

**Of Human Identity:
Deconstruction and Its Discontents**

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Introduction

In the eyes of philosophers, and certainly among those working in leading departments of philosophy throughout the world, M. Derrida's work does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigour...M. Derrida seems to us to have come close to making a career out of what we regard as translating into the academic sphere tricks and gimmicks similar to those of the Dadaists or of the concrete poets...When the effort is made to penetrate [Derrida's writing], however, it becomes clear, to us at least, that, where coherent assertions are being made at all, these are either false or trivial.

Barry Smith, et al. "Open letter against Derrida receiving an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University"

Why would Jacques Derrida and deconstruction so often evoke baseless and sweeping objections like those in the epigraph? Many students and academics find Derrida's works incomprehensible and even contradictory at times. But if deconstruction is really devoid of any philosophical worth as these critics put it, how do they account for deconstruction's contributions to linguistics, literary theory, feminism, performance studies, and so on? If Derrida's writings were indeed riddled with "false or trivial" claims, how could deconstruction play such a major role in many prominent areas of contemporary thought? It is absurd that Derrida is characterized as the anti-philosopher who trivializes philosophy with "tricks and gimmicks"; if anything, Derrida's career is dedicated to expanding the boundaries of philosophy into horizons that were rarely treaded before his time. Unlike the German or Anglo-American traditions, Derrida writes in a more flamboyant and less structural way because his style is meant to emphasize the element of "play" in his philosophy. Many critics also casually brush aside

deconstruction without giving much substance and proof, and their excuse generally falls under the allegation that Derridian thought “does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigour.” John M. Ellis’ *Against Deconstruction* is the most insightful attack on deconstruction by far. Although this book is helpful in offering an analytical account of how to critique deconstruction, Ellis unwittingly legitimizes deconstruction through his inability to refute it – his work only proves that that Derrida is a philosopher who positions himself in the *margins* of philosophy. Deconstruction’s ability to be simultaneously inside and outside of philosophy has profound significance – not only does it confirm Derrida’s belief that, despite our best efforts, we can never escape certain aspects of human existence like logocentrism, the interpreting of deconstruction tells us much about who we are. This paper seeks to demonstrate the legitimacy and philosophical significance of deconstruction, and explore its implications on personal identity.

Chapter I: *Against Deconstruction*

All along Derrida always maintains that deconstruction should not be defined in that it is not a philosophical concept that is fixed and definite. In a way, deconstruction is similar to the logic of negative theology in that one can only show what deconstruction *is not*, but not what deconstruction *is*. To preserve and highlight the instability of our existence, there is not one central document that systematically analyzes and defines deconstruction. The early deconstructive readings Derrida published focus primarily on the relationship between language and the history of philosophy. Based on Derrida’s belief that language, difference, and the freeplay of signs are the basis of meaning, deconstruction is always dealing with language and text. In fact, Derrida goes as far as to

say that “[t]here is no outside of the text.” Borrowing Jonathan Culler’s words, Derrida is arguing for a new way to look at existence; instead of viewing text and signs as concepts created and added to our world, we should look at our world as “suffused with signs, made what it is by a process of signification.”¹ As a result, the possibility of meaning in a text is infinite. For the purpose of making clear how deconstruction operates, the emphasis of this section is to present and respond to Ellis’ five major objections to deconstruction. Ellis’ objective is to demonstrate that deconstruction has very few, if any, contributions to philosophy – in a nutshell, Derrida relies on a pretentious and misleading rhetoric to mask the lack of originality in deconstruction. Therefore, deconstruction is an anti-theoretical enterprise.

“Other Logic”

Against Deconstruction begins by attacking the claim that it is impossible to analyze deconstruction “using the tools of reason and logical analysis because it functions in a different way, both requiring and embodying a different logic.”² Ellis contends that the grounds for appropriating an “other logic” to interpret deconstruction is irrational, and nothing more than a rhetorical device. First of all, he rejects this claim because those who advocate this alternative logic fail to sufficiently clarify what it entails. It is their inability to defend deconstruction, Ellis asserts, that leads to this questionable need for an alternative logic. Besides, the rhetoric of deconstructionists, like the following passage by Barbara Johnson that Ellis cited,³ is no different from the writings of “religious mysticism”:

¹ Jonathan Culler, Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction, (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2000), 2.

² John M. Ellis, Against Deconstruction, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 3-4.

³ Ellis, 9.

Consider the following passage from Derrida's *Dissémination*: "It is thus not simply false to say that Mallarmé is a Platonist or a Hegelian. But it is above all not true. And vice versa." Instead of a simple either/or structure, deconstruction attempts to elaborate a discourse that says *neither* 'either/or', *nor* 'both/and' nor even 'neither/nor', while at the same time not totally abandoning these logics either.⁴

Ellis asserts that there is simply nothing groundbreaking about Derrida's diagnosis that Mallarmé is neither a Platonist nor a Hegelian; it is plain to see that "the truth is somewhere between them," the margins between two opposite positions. Besides that, instead of pursuing clarity, Johnson's style aims at producing a grand and high-sounding illusion to decorate deconstruction as something of profound significance.

