

INTRODUCING Derrida

Jacques Derrida is one of the most influential figures in contemporary philosophy. Yet Derrida has undermined the accepted rules of philosophy, rejected its methods and concepts, disrupted its boundaries and contaminated philosophy with literary and other kinds of writing. Derrida's philosophy is an initially puzzling array of oblique, sliding and yet rigorous tactics for destabilizing texts, meanings and identities. "Deconstruction", as these strategies have been called, has been reviled as a politically pernicious nihilism and celebrated as a liberatory politics of choice and indifference.

Introducing Derrida describes the key strategies of Derrida's writing, explains their controversial effects in philosophy, and shows how Derrida himself has put them to use in literature, art, architecture and politics. Written and illustrated with wit and clarity by Jeff Collins and Bill Mayblin, the book offers a starting point for an intellectual adventure that threatens to disturb some of the most comfortable habits of contemporary thought.

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SPEECH AND WRITING

Can Derrida's strategies be "important" to philosophy? Everything is against it. It's destined to *miss the point*, to pull Plato's text *outside* of philosophy, to *trivialize* Plato's thought.

But Derrida is confronting an argument for the priority of speech over writing. A side issue? According to Derrida, setting speech to rule over writing is crucial to the underpinning presuppositions of Western philosophy.

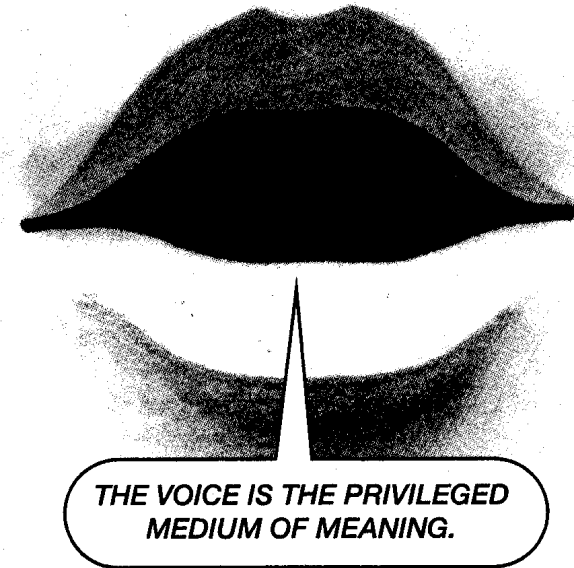


This is a large claim. First, is it plausible?
Have philosophers privileged speech?

Phonocentrism

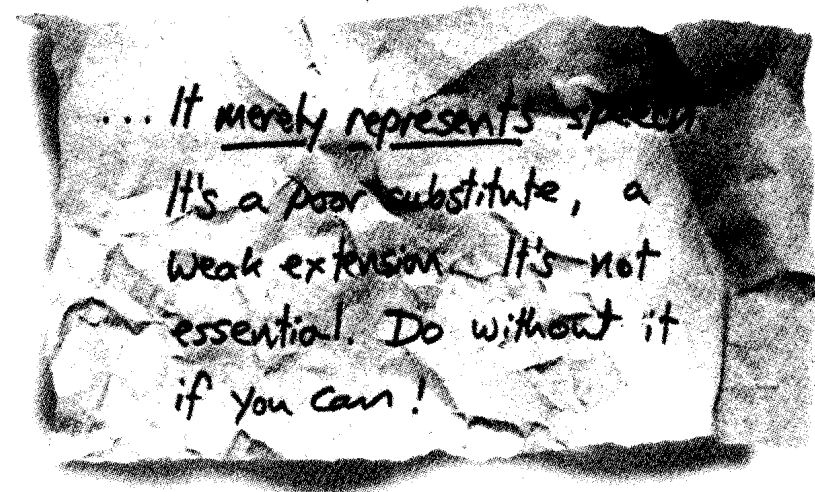
Derrida maintains that through three millenia of Western philosophy, from Plato and Aristotle to Rousseau, Hegel, Husserl and others, philosophers have indeed privileged speech.

What have they claimed?



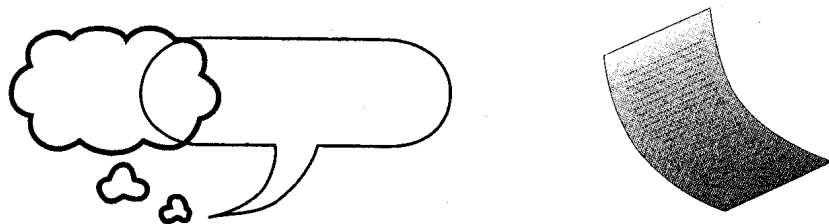
This is *phonocentrism*: the voice is the centre

Writing is derivative ...



If the voice is king, writing is its *enemy*. Writing is a pernicious threat to the true carrier of meaning.

If writing represents speech, speech is the representative of THOUGHT, of sovereign idea, of ideation, of consciousness itself.



In the chain **thought** **speech** **writing**,
speech lies closest to thought.

