presented.' Rather, such *différance* is always occulted/repressed *in* the act of presentation (positive identification) itself. In more concrete terms, in the operations and activities of ordinary discourse, we, of necessity, ignore or repress the 'play' out of which such discourse is constituted. That is, in order to conduct a conversation or write a book, and so on, we have to treat words and concepts *as if* they are fully present. If only momentarily or temporarily, here, we have to suspend the 'play' of *différance*. In other words, in discourse, the trace in general appears as that which has disappeared in the presented. Thus, as Derrida notes: Presence in general is *différance* disguised; presence is the dissimulation of *différance*.

To offer a concrete example of such 'effacement:' the binary continuum of hot and cold forms a complex system with no absolute or inherent boundaries (no absolute extremities) and no inherent qualities to the terms. The terms gain their value in terms of their relations of difference. A warm bath is hot in relation to seawater and cold in relation to a cup of tea, and so on. Within this system, to identify anything as 'hot' is to 'present,' or expose this quality as if it were a positive attribute of the 'thing' in question, thereby deferring, setting aside, putting into reserve (for the moment, or in the

particular context) the possibility of its being other than hot. Yet simultaneously, this quality retains its relation to the occulted 'cold' without which it can have no value at all. Thus 'hot' is the sign of the effacement (in a particular context) of 'cold.' Paradoxically, then, as Derrida points out (1982:24), 'the present becomes the sign of the sign, the trace of the trace.' In other words, 'erasure' (deferral, setting aside, putting into reserve, repression) 'belongs to the very structure of the trace.' However, this 'erasure' or 'effacement' must leave a mark (symptom) in that from which it is effaced; that is, a mark in the present. Thus, the present can be described as the 'repository' of the marks of effacement.

In sum, it could be said that, in general, an interpretation of interpretation that accommodates 'structurality' indicates a certain 'slipperiness' about our 'interpretations themselves,' or, in alternative terms, about 'reality,' presence, or meaning. Eagleton's description of the nature of 'writing' in a literary sense may be generalised to a description of the *text*, as, in Derrida's general sense of the term, a metaphor for 'reality.' As Eagleton (1983:134) puts it:

There is a continual flickering, spilling and defusing of meaning – what Derrida calls “dissemination” – which cannot be easily contained with[in] the categories of the text's structure, or within the categories of a conventional critical approach to it.

Again, in Eagleton's (1983:134) words: 'All language, for Derrida, displays this “surplus” over exact meaning, is always threatening to outrun and escape the sense which tries to contain it.'

## 5. Postmodernism and Deconstructive Thinking

### i. 'Freeplay' Postmodernism

What is often subsumed under the aegis of 'postmodernism' may – in its more responsible, critical guise, at least – represent a welcome recognition of, or agreement with, Derrida's views on what it might mean to acknowledge 'structurality' (the 'play' of possible permutations in a system) in theory in general.<sup>88</sup> There are, however, extremes in postmodern discourse, on the other hand, in which these views are expropriated for a 'freeplay' or cynical postmodernism that he explicitly rejects. One might say, generally speaking, that these extremes of 'freeplay' in postmodernist discourse – given to excess in the form of either an exultant or a cynical 'anything goes' mentality – are the effects of not

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<sup>88</sup> Sometimes, in an effort to preserve a critical moment in postmodern discourse, one is tempted to make the distinction between a 'freeplay' postmodernist sensibility and 'poststructuralism' as a more responsible endeavour to accommodate 'structurality' without denying structure altogether. However, it is understandable that Derrida, for one, would find this term problematic in application to his own strategy of deconstructive thinking, for, strictly speaking, his thinking is not 'post-' anything. I have opted, therefore, for a distinction between 'freeplay' postmodernism and deconstructive thinking, where a critical capacity is seen as being characteristic of the latter (Olivier 1988).



differentiating carefully between a more restricted and responsible interpretation of 'play' as a certain degree of 'give' or 'flexibility' within a structure, and a radical interpretation of 'play' as 'freeplay.'<sup>89</sup> It is this lack of careful differentiation (coupled with an either/or logic) that seems to compel any rational being, after the 'event' of the decentring rupture of the Western *episteme* (Derrida 1978b:278), to conclude that the assailability of absolute truth leaves only one alternative; namely the absolute scepticism of a 'freeplay' postmodernism. Thus as the implications of the 'event' of the 'linguistic turn' work their way through the fabric of contemporary theory and infiltrate cultural practice, thinking in general, still constrained by a traditional either/or logic, it seems, has been subject to erratic pendulum swings in which what *is* (or is *construed* as) an 'anything goes' approach, in its turn, generates the momentum for a resurgence of conservatism (Harvey 1989:292; Caputo 1997:36-44; Norris 1990:134-163). Here, if not faced with outright caricature<sup>90</sup> and rejection, *différance* or Derrida's deconstructive thinking, less often, may be threatened with possible 'rehabilitation' for more conservative ends.

Briefly put, the position that I refer to generally as 'freeplay' postmodernism (Norris 1990:134) may be understood against the backdrop of undeniable shifts in intellectual sensibilities, cultural forms, and urban life-styles over the past forty years or so, which permit talk of what Harvey (1989:39-44) describes as a '*passage*' from modernity (and a general 'sensibility' or 'mentality' subtended by modernist ideals and structuralist methodologies) to a new cultural condition, referred to as 'postmodernity.' With the cautionary note that such talk of a 'passage' is by no means unproblematic (Harvey 1989:7; Lyotard 1984:79), what one could call the cultural condition of postmodernity is succinctly captured by two commentators (both of whom seem to consider this condition as having become all-encompassing). Commenting on the radical postmodernist views of Jean Baudrillard (1992:172), who argues that social reality itself has disappeared, leaving in its place a hyperreal universe of endlessly self-referential simulations or 'simulacra,' David Lyon says (1994:16):

This self-referentiality goes far beyond Max Weber's fears for a disenchanted, detraditionalized world. Signs lose contact with things signified; the late twentieth century is witness to unprecedented destruction of meaning. The quest for some division between the moral and immoral, the real and the unreal, is futile.

In a similar vein, Richard Kearney (1988:251-252) remarks,

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<sup>89</sup> This articulation of the problem was suggested to me by Bert Olivier, from the testimony of Chris Norris, in recounting a conversation with Jacques Derrida.

<sup>90</sup> There is recent evidence that this still occurs, as demonstrated by Dale Jacquette's caricature, for example, in his paper 'The Deconstruction Debacle in Theory and Practice' presented at the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy (Boston, 10-16 August, 1998; cf. *Abstracts* 1998:8).

...we seem to have entered an age where reality is inseparable from the image, where the original has been replaced by its imitation, where our understanding of the world is preconditioned by the electronically reproducible media of television, cinema, video and radio...

These assessments are of the kind that respond to the work of theorists like Baudrillard and a host of other, 'freeplay' postmodernists, including philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend - whose 'Anything Goes' (1996:195-199) is exemplary in this regard in so far as it proposes a radically anarchistic procedure for science in the place of its hallowed inductivist methodology - as well as literary 'theorist' Stanley Fish, who wishes to dispense with theory altogether (cf. Norris 1990:77-82). It is perhaps worth mentioning that it is not only in the context of theory that the attitude of 'anything goes' is noticeable. A study of the various arts - cinema, for instance (cf. Olivier 1996, especially the chapter on Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct*; pp.125-142) shows many artefacts as being symptomatic of a similar abandonment of coherent structures and the like in favour of a preoccupation with surfaces, ephemerality, mere spectacle and fragmentation.<sup>91</sup>

Furthermore, the abandonment of coherent structures in 'freeplay' postmodernism - in reaction to what is rightly conceived of as the reification of the concept of structure in 'structuralism,' which led to the inflexibility and authoritarianism of imposed (supposedly) universally applicable systemic totalities in diverse spheres - is coupled with an emphasis and over-emphasis on the opposing moments of 'play,' particularity or radical 'alterity' ('otherness'). Against the generalising tendency of structuralism, such postmodernism valorises the fleeting 'event' for its radical particularity that is impossible to capture (cf. Nietzsche 1968:46 on the impossibility of capturing the radical particularity of the innumerable different leaves via the word/concept 'leaf.') In this view, the moment an 'event' or 'thing' is pinned down to a particular set of relations or associations - that is, the moment it is placed within a structure and thereby understood, made intelligible or 'spatialised' - it is deemed falsified, domesticated, lost. Such postmodernism, thus, reflects a 'rage against' the domestic ordering of 'spatialisation,' and an attempt to rehabilitate the particular phenomenon, unique event, or absolute alterity.

This, needless to say, is impossible in any absolute sense. As Olivier (1998b:491) notes, Foucault's efforts, for example, to escape from the 'tyranny' of spatialisation (in the form of a universalising tendency typical of Western rationality) through his exhortation to 'eventalize,' demonstrate that the only possible 'escape' is to multiply the 'spaces' of intelligibility, rather than deny spatialisation altogether. According to Olivier (491), therefore, through 'eventalization' one cannot achieve access to the unique, particular moment of the 'event' itself. Rather, one must remain satisfied with an evocation of its 'particularity' through historical research into the 'constellation' of 'discursive mechanisms'

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<sup>91</sup> Needless to say, within the category of postmodernist artefacts, there are many (such as Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire*) which deal with issues such as fragmentation in a critical rather than merely affirmative manner (cf. Olivier 1996: 89-106).

constructed around an 'event' – such as 'connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies' (Foucault 1988: 104). This strategy, as Olivier notes, has the effect of 'multiplying' the 'causes,' processes or 'structures' that constitute an event, thereby destabilising what later appears to be a necessary, univocal, or universal (generally accepted) account of it.

Just as 'structurality' invades and contaminates any attempt to articulate structures according to the model of a fixed, absolute, centred set of relations, so the reverse is equally true. Structure, or 'spatiality,' as the above example demonstrates, has always already contaminated attempts at the extremes of postmodernist discourse to gain access to the 'radically' particular, or the 'absolute' other, or, on the other hand, to exult in the absolutely polysemic.

## ii. Deconstructive Thinking Against 'Freeplay:' Derrida's Refusal to Choose

It is the *degree* to which the 'slippage,' described earlier in Eagleton's (1983:134) terms – particularity, 'alterity,' polysemy, and so on – is taken to be definitive of 'reality' that separates Derrida's thinking from the kind of 'freeplay' postmodernism that has since become his bane. Those who associate Derrida's name with such postmodernism, as Caputo (1997:36-44) notes, have accused him of almost 'everything,' from the destruction of 'the values of reason, truth, and scholarship' (39),<sup>92</sup> through all manner of political aberration, to an abstract aestheticism that has no purchase on 'reality' (41). Indeed, in Caputo's words (1997:36):

It is not uncommon to portray Derrida as the devil himself, a street-corner anarchist, a relativist, or subjectivist, or nihilist, out to destroy our traditions and institutions, our beliefs and values, to mock philosophy and truth itself, to undo everything the Enlightenment has done – and to replace all this with wild nonsense and irresponsible play.

Aside from the patent absurdity of some of these accusations, and as if Derrida could be all that he is accused of at once (Caputo 1997:41), one may find in Derrida's texts themselves as strong a testimony to the contrary as any could be. Therefore, Caputo (1997) and others (Norris 1987:142-145; Olivier 1998a:167) repeatedly affirm Derrida's own repeated insistence that only a careless or 'restricted'<sup>93</sup> reading of his texts will permit the mistake of associating deconstructive thinking with a 'freeplay' or 'anything-goes' postmodernism. It is perhaps significant to note that Christopher Norris, who may be regarded as one of the leading interpreters and defenders of Derrida's work, has relentlessly

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<sup>92</sup> This accusation was levelled at him in connection with the event of his nomination for an honorary degree from Cambridge University (See Caputo 1997:38-39).

<sup>93</sup> A 'restricted' reading, here, does not refer to the number of texts read, but to the kind of 'selective' reading that looks for confirmation of existing prejudices while glossing over complexities that may run counter to them.

criticised such 'freeplay' postmodernists in a number of publications with telling titles such as *What's wrong with postmodernism* (1990) and *The truth about postmodernism* (1993), to mention only two.

Against those who, as the consequence of a lack of careful differentiation between 'play' and 'freeplay,' coupled with an either/or logic, conclude that a demonstration of the assailability of *absolute* meaning, presence, truth, structure and so on, leaves only one alternative, namely the absolute scepticism of a 'freeplay' postmodernism, Derrida's constantly repeated refrain, in multiple texts and contexts, is that the relationship between the insistence on 'truth' and 'scepticism,' as in the case of any other pair of binaries, is unavoidably circular or reciprocal, and therefore must assume a both/and structure. Such 'circularity' brings to mind Heidegger's (1975:17) articulation of the relationship between the artist and the work of art, where each seems to be the 'origin' of the other.

Derrida's argument for the both/and structure of a *logos* of difference turns on, or arises out of the very notion of the 'trace' (*différance*) that, according to Derrida, describes the general form of the relationship between binary opposites as circular, but, ironically, is often (mis)taken to justify an infinite 'freeplay' of signification, and all manner of other absurdities all too often flung about in the name of deconstruction. To suggest that Derrida offers unequivocal support for a valorisation of radical particularity, an absolute alterity, an unintelligible singularity and so on, against the generalisation associated with structures, is to deny the complexity of his position which attests to the ultimate and inevitable failure of any attempt to escape from, or to exceed, the so-called 'tyranny' of spatialisation or 'structure.'

By the same token, the very circularity of the relationship between binaries should caution those who (laudably, in face of almost overwhelming misrepresentation at the opposite end of the scale), might wish to claim Derrida's thinking for 'respectability.' Here, it is of equal importance to remain wary of the ease with which the effects of deconstructive thinking may thereby be domesticated, and the flame of philosophy itself smothered. Hence, Derrida's avowal of the need for a deconstruction of structuralism, is decidedly *not* to revert to a theoretical camp that eschews the notion of 'structure' or 'spatiality' altogether in favour of an out and out freeplay of signification. Yet, this refusal of 'freeplay' postmodernism, in turn, cannot be interpreted, as permitting the liberty of an economy which offers final resolution to aporias, 'differends,' or paradoxes that emerge in the relations between the 'same' and the radically 'other.' Again, what may therefore be seen as his unequivocal insistence on a both/and *logos*, appears at the end of '*Structure, Sign and Play*', where he states his belief that there is *no question of choosing* between the two irreconcilable modes of interpretation that divide contemporary thinking between a rigid 'dream of presence' and a cynical affirmation of shattered dreams; between traditional philosophical concepts such as 'being' or 'presence,' 'origin' or '*telos*,' 'causality,' and so on, and their 'hopeless' or 'emancipatory' dissolution.

One could cite countless instances in Derrida's texts to make the point that those who appropriate Derrida's thinking either in support of the celebration of absolute 'structurality' in general

or in order to revert to a preservation of 'structure' in general, make a similar mistake, which is grounded by adherence to an either/or logic. In fact, one could view Derrida's extensive oeuvre as a sustained demonstration of his refusal to be bound by such a logic, and his effort to think differently (cf. 1993:13). Indeed in his book *'Aporias'* (1993:13-17) he offers a lengthy list of instances in his work where he has come up against the impossibility of making a simple choice between 'structure' and 'structurality.'