To be fair, Johnson's interpretation above is clearly in need of more clarification. She is trying to argue that the other logic Derrida speaks of is both *and* neither. Through this perspective of looking at philosophy, Derrida then goes on a search for concepts that he identifies as "undecidables." In his view, the philosophical tradition before him tends to categorize things into oppositions that fit the logical conventions of either/or and neither/nor. But his studies conclude that many ideas that are categorized as oppositions are actually not as stable as they seem. That is, the differences between the two "opposites" are not extreme enough to pair them as polar oppositions. He also uncovers some undecidables that are ignored because they are buried somewhere between the two dominant, binary oppositions in a text. In *Of Grammatology* where he explores Jean Jacques Rousseau's writing, Derrida's deconstruction of the opposition of "supplement" and "encyclopedia" details this undecidable phenomenon. The supplement to an

⁴ Ellis, 5-6.

encyclopedia, Derrida asserts, has both the connotations of “plenitude” and “lack” – while it completes the encyclopedia, a term that traditionally signals completeness and plenitude, the fact that the encyclopedia requires a supplement signifies that the encyclopedia is in a state of lack as well. Therefore, the meaning of supplement is *neither* plenitude nor lack *and* both at the same time. By that logic, supplement and encyclopedia are not opposite, but accomplices, of one another. Derrida’s analysis of undecidables like the term supplement clearly illustrates how this other logic of both and neither operates in the context of deconstruction. Not only does the other logic show that the truth is indeed “somewhere in the margins,” it also offers a new perspective in thinking and evaluating philosophy. Ellis is right to denounce Derrida and his followers when they fall short of elaborating their ideas. However, for him to say that the other logic either does not exist or does not make sense without investigation further indicates, at the very least, his misreading of deconstruction. As Jeffery J. Folks writes in his review of *Against Deconstruction*, Ellis’ “highly partisan approach” sometimes backfires and obscures his ability to evaluate Derrida and deconstruction fairly: “There is a sense that Ellis has decided ahead of time to dismiss all of the fundamental assertions of deconstruction and that his proofs are arrived at after the fact.”⁵

Style

Derrida’s style receives even heavier criticism from Ellis. He finds it a gimmick with the intention to mislead readers into thinking deconstruction is something much more sophisticated than it is, and “the reluctance to allow that deconstruction can be characterized and that characterization subjected to evaluation...when deconstruction is

⁵ Jeffery J Folks, “Book Review,” *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 55, No.1, (Jan., 1990), 110-111.

under attack.”⁶ Many critics actually share his sentiments that Derrida’s style contributes to the difficulty in reading it. Some, like Ellis, go as far as to say that this kind of writing has no place in philosophy. Once again, his refusal to even acknowledge Derrida’s style reflects his inability to escape his prejudgments about deconstruction. It is true that Derrida has a tendency in constantly changing his terminology “from essay to essay.”⁷ But he chooses to write in this way for two reasons that Ellis manages to completely overlook in his critique. First, deconstruction is never meant to be *stable* because it is not a fixed and closed systematic thought. This has much to do with Derrida’s resistance to what he calls “logocentrism,” or essentialism, of western philosophy, which he explains in the beginning of “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” Logocentrism is the traditional practice giving every philosophy and systematic thinking “a centre or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin.”⁸ An example would be Kant’s critical project, a monumental three-volume endeavour that is dedicated to exploring the limits of knowledge. Every system, like western philosophy, possesses assumptions and conditions. The problem with logocentrism lies with the tremendous restrictions its possess on interpretation, which Derrida calls the “enclosure of interpretation.” That is why Derrida is so adamant about the instability and openness of deconstruction – it fosters the sense that philosophy should always be open to interpretation. What sets deconstruction apart is that it is not grounded on one or multiple principles. It assumes nothing; if anything, its one and only condition would be to assume no assumptions. In fact, Derrida is merely expanding on the Nietzschean idea of a

⁶ Ellis, 15.

⁷ David Richter, The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1998), 818.

⁸ Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the History of Human Sciences,” The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends, ed. David Richter, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1998), 878.

“plural” style. In “The Ends of Man,” he points to the multiple “registers of discourse” in Nietzsche’s works as a way to break out of the logocentric tradition.”⁹ Ellis fails to understand and accept that Derrida’s resistance to characterization is not a futile defense mechanism, but a way for him to resist logocentrism and essentialism as much as possible.

The other function of Derrida’s elusive style is to highlight the playfulness of the “play” in signifiers that makes the infinite signification of meaning possible. The emphasis on play is not new to philosophy; Wittgenstein, for one, advocates the importance of playfulness in *Philosophical Investigations*. Contrary to the traditional belief that one point of origin generates meaning, Derrida proposes to replace logocentrism and essentialism with the “freeplay” of signs, where “the centre...was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came in play.”¹⁰ Based on Saussure’s idea that a word made of the signifier (sound of the word) and the signified (meaning of the word), Derrida reasons that the world is “suffused” with signs where the freeplay of an infinite number of signs generate infinite interpretations. Instead of the pursuit of one transcendental signified like Heidegger’s “determination of being as presence,” Derrida’s freeplay of signs is another way for us to resist logocentrism. Note that Derrida does not believe we can ever get pass logocentrism because it is part of the condition of this freeplay of signs – it is predicated upon our language, a fixed “immobility” that we can never completely abandon. In fact, it is language that makes meaning possible because the freeplay of

⁹ Jacques Derrida, “The Ends of Man,” *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 136.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the History of Human Sciences,” 879.

signs cannot take place without language. Ellis also discusses extensively this conception of freeplay of signs in *Against Deconstruction*, and it will be addressed later in this paper.

