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DECONSTRUCTION AND RELATIVISM

© Joseph William

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of Philosophy



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DECONSTRUCTION AND RELATIVISM

ABSTRACT

Joseph William

During the last fifteen years a revival of philosophical interest has gathered strength in the thesis of relativism. It is not uncommon, for example, to find accusations to the effect that Rorty, Putnam, Quine, Foucault, Kuhn, Gadamer, Lyotard, Derrida and many others are guilty of propounding relativism. For many people, Derrida's deconstructionism is a splendid example the drift towards relativism. The problem, however, is that no one has yet explained in any detail how and why deconstruction entails relativism, and Derrida himself rejects outright the claim that a relationship obtains between deconstruction and relativism.

The central goal of this study is to settle this problem by explicating the nature of the relationship between deconstruction and relativism. The object of my research is two-fold. Firstly and most importantly, the thesis will attempt to show that Derrida's deconstructionism does in fact entail an unconstrained version of relativism. To achieve this, I shall examine in some detail the nature of the key terms, such as "differance," "trace," "supplement," etc., that are used by Derrida in deconstructing texts. The nature of these terms, I shall argue, entail a relativistic standpoint. Secondly, the thesis will attempt to show that Derrida's brand of relativism is incoherent. In particular, I propose to examine some of the main arguments and counterarguments in the debate between the proponents and detractors of relativism, and then argue that the common ground argument (which is sometimes also called the common world argument) is effective against Derrida's brand of relativism and, I shall urge, against relativism in general. In summary, I propose to show that by making the connection between deconstruction and relativism, we see more clearly what Derrida's deconstructionism represents, namely, an ultimately incoherent brand of relativism. This approach will go some way towards establishing the claim that the influence exerted by deconstruction on the contemporary intellectual scene is philosophically untenable.

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Preface

There is widespread agreement today that higher education is undergoing a 'crisis.' The symptoms of this crisis include sustained controversies over the relative decline of the humanities and social sciences, over the rules, principles and methods for obtaining knowledge, and even over the ideals of truth and reason. But there is less agreement on the origin or cause of this crisis. Some leading figures point to the economic troubles faced by universities whereas others, such as John Searle, in his essay, "Rationality and Realism, What is at Stake?," complain that postmodernism, post-structuralism, deconstructionism and related intellectual movements are largely responsible for the present crisis in higher education.¹

It is Searle's contention that these intellectual movements are subversive, that they have infiltrated and undermined the traditional university with its epistemic, ontological and moral underpinnings. These movements, Searle maintains, threaten the very conceptions of truth, rationality, objectivity, reality, and associated values that have been the mainstay of traditional discourses on knowledge. I tend to agree with Searle, though I am not quite as confident as he in asserting that these movements are mainly responsible for the crisis at hand. However, even those who believe that the movements in question have contributed to the present crisis must admit that it is difficult to determine the sort of impact they have had on the contemporary intellectual scene.

This study is intended to provide a critical appraisal of a particular movement which has attracted a certain allegiance

throughout Europe and North America, namely, Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism. While I agree with Derrida's critics that it is formidably difficult to acquire a coherent understanding of his work as a whole, I believe it is still possible to give a relatively straightforward account of at least some of the aims and claims of deconstruction. Put another way, it is not my intention to offer a thorough analysis of all that is fundamental to Derrida's thought. Such an intention would be impossible to fulfil in a study of this kind, not to mention the inherent futility in deciphering the extensive areas of confusion surrounding Derrida's work. For this reason I have chosen to concentrate on Derrida's position on the nature of meaning and interpretation, and on the kind of relativism that I believe is entailed by that position.

Relativism is an ancient doctrine, usually traced to Protagoras, who is portrayed in Plato's *Theaetatus* as holding that "man is the measure of all things. . . ." ² Plato's Socrates characterizes Protagorean relativism as consisting of the view that there is no standard higher than the individual's own rules, principles and ideas for obtaining knowledge, or for guiding human conduct. This view should be distinguished, however, from ancient Greek Pyrrhonian scepticism, which held that knowledge is impossible, or at least that we lack knowledge. ³ Protagorean relativism denies this, holding that we can have knowledge, though not of an unique truth transcending the standards of the individual. Protagorean relativism did not of course prevail over the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and other, ancient Greek thinkers. ⁴

But relativism as defined above is by no means exhaustive; today there are many versions of relativism which occur in a variety of philosophical contexts--knowledge, existence, meaning and value. Epistemological relativism, for example, holds that knowledge is relative to culture, historical epoch, conceptual scheme and the like. Ontological relativism, by contrast, holds that what exists for people is relative to the conceptual tools they happen to possess, and that there are different classificatory systems for judging what there is in the familiar world. A semantic relativism, on the other hand, holds that the meanings of words are a function of their places (or uses) in different languages between which translation is not always possible. The sources of these and other versions of relativism can vary as well, depending on which genera of absolutism (e.g., objectivism, universalism, foundationalism) is rejected.

The appearance of almost endless varieties of relativism onto the contemporary intellectual scene points to a revival of philosophical interest in the doctrine of relativism. But this renewed interest is peculiar given that almost everyone continues to think that relativism is ultimately indefensible. Why, then, is there so much interest in relativism? I take the correct answer to be that while few people openly endorse relativism, many others are accused of propounding it. It is not uncommon, for example, to find in the recent literature claims to the effect that Wittgenstein, Kuhn, Rorty, Gadamer, Foucault, Quine, Lyotard, Derrida, and many others have, perhaps unwittingly, spawned versions of relativism.

This situation raises interesting questions of the form "What halts the slide from absolutism or from a transcendental point of view (since the writers mentioned above have urged that we can do without it) to relativism?" From the vantage point of metaphysical realism, for example, any philosophical position which asserts that knowledge-claims are justified only by reference to language, scheme or practice looks suspiciously like relativism. I might put the problem at hand this way: many philosophers are at pains to carve out a coherent philosophical position located somewhere between an absolutist position and relativism. Derrida's deconstructionism is, I believe, a splendid example of such an attempt, though as noted above many critics have urged that his project of deconstruction entails relativism.

But the claim that deconstruction entails relativism is in need of a careful and thorough study for two reasons. Firstly, Derrida himself forcefully denies deconstruction's relationship to relativism. Secondly, while few scholars interested in Derrida's work--certainly not many of his critics--would attempt to block deconstruction's assimilation to relativism, no full-length study to date has worked out in detail the nature of the relationship between deconstruction and relativism. In light of Derrida's disclaimer and the lack of scholarship on this matter, the present study is useful and timely as it is mainly concerned to specify the kind of relativism at issue in deconstruction.

Before moving on to the analysis of Derrida's work, it is important in a study of this kind to say something about the direction it will take. Two points are worth addressing here. Firstly, Derrida's prolific output requires a careful selection

of the most appropriate texts and, secondly, it will be useful to indicate the kind of research this study undertakes, given the diversity of approaches to research on deconstruction.

In *The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations*, Derrida suggests that his work can be divided into three periods, roughly, between 1963 and 1974, then between 1974 and 1980, and finally from 1980 onwards.⁵ The first period of his work contains the three texts most important to this study: *La Voix et le phenomene* (*Speech and Phenomena*), *L'Ecriture et la difference* (*Writing and Difference*) and especially *De la grammatologie* (*Of Grammatology*). In these texts, Derrida sets out his views on the referential and communicative characteristics of language. His treatment of these matters has been the focus of much debate and controversy among philosophers and among scholars in other disciplines.

One kind of research on deconstruction, carried out in the 1970's, involved making Derrida's texts accessible to English-speaking readers. In this regard, we can thank David B. Allison for *Speech and Phenomena*, Alan Bass for *Writing and Difference* and Gayatri Spivak for *Of Grammatology*, each of which has provided what is generally considered to be the standard translation of Derrida's early texts. Two other kinds of research involve a continuing effort by scholars to assess the claims made in the name of deconstruction. But these are different in at least one important respect.

Texts that fall within the scope of the second kind of research are primarily concerned with questions about Derrida's appropriation of the ideas of his predecessors (e.g., Nietzsche, Heidegger, Husserl). Christopher Norris and Rodolphe Gasche are

the most notable of a host of writers undertaking this kind of research. By contrast, texts that fall within the scope of the third kind of research on deconstruction are primarily concerned with the nature of the claims made in the name of deconstruction. Here, philosophers such as John Searle and Richard Rorty have expressed interest in Derrida's project of deconstruction as it stands on its own merit, largely independent of considerations about Derrida's appropriation of the ideas of other authors.

The present study falls within the scope of the last kind of research on deconstruction. It sets aside, for the most part, questions and concerns raised by the first two kinds of research on deconstruction in favour of examining what it is about deconstruction that entitles many of Derrida's critics to charge that his work entails relativism.⁶ In the end, I hope to show that Derrida's misconstrual of the relationship between deconstruction and relativism leads to certain inconsistencies in his deconstructive train of thought which culminate in a crisis for deconstruction itself.

Introduction

To define philosophy as the attempt-to-say-hyperbole is to confess--and philosophy is perhaps this gigantic confession--that by virtue of the historical enunciation through which philosophy tranquilizes itself and excludes madness, philosophy also betrays itself . . . enters into a crisis and a forgetting of itself that are an essential and necessary period of its movement. I philosophize only in terror, but in the confessed terror of going mad.

---Jacques Derrida¹

This Introduction reviews some of the central elements in Derrida's thought that have come to designate the essential content of his work on meaning and interpretation. It concentrates on two themes in particular, namely, Derrida's conception of the metaphysics of presence and of the nature of linguistic signs. Derrida, I shall be arguing, uses these themes as a pretext to engage in an analysis of the nature of meaning and interpretation.

Roughly put, my position is that Derrida urges us to interpret the history of Western philosophy as being a self-deceptive attempt to transcend its own medium, the play of linguistic signs. This way of reading Derrida provides some insight into his style of reasoning, and it calls our attention to the charge of relativism raised against deconstruction by its detractors. I close the introductory chapter by stating the aims of the present study as well as provide an outline of the chapters that follow.

In a familiar philosophical tradition, language is often depicted as a medium with which to communicate meanings from one thinking being to another; sometimes those meanings are said to name things in the experienced world. Underlying this conception of the communicative and referential characteristics of language is the assumption that the 'inwardness'² of meanings, i.e., what is implied or referred to, is somehow captured in human thoughts or ideas, which themselves accurately represent objects and states of affairs that exist independently of their being represented in a language and its signs. Commitment to some such assumption is found in the writings of Plato and Aristotle and is reiterated, albeit in revised forms, in the writings of Descartes, Locke and others.² Aside from Hume, perhaps no philosopher up to the nineteenth century had done more to challenge this assumption than Nietzsche.³

Among Nietzsche's works, *The Gay Science* in particular reveals his disbelief in the assumption that human thought or language in general can accurately represent the structure of things in the world.⁴ More generally, Nietzsche maintains that the knowledge-claims to be found in any domain of inquiry do not refer to things whose identity or existence does not depend on one's conceiving of them, but instead such knowledge is the product of the multitude of different perspectives on the world around us. Nietzsche thus highlights the theme of perspectivalism, i.e., the power relationships that underlie all discourses on knowledge.

Nietzsche's philosophy helped to prepare the way for deconstruction, an intellectual movement which continues to influence research in the social sciences and especially in the humanities where interpretation is crucial, such as literary criticism and philosophy.⁵ Deconstructionist-minded thinkers like Derrida, we are often told, are busy unmasking the myth of presence that has sustained much of Western thought. But what this unmasking consists of remains philosophically elusive. We can gain some ground here by noting how Derrida sets himself apart from his acknowledged predecessor, Martin Heidegger.

As is well known, Heidegger's attempt to answer and overcome *die Seinsfrage*, 'the question of being,' in part rested on discovering a word that is so powerful that it just must capture the essence of 'Being': "[I]n order to name the essential nature of Being, language would have to find a single word, the unique word."⁶ The search for the unique word that would clarify the 'presence' of Being runs through much of Heidegger's work, beginning with his *Being and Time*. There, in addition to searching for the unique word, Heidegger finds philosophy's main task to be the delineation of the various forms of presence which things assume in their 'Being.'⁷ Elsewhere, however, Heidegger himself asked "[h]ave the critics ever asked whether the question posed is possible or impossible?"⁸ The suggestion that the question posed is impossible or perhaps misconstrued reveals something about Derrida's project of deconstruction.

Derrida agrees that the question of being is of fundamental philosophical importance but he seizes the obvious implication of

Heidegger's doubt: "There will be no unique name, even if it were the name of Being. And we must think this without *nostalgia*."⁹ This is how Derrida's relation to Heidegger is best interpreted.¹⁰ Indeed Derrida himself has remarked that "[w]hat I have attempted to do would not have been possible without the opening of Heidegger's questions. . . ." ¹¹ Concerned that Heidegger's philosophy never got beyond the question of 'Being,' Derrida sets himself the task of forging a different path.

As Derrida sees it, the idea that there is something called 'Being,' some *thing* that is immediately present to us, is deceptive:

It remains that being, which is nothing, is not a being, cannot be said, cannot say itself, except in ontic metaphor. And the choice of one or the other group of metaphors is necessarily significant. It is within a metaphorical insistence, then, that the interpretation of the meaning of being is produced.¹²

Derrida is saying here that philosophers have imprisoned themselves within metaphors, pretending to give new, original or innovative accounts of the manner in which being can be explicated when all the while they have been doing the same thing, namely, relying on a conception of being as presence. On the basis of this determination, he formulates an intellectual project which aims to reread the texts of Western philosophy in order to expose the longstanding myth of presence so that it would no longer deceive us. In this connection, a brief outline of Derrida's reading of the history of Western philosophy is in order.

According to Derrida, many philosophers (e.g., Plato, Rousseau, Husserl) have shared the belief that writing is merely

a derivative of speech. Acceptance of this belief is what he calls 'phonocentrism':

[T]he essence of the phone would be immediately proximate to that which within 'thought' as logos relates to 'meaning,' produces it, receives it, speaks it . . . it is because the voice, producer of the *first symbols*, has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind. Producer of the first signifier, it is not just a simple signifier among others. It signifies 'mental experiences' which themselves reflect or mirror things by natural resemblance. . . . And the first convention, which would relate immediately to the order of natural and universal signification, would be produced as spoken language.¹³

Now, many elements in this passage seem perversely unclear, and many commentators have complained about Derrida's vague and ambiguous use of terms 'phone,' 'immediate proximity,' 'natural resemblance,' and the like. Indeed it is hardly controversial to note that these and many other terms are left largely undefined throughout Derrida's numerous writings.

However, rather than trying to decipher the meaning of these terms directly, it is more fruitful to pursue Derrida's claim that phonocentrism is closely associated to what he calls 'logocentrism':

[P]honocentrism merges with the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as *presence*, with all the subdeterminations which depend on this general form and which organize within it their system and their historical sequence (presence of the thing to the sight as *eidos*, presence as substance/essence/existence [*ousia*] . . . the self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity . . . intersubjectivity as the intentional phenomenon of the ego, and so forth). Logocentrism would thus support the determination of the being of the entity as presence.¹⁴

Each of the subdeterminations in the history of Western philosophy that Derrida alludes to in this passage is for him a

metaphoric redescription that aims to show the same old thing, i.e., the being of an entity as presence. But the presence of which he speaks is somewhat difficult to explicate.¹⁵

Perhaps we can edge closer to Derrida's conception of presence by recalling Heidegger's claim that "[e]ntities are grasped in their Being as 'presence': this means that they are understood with regard to a definite mode of time--the 'Present.'"¹⁶ While Heidegger's point that presence has an inescapably temporal dimension is helpful, we can attach to it another feature that draws out more completely Derrida's conception of presence. I want to suggest that by presence Derrida means that a thing is present to us here and now. The advantage of this approach is that it anticipates both the temporal and spatial play that Derrida thinks underlies and undermines all talk of anything being simply present to us.

However, the push that is needed to make this conception of presence a philosophical concern is to be found in Derrida's claim that "[f]rom the moment there is meaning there are nothing but signs. *We think only in signs.*"¹⁷ I take the fundamental point to be that when we refer to something as being here and now, we neglect the involvement of linguistic signs which mediate our encounters with the experienced world.¹⁸ So what is philosophically worthy of note is whether the identity of a given sign depends on, or is determined by, something that is *nonsign*, an extra-linguistic entity or a class of existents which the sign is said to stand for, refer to or name.¹⁹

For Derrida, anyone who claims that the identity of a sign depends on the identity of the nonsign it is supposed to stand for makes the ontological presupposition that there is a thing, whose 'being' is here and now, which subordinates signs to a secondary status. Against this conception of signs, Derrida proposes "to restore the original and non-derivative character of signs" ²⁰ While this may seem harmless enough as a challenge to classical metaphysics (e.g., to disputes about the meaning of being, essence, logos, etc.), it is troublesome for other areas of inquiry. ²¹ What concerns us here is that Derrida's views on the nature of signs pose a challenge to traditional conceptions of both the referential and communicative characteristics of language. ²²

We can recognize this challenge by noting that for deconstruction, linguistic signs not only stand in for the things to which they allegedly refer but also signs cannot be differentiated from nonsigns. Derrida's claim that we only think in signs means that signs refer back not to the things they are said to name but to further signs, and these to still other signs. On this view, when we speak about the 'facts' in either ordinary or scientific language we cannot be speaking of facts that confirm, disconfirm or directly register the identity or existence of the objects or states of affairs under consideration. But if this is what he means by challenging the referential and communicative characteristics of language he runs into some trouble.

Presumably, the claim that "this page is white" is accurate and the claim that "this page is black" is not accurate. Indeed

Derrida would be hard-pressed to deny this fact about the sheets of paper you are now reading. However, he seems to be making a more subtle claim about the referential and communicative characteristics of language, namely, that there is a object/sign distinction at work in them. For Derrida, when a sign comes into existence or is deployed (e.g., a word uttered), the thing signified by the sign is not immediately present to us. That is, he urges us to realize that in any present instance the object or thing itself can never be temporally or spatially present. What support does he offer for this view?

