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The Metaphysics of Presence

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The aim of deconstruction is to reveal the onto-theological foundations of Western metaphysics; it proceeds on the hypothesis that Western culture is based on an understanding of being that is either explicitly or implicitly theological: divinity in some form dictates all our thinking and doing.

The form and substance of divinity coincide in presence: what is, in totality, is the totality present to the omniscient divinity. Omniscience is the measure of science: divine knowledge, conceived as the creator's absolute presence to his creation, is the standard of truth. The truth of propositions is measured against the thing to which the proposition refers: the proposition, 'swans are white,' is true only if swans are white, but whether or not swans are white absolutely (that is, not merely from a given human perspective) is a matter of absolute knowledge. Absolute knowledge is absolute coincidence of what is with what is known. The name of this coincidence is absolute self-presence: divinity knowing all things and knowing himself as the reason for the being of all that is. Divinity is the symbol of the absolute coincidence of being and knowing under the heading of absolute self-presence.

The principal strategy for revealing the onto-theological foundations of a given philosophical point of view is to expose a claim for absolute self-presence as intrinsic to that point of view. This strategy defines deconstruction. It is coupled with the related strategy of demonstrating that the claim to absolute self-presence intrinsically results in aporia or the assertion of mutually exclusive tenets. To claim that a statement is true is to assert a coincidence between what is known to a given intellect and what is independent of that intellect. Deconstruction contends that this coincidence is necessary for the assertion of a truth, but is also an impossibility: the impossibility of a finite, circumscribed, human mind coinciding in its knowledge with what is absolutely. The mutually exclusive tenets are always variations of the dyad: (a) I know that X is the case and (b) X is the case apart from my knowing. Or, in different terms, the ground assertion of Western metaphysics (or onto-theology) is the assertion of a coincidence of impossibles: (a) immanent knowing and (b) transcendent being.

The deconstructive argument taken up in chapter 1 centers on the correlative notions of temporality and consciousness (specifically, consciousness conceived as transcendental subjectivity). As Derrida interprets the tradition, transcendental subjectivity is temporality. Husserl identifies consciousness with temporal synthesis in an explicit way. The correlation of consciousness and time under the heading of transcendental synthesis can also be seen as a

core thesis in Hegel and Kant. Derrida makes a plausible case that this thesis is incipient, covertly operative, in Aristotle's metaphysics and epistemology: that it is an unthought thought (a fundamental presupposition never explicitly identified as such) which drives Aristotle's thinking. He also purports to uncover the thesis in Heidegger's notion of authenticity.

Derrida's argument, reduced to essentials, is simple, elegant, and persuasive: if a cognition is to be true, the temporal synthesis it performs must coincide with the synthesis accomplished by the unfolding of time itself. That is, there must be a coincidence of immanent synthesis and transcendent synthesis. This coincidence, however, turns out to be impossible. Derrida demonstrates this impossibility in two, closely correlated ways.

1. Immanent temporal synthesis cannot coincide with transcendent temporal synthesis because transcendent time does not have the character of a synthesis (or putting together of successive moments as they unfold). Time itself does not unfold. Time itself, absolute time, has been conceived from the inception of Western thought in terms of perfection, completion: to think time *sub specie aeternitatis* is to think time as the completed circle, as eternity present in its entirety to an absolute mind. Hence, there can be no coincidence of immanent time and transcendent time just because immanent time unfolds and transcendent time does not. In other words, it is constitutive of finite consciousness to live time as succession, that is, to live time in a mode that cannot coincide with time itself.

2. This aporia, explicitly acknowledged since the time of the Eleatics, replicates itself throughout the history of transcendental philosophy (which, if Derrida is right, is the history of Western thought as such). Transcendental philosophy asserts that conscious activity, specifically the activity of temporal synthesis, constitutes its own reality. With Hegel, transcendental philosophy reaches its culmination in the thesis that the reality constituted by consciousness is reality, itself. Absolute thought constitutes absolute reality—this is the unthought thought secretly driving the Western tradition and finally achieving explicit expression in Hegel. Truth now is explicitly acknowledged to be the coincidence of thought with itself; in Spinoza's terms, truth is the coincidence of *natura naturans* with *natura naturata*. In the terms I have been developing, truth requires the coincidence of finite consciousness (or finite temporal synthesis) with absolute consciousness (time itself or eternity). This coincidence, necessary to the Western conception of truth, is impossible because the finite time of unfolding, succession, and synthesis is incommensurate with the absolute time of reality cognized aperspectively, that is, atemporally.