Logocentrism

Besides the other logic and Derrida's style in general, Ellis alleges that the definition and role of logocentrism present many problems for deconstruction. More specifically, Derrida and his followers have failed to fully explain the notion of logocentrism, that their preoccupation with overcoming logocentrism is nothing groundbreaking in the history of philosophy, and that they have no way to achieve this seemingly noble and sophisticated ideal. If this is so, then deconstruction has accomplished nothing that sets it apart from Derrida's predecessors because it is and will be stuck in logocentrism like everything else. Derrida is also misguided, Ellis suggests, in his portrayal of logocentrism as the one prevalent view in the history of philosophy because any philosophers by now should be able to recognize logocentrism as "very naïve and uninformed."¹¹ Although deconstructionists sometimes fall prey to this problem of interpretation, Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play" provides a very clear definition and elucidation of what logocentrism entails, as discussed in the previous section. Second, Ellis' argument that deconstruction's emphasis in overcoming logocentrism is unoriginal does nothing to discredit deconstruction. Although he rightly points out that philosophers before Derrida's time like Wittgenstein and J.R. Firth were already working against logocentrism. All Derrida is saying is that logocentrism remains a major force in philosophy, despite the writings of his predecessors. Derrida actually acknowledges Freud, Heidegger, and Nietzsche's efforts in trying to battle logocentrism in the earlier section of "Structure, Sign, and Play." Derrida never takes credit for

¹¹ Ellis, 38.

inventing the idea of resisting logocentrism because he did not invent it; but the writings of his predecessors and contemporaries clearly show that logocentrism is still the dominant strand of philosophy. In response, he devises deconstruction in an attempt to illustrate a better way to study philosophy. Finally, it is true that Derrida does not believe we can ever get pass logocentrism, but the fact that deconstruction is able to establish the freeplay of signs separates it from other major ideas and movements in the history of philosophy. The problem with Ellis' trivialized account of deconstruction lies in its insistence that deconstruction can only be unique *if and only if* it can overcome logocentrism. This is one of many examples of the unreasonably narrow standards that Ellis uses to evaluate Derrida and deconstruction.

Freeplay of Signs

Like many aspects of deconstruction, Ellis argues that the freeplay of signs is fundamentally impossible and irrational. He defines the freeplay of signs as “the idea that signs play infinitely and indiscriminately against each other.”¹² And this is impossible because this would produce total ambiguity and indefiniteness. For a sign to be recognizable, it must possess distinctive features and functions that set it apart from other signs. If signs really play “indefinitely and infinitely” against other signs like Derrida says, then no individual sign would yield any recognizable feature or function. Ellis' critique also tries to portray the freeplay of signs as an idea that brings nothing new to philosophy. Some deconstructions may contend that, as any text is open to multiple interpretations, the freeplay of signs does exist. But if all the freeplay of signs does is to show that multiple interpretations of a particular text are possible, then there is no reason to create a new theory to explain such a simple and common phenomenon. Ellis finds the

¹² Ellis, 118.

freeplay of signs very misleading because it is supposed to give us total freedom, in literature, writing and life without any constraints. Where Derrida claims to be showing a new way to evaluate literature and writing to free from the bonds of traditional conventions, Ellis finds this erroneous because all texts are dependent on the language it is written in. Total freedom is therefore impossible. In fact, conventions of language are the structures of language, Ellis reasons, that makes intelligible communication possible. We would be forced to abandon meaning if we do not submit to these conventions.

There are three problems with Ellis' analysis of the freeplay of signs. First, it is impossible to refute that freeplay of signs does not exist. Consider the English language: any combinations of words in the English language can yield many interpretations. It makes no sense for Ellis to claim that the freeplay of signs is impossible. Second, the fact that the freeplay of signs generates numerous interpretations does not mean that it would lead to undistinguishable signs, interpretations, and total vagueness. For example, there are many widely differing scholarly interpretations of *Heart of Darkness*, and yet no one would ever say that this masterpiece is devoid of meaning or distinctive features. Joanna Smith's feminist reading argues that it accurately depicts the prevalence of chauvinism and sexism in the 19th century; J. Hillis Miller's deconstructive reading shows that the apocalyptic vision in the book is much more horrific beneath the surface; Brook Thomas' new historicist perspective illustrates how we can see Conrad's conception of the west by studying the text in view of its historical significance; a cultural critic like Patrick Brantlinger would assert that this book is a scathing indictment of all the values the western culture held dear in Conrad's time; and so on.¹³ These differing criticisms

¹³ These readings are collected in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, edited by Ross C. Murfin, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996).

are only the tip of an iceberg; the freeplay of signs does generate many interpretations, and these interpretations are far from total vagueness or meaninglessness. As we can see, each of these interpretations is recognizable individually and can be easily differentiated from others. The fact that we can read *Heart of Darkness* in so many ways is a testimony to its sophistication. Deconstruction is never meant to show that anything goes. To the contrary, it adds to our understanding by calling attention to the complexity of our world, as much work is needed to decipher the many layers of meaning in our existence. Finally, Ellis fundamentally misses Derrida's conceptions of language and what the constraints are. As mentioned earlier, Derrida says that language is the one fundamental "immobility" that we cannot escape from. He never states that we should be liberated from language or the structures of language – he knows all along that there has to be some constants and constraints in our life that we cannot escape from.

Chapter II: Deconstruction, Language, Difference

So far we can see that the four objections to deconstruction in Ellis' critique have all failed to give enough substantial or valid evidence that undermine the legitimacy of deconstruction. This chapter is devoted to examining the most important argument in the "Deconstruction and the Nature of Language" section in Ellis' book, where he endeavours to prove that Derrida does not understand Saussurean linguistics, and the notions of language and difference in general. This is by far the most scathing indictment of deconstruction. On the one hand, Derrida heavily draws on Saussure's theory of the sign to illustrate his own vision of deconstruction. If Ellis' accusation were valid, the legitimacy of deconstruction would be compromised. On the other hand, deconstruction, language and difference are inseparable. It is difference and language, according to