One such example of Derrida's insistence on a both/and *logos*, takes the form of his analysis of the 'sign' in *'Structure, Sign and Play'* (1978b:281).<sup>94</sup> Here, *at one and the same time*, Derrida denies the stability of the relationship between signifier and signified in the sign, and works against the view that such instability inevitably leads to an infinite proliferation of meaning in which 'anything goes.' Here, Derrida analyses the concept 'sign' in terms of the binary opposition between limit and possibility. In this analysis he argues that the 'metaphysics of presence' (the belief in an external, stable reality to which we have unmediated, unproblematic or direct access) is indeed shaken, once we become aware of the 'sign character' of language – that is, the character of language as representational by nature, and as consisting of a signifier, distinguished from, and standing for, a signified (thing or concept) in its absence. Saussure (1974:73-74), it should be recalled, established that the absence of the referent, together with the arbitrariness of the relation between signifier and signified, renders the signified indeterminate. In short, where there is language, there can be no privileged or transcendental (ultimately limiting or stabilising) signified, because language, as representational, implies a distance or 'spacing' that renounces the immediacy of 'sense.' The sign is, then, inherently subject to a potentially indefinite mutability.

Now, *if* one takes this to mean that, as Derrida puts it, 'the domain or play of signification henceforth has no limit' (1978b:281), and *if*, as he argues, one were to apply this insight consistently to all signs, then one would be obliged to say that the concept and word 'sign' itself has an infinitely plastic or at least indeterminate meaning. This, however, he counters, is precisely what cannot be done if one is intent on shaking the 'metaphysics of presence,' since such 'solicitation' (Derrida 1982:16) requires 'sign' to have a fixed meaning. That is, 'sign' cannot mean anything other than 'sign-of,' which denotes the ability to differentiate in a determinate manner between a signifier and that to which it refers; a signified. Hence, Derrida's paradoxical conclusion: presence in the sense of a stable, determinate meaning is necessary if one means to shake up the 'metaphysics of presence.' In essence, then, while the 'sign character' of language is the condition of the possibility of a play of meaning, the very existence of this play depends *at the same time*, on quite the opposite, namely stability of meaning.

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<sup>94</sup> This is a slightly modified version of what appeared in the essay out of which this dissertation grew, which appeared in the *South African Journal of Philosophy*, namely 'Sign and Subject: Subjectivity After Poststructuralism' (Hurst 1998).

Or, to put it differently, by way of his analysis of the concept 'sign' Derrida brings to the fore an inherent circularity in the *form of the relationship* characterising the binary opposites of limit and possibility. That is, it is first necessary to assume a limit in the form of a stability of meaning in language before one has the intellectual means or conceptual tools (that is, the concept 'sign' as consisting of signifier and signified) at one's disposal to shake up the very idea of limits. This is the same circle that traps those who insist that the only truth is that there is no truth – here one unavoidably makes the very metaphysical assumption that one wishes to deny; namely privileged access to truth (the truth that there is no truth), or the power of a view of the total picture from outside. There appears to be no way out of the circle, since positing either extreme – that is, limit (we can know the final truth about things) or possibility/ infinity (we can know that there is no final truth but only an infinite play of possibility) – is to fall back into the trap of making the untenable metaphysical assumption of a view from outside the totality. The way forward (as sign-posted by Kant) is to accept the strict undecidability of metaphysical notions such as the 'world,' the 'self' and God as far as their ultimate natures are concerned. Thus, to commandeer Derrida's thinking about signification in support of a position that valorises either 'freeplay' or absolute stability of meaning is simply to ignore the *logos* at work in his text here.

A similar both/and structure serves to resist those who (whether in praise or damnation) claim that Derrida's thinking proclaims an end to the long tradition of Western philosophy. As Caputo (1997:50) suggests, these claims simply do not tally with Derrida's activities and initiatives. These, in fact, he argues here, may tempt one instead to see Derrida as 'one of philosophy's staunchest advocates.' In Caputo's (50) words:

It will surprise only those who know little about Derrida that, over the course of an active life, he has consistently rallied to the defense of philosophy and undertaken various practical initiatives aimed at promoting the teaching of philosophy.

Thus, Derrida's injunction to think the 'structurality' in our interpretations of interpretation is emphatically *not* to say that he rejects traditional philosophical concepts out of hand. Nevertheless, this again is not to say that he avoids questioning 'hallowed' philosophical concepts. Indeed, for Derrida, it seems, the never-ceasing philosophical (even moral) responsibility for questioning or 'shaking up' is such that it should be avoided only at the risk of sleepless nights (cf. Caputo 1997:40). Thus, the crux of a deconstructive approach is an attempt to rethink the very terms that have enthralled Western metaphysics, without assuming the means to escape its history; that is, without any illusions about the possibility of a 'clean slate' or fresh start. As Derrida (1978b:280)<sup>95</sup> puts it:

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<sup>95</sup> See also *Speech and Phenomena* (1973: 142; 143, translator's note) and *Of Grammatology* (1976:31-40; 61).

There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest.

Deconstructive thinking therefore begins with the idea that certain terms from Western metaphysics and logic no longer have their full meaning. The condition of the possibility of conceptuality itself, namely *différance*, cannot simply be thought in terms of presence, or consciousness as the ‘form of presence,’ or as an origin or *telos*, or in terms of classical causality. Yet, as Derrida (1982:12; 1976:31-40) acknowledges, in view of the ‘circle’ within which theory is trapped, these classical terms retain a certain sense or value that simply cannot be wiped off the slate, that must be exhausted gradually before they can be displaced. Thus, according to Derrida, a certain inability to escape the tradition of Western metaphysics, has to be thought *together with* a concomitant inability to escape the ‘occulted’ disorder within traditional concepts that he refers to as *différance*. In short, deconstructive thinking finds its place within the tension created by our inability to escape both tradition and its occulted other.

To sum up, Derrida’s analysis of the ‘sign’ and his relationship with the Western philosophical tradition are two among countless examples that demonstrate the tension maintained in his texts between two opposing moments. Ignoring this tension, it seems that one could impose on Derrida’s thinking the kind of claims that inform a radical ‘freeplay’ postmodernism by arming oneself (one-sidedly) with all of Derrida’s arguments against ‘closure,’ for instance, or for ‘structurality,’ and so on. At the same time, it seems that one could defend his work against such claims by making use of opposing moments in his work. Both positions, however, are possible only by glossing over the complexities of his texts, which operate at the level of ‘showing’ (performing) according to the alternative *logos* he advocates at the level of ‘saying;’ namely, a *logos* that does not conform to the exigencies of ‘either/or.’ Following Derrida himself, and many of his commentators (Caputo 1997; Norris 1989:16-17; Olivier 1988, to name a few), I shall be at pains to reiterate his unequivocal disavowal of *both* the rigidity of structuralism *and* the scepticism or cynicism of a ‘freeplay’ approach.

It seems that structuralism (as a kind of modernism) and ‘freeplay’ postmodernism represent two opposing modes of interpreting interpretation, one which insists upon the possibility of absolute truth, and one which resorts to absolute scepticism. This conflict between two opposing interpretations of interpretation takes the form of arguments on either side of the age-old limit/possibility debate. Yet it is clear from Derrida’s texts that, for him, neither alternative (meaning in language is *either* fixed *or* impossible) seems acceptable as it stands. In other words, neither the excessive (temporal or spatial) rigidity of ‘absolute structure,’ nor complete freeplay seems adequate as an interpretation of interpretation. Hence his refusal to choose between them, and his strenuous efforts to re-think the very

logical or theoretical terrain in which such a choice seems mandatory. Interestingly enough, it seems that Kant himself offered the justification, on logical grounds, for such a resistance to choosing. Hence, an argument for the both/and structure, or a *logos* of difference, in Derrida's thinking will take the form of an argument, derived from Kant's analysis of the antinomies of pure reason, that an either/or logic is not the only, nor indeed the proper, option when considering the two moments of limit and 'play,' 'structure and 'structurality' in the interpretation of 'reality.'

The apparent necessity to choose either a structuralist model of interpretation or a postmodernist alternative resurrects, in contemporary terms, the selfsame debate between Humean scepticism and the rationalists who laboured to keep it at bay. In other words, what is particularly noteworthy at this point is the isomorphism between this contemporary situation and the similar problematic limit/possibility debate that Kant thought he had resolved once and for all in mediating between extremes of rationalism and empiricism. It should be noted as Copjec (1994:19) points out, that if we are to take the relational structure of language as axiomatic, then in our investigation into the nature of meaning (can meaning ever be conclusive, or does it proliferate senselessly), we find ourselves committed to two contradictory positions. We find ourselves facing, in fact, a classical 'conflict of the laws of pure reason,' or 'antinomy' (Kant 1964:250). This suggests that there is much to be gained – by way of understanding the reasons for Derrida's refusal to enter into the contemporary limit/possibility debate on its own terms – from a return to Kant's analysis of the antinomies in his First *Critique*. It is, therefore to Kant that I shall (re)turn.



## Part Three: A *Logos* of Difference

### Chapter Seven: From Kant's First Antinomy to *Différance*

#### 1. A Note on the Antinomial Nature of Meaning

Following Copjec (1994:19-20) it could be argued that antinomial conflicts arise when we seek a final or 'true' pronouncement on the status of meaning in language. Here (in a structuralist vein) it seems possible to point to the necessary limits of any semiotic system with regard to 'true meaning' by arguing that if meaning is a result of a network of differential relations between signs, then we have to presuppose that the network is complete in space and time before the meaning of even a single word can be finalised. To claim the opposite (an inexhaustible network) seems to commit us to the impossible assertion of an endless 'freeplay' of signification, or an inherent meaninglessness, which defeats the object of language use in the first place.

On the other hand, it is equally plausible to argue for precisely the opposite conclusion; that is, the impossibility of limits to the system or network. For if it is granted that language is indeed a completed system, then it becomes impossible to account for an undeniable, empirically observable and demonstrable mutability of signs. The fact that a word acquires meaning only through its difference from all other terms, even retroactively and prospectively, attests to the inexhaustibility of the process of meaning-generation. With no 'transcendental signified' to constrain the potential within language for the endless proliferation of signifiers and signifieds, there is no way in which any language (even a 'dead' language such as Latin) can be viewed as a totality and studied 'as a thing, or as a living organism or as a matter to be analyzed by an instrumental technique' (Benveniste 1971:35). In other words, the elements of language (signs) are never inherently stable and thus transferable intact or undistorted from one context to the next. It is in the nature of language that new contexts continually produce new signs. This is to accept that, as Copjec (19) puts it, 'one term acquires meaning only through its difference from all the others – ad infinitum, since the final term is never at hand.'

If language as a system is dynamic or always in process and signs become meaningful only as part of a network of past and future differences, then they remain inherently ambiguous as a result of the impossibility of establishing all potential connections at once. Yet, for all of this, signs are patently not meaningless. Hence, we appear to be trapped in a contradiction, for it seems that we are obliged to argue that a concept *both* cannot *and* must have a 'true meaning' (in the sense of a meaning that is final, stable, and universal). In other words, achieving meaning seems simultaneously to demand and

preclude the completeness of the system (Copjec 1994:19). While meaning requires limits to the totality, these very limits would deny the primordial linearity of the process by which meaning is achieved.

Those who search for a solution on either side of this debate, it would appear, forget the lesson to be learned from Kant's discussion of the antinomies (particularly his first antinomy). Kant demonstrated here that when such either/or logic does not seem to work, we should be alerted to the possibility that reason has come up against or overstepped its limits and has thus fallen into contradiction. In other words, due to the nature of signification in general, the notion that it is possible to know any given language or system of signification as a totality (in order to pronounce either on its limits or its infinity) attains the status of one of the deceptive 'ideas of reason' articulated by Kant. It therefore seems well worth taking some time to clarify what Kant had in mind when he wrote of the illusion of rational cosmology or 'first antinomy' to which 'pure' reason was inevitably drawn in its effort to pronounce definitively on the ultimate nature of the 'world'. In this way, I aim to demonstrate how Kant's analysis of this antinomy provides a key understanding to the resolution of the analogous limit/possibility problematic with which deconstructive thinking is concerned.

## **2. Kant's First Antinomy**

Scruton (1982:48-49) succinctly defines an antinomy as 'the peculiar fallacy which enables us to derive both a proposition and its negation from the same premise.' Antinomies however, he adds, are not genuine contradictions according to Kant, 'since both of the propositions which constitute them are false, being based on a false assumption' – a false premise, in other words, issuing from an illusory 'idea' of 'pure reason.'

In his analysis of the first antinomy, Kant (260-266) argued that reason was torn apart by two apparently contradictory, but equally plausible, claims concerning the ultimate nature of the 'world'; that is, concerning its spatio-temporal limits or their absence. According to Kant, it seemed equally plausible to conclude that the 'world' was bounded in time and space (thesis) and alternatively, that it was boundless (antithesis). One could, for example, he argued (260), point to the necessity of its limits with regard to time by arguing that to claim the opposite is to commit oneself to the impossible assertion of a completed infinity; the notion, that is, that at every given moment an infinite series of events must already have elapsed. Since this is clearly a logical absurdity, it seems incontrovertible that the 'world' must have had a beginning in time.

Similarly, as regards space, Kant (260) argued that the only way in which we could conceive of the dimensions of something which was not, like any object of small dimensions, amenable to intuition as a whole, was by means of the 'successive synthesis' of its parts. To take a simple example, he argued, it was not possible to intuit a country as a whole, but one could construct a notion of its dimensions –

assuming, of course, that the successive synthesis of its parts could at some point be seen as complete – by adding together some or other unit of measurement. It followed, according to Kant, that it was impossible to construct a notion of the spatial dimensions of an infinite quantity. That is to say, something infinite could not be considered as a given whole. Accordingly, if we were to insist that the ‘world’ had no spatial limits, we would assume that in total it had to consist of an infinite number of things and could not be considered as a whole. If we wished to consider the ‘world’ as a whole, therefore, we had to assume that it was not infinite, but limited in space.

On the other hand, Kant argued that it was equally possible to offer coherent counter-arguments for precisely the opposite conclusions. If it were granted that the ‘world’ did indeed have a beginning in time, we would be committed to the assumption that before this event, time elapsed in which there was nothing. Yet, then, to explain the beginning of the ‘world’, one would be obliged to attribute causal powers to a particular moment in time. The unacceptability of this attribution, given our spatio-temporal limitations) cast doubt on the notion that the ‘world’ could have a beginning in time. Again, Kant offered a corresponding counter-argument related to space. Here he maintained that if we saw the objective ‘world’ (the ‘world’ we could intuit) as limited in space, we had to assume it to be separated off from a ‘void’ or non-objective space which was not limited. That is, we were obliged to make some kind of distinction between phenomena and ‘empty’ space, and consequently posit a relation of sorts between the two. However, the notion of a division of this kind between space and phenomena was, for Kant, incoherent, since space was inconceivable apart from phenomena. In other words, space, as the formal condition of the possibility of phenomena could not be a real perceivable object at all and could not, therefore, stand in any sort of external relation to the objective ‘world’. For this reason, the ‘world’ could not be set apart from space and therefore had to be infinite. Bringing together these conclusions concerning the limitlessness of the phenomenal (objective) ‘world’ Copjec (31) notes:

There can be no limit to phenomena in the phenomenal realm, for this would require the existence of a phenomenon of an exceptional sort, one that was not itself conditioned and would thus allow us to halt our regress, or one that took no phenomenal form, i.e. that was empty: a void space or a void time.