SPOKEN WORDS
ARE THE SYMBOLS
OF MENTAL
EXPERIENCE. AND
WRITTEN WORDS
ARE THE SYMBOLS
OF SPOKEN WORDS.

LANGUAGES ARE
MADE TO BE
SPOKEN. WRITING
SERVES ONLY AS A
SUPPLEMENT TO
SPEECH.

THE SPOKEN WORD ALONE IS
THE OBJECT OF LINGUISTIC
STUDY. WRITING IS A TRAP. ITS
ACTIONS ARE VICIOUS AND
TYRANNICAL. ALL ITS CASES ARE
MONSTROUS. LINGUISTICS
SHOULD PUT THEM UNDER
OBSERVATION IN SPECIAL
COMPARTMENTS.

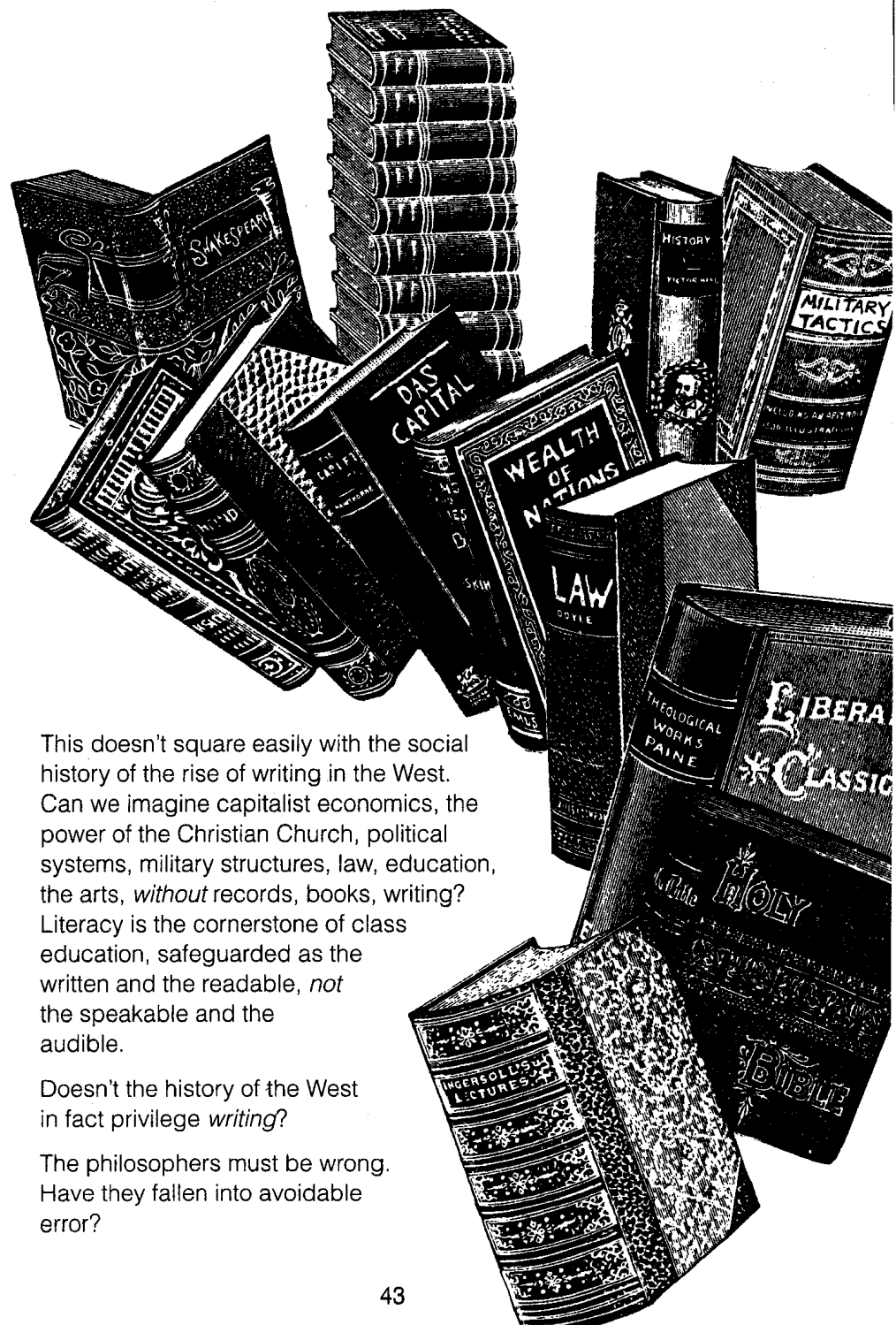


Aristotle of Stagira
(384-322 BC), pupil of
Plato and important
source for Christian and
Islamic philosophy.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau
(1712-78), philosopher of
nature and forerunner of
Romanticism.

Ferdinand de Saussure
(1857-1913), Swiss linguist
and pioneer of structuralism
and semiotics.

Is Writing Both Useless and Dangerous?



This doesn't square easily with the social history of the rise of writing in the West. Can we imagine capitalist economics, the power of the Christian Church, political systems, military structures, law, education, the arts, *without* records, books, writing? Literacy is the cornerstone of class education, safeguarded as the written and the readable, *not* the speakable and the audible.