Derrida, that make meaning and the freeplay of signs possible. In summary, Ellis' rejection of Derrida's critique of language difference is predicated on his argument that "meaning is created by the opposition of forms, that is, by specific differences."¹⁴ Since Derrida maintains that it is the freeplay of signs, the indiscriminate and indefinite interaction among signs, generate meaning, Ellis concludes that deconstruction's "contribution to the debate on language and meaning is not substantial; it fails to establish any coherent new view of meaning or of the way language functions."¹⁵

This chapter will first proceed by presenting Derrida's analysis of language and difference since Ellis' critique in this particular case is rather incoherent. His argument against Derrida somehow contradicts his own account of Derrida's ideas: he is able to explain Derrida's ideas clearly, and somehow he fails to see their significance. Ellis also does not seem to recognize that deconstruction operates in the margins of philosophy. Perhaps that is why his arguments in this section are especially flawed. To fully comprehend how deconstruction interacts with the margins of philosophy, this chapter will draw on *Of Grammatology*, a selection of Derrida's other works, and the "Translator's Preface" in *Of Grammatology* written by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Spivak's essay is a meticulous introduction that provides some very concise and brilliant insights into the intricacies of Derrida's vision of deconstruction that Ellis fails to identify and elucidate in *Against Deconstruction*.

Of Grammatology is Derrida's attempt at deconstructing the tradition of favouring oppositions and presence, and reconstructing a new outlook on meaning and difference. Primarily based on his readings of Freud, Hegel, Heidegger, Husserl and Saussure, this

¹⁴ Ellis, 553.

¹⁵ Ellis, 66.

book is a manifesto of Derrida's breaking from the shadows of his predecessors. Instead of polar oppositions, it is the *margins* of philosophy that intrigues Derrida most. For centuries, philosophers tend to put things into perspective by categorizing them into binary opposites and conclude their analyses by siding with either one opposition: good or evil, truth or fiction, right or wrong, science or arts, etc. As mentioned earlier, he argues that there are many concepts that actually cannot be paired as opposites. The main theme in *Of Grammatology* is the opposition of writing and speech, where Derrida calls attention to the fallacy of preferring speech to writing, or writing over speech. This opposition and the primacy of speech are inaccurate because speech and writing are "accomplices," not opposites, of each other.¹⁶ Similarly, in revisiting Heidegger and his treatment of the question of being, Derrida shows that Heidegger's preference for presence over absence is problematic. For Heidegger, presence is the transcendental signified that generates meaning and difference. For Derrida, it is *absence* that makes difference possible and determines meaning. A concept or a sign is not defined by its opposite; the difference of a sign is found in the "trace" of other signs. And difference is the condition of meaning and difference that he calls the "absolutely other."

In the Margins

Deconstruction does not look at philosophy from the outside or inside; it operates in the margins where it can move inside and outside freely. When Derrida was asked to explain deconstruction at The Villanova Roundtable, he stressed the importance of deconstruction as a project that gives equal attention to the past, the present and the future: "If an institution is to be an institution, it must to some extent break with past,

¹⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translator's Preface," *Of Grammatology*, xxix.

keep the memory of the past, while inaugurating something absolutely new.”¹⁷ *Of Grammatology* as a text mirrors how deconstruction operates. While it calls attention to the problems and brilliance of the works of many thinkers before and during Derrida’s time like Rousseau, Saussure, Heidegger and J.L. Austin, it also introduces new interpretations of these texts. It is precisely this position of being in the margins that allows Derrida to preserve and criticize these thinkers at the same time. Being in the margins also means that he does not have to choose between the two. For instance, where Heidegger chooses the transcendental signified over signifiers, Derrida recognizes the essential nature of the relationship between the signified and the signifiers, that signification only works if a sign requires both the signified and the signifier. That is why it is the freeplay of “signs,” not the freeplay of the signified or signifiers. It is crucial to recognize that Derrida is not trying to do away with specialized disciplines and, by extension, the notion of established distinctions:

But at the same time I emphasized the necessity of discipline, of something specifically philosophical, that we should not dissolve philosophy into other disciplines, that we need at the same time interdisciplinarity, crossing the borders, establishing new themes, new problems, new ways...all the while teaching the history of philosophy, the techniques, professional rigour, what one calls discipline.¹⁸

The key is not to forget the past, but to “keep the memory of the past” and develop something new through “crossing the borders” between the past and the present. And Derrida can only constantly transgress distinctive oppositions when he is in the margins.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable,” in Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida, ed. John David Caputo, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 6.

¹⁸ Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable,” 7.

Note that he never claims to have created this practice of examining philosophy in the margins, for many thinkers before his time, like Nietzsche and Freud, have done this as well. What is remarkable about Derrida's emphasis of being in the margins is the concepts he unearths as a result of deconstructing texts in the margins. The trace and differance are examples of these undecidables that are intricately related to deconstruction: without the trace and differance, deconstruction would neither be possible nor make any sense, and vice-versa.

The Trace

The trace is a very important Derridian term that characterizes deconstruction's unique way of looking at the world. Unlike his predecessors, Derrida maintains that difference is found in *the trace of others*. In *Of Grammatology*, he heavily draws on Heidegger and his treatment of being to elaborate his own position on language and his notion of differences, which is predicated on what he calls the "trace structure." While they both agree that there is nothing outside of language and that Saussure's conception of the sign is a structure of difference, Derrida breaks from the Heideggerian search for the transcendental signified. According to Heidegger, the transcendental signified is the origin of difference; it is this presence that makes the difference between signifier and signified possible.¹⁹ But Derrida argues that difference is possible in the "fabric of trace." This goes back to the freeplay of signs, where signs play against each other indiscriminately to produce meaning. This is possible because each sign possesses individual identity, and this individuality is predicated on difference – every sign must have one or more features that distinguish it from other signs. By extension, Derrida

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 20.

reasons that difference, as a whole, exists in the trace, or “footprints,” of others.