It seems that from whatever perspective we consider what is at bottom the problematic relationship between limit and possibility, we find ourselves trapped in a paradox, where what we seem to have are two contradictory claims, one of which, if we are to follow the rule of conventional logic, must be false if the other is true. Yet we seem to have no means of making a decisive choice between the two since there are adequate arguments in support of both thesis and antithesis. Faced with the apparent unresolvability of this antinomy of pure reason, Kant (250) suggested that reason was compelled to make an unsatisfactory choice;

...either, on the one hand to abandon itself to a despairing scepticism, or, on the other, to assume a dogmatical confidence and obstinate persistence in certain assertions, without granting a fair hearing to the other side of the question.

It is not incidental that Kant rejected the choice between these two opposing trends, which generally correspond to the age-old philosophical conflict between Becoming and Being – or in contemporary terms, between modernism’s excessive and dogmatic clutching at Being and the manic preponderance of Becoming in postmodernism – for this is precisely the problematic faced by those who wish to take into account the effects of the ‘decentering rupture’ (Derrida) in the traditional discourses of the West attributed to the ‘linguistic turn,’ without at the same time falling prey to the endless freeplay of postmodernism (in its nostalgic, nihilistic or its affirmative guise). If we are constrained to assume the necessity of a choice between the two, as Copjec (17) notes, the

...happy voidance of the dogmatic option simply clears a space for the assertion of its binary opposite, if not for the “despairing scepticism” about which Kant warned us, then of scepticism’s sunny obverse: a confident voluntarism.

Both of these options, the dogmatic and the sceptical, as Kant (250) warned long ago, signal ‘the death of a sound philosophy.’

### **i. The ‘Contrary’ Opposition.**

Kant’s first antinomy arose out of the implicit assumption that it was possible for reasoning to reach a final point at which the ‘world’ could be grasped in its ‘unconditioned’ totality; an assumption which lent itself equally to two *seemingly* contradictory claims: the ‘world’ had a beginning in time and spatial limits, or alternatively, the ‘world’ was infinite in time and space. Yet the insusceptibility of the opposing antinomial claims to resolution by means of traditional either/or logic led him to question whether these two options were the only available alternatives, and to search for an explanation and a resolution in the very way the dilemma had been posed. What he discovered was, in essence, a false premise from which a *contrary* opposition, rather than a *true contradiction*, was derived (Copjec 29).

Kant’s (302) crucial distinction between ‘dialectical’ (*contrary*) and genuine or ‘analytical’ contradictions may be described as follows: An ‘analytical’ or genuine contradiction is derived from the proposition ‘something either is or is not the case’ (it either is or is not hot, to use a simple example). Here, a contradiction is said to occur between two complementary or mutually exclusive claims (it *is* hot; it *is not* hot), between which a sharp dividing line is maintained, and, as Copjec (28) puts it ‘since the two together exhaust the entire range of possibilities, the truth of one establishes the falsity of the

other, and vice versa.’ In other words, an analytical contradiction depends on the possibility of positing a totality (here, ‘*is*’ and ‘*is not*’ cover the entire range of available possibilities). In this case, then, it is impossible to deny a proposition without simultaneously affirming its opposite.

According to Kant (302) however, if, in contrast to this genuine contradiction, we were to consider a different kind of proposition – one that took the form of a binary opposition (something is either one thing or its opposite; something is either *hot* or *cold*) – we derive a different kind of contradiction altogether; one which he termed ‘dialectical.’ Copjec (29-30) explains a dialectical contradiction in terms of an opposition not between genuinely *contradictory* terms, but between *contraries*. A contrary opposition between two propositions, she explains, occurs when each proposition not only simply denies the other, but also implicitly makes a further claim. That is (my added emphasis and interjection),

The negation, which bears this time only on the *predicate* [‘hot’ or ‘cold’ as opposed to ‘is’ or ‘is not’], does not exhaust all the possibilities, but leaves behind something on which it does not pronounce. For this reason, *both* statements may simultaneously be false.

Perhaps this crucial point may be clarified as follows: If we are to assume (falsely) that the binary opposites ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ form a genuine contradiction, and that, accordingly, the truth of one establishes the falsity of the other, then to *affirm* that it is hot is indeed unproblematically to deny that it is cold. However, in assuming also, as we must, that the converse is true, we encounter a difficulty; for to *deny* that it is hot is not at all the same as to affirm the opposite, that it is cold; the temperature may quite simply be neutral, neither hot nor cold. Here, one is dealing with three options rather than only two. Naturally, then, if it is neither hot nor cold, then both positive claims, although contradictory, may simultaneously be false. As concerns the ultimate nature of the ‘world’, then, according to Kant (302): if we were to pose the question analytically, we were obliged to deal with one predicate at a time. Thus, we could ask whether the ‘world’ is or is not *infinite*. Then, assuming the falsity of the first (the ‘world’ is infinite) would oblige us to accept the truth of its opposite (the ‘world’ is not infinite) *without* demanding any further pronouncement concerning *other predicates* such as the world’s finitude. On the other hand, if we tried to construct the proposition *dialectically* – the ‘world’ is *either* infinite *or* finite – assuming wrongly that this took the form of a genuine contradiction, then we were faced with a conundrum, for both propositions could be false.

In other words, what makes the difference between an analytical and a dialectical contradiction, is not in the power to establish the positive truth of a ‘thesis statement’ against which an antithesis can be measured as false. Rather, the difference lies in the applicability of the converse. A contradiction is ‘analytical’ if the negation of the thesis establishes the antithesis as true, while it is ‘dialectical’ if the negation of the thesis cannot offer any pronouncement on the status of the antithesis. It follows that a

genuine contradiction depends on the power to assume that the two opposing terms are complementary, forming the kind of experienceable totality that enables us to make definite judgements. Failing this, a contradiction becomes merely dialectical, and, indeed, falsely named a contradiction at all. It is interesting to note that binary oppositions are paradigm cases of such dialectical 'contradictions.' Because the terms in such oppositions are constituted only in relation to each other, they form an open-ended system in which the assumption of the possibility of an experienceable totality cannot be made. At best, one can treat them *as if* they were complementary, in a particular context, by imposing definite qualities on the opposing terms. This imposition, of course, always remains contingent, contextual, provisional, and, therefore, subject to endless revision.

In sum, what Kant argued here is this: If we found that, paradoxically, we could derive a proposition and its negation from the same premise, then we should be alerted to the possibility that the premise was false, and that the 'contradiction' thus derived took the form of a 'contrary' or 'dialectical' opposition rather than a true contradiction. This meant, in turn, that the two 'opposing' propositions could simultaneously be false, and consequently, the necessity of a choice between them fell away.

Kant was able to avoid the impasse reached by the demand for an either/or choice between infinity and finitude in the first antinomy by arguing that it took the form of just such a dialectical contradiction. He reasoned as follows (1964:303):

When we regard the two propositions – the world is infinite in quantity, and, the world is finite in quantity, as contradictory opposites, we are assuming that the world – the complete series of phenomena – is a thing in itself. For it remains as a permanent quantity, whether I deny the infinite or the finite regress in the series of its phenomena.

In short, there is a further assumption, implicit in both propositions, that 'the world is a whole existing in itself' (Kant 304), apart from our representations of it. This presupposes that the 'world' can be grasped in its totality and consequently, questions concerning its ultimate nature are subject to an either/or logic where a choice between contradictory claims is mandatory. However, if it can be demonstrated that this assumption is incoherent or ill founded, then neither alternative need be taken as true and the necessity of a choice falls away (Copjec 29).

## **ii. The False Premise**

The ill-foundedness of the assumption that the 'world' is a whole that can be grasped in its totality, is precisely what Kant demonstrated at length and conclusively, I think, by means of his antecedent 'Copernican revolution.' Here, leading up to his discussion of the antinomies, Kant (299)

argued that: 'It is a logical postulate of reason: to pursue, as far as possible, the connection of a conception with its conditions.' Thus, as he (299) put it:

If the conditioned is given, a regress in the series of all its conditions is thereby imperatively *required*. For the very conception of a conditioned is a conception of something related to a condition, and, if this condition is itself conditioned, to another condition – and so on through all the members of the series.

In alternative terms, one could say that any explanation of the 'world' obviously depends for its veracity on the truth of its premises, but something must guarantee the truth of these premises, and, in turn, guarantee the truth of the guarantees, and so on. In this way reasoning pursues some final condition that requires no further condition to explain it or guarantee its truth, and which, therefore, completes or unifies the object of reason's inquiry and is able to serve as a stable ground for explaining all that is.

It follows, therefore, as Kant (299-300) argued, that any *given* thing (which presupposed the immediate conditions of its possibility) also had to presuppose the *whole* series of its conditions. Thus, in this case the final condition in the series (the 'unconditioned' or 'first principle') was given with, or at least implied by, the conditioned. That is, logically, a totality of conditions (including the unconditioned) necessarily had to be possible, by virtue of the very existence of the given. In Kant's words (300),

...the entire series of conditions, and with them the unconditioned, is at the same time given in the very fact of the conditioned, the existence of which is possible only in and through that series, being given.

For Kant (300), then, it seemed natural to assume that in principle, knowledge of the 'unconditioned' should be possible from the very fact of the given. In relation to the notion of the 'world,' for example, thinkers who assumed that the 'world' was a given, unified 'thing,' independent of and external to the human faculties of intuition and understanding, trapped themselves into accepting that, in principle, its 'first principle,' which served as guarantor of its ultimate nature, could be known. Yet, as we have seen, in <sup>practice</sup> this assumption, when applied to cosmology, generated contradictions that pure reason could not resolve (Kant 301).<sup>96</sup>

According to Kant, the initial mistake here (the false premise) was to have assumed the givenness of the 'conditioned' (that is, the independent existence of things in the 'world' and, by extension, the 'world' itself). This, in turn, meant that in order to grasp the 'first principle' that could complete or unify the 'world' and thereby guarantee its ultimate nature, reason would have to transcend the spatio-temporal limitations of human experience. This 'first principle' or final condition would have to

separate the spatio-temporal series of the conditioned and its conditions from something that transcended space or time. That is, to conceive of the spatio-temporal 'world' as a totality, one would have to separate it off from what is not space or time. Since human experience was inextricably bound within, or dependent on space and time, we could never be in a position to experience such a separation. Further, Kant argued that if we could conceive of this separation at all, it was only possible to conceive of it as an 'idea,' and not as a 'concept' which had to have empirical (spatio-temporal) content. This, incidentally, recalls Parmenides's (Melchert 1991:24) insistence that we can conceive of empty space, but we cannot think of nothing. Thus, we can never experience such an 'idea' of non-space or non-time in actuality, and nor can it be an object of the understanding (a concept). In other words, to grasp such a 'first principle' (were it at all possible) we would have to assume the possibility of pure intelligibility or perspective-free knowledge. Such ostensibly 'pure' intelligibility is consonant with what Kant labelled 'pure' reason. For Kant, then (251), such 'pure reason' was characterised by the attempt to make judgements, using, not concepts, which always had an empirical component, but 'ideas' from which all empirical conditions had been removed.

However, the use of 'pure reason' to grasp 'first principles' was, for Kant, to embark on a futile quest for knowledge; for, as he had demonstrated in his 'Copernican revolution,' space and time, as the *a priori* forms of intuition inextricably formed part of the very conditions that made knowledge possible. Thus, in Kant's view, while reasoning may well have yielded genuine, objective knowledge, provided that it was tied in some way to sensory experience, to 'aspire to knowledge of the unconditioned' was, as Scruton (47) puts it, 'to aspire beyond the conditions which make knowledge possible.' Accordingly, Kant argued against the claim that the 'world' could be conceived of as 'a whole existing in itself' by showing that the idea of the 'world' as a totality could not meet the conditions of the possibility of being an object of experience.

As Kant demonstrated at length by means of his 'Copernican revolution,' when we considered the 'world' we could not begin from the assumption that it was a *given* 'object' or 'thing' with circumscribed limits or boundaries. Rather, it was necessary to begin from a different assumption; namely that the conditioned was *not* given, but was 'produced' by the rational faculties of intuition and understanding. This, in turn, according to Kant, put paid to reason's quest for 'first principles.' In his words (300):

But if I have to do with phenomena, which, in their character of mere representations, are not given ...I am not entitled to say: If the conditioned is given, all its conditions (as phenomena) are also given. I cannot, therefore, from the fact of a conditioned being given, infer the absolute totality of the series of its conditions.

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<sup>96</sup> 'Cosmology' here, refers to the doctrine or discipline concerning the ultimate nature of the 'world.'



Thus, one ought properly to speak of a constitutively interpreted 'reality,' which rational beings are part of, and cannot get outside of in order to determine its limits or 'objectify' it as a whole. For this reason, the interpretations that constitute 'reality' have no perceivable end point. Thus, after Kant's 'Copernican revolution' the limitations imposed on reason, as Copjec (30) notes, 'specify that a possible object of experience must be locatable through a progression or regression of phenomena in time and space.' In other words, for Kant, all *possible* objects of experience for rational beings were necessarily subject, *without end*, to the linear or successive process of cause and effect. This endless succession of conditioned and conditions, however, is precisely what is precluded in the concept 'world' since it incorporates the assumption that an absolute totality of phenomena is conceivable as complete. Thus as Copjec (30-31) concludes:

The rule of reason that requires us to seek after conditions is therefore abridged by the conception of the rule's total satisfaction, that is, by the conception of the world. Adherence to the rule and the complete satisfaction of the rule are, as it turns out, antinomic. The world is an object that destroys the means of finding it; it is for this reason illegitimate to call it an object at all. A universe of phenomena is a true contradiction in terms; the world cannot and does not exist.

In short, Kant's analysis (Copjec 30) shows that, for such rational beings as humans, 'the world is a self-contradictory concept, that the absolute totality of an endless progression is inconceivable by definition.' In less condensed terms, since the knowable reality of our ordinary experience involves a synthesis between understanding and intuition (which is unavoidably situated or perspective-bound), the idea of 'absolute totality' is applicable only to those things outside of our possible experience; to things-in-themselves, which is in effect to nothing knowable. In Kant's (303) words, the cosmological antinomy

...is merely the product of a dialectical and illusory opposition, which arises from the application of the idea of absolute totality – admissible only as a condition of things in themselves, to phenomena, which exist only in our representations, and – when constituting a series – in a successive regress.

### **iii. The False Propositions**

Having demonstrated the falsity of the premise upon which the thesis (the 'world' is finite) and the antithesis (the 'world' is infinite) of the first antinomy depend, Kant could then dismiss each as lacking or incomplete and thus, taken by itself, as impossible to verify. Consequently, as he (303) put it,

...the contradictory opposition is metamorphosed into a merely dialectical one; and the 'world', as not existing in itself – independently of the regressive series of my representations, exists in like manner neither as a whole which is infinite nor as a whole which is finite in itself. The universe exists for me only in the empirical regress of the phenomena, and not *per se*. If, then, it is always

conditioned, it is never given completely or as a whole; and it is, therefore, not an unconditioned whole, and does not exist as such, either with an infinite, or with a finite quantity.