It is difficult to say how Derrida would answer this question head on but the following comments help to capture his line of thinking. If, for example, the white sheet of paper you are reading is in fact white independent of one's conceiving of it as such, then the white sheet of paper exists in a ready-made world, a world of the kind such that we can gain knowledge of things whose identity or existence does not depend on one's linguistic conception of them. But the white sheet of paper does not exist in a ready-made world with respect to having its feature 'whiteness' if the white sheet of paper depends, logically or causally, on someone's conceiving of the sheet of paper as such. This latter view is a plausible way of reading Derrida's challenge to the referential and communicative characteristics of language.

But if we are to get a critical purchase on Derrida's challenge, we need to delve deeper into the object/sign distinction. That is to say, we need to grasp the manner in which

Derrida proposes to deconstruct what we might otherwise refer to as the nonconceptual/conceptual order. By nonconceptual order I mean that there is some *thing* whose identity and existence is present here and now, and which supports the determination of the conceptual order that represents it. What set of strategies does Derrida employ to deconstruct this order? Derrida himself suggests that the most obdurate strategies are reversal and displacement: "Deconstruction does not consist in moving from one concept to another, but in reversing and displacing a conceptual order as well as the nonconceptual order with which it is articulated."²³ These strategies are implemented as follows.

In his deconstructive reading of texts, Derrida searches for any number of object/sign distinctions which are said (or meant) to support paired oppositions (e.g., presence vs absence, literal language vs metaphorical language, being vs thought). Once any such distinction is found, his aim is to show that the former (object) is given undue priority over the latter (sign). For example, Derrida often claims that many Western philosophers suppose that we can know the identity of a thing without reference to signs or, alternately, that a sign is more often than not construed as a mere contrivance or derivative of the thing it names. More generally, Derrida urges us to see that Western thought supposes that the object, i.e., the thing signified, always comes before the sign.

Against this line of reasoning, Derrida maintains that our knowledge of the former is always dependent upon the latter:

There is thus no phenomenality reducing the sign
or the representer so that the thing signified

may be allowed to glow in the luminosity of its presence. The so-called 'thing itself' is always already a *representamen* shielded from the simplicity of intuitive evidence.²⁴

Derrida's point here is that any attempt to ground a sign in its signified by first distinguishing a signified from its sign is untenable since we can know the signified only through the various signs that we employ to name or describe it. A linguistic sign, in other words, defers the presence of the thing it is supposed to signify. This is the sense in which Derrida thinks that the nonconceptual/conceptual order is reversed.

How then does he propose to displace this order? For Derrida, the order is displaced by recognizing that the identity of a sign, i.e., what a sign is, is never simply present here and now. More precisely, signs attain their identity only by differing from other signs such that the identity of a sign is cut off from any natural or formal source of meaning. Indeed Derrida contends that signs refer back "to a multiplicity of references, so many different traces referring back to other traces and to traces of others."²⁵ In passages such as this one Derrida invokes what he calls the ceaseless 'play' of signs, a play which, so to say, has no discernable beginning or ending. This is the sense in which Derrida maintains that the nonconceptual/conceptual order is displaced.

In view of this reversal and displacement, Derrida would have us believe that any attempt to set a firm distinction between nonconceptual and conceptual order constitutes one of the fundamental mistakes from which the ontological, epistemic and semantic confusions of Western thought are produced. And these

mistakes are said to occur mainly because we attempt to separate elements, i.e., signs and signifieds, that cannot be separated. It is no secret that Derrida's conception of presence and of linguistic signs amounts to an attack on our ability to discover anything about a 'real' world that exists independently of our thought and talk about that world. (There is of course more to Derrida's work than an attack on the real world, and this is what the following chapters will try to articulate).

What, then, does Derrida mean in claiming that Western philosophy is a self-deceptive attempt to transcend its own medium? He sees in the history of Western philosophy a sequence of pretences committed to grounding meaning and interpretation in unmediated presences: the logical character of language, univocal meanings or ready-made ideas held within self-conscious minds, nonconceptual/conceptual orders, expressions of the secondary status of linguistic signs, and so on--each of which aims to solve the difficulties with meaning and interpretation by halting the play of signs. According to him, any such attempt at closure is, in the last analysis, unfeasible. This brings us to the charge of relativism raised against deconstruction.

In recent years, philosophers have grown uneasy with the influence that deconstruction has had on the contemporary intellectual scene.²⁶ There are many reasons for this uneasiness but at least four stand out. Firstly, Derrida's work is often construed as licensing the undecidability of all meaning as a result of his conception of the ceaseless play of linguistic signs. Secondly, and relatedly, Derrida is often accused of

arbitrarily disregarding the established constraints on the production of meaning and interpretation. Thirdly, Derrida has a tendency to substitute rhetoric for argumentation when it comes to defending his views. Fourthly, both Derrida's admirers and critics have remarked that one can find many passages in his writings that invite competing interpretations of his work.

For these and other reasons, many philosophers have questioned the legitimacy of Derrida's work as a whole, and, as a result, his critics have charged that deconstruction entails relativism as a step towards dismissing it as incoherent.²⁷ But the problem is that no one has yet explained in any detail how or why deconstruction entails relativism.²⁸ I take this to be a serious shortcoming of the people who make (or even reject) this charge. The aim of this study is two-fold. Firstly, it specifies the kind of relativism at issue in deconstruction. Secondly, it tries to reveal the inconsistencies in Derrida's relativistic treatment of the nature of meaning and interpretation. I turn now to give an outline of the chapters that follow.

Chapter one begins by examining the core of the relativist position. However, it is worth emphasizing right away that in this chapter I am not aiming to resolve the persistent debates between the proponents and detractors of relativism. Indeed many of the questions and concerns about relativism remain unresolved in the immense literature on this subject. It is difficult to say, for example, whether relativism can be construed as a positive epistemic theory since it is usually characterized in negative terms, say, as the denial of absolutism. So rather than

adding to the arguments and counterarguments advanced by those concerned with relativism, this chapter instead explicates some of the reasons that prompt some theorists to subscribe to relativism. Stated thus briefly, the goal of this chapter is simple enough.

The first section tries to convey how enormously complex a phenomenon relativism is, both as to its content and its varieties. Next, I cite a definition of relativism that covers everyone who claims to be a relativist and then examine some of the implications of this definition with respect to its rejection of three main theses, namely, foundationalism, universalism and objectivism. In this connection, I state the kind of relativism that I take to be at issue in deconstruction. My aim in stating this early on is to draw out an axiom of Derrida's project of deconstruction, i.e., that there is no 'privileged basis.'

Indeed the following chapters shall draw a good deal on this notion--which, I shall argue, best represents what Derrida intends to deconstruct. I shall illustrate what is meant by a privileged basis in offering several examples of how different thinkers have appealed to this notion in order to block the surge towards relativism in their respective fields. Of course, it is worth noting here that many philosophers--and I count myself among them--have rejected both relativism and the notion of a privileged basis. So my strategy in appealing to this notion is really to anticipate how Derrida's deconstructionism sets it up as a target for attack.

To clarify the implications of the notion of a privileged basis from the relativist's perspective, the first chapter examines some of the central themes in Nelson Goodman's brand of relativism. Goodman, I shall be arguing, rejects the notion of a privileged basis but imposes constraints on his relativism in order to deny that anything goes in his philosophy. This is the sense in which Goodman claims that his relativism is radical but constrained. Furthermore, I will devote some time to Goodman's views on the relationship between intentionality and meaning as a means to anticipate the nature and implications of Derrida's own views on this matter. The first chapter, then, is intended to prepare the way for a more detailed discussion of the kind of relativism to which deconstruction leads.

Chapter two begins by criticizing Rodolphe Gasche and Richard Rorty's readings of Derrida's work. My position is that Gasche goes too far in trying to demonstrate the argumentative rigour of deconstruction whereas Rorty fails to properly appreciate the aims of deconstruction. I suggest instead that a more informative reading of Derrida's work lies between the different types of reading Gasche and Rorty have offered.

The main thesis of the second chapter is that the identity of a linguistic sign is cut off from any privileged source of meaning. More precisely, I shall make the point that for Derrida the only determination there is for meaning are the rules and conventions that we set out for what constitutes a signifier or a signified in a given system of signs. We shall see that for him the implication of this thesis is that both meaning and

interpretation are essentially dependent on historical-political-social-institutional determinations, which themselves are not indifferent to a change in time or context.

It is worth mentioning here that to draw out the thesis in question I will have to take a somewhat tortuous route through Derrida's early writings in order to avoid some persistent misunderstandings of his work. As noted earlier, one of the main criticisms of Derrida's deconstructionism is that one can find passages in his writings that support competing and even conflicting interpretations of his work. To avoid this sort of misunderstanding--to the extent that this is possible--I shall rely heavily on key passages in Derrida's writings and only superficially on secondary readings of him.

The thesis in question is introduced by means of a technical and detailed analysis of Derrida's conception of the ceaseless play signs and of how this poses a difficulty for foundational approaches to meaning, such as those put forward by Saussure, Husserl and Rousseau. Next, the meaning and function of some of the technical terms in the deconstructive vocabulary are examined, along with the way in which these terms interact with one another. These technical terms, I shall be arguing, are labels for the difficulties that Derrida thinks lie at the heart of certain assumptions about meaning and interpretation in Western philosophy. An analysis of the technical terms that Derrida employs to characterize deconstruction will provide support for the claim that deconstruction entails relativism.

To relieve the abstractness of chapter two I examine, in chapter three, the dispute between Derrida and Searle. An analysis of this dispute is important to the present study for several reasons. First, the dispute is mainly concerned with the nature of Derrida's views on the nature of meaning and interpretation. Second, the dispute has forced Derrida to clarify his commentary on the difficulties that he sees with relating intentionality to meaning. Third, Searle's conception of the Western Rationalistic Tradition is representative of the sort of discourse on philosophic reason that Derrida aims to deconstruct. Fourth, Searle's reaction to deconstruction is exemplary of an attitude shared by many critics; that is, even prior to reading Derrida's texts thoroughly, the attitude of many critics is that his work is unworthy of serious consideration.

But the main thesis of this chapter is that Derrida's contribution to the dispute is strictly a matter of outlining--without much argumentative support--the difficulties with relating intentionality and meaning. We shall find that Derrida not only fails to adequately address the fundamental question of the role of intentionality in justifying interpretations, but also invites the charge that for deconstruction there is no theoretical way to determine what authority intentionality has as a constraint on interpretation. Toward the end of the chapter, I will relate this criticism to the charge of relativism. In examining the Derrida-Searle dispute I am, then, taking another step towards relating deconstruction to relativism.

The fourth and final chapter concerns Derrida's version of relativism, which we can call a 'textual relativism' as much of his work is concerned with deconstructing interpretations of literary and non-literary texts. My position is that Derrida locates the justification for interpretations in what he calls 'larger, more stratified' socio-political-institutional contexts. Moreover, I shall be arguing that for Derrida there is nothing to such contexts that is indifferent to a change of practice of interpreting such that there can be no privileged basis. This aspect of Derrida's work is drawn out by reference to what he calls the 'politics' of (academic) discourse, i.e., the relationships of power that are implied in every socio-political-institutional context or practice of interpreting.

To explain the implications of Derrida's textual relativism, I shall examine his work in relation to a set of issues that is much discussed in the recent literature: (1) the question of what makes an interpretation correct and (2) the legitimacy of universal norms for constraining interpretations. We shall see that for deconstruction insofar as interpreters endorse different norms of interpretive inquiry, their disagreements are not rationally resolvable. More importantly, I shall argue that Derrida's deconstructionism does not recognize any constraints on the choice of norms of interpretive inquiry. In short, the lack of constraints for choosing between norms implies that 'anything goes.' This position, I shall urge, best characterizes the implications of Derrida's brand of relativism.

In the next section, I turn again to the thesis of relativism in examining some standard criticisms of it. My aim in addressing this issue is to point out that philosophers sympathetic to relativism have provided some grounds for thinking that the standard criticisms of relativism are neither clear nor conclusive. I close this section by suggesting that we should look for other ways to undermine the thesis of relativism.

Toward this end, the last section examines a more recently developed objection to relativism, namely, Donald Davidson's version of the 'common ground' argument. Roughly put, my position is that the conception of normativity which underlies this argument, and particularly Davidson's conception of the principle of charity, enables us to see clearly how Derrida misconstrues the nature of philosophical theorizing about interpretation.

With regard to interpretation, Davidson's principle of charity holds that even in cases where theorists endorse competing practices of evaluation, where for Derrida differences in textual interpretation come clearly to the fore, we should not ignore the body of shared beliefs that such theorists hold in common. My position is that Derrida's version of relativism denies, incorrectly, the necessity of normative principles like the principle of charity. In short, this line of inquiry into Davidson's theory of interpretation is intended to point out an important inconsistency in Derrida's version of relativism, an inconsistency that makes his work on meaning and interpretation philosophically untenable.

CHAPTER ONE

SOME SOURCES OF RELATIVISM

I regard the defense of relativism as a strategic part of a much larger philosophical venture that is likely to collect the strongest currents of the end of the century and to dominate the best thinking of the new century. . . . The larger venture is one of producing a conceptual vision . . . of our place in the world, coherent and humane at the same time it discards, one by one, every last trace of the (grand, pretended) invariances - the perennial truths - of ultimate reality, knowledge, thought, rationality, virtue and value, logic, science, intelligibility, and all the rest that have falsely reassured us all the while we disorder the planet.

---Joseph Margolis¹

This chapter offers an explication of some of the main sources of relativism. The sources to be examined are familiar enough, namely, the negation or dismissal of foundationalism, universalism and objectivism. Next, I connect the relativist's rejection of these three genera of absolutism to the claim that there is no privileged basis. This claim, I shall be arguing, accords well with Derrida's deconstructionism.

The remainder of the chapter focuses on a version of relativism which, to my mind, provides what is perhaps the best account--from the relativist's perspective--of the reasons that are purported to support the view that there is no privileged basis. The version in question is Nelson Goodman's so-called 'radical relativism with constraints.' Finally, this chapter attempts to shed some light on what I take to be Derrida's version of relativism by comparing and contrasting it with several crucial features of Goodman's version of relativism.

(1) Relativism: Some Preliminaries

It is frequently alleged that the term 'relativism' has a somewhat sordid history; that it is a vague and ambiguous term at best describing a family of views that is incoherent.³ To take an example, the version of relativism which says that a proposition is true only if I believe it is true is a version that for many is patently incoherent. For, on formal grounds alone, to say that P is true only if I believe P is true, is a case in which 'is true' occurs in the definiens as well as in the definiendum. In short, this simple version of relativism offers no analysis of truth at all. Of course, not all versions of relativism are of this simple form, but even the more complex versions struggle to maintain intelligibility.⁴ Indeed many of the difficulties with relativism concern both its content and its varieties.

With respect to the content of relativism, we are often told that truth, meaning, metaphysical commitment, knowledge, existence, and value (e.g., epistemic, aesthetic, moral) are relative to language, culture, frame of reference, conceptual scheme, paradigm, tradition of thought, background beliefs or convictions, practices of evaluation, and the like. While philosophers continue to disagree about which if any of these combinations is coherent, a thorough search of the literature on relativism would, I suspect, reveal that each of the possible combinations has been endorsed by at least one theorist.⁵ Moreover, the varieties of relativism that have been concocted by theorists are legion: simple, complex, sophisticated, shallow vs. deep, weak vs. strong, constrained vs. unconstrained, and robust

forms of relativism.⁶ In any discussion of the relationship between deconstruction and relativism, then, it makes a great difference what sort of relativism one has in mind.

As perhaps the above remarks make plain, defining relativism is no easy task. But the difficulty with defining relativism is not just that its sources are diverse, there are also a variety of opinions as to which philosophers should be construed as propounding relativism. This only adds to the confusion about relativism. This problem arises in cases where it is difficult to distinguish the conceptual credentials of anti-relativist positions from relativist positions.

Take, for example, a passage from Putnam which ties in with the previous remarks:

In an internalist view . . . signs do not intrinsically correspond to objects, independently of how those signs are employed and by whom. But a sign that is actually employed in a particular way by a particular community of users can correspond to particular objects within the conceptual scheme of those users. 'Objects' do not exist independently of those conceptual schemes. We cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme or description.⁷

Next, consider a passage from Goodman which also bears on the matter in question:

Frames of reference, though, seem to belong less to what is described than to systems of description If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say? We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described.⁸

Both of these passages point to the views that there is no ready-made world, i.e., a real world that exists independently of our

thought and talk, that knowledge is the product of this or that conceptual scheme or frame of reference, and that knowledge-claims can be evaluated only with reference to the criteria sanctioned by this or that scheme or frame. Yet since these views are endorsed by a self-proclaimed anti-relativist (Putnam) and by a self-proclaimed relativist (Goodman), it would appear that the line between anti-relativist and relativist positions is not so easily drawn. I do not wish this remark to be misunderstood.⁹

Putnam's so-called 'internal realism' is in part meant to offer a philosophical alternative to metaphysical realism, which he defines as an externalist perspective according to which there is a correspondence between true beliefs and a reality wholly independent of those beliefs.¹⁰ And while Putnam holds that there is indeed an external world which impinges itself upon us, he nonetheless maintains that it can be made intelligible only from within some or other scheme. Internalism, Putnam says, denies that "there are inputs *which are not themselves to some extent shaped by our concepts*, by the vocabulary we use to report and describe them or any inputs *which admit of only one description, independent of all conceptual choices*."¹¹ This means that for the world to impose itself on our cognitive inquiries it must already be understandable to us, and the pursuit of understanding the world is a cognitive activity that is internal to a scheme.