Everything is, hence, always already signified by the trace of others that are not the thing itself.²⁰ For instance, we can see that the sun is red because the sun is not blue, green, black, white, and so on. We can identify the colour of the sun in the trace or footprints of other colours that are different from the sun. Instead of focusing on “the metaphysics of presence” like Derrida’s predecessors did, deconstruction looks at the world as a trace structure. It is the trace of other signs, not presence, that leads to difference and meaning.

Going back to Ellis, the trace is trivial since it essentially serves no purpose.

When one sees an object, Ellis argues that one usually does not have to analyze how this object differs from other objects before one recognizes the identity of the object. Ellis is oblivious of the implications and significance of the trace beneath the surface: it reveals the inaccuracy of the notion of a presence-structured and logocentric world. The presence of a thing is signified by the presence of others, which is *absent* from the thing they signify: it is absence that makes presence possible. Therefore, Heidegger’s argument that difference is possible because of the transcendental signified does not hold. It is important to note that Heidegger actually shares with Derrida the belief that absence indeed denotes presence; Heidegger only arrives at a conclusion different from Derrida’s. In *Zur Seinsfrage*, Heidegger crosses out the word “Sein,” which means “Being” in English, in his discussion about the question of what Being is. This is because, on the one hand, Heidegger must use the word “Being” to signal that he is writing about Being; on the other hand, any *representation* of Being is not Being. In other words, the presence of the word “Being” is signified by the absence of Being. As Spivak remarks, the crossing-out of Being illustrates how “twisted and bent” language is even as it guides

²⁰ Spivak, lxix.

us.²¹ Derrida also uses this crossing-out of words, and he calls it “writing under erasure” (*sous-rature*).

Logocentrism is under attack as well because the trace unseats the necessity of a centre: “The trace is not only the disappearance of origin...it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace.”²² Derrida is not saying that nothing is stable in the world, that anything goes. Language is, after all, the site in which meaning is located and the “one fixed immobility” that makes the freeplay of signs possible. But Derrida is trying to establish that the trace structure offers a world of many possibilities that neither presence nor logocentrism can rival. The key rests in the dynamic nature of language, as its role as the origin of meaning adds a new layer to the previously conceived definition of origin. Language consists of an infinite amount of signs, and it is the freeplay of signs that produces meaning in the trace of others. In the trace structure, meaning no longer comes from a singular origin, the transcendental signified for instance; it is now generated from the countless significations of signs in the “origin” that is language. But something is missing from the picture here; besides the trace, the freeplay of signs, and language, Derrida argues that “différance” is the one condition for meaning to be possible at all.

Différance

“Différance” is a neologism Derrida creates to highlight the sense of both “to differ” and “to defer.” It is the condition of conceptuality: a sign is only a sign if its meanings must be different from and endlessly *deferring* to other concepts. We use a fork for eating, and it is different from, say, a printer because we use a printer to print.

²¹ Spivak, xiv.

²² Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 90.

But a fork can be used as a weapon as well. Therefore, a fork is a sign because its meanings differ from and defer to other signs. Similar to the trace, difference demonstrates that a sign represents the present in its absence. A fork is not a printer, a car, a hammer, and so on. It is the absence of other signs (a printer, a car, a hammer) that signifies the presence of a sign (a fork). Even though difference is the condition that makes conceptuality possible, it is *not* a sign or a concept in itself because Derrida maintains that difference is neither different nor deferring from anything. Thus, he calls it the “absolutely other.” The fact that difference is not utterable is evidence that it is not a concept according to him. One famous example Derrida often employs to support this claim is the case of different colours that we see. We cannot say what the difference between blue and green; we can only identify that they are different, but we cannot say the difference. Some may argue that, assuming Derrida’s conclusion is correct, the claim that difference is a non-concept remains questionable. After all, even if difference is truly the “absolutely other,” its absolute otherness suggests that it is different from everything else. And if it is a non-concept, how can it be thought of or understood in the first place? Perhaps we should consider difference as a “special” concept.

Besides its role as the condition of conceptuality, difference is important to Derrida’s attack on the conventional emphasis of binary oppositions. In the essay “Différance,” Derrida actually gives credit to Nietzsche for being the first philosopher to challenge this way of studying philosophy. The similarities between their ideas, as Spivak elucidates more extensively in the “Translator’s Preface,” are evidence of Nietzsche’s influence on Derrida. For one, Nietzsche thinks the meaning of a concept is constantly deferring: “Every single time something is done with a purpose in view,

something fundamentally different and other occurs.”²³ He also shares Derrida’s belief that language can be very misleading at times, as “nothing is ever comprehended, but rather designated and distorted...”²⁴ Above all, what Derrida really identifies with Nietzsche is the German’s radical view of philosophy:

Quantity itself, therefore, is not separable from the difference of quantity. The difference of quantity is in the essence of force, the relation of force to force. The dream of two equal forces, even if they are granted an opposition of meaning, is an approximate and crude dream, a statistical dream, plunged into by the living but dispelled by chemistry.²⁵

This passage that Derrida quotes in “Différance” illustrates Nietzsche’s rejection to the age-old preoccupation with binary oppositions in metaphysics. Interestingly, in his attempt to refute the notion that equal opposites exist, Nietzsche is basically saying that difference is the “relation of force to force,” much like the trace of signs in Derrida’s writing. On the one hand, différance shows that, in many instances, we have mistakenly categorize two ideas as opposites even though their relationship to each other are more complicated than that; on the other hand, Derrida is not trying to completely do away with opposites. Consider the opposition of supplement and encyclopedia in his analysis of supplement mentioned earlier. Even though Derrida shows that a supplement or an encyclopedia signifies neither lack nor plenitude, and both lack and plenitude at the same time, the opposition of lack and plenitude remains in tact. As we can see, différance does not dissolve all oppositions.