In other words, as the earlier example of hot and cold binary opposites demonstrated, because the thesis and antithesis statements of a contrary opposition do not form a genuine contradiction, the negation of each proposition involved in the first antinomy (which is all that is possible from our limited perspective as spatio-temporal beings) may not be used in either case to demonstrate the truth of its opposite (cf. Copjec 29). Importantly, as far as this relates to the Kantian (and contemporary) limit/possibility problematic with which we are concerned, this means that denial of the thesis of the first antinomy – conceding, that is, the lack of a limit to the collection of phenomena of which the ‘world’ consists – does not constrain us to accept the antithesis; that these phenomena are infinite (Copjec 31). It is precisely dogged adherence to an either/or logic which, in the face of the negation of absolute limit, drives a culture in the opposite direction toward the kind of ‘anything goes,’ cynical postmodernism that is the devastation of thinking. Beware of the logic, Copjec (32) warns, ‘which conceives the universal and the particular as exhaustive possibilities;’ where ‘the negation of the all produces the particular.’

#### **iv. Indeterminacy**

Once he had uncovered the contrary structure of the antinomies in which the idea of the ‘world’ as a totality entangled us, Kant’s counsel was to avoid their trap by denying the thesis of the first antinomy *without* asserting anything beyond this regarding the nature of the ‘world.’ In other words, the outcome of his ‘Copernican revolution’ constrains us to accept that a spatio-temporally bound conceptual faculty denies rational beings the capacity to conceive of the ‘world’ in its totality. Instead, as Copjec (31) argues, we are obliged to

...recognize the basic finitude of all phenomena, the fact that they are inescapably subject to conditions of time and space and must therefore be encountered one by one, indefinitely, without the possibility of reaching an end, a point where all phenomena would be known.

Thus, as Copjec (31) points out: ‘The status of the world is not infinite but indeterminate.’ Briefly stated, then, Kant’s analysis of the antinomies offers a way out of the apparent antinomies of reason generated by conflating two kinds of oppositions (namely analytical and dialectical) which should properly be distinguished. He demonstrated that it is only with respect to analytical contradictions that an either/or choice makes sense. In relation to dialectical contradictions, which occur in structures or systems that cannot be viewed as complete, a different logical form operates, inherent to which is the notion of indeterminacy or undecidability.

### 3. Indeterminacy, Complexity and Deconstructive Thinking

What is important here in relation to the structuralist/postmodernist conflict over the nature of language, and hence the nature of 'reality,' is that this 'undecidability' associated with a dialectical structure (a structure of neither/nor, or both/and) can be generalised to any 'system' which does not have inherent or 'natural' limits. Thus, what Kant offers here is an explanation of the general logic of what, following Cilliers (1998a:3-5), one could call 'complex systems.'

Briefly (I shall offer more detail presently), Cilliers suggests that the term 'complex systems' may describe systems consisting of many elements or components that enter into diverse and flexible relations with each other without a central governing principle, nor an inherent or necessary telos or origin. Such systems must be conceived of as living, open-ended, and therefore historical. Examples that he offers (3) include the human brain, systems of signification or societies (if one is not a structuralist), ecological systems, bacteria and the like. Cilliers contrasts 'complex systems' with 'complicated systems,' which, while also consisting of many components, can be viewed as complete systems in which these components remain bound by fixed relations (a jet engine is one example that he offers, along with such things as intricate electronic equipment, a snowflake and the Mandelbrot set).

As we have already seen, the antinomial conflicts that arise concerning the ultimate nature of meaning suggest that language, or signification in general, should most properly be viewed as such a 'complex system,' inherent to which is the notion of 'undecidability' or 'indeterminacy.' It is this view of language as a 'complex system' that forms the very axis upon which the difference between Derrida's position and both structuralism as well as 'freeplay' postmodernism turns. In other words, following the logic (pertaining to 'complex systems') outlined by Kant, Derrida's critique of structuralism does not automatically force him into complicity with a 'freeplay' postmodernism. Rather, the 'undecidability' concerning priority here provides a 'key' to understanding Derrida's refusal to enter into the limit/possibility debate between structuralists and postmodernists on the restrictive basis of an either/or choice.

On the one hand, 'undecidability' forms the basis for interpreting the pattern of deconstructive thinking (a *logos* of difference) as 'rooted' in Kant's analysis of the antinomies, rather than in postmodernism. Yet, on the other hand, Kant himself would probably have balked at Derrida's insistence, from the perspective of philosophy after the 'linguistic turn,' that the 'logic of complexity' is the pervasive logical structure of all 'reality.' In other words, given the historical perspective provided by two centuries, which includes the radical philosophical shift inaugurated by the 'linguistic turn,' Derrida's (at least implicit) appropriation of Kant is not without its critical element. In other words, he

may indeed have accepted the outcome of Kant's 'Copernican revolution' (that is, the notion that the knowable 'world' or 'reality' is a matter of representation or interpretation),<sup>97</sup> as well as the outcome of his analysis of the antinomies (that is, the insistence on a middle path between binary extremes, in a system without borders, via the notion of undecidability), but this is not, for Derrida, the final word on the matter. For there is a certain irony in the fact that Kant himself (by means of his examination of the 'logic of complex systems' in his analysis of the antinomies) provided the theoretical tools to render a critique of the epistemological commitments that underpin his 'Copernican revolution.'

More specifically, philosophy after the 'linguistic turn' offers the means to criticise of Kant's belief that in spite of the complexity of 'reality' (the endlessness of the realm of phenomena and therefore the undecidability pertaining to its ultimate nature) it was possible to achieve epistemological certainty with regard to it. Such a critique, I should immediately add, does not vitiate the fundamental insight expressed in Kant's 'Copernican revolution' that 'reality' is a matter of interpretation. From the point of view of philosophy after the 'linguistic turn,' this insight certainly still holds water. Yet, from this point of view, there are concomitant limitations in Kant's attempt to secure objective knowledge. Perhaps one could see his quest for epistemological security in terms of a certain (historically mediated) blindness due to metaphysical commitments unchallenged until the incursion of language into the 'universal problematic' (Derrida 1978b:280). Thus, it is probably true that Kant could not have extended the results of his analysis of the antinomies to the notion of objective knowledge proposed in his 'Copernican revolution' without the 'retrospective perspective' offered by the insights of the 'linguistic turn.'

#### **4. Translation of the Logic of Kant's First Antinomy into Cilliers's Distinction Between Complex and Complicated Systems.**

In order to clarify Derrida's implicit critique of Kant for thinking he could accommodate complexity as well as absolute certainty within one system, I have made use of alternative theoretical terms, namely, the aforementioned distinction between complex and complicated systems, to describe Kant's crucial delimitation of the knowable or decidable (the structure of our own minds), the conceivable but undecidable (the phenomenal or objective 'world'), and the inconceivable or 'noumenal' (the 'thing-in-itself').

In the first place, it should be noted that this distinction between complex and complicated systems does not correspond with the Kantian distinction between noumenon and phenomenon, but

rather to the ‘structure/structurality’ or limit/possibility tension within the phenomenal realm that Kant grappled with in his analysis of the First Antinomy.

### **i. Phenomena and Noumena**

In general terms, one could relate the distinction between phenomena and noumena to the binary opposition between objective knowledge (knowability) and the radical alterity of its opposite. Or alternatively, this distinction concerns the relation of spatiality and temporality to non-space and non-time. Recall that for Kant, what we could know had to conform to the spatio-temporal conditions of the possibility of experience. Thus, as he (1964: 182-184) argued at length, not only were the forms of intuition inherently spatio-temporal, but the categories and principles of the understanding, too, were incomprehensible outside of time and space. In his words (183):

The conception itself is always produced *a priori*, together with the synthetic principles or formulas from such conceptions; but the proper employment of them, and their application to objects, can exist nowhere but in experience, the possibility of which, as regards its form, they contain *a priori*.

That this is also the case with all of the categories and the principles based upon them, is evident from the fact, that we cannot render intelligible the possibility an object corresponding to them without having recourse to the conditions of sensibility, consequently, to the form of phenomena, to which, as their only proper objects, their use must therefore be confined...

Subsequently, Kant listed a whole series of instances explaining the sense in which categories/concepts such as magnitude, reality, causality and so on, could not be explained except in terms of their reducibility to spatial or temporal terms. He argued for example that (183):

The concept of quantity cannot be explained except by saying that it is the determination of a thing whereby it can be cogitated how many times one is placed in it. But this ‘how many times’ is based upon successive repetition, consequently upon time and the synthesis of the homogeneous therein.

It is unnecessary, here, to consider the details of Kant’s argumentation; suffice it to say that similar arguments for the rest of the categories follow. The point to be made is that Kant clearly restricted the knowable as well as the conceivable (as opposed to the ‘merely’ thinkable), or the perspective of possible experience, to the spatio-temporal.

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<sup>97</sup> Recall that Kant’s doctrine of Transcendental Idealism asserted that (1964:296; my emphasis), ‘...everything intuited in space and time – all objects of a possible experience, are nothing but phenomena, that is, mere representations; and that these, as presented to us – as extended bodies, or as series of changes – have no self-subsistent existence apart from *human thought*.’

However, born of our very notion of the perspective of possible experience was the postulate of its opposite, the postulate of that which was in excess of this perspective. As Kant (1964:186) articulated it:

The understanding, when it terms an object in a certain relation phenomenon, at the same time forms out of this relation a representation or notion of an *object in itself*...

In other words, for Kant, the very fact that we were bound by spatio-temporal limits, incorporated or included the 'idea' of an outside or a beyond to those limits; that is, a non-space or a non-time.<sup>98</sup> However, this 'idea,' that Kant entitled the noumenal, was utterly beyond our sensory and intellectual faculties. It lay outside perception, but more than this, it lay wholly outside of the possible application of the categories, which themselves could only be explained in spatio-temporal terms. The phenomenal/noumenal distinction may be clarified by considering a concrete example, such as the light spectrum. Humans, because of our physical capabilities, have access to a certain range within the light spectrum (measured in terms of wavelength). We are able to extend the range of our natural endowment by means of sophisticated technical equipment. Thus, at the limits of the measurable spectrum, there is always the possibility of one more or one less, given ever more sophisticated means of extending the power of human faculties. Yet as far as we can extend this range, it will always be in space and time, and can never be extended into the non-spatial or non-temporal. The phenomenal, thus, designates that which *can* be the object of knowledge (although it may not currently form part of human experience), since it is ordered in time and space. This is, then, set against the notion of the noumenal as its opposite. As mentioned earlier, Derrida's (1976:158) statement 'there is nothing outside of the text' can be read as a translation of this Kantian distinction into linguistic terms. Thus for Derrida, as for Kant, the noumenal designates that about whose *nature* we can, in principle, have nothing at all to say in positive terms.

## ii. Limit and Possibility Within the Phenomenal/Objective Realm

In contrast to the phenomenal/noumenal distinction, which includes the notion of a 'radical other' to our very knowing faculties, Kant was concerned with a somewhat different distinction when discussing the antinomies of 'pure' reason. Here he was occupied with a tension that persisted *within* the realm of *possible* experience, due to the very (limited) nature of our knowing faculties themselves. This can be articulated as a tension between the finite and the infinite, the complete and the open-ended, or between limit and possibility – to return to a familiar theme. Here, Kant was not concerned with the

border between the knowable and the inconceivable insofar as it manifested itself as a tension between temporality and non-time or spatiality and non-space. Rather, *within* the spatio-temporal, limits of the conceivable, he was concerned with the border between the decidable and the undecidable, which manifested itself in the tension between the definability of particular spaces and times and the indeterminacy of 'all' space and time. Extending the above example, it has become increasingly clear that as far as we may be able to extend the range of our sensory apparatus (be it physical or technological) within the spatio-temporal realm, we will *never be sure* that we have reached the limits of all possible wavelengths (or, more broadly, all experiencable or measurable phenomena). That is, we may be able to record the highest or lowest currently available to us via our senses (extended by means of our devices), but we can never be sure that this present limit covers all that there is. Thus, while we can be sure that whatever becomes accessible to us will be spatio-temporal, the question of the limits of possible manifestation remain undecidable (There may be limits, there may not; we may have reached them already; we may discover more. Here, we are helpless; we cannot tell). Thus, from Kant's perspective, the tension played out within the spatio-temporal order took the following form: the whole of the phenomenal realm (each particular detail of it) was knowable in principle, but it was not knowable as a whole.<sup>99</sup>

### iii. Complex and Complicated Systems

This tension, *within* the objective/spatio-temporal realm of possible experience, may be elaborated in the terms provided by Cilliers's (1998a:3-5) complex/complicated distinction. Briefly put, a system is 'complex' when it exceeds our power to perceive or grasp (intuit) it as complete, and it, therefore, remains open-ended. It is 'complicated,' on the other hand when we have the capacity to intuit it as complete.<sup>100</sup> Here, both terms of this distinction involve, or include, the spatio-temporal limitations of human powers of perception and understanding which constrain us to perceive or grasp the 'non-simple' diachronically (that is, in terms of linear succession or accretion), or relationally (in terms of localised patterns of interaction). Thus, in contrast to simple phenomena or objects that can

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<sup>98</sup> Bear in mind that non-space or non-time refers to a complete lack of these and not to the conceivable notion of empty space.

<sup>99</sup> This articulation of the tension was suggested to me by Bert Olivier.

<sup>100</sup> If one wanted to take an empiricist line here, one could say that the system *is* open-ended, and, *for this reason*, we cannot grasp it in its entirety. My articulation tends toward a more Kantian line as a consequence of the testimony of Sacks concerning Dr. P., for whom, it could be ventured – as a result of a decline in his power to grasp anything as complete – the stable relations between elements ordinarily characteristic of complicated systems had disappeared, leaving in their wake an almost total complexity. Thus, thinking along these lines, one would say that the system is open-ended *because* we cannot grasp it in its entirety.

be grasped in terms of simultaneity, more complicated ‘things’ or systems cannot be intuited all at once, or as a whole.

While the impossibility of grasping them in terms of simultaneity is true of both complex and complicated systems, however, there is a clear difference between the two when it comes down to the question of certainty with regard to *knowledge* of them, which requires the power of ‘objectification.’ Objectification involves the ability to distance oneself from the objectified ‘thing,’ and to view it from a position external to it. This implies the ability to *know the limits* of a ‘thing’ or system. It demands the power ‘closure’ in Derrida’s terms – if not through intuiting its every detail at once, then at least through knowing that each component stands in a fixed relation with those around it, or, as Kant would have argued, by being able to trace a conditioned back to its ‘first’ principle. Thus, any static system that is circumscribed by conceivable limits, or has an external, governing or controlling centre or point of origin, however complicated, remains within the scope of certainty. (In alternative terms, the notion of a complicated system corresponds to Derrida’s notion of a centred structure.) We may not have the capacity to perceive or grasp the intricacies of a very complicated system at a glance, yet we are capable, nevertheless, of *understanding* or conceptualising it as a finite entity: through, for example, a concatenation of single units (a finite sum of finite parts) or through delineating a set of elements bound by immutable relationships. As Cilliers (3) argues, one of the features of a complicated system is its amenability to accurate analysis – in the ‘full sense of the word,’ as Cilliers notes. Thus, despite our inability to grasp all parts simultaneously, the whole of a complicated system is capable of being known with certainty.

In contrast, according to Cilliers (3) a complex system may be described as a ‘living’ system, in which dynamic interactions between components render it changeable, opportunistically flexible and adaptable; and capable of an indeterminate number of manifestations. Thus, *as a whole*, it cannot be objectified. In other words, while such systems, for rational beings, must become manifest within space and time (i.e. their parts and relations are inevitably spatio-temporal), the extent of these remains permanently open-ended. This means that the extent of a complex system exceeds both imagination and understanding. In other words, we lack the means to posit a necessary, final term (centre or origin of the system) which could stand as guarantor for all the rest; that is, we lack the means to conceive of the system as complete or bounded.