Doesn't the history of the West in fact privilege *writing*?

The philosophers must be wrong. Have they fallen into avoidable error?

There *are* some arguments on their side. Sometimes speech is offered a curious privilege ...

LAW COURTS RELY ON WRITING, BUT WHAT DO THEY PRIVILEGE?... VOCAL TESTIMONY.



I PROMISE TO TELL THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH, AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

AN ACADEMIC THESIS FORBIDDEN TO CITE ORAL STATEMENTS AS EVIDENCE IS BROUGHT TO ITS FINAL COURT, THE VIVA VOCE, THE COURT OF THE LIVING VOICE.



THE ARGUMENT OF MY THESIS IS ...

THE MINUTES OF THE COMMITTEE MEETING ARE WRITTEN, BUT ARE RATIFIED AT THE NEXT MEETING IN SPEECH.



I CALL UPON THE SECRETARY TO READ THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

CAN A SHOPPING MALL BE PROPERLY OPENED EXCEPT BY SPEAKING WORDS?



I DECLARE THIS SHOPPING MALL "OPEN".

But that's not quite Derrida's argument. First, paradoxically, phonocentrism is a "history of silence", a repression of writing which can scarcely be acknowledged.

Secondly, the suppression of writing is *necessary* to Western philosophy, and all thinking influenced by it. It is crucial to philosophy's metaphysical presuppositions...

Metaphysics and Logocentrism

Metaphysics inquires into aspects of reality which seem to lie beyond the empirically knowable world, out of reach of scientific methods. Its questions look like *the* philosophical questions: essential truth, being and knowing, mind, presence, time and space, causation, free will, belief in God, human immortality, etc.

Are there such questions? Empiricists like **David Hume** (1711-76), and many positivists, scientific naturalists, sceptics and others have said no.

But the questions persist. To set them up and answer them, Western metaphysics has looked for foundations:- fundamentals, principles, or a notion of the centre. These are the groundings for all of its inquiries and statements.

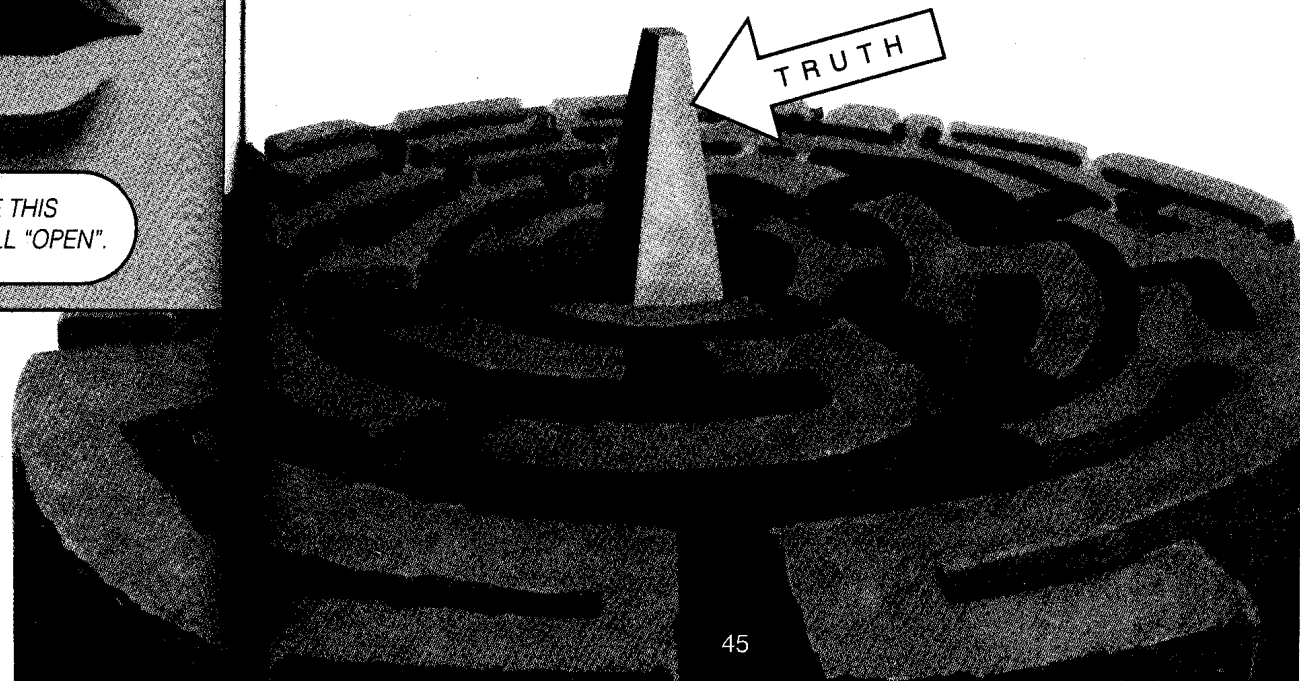
This is the drive to ground truth in a single ultimate point – an ultimate *origin*. Derrida calls this impulse **logocentrism**. The *logos* is taken as the undivided point, the origin. Metaphysics ascribes **truth** to the *logos*, along with the origin of truth in general.