²³ Spivak, xxiii

²⁴ Spivak, xxiii.

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 17.

The “Origin” of Deconstruction

Contrary to Ellis’ argument, deconstruction is not “anything goes” in that it respects details and specificity much more than Ellis likes to believe. To prove this, a study of the reasons behind Derrida’s decision to choose the word “deconstruction” to characterize his project will be helpful. When he tries to explain what deconstruction is in “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” he first acknowledges that his own conception of deconstruction is heavily influenced by the Heideggerian “destrucktion.”²⁶ While deconstruction seeks to undo problematic structures, it is by no means a “negative operation:” “Rather than destroying, it was also necessary to understand how an ‘ensemble’ was constituted and to reconstruct it to this end.”²⁷ That is why Derrida did not translate it literally from *destruktion*, as explains that the word “destruction” in French connotes annihilation and total negation. Although deconstruction shows that the essentialist nature of traditional philosophical systems is flawed, it should reconstruct and provide a remedy for the system it deconstructed. By that logic, deconstruction is anything but a negative operation. In “The Villanova Roundtable,” Derrida actually called himself “a very conservative person:”

I love institutions and I spent a lot of time participating in new institutions, which sometimes do not work. At the same time, I try to dismantle not institutions but some structures in given institutions which are too rigid or are dogmatic or which work as an obstacle to future research.²⁸

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” *A Derrida Reader: Reading Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf, (New York, Columbia University Press: 1991), 270-271.

²⁷ Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” 272.

²⁸ Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable,” 8.

This emphasis in dismantling *specific* structures in a system is a crucial aspect of deconstruction that many critics, like Ellis, choose to ignore. By charging that deconstruction seeks to destroy systems and institutions, Ellis can then portray deconstruction as a negative operation that only leads to nihilism. This is most irrational and ironic because deconstruction is anything *but* nihilism. It only works because every system contains certain structures that are flawed. It “does not mean that we have to destroy all forms of unity wherever they occur,” Derrida asserts, because “we need unity, some gathering, some configuration.”²⁹ Borrowing Walter Brogan’s words, deconstruction is therefore a constant tension between “disruption” and “attentiveness.” On the one hand, it removes specific structures that do not make sense; on the other hand, it should improve on the “structural integrity” and complexity of the system in question because deconstruction pays so much attention to structures. A system should never be closed up since its meaning should be constantly fluid in the trace of other systems. When a system is being deconstructed, it is not necessarily reduced to a single element or origin. That is why Derrida refuses to call deconstruction a critique or an analysis, as both terms traditionally signify the practice of tracing back to the origin. Basically, deconstruction is a system, despite Derrida’s resistance to this term, with a difference – it is a system that is never stable since it does not have any structures or presuppositions. Strictly speaking, it has one presupposition, and that is to assume and presuppose nothing. What Ellis and other critics fail to see is that if deconstruction can be defined like other philosophical ideals, then it would become the very closed unity that it opposes.

Deconstructing *Against Deconstruction* and Deconstruction

²⁹ Derrida, Caputo 13.

As we can see, the five major objections to deconstruction in *Against Deconstruction* are inaccurate and fairly biased. Ellis would have come up with a better understanding of deconstruction if he had read Derrida, and even other deconstructionists' works more carefully. His glaring misinterpretation of the trace and differance is further proof that he does not understand deconstruction. A possible explanation to Ellis' misreading is his inability to abandon his own presuppositions of philosophy. For one, his resistance to Derrida's style and constantly changing terminology, at one point he characterizes as "arrogant frivolity,"³⁰ and the strict standards he employs in his analysis belie his own preference for the analytic tradition and formal logic. There is nothing wrong with analytic philosophy or formal logic; but there is something very wrong with Ellis' inability to objectively examine ideas presented in a way that is wholly different from the analytic tradition, or any tradition he favours. Perhaps this has much to do with the fact that deconstruction challenges beliefs he holds dear. Consider the very first paragraph of *Against Deconstruction*, where he lays down his position on theory and how he evaluates deconstruction:

A common assumption about theoretical discussion has been that it is a careful, patient, analytical exercise in which precision of formulation, finely drawn distinctions, and all similar marks of cogent, consistent thinking are of the essence.³¹

Derrida would agree that deconstruction should be "a careful, patient, analytical exercise" like any theoretical discussion, as evident in the meticulous close-readings he offers in *Of Grammatology*. But the "precision of formulation" is precisely what deconstruction sets

³⁰ Ellis, 84.

³¹ Ellis, 3.

out to challenge – “precision” and “formulation,” in Derrida’s opinion, are synonymous with logocentrism in that they all signify stability. The freeplay of signs, the trace and differance all indicate that meaning and interpretation are never as stable as previously thought. Derrida’s elusive style does not necessarily suggest the absence of “marks of cogent [and] consistent thinking.” Deconstruction has also shown that not all distinctions can be as “finely drawn” as Ellis desires. Where he believes the world should remain in the either/or, opposition structure, Derrida demonstrates that difference is actually found in the trace of others. Since some of these presuppositions Ellis considers as the foundation of philosophy are all effectively dissolved by deconstruction, it is merely fitting that his analysis is riddled with irrational objections and misunderstandings. To truly appreciate deconstruction for what it is, Ellis must be able to at least acknowledge that philosophy can come in a form that is less structured so that it is more opened to interpretation.