The same argument appears in another formulation structured around the notion of presence. Western philosophy from Plato and Aristotle through Husserl and Heidegger explicitly grants epistemological and ontological priority to presence. 'Presence,' akin to '*ousia*,' names in one word (*a*) the now

moment in which Being reveals itself (epistemological privilege) and also (b) the true reality of Being (ontological privilege): past and future are both more obscure and less real than the present. But the now point *is* not: it does not endure and, as Kant made explicit, permanence in time is the criterion of reality for the Western tradition. Furthermore, the now point, if it were to be the coalescence of revelation and reality, would have to coincide with the revelation of what truly is, namely, the closed circle of eternal Being, the timeless apprehension of the permanent, the Absolute self-apprehension. This impossible coincidence of now point and eternity is the same aporia all over again, the impossible coincidence of temporal passage and eternity inscribed in the circular gramme that has always signified time in the West.

The *gramme* is *comprehended* by metaphysics between the point and the circle...; and all the critiques of the spatialization of time, from Aristotle to Bergson, remain within the limits of this comprehension. *Time*, then, would be but the name of the limits within which the *gramme* is thus comprehended...*Nothing other has ever been thought by the name of time.*¹

The conclusion to which these arguments lead is that the philosophical foundations of Western culture are untenable: the defining project of metaphysics necessarily ends in aporia. To demonstrate this is to bring that project to closure, to its end. Derrida points beyond this ending. His pointers are the non-concept of *différance* and the notion of the trace.

Différance is the transcendental condition for the possibility of differentiation in space and time, that is, for the possibility of givenness, that is, for the possibility of re-presentation. Here we encounter Derrida's version of the core thesis of postmodern thought: the semiological reduction. The semiological reduction is driven by an argument based on the transcendental function of signifiers: cognition presupposes identification which presupposes a formal ideality (an *eidos*, an essence, a concept, a *noema*, a signifier). Regardless of noetic mode (perception, memory, fantasy, etc.), cognition of an individual presupposes identification of the individual as an instance of a type, and that presupposes the functioning of a formal identifier. To see a dog, for example, presupposes identifying the dog as a dog, and that presupposes the functioning of the ideality named by the signifier 'dog.' Absent the ideality, there can be no identification, no repetition or referential return to the datum, hence no coherence of experience over time and among diverse intelligences. Some version of this argument informs every appeal to ideality as a condition for intelligibility from Platonic forms, through Kantian categories, Hegelian *Begriffen*, Husserlian noemata, to Derridian signifiers.

Just how this traditional argument is deployed by Derrida is the subject matter of chapter 2, and will be summarized in its caricolog.

My critique of Derrida's deconstructive strategy is briefly introduced in the first chapter and developed in succeeding chapters. It is structured around

a straightforward denial of the claim that “nothing other [than the aporetic conception deconstructed by Derrida] has ever been thought by the name of time.” I grant that time and presence have, indeed, been thought as the impossible conjunction of intantaneous now point and eternal being, but point out that time has also been thought as becoming.

If one operates, as Derrida does, under the Eleatic metaphysical assumption that immutability is definitive of reality and the passing moment is unreal, then—and only then—is one necessarily committed to the aporetic conception of time. The competitive view introduced here holds that both eternity and now point are abstractions that are finally unthinkable, and that their source lies in a temporal unfolding, a reality in which temporal boundaries are ambiguous and cannot be sharply drawn. The correlative notion of presence is defined in terms of duration and associated with the perceptual world (the reality of which has always been denied by philosophers of an Eleatic cast of mind). To broach the question of the reality of time under the heading of presence is also to approach the question of the epistemological and ontological status of perception under the same heading of presence.

The present moment is the moment in which the world is present. Derrida conceives worldly presence as presence to a subject which is present to itself. In this model, there is a coincidence of reflexivity (presence of subject to itself) and perception (presence to worldly object) such that the two are indistinguishable. Therein lies the Husserlian claim to apodicticity: if the reflexive cogito is indubitable, so is the cognition coincidental with it. Apodicticity is achieved through a reduction to immanence, that is, a reduction of the world to a content of consciousness.

Chapter 2 is devoted to Derrida’s critique, transformation, and reappropriation of the Husserlian conception of reflexivity and the transcendental idealism that is wedded to it.

TEXT

Derrida announces the closure of the epoch of metaphysics and develops Heidegger’s project of *Destruktion* into his own methodology of deconstruction with the strategy of revealing to this epoch its own end. Heidegger and Derrida have in common three beliefs which I share. The first is that the ontology which informed twentieth-century Continental philosophy is an ontology centered on the transcendental subject. The second is that this ontology began to formulate itself at the time of the ancient Greeks. And the third is that the failure of this ontology is becoming apparent. But, whereas Heidegger sought “to destroy the traditional content of ancient ontology” in order to retrieve “those primordial experiences in which we achieved our

first ways of determining the nature of Being,”² Derrida challenges the core notion of phenomenology, the notion that there is a retrievable domain of primordial experience upon which an authentic understanding of Being could be founded.