Metaphysics in its search for foundations is logocentric.

METAPHYSICS?
BURN IT.
NOTHING BUT
SOPHISTRY AND
ILLUSION.

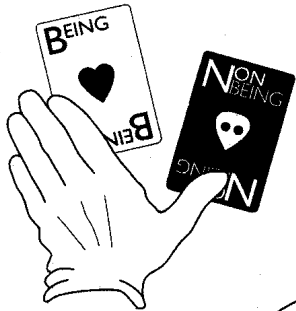


Logos (Greek) can mean logic, reason, the word, God.

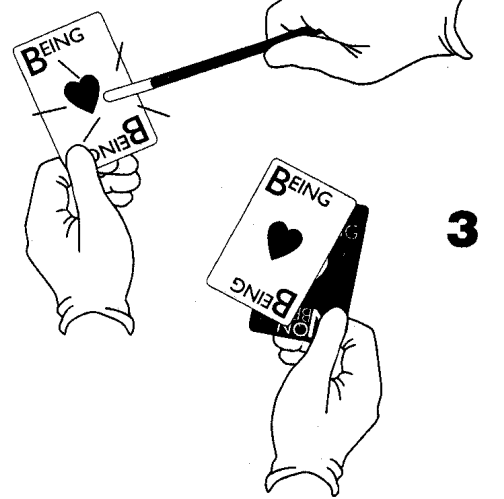


How Are the Foundations Laid?

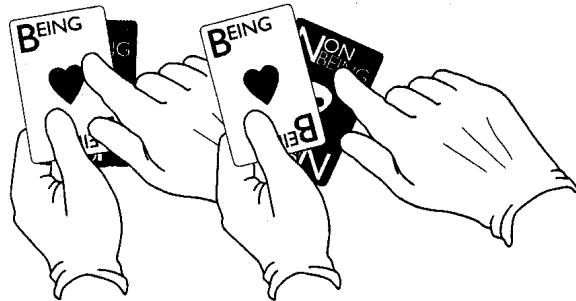
- 1 Use binary oppositions:** cast the key terms against their opposites. If the question is *being*, establish "being" against "not-being". And so on... presence/absence, mind/body, cause/effect, God/man, etc.



- 2 Privilege the first term:** it's the "groundly" term, the positive term, give it priority. It's the term which articulates the fundamentals, principles or the centre. It's on the side of the *logos*.



- 3 Subordinate the second term:** it has to be negative, or the first term can't be positive. It has to be deficient, lacking, corrupt, or just derivative. It opposes the *logos*, it is its enemy; or it dilutes that truth of truth, attenuates it, bleaches it out.



- 4 Set up a procedure:** always move from the first term towards the second ...

ALL METAPHYSICIANS PROCEED FROM AN ORIGIN, SEEN AS SIMPLE, INTACT, NORMAL, PURE, STANDARD, SELF-IDENTICAL ... TO TREAT THEN OF ACCIDENTS, DERIVATION, COMPLICATION, DETERIORATION. HENCE GOOD BEFORE EVIL, POSITIVE BEFORE NEGATIVE, PURE BEFORE IMPURE, SIMPLE BEFORE COMPLEX, ETC. THIS IS NOT JUST ONE METAPHYSICAL GESTURE AMONG OTHERS: IT IS THE METAPHYSICAL EXIGENCY, THE MOST CONSTANT, PROFOUND AND POTENT PROCEDURE.

Derrida and Metaphysics

Derrida's task is to undermine metaphysical thinking – to disrupt its foundations, dislodge its certitudes, turn aside its quests for an undivided point of origin, the *logos*.

It's a major task. Derrida argues that metaphysics *pervades* Western thought. In a sense, it has *been* Western thought. Is it escapable? Has anyone escaped it?