On this view, objects or events and the signs that represent them may be alike internal to a scheme but never independent of a given scheme. So the main difference between Putnam's internal realism and metaphysical realism is that Putnam allows for the

possibility that competing conceptual schemes may produce equally legitimate accounts of the world around us. Does this mean that Putnam's philosophy entails relativism? Not according to Putnam. He writes that "[i]nternalism is not a facile relativism that says, 'Anything goes'."¹² Putnam therefore sees himself as carving out a path between absolutism (or his conception of metaphysical realism) and relativism. Oddly enough, however, Putnam notes that "[i]n recent years Nelson Goodman and I have detected a convergence in our views"¹³ This convergence is precisely what offends many of his critics.

Putnam's internalism has been criticized from a variety of directions. Perhaps the main criticism is that his position is better understood as a version of relativism as it admits that a variety of schemes can stand in some unique relation to the world.¹⁴ The charge is that Putnam's internalism not only entails pluralism, i.e., that there are all sorts of different ways in which theories can be mapped onto the world, but also the view that there are no independent or impartial criteria of evaluation available. That is, it is supposed that for Putnam the evaluation of knowledge-claims is relative to the criteria appealed to, and that there are no criteria by which schemes themselves can be judged. Putnam himself has so far failed to dispel this charge convincingly and so it is fair to say that the final verdict on his philosophy has yet to be made.

We can, however, distinguish the conceptual credentials of anti-relativist positions from relativist positions by identifying what relativists feel it is necessary to oppose or

challenge in Western thought. In what follows, I shall cite a standard definition of relativism and then examine its implications in order to discover what is put under challenge by the proponents of relativism.

In a survey of the issue Harvey Siegel^o has put forward an account of relativism that covers every position claiming to be relativist. According to Siegel, relativism can be defined as:

[T]he view that knowledge (and/or truth) is relative -- to time, to place, to society, to historical epoch, to place, to conceptual scheme or framework, or to personal training or conviction-- so that what counts as knowledge depends upon the value of one or more of these variables. . . . So the relativist's basic claim is that the truth and rational justifiability of knowledge-claims are relative to the standards used in evaluating such claims.¹⁵

In this passage, Siegel implies that all varieties of relativism depend on the viability of the claim that there are, without question, many different schemes or frames that offer differing accounts of the experienced world. And from this claim relativists of whatever persuasion conclude that knowledge-claims about the experienced world (and the standards of assessment of those claims) are relative to which of the schemes or frames is favoured over others.

Here it is useful to state more clearly what is meant by such terms as frameworks, conceptual schemes, traditions of thought, frames of reference, paradigms, and the like. There are of course other terms that relativists have used to characterize the relativist position. They include: perspectives (Nietzsche); language-games or forms of life (Wittgenstein); disciplinary matrices (Kuhn); or, more generally, belief systems, ideologies,

world views, and the like. For the sake of convenience, however, I here settle upon the term 'practices of evaluation' or practices for short as this comes closer to the kind of relativism at issue in deconstruction.

While the essence of a practice is difficult to define, the following features seem particularly important: (1) practices themselves make no claims or statements but rather they determine what counts as a knowledge-claim for the domain of inquiry in question; (2) practices consist of various methods of reasoning that constitute the intellectual standards by which those persons committed to such practices come to assess knowledge-claims as correct or incorrect; (3) since they define the standards of assessment of knowledge-claims, practices themselves are immune to critical assessment. And while it is possible to show that one part of a practice can be used to judge the validity of another part, what we cannot do according to the relativist is judge the relative merits of a practice as a whole. Hence a practice is comprised of an assortment of methods and strategies which determines what those who adhere to it regard as acceptable, true or right.

We can, I think, sum up the relativist position in the following four theses:

- (i) All knowledge-claims whatever presuppose some or other practice of evaluation according to which such claims are assessed for truth, correctness or rightness.
- (ii) Scholars and other reflective persons have employed different practices with respect to the same subject matter and sometimes the differences between those practices are ultimate.
- (iii) In cases where the differences are ultimate, it is indefensible to hold that one practice is more privileged than another.

- (iv) Thus, the decision to endorse a given practice over others is arbitrary.

But there are certain presuppositions in all accounts of relativism that have not as yet been considered. I might put this another way. What reason is there, if any, for believing in relativism? I take the correct answer to be that certain people are attracted to relativism because they oppose one or more of three main theses, namely foundationalism, universalism and objectivism.¹⁶ Let us first consider the thesis of foundationalism.

The essential element of foundationalism is that some knowledge-claims about the experienced world are judged to be self-sufficient, non-inferred or basic. However, as Harre and Krausz have remarked, foundationalism comes in a discursive and ontological variant:

- (a) discursive variant: there is a common set of basic statements, not capable of further analysis, which serve in each context for each kind of enquiry for the assessment of all judgements of a relevant kind.
- (b) ontological variant: there is a common ontology or set of basic existents, incapable of further analysis, out of which all other existents are constructed.¹⁷

Standardly, the relativist wants to say against each variant that we can never have direct access to, or awareness of, what our knowledge-claims are about independent of the frame that we hold. For example, relativists who reject the ontological variant contend that basic existents are not properties of a frame-independent world given that there is no way of investigating the nature of such existents apart from the frame that one employs. And on the basis of this, the relativist urges that the use of

different practices implies that what is experienced may vary in significance, and that the different practices under which things are observed can bear varying interpretations. There is, so the argument goes, no way of 'approaching' reality separate from one's frame. This needs to be stated more carefully.

Relativists who reject foundationalism can hold either an unconstrained or a constrained version of relativism. An unconstrained version maintains that the only way to decide between practices is to step outside all frames to see things as they really are. But since this is impossible the choice between practices is thought to be arbitrary in that there is no neutral basis upon which to rationally decide between better or worse practices. By contrast, a constrained version holds that while we cannot step outside all practices, it is still possible to distinguish right from wrong practices. In the next section, I shall consider in some detail what Goodman has to say about this matter. In particular, we shall see that Goodman claims to place rigorous constraints on his radical relativism in order to preclude the view that anything goes, a view that for many is necessarily entailed by the unconstrained version of relativism mentioned above. I turn now to the thesis of universalism.

The essential element of the thesis of universalism is that there are some knowledge-claims which are stable, fixed or guaranteed, and which hold across all practices. Again, we can look to Harre and Krausz's remarks about the discursive and ontological variants at issue here:

- (a) discursive variant: there are beliefs (classes of statements) which hold good in all contexts,

- at all times and for all persons.
- (b) ontological variant: there are entities (classes of existents) which exist for all persons.¹⁸

Relativists who reject these variants want to say that each practice has its own unique way of accounting for the beliefs and entities that fall within its purview. Kuhn's views on the development of science are a case in point.¹⁹ That is, Kuhn's critics have (despite his disclaimers) supposed that for Kuhn the proponents of competing paradigms each describe the experienced world according to the standards their own paradigm sanctions, and that there are no independent or impartial standards available with which to judge the superiority of one paradigm over another. On this reading, we are to regard competing paradigms as incommensurable and thus obliged to think of those who endorse different paradigms as talking past one another. We can state the relativist's position on this matter more generally as follows.

Relativists who deny the thesis of universalism characteristically urge that each and every knowledge-claim carries a tacit rider that it is a claim from a particular practice, and that it holds only for the practice in which it is made. For example, individuals who share a given practice will likely share the same corpus of beliefs whereas those who endorse a different practice will share some other corpus of beliefs. Hence, people who endorse different practices need not recognize or acknowledge the beliefs endorsed by others even if they comprehend them. And while those who endorse different practices may share some beliefs about the experienced world, the relativist draws the

line at allowing such beliefs to serve as foundations for other beliefs in all practices. Those who endorse this line of thinking will thus maintain that there are no fundamental beliefs, knowledge-claims or values binding on all people. I turn now to the thesis of objectivism.

The essential element of objectivism is that some knowledge-claims about the experienced world are true, correct or right independent of any and all practices. Objectivity, it is maintained, is what enables us to provide independent control over our beliefs. Again, we can look to what Harre and Krausz have to say about the discursive and ontological variants of objectivism:

- (a) discursive variant: there are beliefs (classes of statements) which hold independently of the point of view, corpus of beliefs or conceptual scheme held to and employed by any particular person or society.
- (b) ontological variant: there are entities (classes of existents) which exist independently of the point of view, corpus of beliefs or conceptual scheme held to or employed by any particular person or society.²⁰

Relativists who reject these variants hold that there are no facts, objects, events, and the like, which exist independently of the cognitive access we have of them. In this spirit, Jack Meiland maintains that a statement "'P corresponds to the facts from the point of view of W' (where W is a person, a set of leading principles, a world view, or a situation)."²¹ Those who hold this sort of view suppose that the proponents of competing frames each judge what falls within their purview according to the criteria of evaluation their own practice sanctions. So relativists want to say that all knowledge-claims arise only

within practices, and never outside practices such as by reference to an independently existing, determinate reality.

The implication of this position is of course that beliefs and existents are properly the product of practices, and that there are no independent or impartial standards to which one can appeal in determining the adequacy of beliefs or the ontological status of objects or events. More precisely, relativists who hold this view maintain that beliefs and entities exist only insofar as they are recognized and indeed accepted by a community, and absence of acceptance signals absence of the existence of beliefs and entities. Relativists thus argue that objectivity is at best a form of intersubjectivity given that it functions only relative to the background beliefs and convictions held by those who endorse a given practice.

Now, it seems clear that a relativist might accept universalism but reject both objectivism and foundationalism. For example, a moral relativist might agree that every culture puts forward some sort of justification for the infliction of pain, suffering and punishment and yet insist that such common judgments across cultures cannot be grounded in still more basic moral principles that are binding on all cultures.²² The array of conceptions of moral worth of personhood is one way of demonstrating the cultural diversity of moral positions.²³ Indeed there are important differences in moral perspective between cultures and the relativist demands that we take these into account. There may even be some versions of relativism that are compatible with objectivism or foundationalism, but I shall not

discuss this matter any further as my task is to draw out the relationship between deconstruction and relativism. To this end, I turn now to discuss the kind of relativism that I take to be at issue in deconstruction.

A substantial part of my effort to explicate Derrida's brand of relativism will be devoted to identifying his position on the referential and communicative characteristics of language. Derrida's position on these two characteristics of language is, as I see it, what drives deconstruction towards relativism. But much is vague in Derrida's treatment of this matter, and this is mainly due to the fact that there are many places in his writings where important ideas are expressed in a very obscure manner.

Take, for example, Derrida's well known slogan "There is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text; il n'y a pas de hors-texte]." ²⁴ This slogan has generated much debate and confusion in recent years, and Derrida has done little to clarify his views on this matter. He writes that "[t]he phrase which for some has become a sort of slogan, in general so badly understood, of deconstruction ('there is nothing outside of the text' . . . means nothing else: there is nothing outside context." However, he then adds that "[w]e can call 'context' the entire 'real history of the world. . . ." ²⁵ And he says that he insists on "the strange and trivial formula, 'real history of the world,' in order to mark clearly that the concept of text or of context which guides me embraces and does not exclude the world, reality, history." ²⁶

What are we to make of these passages? Derrida's discussion of the terms 'context,' 'world,' and 'reality' is much too general and vague, and what constitutes the 'real history of the world' is left totally unexplained in his writings. Worse still, Derrida subsumes all of these notions under the heading of text and thus oversimplifies many deep philosophical issues about the object and function of context. Or does he?

Derrida's deconstructionism deliberately incorporates a fluid movement of interpretation which has no clear methodological conclusions with respect to the boundaries of context. For him, there is no stable or formally closed context, and each context in any domain of inquiry can refer to history, to the world, to reality, and so on, without ever halting reference. In his view, not only is meaning dependent on context but also contexts themselves undergo historical changes, take on disparate nuances in different languages or be subjected to diverging provisions for different practical or theoretical purposes. So any attempt to fix the boundaries of context is, on this view, wholly arbitrary since there is no obvious, self-evident basis upon which to halt reference. Indeed the maxim of minimal analysis to which most people adhere, i.e., expose only as much structure or context as the purpose at hand requires, seemingly has no place in Derrida's philosophy.²⁷ It would appear that for Derrida all is text (context) or, conversely, text (context) is all. For this reason, we can call the kind of relativism toward which deconstruction leads a "textual relativism."

We shall encounter Derrida's textual relativism in examining his conception of the ceaseless play of signs and how this play poses problems for the production of meaning and interpretation. In particular, we shall see that against the thesis of universalism Derrida holds that there are no meanings which can be 'fully' preserved across languages, across contexts, across time, across practices, and so on. Moreover, we shall see that against the thesis of foundationalism Derrida holds that there are no meanings which are self-sufficient, non-inferred or basic. Finally, we shall see that for Derrida there are no meanings which have their character or identity fixed independently of a context or practice. In short, I shall be arguing that Derrida's deconstructionism entails a textual relativism with the ceaseless play of linguistic signs as its source.

The most telling indication of Derrida's textual relativism is to be found in his claim that any attempt to halt the play of signs is untenable or at least arbitrary. For Derrida, there is no privileged basis (universal, foundational, objective) upon which to derive uncontroversial facts about the identity of linguistic signs. By privileged basis I mean, roughly, that there is a unique point of view, criterion, standard, requirement, truth or fact, the application of which enables us to pick out which of the range of competing positions on a given issue (e.g., the phenomena of verbal meaning) is best. Indeed many anti-relativists have appealed to a privileged basis in order to block the surge towards relativism in their respective domain of

inquiry. Lest anyone doubt this fact, consider the following examples.

With respect to linguistic meaning, Searle has argued that the 'Intentionality' of mental states constitutes a privileged basis upon which to determine the meaning of speech acts or of linguistic expressions in general. He writes,

Since sentences - the sounds that come out of one's mouth or the marks that one makes on paper - are . . . just objects in the world like any other objects, their capacity to represent is not intrinsic but is derived from the Intentionality of the mind. The intentionality of mental states, on the other hand, is not derived from some prior forms of Intentionality but is intrinsic to states themselves.²⁸

For Derrida, however, it is unrealistic to suppose that the avowed force of 'Intentionality' can make signs or objects mean one thing rather than another. My explication of Derrida's views on the relationship between intentionality and meaning in the third chapter is exemplary of the kind of objection that can be raised against Searle's conception of Intentionality.

With respect to translation, Anna Weirzbicka has argued that there is a basic universal vocabulary that serves as a privileged basis from which to fully transfer meaning from one language to any other:

Thus, the elements 'I', 'you', 'someone' and 'something' form something like a nominal class; the elements 'this' and 'the same' (or 'other') can be regarded as an analogue of determiners; 'good' and 'bad' as an analogue of adjectives; 'think', 'say', 'want', and 'know' as an analogue of verbs; and so on.²⁹

Derrida would, I think, object to this by saying that there can be no self-identical or 'exact' equivalent of indexicals in all

languages given that there is nothing to any sign that is indifferent to a change of time, circumstance or context. And the reason for this is that indexicals will vary in significance depending on viewpoint, expectations, beliefs, circumstance, metaphysical commitment, and the like. So, according to Derrida, to say that the meanings of indexicals can be fully translated from one language into another is altogether untenable.

With respect to the philosophy of science, Israel Scheffler has appealed to a privileged basis in saying that scientists can "step outside of their theories . . . and engage in a common check of their observational consequences through a shared observational language."³⁰ But for Derrida there is no common language, observational or otherwise, which is fully determinate or self-identical and which can non-arbitrarily terminate references from sign to sign since what is observed can bear varying interpretations depending on theoretical commitment. That is, there are no neutral or common facts which can be discovered apart from the role that such facts play in a given theoretical context. The implication here of course is that since the identity of any sign is conditioned by this or that practice of evaluation, we cannot possibly step outside our theories or practices.

With respect to political philosophy, Will Kymlicka has appealed to a privileged basis in saying that "every plausible political theory has the same ultimate value, which is equality."³¹ Derrida, I suspect, would want to say that this value can--by virtue of the openness of context--be interpreted

in various ways, without necessarily favouring any one interpretation in all situations. Moreover, I shall be arguing that (on related issues concerning foundational norms and values) Derrida holds that any value can be ranked and weighed in more than one way and that disputes about its application will often reach an impasse. For Derrida, it may be the case that between competing rankings and weightings no argument is possible.

There are of course many other examples of theorists who have appealed to a privileged basis in order to block the surge towards relativism, though such moves have not gone unchallenged. This is not to say that the search for a privileged basis is necessarily wrong-headed, but only that for thinkers like Derrida any appeal to a privileged basis is either untenable or at least arbitrary. There is, for Derrida, no basis whatsoever that can non-arbitrarily terminate reference from sign to sign. Later, I shall return to this position and its implications for all discourses on knowledge in which the production of meaning and interpretation is at issue.

I turn now to discuss a version of relativism that I regard to be among the strongest and most interesting, namely, Goodman's radical relativism. In my opinion, Goodman in particular has gone farther than any other writer to date in attempting to show--from the relativist's perspective--why it is the case that there is no privileged basis. It is not my intention, however, to extend or even defend Goodman's work. Rather, I want instead to consider some of the central themes in his work which shed some light on the kind of relativism that I attribute to Derrida.

(2) Radical Relativism

The radical nature of Goodman's relativistic philosophy is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in his *Ways of Worldmaking*. In this book, Goodman insists that his version of relativism

[P]oints to a radical relativism; but severe constraints are imposed. Willingness to accept countless alternative true or right world-versions does not mean that everything goes, that tall stories are as good as short ones, that truths are no longer distinguished from falsehoods, but only that truth must be otherwise conceived than as correspondence with a ready-made world.³²

Goodman calls his relativism 'radical' because of his theses that facts are fabricated, that worlds are made by composition, supplementation, deletion, etc, and not found, and that competing versions can all be true or right. Yet the severe constraints of which he speaks are intended to block the view that anything goes, that all versions whatever are equally true or right. Before I examine Goodman's views on the nature of these constraints, I will first consider the reasons he gives for rejecting the view that there is (or can be) a single, correct version that best describes reality. We shall see that Goodman's reasons for rejecting the view that there is a privileged basis stems from his anti-foundationalist epistemology.