The question, therefore, of the system’s essential nature (answerable only by virtue of an ability to prioritise one term of the binaries that constitute it) is strictly undecidable. In relation to its extent, for example, we may say that the system is not *finite* in the sense of being static, circumscribed or centred, since the final term which could guarantee this stasis (or ‘determinate comprehensibility, in epistemological terms) is never at hand (Copjec 1994:19-20). Were the system to come into being at a locatable point, or somehow to come to an end, these occurrences would be purely contingent. The



origin of a complex system, therefore, cannot be endowed with any kind of logical necessity, for this would assume an 'outside' to the system which, therefore, completes and governs it, reducing its 'complexity' to 'complicatedness.' Nor, for the same reason, can its end form a necessary or logical part of its development or functioning. Yet, at the same time, this very contingency, bound to its spatio-temporality, forbids the assumption that a complex system is *infinite*. In other words, it incorporates the possibility, but not the necessity, of its own end. Or, alternatively stated, its dynamism operates within the limits of space and time. Pushed beyond the extremes of those limits, it is susceptible to overload and collapse. (In language as an example of a complex system, *absolute* refusal to abide by the linearity of the production of meaning would result in the collapse of meaning.) In other words, a complex system may be open-ended and dynamic, but it is not infinitely flexible at any given moment, because all relations are still constrained to manifest themselves or operate within the spatio-temporal conditions of their possibility. Thus, to sum up briefly, while a complex system, as it is manifested diachronically, does not exceed the spatio-temporal conditions of the possibility of objectivity, it nevertheless exceeds the conditions which would guarantee its 'determinate comprehensibility.'

#### **iv. Complexity and Certainty in a Single System**

Cilliers's (1998a:3-5) complex/complicated distinction seems to offer an illuminating angle of incidence into Kant's attempt to accommodate, within one system, what seem to be opposing notions. In principle, for Kant, every aspect of the phenomenal/objective realm ('representations' or constitutive interpretations) was an object of possible experience, and therefore, certain knowledge of it was possible. Yet, on the other hand there was no question that the phenomenal or objective realm was indeed endlessly reproductive, or ceaselessly manifesting, and, as concerns its ultimate nature, subject to the logic of undecidability outlined in his first antinomy. Here, a distinction between complex and complicated systems proves to be a valuable means to untangle what seems to be contradictory.

Using this distinction, one could say that 'existence,' from a Kantian point of view, or the 'world' as a whole, forms a complex system. Thus, for Kant, while we could, in principle, know all possible objective manifestations (that is, be certain of their qualities or behaviour), in fact, as a result of our (human) spatio-temporal limitations (which determined that reason had to operate in terms of linear succession in order to grasp non-simple objects), we could not know the phenomenal/objective 'world' as a whole. In other words, we could not synthesise all possible past, present and future phenomena at once, in terms of simultaneity. This meant that we could not say anything conclusive about the extent of its 'being' or existence, not because any part of it exceeded the point of view of possible experience – as the noumenal would – but because the extent of the realm of possible experience was such that it exceeded the possibility of objectification *as a whole*. That is, the question of its 'being' (its essential

nature) remained strictly undecidable. We could not say whether or not it would exist forever in time, nor could we tell whether or not it contained an infinite amount of possible phenomena/objects. In Kantian terms, we could never know the 'world' as a thing-in-itself; that is, as a circumscribed or centred entity, separate from and independent of our knowing faculties, or outside of the operational limits of our own point of view. In other words, in terms of its 'being' or 'existence,' the 'world' formed a complex system.<sup>101</sup>

Hence, Kant would have argued that because we did not have the power to circumscribe all existence, there was no end to the potential for new objective manifestations. For this reason, we would never have full knowledge of all possible 'constitutive interpretations.' This may tempt one to think of the activity of constitutive interpretation that produces knowable, objective 'reality' as a similarly complex system, and, therefore as leading to an inherent uncertainty concerning such 'reality.' Kant, however, would have insisted that 'reality' was in fact merely 'complicated' (that is, we could know it with certainty).

For Kant, our inability to circumscribe the 'world' would not have been cause for epistemological despair, for epistemological certainty depended not on knowing *transcendent* (independent or external to the rational subject) 'first principles' that could complete and unify *the 'world,'* but rather on knowing the *complete set of rational 'rules'* according to which 'things' were produced indefinitely. Hence, we could know 'reality' with certainty, not because we had access to the entire extent of its possible manifestation in space and time, but because we could trace the grounds or conditions of its possible manifestation to a stable point of origin. This recalls Kant's (252-253) analysis of time in which he made a fundamental distinction between the '*antecedentia*' (past time), and the '*consequentia*' (future time), and insisted that certainty or 'truth' (i.e. 'closure') depended on the necessity of an 'end' to the series of receding conditions (that is, an 'origin') but not necessarily a totality of consequences. In other words, 'closure' in this sense does not require that 'Being' cease to be productive. Rather, it signifies the grounding of it's meaning in an absolute beginning. It implies the power to privilege – as a stable, primary point of origin in relation to which all else is derivative or secondary – the *complete* set or structure of rules according to which the rational faculty itself *conditions* 'the being of objects' (Melchert 1991:381).

Hence, Kant's characterisation of 'reality' as complicated (as knowable with certainty) depended on his assumption that the forms of intuition and categories of the understanding, grounded the possible manifestation of objective 'reality.' Furthermore, and importantly, he assumed that we had

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<sup>101</sup> As a totality, it attains a status equivalent to that of a noumenon, even though, strictly speaking it is not noumenal. (The noumenal lies wholly outside conceptuality, and thus is subject to neither decidability nor undecidability). Thus there appears to be a curious kind of circularity or doubling back that pertains to the question of the possible equivalence of all- space/time and non- space/time. However, while the pursuit of this question may be interesting in its own right, it appears to be a digression too large, and perhaps not strictly necessary to the present argument.

immediate access to our own mental states or rational functioning; that is, he thought that reason could objectify itself. By means of this very reason, he thought that he could ascertain the complete set of essential and universal conditions of the possibility of representing an objective 'world', for which he coined the phrase synthetic *a priori*.<sup>102</sup>

For Kant, then, epistemological certainty depended on understanding the human rational faculty as a 'complicated system,' circumscribed by the operation of the forms of intuition and categories of the understanding, that he thought were rationally ascertainable as a completed set. In his (1964:70) words:

Transcendental analytic is the dissection of the whole of our *a priori* knowledge into the elements of the pure cognition of the understanding. In order to effect our purpose it is necessary: (1) that the conceptions be pure and not empirical; (2) That they belong not to intuition and sensibility, but to thought and understanding; (3) That they be elementary conceptions and not deduced or compound conceptions; (4) That our table of these elementary conceptions be complete, and fill up the whole sphere of the pure understanding.

For Kant (70), such completeness could not be achieved empirically by means of repeated experiments.

The completeness which we require is possible only by means of an idea [ironically] of the totality of the *a priori* cognition of the understanding, and through the thereby determined division of the conceptions which form the said whole; consequently, only by means of their connection in a system. Pure understanding distinguishes itself not merely from everything empirical, but also completely from all sensibility [content]. It is a unity self-subsistent, self-sufficient, and not to be enlarged by any additions from without. Hence the sum of its cognition constitutes a system to be determined by and comprised under an idea; and the completeness and articulation of this system can at the same time serve as a test of the correctness and genuineness of all the parts of cognition that belong to it.

In sum, Kant reduced what was knowable, or objective ('reality' as representation), to a complicated system; one that had a definite origin, namely, the point of view of the universal subject, governed by its complete and unchanging, complicated system of *a priori* intuitions, categories and principles. Accordingly we could say with certainty how the 'world' *had to* be for us, *if* it was going to be at all. Yet, even if we knew the 'rules' according to which objects had to 'be' for us, we could not know the extent of their possibilities of 'being' for us (not to mention the possibilities of being outside of a human point of view); for 'knowledge' of these possibilities would require the impossible. In other words, grasping the 'world' as a whole required us to step outside of the very conditions of the possibility of knowing at all.

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<sup>102</sup> It is precisely on this point, incidentally, that thinkers after the 'linguistic turn,' as a rule, differ from Kant.

For Kant, the resolution of this tension was to avoid the temptation to make decisions about the essential nature of the 'world' as a totality, for such decisions were strictly beyond the powers of reason. Thus, any attempt to make definitive claims about the objective 'world' as a whole was bound to fail (that is, to fall into contradiction, or remain trapped in the realm of illusion). Reason, he argued, was capable of providing reliable, or true statements about objective 'reality' as long as it restricted itself to explaining how it 'was,' if it was to be objective at all. In other words, in his view, reason in this circumscribed or limited capacity, was capable of truth; beyond this it was only capable of the illusion of truth.

#### **v. Derrida's Appropriation and Critique of Kant**

Throughout this text I have touched upon different aspects of Derrida's deconstructive thinking, all of which have some bearing on the delineation of a different *logos* – a *logos* of difference. By way of an ending of sorts, although this is equally a beginning, I shall return to Derrida's texts, in an attempt to outline a general 'economic' framework for understanding what it could mean to replace an adversarial either/or logic with an inclusive both/and way of thinking. First, however, it may be worth casting a brief glance back over the general argument of this text, which lays the basis for an understanding of Derrida's appropriation and critique of Kant.

Kant's 'Copernican revolution' demonstrated that the human rational faculty was involved in the constitution not of 'existence,' but of 'knowable reality' (thought of as being 'objects,' 'things,' or generally that which has 'form,' is interpreted, or has meaning). Kant conceived of the human rational faculty in terms of forms of intuition and categories of the understanding, which formed a closed, complete, and, therefore, merely complicated system. The 'linguistic turn,' however, has demonstrated the unavoidable linguistic articulation of the human rational faculty, with the implication that it is language that constitutes, not existence, but (knowable) 'reality.' Structuralism represents an attempt to secure 'reality' by insisting that language itself may be thought of as a complicated system. This view, however, is subject to the contradictions pertaining to Derrida's notion of a centred structure, which requires an 'outside' to the structure in order to establish its limits. 'Freeplay' postmodernism, on the other hand, embraces the nihilistic or alternatively particularistic (anarchistic) implications of the proliferation of signs; overlooking in the process, the need to theorise the 'structurality' of signification in such a way that the very meanings it celebrates may be rendered cogent.

In contrast, one may understand Derrida's deconstructive thinking to be a way of thinking that avoids such contradictions. In the first place, Derrida retains (reaffirms) Kant's phenomena/noumena distinction through his argument that there is 'nothing outside of the text.' Adding its might to the momentum of the 'linguistic turn,' deconstructive thinking presupposes agreement that the powers of

representation belong to the order of language. For this reason, it does not allow for an 'outside text' in the form of a complete rational faculty exterior to linguistic articulation.

In the second place, deconstructive thinking involves a rejection of Kant's strict demarcation, within the phenomenal, objective or representational realm of 'reality,' between the knowable and the undecidable, designed to preserve the absolute certainty of the knowable. Like the 'world,' of which Kant writes in his analysis of the antinomies, the very language in which his categories must be articulated, is seen to be a 'complex' system, where spatial and temporal 'totality' is not achievable.

Taking Saussure's differential structure of language as axiomatic, Derrida has demonstrated that language as a system cannot be closed in the temporal sense of positing a point of origin. Nor, however, can it be closed in the spatial sense of positing a boundary. This impossibility of 'closure' – together with the impossibility of an 'outside text' – enables one to apply the conclusions of Kant's analysis of the logic of open-ended systems (in his analysis of the antinomies) to areas he thought he had preserved from its destabilising effects. Consequently, we are obliged to bring the notion of undecidability to bear on Kant's conception of rationality, and by extension, on the objective world or 'reality,' that is, the realm of knowledge or 'truth.' For this reason, therefore, what Kant demarcated as circumscribed or 'merely' complicated (namely human rationality: the forms of intuition and the complete set of categories of the understanding), must, in fact, be seen as a 'complex system.' It is the open-endedness of meaning in systems of signification that underpins deconstructive thinking.

Thus, one could say that Kant criticised rationalists and empiricists for thinking that the world was accessible in its totality, and making erroneous assumptions on that basis. Yet, the same criticism, in essence, could be levelled at him, for thinking we had access to the human mind as a totality. This, of course, is not to imply that the mind is an unstructured chaos and that reality follows suit. Rather, as linguistic constructions, the forms of intuition and categories of the understanding that subtend synthetic *a priori* judgements are differentially constituted. That is, they are not positive terms with essential qualities, but are constituted in terms of relations of difference within a binary continuum without necessary, stable, inherent end-points; and without a centre. Viewing rationality in this way, perhaps, would give credence to Reichenbach's (1962) criticism (discussed earlier) of Kant's conception of the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgements, without vitiating it altogether, however.

In other words, one could say that Kant's mistake was to have conceived of the point of view of possible human experience too narrowly, by valorising the side of binary oppositions that exemplifies 'limit' (stability, certainty and predictability), such as regularity as opposed to irregularity in space, predictability as opposed to spontaneity in causal relations, conservation as opposed to generation of matter. Perhaps if he had been sensitive to the logic of binaries, he may have seen that the very possibility of a regular geometry such as Euclid's always already includes (in the occult form of the

'trace') the notion of one that is irregular. Similarly the very notion of cause includes the possibility of spontaneity. This, of course, operates the other way around too.

Kant's contention that, if principles are *a priori*, then it means that we cannot even imagine or conceive of a world in which experience could contradict them, since they are the very conditions of the possibility of having experience at all, would still hold true as long as we do not limit space, for example, to one side of the binary continuum. That is, insofar as we do not restrict the 'form' of space to a particular limited 'content,' such as 'regular space.' Instead, one could think of spatiality itself, for example, as complex or open-ended, rather than as definite – but still, nevertheless a synthetic *a priori* principle. Hence, what is to be found in the non-Euclidean world is not the dissolution of Kant's notion of synthetic *a priori* judgements, but rather, within them, the neglected or negated 'other' of our quotidian experience – which, by being 'other' or 'outside' serves to confirm, rather than refute Kant's system, insofar as it pertains to ordinary experience, although it also limits Kant's observations to such experience.

Thus, in contrast to Reichenbach – who views the failings of Kant's articulation of his 'Copernican revolution' as a complete vindication of 'common sense' empiricism – one may grant, from the point of view of a *logos* of difference, that the failure of Euclidean geometry as proof of the synthetic *a priori*, indicates that a re-consideration of Kant's formulation of his 'Copernican revolution' is in order. However, one may argue that it is not necessary to abandon it altogether. At most, in response to Reichenbach, one would have to grant that Kant's articulation of the synthetic *a priori* was lacking – perhaps reflecting Kant's thinking as being caught up in Derrida's (1976:49) 'metaphysics of presence,' which could be attributed to Kant's failure to take language seriously as an open-ended, complex system. However, we need not go so far as to accept its complete refutation. In short, the discovery of non-Euclidean geometry and spontaneity at the subatomic level, does not dissolve the synthetic *a priori*, but it does mean that the synthetic *a priori* as Kant envisaged it, was only half the story.