It is important to note the dubious selection of scholarship that Ellis cited in *Against Deconstruction*. Spivak is a prominent translator and proponent of Derrida’s work, and she is only cited once in *Against Deconstruction* in a passing footnote that acknowledges her as the translator of *Of Grammatology*. John D. Caputo, another scholar who has written a collection of brilliant commentary advocating deconstruction, is also missing from Ellis’ critique. Instead, the burden of elaborating deconstruction falls on Jonathan Culler. He is the most cited “deconstructionist” in the book second to Derrida, and naturally receives the most critical response from Ellis. Culler is a major proponent of structuralism, a movement that is similar to deconstruction in a number of ways because of its roots in Saussurean linguistics. But deconstruction is a departure

from Saussure, which means Ellis' portrayal of Culler as an advocate for deconstruction is a glaring mistake. *On Deconstruction* and *Structuralist Poetics*, the two books that Ellis most often cites and criticizes, offer Culler's criticisms of and objections to deconstruction. Therefore, attacking Culler's exposition of deconstruction, assuming that they are as problematic as Ellis alleges, fails to discredit deconstruction or Derrida. One may even argue that Ellis' devotion to reading and responding to "deconstructionists" who do not quite understand deconstruction ultimately confounds his own conception of deconstruction.

Incidentally, Ellis very rarely brings up the thinkers and philosophical traditions that influence Derrida and deconstruction. In one exceptional occasion, Ellis attempts to discredit Derrida by asserting that Freud, Heidegger, Lévi-Strauss, and Nietzsche, those who Derrida cited as famous intellectuals who have fought against logocentrism, "are nowhere near being central figures in the debate on this particular issue."³² But Ellis then fails to provide any evidence to support his allegation. And Derrida's rationale in choosing these figures, which can be found in "Structure Sign and Play," is also omitted in Ellis' attack. The reason behind Ellis' general reluctance in commenting on Derrida's influences is unmistakable: since most of Derrida's writings are essentially readings of well-respected thinkers like those mentioned above, examining his influences would only enhance his and deconstruction's credibility. In contrast, Spivak's "Translator's Preface" and Caputo's *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* contain detailed analyses that investigate Derrida's connection to Freud, Heidegger, James Joyce, Nietzsche, Plato, and so on. Perhaps, Ellis is also aware that, by critiquing Derrida's influences, it effectively affirms

³² Ellis, 40.

the trace – it is the trace of other thinkers where Derrida’s work as a philosopher acquires its meaning.

Despite the many problems with *Against Deconstruction*, it offers some insights of which many deconstructionists should take note. Incidentally, they reveal some similarities Ellis and deconstruction share that perhaps not even Ellis himself notices. First, as he says in the preface, philosophy requires continual discourse, and exchange of ideas for it to ever make any progress. Thus, the main goal of his book is to provide an intellectual voice against deconstruction at a time when very few stood up to it. Derrida actually shares his view that philosophy is a fluid discipline that relies on persistent adjustments. Second, Ellis’ insistence that philosophy should be conveyed with “precision” and “marks of cogent [and] consistent thinking” serves as a healthy reminder for many deconstructionists, even Derrida. Though it is necessary for Derrida to utilize an elusive style, it is also necessary that he can write in a more assessable way. At the end of the day, his philosophy would be useless if his readers cannot understand him. Like the relationship between deconstruction and philosophy, it is a tension between style and the demands of communication that we all need to wrestle with. Third, Ellis’ strategy of comparing deconstruction to the past is also commendable. While his goal is to establish that deconstruction is ordinary and contributes very few new ideas to philosophy, this emphasis in studying the past is key to any philosophical inquiry. Once again, we can see Ellis’ connection to Derrida. Without studying the past, deconstruction would have nothing to deconstruct or reconstruct. Finally, Derrida’s tendency to play “word games” receives heavy criticism from Ellis, and not without reason. For instance, Ellis points out that Derrida’s refusal to characterize deconstruction as an “analysis,” “critique,” or

“theory” is rather pointless. In “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” Derrida explains that the term “project” is preferred because it does not have the connotation of logocentrism that other words carry, and that it does not signify the necessity of structures. But this special treatment achieves little, Ellis contends, since a project can just as easily be characterized as theory. In fact, Derrida’s claim that deconstruction can deconstruct itself implies that it possesses structures. Despite Derrida’s insistence that the play of words is important, its effects and significance seem trivial in some cases.

In the end, the primary purpose behind this strategy of reading and responding to *Against Deconstruction* is to provide a practical example of how deconstruction works. It begins by offering a close reading of Ellis’ objections to deconstruction before it proceeds to address the problematic “structures” and presuppositions in Ellis’ critique. But this paper never treats *Against Deconstruction* and deconstruction as oppositions: the fact that it heavily relies on critiquing Ellis’ critique of deconstruction to explain what deconstruction is further prove that difference is found in the trace of others. That is why this paper is, so to speak, in the margins, and is never aimed at completely rejecting Ellis or totally side with Derrida and deconstruction. Rather, it seeks to correct Ellis’ misconceptions and reconstructs a new interpretation of *Against Deconstruction* and Derrida’s work.

Chapter III: Deconstruction and Personal Identity

Throughout the history of humanity, many thinkers have painstakingly dedicated their lives to examining the formation of personal identity. In *Monolinguisism of the Other*, Derrida is particularly interested in the impact of culture and language on the identity of colonized people. By establishing that language and culture are always in a flux, he

reasons that the notion of one possessing a proper home is problematic.³³ Based on this argument, this chapter will present a deconstructive interpretation of what personal identity entails in this day and age.