Derrida’s challenge derives from the deconstructive revelation that phenomenology presupposes the very metaphysics of presence that founded the ontology of the transcendental subject. The ground of phenomenology is the phenomenon, and the phenomenon is conceived as presence to a subject. Decenter the transcendental subject, or replace it with historical Dasein, and presence remains. Or, as Gasché has argued,³ reflexivity remains: presence to itself is but another name for transcendental subjectivity. In either case—whether one fastens upon the phenomenon presenting itself, or upon the presence to itself necessary for this phenomenal presentation—the grounding term is presence. And since the vocabulary of *Anwesenheit*, of presence and presencing, is still operative in Heidegger’s latest writings, Derrida’s deconstruction of presence purports to show that, despite his glimpses beyond, Heidegger’s thinking remains within the closure of the metaphysics of presence.

Among the many themes in Derrida’s deconstruction of the notion of presence, two are foundational inasmuch as they function to ground the validity of higher stories in his narrative. One is the critique of the temporality of presence, the critique that focuses on the aporetic nature of the now. The other, which involves what Derrida sometimes characterizes as the spatial aspect of presence, turns on that aspect of presence which might be described in Husserlian terms as original intuition or the self-manifestation of the phenomenon.⁴ These two themes are correlates, since it is in the now that the phenomenon makes itself evident, but, following Derrida’s practice, I will take them up separately before bringing them together.

The Aporetic Nature of the Now

Derrida’s critique of the temporality of presence is presented in his essay, “*Ousia and Gramme: Note on a Note from Being and Time.*” The crux of his argument is the conundrum about time posed in *Physics IV* where Aristotle ponders (1) whether time belongs to beings or nonbeings, and (2) what the nature of time might be. As I read Derrida’s interpretation of this text, the conundrum or *aporia* takes the form of a dilemma which arises from the difficulty of answering the two questions.

The first question presupposes an understanding of what it is to be, what a being is. In Derrida’s reading, being, for Aristotle, has “already, secretly...been determined as present, and beingness (*ousia*) as presence” (OG 51).

But the presence of the present is eternal, that which does not change, permanent presence.⁵ This understanding of "beingness or *ousia*" as eternal presence is identified by Derrida as "a fundamentally Greek gesture" taken up by Hegel. I would identify it as the quintessential Eleatic thought: that which truly is does not change because it excludes what is not.⁶

The second question turns on the relation of time to the now (*nun*): is time composed of the now or not? The problem here is that the now is defined in two mutually exclusive ways: (1) "The now is given simultaneously as that which is no longer and as that which is not yet" (OG 39). The now is here defined as temporal flux, the evanescent boundary between past and future; it is defined by negation: not past and not future. (2) The second definition of the now identifies it with the eternal present: the now names the presence which is always present, hence never changes, hence is eternal.

If time *is* (i.e., is a being), and if the being that time *is* is composed of the now, then the following dilemma surfaces. If the now is temporal (i.e., in flux, changing), it cannot *be*. But if the now *is*, it cannot be temporal. The horns of the dilemma are mutually exclusive, and neither alternative is philosophically acceptable. Time is flux, change, passage, but it *is* not (i.e., is not real); or time is real, but does not change. To grasp both horns of the dilemma is to adopt the Eleatic posture that only the eternal and immutable is real and that the appearance of flux, change, passage is an illusion. But this is to raise contradiction to the level of principle by a fundamental equivocation: time is equivocally the reality of eternal presence and the unreality of the present now which *is not*.

The magnitude of the dilemma makes resolution a matter of philosophical urgency. On this issue rests the foundation of Western thinking: the interdependence of being and time. If the contradiction is left to stand, our metaphysical foundations tremble and our culture falls.

In Derrida's deconstruction of our philosophical history, Aristotle waffles on the issue and fails to resolve the dilemma.⁷ And so does every other thinker of consequence, notably Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger. Derrida's close scrutiny of selected texts shows that each of the thinkers mentioned builds his philosophy on the fundamental equivocation of the being of time and the temporality of being.⁸

How is this equivocation or contradiction or aporia to be resolved? The problem centers on the notion of *ousia*, and the solution is set forth in terms of the *gramme*—whence the title of his essay. The problem: presence is conceived by means of the now, but the now is conceived both as the evanescent passage which *is not* and the unchanging presence which eternally *is*. The solution: combine the passing moment with the unchanging now in the *gramme* or line which signifies both (a) the unreal or arbitrary atomic element in the line's infinite divisibility and (b) the real eternity in the line's circular unchanging continuous unity. The circular clock face, with its peri-

meter divided into minutes or seconds or micro-seconds or nano-seconds, (i.e., quantified, made commensurate with number in accordance with an arbitrarily adopted—unnatural, unreal—measure), is the analogue of time, the signifier of time and its being for our era.