In the section "The Fabrication of Facts" of *Ways of Worldmaking*, Goodman makes plain his view that what is fundamental in one interpretative system need not be in another. For example, he relates how in one typical experiment on apparent motion, one observer says that he sees two flashes whereas another says that he sees only one.³³ According to Goodman, to argue that one or the other observer is mistaken, even after

repeated attempts are made to 'correct' his vision, is futile. The reason he gives for this is that the sort of information resulting from the flash or flashes is not a uniform function of what is encountered but rather differs with the interpretation of what is encountered. The flash or flashes in question, like anything else, may inform the observer in as many ways as there are interpretative systems. So, according to Goodman, the question of what the one or the other observer 'actually' sees, that is, of what he sees uninfluenced by interpretation is a non-starter.

Goodman's example is well selected as it points to his commitment to the view that there are many equally valid ways of describing the things around us. In the case of the observer who is asked to describe apparent motion, Goodman says that "[t]he best we can do is to specify the sort of terms, the vocabulary, he is to use, telling him to describe what he sees in perceptual or phenomenal rather than physical terms."³⁴ While we can specify the terminology that an observer may use in reporting what he sees, we cannot ask him to report directly on his actual perceptual experiences.³⁵ And for Goodman choice of frame (e.g., physicalist, phenomenalist, or what have you) is relative to pragmatic consideration, to whether we choose construe the world as being made up of sense data, or of physical objects and events. This perspective brings to mind the relativist's basic contention that I discussed earlier, namely, that we can never have direct access to, or awareness of, what our knowledge-claims are about independent of the frame that one holds.

What then do Goodman's reflections on fact-finding as an epistemic activity come to? Goodman holds that any comparison of interpretative system with description is not comparison with a ready-made world. Since for him any effort to sever perception from interpretation is untenable, he concludes, further, that what is experienced will vary in significance, and that the different schemes under which objects and events are observed will bear varying interpretations. For Goodman, competing and even conflicting frames can be "of independent interest and importance, without any requirement or presumption of reducibility to a single base."³⁶ The upshot of his position is that there are no frame-independent objects or events and, relatedly, that there is no requisite frame. These are the sorts of reasons which are intended to support the view that there is no privileged basis.

In his review of *Ways of Worldmaking*, Putnam means to reinforce this last point in claiming that there is no frame which has any special priority in the task of reporting our descriptions:

Goodman's two big points still hold: all species of reduction and ontological identification involve posits, legislation, non-uniqueness; and there are both different kinds of reduction and different directions of reduction. If all versions can be reduced in one way to a physicalist version (in principle, in the ideal limit, as a regulative ideal), then they can all be reduced to a phenomenalist version in another way (in principle, in the ideal limit, as a regulative ideal).³⁷

I take Putnam's point to be that there is no theoretical way to determine which of the two frames, i.e., physicalism or phenomenism, best serves to order our descriptions of the

objects and events around us. For Goodman, as well as for Putnam, there is no frame-independent answer to (metaphysical) questions of the form "What are the constituents of reality?" The reason for this is that we can never set aside the theoretical contributions of both the physicalist and phenomenalist frames (or any other frame) in the hope of discovering a common ontology that underlies each of them. So, as relativists like Goodman would have it, to strip away everything that is frame-dependent is just to strip away everything that is experienced, perceived or described.

Goodman develops his relativism further by offering an account of 'worldmaking' as follows: "With false hope of a firm foundation gone, with the world displaced by worlds that are but versions . . . we face the questions of how worlds are made, tested and known."³⁸ Goodman here wants to say that we make not only versions but also the objects and events they are said to refer to. The motivation for this view rests on Goodman's claim that any effort to sever perception from interpretation is untenable. We have no access to objects and events aside from our versions of them; objects and events are thus themselves known only by reference to this or that frame.

That it is versions or frames rather than 'real' objects and events which are the object of judgment and understanding is, I think, best illustrated in Goodman's treatment of the arts. It is through an analysis of the arts that Goodman stakes his claim that there are many routes of reference to the world around us. Indeed for him the arts include "versions and visions

metaphorical as well as literal, pictorial and musical as well as verbal. . . ."³⁹ With this we arrive at Goodman's claim that cognitive understanding is not the exclusive concern of science and other related discourses which are mainly concerned with statement-making. That is to say, the various disciplines in the arts also aim to increase our understanding of the experienced world, though they do so by expressing, exemplifying, picturing, resembling and depicting things rather than by making statements which are intended to represent the external world.

Take, for example, Goodman's views on contemporary abstract paintings. For many people, it is difficult to say what we are to make of such paintings; that is, they elude our understanding of what the painting supposedly expresses, if anything at all. Indeed this matter seems rather complicated even on Goodman's account. He writes, "An abstract painting that represents nothing and is not representational at all may express, and so symbolize, a feeling or other quality, or an emotion or idea."⁴⁰ With respect to abstract paintings we come to know that there is no rigid requirement to accurately represent anything in the world, though such paintings may symbolize certain feelings or emotions. In such cases, the painting is not representational, as is the case for realist paintings, but it is rather a sort of expression or symbolization of the subject matter in question. I take Goodman's point to be that we can begin to understand what an abstract painting expresses only by developing a more focused sensitivity to our conceptual and perceptual resources.⁴¹

However, I find Goodman's discussion on the arts somewhat obscure. What would seem more desirable to me is a fuller account of the distinction between representation and expression or symbolization. It is not my intention, however, to worry over Goodman's views on nonverbal symbol systems and of the way symbols sometimes describe or represent and sometimes not, and of the way we can tell the difference. Rather, I want now to consider Goodman's commentary on the role of intentionality in justifying textual interpretations. This aspect of his work will prove useful to my analysis of Derrida's deconstructionism in later chapters.

In the Preface to *Of Mind and Other Matters*, Goodman asserts that "I [Goodman] am a relativist who nevertheless maintains that there is a distinction between right and wrong theories, interpretations, and works of art; I believe neither that a literary work is determined by the intent of the author nor that all interpretations are equally right. . . ."42 This passage provides some insight into Goodman's views on the relationship between intentionality and interpretation but it is in his *Reconceptions in Philosophy* that he gives a fuller account of that relationship. His account there has several features but three in particular stand out: (1) the relationship between pluralism about reality and pluralism about literature; (2) the identity of a text; and (3) the relationship between intentionality and meaning. Let us begin with his views on pluralism.

According to Goodman, it seems natural on first inspection to think that pluralism about reality extends automatically to pluralism about literature. For the view that there is a multitude of individually adequate interpretations of a text is decidedly less controversial than the view that there is a multitude of individually adequate frames or versions. Yet for him this analogy works only insofar as the same text abides in different worlds. If there are many different worlds in which a text is recognized as a text, then that text immediately qualifies as many different works. Only in this sense, then, can a text be interpreted as many varied works of art.

However, this should not be taken to imply that in any one version there is only one right interpretation of a text, but only that there is only one text and hence only one work of art. This brings us to the second point. Oddly enough, the point made earlier that whatever is 'out there' in the world is as much the product of a scheme as is the scheme that is constructed from our experience of what is 'out there' does not apply to texts themselves, at least not in the same way. For Goodman, "The text, unlike the world, does not dissolve under opposing accounts."⁴³ As Goodman would have it, in its original moment of production a text acquires a formal pattern, namely, a syntactical structure.

From Goodman's standpoint, the arrangement of letters in words and of words in phrases or sentences is precisely what makes up the identity of a text: "However the work is identified, this much is clear: the various interpretations in question are interpretations of a single text. The text can be identified

syntactically, without appealing to any of the semantic or literary interpretations it bears."⁴⁴ So whereas the experienced world dissolves into as many worlds as there are frames, competing and conflicting interpretations concern the same text.

Does this give rise to an objectively valid method of interpretation which defeats relativism? Not so, Goodman would say. While a text's identity can be identified syntactically, it does not follow that we can determine the text's meaning or meanings by appealing directly to its syntactic structure. For there are many varied ways to sort out this structure and, in any case, the text is made up not merely of a syntactic structure but also of features that are exemplified by convention.⁴⁵ Moreover, and more importantly, it does not follow that since there is only one text to interpret, there is then only one right interpretation of that text, and even more so that a right interpretation is determined by reference to authorial intention. According to Goodman, "That a text has a single right interpretation that is determined by and is entirely in accord with the author's intentions has been, and perhaps still is, like absolute realism, the most popular view. But like absolute realism, it is untenable."⁴⁶ So for Goodman there can be a multitude of right interpretations, not all of which depend on the author's intentions for producing a text. This brings us to the last point.

Goodman is obviously skeptical of the thesis that a right interpretation is just that interpretation which is identified

with authorial intention. His views on this matter can be summed up in the following passage:

Even where the author's intentions are to some extent discoverable, they do not determine the correctness of interpretations; for the significance of a work often diverges from, and may transcend or fall short of, what the author had in mind. Where information about the author's intention is available, it may suggest interpretations of his work. But the importance of such information varies from one work to the next. For works do not always realize their author's intentions. And even when they do, the realization of those intentions is not always central to the effectiveness or even the identity of a literary work. Understanding a work may be quite different from understanding what the author intended by it."⁴⁷

The important point here is that authorial intention has little to do with determining the correctness of interpretations. The problem Goodman sees with relating a right or correct interpretation to authorial intention is that authorial intention is not a property of a text as is the text's syntactical structure. Moreover, since a text's syntactical structure can be sorted out in a multitude of ways it follows for him that what counts as authorial intention is also open to a multitude of interpretations. But this should not be taken to imply that all interpretations are equally valid. As Goodman would have it, there are standards which determine what counts as a right interpretation. With this we finally arrive at Goodman's conception of criteria of rightness.

One of the central tasks of Goodman's inquiry is to articulate these criteria of rightness with respect to his versional account of the acquisition of knowledge. The first

thing to notice, Goodman tells us, is that rightness cannot be equated with truth:

[B]roadening our purview to include versions and visions that make no statements and may even not describe or depict anything requires consideration of standards other than truth. Truth is often inapplicable, is seldom sufficient, and must sometimes give way to competing criteria.⁴⁸

Truth, then, is just one aspect of rightness since some versions may be right but not true and since competing--and even conflicting--versions may all be right. But evidently this does not explain what makes a version true or right.

Goodman, however, has tried to explain both truth and rightness in terms of the notion of fit. He writes that the "truth of statements and rightness of descriptions, representations, expressions--of design, drawing, diction, rhythm--is primarily a matter of fit: fit to what is referred to in one way or another, or to other renderings, or to modes and manners of organization."⁴⁹ I take the term 'fit' to mean that versions are to be judged primarily in terms of their efficacy in making intelligible the world around us. More generally, Goodman maintains that rightness of interpretation, of expression, of exemplification, of coherence, of inference, and so on, is a matter of fit with practice.⁵⁰

Goodman's discussion on rightness as fit with practice bothers me, however, with respect to his relativistic philosophy. That is, we need to keep in mind that for Goodman rightness is relative to frame, and so what constitutes a fit with practice can be judged acceptable in one frame but not in another. Indeed he says nothing about the making of practices themselves, of what

constraints there are on making practices. Does the sanctioning of a practice entail that everyone in a given community adheres to it, or only a majority, or only a minority, or only a cherished few who happen to express an opinion about the rightness of that practice? Putnam has directed his attention to this problem in saying that "'[t]rue' . . . means 'true for me' - -i.e., in keeping with my standards and seat-of-the-pants feelings of rightness" and he goes on to add that "I am sure Goodman would be horrified at such a position."⁵¹

Goodman may well be horrified at such a position but there is practically nothing in his writings which blocks one from making practices at will. For example, what could Goodman say against those who create a practice of deciding the meaning of texts solely on the basis of intuition rather than, say, on authorial intention. Worse still, what if this intuitionist practice is capable of being taught to others as well as being applied in a consistent fashion in virtue of having criteria of evaluation that are so general that almost any interpretation fits with the practice. Is it appropriate in such cases to hold that the frame is right though the practice that sustains it is vague and ambiguous? I don't think it is.

We can state the problem with Goodman's position more generally as follows. Goodman appears to treat competing frames as having criteria of evaluation of their own. But if the proponents of competing frames each judge the efficacy of their frame according to the criteria that their respective practices dictate, then this would imply that there are no neutral criteria

available with which to judge the inferiority or superiority of some practices over others. So my complaint is that Goodman's criteria of rightness themselves rest on practices which apparently have no constraints imposed on them. If this is right, then it is not clear on Goodman's account why it is not the case that anything goes at the more fundamental level of making practices. I am, then, essentially in agreement with Goodman's critics who are not entirely satisfied that his rigorous constraints do the work that he intends them to do.⁵²

Let me, now, close this section by summarizing the main points of Goodman's relativistic views on the nature of textual interpretation. Using arguments intended to show that different world-views or versions define different worlds, he argues that the author's intentions for producing a text is but one version or interpretation of the multitude of meanings that a given text can have. However, he next argues that whereas the 'world' succumbs to separately adequate interpretations, the various interpretations of a literary or non-literary work concern the same text. More specifically, he argues that a text's syntactical structure gives it a unique identity quite apart from the semantic interpretations it can bear. But this should not be taken to imply that there is a single right interpretation of a given text. Rather, Goodman holds that there can be many right interpretations of a text since the importance given to the information in that text can vary from version to version.

What purpose is served by arguing that a text can have as many right interpretations as there are separately adequate

versions which support those interpretations? Presumably Goodman's answer is that it helps us respect the difference in methodical readings of texts, say, a pragmatist reading, a deconstructionist reading, a feminist reading, a reader-response reading, a psychoanalytic reading, and so on. And for Goodman this is not just to say that the meanings a text can have depend on the sort of questions one is raising in regard to what the text conveys, or on the sort of interpretation one is seeking. Rather, his point is that these and other methodical readings embody different practices of evaluation between which there can be no argument.

Goodman's position, the reader will note, amounts to theses (ii) and (iii) of the four theses outlined earlier: (ii) scholars and other reflective persons have employed different practices with respect to the same subject matter and sometimes the differences between those practices are ultimate; and (iii) in cases where the differences are ultimate, it is indefensible to hold that one practice is more privileged than another. From these Goodman infers thesis (iv) which holds that the decision to endorse a given practice (or we can here say a method of reading) over others is arbitrary.

This way of construing Goodman's views on the nature of textual interpretation helps us highlight the heart of the debate between relativists and anti-relativists. The issue, I think, is not so much whether we can get 'inside' the text itself to determine what is *really* going on in the text but rather whether the differences in competing practices of evaluation (different

methods of reading in this case) are ultimate. If so, and if there can be many different practices of evaluation between which there can be no argument, then it is hard to see why it is not in fact the case that 'anything goes.'

Our disinclination, however, to accept the view that 'anything goes' leads us to seek ways of showing how and why the relativist's position is philosophically untenable. One way to approach this matter is to deny the force of theses (ii) and (iii) of the relativist's argument. If this can be achieved, then we can show with confidence that the conclusion falls with them. Later, in the last chapter, I shall bring Davidson's views on the nature of interpretation to bear against Derrida's textual relativism in the hope of showing just that. But in order to demonstrate that, it will first be necessary for me to explain in some detail the relationship between deconstruction and relativism. This is the task of the next two chapters.

Before closing this section, I should note that my criticism of Goodman's work is not intended to refute his relativistic philosophy decisively. For it may be the case that he has yet to work out what he wants to say on the notion of fittingness. Indeed it should be noted that in *Ways of Worldmaking* Goodman presents his discussion on rightness with the caveat that his views are still in a preliminary stage of development. At any rate, whatever the weaknesses in Goodman's relativism, I propose to ignore them from here on in so that I may examine what we can learn from it with respect to Derrida's brand of relativism.

(3) Some Concluding Remarks

My presentation of the core elements of the relativist position has been framed by the denial of certain genera of absolutism; most centrally, foundationalism, universalism and objectivism. I began with an outline of the difficulties with defining relativism, difficulties which concern both its content and its varieties. And in matching key passages from the writings of Putnam and Goodman, I have suggested that the line between relativist and anti-relativist positions is not so easily drawn. However, I have tried to distinguish the conceptual credentials of relativist from anti-relativist positions by identifying the core theses that relativists of whatever persuasion hold in common.

I have summed up the core theses in question as follows:

- (i) All knowledge-claims whatever presuppose some or other practice of evaluation according to which such claims are assessed for truth, correctness or rightness.
- (ii) Scholars and other reflective persons have employed different practices with respect to the same subject matter and sometimes the differences between those practices are ultimate.
- (iii) In cases where the differences are ultimate, it is indefensible to hold that one practice is more privileged than another.
- (iv) Thus, the decision to endorse a given practice over others is arbitrary.

Relativists therefore propose that our knowledge of the experienced world depends on the different ways in which the world is talked about, represented, individuated, generalized, etc. And none of the ways is about the world 'intrinsically,' but rather what is seen, understood or taken as true or correct is the product of the frame that one holds. In short, relativists

hold that all knowledge-claims whatever are uniquely assertible as such only within a given practice.

We can, I have suggested, best understand the basic point of the relativist position by noting that for relativists there is no privileged basis. Indeed the effort to show what the experienced world is like from a privileged vantage point is precisely what the relativist rejects outright. To put this another way, any attempt to characterize or describe the world from a non-perspectival view is for the relativist entirely implausible. Does this mean that all positions in any domain of inquiry are equally valid? I have dealt with this question by examining some of the central elements in Goodman's perplexing brand of relativism.

Underlying Goodman's relativism is the position that all facts are fabricated since the sort of information derived from our perceptual experiences is not a uniform function of the objects and events that we encounter but rather such information differs with the interpretation of those things. For Goodman, whatever we encounter may inform us in as many ways as there are interpretative systems. Derrida, I shall be arguing, endorses a similar position in holding that there is no self-present thing which can halt the play between signs such that the distinction between thing and sign loses all (ontological) importance. But we shall see, I think, that Derrida emphasizes more than Goodman the view that facts are not validated by reference to a one-to-one correspondence with the external world.

