

CONSCIOUSNESS IN RE-PRESENTATION

Towards a Cross-Textual Definition of “Différance”

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THE TEXTS OF JACQUES DERRIDA (1930-2004) ARE KNOWN FOR THEIR METICULOUSLY MEASURED LANGUAGE, A QUALITY THAT LEADS MANY READERS TO PASS OVER HIS WORK. IT IS OFTEN RELEGATED TO THE MARGINS OF THOUGHT AS ‘NONSENSE’ OR ELUSIVE IN MEANING. THIS SHORT PIECE ATTEMPTS TO OFFER A PARTIAL ELUCIDATION ON SOME KEY THEMES OF JACQUES DERRIDA’S 1968 ESSAY, “DIFFÉRANCE.” THIS ESSAY FIRST CONTRASTS *DIFFÉRANCE*, A FRENCH NEO-GRAPHISM REFERRING TO THE SIMULTANEOUS PROCESSES OF DEFERRAL AND DIFFERENTIATION , WITH THE PREVALENT MOTIF OF “PRESENCE” THAT HAS DOMINATED LARGE TRACTS OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSES. IT THEN MOVES TO DISCUSS THE POSSIBLE STRUCTURAL AND METHODOLOGICAL WAYS IN WHICH ONE MAY READ *DIFFÉRANCE*, ULTIMATELY WORKING TO PLACE IT INTO CONVERSATION WITH PHILOSOPHIES OF CONSCIOUSNESS, UNDERSTOOD AS A SELF-PRESENCE OR A PRESENCE-TO-ONESELF (*PRÉSENCE À SOI*), MAINLY IN CONVERSATION WITH THE WORK OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS (1906-1995).

INTRODUCTION

Absence and presence—in discourses of language, metaphysics, and consciousness—have been ubiquitous and influential motives throughout much of the history of Western philosophy. This paper shall seek to present Jacques Derrida's (1930-2004) *solicitation* of the authority that presence has been afforded throughout this tradition in his 1968 work, "Différance." Further, I will present the strategies of deferral and differentiation, which Derrida posits as an inherent structure of language enabling the very functionality of language, ultimately working toward the usurpation of such authoritative presence in language, generally, but more specifically, in discourses regarding consciousness. The presence of consciousness, as illustrated throughout Derrida's text, shall be put into further conversation with the phenomenological account of ethics as articulated by Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), with special attention to the privileged role Levinas affords to the theories of consciousness throughout his philosophy.

Therefore, I will argue that the cross-pollination of these approaches—namely the reading of *différance* into Levinas' conceptualization of intentional and non-intentional theories of consciousness—stands to further augment the claims that Levinas advances regarding the inherent violence of the appropriative renderings of re-presentations found within the interactions between the self as acting in accordance with her intentional and reflective consciousness, and the Other.

Lastly, I will seek to understand this countersignature of Derrida to further, and better, understand Levinas' seminal claim that the actions of the intentional consciousness' attempts to re-present and apprehend the phenomenal presentation of the Other necessarily constitute an act of epistemic violence and further, that Derrida's articulation of *différance* reveal additional supporting evidence for the claim that the presupposed domination and authority of the intentional consciousness over the alterity of an-Other and of the self.

DIFFÉRENCE AND THE AUTHORITY OF PRESENCE

Most famously presented in his aforementioned essay, "Différance" (1968), Derrida's articulation of *différance* is ubiquitous throughout the large cannon of work that he produced over the course of his academic career. It is

through painstakingly measured and often dense, language that Derrida sought to explicate *différance*. In his address before the French Society of Philosophy, he explicated it as neither a concept nor a word, but as a neographism—a "discreet graphic intervention" which occurs at the level the orthographic structuring of language. *Différance* is understood in the most comprehensive sense as a discreet graphic intervention as such a characterization does not seek to locate, or to limit, *différance* to one meaning or another. That is to say, that of *différance* nothing can be predicated, and the formation of any sentence as "*différance* is _____," would necessarily fail, as this structure would intend to describe a specific meaning to *différance*.

Therefore, *différance* can only be accurately described as a *discreet* graphic intervention. As graphic, from grapheme, *différance* pertains to the "level of the letter" as opposed to a neologism, which would pertain to the rhetorical or spoken word. Further, *différance* is a discreet intervention as, etymologically speaking, *différance* is derived from the French words to defer and to differ, which when spoken in Derrida's original French, are indistinguishable from one another. Therefore, *différance* can be said, at least at this level, to have the dual aspects of difference and deferment.