The circular line as the analogue which constitutes the signification or meaning of time for our era also appropriates the two remaining essential moments of the being of time as presence: presence as presence to itself and presence as spatialization.

Although it embodies a conceptual difficulty—the parts of the line are simultaneous but the parts of time are successive—the linear depiction of time constitutes the necessary form of sensibility: according to Derrida, the tradition from Aristotle to Kant and beyond correlates the linear depiction of time with the presence to itself that is the transcendental condition for the possibility of experience. The grounding thought here seems to be that the coherence of experience presupposes the continuity of temporal synthesis which must be thought as the line which converts successive now moments to co-presence or simultaneity.⁹

The Spatialization of Presence

The original aporia is resolved, not by eliminating the conundrum, but by compounding it with another. The being and non-being of time, time as the real eternal now or the unreal passing now, come together in the gramme, the circular line, but this spatialization of time essentially depends upon the coincidence of impossibles: the succession proper to time and the simultaneity proper to space (OG 55).

In the context of the metaphysics of presence, succession and simultaneity are defined in mutually exclusive terms. The impossibility of co-presence of nows is the succession of nows which essentially defines time. And the necessity of that co-presence or simultaneity essentially defines space. Thus, space and time cannot be thought together. But it is necessary to think them together: space and time must coincide for the metaphysics of presence because, for something to be, it must present itself in space *and* time. What Derrida calls the “pivot of essence,” the fulcrum from which metaphysics acquires its leverage, is “the small key that opens and closes the history of metaphysics.” That “small key” is “the small word *hama*.”

In Greek *hama* means “together,” “all at once,” both together, “*at the same time*.” This locution is first neither spatial nor temporal. The duplicity of the *simul* to which it refers does not yet reassemble, within itself, either points or nows, places or phrases. It says the complicity, the common origin of time and space, appearing together as the condition for all appearing of Being. (OG 56)

Here is the conundrum. The metaphysics of presence must define time (suc-

cession) and space (simultaneity) as mutually exclusive (i.e., as a binary opposition), yet must think them together as the condition for presence or appearing of Being.

At this point in his discourse, Derrida's argument becomes more than usually obscure. He claims that the thinking of the impossibility of the coexistence (of space and time, simultaneity and succession) requires the thought of their coexistence.¹⁰ This is the thought expressed in the *hama*. The thought is not as obscure as Derrida's formulation would make it. The key idea is that it is mistaken to start by defining space and time in ways that render them mutually exclusive. If space and time cannot be thought separately, then to think them at all is to think them as coexistent. Hence, the thought that would conceive space and time as impossible, to the extent that it *thinks space and time*, must think them as coexistent.¹¹

The *gramme* of the circular line accomplishes the spatialization of time that cannot consistently be thought in the context of the metaphysics of presence—as it accomplishes the representation of time's essential divisibility and indivisibility, its passage through the unreal now and its permanence in the eternal now. But, as demonstrated, this spatialization of time which is necessary in order to think presence (i.e., to think of things presenting themselves in the present moment) cannot be thought in the metaphysics of presence. Again, phenomenal presencing or the self-manifestation of beings, which Derrida regards as the foundation of Western ontology ("beingness," *ousia*), itself rests upon a spatialization of time which Derrida contends is unthinkable because it embodies a double contradiction: (1) it must conceive time as both unreal and passing and as real and eternal; and (2) it must conceive space (composed of simultaneous now-points) and time (composed of successive now-points) as together (*hama*) despite the fact that their essences are defined as mutually exclusive (succession is the impossibility of simultaneity).

Implications of the Deconstruction of Presence

The epoch of Western metaphysics is defined by the line representing time as an unending circle delimited by now-points.

The gramme is comprehended by metaphysics between the point and the circle...; and all the critiques of the spatialization of time, from Aristotle to Bergson, remain within the limits of this comprehension. Time, then, would be but the name of the limits within which the gramme is thus comprehended... Nothing other has ever been thought by the name of time. (OG 60)

Derrida goes on to imply that this circularity is the circularity of the Hegelian system *and* the circularity of Heideggerian hermeneutics.¹² He asserts that

there is a “formal necessity” that dictates this conception of time “from the moment when the sign ‘time’...begins to function in a discourse” (OG 60-61). And he argues that this conception of time drives all the binary oppositions that, in turn, have driven the history of metaphysics: act/potency, real/unreal, authentic/inauthentic, and so on.¹³

The indictment is radical and, if upheld, devastating to Western culture. Our language and our thinking are through a “formal necessity” driven by a conception of time whose basic contradiction is recapitulated in the system of binary oppositions—among them good and evil—around which we structure our lives. If the metaphysics of presence trembles and falls under this critique, the magnitude of our need to see beyond Derrida’s foreclosure can be measured by the pathetic errancy of our history: it may be oppositional thinking that produces war and oppression. Where would Derrida lead us, in what direction does his writing point?