There are of course other key theses that Derrida and Goodman hold in common, such as the view that there is no ready-made world, that truth, meaning and interpretation come into play only after a frame has been introduced; and that there is no requisite practice or frame. We shall encounter Derrida's rendering of these and other related theses in the next chapter. My position will be that for Derrida, as for Goodman, what constitutes 'reality' depends on what practice or frame is at work and, more importantly, that the resulting pluralism need not reduce to a single, privileged base.

However, there is an important difference between what I take to be Derrida's brand of relativism and Goodman's. I have hinted at the difference in examining Goodman's conception of the criteria of rightness, which allegedly constitute the constraints on his radical relativism. This aspect of Goodman's work is what makes his version of relativism significantly different from more traditional accounts of relativism which are mainly concerned to deny absolutism rather than to explain the role of relativism in epistemology and elsewhere. Yet I have suggested that Goodman's effort to explicate the constraints on his radical relativism is at least highly questionable if not entirely implausible. The main trouble is that Goodman fails to explain adequately the notion of fittingness, which for him is intended to block the view that anything goes.

But my discussion on Goodman's conception of criteria of rightness is useful here as it raises the pressing question of what Derrida has to say about what constraints there are on the

production of meaning and interpretation. This, we shall see, is a surprisingly difficult question to answer. But I shall be arguing that the constraints he puts forward as part of his account of the project of deconstruction hardly preclude the view that 'anything goes.' Indeed I intend to show that this aspect of Derrida's work most clearly demonstrates the nature and implications, as well as the shortcomings, of his textual relativism.

But there is an important presupposition in my discussion on the relationship between deconstruction and relativism, which will not have gone unnoticed by the reader. That is to say, I have been writing as if it is quite easy to make the connection between deconstruction and relativism. However, this is not the case, in part because Derrida's presentation of the project of deconstruction is at times vague and ambiguous. To counteract the problems that I see with Derrida's presentation of his own views, I propose to examine in some detail a number of the technical terms in the deconstructive vocabulary. These terms are central to Derrida's work, and while they have received and continue to receive much attention in the literature on deconstruction, they have yet to be carefully studied and delineated. The next chapter will both clarify the aims and claims of Derrida's project of deconstruction and make clearer the connection between deconstruction and relativism.

Chapter Two

SIGNS AND THE PROBLEM OF REFERENCE

Deconstruction does not exist somewhere pure, proper, self-identical. . . . Deconstruction in the singular cannot simply be 'appropriated' by anyone . . . [but] it is inevitable that something resembling appropriation take place in order for the university, for example, to be affected by it. Otherwise, the only hope for deconstruction's remaining happily intact and pure would be for it to be utterly ignored, radically excluded or definitely rejected.

---Jacques Derrida¹

This chapter first discusses the readings of deconstruction offered by Gasche and Rorty. My position is that each of them is mistaken with respect to some of the central aims and claims of deconstruction. Next, I examine the way in which some of the technical terms in the deconstructive vocabulary interact with one another. This is an important step towards relating deconstruction to relativism since Derrida himself fails to explain adequately what is meant by many of the key terms that he employs in characterizing deconstruction.

But to demonstrate this point at length for each of the terms of the deconstructive vocabulary would be too laborious and unnecessary for our purposes.² I will therefore concentrate on the terms 'sign,' 'trace,' 'supplement' and 'differance.' These technical terms, I contend, are labels for the difficulties with certain assumptions about the production of meaning and interpretation that Derrida thinks have been overlooked or marginalized in Western philosophy.

(1) The Project of Deconstruction: Some Preliminaries

Whereas the previous chapter is in part concerned with the kind of relativism at issue in deconstruction, the focus in this chapter is on some of the central aims and claims of deconstruction. Much of what passes for current knowledge of Derrida's thought or of what is represented by deconstruction is ill-formed or at the very least inadequate. The question of whether Derrida is a serious philosopher with profound ideas is a case in point. On one side of this issue is Rodolphe Gasche who reads Derrida as a technical philosopher who, on the basis of some sort of deconstructive methodology, gives an account of the conditions under which philosophy works (or fails to work).³ On the other side, Richard Rorty reads Derrida as having invented a polemical style of writing about Western philosophy, though one that is devoid of rigorous argumentation.⁴

What this issue comes down to is that Gasche construes deconstruction as a philosophical methodology, whereas Rorty construes deconstruction as if it were nothing other than a disorganized body of ideas lacking argumentative support. I am not entirely convinced that deconstruction can be construed as a philosophical methodology, though I think Derrida does have a philosophical project of sorts that aims to identify some of the difficulties with the production of meaning and interpretation.⁵ Before stating more clearly my own position on this matter, I begin with Gasche and then turn to Rorty.

Gasche situates Derrida's work in the framework of the problem of reflection (somewhat in the manner of a transcendental

philosopher like Kant who seeks to establish the conditions of the possibility of acquiring knowledge). To support this reading of deconstruction, Gasche opts to construe the technical terms in the deconstructive vocabulary as a network of infrastructures. Yet what Gasche means by infrastructure is far from clear. So far as I can tell, he seems to think that infrastructures are sorts of quasi-conceptual foundations that serve to put philosophy and its conceptual tools into question.

In his most recent book, *Inventions of Difference*, Gasche sheds some light on what his account of infrastructures is supposed to show:

In short, then, infrastructures are not words or concepts, because as laws of intelligibility of both words or concepts, they articulate not only the conditions under which the recognizable and understandable identity of both become possible, but also the limits of a word's meaningful unity, a token's identity, and a concept's unifying power. In their ensemble . . . they represent a complex set of conditions which brings the ideality of a whole or a system both into reach and out of reach. . . .⁶

While insightful, this does not clearly indicate the defining traits of infrastructures. In *The Tain of the Mirror*, Gasche provides a somewhat better account of the nature of infrastructures. His account there has several features but at least two stand out: (1) infrastructures are pre-logical in the sense that they are not concepts but are what he otherwise calls 'quasi-synthetic constructs'; and (2) infrastructures are responsible for producing the conditions that both enable and limit philosophical (or other) discourse. To illustrate what

Gasche means I will briefly explain how he envisions trace as an infrastructure.

Seizing upon the deconstructive strategies that consist in reversing and displacing conceptual orders, Gasche highlights three principles in what he calls 'traditional conceptuality': "(1) that concepts in metaphysics are viewed as self-sufficient units; (2) yet they only appear in oppositions, which are never simple juxtapositions of terms but hierarchies and orders of subordination; and (3) that . . . all concepts stand in relations of solidarity."⁷ Against this conception of traditional conceptuality, Gasche contends (pace Derrida) that every concept is marked by others or, more precisely, each concept in a binary set has within it a reference to its opposite, such that each concept carries within itself a trace of its opposite.

Let me try to explain how Gasche understands what he calls 'traditional conceptuality' more concisely, according to the way he envisions the formation of philosophical (or other) concepts. Gasche's contention is that philosophers have viewed the central concepts in the history of Western thought as being homogeneous or self-sufficient, i.e., they possess a nucleus of meaning which is largely unaffected by other, related concepts. Yet he argues that this traditional view can be discredited by studying the very process of the formation of concepts; that is, by noting how other concepts are inscribed within the structure of so-called 'central' concepts themselves.

According to Gasche, no concept is an atom unto itself but rather it contains within its structure a cluster of other

concepts against which it is defined and indeed understood. This means, for example, that the concept of 'ethics' has no unique meaning apart from what deconstructionist-minded thinkers call its 'Other,' say, the notion that there are no irreducible moral values.⁸ The consequence of this shift in thinking about the formation of concepts is that any one concept can be subjected to (even radically) different meanings by virtue of the plurality of concepts that can affect them to their very core. In short, Gasche holds that no concept in the history of Western thought possesses a profound, hidden meaning apart from the play of meanings that arise from considering the multitude of concepts embedded in the concept's structure.

(Later in this chapter, I shall demonstrate how Derrida proposes to deconstruct bits of Western philosophy by examining his critique of Rousseau's conception of the origin of language. Derrida, we shall see, argues as follows: (i) Rousseau's holds that writing is exterior to, or the opposite of, speech; (ii) for Rousseau, writing is harmful because it contaminates or corrupts the 'naturalness' of speech; (iii) yet at the same time Rousseau argues that writing is necessary because the origin of speech is deficient, i.e., it is already a form of writing--in Derrida's peculiar sense of the term. Thus, Derrida argues that writing is neither exterior nor harmful to speech but rather it is already contained within its structure.)

What Gasche calls 'arche-trace,' then, is the name of the oppositional system within which every concept is what it is because of the trace that its opposite impresses upon it. But

Gasche thinks that trace as an infrastructure is not always readily visible in philosophical discourse until one reflects upon the paired oppositions contained within such discourses. Indeed he contends that all philosophical discourse grows out of infrastructures, and that Derrida's great achievement is to have shown that philosophy cannot prevail over them since they operate at a level prior to, or below the level of, philosophical discourse. I shall take up this last point a bit later in discussing Derrida's conception of the meaning and function of the trace.

This outline of Gasche's account of infrastructures brings us to the main problem in his reading of deconstruction. There is a tension in his work that derives from the way in which he tries to make Derrida respectable in the philosophic community by demonstrating the rigour of deconstruction. More specifically, the question of whether deconstruction should be construed as rigorous gets linked to the idea that the network of infrastructures make up a deconstructive methodology.

In the chapter "Deconstructive Methodology," Gasche spends a lot of time trying to show that "[a]lthough a deconstruction of method, deconstruction is not non-method, an invitation to wild and private lucubrations."⁹ Indeed he makes much use of terms such as rigorous and system to characterize the network of infrastructures. Yet his technical argumentation about infrastructures is not without its difficulties. Gasche not only fails to explain clearly what he means to say about the methodological

nature of deconstruction, but he also fails to take into account Derrida's insistence that deconstruction is not a method.

The following citation serves to show that Derrida is strongly opposed to any reading of his work that tries to spell out a deconstructive methodology:

I don't consider deconstruction as a method, a general method, that should be applied to many fields. *Deconstruction is not a method*. It has some methodological effects. There are some rules that in certain limited situations you can draw out of deconstruction and apply. I think this is the condition for teaching something as 'deconstruction', but deconstruction as a whole doesn't consist in a set of methodological rules that have to be applied to philosophy, literature, and so on. . . .¹⁰

Two points need to be addressed here. First, we might be tempted to say that Gasche's view that deconstruction is not non-method refers to the methodological effects of which Derrida speaks. But even if this were the case Gasche still fails to explain the sense of method operating here. For all of Gasche's talk of the relationship between infrastructures and philosophical methodology no clear sense of these terms comes to the fore. Hence, the extent to which deconstruction can be construed as a philosophical methodology is left largely unresolved in Gasche's writings.

Second, and more important, Derrida's unwillingness to call deconstruction a method can be explained by reference to his claim that deconstruction consists in reversing and then displacing *all* conceptual orders. This deconstructive strategy requires us to take into account the latter concept in the binary set of method/fragment. As employed here, the concept of fragment suggests that the relationship between the various terms in the

deconstructive vocabulary is partial or incomplete and hence cannot be construed as constituting a method. In short, method/fragment is just one more binary set that Derrida must deconstruct if he is to apply consistently the strategies of deconstruction. This point helps to explain why Derrida seemingly promotes and yet cannot fully endorse attempts to formally classify the network of technical terms that lie at the core of his project of deconstruction.

So what I find troublesome in Gasche's reading of Derrida is that he favours the more reputable term in the binary set of method/fragment without taking stock that deconstruction requires both the reversal and the displacement of each concept in that set. Or, to put this differently, it is notably undeconstructive of Gasche to insist upon the former term without considering the effects of the latter term upon the former. When the latter term is taken into consideration, concepts such as rigorous, system and structure cannot be used to characterize a deconstructive methodology. Hence while we may speak loosely of a network of infrastructures, it is questionable whether we can go the added distance and say that in Derrida's work there exists a deconstructive methodology. The upshot of my criticism of Gasche is that he appears to go too far in his attempt to make Derrida respectable in the philosophic community by demonstrating the methodological rigour of deconstruction. I turn now to Rorty's reading of Derrida's work.

Rorty sees little use in trying to make Derrida respectable in the philosophic community by demonstrating the rigour of

deconstruction, and he presents two reasons for this view. First, and most important, he thinks that Derrida's work is devoid of rigorous argumentation and as a result contends that there can be no deconstructive methodology. Second, he thinks that Gasche's understanding of the term 'philosophy' is untenable. A closer look at the second point will help to explain the first.

According to Rorty, the term 'philosophy' is appropriate to Gasche's reading of Derrida's work "only if one buys in on the logocentric idea that there just must be an autonomous discipline which adjudicates ultimate questions. . . ." ¹¹ Logocentric because any project that is called transcendental or reflective amounts to a pretense on the part of philosophers to answer questions of the form "What are the conditions of the possibility of...?" Indeed he insists that when we try to answer such questions "the hapless and tedious metaphilosophical question 'How can we know when we have hit bottom?' is bound to arise." ¹² For Rorty, the habit of posing and then trying to answer ultimate questions is self-deceptive.

Rorty holds this view in part because he thinks that attempts to answer ultimate questions normally involve positing new problems rather than solving old ones, and even more so that positing new problems involves an original way of thinking about those new problems. Put another way, he thinks that many philosophers do not commonly attempt to solve old problems by employing rigorous argumentation so much as formulating new problems altogether. Indeed he says that the aim of original thought "is not so much to refute or subvert our previous beliefs

as to help us forget them by giving us a substitute for them."¹³ So as Rorty would have it most original thinkers do not commonly try to solve old, persistent problems so much as formulate new ones. Whether Rorty is right about this matter is not directly at issue here. What is important that Rorty sees in Derrida's work is an original way of thinking and a lack of rigorous argumentation: "I find little use, in reading or discussing him [Derrida], for the notion of 'rigorous argumentation.'"¹⁴ But Rorty's reading of Derrida's work needs some clarification. If we mean by the word 'argument' a statement, or group of statements, that purportedly provide support for another statement, i.e., the conclusion, then it is absurd to say Derrida's work is non-argumentative. Somewhere in Derrida's writings there must surely be arguments in this sense.

What Rorty appears to have in mind, however, is that there is a distinction to be made between philosophy that is argumentative and philosophy that is non-argumentative. Of this, he writes "It is the line between the attempt to be objective . . . and a willingness to abandon consensus in the hope of transfiguration."¹⁵ Rorty's conception of philosophy holds that philosophy can be argumentative if and only if it attempts to solve the problems and issues of an old philosophical tradition. It is with this conception of philosophy in mind that Rorty sees Derrida as someone having little to do with philosophy's traditional problem-solving activities.

But the claim that the mark of original thinking consists in offering new problems rather than solving old ones does not

appear to characterize Derrida's work at all well. That is to say, I am not convinced that we can plausibly read Derrida as positing, say, a new or improved theory of meaning and interpretation or any other theory for that matter. True, Derrida does try to articulate some subtle difficulties with the production of meaning and interpretation. But in so doing he is not at all concerned with supplying a new way of dealing about these difficulties. So as I see it Rorty's reading of Derrida is problematic since it is far from clear that deconstruction fits neatly into his account of the nature of philosophical theorizing. But my quarrel with Rorty's account of Derrida's work extends beyond this point.

Rorty's claim that Derrida's work does not involve questions of the form "What are the conditions of the possibility of...?" is misinformed. In line with Gasche, I hold the view that Derrida addresses questions of the form "What are the conditions of the possibility of meaning?" as well as "What are the conditions of the possibility of interpretation?" Against Rorty, I suggest that there are plenty of passages in Derrida's writings which show that such questions are at issue. However, I am not saying that deconstruction is a novel answer to traditional problems since it is not clear that Derrida is offering a positive doctrine of non-presence so much as a negative critique of certain philosophical assumptions about meaning and interpretation. In any case, it seems to me that Rorty goes too far in arguing that Derrida's deconstructionism is devoid of rigorous argumentation.

Given the difficulties with Gasche and Rorty's accounts, I am urging a reading of Derrida's work that cuts across their reading of him. I see no good reason why Derrida cannot be regarded as a serious philosopher who is concerned with questions of the form "What are the conditions of the possibility of...?"--of meaning or interpretation, without going the added distance in saying he has put forward a philosophical methodology with which to approach such questions. This reading of Derrida allows us to gain a better grasp of the aims and claims of deconstruction. The aim of deconstruction, I want to urge, is not so much to supply us with a new philosophical methodology but rather the aim is to identify and explicate some of the difficulties with the production of meaning and interpretation.¹⁶

We shall see that the difficulties of which Derrida speaks are introduced by reference to certain key terms in the deconstructive vocabulary. In the sections below, I want to show that for Derrida these key terms are supposed to reflect certain difficulties which prevent linguistic meaning and interpretation from being clearly grounded in determinate entities or presences. With this in mind, I turn now to examine what Derrida takes to be the ceaseless play of signs.

(2) The Ceaseless Play of Signs

Any attempt to discern what Derrida means by the ceaseless play of signs must take into account his reaction to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's work provides the impetus for Derrida's thesis that all foundational approaches to meaning and interpretation are essentially undermined by the ceaseless play

of signs. In what follows, I concentrate on Derrida's treatment of what Saussure calls 'Principle I: The Arbitrary Nature of the Sign' in his *Course in General Linguistics*.¹⁷

Saussure opens section one, "Sign, Signified, Signifier," with the following remark "Some people regard language, when reduced to its elements, as a naming-process only, each corresponding to the thing that it names. . . . This conception is open to criticism at several points. It assumes that ready-made ideas exist before words. . . ." ¹⁸ Rejecting this view, he writes that a linguistic sign "unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept [signified] and a sound-image [signifier]." ¹⁹ This statement leads to the formulation of Principle I and its philosophical implications rest with the following consequences.

The principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign points to the view that we can never characterize the connection between word and world by grounding signs in the world. Saussure writes that "it is evident, even *a priori*, that a segment of language can never in the final analysis be based on anything except its noncoincidence with the rest. *Arbitrary* and *differential* are two correlative qualities." ²⁰ As evidence for this view, he refers to the assortment of signs to be found in different languages. The signs *cat* and *chat*, for instance, are not two signifiers with a common signified. The signified of *cat* is to be found by reference to the relation among signs in the English language, and the signified of *chat* is to be found by reference to the relation among signs in the French language. In neither case is the signified determined by reference to some furry creature

lying on a mat at a particular place in the world. On this account, signs do not gain their meaning by recourse to one-to-one correspondences with things in a ready-made world.

How, then, do signs gain their meaning? Saussure's response is essentially that signs must gain their meaning by recourse to the relationships they have to other signs within the linguistic system in which they belong: "Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that issued from the system."²¹ All linguistic systems, along with the differential relations among their respective signs, are marked by a clear autonomy from the external world.

The trouble with Saussure's views, as Derrida sees it, is that signs seemingly have no function or purpose independent of a given linguistic system. That is, Saussure cannot consistently argue both that signs are marked by a clear autonomy from the external world and that signs gain their meaning by reference to something that is not itself a sign. As Barry Allen has noted, for Saussure:

Any occasional, empirical, token sign has a determinate identity or value only if there is a momentarily changeless and formally closed total distribution of differences. . . . Why does the idea of a synchronic language-state come into the picture for Saussure? Because he wants the signs of language to have values determinate in themselves and objectively determinable by a synchronic science indifferent to history. . . . For Saussure . . . it is finally by reference to something that is not itself another sign that the occasional sign derives its identity and existence as a sign or as a language--

something 'fully present' and 'identical to itself'; in this case, *la langue*.²²

This problem is precisely what leads Derrida to assert that Saussure "accedes to the classical exigency of what I have proposed to call the 'transcendental signified,' which in and of itself, in its essence would refer to no signifier, would exceed the chain of signs, and would no longer function as a signifier."²³ As he points out here, Saussure falsely argues that a sign's meaning is ultimately determined by reference to something which is not itself a sign, namely, to a formally closed linguistic system.

So while Derrida accepts Saussure's conception of the arbitrary and differential nature of linguistic signs, he nonetheless departs from Saussure in asserting that the content of a signified can be comprehended only in relation to other signs. On the basis of this insight, Derrida introduces the idea of the play of signs as a way to explain how signs gain their meaning: "[T]he meaning of meaning . . . is infinite implication, the indefinite referral of signifier to signifier."²⁴ There is of course a leap here from the view that the content of a signified gains its identity from other signs to the view of the indefinite play among signs. And this is precisely where I see Derrida as faltering in his presentation of the nature of linguistic signs. However, I shall try to draw out what Derrida means in saying that the meaning of meaning is 'indefinite referral of signifier to signifier' in the remainder of this section and in the sections that follow.

A good place to begin is with Derrida's commentary on the connection between the play of signs and the metaphysics of presence. He writes, "One could call *play* the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say as the destruction of onto-theology and the metaphysics of presence."²⁵ To better grasp the force of this assertion, we can look to Derrida's treatment of a philosophical movement that he thinks embodies a foundational approach to meaning rooted in the metaphysics of presence. I have in mind Derrida's analysis of Husserl's phenomenological theory of meaning and the problematic of the sign found within it.

In the introduction to *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida tells us that one of the aims of that text is to examine "the privileged example of the concept of sign . . . [and] to see the phenomenological critique of metaphysics betray itself as a moment within the history of metaphysical assurance."²⁶ His interest in the Husserlian project stems from the belief that it is thoroughly representative of logocentrism, i.e., the preoccupation with logic and rationality as a means to uncovering univocal meanings and basic truths. Derrida's analysis of this issue rests for the most part with the central ideas in Husserl's essay "Expression and Meaning" in the first of his *Logical Investigations*.²⁷

In this essay, Husserl is primarily interested in distinguishing sign (*Zeichen*) in the sense of expression (*Ausdruck*) from sign in the sense of indication (*Anzeichen*). Only in the former sense can a sign be meaningful since for Husserl

the concept of meaning (*Bedeutung*) is restricted to the intention to signify meaning. Of the latter, he argues that while indicative signs do signify, they point to something beyond themselves in order to indicate something to other thinking beings, they nonetheless do not involve the intention to signify meaning. He makes this initial distinction in order to demarcate linguistic expressions that arise in the inner monological sphere, i.e., the realm of pure phenomenological experience, from linguistic expressions employed in ordinary discourse. He thus argues that linguistic expressions in the monological sphere must take on the function of indication as soon as they serve to communicate meaning in the external sphere, that is, to communicate to other thinking beings in speech or in writing.

With this distinction in mind, Husserl contends that the sign in the sense of expression gains its meaning on the basis of an ideal association with essences, i.e., the necessary and invariant features of phenomena (in his special sense of that term), that are acquired by some species of intuition to be found only within the sphere of pure consciousness. This, Husserl maintains, safeguards the sign in the sense of expression from confusion with the sign in the sense of indication. For him, the intrusion of the sign in the sense of indication brings along with it many or all of the problems commonly associated to attempts at matching word and world. Thus, by blocking this intrusion Husserl proposes to get at univocal meanings and basic truths.

In the early chapters of *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida examines Husserl's transition from an empirical observation of the familiar world to a phenomenologically reflective attitude towards phenomena. In discussing this transition, Derrida is primarily concerned with Husserl's systematic exclusion of the indicative sign from the realm of pure phenomenological experience, which he regards as an attempt on the part of Husserl to halt the play of signs at the periphery of phenomenological investigation. This is the privileged example of the sign of which Derrida speaks. His aim, then, is to show that signs cannot be effaced in the manner contemplated by Husserl.

Derrida's critique strikes at the very core of Husserl's phenomenology by undermining his concept of evidence. Husserl proposes that phenomenological evidence adds the dimension of being to what is intended in that it constitutes the immediate presence or self-giveness of the essence of a thing perceived in the solitary mental life. However, in order to defend this idealistic interpretation of evidence, Husserl finds it necessary to demonstrate that, while phenomenological statements are descriptions of phenomena, they are nonetheless non-empirical in nature.

The defence of this thesis rests in large part with the phenomenological epoche or the transcendental-phenomenological reduction that constitutes the methodological device allowing the objects under investigation to be perceived as phenomena. Husserl thinks that this reduction enables him to, so to speak, avoid actual contact with things in the world since their presence is

mediated by the essence of the phenomena in question. As already noted, however, Husserl needed recourse to some species of intuitionism to gain access to the essences of such phenomena. This is the feature of Husserl's work that Derrida calls into question. Derrida insists that Husserl's ideal of a self-identical meaning ultimately rests on positing an immediate encounter with the presence of the essence of a thing that, when experienced in the interiority of an unmediated and intuitively accessible monological sphere, is cleansed of all empirical associations. This ideal enables Derrida to situate Husserl firmly within logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence.

In the later chapters of *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida seeks to undermine this version of the metaphysics of presence by demonstrating in Husserl's analysis of internal time-consciousness, along with his treatment of phenomenological intuitionism, the inevitable non-presence of the intuited essences. Derrida writes, "One then sees quickly that the presence of the perceived present can appear as such only inasmuch as it is continuously compounded by nonpresence and nonperception. . . ." ²⁸ In his argument leading up to this point, he declares that the phenomenological experience of phenomena cannot involve the pure and simple presence of an undivided thing in itself from which one can then draw out its necessary and invariant features.

But Derrida does not clearly lay out his argument against Husserl, nor does he explicitly announce just what aspect of the

Husserlian project is under fire from his critique.²⁹ Yet he does state the core of his objection to Husserl's work as follows:

In its critical as well as descriptive work, The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness demonstrates and confirms throughout the irreducibility of re-presentation . . . to presentative perception (Gegenwartigen, Präsensieren), secondary and reproductive memory to retention, imagination to the primordial impression, the re-produced now to the perceived or retained actual now. . . .³⁰

To get at the heart of this objection to Husserl, I propose to examine what Derrida takes to be the plurality of temporal moments that are involved in Husserl's strategy of free imaginative variation.³¹

Briefly, the goal of the phenomenologist within the context of this strategy (which is to say that the phenomenologist has already performed the transcendental reduction in order to access the monological sphere) is to describe a thing in the experienced world and then to transform its description in such a way as to add or delete from it one or more of its predicates. In manipulating the original description, the phenomenologist attempts to uncover the decisive features of a thing that stay the same as in the original description of that thing. If, on the one hand, any such addition or deletion leads to a description of a different kind of thing, then it does not reflect the necessary and invariant features of the thing described in the original description. If, on the other hand, any such addition or deletion does not affect or change the thing in the original description, then the phenomenologist can lay claim to having discovered the necessary and invariant features of the thing, in short, its essence.

What is most important for Derrida is that in the process of modifying the original description, the phenomenologist is obliged to retain in memory or in the imagination a representation of the essence of the phenomena given in the original description. Moreover, the phenomenologist is obliged to retain in memory or in the imagination a representation of the various additions or deletions imposed on, or taken from, the original description. The problem, then, is that the act of retention in the solitary mental life cannot take place in any self-same moment but rather involves the repeatability (iterability) or representation of the original and immediate presence of an intuited essence. And since the essences of phenomena are not presented in the original, it follows that what is given in solitary mental life are various representations of the original presence of the essences of the phenomena in question. The repeatability or representation of antecedent pure experiences no longer fits the idea of the origin of the immediate presence of essences as Husserl requires.

At this point in his critique of Husserl's work, Derrida introduces the play of signs that he thinks is involved in the phenomenological enterprise:

As soon as we admit this continuity of the now and the not-now, perception and non-perception, in the zone of the primordial common to primordial impression and primordial retention, we admit the other into the self-identity of the *Augenblick*; non-presence and non-evidence are admitted in the *blink of the instant*.³²

The communication of essences mediated to oneself in solitary mental life not only involves the modification--by means of

representations--of antecedent experiences, but it also involves reference to linguistic signs in order to carry out phenomenological inquiry. Indeed Husserl fails to show that the linguistic expressions arising in the solitary mental life gain their meaning *only* by recourse to ideal associations, or to the full or immediate presence of intuited essences. Hence, Derrida concludes that Husserl's version of the metaphysics of presence is undermined by admitting within the heart of phenomenology the play of signs in the form of the representation or non-presence of the essences of things as phenomena.

We can summarize the relevant points in Derrida's discussion on Husserl's work as follows. Derrida proposes to deconstruct Husserl's attempt to ground knowledge on intentional contents which are purportedly capable of being fully present to a unitary self. He urges, in effect, that there are no pure intentional contents present to consciousness as a foundation which grounds our subjective experiences, given that such intentional contents are themselves subject to interpretation in virtue of the play of signs. For it is the very function of signs, Derrida argues in his analysis of the phenomenological reduction, to be able to operate in the absence of foundations such as so-called 'pure' intentional contents.

Now what is the upshot of Derrida's critique of Husserl's work for our understanding of the project of deconstruction? Earlier, I said that Derrida's interest in the Husserlian project stems from the belief that it is representative of logocentrism, that is, the preoccupation with logic and rationality as a means

to uncovering univocal meanings and basic truths. What Derrida's deconstructive reading of Husserl's texts aims to show is that, as with other attempts in the history of Western philosophy to uncover univocal meanings and basic truths, the phenomenological project is not carried out far enough.

Indeed Derrida reads Husserl as halting his phenomenological inquiry in the moment when it seems that what is 'self-present' to the mind has been discovered. But by pressing the limits of phenomenological inquiry, Derrida tries to show (against Husserl) how signs inevitably stand in for, or take the place of, what would otherwise be durably self-present to the mind. And, as Derrida would have it, Husserl's work is but one of a series of attempts in Western thought to provide a solid foundation for knowledge through philosophy's critical power of reflection.

More generally, Derrida holds that no matter how calculated a given philosophical method is in ordering our descriptions of the world, such descriptions are always mediated by signs, and that signs themselves do not gain their meaning by reference to something that is not itself a sign. Or, to put this differently, Derrida is concerned to show that there is no way to characterize the connection between language and the world by positing pure meanings which can be present to consciousness as a foundation which grounds interpretation. What reasons, aside from his study of Husserl's work, does he provide in support of this view? To draw out the reasons he gives I turn now to examine Derrida's conception of the ceaseless play of signs in relation to the technical term 'trace.'

(3) The Condition of the Sign as Trace

To account for the source of the ceaseless reference from sign to sign Derrida puts forward the term 'trace.'³³ While Derrida's discussion of this term is largely obscure, what he means by trace may become clearer if we first outline the difficulty with Gasche's account of the trace as an infrastructure. As noted earlier, Gasche thinks that this technical term is one of the very foundations upon which the deconstructive method rests. Indeed he asserts that "infrastructures are the 'grounds' by means of which deconstruction attempts to account for the 'contradictions' and dissimilarities in, from a philosophical standpoint, successful concept formation, and the production of discursive totalities."³⁴

Derrida, however, explicitly denies that trace should be so construed:

[H]ave I not indefatigably repeated--and I would dare say demonstrated--that the trace is neither a ground, nor a foundation, nor an origin, and that in no case can it provide for a manifest or disguised onto-theology? It is true that this confusion, which consists in turning against my texts criticisms one forgets one has found in them first and borrowed from them--this confusion has already been feigned, at least, by readers who were a bit better informed, if not better armed.³⁵

Derrida, then, strongly opposes the view that trace is a sort of ground or foundation. But if trace is not one of the grounds upon which a deconstructive methodology rests, what is the nature of the trace? Indeed of what is the trace a trace?

To answer these questions, I shall concentrate on Derrida's conception of the relationship between the trace and the

metaphysics of presence. In what follows, I take up a point raised in the introduction, namely, that for Derrida one of the characteristic mistakes of logocentrism is to separate elements, i.e., signs and signifieds, that cannot be separated. We can make the connection here with Goodman's relativism which holds that to strip away everything that is frame-dependent is just to strip away everything that is experienced, perceived or described. We shall see that Derrida makes a similar claim in holding that the trace is non-presence as the condition of the sign. That is, the trace is non-presence in that the identity of the things to which signs refer (e.g., referents, perceptions, intentions) are always dependent on other things, including subsequent interpretations that are not immediately given.

According to Derrida, many intellectual disciplines, namely philosophy and science, share a number of commitments concerning the nature of truth claims and the ontological status of objects. The most important of such commitments consists in positing the presence of certain perceivable or meaningful objects, of the intrinsic nature of things, of discernible causes and origins, and so on--each of which can purportedly be made intelligible in ordinary or specialized discourse. This conception of philosophy and of science assumes that the play of signs can be simply subordinated by grounding signs in something that is not itself a linguistic sign.

Against this view, Derrida maintains that "the signified is originally and essentially (and not only for a finite or created spirit) trace, that it is always already in the position of

signifier. . . ."36 The signified is already in the position of signifier because we can say nothing that reveals how things are independent of our linguistic conceptions of them. Our knowledge of the identity or presence of a signified is always deferred because any sign we employ, or any sign we put in place of another sign, to reflect or represent the thing signified is still a trace of that thing. On this view, the thing signified, like the sign which stands in its place, is a trace by virtue of the fact that its identity or presence is differential and deferred.

To explain more clearly the non-derivative status of the sign, we can look to the manner in which Derrida proposes to disassociate the trace from the idea of presence:

The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. . . . In the language of metaphysics the paradox of such a structure is the inversion of the metaphysical concept which produces the following effect: the present becomes the signs of signs, the trace of traces. It is no longer what every reference refers to in the last instance; it becomes a function in a generalized referential structure.³⁷

I take the phrase 'the present becomes the signs of signs' to mean nothing in the present or, more precisely, there is no self-identical, self-present thing which can limit the reference or play between signs such that the distinction between thing and sign loses all (ontological) importance. In other words, Derrida holds that nothing-no *thing*-can serve as a self-present or fully determinate ground for meaning and interpretation. The trace, understood as the condition of the sign as non-presence, is what stands between or otherwise divides reference. So for

deconstruction the trace divides reference in the sense that it refers back not to some self-present origin but only to yet other signs (or traces).

But, like Goodman, Derrida is not saying that there are no extra-linguistic entities in the world. He writes, "Every week I receive critical commentaries and studies on deconstruction which operate on the assumption that what they call 'post-structuralism' amounts to saying that there is nothing beyond language, that we are submerged in words--and other stupidities of that sort."³⁸ The gist of this assertion is not a denial of the existence of extra-linguistic entities. Nor, I suggest, does it mean that everything is a sign. Rather, Derrida's point is that we cannot differentiate a sign ontologically from something that is not itself a sign, namely, some thing whose identity is independent of our various different linguistic conceptions of it.

Derrida holds this view because he thinks that "From the moment there is meaning there are nothing but signs. *We think only in signs.*"³⁹ We think only in signs because what we mean to express by our linguistic signs presupposes the use of signs to report the nature of what is being expressed. The implication of this view for philosophy and for every branch of the physical or human sciences is that a philosophical or scientific theory is nothing other than a system of signs. For Derrida, this is the case even though philosophers and scientists may pretend to have gained control over the play of signs by appealing to rigorous

standards of reason, logic, experimentation and evidence or confirmation to report or explain the experienced world.

In making this last point I do not mean to say that for Derrida we cannot explain how things really stand in the world simply because there is an unconceptualized reality we are mediated from; rather, the essential point is that for Derrida there is no certain or privileged basis upon which to derive indisputable facts independently of the various system of signs that we employ to describe the world. Or, to put this another way, since the trace does not refer back to some self-present origin, but to other signs or traces, there seems to be no non-arbitrary way of halting the play of signs. On this account, there is no one single reference point that a sign can refer back to and any attempt to do so consists in nothing other than arbitrarily putting into place a different sign as a substitute for another sign.

Against attempts to non-arbitrarily prevail over the play of signs, Derrida urges, in *Writing and Difference*, that "In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to genetic indeterminacy, to the seminal adventure of the trace."⁴⁰ Derrida here speaks of absolute chance because he thinks that the legitimacy of any assertive discourse that relies on a foundational approach can be called into question. That is, any assertive discourse which purports to give an account of the way things really are is problematic since comparison of knowledge-claims about the world with experience of the world is not

comparison with a ready-made world, a world wherein the identity of what is nonsign is immediately present to us.