Instability with a Difference

Since deconstruction shows that change is constant and inevitable, personal identity is not as stable as previously thought. This has much to do with the basis of meaning in our existence: language. Many words that Shakespeare used in his days are no longer part of our daily conversation because meaning of words changes over time. It is not the case that these words do not possess meaning anymore; rather, we keep revising language in responses to changes brought on by the progression of our own history. This tension between meaning and time is inevitable because it is not always in our power to resist the external forces that shape our existence. That is why the courts have to periodically reinterpret the US Constitution. The recent debate concerning the legality of embryonic research is one of many examples where existing legislations are in need of revision because they are no longer applicable. The Constitution and the law did not cover the legality of embryonic research because it did not exist in the Framers' time. Likewise, every individual's identity is continuously changing as time goes by. Although personal identity is unstable, it does not necessarily mean that an individual is a totally different person. A parallel can be drawn between deconstruction and the instability of personal identity. Derrida repeatedly maintains that any deconstructive criticisms should never seek to dismantle all structures; deconstruction should selectively remove structures that are problematic and irrational. Similarly, the changes in one's identity should be selective and not totalizing. Going back to the Constitution, it is the

³³ Penelope Deutscher, How to Read Derrida, (London, W.W. Norton and Company: 2006), 17.

same as the one the Framers drafted centuries ago. It is the interpretation of the Constitution, in the form of constitutional amendments and the law, that go through continuous revisions over time. Even though deconstruction opposes essentialism and logocentrism, Derrida has to concede that language is the one “immobility” in our existence from which we can never escape. By extension, we can also infer that that every person must possess some core features that guide and shape one’s identity through one’s lifetime.

Multiple and Outside

For anyone to be an individual, one must be different from others. Therefore, personal identity is contingent on its difference in the trace of others, which also implies that the individual self originates from multiple sources. One can say that Ellis authored *Against Deconstruction*; but to claim that he is the origin of all the ideas presented in that book is incorrect. The ownership of these ideas can be traced back to many sources because Ellis is merely revisiting and interpreting ideas passed on to him. By that logic, personal identity is neither fixed nor singular. Derrida goes as far as to contend that the individual self is always outside of the individual since it is in the trace of others that we can establish personal identity. In a sense, he is right to say that individual identity is not possible unless it is different from other identities. But to say that it is forever outside of the individual is a stretch – after all, identity is “personal” because it belongs to the individual. Even though it is correct that one constructs one’s identity by responding to those of others, it is a leap to suggest that one’s identity is thus displaced and lost to the outside. The answer is located somewhere in the middle. The individual must have some ownership and influence over the formation of one’s identity, and traces of one identity

can also be found in others' identities. Personal identity is *neither* totally singular nor totally outside of the self, but *both* singular and outside of the self at the same time.

Resemblance

Meaning and difference are inseparable in Derrida's philosophy, but the notion of resemblance, which is important to Wittgenstein's theory of language and meaning, is virtually absent in his commentaries. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein reasons that the ability to identify what is similar is as important as our ability to recognize differences. If this is true, then the notion of personal identity and difference must be reevaluated. According to Wittgenstein, language is "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail."³⁴ When he is examining language, he notices that there is an exceptionally high level of interconnectivity among words and concepts. For instance, different species of leaves have different colours, shapes, sizes, etc. We can still recognize leaves when we see them even without knowing the specific characteristics that define them as such. This is because we have a general concept of what a leaf is – when we identify the similarities between these things we see and the concept of a leaf, we can logically conclude that these things are leaves. Wittgenstein's analysis indicates that our ability to recognize resemblance is the condition that makes human communication possible.

Once again, a compromise between Wittgenstein's argument and difference, two seemingly contradicting opposites, will actually yield a better understanding of language and meaning. In keeping with the deconstructive approach, it is irrational to prefer one to the other; we should look for a way to reconstruct from the tension between resemblance

³⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1958), 67.

and difference. Examining Derrida's relationship to his influences will provide some insights into this inquiry. The uniqueness of Derrida's work comes from his ability to produce his own interpretation through extrapolating others' ideas. Difference, for instance, closely resembles Saussure's theory of the sign and language as a system of difference even though he is often criticized in *Of Grammatology*. From this, we can see that difference and resemblance are both at work in Derrida's interpretation of Saussurean linguistics: he can only extrapolate from Saussurean linguistics and criticize it at the same if he can identify the differences *and* similarities between their ideas. Going back to the question of personal identity, we can then infer that the formation of identity is as much about resemblance as it is about difference. Where individual identity emerges from one's differentiating from others, one also forms the self by seeking out similarities in one's peers.

After Deconstruction?

Not to be discouraged by the realization that human identity and existence are riddled with uncertainty, deconstruction is meant to signify hope and affirmation. For one, this paper itself can be deconstructed. Where Derrida fights against the essentialist preoccupation with going back to the origin, this paper is based on Derrida's work, effectively rendering him the origin. This paper, despite its stance against binary opposites, primarily analyzes by means of comparing one view against another. So after all that is said and done, what has this paper and deconstruction achieved? Is there anything after deconstruction? Once again, we need a compromise. Much like Nietzsche's conception of the Over-man, Derrida proposes that we should not mourn the loss of assurance in the face of a postmodern world where almost nothing is stable. On

the contrary, it is precisely this uncertainty that gives rise to progression and joy: the risks involved in a life of constant experimenting with interpretations are just as affirmative as a world that advocates stability and logocentrism. The choice cannot be any more apparent; we should all embrace the “joyous affirmation” that deconstruction offers:

...the joyous affirmation of the freeplay of the world and of the innocence of becoming...*This affirmation then determines the non-centre otherwise than as loss of the centre.* And it plays the game without security...In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to *genetic* indetermination, to the *seminal* adventure of the trace.³⁵

³⁵ Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the History of Human Sciences,” 888.

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