Différance and Ontological Difference

Derrida’s original contributions are, as he says, non-originary. The antecedents of his key non-concept, *différance*, are diverse, but two stand out: Saussure and Heidegger. Saussure’s diacritical theory of language as a system of “differences without positive terms”¹⁴ is a key source,¹⁵ but it is Heidegger’s ontological difference that is most relevant in the present discourse.

As we have seen, Derrida argues that, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger is still operating within the parameters of the metaphysics of presence. The binary opposition of authenticity and fallenness derives from the basic contradiction underlying the enigma of time. Authenticity is associated with Being or the eternity of the circle, and inauthenticity with the now moment into which we fall in our fascination with the beings which present themselves in the moment. The correlation is only tacitly implied, but, as I interpret the key texts (OG 63-67; D 22-27), it is evident that, for Derrida, the ontological difference, in naming the difference between Being and beings, straddles the contradiction underlying the vulgar¹⁶ conception of time: the originary difference, the ontological difference, is the difference between Being and beings, that is, the difference between the eternal present and the present now moment.

Derrida argues that the two senses of time are assimilated to one another in *Being and Time*, but in later texts are distinguished. In “The Anaximander Fragment”¹⁷ Heidegger speaks of an “*ungegenwärtig Anwesende*” which leads Derrida to infer that he is distinguishing “a more original thought of Being as presence (*Anwesenheit*)” from “*Gegenwärtigkeit* (presence in the temporal sense of nowness).” Derrida suggests that *Gegenwärtigkeit* should be understood as “only a restriction” or “narrowing determination” of *Anwesenheit*.¹⁸

Derrida concludes "Ousia and Gramme" by interpreting the later Heidegger as working toward a delimitation of Being along the lines of two texts. One text appeals "to a less narrow determination of presence from a more narrow determination of it, thereby going back from the present toward a more original thought of Being as presence (*Anwesenheit*).¹⁸ The other text questions this thought and attempts "to think it as a closure, as *the* Greco-Western-philosophical closure." This latter text points beyond metaphysics—"making thought tremble by means of a *Wesen* that would not yet even be *Anwesen*" (OG 65).

The third, and most complex, of Derrida's concluding points concerns "the relationship between the two texts, between presence in general (*Anwesenheit*) and that which exceeds it before or beyond Greece." This relationship—between the metaphysics of presence and what exceeds it—cannot be thought within the context of metaphysics. "In order to exceed metaphysics it is necessary that a trace be inscribed within the text of metaphysics, a trace that continues to signal not in the direction of another presence, or another form of presence, but in the direction of an entirely other text."¹⁹

The mode of inscription of such a trace in the text of metaphysics is so unthinkable that it must be described as an erasure of the trace itself. The trace is produced as its own erasure. And it belongs to the trace to erase itself, to elude that which might maintain it in presence. (OG 65)

Here Derrida argues by analogy. As the difference between Being and beings is forgotten/erased/covered over (and that forgetfulness also forgotten) in the reduction of Being to a being, the highest being, so is that which underlies the ontological difference (*différance*)²⁰ covered over. It belongs to this forgotten trace to be forgotten. Presence is the trace of the erasure of this trace (i.e., presence is the trace of the erasure of the trace of *différance*).²¹ Presence is the trace that covers over and obscures, rendering us oblivious to the trace of *différance*. When we think Being as presence, we obscure *différance*.

Condensing Derrida's argument to its essentials, we get something like the following. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger names the difference between Being and beings as the ontological difference. In later work, this ontological difference becomes articulated as the difference between presence and the present (OG 66-67). This thinking, however, remains within the closure of metaphysics,²² hence trembles with the deconstruction of the concept of presence (i.e., the deconstruction of the concept of time and its "together" with space). Nonetheless, Heidegger's later thinking glimpses beyond to what subtends the difference between the trace of presence and what it obscures. What presence obscures is *différance*.

Differing and Deferring

This leaves the question before us as to how *différance* signals beyond the metaphysics of presence, that is, how it comes to terms with the enigmas of time and its “together” with space. Derrida’s answer is couched in terms of the two correlates of *différance*, differing and deferring.