In answer to the question whether it is our mental capacities that determine what 'reality' is like, or the world that determines how our minds are shaped, one could then answer 'neither and both.' In other words, it could be said that neither the rational mind, nor the world is an unstructured manifold: both may be structured entities and objective reality is a result of their interaction. While I do not intend to enter these 'murky waters,' there seems to be potential for verification of this position from the quantum world. According to Brink (1985:21): 'It is significant, as Zukav also points out, that our very word "reality" is derived from the roots "thing" (*res*) and "think" (*revi*).' In this regard, Brink (20-23) cites: Heisenberg ('What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning'); Bohr ('an independent reality in the ordinary physical sense can be ascribed neither to the phenomena nor to the agencies of observation.');

and particle-like behaviours be properties of one and the same light? They are not properties of light. They are properties of our *interaction* with light’).

Perhaps, in light of a *logos* of difference, one could acknowledge a circularity or reciprocity in the process of constituting a ‘reality.’ Hence, Reichenbach’s (140) evaluation of Kant – ‘what he regarded as laws of reason was actually a conditioning of human imagination by the physical structure of the environment’ – could be extended to include a reciprocal moment, which suggests that a certain physical structure is open to human beings by virtue of, or in the context of, the ‘rationality’ they are capable of at a given time. This would leave open a possibility that the physical structure of the environment is indefinitely plastic, and can ‘open itself’ in different ways, indefinitely, as rationality changes, becomes broader and more complex, or perhaps narrower (as in the case of Dr. P.).

Reichenbach (141) himself allows for this ‘dance’ between reason and the ‘world’ for he insists that:

The power of reason must be sought not in rules that reason dictates to our imagination, but in the ability to *free ourselves* from *any kind of rules* to which we have been conditioned through experience and tradition.

Ironically – if, as he insists elsewhere, our ‘rationality’ is limited to the outcome of empirical conditioning, reason could never *free* itself from the grip of such conditioning. Here, Reichenbach leaves open the possibility of a subjectively originated change in our ‘rationality’ that would enable us to *experience* the different ‘structures’ that signal such freedom. In other words, in order to grasp the effects of new experiences, we first have to be ‘open’ to them; that is, a change in our ‘mind-set,’ our ‘rationality,’ seems necessary before ‘experience’ can do its work.

Not that this means that we could ever free ourselves completely from ‘any kind of rules,’ for what could this amount to but death? Thus, even given that rationality can be plastic, it cannot be infinitely plastic and still retain any sense. In the same sense that a word requires limits to be the word it is, in spite of the possibility of endless change, rationality also requires limits. Within these limits, changes might occur, but for them to remain intelligible, they have to occur incrementally, in relation to what is, and in relation to the ‘traces’ of what is left behind. In other words, even if it is agreed that, in relation to rationality, limit does not enter into the equation in an absolute sense as Kant had hoped to establish, we should acknowledge that we also cannot do without limits. This would amount to the loss of everything. In the final analysis, Reichenbach does force us to modify Kant’s position, but it does not vitiate the basic insight of Kant’s ‘Copernican revolution.’ For, in spite of criticism levelled at Kant for his (in the light of modern mathematics and physics) unsuccessful attempt to attribute an absoluteness to his system, the basic insight of the *Analytic*, namely that objective experience depends on the fusion of subject and object still holds good. In other words, the idea that there are such things

as inherent, *a priori* and also ‘content-filled’ conceptions/categories, which impose a structure on the objective world and thus ensure that we can know the world absolutely, no longer holds. Yet, while we can, perhaps, do without Euclidean space, we cannot do without ‘space’ as an *a priori* form (however it is organised). Again, we cannot do without a notion of causality if we are to comprehend something that does not act causally but spontaneously. Hence the circularity of this problematic.

Derrida articulates this very circularity or reciprocity in a different context. In his words (1982:17):

Thus one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed, and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the *différance* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same (the intelligible as differing-deferring the sensible, as the sensible different and deferred; the concept as different and deferred, differing-deferring intuition; culture as nature different and deferred, differing-deferring; all the others of *physis* – *tekhné*, *nomos*, *thesis*, society, freedom, history, mind, etc. – as *physis* different and deferred, or as *physis* differing and deferring. *Physis in différance*.

Thus, *différance* takes the place of fixed categories as the condition of the possibility of conceptuality. In other words, our faculty of constitutive interpretation cannot be thought of as a fixed, final, stable, and absolutely complete set of rules according to which reality is constituted. The strict undecidability, therefore, that Kant reserved for the notion of totality (but excluded from the objective world in its succession of experience) is found, by virtue of the ineluctable linguistic character of the rational faculties, to be pervasive of the very ‘reality’ from which Kant excluded it. *At the same time*, and this is an important limitation, *différance* cannot be thought of as *infinitely* productive. The implication is that what constitutes ‘reality’ has to be thought differently; thought, that is, in a way that accommodates both of these moments of limit and possibility, rather than attempting to make a choice between one or the other. The thinking of that which constitutes ‘reality’ will, thus, be opposed to traditional either/or logic, making it, as Derrida warns (1982:19), necessarily uncomfortable and difficult. Yet, the aporia we are left with in the dilemma between a structuralism whose rigidity destroys the life of philosophy,<sup>103</sup> and a postmodernism whose paralysis does the same, suggests that a different way of thinking about thinking and about ‘reality’ is mandatory if philosophy is to live and breathe.

## 5. The ‘Restricted’ and ‘General’ Economies of *Différance*

### i. Introduction: ‘One Does Not Make a Choice’

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<sup>103</sup> Norris (1987:224) reminds us of the way in which Derrida characterises structuralism by evoking the image of a deserted city in which all signs of life have been obliterated in the wake of some catastrophe.



Here as elsewhere, to pose the problem in terms of choice, to oblige or to believe oneself obliged to answer it by a *yes* or *no*, to conceive of appurtenance as an allegiance or nonappurtenance as plain speaking, is to confuse very different levels, paths, and styles. In the deconstructive thinking of the arche, one does not make a choice.

(Derrida: 1976:62)

An attempt to outline a general 'economic' framework for understanding an inclusive both/and way of thinking is in itself an insistence that Derrida's work does not amount to a 'freeplay' postmodernism; that deconstructive thinking is not impossible to grasp or to emulate. Thus if it is no longer appropriate to speak here of a foundation in the traditional sense of the word, there is at least a discernible 'pattern' – I have ventured to call it a *logos* – according to which deconstructive thinking produces its effects. Once this *logos* is grasped, it becomes possible to make sense of deconstructive thinking in a variety of different fields (Derrida 1993:13-15).

In its most general form, this *logos* of deconstructive thinking recalls Kant's analysis of the first antinomy. Here, to insist on presence as absolute (absolute limit), is simply to stop; or, as Lacan (cf. Ragland-Sullivan 1991:72) has suggested, it is to pretend to an absolute stasis, a 'lack of lack' that joins hands with psychosis. On the other hand, to pronounce, in any absolute sense, on the basis of either/or, against presence or against stasis, and to insist on the opposite (absolute possibility), is to beckon to the inhuman paralysis of the infinite. Hence, Derrida suggests that '...the establishment of a pure presence, without loss, is one with the occurrence of absolute loss, with death.' In-between these extremes, according to Derrida (1982:19), there are two 'economies' at work, namely, '...a *différance* that is accounted for' (a 'restricted economy') 'and a *différance* that fails to be accounted for...' (a 'general economy').

In general, an 'economy' of *différance* implies that the movement of the 'trace' (its 'occultation') is *necessary* in order to *preserve* or *protect* 'presence' (of mind). To put a Freudian spin on it, as Derrida does (1982:18): '...the movement of the trace is described as an effort of life to protect itself by *deferring* the dangerous investment' (of too much meaning involved in positing either absolute presence or absolute absence, absolute truth or no truth at all; finality or infinity, and so on) by deferring judgement. While in a 'restricted economy,' the 'dangerous investment' is deferred by 'constituting a reserve,' in a 'general economy' such investment is deferred by invoking undecidability. The difference between these two economies is irreducible. Yet, making a point similar to Lacan's – that the psychosis of both absolute lack and absolute lack of lack mark limit points of a continuum – Derrida suggests that in isolation from one another, neither 'economy' of *différance* is adequate to comprehend the human condition.

Ultimately, as I hope to show here, a *logos* of difference implies the necessity of thinking the conditions of the possibility of conceptuality, of 'form,' of meaning, of 'reality' in terms of *both* the 'respectable' 'restricted economy' of controlled 'difference and deferral' (which corresponds with the

notion outlined earlier of a complicated system) *and* the ‘disreputable’ ‘general economy’ characteristic of a system whose complexity ensures that deferral of meaning remains permanent. This necessity to think both of these ‘economies’ together, points to a profound new *logos* at work in philosophy, that indeed has always been at work (or should I say at ‘play?’) in signification.

## ii. The Restricted Economy of *Différance*

One way of articulating the dynamics of a ‘restricted economy’ is by analogy to Freud’s description of the relations between the ‘pleasure principle’ and the ‘reality principle’ (Derrida 1982:19). It is unnecessary to enter into a detailed description of Freudian theory; suffice it to point out that according to Freud, ‘the reality principle,’ or what one may also designate as the ‘secondary process,’ operates not in opposition to pleasure, but in its service. When dangers or obstacles thwart instant gratification, gratification is certainly deferred in acquiescence to the exigencies of ‘reality,’ (in the sense of what it is reasonably possible to achieve or expect at the time) but only in order to preserve or protect the subject so that ‘full’ gratification may be achieved at an appropriate moment (cf. Silverman 1983:67).

According to Derrida, *différance* may be thought of, *on the one hand*, in analogous terms. Thus, in the same way that for Freud the ‘reality principle’ is the necessary deferral of pleasure for its own sake, so ‘presence’ is the necessary occultation or deferral of *différance*, in the name of whatever ‘truth’ (signification, use-value) remains open to reason. In Derrida’s (1982:19) terms, we can think of

...*différance* as the economic detour which, in the element of the same, always aims at coming back to the pleasure or the presence that have been deferred by (conscious or unconscious) calculation.

Perhaps a more telling example<sup>104</sup> of such a restricted economy may be found in Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry* (Derrida 1978c: 161-164). Here, an original insight, is grasped intuitively in the consciousness of Husserl’s ‘original’ geometer. To preserve and communicate it, this ‘original’ geometer has to go through the detour of language, thereby deferring its immediacy to consciousness. That is, it is necessary to constitute language as an *unconscious* ‘reserve,’ and to place what is present to consciousness ‘on reserve’ in language in order to preserve it. This is done in the hope of creating the means to return to its full presence later, or for others to ‘reactivate the self-evidence’ (164) or re-invoke the full presence of the ‘original’ geometer’s original insight for themselves. Thus, an insight has to be committed to the unconscious detour of language in order for it to be of any use or value to a

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<sup>104</sup> More telling, because more extreme, since it is doubtful that Freud thought that full or permanent gratification was ever possible.

'scientific' community (that is, a community of 'knowers'). Here, then, just as reality is only pleasure deferred, so language is only presence deferred.

In a different (con)text, Derrida (1978a) has articulated the structure of a 'restricted economy' in terms of the difference between 'lordship' and 'sovereignty' in Bataille's reading of Hegel. Here, as against 'sovereignty,' which is associated with the (impossible) absolute freedom of a 'general economy,' 'lordship' in its relation to slavery is associated with a 'restricted economy.'

The 'restricted economy' of 'lordship' and slavery reveals a structure identical to Freud's 'economy' of pleasure, to Derrida's (1982:24) more general notion of 'trace' as effacement, as well as to Lacan's (1981) language-orientated theory of subjective identification. Here, 'pleasure,' the positive 'meaning' of a 'thing' or the positive self-identification on the part of any subject is the disguise, or dissimulation, of all those possibilities (signifieds) necessarily repressed or effaced in the identification process. In a similar sense, 'lordship,' associated with the power of self-consciousness, or self-actualisation, is involved in an economy that demands the repression or effacement of the power for self-actualisation in others.

This does not imply the absolute disappearance of the 'trace' any more than it implies the nullification of the role played by the 'other' in the economy of subject formation, or the slave in the economy of 'lordship.' For the continuing lordship of the master depends wholly on the continued willingness of the slave to recognise such lordship. In the act of recognising the master as having the power of pleasurable consumption, or the power to enjoy the fruits of the slave's labour, the slave must defer her/his own claim to such power or pleasure. In a similar sense, in working to identify the 'thing' – to give it form or meaning in a system of differences – the potential within the 'trace' for coming out of hiding, its own claim to identity or actuality, must be deferred. Thus, the 'trace' 'works' or 'plays' to maintain the identity of the 'thing' just as the slave 'works' for the master's pleasure. The 'trace,' or the 'other,' or the slave, therefore, is not in any sense meaningless; its meaning resides in the work that it does to maintain the 'form' of the 'thing,' or the identity of the subject, or the self-actualisation of the master. By the same token, the meaning or identity of the 'thing,' etc. depends wholly on this 'work.'

Hence it is the work of the slaves (or of the 'traces' or 'others') that regulates the economy; it is the slave who recognises a lord; and who deposes her/him. Thus, just as the 'thing' risks its identity simply by virtue of its privileged position in the economy of relations that holds it in place there, the master lives in constant fear of the slave's rebellion. As Derrida (1978a:254) notes, 'lordship' is associated with the willingness to risk one's own 'life,' metaphorically speaking – to risk meaning nothing, or to risk not being recognised as master – for the sake of self-consciousness, or for the sake of experiencing one's own identity, meaning or truth. Such 'lordship' is set against the servile consciousness of the slave or the 'trace' in which one's own 'life' is not willingly put at stake for the sake of the power of self-consciousness. To be 'lord,' thus, is always to risk lordship, for it remains in

constant demand of re-confirmation, and hence, helplessly dependent on the 'servile' 'work' of recognition.

Thus the economy of lordship is a reciprocal economy that incorporates every component in a constitutive role, and allows for no 'outside,' or, as Derrida (1978a:252) would put it, this economy cannot abide laughter. Within this economy, the risk that the lord or subject or 'thing' faces is merely the risk of losing a particular privileged position or identity, and not the loss of identity or meaning *as such*. Thus, its 'death,' its fall from 'presence' will be accommodated within the economy as an investment in the service of a greater 'truth.' In other words, this is a negation, 'which cancels in such a way that it *preserves and maintains* what is sublated...and thereby *survives* its being sublated...' (Derrida 1978:255; my italics). Nothing is lost; what is negated, or deposed, remains meaningful insofar as it is taken up in the service of a greater truth. As Derrida puts it (1978a:257):

*Aufhebung* reappropriates all negativity for itself, as it works the "putting at stake" into an *investment*, as it *amortizes* absolute expenditure; and as it gives meaning to death...

In a 'restricted economy,' then, philosophy apparently *completes* itself (Derrida 1978a:252). This 'economy,' as Derrida (1978a:255) notes, provides philosophy with the gratification of 'metaphysical security,' for within it there is no absence or negativity that, as Bass (Derrida 1982: 20; Translator's Note 23) puts it '...cannot be made to make sense' or '...there is nothing *other* than meaning.' Such an economy accords philosophy the power to control the play of meaning, to incorporate within its bounds all absence, even the absence of the still to come. Most conspicuously, of course, the economy described here is that of Hegel's omnivorous dialectic. It may also be understood, however, as being exemplified in Kant's articulation of his transcendental philosophy, where objective knowledge depends not on the ability to grasp the 'world' in its totality, but on knowing the universal rules according to which all phenomena must necessarily conform. The form of the economy is such that it insists upon a future that is always already anticipated. Thus, as Derrida (1978a:255) puts it:

Through this recourse to the *Aufhebung*, which conserves the stakes, remains in control of the play, limiting it and elaborating it by giving it form and meaning...this economy of life restricts itself to conservation, to circulation and self-reproduction as the reproduction of meaning...