What is differentiated and deferred in *différance* is presence, and therefore *différance* cannot be "exposed" as a word or concept. This process of exposition would attempt to signify *différance* as a being-present (*étant-present*) within an order of truth, of referential definitions and localized



AN IMAGE OF THE FRENCH PHILOSOPHER JACQUES DERRIDA (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

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meanings. Resistance to such presencing does not, however, reduce *différance* into an order of absence for *différance* cannot be thought of as being within this binary of absence and presence, but rather seeks to solicit the grounds upon which each of these terms (absence and presence) are based. Derrida particularly resists the temptation to define *différance* solely as a negative entity. This would presume an equally troubling array of metaphysical assumptions regarding absence that, as with presence, would determine and inform substantially the discourses within Western philosophy. Of *différance*, Derrida says “we will be led to delineate also everything *that it is not*, that is, *everything*; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent.” Given that Derrida is postulating that *différance* can be defined only by negating every definition and label, further investigation into the *structure* and *functionality* of *différance* is necessary.

ON THE STRUCTURE OF DIFFÉRANCE

Derrida most clearly sketches the structure of *différance* when he writes:

the word *sheaf* seems to mark more appropriately that the *assemblage* to be proposed has the complex structure of a *weaving*, an *interlacing* which permits the *different threads* and different lines of meaning—or of force—to *go off again in different directions*, just as it is always ready to tie itself up with others [my emphasis].

Immediately, this analysis draws back to one made in the previous section, that of *différance*'s resistance to identification with one location of meaning or being identified with one set definition: it resists, totally, the ascription of a univocal meaning and definition.

Derrida situates *différance* within a meshwork of possible meanings, and it is apparent that, within this enmeshed assemblage of meaning, *différance* is located on, within, and throughout each thread. Within such an array, no one locality could claim to have an authoritative definition of *différance*, as each location is imbued equally with *différance*.

Further, no linear teleology is capable of being distilled as the threads extend, theoretically, ad infinitum in all directions which further resists the desire to locate within *différance* a point of origin and of termination.

If this above formulation holds true for language in general, *différance*, which is located throughout this meshwork of meaning, engages in a process of rooting, de-rooting, and re-rooting such that its functionality is further de-localized. Yet *différance* is also ubiquitous and omnipresent throughout: nothing is exempt from the solicitation of *différance* and its solicitation of the *orthodoxy* of the *orthographic* structures that are read into the meaningfulness of language that is brought about through the “discovery” of this discreet graphic intervention. The motif of threading is often used in the analogizing of *différance*: the French word for thread, *fil*, which forms the root of “filiation,” roughly refers to familial relations, with *fil*s also being translated to “son.” The “weave of differences,” therefore take on a familial tone, where the re-rooting process of *différance* retains some trace of past iterations, of past threads. This meshwork is always relational, Derrida believes, but its threads are non-binding. *Différance* is always more than the binding together and separating which is the work of comparisons. This structure, which resists all absolute signification, functions analogously with Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1889-1951) theory of “family resemblance” where, in accordance with a particular language game (i.e. a localized linguistic context), the understanding of a word is thought to change, while still bearing an irreducible resemblance with other occurrences of that same word. Words, for Wittgenstein, resist univocal definition as from one language to another, the functioning of that word is said to change. The “unbounded-ness” of words, for Wittgenstein, places language within the meshwork of signification that is found in Derrida's articulation of *différance*.

ON THE METHOD OF DIFFÉRANCE

As discussed in the previous section, Derrida's method when using *différance* is not a straightforward methodological deployment of a concept, but rather one

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that takes its form as strategic and adventurous. Derrida explains that this method is, “strategic because no transcendental truth present outside the field of writing can govern theologically the totality of this field.” Theological governance pertains to an ordering that derives its authority from an external source, one that enacts its will upon the discourses of language.

The strategic approach is coupled with the adventurous approach where, “this strategy is not a simple strategy in the sense that strategy orients tactics according to a final goal, a *telos* or theme of domination, a mastery and ultimate reappropriation of the development of the field.” Together, these approaches of *différance* are best understood as operating in a fashion resembling that of the rhizome, rather than the *telos* of an arborescent structure. The botanical rhizome comes to be through an activity of rooting and re-rooting at different locations towards such a point where the enmeshing resists teleological interpretations such that the origin and end become indiscernible, perhaps even coincidental. The rhizomatic structuring of *différance* would resist the ability of totalitarian definition and univocal meanings—*différance* would exist throughout the entire structure, constantly changing location and emphasis, “immediately and irreducibly polysemic.”