Derrida constantly reminds us that *différance* is not a word and not a concept (D 3), indeed, is not (D 6)—where to *be* is to be present²³—but it is the condition for the possibility of lots of things: “the possibility of the functioning of every sign” (D 5), “the possibility of conceptuality” (D 11), “the possibility of nominal effects,” (D 26) (i.e., the “structures that are called names” in chains of signifier substitutions), the possibility of “the presentation of the being-present” (D 6), etc. Furthermore, *différance* subtends or “remains undecided” between activity and passivity (D 9), sensibility and understanding (D 5), existence and essence (D 6), in short, all the “founding oppositions” of the metaphysics of presence.

Derrida claims that the polysemic nature of “*différance*” allows it to “refer simultaneously to the entire configuration of its meanings” (D 8) as “difference” cannot. Specifically, it can accommodate the two senses of the French verb *différer* (from the Latin *differre*):²⁴ (a) to differ, “to be not identical, to be other, discernable” (which Derrida associates with spacing) (D 8), and (b) to defer, “the action of putting off until later” that “implies an economical calculation, a detour, a delay, a relay, a reserve, a representation” (which he associates with “temporalization” and sums up in the word “temporization”) (D 8). In the essay at hand, “*Différance*,” deferring is explicitly associated with the Freudian notions of sublimation and death instinct,²⁵ but, in “*Freud and the Scene of Writing*,”²⁶ written two years earlier, it is elaborated in terms of Freud’s notion of *Verspätung* or the delay intrinsic to the operation of the secondary process or reality principle.²⁷ This text says that we can have no direct experience of an origin. Or of any other presence. Everything present to consciousness is present only by virtue of having been deferred. In Freudian terms, every experience or excitation reaches us only after having suffered the transfiguration of secondary elaboration.

“*Freud and the Scene of Writing*” elaborates Freud’s metaphorical representation of the psyche as a writing machine. The basic idea is that “psychical content” is “represented by a text whose essence is irreducibly graphic” (FSW 199). The point that is relevant here is that this metaphor precludes perception from being understood as a present origin or cognitive ground for truth because the perceived content is always the deferred/transformed trace of a prior inscription which, itself, was never originally present but imbued with an essential secondarity.

Derrida concludes “that the present in general is not primal but, rather, reconstituted, that it is not the absolute, wholly living form which constitutes

experience, that there is no purity of the living present—such is the theme, formidable for metaphysics, which Freud, in a conceptual scheme unequal to the thing itself, would have us pursue” (FSW 212).

Here is the problem of access, the problem of foundations, the denial of any grounding function to perception. Derrida is uncharacteristically straightforward about this claim: the deferred is the original, and it is irreducible. There is nothing (i.e., nothing accessible to us) prior to the transcription; no meaning prior to that which suffers symbolic transformation (condensation, displacement, overdetermination). “Since the transition to consciousness [i.e., the pathbreaking, Freud’s *Bahnung*] is not a derivative or repetitive writing, a transcription duplicating an unconscious writing, it occurs in an original manner and, in its very secondariness, is originary and irreducible” (FSW 212).

This provides support for my claim²⁸ that Derrida is working within a reduced sphere of immanence, that is, that he refuses on principle to make any non-empty reference to a transcendent world. The principle is that all such access is mediated by the play of signifiers. The positive side of this thesis of immanence is stated in Derrida’s doctrine of “transcendental writing” which he correlates with Freud’s notion of dreamwork and conceives as erasing “the transcendental distinction between the origin of the world and Being-in-the-world” (FSW 212).²⁹ The world is transcendently constituted by the work of the psyche/writing machine upon pure traces of which we can never be conscious in their purity. It is essential to the trace to be erased. There is an originary distortion. The motor of Husserl’s transcendental consciousness has been identified as desire.³⁰

The deferring of *différance* undermines the originality of the impression, of what is held to be present to the presence to itself of perceptual consciousness.

The metaphor of pathbreaking...is always in communication with the theme of the *supplementary delay* and with the reconstitution of meaning through deferral ...after the subterranean toil of an impression. This impression has left behind a laborious trace which has never been *perceived*, whose meaning has never been lived in the present, i.e., has never been lived consciously. (FSW 214)

In sum, the world we perceive is a text written by a machine laboring in impenetrable, primordial darkness.³¹