### **iii. The General Economy of *Différance***

To be indifferent to the comedy of the *Aufhebung*, as was Hegel, is to blind oneself to the experience of the sacred, to the heedless sacrifice of presence and meaning.

(Derrida 1978a:257)

Within what Derrida (1982:20) calls the ‘metaphysical, dialectical, “Hegelian” interpretation of the economic movement of *différance*,’ the risk of ‘deposition’ has nothing to do with the risk of death in the sense of absolute loss, that is, the ‘mute and nonproductive death’ that Hegel called ‘*abstract negativity*’ (Derrida 1978a: 255). In other words, within the controlled difference and deferral of a ‘restricted economy’ in which a ‘reserve’ is constituted that guarantees meaning, there is no genuine risk of the absolute meaninglessness associated with death. What is deferred (deposed, made negative or ‘other’) is held in ‘reserve’ in order to ‘work’ for a greater purpose. Hence, this ‘restricted economy’ which describes the ‘economy’ of *différance* in its ‘respectable’ guise, does not suffice to explain the human condition, since humanity, in every sense, must live in confrontation with the genuine possibility of death, in the sense of ‘a loss without reserve,’ or a loss that cannot be rehabilitated in the form of an investment (Derrida 1978:261). In other words, humans must face the possibility of ‘sovereignty.’ ‘Sovereignty,’ here, stands as metaphor for what cannot be accommodated or accounted for in a ‘restricted economy;’ it is associated with the radical ‘alterity’ of that which remains ‘outside,’ which resists making ‘sense,’ of nonsense, or of the absolutely different.

In the face of a ‘restricted economy,’ or its hegemony, thus, Derrida can be heard to laugh a little dryly (1978a:252). For attention to the movement or ‘work’ of philosophy, time and again, reveals *within* the most rigorous and strenuous attempts to delineate the workings of a ‘restricted economy’ (such as Kant’s ‘Transcendental Philosophy,’ Husserl’s ‘Phenomenology’ or Hegel’s ‘Dialectic’), symptoms of an ‘outside’ to this economy. That is, one notices symptoms of an excess of meaning which escapes the ‘reserve’ that holds or binds all signification to an eternal recurrence of the same (Derrida 1978a:255).

Yet, one must be careful not to misinterpret this laughter. It is not an easy laughter. Rather, it is the laugh of one who knows only too well that he has taken the ‘work’ of ‘philosophy’ too seriously; that he has taken ‘philosophy’ at its word and found it lacking.<sup>105</sup> Hence, Derrida (1978a:252) immediately insists that:

To laugh at philosophy (at Hegelianism) – such, in effect, is the form of the awakening – henceforth calls for an entire “discipline,” an entire “method of meditation” that acknowledges the philosopher’s byways, understands his techniques, makes use of his ruses, manipulates his cards, lets him deploy his strategy, appropriates his texts. Then, thanks to this work which has prepared it...but quickly, furtively, and unforeseeably breaking with it, as betrayal or as detachment, drily, laughter bursts out.

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<sup>105</sup> Here the allusion is to philosophy in its traditional guise, and not the ‘other’ kind of deconstructive philosophy which resides in the tension between a ‘restricted’ and a ‘general’ economy of *différance*.

Such laughter<sup>106</sup> accompanies an 'awakening' to that in the economy of *différance* which will always resist the 'work' of philosophy, or the workings of a restricted economy. Such resistance occurs not through deferral in the name of pleasure, or a greater truth, which is akin to 'repression' in Freud's sense where the repressed was once in consciousness, and which in its repressed state still works to govern the psyche. Rather, this other resistance emerges in the awareness of a ubiquitous 'undecidability,' which draws upon the relation of an economy of meaning to that which remains 'unspeakable,' in excess of meaning, or outside of the system. Derrida (1982:19) conceives of this 'economy' of *différance*

...as the relation to an impossible presence, an expenditure without reserve, as the irreparable loss of presence, the irreversible usage of energy, that is, as the death instinct, and as the entirely other relationship that apparently interrupts every economy...

This thinking gestures toward the possibility of irretrievable loss in deferral, the possibility that deferral of meaning may be permanent, which ensures that the system can never be complete, can never finally make sense (Derrida's 1982:20). Moreover, *différance*, in this other sense, according to Derrida (1982:20), must even be viewed in terms of a death instinct; an equilibrium, an equalisation of force, or a lack of 'facilitation' (in the Freudian sense of inscribing mental pathways to satisfaction or gratification). In this case *différance* alludes to tensions, paradoxes, 'differends' (to use Lyotard's term), aporias or impasses, which cannot simply be resolved in favour of one party or another. Hence, apart from its epistemological sense, there is an ethical or polemical sense of the 'general economy' of *différance* 'as a relation to the absolutely other' in concrete human relations that apparently interrupts or solicits any fixed economy (or set of workable, resolvable relations).

Such is the difference between a 'restricted' and 'general' economy; a difference, however, that does not mirror the difference between presence and absence (Derrida 1978:256). That which must be acknowledged in a general economy never *appears* as either positive or negative, presence or absence. It is indeed, according to Derrida, 'what Hegel calls abstract negativity.' It is not a negativity that can be placed in opposition to presence, for such negativity has meaning within a system of differences. In Derrida's (1978a:256) words, then, a 'general economy' must take account of: 'A negativity that never takes place, that never *presents* itself, because in doing so it would start to work again.'

Thus the source of laughter, which eludes 'every process of presentation by means of which we would call upon it to show itself in person' (Derrida 1982:20), is not a present 'thing' any more than it is

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<sup>106</sup> The theme of laughter in relation to the 'seriousness' of traditional philosophy, although not within the scope of the present study, is one with interesting and promising comparative resonances. Apart from the work of Bataille, one only has to think of laughing at 'truth' in Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1984), or the laughter of the angels as opposed to that of the devil in Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1983).

an absent or hidden ‘thing.’ As Derrida (1982:20-21) puts it, (it) is not ‘...a hidden, virtual, and potential self-presence,’ and there is no chance that (it) ‘might “exist,” might be present, be “itself” somewhere, and ...less chance that it might become conscious.’ Nevertheless, it is felt in the form of symptoms. In Derrida’s words(1982:21): ‘This radical alterity as concerns every possible mode of presence is marked by the irreducibility of the aftereffect, the delay.’ However, Derrida insists here that ‘the language of presence or absence’ is in principle inadequate to describe these aftereffects, or to read the symptoms or ‘traces.’ Hence, as Derrida (1982:20) notes, the ‘general economy’ of *différance* ‘maintains our relationship with that which we necessarily misconstrue and which exceeds the alternative of presence or absence.’

According to Derrida, it is this ‘other’ side of *différance*, that forces thinking to turn toward a ‘general economy,’ to take into account what, following Freud and Lacan, may be called the ‘foreclosed.’ It is difficult to miss the resonance here with the notion of the ‘sublime;’ what is sublime (or the occasion for the sense of the sublime) is not absent – it is, rather, unspeakable.

#### **iv. Thinking the General and Restricted Economies of *Différance* Together**

Assuming the point of view of traditional logic, it is inconceivable that, as Derrida (1982:19) puts it, ‘...the economical and the noneconomical, the same and the entirely other’ can be thought *together*. From this point of view, then, a choice between *différance* as ‘restricted economy’ and *différance* as a system that takes account of a certain excess of meaning, becomes mandatory. Yet as Kant has demonstrated, when dealing with complex systems, the necessity of such a choice falls away. Thus, here, on the other hand – and, as Derrida (1982:19) warns, we are to be confronted again with the unsettling discomfort of the thinking of *différance*; that is, ‘we touch upon the very enigma of *différance*’ – we are required not to choose between these two economies, nor to allow them to co-exist side by side, but to think the two together. As he puts it in another text (1978a:261):

There is only one discourse, it is signitive, and here one cannot get around Hegel. The poetic or the ecstatic is that *in every discourse* which can open itself up to the absolute loss of its sense, to the (non-) base of the sacred, of nonmeaning, of un-knowledge or of play...

The very act of interpretation (of ‘speaking,’ or better, of signification in general) incorporates within it an act of structuring, which carries with it those metaphysical concepts which underpin Western thinking (unity, stability and presence). Hegel, Derrida (1978a:263) acknowledges, ‘is always right, as soon as one opens one’s mouth in order to articulate meaning.’ In other words, even in the face of insights gained via the ‘linguistic turn,’ we cannot simply abandon structure, for to do this would be to abandon ourselves to silence. As Derrida (1978a:261) notes in relation to poetry, ‘...given

over to “play without rules,” poetry risks letting itself be domesticated, “subordinated,” better than ever.’ Thus, as he insists, ‘we must speak.’

The risk, however, in ‘speaking’ or ‘calling forth’ (in remaining bound to a ‘restricted economy’) is not the risk of meaninglessness. Rather, according to Derrida (1978:262) it is the risk of ‘...the loss of sovereignty in the figure of discourse.’ The risk is that of ‘*making sense*,’ of ‘agreeing to the reasonableness of reason, of philosophy...’ Hence we seem to be faced with the problem of how to accommodate within discourse a sense of its limitations, its inability to encompass or capture everything. That is, we are faced with the problem, as Lyotard (1984:80) articulates it of how to ‘call forth the unrepresentable;’ or of how to speak the unspeakable (Derrida 1978a:262). Here, according to Derrida (1978a:261), in order to avert this risk, in order to save the possibility of play, the inadequacy of all speech must be announced *in speaking*,

...in order to maintain sovereignty, which is to say, after a fashion, in order to lose it, in order still to reserve the possibility not of its meaning but of its nonmeaning; in order to distinguish it, through this impossible “commentary,” from all negativity.

In more prosaic terms, one could insist that if we wish to ‘know’ a complex system, (that is, if we wish to make statements about it, or describe it) we have to treat it *as if* it were merely complicated. That is, it becomes necessary to impose limits on the system, to reduce the possibility of ‘play,’ or the ‘sliding of the signified under the signifier’ (Lacan 1977a:154; Derrida 1978a:262), and risk the fixity that in the final analysis is always ideological. Yet, in order to save the possibility of play – the openness of the future that is the source of creativity and hope – we have to accept (incorporate) the arbitrary, functional, pragmatic, non-necessary nature of any such imposition of limits, and thus their relative instability; that is, their nature as temporary, provisional and negotiable. This means that we can never claim absolute truth or certainty for these impositions. Thus, as far as knowledge of complex systems is concerned, at best, we can acknowledge that we have intentionally imposed limits of a certain nature in order to achieve knowledge of a certain kind. Such knowledge, however, cannot be regarded as ‘true,’ for it remains open to revision (minuscule or sweeping) that is indefinite and incessant. As Derrida puts it, (1982:18) knowledge becomes a matter of,

...active interpretation, which substitutes an incessant deciphering for the disclosure of truth as a presentation of the thing itself in its presence, etc. What results is a cipher without truth, or at least a system of ciphers that is not dominated by truth value, which only then becomes a function that is understood, inscribed and circumscribed.

The play between a ‘restricted economy,’ which accords humanity the security of a ground upon which to stand, and a ‘general economy,’ which acknowledges the figure of the sublime, could represent



the means to meet the challenge of understanding (finding metaphors for) the structure of what seems to be inescapably human; namely the tension between the limitations of what is, and the possibilities and terrors represented by the 'in-coming other' (Caputo 1997:57), the ineffable, or unintelligible. Such a 'play' would suggest that what is most characteristic of the human condition is the *permanent* openness of the future. This openness is not only, as some may think, cause for anxiety or alarm. Indeed, more alarming still is the thought that what humanity *is* now is all that it can be. Rather, the recompense for anxiety is hope, or the price to be paid for hope is anxiety. Looking forward, then, Derrida's deconstructive thinking represents a *desire* (using 'desire' advisedly) to 'trace' the terror and joy of the human condition; and, perhaps, to reaffirm its intensity against the blunting effects of more prosaic concerns. This places deconstructive thinking in an uncomfortable in-between space, dividing and divided by, as John Caputo (1997:70) has noted, a dream of the *impossibility* always still to come, and the discontent with what *is* or is possible.

## Conclusion: Working Through

For all the conflicts and confusions surrounding deconstructive thinking, there *is* a *logos* (in the broad sense of the term) that one can understand to be at work in Derrida's texts. That much is implied in the title of this dissertation. What is, perhaps, more striking, given the widespread reception of Derrida's thinking, is that one may find a 'context of justification' for this *logos* in the thick of the philosophical tradition that it undermines. Upon close reading of Derrida's work, however, this is not all that surprising, for he repeatedly insists that it is only through a careful 'working through' of the tradition that its ground, eventually, may be shifted a little.

Deconstructive thinking represents such a shift in *logos*. It is a small/momentous shift in *logos* away from a philosophy that is caught in the stranglehold of an either/or logic, which demands the choice between two poles of a binary opposition; namely limit and possibility. In contrast, the *logos* according to which thinking may be called deconstructive, resists an either/or choice between these binary opposites and insists that they must be thought together. Thus, deconstructive thinking represents the conviction that it is necessary to think the irreducibility of difference in the same, play in structure, sensibility in intelligibility etc., and, of course, *vice versa*. That which a different *logos* takes account of (let us call it, generally, the play of difference that unsettles what once were thought to be fixed structures), has always been interwoven with more dominant threads in the fabric of the Western philosophical tradition. As a rule, this play of difference has been acknowledged in Western philosophy only as that which is to be repressed, expelled, reduced to a secondary, derivative status or kept on the outside of a constellation of traditional philosophical concepts that promise access to 'truth,' and with it, stability and the power of control. Derrida's 'working through' represents an (un)ravelling (Megill 1985:259) of traditional philosophical texts to unveil the play already unconsciously at work, already 'present' or marked in the symptoms (the inconsistencies or gaps) or irregularities that interrupt the regular weave of the texts that constitute the history of Western philosophy.

This dissertation does not represent an attempt to map the intricately detailed territory of Derrida's own painstaking and rigorous 'working through' of the Western philosophical tradition, which he engages in for the sake of disentangling the 'play,' or moment of *différance* from the stranglehold of either/or logic governing a tradition in relentless pursuit of a foundation or base that will afford it metaphysical security. Rather, I hope, at least, to have demonstrated at a more basic level, the 'necessity and force' of his implicit argument for a different *logos*, by situating some of his earliest published work in relation to a particular trajectory of philosophical thinking, which begins with Kant's 'Copernican revolution,' appropriates the 'linguistic turn,' and attempts to theorise a 'reality' made more complex in the process. This is attempted in the hope that acknowledging the *logos* at work in deconstructive thinking, letting it 'speak out,' may deliver us from the strictures of a traditional *logos* that

does not fit well within a complex culture, and, perhaps, help 'cure' humanity of its misguided belief in its own power to control being (keeping in mind the caveat that the 'process of the cure' is interminable; Lyotard 1991:30).