The general strategy of *différance* can, according to David Wood, be understood “to infiltrate *différance* into the syntax of foundationalist and generative thinking with a view to depriving it of its attraction. (One might compare the release of sterile male mosquitoes as an antimalarial measure.)” However, the problem with this characterization of Derrida’s strategy is that it implies, quite apparently with the infiltration and antimalarial analogies, an over emphasis on agency. It also appears to reduce *différance* to a tool of literary and philosophical criticism. This, of course, runs counter to the thrust of argumentation that Derrida appears to be advancing: namely that *différance* is interwoven throughout the meshwork of language. Derrida’s articulation of it should be taken to mean that he is “creating” it, rather than his articulation being presupposed by an initial discovery of *différance*.

THE SOLICITATION OF PRESENCE IN CONSCIOUSNESS AND LEVINASIAN INTENTIONALITY

Within his phenomenological account of ethics, Emmanuel Levinas assigns incredible importance to the role of consciousness and, specifically, the intentionality of consciousness. Levinas sets up his philosophical project as a rejection of the historical interpretation of metaphysics that had privileged ontology and the acquisition of knowledge—a process he later argued contributed to the “filling out” of being. From this, Levinas posited that knowledge entails a structure of appropriation: “thought, *qua* learning [*apprendre*], requires a taking [*prendre*], a seizure, a *grip* on what is learned, and a possession.”

Levinas argues that this structure of grasping is the methodological approach undertaken by the intentional consciousness and that this approach becomes particularly problematic when the Other is reduced to another external known, or graspable object, of knowledge. This all, Levinas believes, occurs at the level of the intentional consciousness, which strives toward a pure self-presence, *présence à soi*, through this process of “filling out.” Through thought, the intentional consciousness is able to become true consciousness of itself. Levinas often calls the intentional consciousness the “self positing portrait” that is always “assured of its right to be.” From this re-presentation of the self, to the self, begot by the unity of the *cogito* and the *sum*, intentional consciousness affirms itself as “absolute being [...]and] identifies itself through all the differences as ‘master of itself as of the universe’ and capable of illuminating all the dark corners in which the *I*’s mastery would be challenged.”

It is this *présence à soi* of the intentional conscious that Levinas found so problematic that *différance* comes to solicit. The solicitation of the presence of intentional consciousness is made possible by the recognition that discourses of consciousness are predicated upon its presence, upon the belief that we may ‘know thy self,’ and therefore “there is the possibility of a reading of a

philosophical text that unmasks not just the difference and deferment involved in every 'presence' but the process of effacing or forgetting that difference." Intentional consciousness as a "self positing portrait" understands it's being as something that can be read and something that can be afforded the presence that enables it to be read.

The sign, for Derrida, is representative of absent and deferred presence; the sign takes the place of presence in the order of meaning. The presence of consciousness is not produced endogenously, ie by the mere fact that I am conscious of myself, but "Derrida is convinced that reference to mental phenomena can take place only via the mediation of signs. Meaning, including the meaning in whose light the phenomena of consciousness come to grasp themselves, on dependent on signs."

The "signifying subject," the intentional consciousness produced through the mediation of signs, owes its creation to the enmeshment of *différance* and functions as traces of this absent presence and therefore subjectivity is an effect of *différance* rather than as the master of language and orthography. This move fundamentally undermines the sovereign ipseity—or selfhood within the first-person experience—of the intentional consciousness that Levinas spoke of prior: "thus one comes to posit presence—and specifically consciousness, the being besides 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*."

CONCLUSION

The significance of this is that, though Levinas decried the reliance on intentionality as means of engaging with the world and Other, he did not manage to adequately challenge the roots of its existence in the same way the exposure of *différance* within our consciousness does. The violence that Levinas cautions against stems directly from the autarchy of presence, or at least from the presumption of presence and self-coherency, specifically the conceptualization of *présence à soi* of self-consciousness that "one grants to the 'living present' the power of synthesizing traces, and of instantly reassembling them." The "living present" is that of the self's consciousness of its own existence, and this power is the ability to supervene onto a meshwork the signs and traces of one coherent account of consciousness.

Derrida's solicitation of Levinas does not negate the efficacy of Levinas' phenomenological project, for I believe that both projects are allied. But rather it further exposes the tenuous construction of intentionality that provides further justification for Levinas' advocacy of pre-reflective engagement with the Other. Levinas' treatment of intentionality was with disdain, but never did he challenge the groundings for its authority in the same fashion that the reading of *différance*, here, has done.

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