Critique

Derrida’s deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence proceeds from a critique of the conception of time that defines presence in our epoch. The burden of that critique is to show that presence is conceived in terms of an

understanding of temporality which is, itself, inconceivable because it rests on a series of contradictions: time must be both real and unreal, eternal and passing, coincidental with space and non-spatial, and so forth. Derrida claims that the aporia of being and time is recapitulated in Heidegger's early work and interprets the difference between Being and beings or the ontological difference as an outgrowth of the difference between the eternal present and the present now moment. But Derrida sees in Heidegger's later work a glimpse of the trace of something beyond presence in general (*Anwesenheit*), something which exceeds this Greco-Western-philosophical closure. The necessarily self-erasing trace Heidegger has glimpsed is the trace of *différance*. *Différance* is older than the ontological difference and underlies it. *Différance* is the condition for the possibility of that which was to have been accounted for by the ontological difference, namely, "the presentation of the being-present." The trace of *différance* has not been seen, indeed, cannot be perceived in the mode of self-presentation, because it erases itself by ceaselessly differing from and deferring itself. Deferral is the mode in which *différance* produces the traces from which it differs, the traces which, unlike itself, can be written or inscribed in present consciousness. What is present is therefore a representation that was never present, a presence that necessarily obscures that of which it is a trace.

What to make of this doctrine?

I take as my clue the terminology of "formal necessity" and "condition for the possibility of _____" which recurs regularly throughout the texts under consideration. These terms are taken from the lexicon of transcendental philosophy where they typically (e.g., in Kant, Husserl, and some of Heidegger's writings) appeal to a ground. Thus, for Kant, the condition for the possibility of temporal synthesis is the transcendental unity of apperception which serves as its ground.³² Or, for Husserl, "the fundamental form of this universal synthesis (i.e., identification), the form that makes all other syntheses of consciousness possible, is the all-embracing consciousness of internal time" which is grounded in "the [transcendental] ego's marvellous being-for-himself," that is, in "the being of his conscious life in the form of reflexive intentional relatedness to itself."³³ Derrida, however, explicitly refuses to appeal to a ground. The reason seems to be that for something = X to serve as a ground, it must first *be*, and to be, for Derrida, is to be present or to be an absent presence. Since the possibility condition under consideration here, *différance*, cannot be presented, indeed, is erased by presence, it cannot serve as a ground. Yet this consideration cannot be conclusive because, as shown in the example of Kant's transcendental unity of apperception, there are grounds which by formal necessity cannot be presented.³⁴

Leaving aside the issue of Derrida's use of a strategy which permits him to employ a term and then disabuse himself of its implications by putting the term under erasure, I confine myself to pointing out that Derrida's appeal to

“an ‘originary’ *différance*” (D 10) as a “playing movement that ‘produces’... differences [and] effects of difference” (D 11)³⁵ allows him to use the language of possibility condition and formal necessity without making an overt ontological commitment to grounds or origins. I will note, however, that there is a strong affinity between the functions performed by *différance* and Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception: both name possibility conditions which are impossible presences or, to use another vocabulary, noumena lying beyond the realm of temporal self-manifestation.³⁶

What does *différance* make possible that, without it, would be impossible? The short answer can be inscribed in a word: presence. A longer answer has been inscribed in the words above which trace the reasoning through which Derrida seeks to demonstrate that presence is inconceivable apart from the circular *gramme* which reconciles time with itself and with space, and that the condition for the possibility of this reconciliation resides in a play of differences without positive terms, that is, the play of *différance*. All the binary oppositions—the differences, including the *ontologische Differenz*—which found the metaphysics of presence originate in the non-origin of *différance* which is the non-existent non-locus of their provenance.³⁷

“*Différance* is the...origin of differences” in two ways: (1) Language as the play of differences without positive terms is ‘produced’ by *différance*, and it is through language that these oppositions formulate themselves. (2) *Différance* ‘produces’ the binary oppositions by generating the privileged opposition—the unreal passing now versus the real eternal now—which functions as the origin of presence and thereby generates all the oppositions that grow out of the difference embodied in presence. It is the second of these originating functions that most concerns us here.

The being present presents itself on condition of presence to itself. This is the thought—implicit in the Cartesian cogito, thematized in the Kantian cogito (i.e., the ‘I think’), and explicitly developed in the Hegelian cogito (i.e., the self-consciousness which is the condition of consciousness or presentation of any object)—which Derrida identifies as “phenomenology’s principle of principles”³⁸ and sees as resting on the aporetic conception of time informing our tradition from Aristotle through Heidegger. To be is to be present in the now. The present now is both the unreal terminator differentiating past and future and the presence to all times which defines the eternal reality of the theological transcendental subject. The condition for the possibility of inner intuition is momentary presence made present to itself through the synthesis of time in an all-embracing or eternal unity. But this is also the condition for outer experience: the spatial being adumbrated successively can be identified as a unity by virtue of the coexistence of adumbrations in the appresentation which spatializes time. The point here is that the deconstruction of presence rests on demonstrating its dependence on a notion of time that differs from itself, hence cannot be thought through, but can be

written in the circular *gramme*. This conception of time 'originates' in *différance*: that is, its non-origin is differing from itself in the dual modes of spatial differing (the difference between the arbitrary finite temporal intervals denominating the passing nows and the infinitely divisible circular periphery which encompasses them while remaining incommensurable with them) and temporal deferring (the difference between the deferred presence and its non-origin in a presence which was never present). The deconstruction of presence rests on the critique of the now.