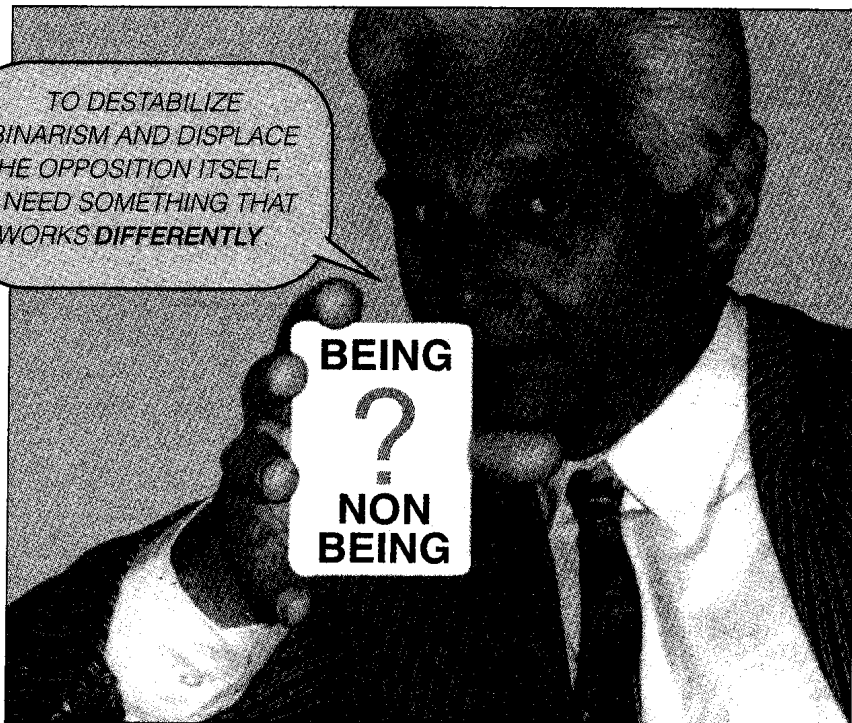
I HAVE SOME ALLIES – NIETZSCHE AND HEIDEGGER ESPECIALLY, MAYBE FREUD, SAUSSURE AND OTHERS. BUT EVEN IN THEM I READ A RESIDUAL RELIANCE ON METAPHYSICAL ASSUMPTIONS.



So is this task possible? If metaphysics is so pervasive, isn't Derrida's own thinking going to be inhabited by it? Yes – inescapably. So the task is impossible? Derrida has never claimed that what he does is possible. He knows that no critique can ever totally escape from what it is criticizing. Meanwhile, movements can be made ...

Overturning

It's always possible to OVERTURN a metaphysical binarism, to reverse its hierarchy by privileging its second term – for instance, to privilege body not mind, Man not God, the complex before the simple, absence rather than presence. Derrida does this. But ...



Displacement

Undecidability disrupts the binary structures of metaphysical thinking. It DISPLACES the "either/or" structure of oppositions. The undecidable plays all ways, takes no sides. It won't be fixed down. It leaves no certainty of privileged foundational term against subordinated second term. The unfixing of this certainty is the unfixing of metaphysics.

Derrida's philosophy has been called an anti-foundationalism. That's partly useful. But Derrida is not simply "against" foundations, he knows they're inescapable. However, metaphysical foundations can still be shaken. That's what he does. He makes a movement of *sollicitation* (French, from old Latin *sollicitare*, to shake as a whole), a shaking at the core, a tremor through the entire structure.

The Metaphysics of Presence

Metaphysical oppositions rely on assumptions of **presence**.

The first or privileged binary term carries "full" presence. Its subordinate is the term of absence, or of mediated, attenuated presence.

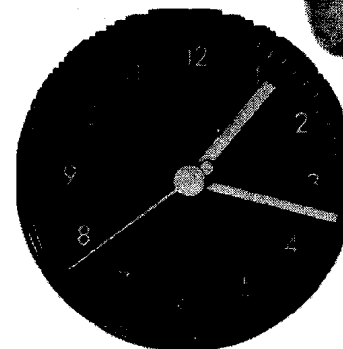
For Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a phenomenologist. Adopting Heidegger's formulation, Derrida argues that in metaphysics the meaning of being in general is determined by presence, in an unproblematic word.



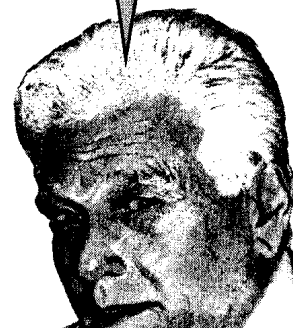
PREOCCUPATION WITH THE QUESTION OF **BEING** LED ME TO REJECT MUCH OF TRADITIONAL METAPHYSICS.

Presence can be **spatial**: e.g. proximity, nearness or adjacency, and also immediacy, having actual or direct contact, lacking mediation, having no intervening material, object or agency.

And it can be **temporal**: it evokes the present as the single present moment, the *now*; and occurrence without delay, lapse or deferral.