But what needs to be noticed here is that the trace only helps to explain why a linguistic sign does not refer back to any one privileged reference point, and hence why we must always have a linguistic conception of what is nonsign, i.e., a referent, perception or intention that allegedly grounds meaning and interpretation. What the trace does not explain is the process of substitution among linguistic signs that is permitted by the absence of a nonsign or signified that the trace characterizes. To gain a better understanding of how the ongoing process of substitution among signs comes about, I turn now to examine the relationship between Derrida's conception of the play of signs and the technical term 'supplement.'

(4) The Condition of the Sign as Supplement

Whereas the trace helps to explain how Derrida proposes to show that we can never have an immediate encounter with the external world, the supplement helps to explain Derrida's conception of the process by which we substitute one sign for another. What he aims to show with the supplement is that the linguistic sign which stands in as a replacement for a referent, perception or intention provides a surplus of information about the nature of these things. Unlike Goodman, however, Derrida holds that it is not simply a matter of telling an observer what vocabulary he or she is to use in reporting his or her perceptual experiences. For Derrida, the sign supplements or adds to the thing it represents and so it is not equal to what it represents.

It is not the full equivalent of what it represents because the limits of what the sign in question can mean are fixed only by what we can find out about its past use in other contexts, along with any other pertinent information we bring to the sign's meaning.

This way of construing the nature of our perceptual experiences amounts to saying that any sign we employ to best describe or represent a thing signified brings along with it the various meanings that it has accumulated over its recorded interpretive history. The explanation offered for this view is that we always use signs to describe or represent a thing signified, and signs are public concepts which themselves require interpretation. In being public concepts, however, there is always something more that can be said about the nature of a thing signified, though what more there is to be said merely supplements what has already been reported; what information is added does not provide knowledge of the intrinsic nature of things. The supplement for Derrida is the condition of the sign as substitution or replacement.

Derrida's presentation of the movement of supplementarity is primarily set out in Part II in *Of Grammatology* where he discusses at length Rousseau's conception of the origin of languages.⁴¹ In what follows, the focus will be on what Derrida has to say about the term supplement and not on the nature of his reading of Rousseau as such. Yet, it should be noted that whereas many would regard Rousseau's conception of language as

nonstandard in the history of Western thought, Derrida argues that Rousseau's work is exemplary of logocentrism.

In "Derrida on Rousseau on Writing," Garver has drawn attention to this matter by saying that Rousseau's *Essay* "is probably the most outrageous thing he ever wrote, and one of the least plausible of the numerous general treatises on language in the history of Western thought."⁴² Yet at the same time he concedes that "Rousseau is thoroughly representative of the logocentrism Derrida wishes to consider. . . ." ⁴³ What Derrida wishes to consider and to deconstruct in Rousseau's *Essay* is the metaphysics of presence that underlies Rousseau's distinction between natural and conventional meaning.

Briefly, Rousseau claims that if "the only needs we ever experienced were physical, we should most likely never have been able to speak; we would fully express our meanings by the language of gesture alone."⁴⁴ That we also have passionate needs suggests to him that the first spoken languages were clear expressions of those needs. In leading up to this point, Rousseau insists that in the first spoken languages "the liveliest exclamations are inarticulate. Cries and moans are the simplest sounds."⁴⁵ The suggestion here is that cries and moans or, similarly, that vowels alone suffice to express feelings and passions. Rousseau's view of natural meaning thus seems to be that inarticulate vocalizations express feelings and passions.

Derrida's interest in Rousseau's conception of language lies with the assumption that feelings and passions are simply present and intuitively intelligible to us. This assumption in Rousseau's

Essay not only points to the metaphysics of presence but also to the inadequacy of signs because of their secondary status. For Rousseau the secondary status of the sign is what demarcates conventional from natural meaning: "Since natural sounds are inarticulate, words have few articulations. Interposing some consonants to fill the gaps between vowels would suffice to make them fluid. . . ."46 Rousseau is saying here that articulation serves to make human thoughts more clear, though at the same time the expressiveness of the first spoken languages, i.e., inarticulate vocalizations, is diminished.

Rousseau's principal insight into the nature of conventional meaning is that language becomes corrupted in the process whereby words are articulated to constitute human thoughts and ideas rather than to express intuitively accessible feelings and passions. According to him, the surest evidence supporting the view that the first spoken languages have been perverted is to be found in the phenomenon of writing: "Writing, which would seem to crystallize language, is precisely what alters it. It changes not the words but the spirit, substituting exactitude for expressiveness. Feelings are expressed in speaking, ideas in writing. In writing, one is forced to use all the words according to their conventional meaning."47

As Garver aptly notes, for Rousseau "Writing is an exteriority; it is based on some convention that lies altogether outside of the matter being expressed. . . . The written sign is therefore called a *supplement*, for a natural sign. . . ."48 This conception of writing allows Derrida to situate Rousseau firmly

within the "heritage of that logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism. . . . All signifiers, and first and foremost the written signifier, are derivative with regard to what would wed the voice indissolubly to the mind or to the thought of the signified sense, indeed to the thing itself. . . ."49 He thus insists on deconstructing Rousseau's foundational view of meaning by demonstrating that all meaning is conventional rather than natural, insofar as 'natural' is understood in Rousseau's sense of the term.

Derrida rejects Rousseau's distinction between natural and conventional meaning for several reasons. First, and most important, the assumption that feelings and passions are immediately intelligible is unfeasible without presupposing ready-made ideas of what such passions or feelings are supposed to be like. Derrida, however, rejects the view that there are ideas which are self-sufficient, non-inferred or basic. For him, ideas cannot be assigned determinate entities (e.g., self-present feelings and passions) as their meaning. The implication here of course is that all ideas whatever are dependent on other things, including subsequent interpretations of them. Second, in the absence of such ready-made ideas it follows that the meaning we attach to feelings or passions rests on our appeal to the linguistic signs that we employ in characterizing our experience of them. For Derrida, all meaning is conventional insofar as one needs to use a language and its signs to report or even to grasp what one feels.

Indeed Derrida's position on this matter is that:

The concept of origin or nature is nothing but the myth of addition, of supplementarity annulled by being purely additive. It is the myth of the effacement of the trace. . . . Originary differance is supplementarity as structure. Here structure means the irreducible complexity within which one can only shape or shift the play of presence or absence: that within which metaphysics can be produced but which metaphysics cannot think.⁵⁰

The irreducible complexity of the supplement as structure is just the process of substitution by which we trade off one sign for another in an attempt to explain, define or characterize the meaning of yet another sign. The point here is that one's report of what one feels is the result of a comparison of the theory or conception one has of the nature of feelings and passions with what is taken to be one's experience of what is felt. And what is taken to be one's experiences is dependent on our linguistic conceptions of them. This falls short of the view that feelings and passions are simply present and intuitively accessible. We can state Derrida's rejection of the significant division between natural and conventional meaning as follows.

According to Derrida, the consequence of the play of supplementarity is that we can never lay claim to having secured a source of meaning which is simply present and intuitively accessible to us. The reason for this is that the process of substitution serves to efface the very origin or source of meaning that it is supposed to assist in making clearer. And though philosophers have sometimes posited clear intuitions or as a means to arrive at a univocal meaning, Derrida insists that any such intuition is always dependent on other things, including subsequent interpretations. Hence, all reports on our

experiences, including intuitions, feelings and passions, can only be expressed or grasped through a differential play between the signs that we employ to report our experiences.

So just as the trace helps to explain how Derrida proposes to show that we can never comprehend the way things really are in the world, the supplement helps to explain his conception of the process of substitution among signs. Two points in particular summarize what Derrida means by the technical terms trace and supplement. First, the trace is the label that Derrida gives to the view that a linguistic signs divide reference, that is, signs do not refer back to any one reference point, namely, a self-present nonsign whose identity and presence is given immediately to the contents of the mind. Second, the supplement is a label for the view that what a sign refers back to is a multiplicity of references in virtue of the play among signs. From this perspective, the technical terms 'sign,' 'trace' and 'supplement' are labels for the difficulties with foundational approaches to meaning and interpretation. I turn now to discuss the relationship between Derrida's conception of the play of signs and the technical term 'differance.'

(5) Differance at the Origin of the Sign

In the essay "Differance," Derrida outlines the meaning and function of the neologism 'differance' in suggesting that it accounts for the way in which the technical terms in the deconstructive vocabulary support one another.⁵¹ In particular, he claims that the French verb 'differer' has two different

meanings, to differ and to delay, thus expressing the word 'difference' in two essentially dissimilar ways:

In the one case 'to differ' signifies nonidentity; in the other case it signifies the order of the same. Yet there must be a common, although entirely different [differante], root within the sphere that relates the two movements of differing to one another. We shall provisionally give the name *differance* to this sameness which is not identical. . . .⁵²

Of this neologism, Behler notes that "With his use of the letter 'a' from the present participle 'differante,' Derrida constructs a noun with a visibly written, however inaudible, spelling change. . . . The 'a' in the monstrous word 'differance' is thus no printing error but an intentional addition by Derrida, in order to make difference even more different from itself than it already usually is."⁵³

Differance is undoubtedly the most difficult of all the technical terms in the deconstructive vocabulary, especially in view of Derrida's assertion that differance is "neither a word nor a concept."⁵⁴ Indeed this assertion has generated much debate and controversy in recent years. In what follows, I cite a number of different commentaries by critics and proponents of deconstruction to illustrate this point and to get at the function of differance in Derrida's deconstructionism.

Gasche's analysis of the decisive traits of differance is helpful here as it sets up a number of critical commentaries on both his own work and Derrida's. For instance, Gasche maintains that "Differance . . . is clearly a transcendental concept. . . ." and he then goes on to say that differance draws together

"difference as temporalizing, difference as spacing, difference as the result of opening as a polemical rift between conceptual poles, difference as diacritical differentiability, difference as ontico-ontological difference, and so on."⁵⁵ In leading up to this obscure summary of the different senses of differance, Gasche declares that "differance is a heterogeneity whose movement cannot be bounded within a definitive setting."⁵⁶ Remarks like this one have led some critics to suggest that differance appears to do a lot of work in deconstruction and yet it is seemingly beyond reproach. That is to say, unlike other words or terms, the meaning and function of differance is purportedly not open to criticism.

Rorty, for example, argues that Gasche treats differance much like something that seemingly works magic:

Gasche takes seriously Derrida's claim that 'differance' is 'neither a word nor a concept' and applies it to all the other Derridean terms which he takes to signify infrastructures. Like late Heidegger, early Derrida goes in for word magic -- hoping to find a word which cannot be banalized and metaphysicized by being used. . . . Gasche seems to think that this magic works. . . . Paying these compliments to Derrida's words seems to me to be whistling in the dark -- saying that it would be nice if there were words which had this impossible combination of properties without explaining how the combination is supposed to have been made possible.⁵⁷

What Rorty means to say is that Gasche accepts without question Derrida's attempt to employ new terms whose meaning is clearly and simply present, that is, without reference to other signs in a system of signs. Rorty therefore thinks that Gasche's account

of this term is altogether deceptive since deconstruction denies the possibility of self-present meanings.

Garver expresses a similar criticism when he writes that "[o]ne way to avoid self-referential criticism is to avoid a commitment to what you are doing. Derrida is a master of such avoidance, and he has even made a virtue of it. In one of his early works . . . he makes much use of the term 'differance', spelled with an 'a,' which he insisted was not a concept (and therefore could neither be defined nor criticized!)." ⁵⁸ So it would appear that few are prepared to accept the importance that Derrida attaches to differance. I turn now to address such criticisms by working out the role that differance plays in the project of deconstruction.

In "Positions," Derrida hints at the role that differance plays in saying that "[s]ince it cannot be elevated into a master-word or master-concept . . . *differance* finds itself enmeshed in the work that it pulls through a chain of other 'concepts,' other 'words,' other textual configurations." ⁵⁹ These other concepts, words and textual configurations, he goes on to say, are none other than the various technical terms (e.g., sign, iterability, trace and supplement) in the deconstructive vocabulary.

As with these other technical terms, differance is best understood in relation to Derrida's conception of the metaphysics of presence. Writing as a proponent of deconstruction, Culler urges that "we can treat 'presence' as the effect of a generalized absence or . . . of *differance*." ⁶⁰ In a similar way,

Harvey insists that differance "is the condition of the possibility of the 'play' of presence and absence as such--of entities, of vision, or metaphysics, and of the world as such."⁶¹ These citations suggest that differance is not an alternative to presence but it is enmeshed in our experience and awareness of the identity of the things in the world around us. To see more clearly what this means, we can look to what Derrida himself has to say about this reading of differance.

In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida asserts that "*Differance* is to be conceived prior to the separation between deferring as delay and differing as the active work of difference."⁶² This sentence is telling. Derrida is not suggesting that differance is to be conceived prior to, or independently of, the other technical terms; rather it is to be conceived prior to the separation between difference in the sense of delay and difference in the sense of differing. To draw out the subtle but important distinction implied here, we can now look to the relationship between differance and the technical terms 'trace' and 'supplement' respectively.

In leading up to the passage just cited, Derrida insists that "The living present springs forth out of its nonidentity with itself and from the possibility of a retentional trace."⁶³ This refers to both meanings of differance, i.e., to delay and to differ.

It refers to the former meaning in that our experience and awareness of the presence of a perceivable or meaningful object is always postponed or delayed by whatever constitutes our

conception of it, i.e., that the identity or immediate presence of a thing is always mediated by its trace in the signs that we choose to employ in characterizing it. Indeed Derrida maintains that the "trace is the differance which opens appearance [l'apparaitre] and signification."⁶⁴ The point here is that differance works in association with, but not prior to or independently of, the function of the trace. Put simply, the neologism 'differance' and the term 'trace' are interdependent.

But differance also refers to the latter meaning, i.e., that the living present springs forth out of its nonidentity with itself. Under the heading "The Play of Supplementarity," Harvey asserts that "[i]n some respects, the 'play of supplementarity' describes more precisely the structure of differance itself. . . ."⁶⁵ Why does Harvey think that the supplement best describes differance? She holds this view because, like the supplement, differance characterizes how the economy of signs is organized.

The supplement, as noted earlier, helps to explain the process of substitution by which we trade off one sign for another in an attempt to characterize some or other referent, perception or intention that purportedly serves as the foundation of a sign's meaning. For Derrida the supplement

[a]dds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence. . . . It is thus that art, *techne*, image, representation, convention, etc., come as supplements to nature and are rich with this entire cumulating function. . . . The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself.⁶⁶

The terms 'supplement' and 'differance' characterize the process by which different signs stand in for the signifieds they

allegedly represent. Differance, that is, works in association with, but not prior to or independently of, the supplement. The point here, again, is that the neologism 'differance' and the term 'supplement' are interdependent.

This account of the relationship between differance and the technical terms 'trace' and 'supplement' helps to explain why Derrida insists that differance is neither a word nor a concept. That is to say, differance is neither a word nor a concept in the standard sense since it cannot be thought out clearly without first grasping the role of other technical terms in the deconstructive vocabulary. And this is why Derrida asks "Now, how am I to speak of the a of differance?" and in answer to this question he states "It is clear that it cannot be exposed. . . . Already we had to note that differance is not, does not exist, and is not any sort of being-present. . . ." ⁶⁷

Construed in this way, the meaning and function of differance can be summarized as follows. Differance is not a transcendental concept as Gasche and others have suggested, but rather it is better understood as a sort of 'catch-all' term that summarizes the meaning and function of other technical terms in the deconstructive vocabulary. These other terms, we have seen, refer to various features of the differential nature (or play) of the linguistic sign. This line of thinking about differance means that any criticism of its meaning and function ought first to be directed to the meaning and function of the other terms in the deconstructive vocabulary. Seen in this light, the mystique (and confusion) surrounding the notion of 'differance' seems hardly

warranted. What I am urging, then, is that difference in and of itself has no systematic role to play in the project of deconstruction.

Those who would argue that my approach to this (apparently) central term misses the point would be forced to explain what other role it plays in the project of deconstruction. That is, they would first have to explain away Derrida's own claims (as cited above) concerning the meaning and function of difference. They would then have to claim that what has shown itself, on my reading, to be a 'catch all' term that serves to summarize the role of other terms in the deconstructive vocabulary, is really something more philosophically penetrating and indeed completely different. But it is hard to see, in the face of Derrida's own texts, how this line of thinking could maintain its plausibility.

(6) Some Concluding Remarks

Derrida's position on the referential character of language is peculiar in that while many philosophers hold the view that an independent reality can never be known, he seems to hold the view that it can never be spoken of. This distinction arises from reflection on the kind of difficulties Derrida sees with relating signs to a reality wholly independent of those signs. Put simply, Derrida holds that any attempt to link word with world by first distinguishing a sign ontologically from something that is not itself a sign is untenable or at least arbitrary. This is what Derrida's conception of the condition of the sign as trace and as supplement and of the difference at the origin of the sign aims to show: there are no uncontroversial facts about reference with

respect to the phenomena of linguistic meaning. As we have seen, the reason Derrida gives for this is that signs refer back not to some self-present origin but to yet other signs. As such there is nothing that *finally* determines what a sign is and what it does or does not imply with respect to the familiar world. Derrida is quite right of course in saying that there is a philosophical problem about how a sign can ever be about things in the world.

The question that remains, however, is this: what kind of correspondence does Derrida think there can be between word and world? To this question he gives no clear answer. The reason for this is that he is unconcerned with the way or ways in which we can speak intelligibly about the familiar world. Or, to put this differently, Derrida is mainly concerned with showing that Western thought about the relationship between language and the world tends to posit some or other conception of the secondary status of the sign. Once deconstruction of the secondary status of the sign is achieved there is not much that Derrida has to say about what we can or cannot say and do. Put bluntly, his aim is deconstruction and not reconstruction. But what lies at the heart of Derrida's position on referential character of language, and what makes that position so unappealing, is that he rejects any and all external constraints for determining the nature of linguistic meaning. In short, Derrida holds that there is nothing to a sign that is indifferent to a change in time or circumstance since it is essentially cut off from any and all so-called 'determinate' entities or presences. This has far-reaching implications.