And the critique of the now rests on a mistaken assumption: the assumption of the Eleatic conception of time and its relation to being. Only if being is equated with immutability/eternity, and becoming is relegated to mere appearance on the grounds of the non-being of that which changes, only then does the founding aporia of real eternal now versus unreal passing now generate itself. The deconstruction of presence rests on the assumption that there is a formal necessity that time in our epoch be conceived in this Eleatic way.

This assumption is mistaken to the extent that it constitutes the Eleatic conception of time as (a) the only conception of time to be found in the metaphysical tradition or (b) the conception of time that this tradition has determined to be the true conception of time. Zeno was the first to demonstrate the paradoxes or aporia generated by this conception of time/space, and commentaries showing the mistaken nature of the Eleatic premise restricting the real to the immutable can be documented from Plato and Aristotle through the present. Indeed, the correlative principle of the infinite divisibility of time has been disputed by several of the thinkers Derrida cites as recapitulating the aporia. Although this is not the place to present the textual evidence, Bergson's conception of *la durée*, James's notion of the specious present,³⁹ and Husserl's conception of the now moment as an indissoluble unity of retention and protention are all aimed against the thesis of infinite divisibility. Mention might also be made of the twentieth-century school of process philosophy which, from Whitehead on, conceived process as reality.

Setting aside debate on the interpretation of the history of philosophy, I turn to the crucial philosophical issue: does the metaphysics of presence rest on Eleatic assumptions, or is the ontological privileging of presence compatible with the categories of becoming? The answer, of course, depends on how one defines presence. If one defines it as Derrida does, as resting on the aporetic conception of time, then his answer prevails. But if one defines the present moment, not in terms of a terminator that no person has ever experienced, a terminator that is the product of analytic thought, but rather in terms of a temporal gestalt that has indissoluble ties to past and future, as having the thickness of the living present in which motion can be perceived, then the phenomenon of passage is as real as any other and, indeed, far realer than the abstract reifications of instant and eternity.

In short, the claim being entered here is that the phenomenology of time,

in articulating the primacy of becoming in terms of the irreducibility of perceptual unfolding, provides a conceptual matrix far more adequate to temporalization than a schema that would locate its non-origin in a noumenal or self-erasing trace that necessarily generates impossible articulations and conceives perception in terms of a deferred/transformed inscription of a trace that never was present. The reduction of the perceptual world to a text forever relegates the question of the origin and referent of that text to darkness.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Derrida sees the metaphysics of presence as founded on Eleatic principles and rebounds to a neo-Heraclitean non-position of incessant differing/deferring within the immanent sphere of intertextuality.

I see the metaphysical tradition as contending with the tension between all the binary oppositions (although I would privilege the opposition of immanence and transcendence rather than that of permanence and change—while admitting a principle of non-equivalent translation among the oppositions) in the attempt to resolve them.

We agree that the oppositions sedimented in language can be resolved by appeal to a stratum beneath or prior to language and the dualisms it generates through the reification intrinsic to nomination.⁴¹

Derrida sees *différance* as the ungenerated generator of language, and the language of presence as the generator of metaphysical oppositions. I see the phenomenon (admittedly defined as presence⁴² and privileging the thickness of the living present) as the referent of language and summons to language—which has been afflicted by the very Eleatic antinomy (itself generated by language insofar as the illusion of permanence is instilled by the apparently unchanging nature of words regarded as linguistic essences) which Derrida takes up, affirms, and embodies in his notion of *différance*.

Derrida puts the dualism generator in an inconceivable *différance* beyond language thereby raising contradiction to the level of principle—and I see dualism as generated by language generated in that manner.

We agree in associating presence with the positive content of signs taken as referring to a perceptual origin, but we disagree insofar as Derrida takes that positive content to be spurious and holds that “in language there are only differences without positive terms” (D 11). We agree that “these two motifs—the arbitrary character of the sign and the differential character of the sign—are inseparable [and that] there can be arbitrariness only because the system of signs is constituted solely by the differences in terms, and not by their plenitude” (D 10), but we disagree insofar as I hold that the system of signs is neither arbitrary nor grounded in an a priori necessity but historically generated from origins in which signs are originally meaningful.

Finally, we agree that the metaphysical tradition has gropingly articulat-

ed itself through an ontology of presence conceived in terms of the primacy of the perceptual world, but we disagree insofar as he conceives this metaphysics in the categories of closure and I conceive it as a vital opening.