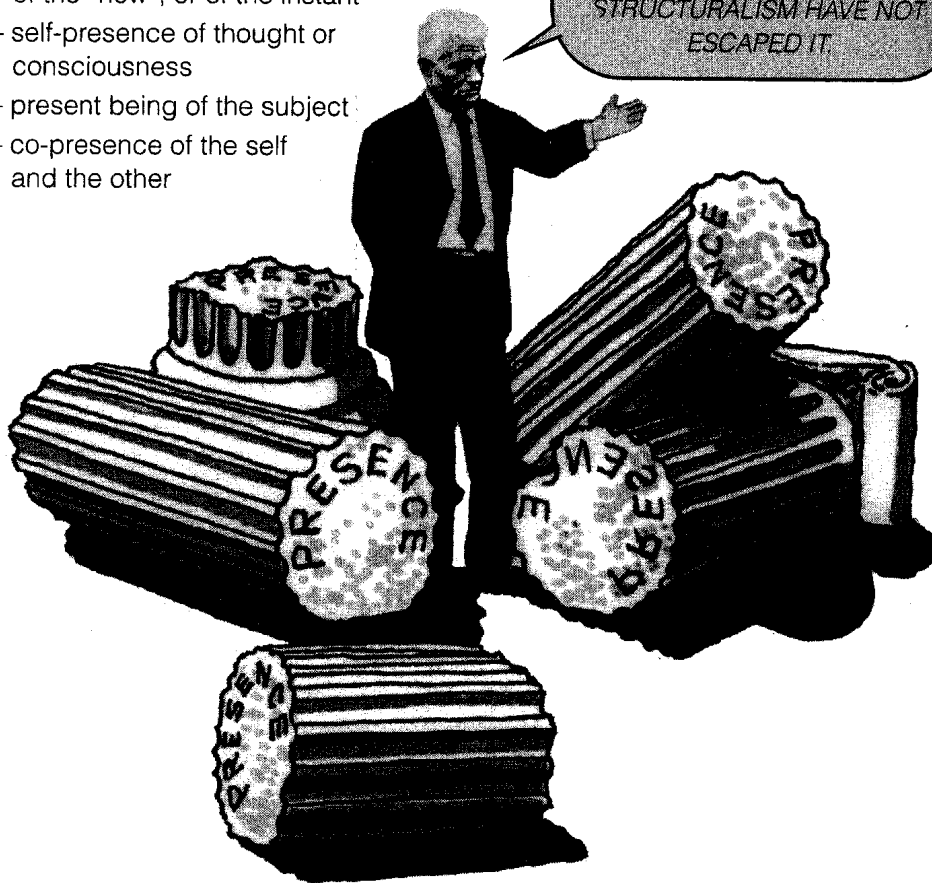


MY INTENTION IS TO MAKE ENIGMATIC WHAT ONE THINKS ONE UNDERSTANDS BY THESE WORDS.



Presence organizes metaphysical concepts of being. And all the "groundly" terms of metaphysics designate a presence. Derrida's examples ...

- presence of the object to sight
- presence as substance, essence or existence
- temporal presence as the point of the "now", or of the instant
- self-presence of thought or consciousness
- present being of the subject
- co-presence of the self and the other



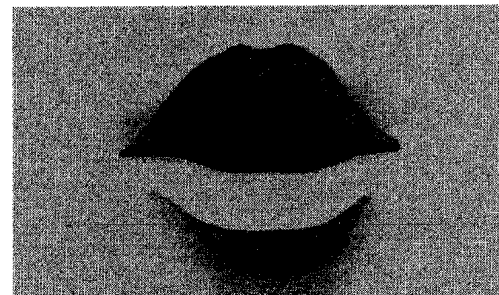
Presence is the foundation for many claims, philosophical or not:-

- that a truth can lie behind (therefore in proximity to) an appearance
- that there is an immediate bond between the "word of God" and truth
- that a "spirit of the age" can inform an historical era, and therefore be present within it
- that a photograph can capture the "significant moment", the now
- that an artist's expressed emotion can be present in their work

Presence and Speech

Why, then, is the speech/writing opposition so important? Why is the privileging of speech a gesture which *inaugurates* Western philosophy? And if philosophy as we know it is writing, why treat writing as a corruption, an obstacle or an irrelevance?

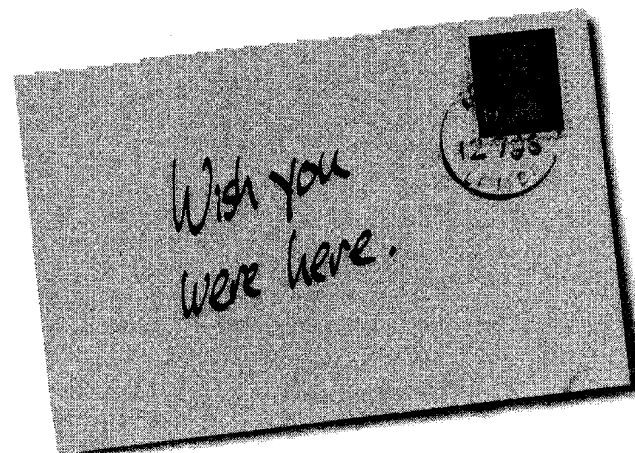
BECAUSE IT'S A NECESSITY OF THE METAPHYSICS OF PRESENCE.



From that perspective...

Speech seems to carry full presence

Metaphysical concepts of being, in time and in space, demand presence.



Writing depends on absence

Its characteristics oppose presence. Metaphysical thinking has to eject it or subordinate it.

In speech, the speaker and the listener have to be *present* in at least two senses:-

- A** Present to the words in a spatial sense
- B** Present at a particular moment in time in which the words are uttered.

Therefore it seems that the speakers' *thoughts* are as close as possible to their *words*. The thoughts are *present* to the words. So speech offers the most direct access to consciousness. The voice can seem to *be* consciousness itself.