Stepping back from a study such as this, and reflecting on the choices made, one may wonder, in retrospect, why this particular path was chosen and not another. In attempting to answer this, I shall deviate in a small way from the customary brief 'retrospective' evaluation that would remain in step with the main line of argumentation as it is set out in the introduction. For if the tracing of such a particular path (in the 'context of justification') seems linear or direct in the telling, this is the result of something akin to Freud's 'secondary revision.' I should like, in some way, however, to acknowledge the crooked flight of the butterfly (Frost). Hence, I shall trace a more circuitous (and 'fortuitous') path in accordance with the 'context of discovery,' where I shall try to recall the questions or exigencies that called for the various analyses and expositions that constitute this study. I hope in this way to demonstrate the significance of the choices I have made, in my attempt to come to grips with the *logos* of difference in Derrida's thinking; remaining aware, all the while, that these choices owe as much to the serendipitous opening of this or that book, or a chance remark, as to the steps of logical argumentation.

Once one becomes aware of something, it figures everywhere. In my case, the question of how to think opposites together began to 'figure' early in my reading, writing and thinking about contemporary philosophers and philosophies. It seemed that while the limit/possibility problematic was a pervasive theme throughout philosophy, the question of the possibility of its resolution by means of a both/and structure was increasingly being considered anew in contemporary thinking. While this kind of resolution may not be entirely new in philosophy, there is a sense that in writing such as Derrida's, it is thought in terms of a new expanded capacity; the implications of which themselves, in turn, require a 'working out.' In the 'working out' the predominance of the 'figure' of a both/and structure should eventually wane and paradigmatically novel responses to other exigencies may replace it. But, this new way of thinking must be exhausted, 'worked out' before it is replaced, and it is only in or by means of this working out, this 'exhausting,' that again, a shift may take place.

Ultimately, it is to this 'working out' that I wish to add my voice. 'Working through,' however, must precede 'working out.' This dissertation, which represents my own attempt to initiate a process of 'working through,' began with some sense that what was important in contemporary thinking had to do with the effects of a 'linguistic turn' (whatever that meant) that had 'overthrown' the repressive philosophical tradition, and ushered in such notions as 'incredulity towards metanarratives,' the 'death' of the subject, and of philosophy, 'there is nothing outside of the text,' 'logocentrism,' 'metaphysics of presence,' and so on, and so forth. I realised early on, however, that like many in my position ('beginners;' students of contemporary ideas in philosophy, literature and the social sciences), I had

stepped directly into deep waters. The well-known contemporary thinkers are generally prolific writers, and their writing, in turn, has generated an avalanche of secondary writing – of appropriations, sometimes profound, sometimes misleading; misappropriations, sometimes generative; basic level studies that apologise for distortion; higher level studies that take the particular discourse or vernacular for granted; highly theoretical works alongside those of subtle ironists, and so on. The profusion and confusion of texts did more to generate than to clarify the plethora of ‘catch phrases’ (including the notion of a ‘linguistic turn’ itself) that seemed to lie in wait around every corner. These phrases had no immediately apparent sense that could be taken for granted. They needed a context, a rationale, or a *logos* (although the term *logos* crept in much later), which would enable me to see how they hung together, if indeed they did. I felt that a ‘working through’ was required.

Although such ‘beginnings’ are never clear-cut, in a certain sense one could say that this study (through which a rationale for contemporary thinking has begun to take shape for me in the form of a *logos* of difference) began with a look at Saussurean linguistics, which seemed pivotal to a contemporary way of thinking that took language ‘seriously.’ Saussure’s well-known articulation of the relations between signifier and signified in the sign, set his linguistic theory in contrast to a referential model of language. The difference, I realised, had to do with the fact that Saussure had denied an ‘external referent,’ and had drawn word and concept (or signifier and signified) together in the ‘sign.’ This meant, it seemed, that signs had no anchor in an external ‘reality’ and there was nothing inherent or necessary in their relationship to objects that could prevent any sign from taking on any meaning at all. Did this amount to an infinite proliferation of meanings, where ultimately, meaning itself did not make sense?

This seemed rather extreme, and it did not wash with the both/and structure that had gained a purchase in my imagination. A reading of Derrida’s essay ‘*Structure, Sign, and Play*,’ where he analysed the concept ‘sign’ in terms of a ‘circularity’ in which the signifier ‘sign’ had to assume a definitive meaning in order to shake up the very notion of definitive meaning in general, confirmed this suspicion. Further reading into this essay, which led to the discovery that Derrida himself resisted a choice between ‘two interpretations of interpretation,’ turned a suspicion into the conviction that my initial interpretation of Saussure was off the mark. This was confirmed in a different sense in conversation with Christopher Norris, where he ‘reminded’ me of Derrida’s criticism of Saussure’s work, which remained ambivalent in relation to the ‘metaphysics of presence.’ Clearly some sorting out was called for.

To begin with, I was puzzled by what it meant, precisely, to say that Saussure’s denial of an ‘external referent,’ meant that ‘reality’ was linguistically constituted. This statement can only be mystifying if one conceives of ‘reality’ from a ‘common sense’ point of view as an external, independent collection of objects. It seemed that I would need some clarity about the nature of ‘reality,’ before I could make sense of a ‘linguistic turn’ that seemed to insist on the dependence on language of what seemed perfectly obviously independent of the words used to describe it.

This seemed to call for a return to Kant's critical philosophy, which I recalled, dealt with the nature of 'reality.' Kant clarified the notion that 'reality' is as much *conceptual* as it is sensory, although care should be taken to emphasise that the subjective faculties (the forms of intuition and the categories of the understanding) play a constitutive role as far as objective 'reality' is concerned (as demonstrated in the case of Dr. P.), but they do not play a creative role as far as existence in general is concerned (which would amount to a voluntarism, subjectivism, or conventionalism, unwarranted by Kant's philosophy).

Hence, as was to be confirmed as the study progressed, it is important to remain sensitive to some version of Kant's distinction between 'reality' and the 'thing-in-itself.' In linguistic terms this translates into the cautionary note that, while all thinking about the nature of language (whether it is to keep signification out of conception or to insist on the impossibility of this) becomes thinking about the nature of 'reality,' this does not extend to thinking about the *nature* of what exists; which remains, for us, unspeakable, inconceivable, unintelligible, indefinable and so on.

Once the Kantian shift has been made from a common-sense conception of 'reality' (as wholly external) to a conception of 'reality' in which the human rational faculties play a role – to the notion of 'reality' as appearance, representation or interpretation – then the door is left open for a linguistic interpretation of 'reality.' For what are concepts, if they are not linguistic, and how do we interpret if not through signification, or 'language' of some kind? Against the background of Kant's 'Copernican revolution, therefore, the notion of a linguistically constituted 'reality' began to look less mystifying – especially if one conceives of 'language' in the broad sense of 'signification.'

I thought I had things 'wrapped up.' Kant offered the theoretical justification for a conception of 'reality' as conceptual (interpretative), although his theory belonged to the 'consciousness paradigm,' in which a universal, rational consciousness was thought to be capable of constituting 'reality' independently of language. Saussure drew concepts into language, demonstrating that the powers of conception or interpretation belonged to the order of language. That is, rationality itself was linguistically constituted. Derrida, in turn, drew on Saussure's theory of signification, but took it further by pointing out that, despite the 'advance' towards a *logos* of difference represented by his 'thesis of difference,' it remained ambivalent in this respect. This ambivalence, according to Derrida, derived from an unsupportable prejudice against the materiality of language (represented by writing). Fuelled by a desire for certainty, Saussure aimed to keep signifier and signified apart yet bound by stable relations that guaranteed meaning; an aim that, ultimately, bound his theory of signification to the very 'consciousness paradigm' it debunked at another level. All that was left to do, it seemed, was to trace the outlines of the more coherent *logos* – one that would justify a refusal to accord priority to either materiality or conceptuality in a theory of signification – that Derrida had put in the place of Saussurean linguistics.

At this point, I was advised by Bert Olivier that Derrida's 'theory' of the constitution of meaning – worked out in accordance with a both/and *logos* which refused both extremes of univocality (priority of concept) and multivocality (priority of the material signifier) – had taken shape in his deconstructive reading of Husserl's theory of signification. He also suggested that many of the 'catch-phrases,' entangled in the weave of contemporary philosophical texts concerning deconstruction and its effects, could be clarified by working through the context of their inception. This called for a reading of Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena*, which, in turn, required at least a backward glance at Husserl's phenomenology.

Hence, the path from a 'consciousness paradigm' to a linguistic one (to the notion of a linguistically constituted 'reality') did not prove to be quite such a smooth step. The question, after Kant, seemed to turn on whether we could have concepts (constitutive interpretations) without language. For Kant, language did not seem to enter the picture. However, through Derrida's critique of the theory of signification offered by Husserl (who is a late representative of the 'consciousness paradigm'), one is led to witness a painful struggle to keep language at bay, as it were, lest it erode the 'secure' foundations so strenuously constructed in the name of phenomenological certainty. One would be tempted to say that Husserl's struggle turned out to have been in vain, were it not for the immensely fecund and suggestive insights he provided to as perceptive a reader as Derrida. For the very sites of Husserl's struggle to keep language at bay, drew attention to themselves as moments of failure, where the differential structure or 'spatiality' of *différance* – that denies pure presence and incorporates representation – entered the very heart of his discourse unawares.

My reading about Husserl's phenomenology and of Derrida's critique of his theory of signification had undoubtedly deepened and enriched the study – indeed, its omission would have amounted to a serious lacuna. Its enriching effect, however, posed a corresponding threat to the manageability of the argument. In the first place, I wanted to argue that Saussurean linguistics had provided the impetus for a new 'differential' conception of language, which led, via Derrida's appropriation and modification, to *différance*. In turn, I wished to demonstrate that *différance* provided equal space for a 'structural' as well as a looser, more 'poetic' approach to 'the text,' which – now that Saussure had drawn concept and language together in the sign – included the broader 'text' of a linguistically constituted 'reality.' In the second place, I had undertaken an analysis of Kant's 'Copernican revolution' that demonstrated his certainty that 'truth' or objective knowledge concerning the constitutive interpretations we call 'reality' was possible; although he did not take language into account. Finally, I had been reading of Husserl's ultimately futile attempts to maintain a Kantian approach which took it for granted that concepts (in spite of being interpretations) were characterised by a pure presence to consciousness that ensured their endurance (and therefore certainty and truth) beyond the vagaries of their expression by material means (that is, via signs).

I had to find a 'key' or framework that could bring these three analyses together. Their most obvious commonality was their insistence on certainty, and a desire to maintain its possibility at all costs; even, as Derrida pointed out, at the cost of coherence. This is where Derrida's notion of 'closure,' so clearly interpreted by Critchley in both spatial and temporal terms, proved to be valuable. This interpretation associated different strategies *within* the 'consciousness paradigm,' or 'metaphysics of presence,' by pointing to different ways of articulating their common quest for certainty; namely a temporally orientated way (which seemed to describe Husserl's theory of signification), and a spatially orientated way (which could be applied to Kant's conception of rationality, Saussure's conception of language, as well as the structuralism that seemed to follow in his wake).

Having grouped Kant, Husserl and Saussure together under the common banner of 'closure,' the obvious question that arose in the face of Derrida's dismissal of the possibility of 'closure' and attendant 'shaking' of the foundations of the 'consciousness paradigm,' was the viability of what he could offer in its place; namely the flexible economy of *différance*. Here, one has to re-enter the contemporary philosophical fray, for it seems that the kind of thinking that Derrida has offered has been met with mixed reactions. On the one hand, a refusal to abandon the fixed structures that can offer certainty; on the other, a misappropriation of such moments as *différance* which seeks to overthrow structure altogether in a radical semantic 'freeplay.'

Finally, thus, I found I had worked back to my starting point; armed this time, however, with a richer context within which to frame the contemporary limit/possibility debate. This debate between thinkers grouped loosely together under the divergent banners of postmodernism and structuralism, could have been framed in many ways, but the context within which I was working seemed to condition the choice of framing it by means of Derrida's analysis of structure. Here, Derrida demonstrated that the notion of a centred structure, which is the quintessential moment of a traditional metaphysics in search of certainty, is ultimately incoherent. This critique of 'structure' does not mean that Derrida embraces the opposite extreme of 'freeplay' (lack of structure). He denies such an interpretation a hundred times or more in his various texts.

In spite of such explicit denials, it seemed to me that many 'beginners' in philosophy were being misled by a widespread misreading of Derrida's aims and strategies. Yet, the force of his arguments point to the impossibility of grasping the nature of 'reality' except in terms of the duality between the definable and the ineffable that, repeatedly, he strives to justify through painstaking argumentation, and demonstrate through a 'writing' that also 'plays' (characteristically, each time, in one and the same text). The consequence of misunderstanding such duality, of refusing a *logos* of difference, is incoherence in our conception of 'reality.' More than this, a conception of 'reality' that is too tight, too rigid, too stable leaves no room for the hope that accompanies the possibility of change. A conception of 'reality' that is, on the other hand, too loose, leaves us with nothing to hope for.

The consequences of misunderstanding were such that I felt it important to add my own voice in strong support of Derrida's deconstructive thinking, which insists that we cannot make sense of the nature of 'reality,' and we cannot hope, unless we try to think of it as constituted by a duality; namely the 'structure' defining what already *is* and the 'play' that opens the structure to what it *could be*.

In my search for a strong concluding statement along these lines, I considered including an exposition of the striking similarities between Derrida's deconstructive thinking and other contemporary thought such as Lacan's psychoanalytic/linguistic theory of subjectivity. In the end, this promised to be too great an undertaking to be contained within the limits of this study. As luck would have it, however, reading in this area brought to my attention an essay by Copjec, '*Sex and the euthanasia of reason*' which made use of Kant's antinomies against the voluntaristic manifestations of a postmodernist conception of sexual identity. In this essay, Copjec pointed out that Kant's analysis of the First Antinomy had direct relevance for an analysis of language, since antinomial conflicts arose in the attempt to specify its ultimate nature. This brought to my attention the fact that the structuralist/postmodernist debate, as a conflict over the ultimate nature of language – out of which Derrida's work emerges as a third option – may be articulated in terms analogous to what Kant achieved in his analysis of the First Antinomy. Furthermore, it seemed that the resolution that Kant offered to this antinomy corresponded perfectly with the alternative path Derrida had chosen. Here, then, was a means of providing justification for Derrida's strategy, or what I called a *logos* of difference; not from within his own texts, this time, but from a source not usually associated with deconstructive thinking. For me, it was an added satisfaction to note that Kant is often cited as 'paradigm philosopher' by the loudest of Derrida's critics; namely the so-called 'analytical philosophers.' The details of working out the justification of Derrida's strategy on logical grounds, brought with it more 'complexities,' so to speak, one of which involved making the distinction between complex and complicated systems, outlined by Paul Cilliers. The distinction seemed worth making, however, for it offered terms through which one could clarify Derrida's deconstructive strategy in relation to Kant's first *Critique*. The final word on the *logos* of difference is left to Derrida himself, through an exposition of his inimitable 'thinking together' of two incompatible 'economies' of *différance*. What is reaffirmed here is the necessity of incorporating the tension between limit and possibility into philosophy, and of protecting this tension against the constant threat of reduction to one or the other of these poles. Indeed, thinking these two economies together is a reaffirmation of the necessity to maintain the uncomfortable 'in-between' space that makes for a philosophical practice that remains both 'responsive and responsible' (Caputo 1997:51). This task of maintaining the tension that *is* philosophy remains indefinite.



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