“ When I speak, I am conscious of being present for what I think, but also of keeping as close as possible to my thought a signifying substance, a sound carried by my breath

I hear this as soon as I emit it. It seems to depend only on my pure and free spontaneity, requiring the use of no instrument, no accessory, no force taken from the world. This signifying substance, this sound, seems to unite with my thought ... so that the sound seems to erase itself, become transparent allowing the concept to present itself as what it is, referring to nothing other than its presence. ”

Speech is transparent, a diaphanous veil through which we view consciousness. Speech and thought – nothing comes between them. No lapse of time, no surface, no gap.

So presence beguilingly seems to attend spoken words ...

BUT NOT WRITING.

Writing operates on absences. As Derrida indicates, it doesn't need the presence of the **writer**, or of the writer's consciousness.

"The written marks are abandoned, cut off from the writer, yet they continue to produce effects beyond his presence and beyond the present actuality of his meaning, i.e., beyond his life itself."

"To write is to produce a mark which will constitute a kind of machine that is in turn productive ... The writer's disappearance will not prevent it functioning."

And the same for the reader

"All writing, in order to be what it is, must be able to function in the radical absence of every empirically determined addressee in general ... This is not a modification of presence, but a break in it, a 'death' or the possibility of a 'death' of the addressee."

Writing cannot be writing unless it can function in these two absences. Presence is unsustainable

The Repression of Writing

The order of writing is distance, delay, opacity and ambiguity. And also death – “dead” meaning, not the living meaning of a present speaker. “Written words, in a state of defenceless misery” have to be “abandonable to their essential drifting.”

So now we begin to understand the paradoxical phonocentric “history of silence”, that repression of writing which can scarcely be acknowledged.

And it begins to explain the disturbing tactics of Derrida’s own writing – its “difficulty”.



Saussure's Linguistics

Saussure broke with previous approaches to linguistics. These had tracked the evolution of sounds and words across time. Saussure focussed on how language *worked*, not how it developed.

Language can be viewed **synchronically**, i.e., as if in a single moment. It can be seen as a structure or system, a set of elements located in *relation* to each other.

In structural linguistics, it's the play of those elements and relations which produces meaning. For Saussure, this happens in two ways.

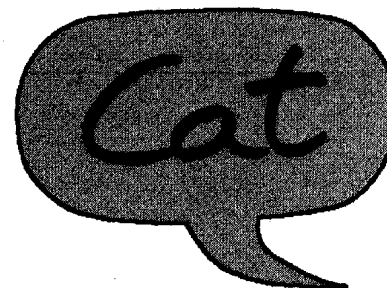


FINE, LET'S LOOK AT THESE TWO CONCEPTS – THE SIGN AND DIFFERENCE.

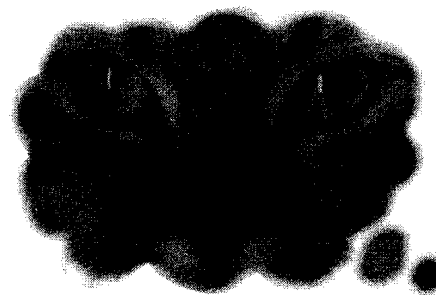


The "sign" has two aspects:-

A signifier: for Saussure, this is a sensory perception (a spoken word has an aspect we can hear; a written word, an aspect we can see).



A signified: a concept or meaning associated with that sensory perception.



A sign, to be a sign, needs both aspects: something we **sense** and something we **think**. It's a relationship ...



This relationship is nothing new. It's the stock-in-trade of Western thinking about language. A sign has two aspects, one *sensible* and the other *intelligible*. Plato introduced the idea in his *Cratylus*, the Stoics formalized it, and it's passed into modern linguistics via early Christian thinkers and others.

A SIGN IS SOMETHING WHICH, IN ADDITION TO THE SUBSTANCE ABSORBED BY THE SENSES, CALLS TO MIND OF ITSELF SOME OTHER THING.

THE CONSTITUTIVE MARK OF EVERY SIGN IN GENERAL RESIDES IN ITS DOUBLE CHARACTER. IT IS BIPARTITE, AND HAS TWO ASPECTS: ONE SENSIBLE AND THE OTHER INTELLIGIBLE.



St Augustine (354-430)



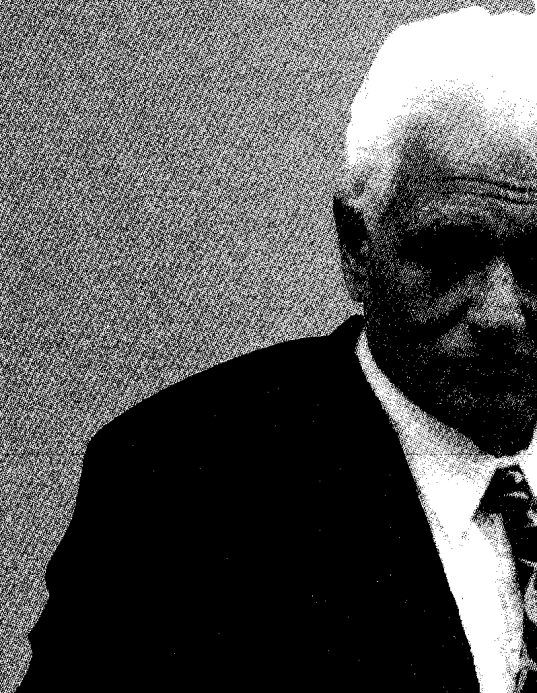
Roman Jakobson (1896-1982)

To Derrida, this is suspect. The sign is premised on a binarism and it looks suspiciously like a foundational concept in Western thinking.

"The difference between signifier and signified is no doubt the governing pattern within which Platonism institutes itself as philosophy."

But Saussure's sign might be useful to the critique of phenomenology. Especially, he emphasises that signifier and signified are indissolubly related. He insists that each requires the other – they cannot exist apart. Saussure conjures two metaphors. Signifier and signified are **body and soul**, or they are **recto and verso** of a leaf of paper. Saussure, choosing between them, prefers the sheet of paper. Its two sides are ultimately inseparable.

THE INVISIBLE, ALMOST NON-EXISTENT, THICKNESS OF THAT "LEAF" BETWEEN THE SIGNIFIER AND THE SIGNIFIED – A SIGNIFICANT METAPHOR, WE SHOULD NOTE, SINCE THE LEAF WITH ITS RECTO ...



... AND VERSO
FIRST APPEARS AS
A SURFACE AND
SUPPORT FOR

... writing

If Saussure is right, we can't be lured into the notion that concepts or meanings exist independently of signifiers. Concepts need their physical sounds, their scripted marks, etc. Even if we can imagine words "inside our head", we are conjuring their signifiers, their sensory aspects. Their external forms pollute the ideal of the purely internal.

So, for Derrida, this resists a classic move of Western metaphysics: the suppression of the signifier. The signified is the grounding term. The signifier? Inessential. It gets in the way, it corrupts the concept.

As with Husserl, evaporate the signifier and you're left with pure thought – a "transcendental signified". Where is this evaporation most complete? In the speaking voice, which seems to melt away under the force of the expressed consciousness.

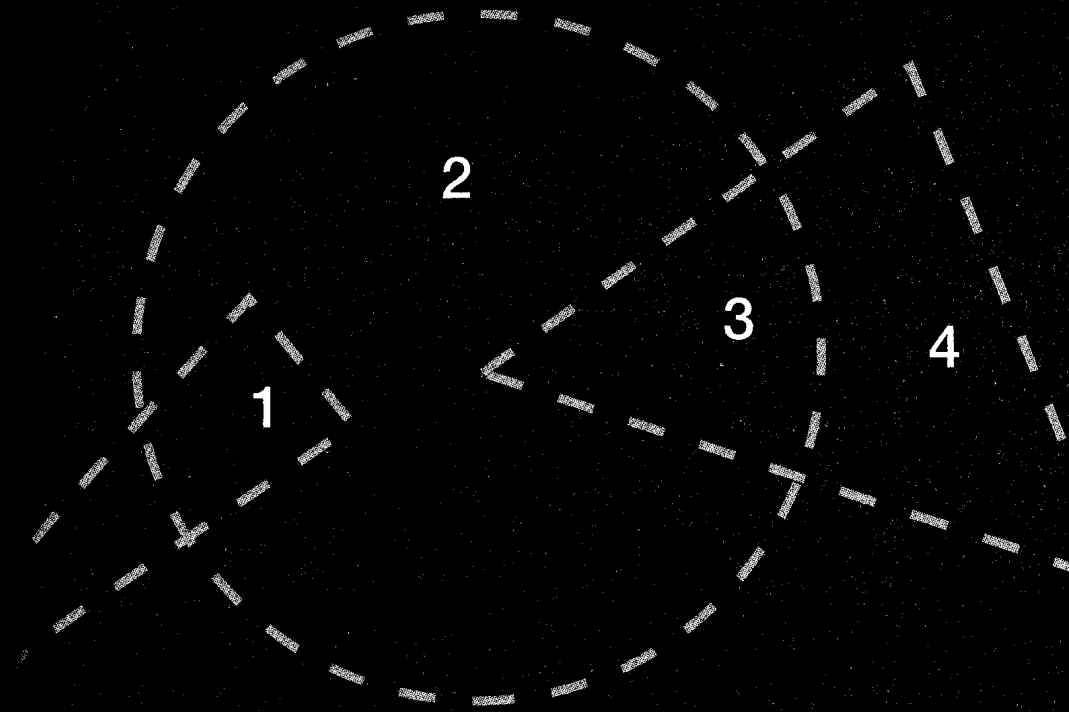
But Saussure too falls back into this phonocentrism. What can be used to *displace* the sign?

Derrida uses Saussure's concept of **difference**.

Meaning can't be produced only in the binding of signifier to signified. It needs the operation of difference. How does this work, according to Saussure?

Saussure goes back to his "sheet of paper" metaphor.

If the sheet is cut into different shapes, one shape can be identified by its difference from the other shapes. That shape takes on an identity in relation to the others – it takes on a certain "value".



In the cutting of the sheet of paper, the front and back have to be cut at the same time. The different shapes of the "signifier" side ...