If we suppose that not everything is a sign but that we cannot distinguish signs from nonsigns, it seems that there will be many different ways in which signs and the languages in which they form a part can correspond to the world. And this is just what Derrida urges. Derrida promotes that view that the only determination of meaning is the productive powers who work to settle what counts as a signifier or signified according to some or other practice of evaluation. Here we get a glimpse at what he calls the 'politics,' i.e., the relationships of power, implied in every practice of evaluation. Later, I shall return to the implications of this for Derrida's brand of relativism. At this point, however, we can say that for Derrida what the relationship between word and world is depends on the relationships between signs and not on the way the world is.

But if there are bound to be all sorts of different ways in which signs relate to other signs, how can we (or rather how can Derrida) possibly avoid relativism? Once we admit that alternative practices of evaluation can be equally legitimate we are on the slippery slope that leads to the view that all relations of correspondence between word and world are equally legitimate. Perhaps the natural reaction at this point is to say (against Derrida) that the intended correspondence between word and world is what halts the drift towards relativism, not to mention the ceaseless play of signs of which Derrida speaks.

Derrida's reply to this line of thinking, as we shall see in the next chapter, is that in principle there is nothing that can determine which relationship or correspondence is the 'intended'

one. For him, any conception of intentionality that alleges an essential connection between mental states and the things in the world that they are allegedly about is untenable or at least arbitrary. Now while this may disappoint readers who have had enough of Derrida's conception of the metaphysics of presence and of ceaseless play of signs, I want to show that Derrida's argument against the determinate nature of intentionality is quite different than what one might expect.

The next chapter, then, examines Derrida's views on the communicative character of language, here understood as the relatively straightforward thesis that we are able to communicate on the basis that we can say what we mean. We shall see that Derrida holds that intention is a very slippery ground for deciding what we mean to say in communicating with others. This will help to show how radical Derrida's deconstructionism is as well as to point more clearly to the kind of relativism at issue in deconstruction.

Chapter Three

SIGNS, INTENTIONALITY AND MEANING

Rationality and truth and intelligence aren't themselves substantive theses, like a particular dogmatic theology. They are not themselves particular historical claims, but they are standards which any attempt to communicate, any attempt to represent, are forced to meet. So the cannons of rationality aren't themselves up for grabs, they're built into the nature of what it is to think and speak.

---John Searle¹

This chapter examines some of the central elements in the dispute between John Searle and Derrida which has helped to make deconstruction familiar to philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition. But the Anglo-American reception of deconstruction is still largely negative. A widely-held belief among Anglo-American philosophers is that deconstruction denies any association between intentionality and meaning.

My position is that deconstruction does not deny outright the link between intentionality and meaning, even though Searle and others are right to say that Derrida fails to explain clearly his own position on this matter. Much of my discussion will be concerned with clarifying the nature and implications of Derrida's views on the role of intentionality in justifying the production of meaning and interpretation. This approach will provide us with a better understanding of Derrida's work, and it will provide some further reasons for endorsing the view that deconstruction entails relativism.

(1) The Derrida-Searle Dispute: Some Preliminaries

Many philosophers appear to regret deconstruction's emergence onto the intellectual scene, and among them Searle is perhaps the most vocal. In a number of essays, Searle has argued that Derrida's treatment of many philosophical topics and issues is ill-informed. In his "Rationality and Realism, What is at Stake?," for example, Searle defines a number of principles that are now under challenge by proponents of deconstruction.²

Searle reviews six principles in particular: (1) that reality exists independently of human representations; (2) that one of the functions of language is to communicate meaning; (3) that truth is a matter of the accuracy of representation; (4) that knowledge is objective; (5) that logic and rationality are formal; and (6) that these intellectual standards cannot be discarded. Taken together, they form a coherent picture that Searle calls the 'Western Rationalistic Tradition.' In what follows, I will try to reconstruct the sequence of arguments that he offers to support this tradition of thought.

According to Searle, many philosophers and other reflective people believe in a reality that exists independently of human representations. Yet Searle acknowledges that we can know the external world only as it is represented to us in language, and he then introduces the second principle: "At least one of the functions of language is to communicate meanings from speakers to hearers, and sometimes those meanings enable the communication to refer to objects and states of affairs in the world that exist independently of language."³ The first part of this sentence

reflects the communicative character of language and the second reflects its referential character.

Believing we can directly access the world around us, Searle puts forward the third principle, i.e., that truth is a matter of the accuracy of representation. That this principle is necessary for Searle, given the first two principles, is not difficult to confirm. For him, to say that language refers to the external world is just to say language (sometimes) accurately represents how things really are in the world. The assertion that truth is a matter of the accuracy of representation is of course meant to provide a firm conceptual link between word and world. To concede anything less is, for Searle, to suggest that the legitimacy of these principles are open to challenge.

If, then, we accept the legitimacy of the first three principles, the fourth principle seems to follow readily. Our knowledge is objective because we can arrive at true propositions about the way things are in the world. For Searle, one consequence of this belief is that we can reject any argument that insists upon the impurity of reason, that is, arguments supporting the view that such things as social dimensions and historical times determine the motives and interests of the maker of a claim. A more plausible view, it seems to me, is to say that while such factors influence one's motives and interests, they do not completely determine them. Searle fails to make this distinction, though I think he would accept it.

The fifth principle, i.e., that logic and rationality are formal, purportedly follows from the fourth. Searle includes this

principle among those central to the Western Rationalistic Tradition as a means to deter challenges to that tradition. If knowledge is objective, then it follows that logic and rationality are, broadly speaking, the tools that we must use in assessing claims about the world. It is exactly this point that is expressed in the sixth principle, i.e., the aforementioned principles cannot be discarded. But as Searle notes, "No principle of the Western Rationalistic Tradition is more repulsive to the culture of postmodernism than this one. . . ."⁴

In the sections that follow, I examine the way in which deconstruction poses a challenge to the communicative character of language. We shall see that Derrida and Searle are at odds as to what role intentionality has to play in communicating meanings from one thinking being to another. It is wrong, however, to think that deconstruction rejects the view that one of the functions of language is to communicate meanings. Rather, it is more accurate to say that deconstruction challenges the view that such meanings are determinate entities or presences which ground the production of meaning and interpretation.

To make sense of this last point, we need to distinguish between a weak and a strong or radical sense of Derrida's position on the role of intentionality in justifying the production of meaning and interpretation. And this distinction concerns the difference between the notion of 'foundationalism' and 'foundation.' Foundationalism, the reader will recall, is a thesis concerned primarily with direct or privileged access. By contrast, foundation refers to the way in which we organize our

discourses on knowledge. Husserlian phenomenology, for example, employs transcendental reduction as a methodological device or foundation for phenomenological inquiry. Indeed it is hardly controversial to note that all discourses on knowledge require some or other foundation.

With this distinction in mind, what I call the weak sense of Derrida's position on the role of intentionality in justifying the production of meaning and interpretation entails that there are no self-present or determinate entities which ground meaning and interpretation. This is the sense in which Derrida's rejects the thesis of foundationalism with regards to the phenomena of verbal meaning. What I take to be the strong or radical sense of Derrida's position is one that rejects the view that intentionality can serve as a foundation for justifying the production of meaning and interpretation. This is radical indeed but I shall urge that Derrida does not fully endorse this view, though we shall see that he often seems to invite this reading of him. To see this point more clearly, I turn next to examine Derrida's essay "Signature Event Context" (hereafter abbreviated as *SEC*).⁵

(2) SEC: Intentionality and Meaning

While many interpretations of the Derrida-Searle dispute emphasize certain aspects of Derrida's reading of Austin's work on language and on speech-acts in particular, the attentive reader will note that the dispute actually turns on Derrida's peculiar conception of 'writing.'⁶ According to Derrida, Western thought about language traditionally holds that writing is a mere

representation of what was expressed prior to it in speech. That is, the traditional picture as Derrida sees it is that speech comes before writing (what he otherwise calls 'phonocentrism'), and intentions (e.g., thoughts, ideas, conceptions, mental impressions, and so forth) come before speech. On this account, speech is closer than writing to an originally intentional power, which itself can be communicated directly to other thinking beings. However, Derrida proposes to deconstruct the traditional distinction between speech and writing. That is, he aims to show that signs are cut off from any intentional source of meaning in both writing and in speech. This is essentially the point of contention between Derrida and Searle, and this because it revolves around the role of intentionality in justifying the production of meaning and interpretation.

There are three essential points that sum up what Derrida has to say about this matter: (i) both speech and writing can transmit meanings independently of what their producers intended; (ii) both speech and writing depend on the independence from their producers in order to function as a piece of communication in the first place; and (iii) the independence of speech and writing from their producers is a structural feature of the phenomena of verbal meaning. Derrida's position is, roughly put, that before any piece of writing or utterance can be said to have communicated something, it must first of all be free of the author's or the speaker's control. I turn now to discuss the arguments that Derrida gives in support of these views with regards to what he takes to be the difficulties with communi-

cative character of language. (I note here that to capture Derrida's line of thinking I shall refer mainly to his conception of the difficulties with grasping authorial intention, though the reader should keep in mind that such difficulties are meant to apply equally to speech-acts.)

Even before Searle's reaction, Derrida had insisted that the primary focus of *SEC* was not any particular philosophical theory (e.g., Austin's theory of speech-acts) but a general philosophical space that "is first of all spacing as a disruption of presence in a mark, what I here call writing."⁷ By 'mark' or what he otherwise calls 'writing' Derrida means anything that is (or could be) recognized as a sign. We shall see that for Derrida any mark or sign must be able to be repeated and thus be capable of being taken out of the context of its original moment of production. That is, to repeat a sign is writing or in speech is for Derrida to alter it, to make it mean something other than what it was intended to mean in its original context of production. Or, to put this differently, Derrida takes up the familiar idea that writing is a form of communication and transforms it into a key deconstructionist thesis that the interpretive constraints that apply to writing also apply to other forms of communication, including speech.

From the outset of the essay, the reader's attention is drawn to a number of difficulties with the term 'communication.' Indeed *SEC* opens with the following question: "Is it certain that to the word *communication* corresponds a concept that is unique, univocal, rigorously controllable, and transmittable: in a word,

communicable?"⁸ That this question is framed with the idea of impurity in mind is no accident. Derrida's emphasis on this idea underlies many of the arguments in *SEC*.⁹

If, for instance, the term communication is impure, if it has no one unique and precise meaning, then to assert that all communication conveys meaning is questionable. To draw out Derrida's point here let us consider two different senses of this term. First, we commonly speak of communication that involves the transmission of meaning. We would all agree that an oral exchange between two people commonly involves the transmission of meaning; that the hearer understands the speaker's intention to communicate something meaningful. But Derrida maintains that we also employ a derivative sense of the term communication that does not commonly involve the transmission of meaning: "We also speak of different or remote places communicating with each other by means of a passage or opening. What takes place, in this sense, what is transmitted, communicated, does not involve phenomena of meaning or signification."¹⁰ Non-semiotic communication occurs, for example, in cases where information-processing machines communicate with one another.

Derrida's remarks, however, raise questions of the form "How are we to know which of these two senses is applicable in situations where it is unclear whether meaning is being transmitted or not?" According to Derrida, we would normally say that context distinguishes which of the two senses is pertinent. However, he also suggests that the concept of context itself is impure: "But are the conditions [*les requisits*] of a context ever

absolutely determinable? Or does the notion of context not conceal, behind a certain confusion, philosophical presuppositions of a very determinate nature?"¹¹ Though he poses this question about the concept of context, he fails to state clearly the point at issue.

The point at issue is not so much the question of whether context can distinguish between the different senses of the term communication, but Derrida's challenge to the view that even the least problematic form of communication can transmit a simple univocal meaning. The basis for this assertion is that any univocal meaning presupposes the presence of an intention that is thought to be the originating centre which grounds that meaning. According to Derrida, the view that intentionality constitutes an originating centre embodies certain philosophical presuppositions that have been overlooked by other thinkers concerned with the relationship between meaning and intentionality.

Under the heading "Writing and Telecommunication," Derrida maintains that the metaphysics of presence underlies a certain view of writing that has been particularly influential over the course of Western intellectual history:

The history of writing will conform to a law of mechanical economy: to gain or save the most space and time possible by means of the most convenient abbreviation; hence writing will never have the slightest effect on either the structure or the contents of the meaning (the ideas) that it is supposed to transmit [vehiculer].¹²

As a clear illustration of this law of mechanical economy, he cites a passage from Condillac's version of the origin of writing: "'Men in a state of communicating their thoughts by

means of sounds, felt the necessity of imagining new signs capable of perpetuating those thoughts and of making them *known* to persons who are absent. . . .'¹³ The law of mechanical economy of which Derrida speaks, or what I here otherwise call the 'view of the economy of writing,' embodies two important presuppositions.

The first is that the interpretive constraints that apply to written communication are no more problematic than those accompanying oral and gestural communication; that the intention which grounds the meaning that is conveyed by a written communication is clear to us, just as it would be if the author were standing before us and conveying his intentions orally. The second is that the representational character of a written communication extends the range of communication over distance and time; that a piece of writing is a more permanent means of conveying something that was meant or expressed prior to it. In light of these presuppositions, Derrida's point is that it seems as if a written communication neither adds nor takes away from the author's original intention for producing that piece of writing.

What is important for Derrida is that the proponents of the view of the economy of writing believe that what a written communication conveys can be traced back to its original source. For instance, when we ask questions of the form "What does the author mean by this word?," we are allegedly able to retrieve the very source that purportedly grounds that word's meaning. But as Derrida would have it, the proponents of the economy of writing

pretend that a piece of writing conveys a meaning whose presence is without logical or spatial distance from what was meant prior to producing that piece of writing.

I will now try to extricate Derrida's objections to this view. However, let me say right away that his objections are difficult to appreciate, if only because Derrida tends obscure his views with what often seems to be hopelessly vague and ambiguous terminology. Nonetheless, we can distinguish two main objections, the first of which corresponds the weak sense of his position and the second to the strong or radical sense.

The first objection concerns the view that we can interpret a piece of writing independently of what the author originally intended for that piece of writing. This echoes the position endorsed by Goodman. Goodman, the reader will recall, holds that even in cases where the author's intentions are discoverable, they do not constitute the sole grounds for deciding a text's meaning. According to Goodman, a text can have meanings that are independent of the author's intentions for producing that text. Derrida, we shall see, endorses a similar position.

Derrida initiates his challenge to the view of writing in question by asserting that any piece of writing must be able to function in the absence of both the author and the intended receiver: "My written communication must be repeatable--iterable--in the absolute absence of the receiver. . . . What holds for the receiver holds also, for the same reasons, for the sender or the producer."¹⁴ The term 'iterability' plays a prominent role in *SEC* and by it Derrida means that a piece of writing must be

readable in a wide range of contexts; that is, it must be open to interpretation even to persons having no knowledge of the author's original intention for having produced that piece of writing.

To be iterable, the meaning that a text conveys must be able to function outside of its original context of production. This being the case since otherwise successful communication would entail that interpreters must retrieve the original intention that purportedly grounds that text's meaning. More to the point, the trouble as Derrida sees is that if an originally intentional power constitutes the sole grounds upon which to discern a text's meaning then this would require interpreters to somehow trace a text's meaning back to its original source. For Derrida, not only is this constraint on interpretation too restrictive, but also the absence of such a ground indicates that a text's meaning is open to a multitude of interpretations.

In his account of the Derrida-Searle dispute, Christopher Norris makes a similar point in saying that ". . . 'iterability', or the power of being transferred from one context to another, is evidence that speech-acts cannot be confined to the unique self-present moment of meaning."¹⁵ In defence of this view Norris suggests that linguistic meaning is encompassed by conventional forms ". . . which are always already in existence before the speaker comes to use them."¹⁶ The main thrust of Norris' reading of Derrida on this matter is that iterability of linguistic meaning can be explained only by reference to he calls a ". . . larger system of non-self-present signification."¹⁷

What Norris is in part alluding to in the passages just cited is the view that a piece of writing is readable in a wide range of contexts because original authorial intention is not the sole ground upon which to discern the meaning or meanings that a text can have. However, we run into a difficulty at this point since Derrida himself does not say how it is that we do come to interpret a piece of writing outside of its original context of production and independently of having knowledge about the original force of the author's intention.

Now, we could try to address this difficulty by filling in the steps on Derrida's behalf, but we will do so at the risk of misconstruing his views on linguistic meaning. We might say, for example, that if we do not have at our disposal knowledge of the original force of the author's intention for producing a piece of writing, we at least do have some knowledge of the linguistic meaning or meanings that piece of writing can have. Take, for instance, the sentence: "No handmaiden will ever tolerate my family." This sentence has at least two different linguistic meanings. It can mean either "No female will ever associate with my blood relatives," or "No female will ever accept my racial lineage." The linguistic ambiguity of the sentence in question trades in part on the verb *to tolerate*. It seems fair to say that when an author or speaker employs the sentence in a given context, he will intend that sentence to express only one or the other of the linguistic meanings in question.

What we need to do here is draw a distinction between the linguistic meaning or meanings that the sentence in question can

have in the English language and the linguistic meaning that it has in a given context. The latter, one might say, will be determined by the intentions of the author using that sentence on a particular occasion. This may well be Derrida's intended meaning. That is, Derrida's point may be that while we can always interpret a text against the background of the meanings that it can have in a given language, it is exceedingly difficult to say which linguistic meaning the author intended on a particular occasion, at least insofar as we consider authorial intention as constituting some sort of unique, self-present moment of meaning.

My claim about the linguistic meaning or meanings that texts can have in the English language is, then, not unlike Norris' claim of the existence of conventional forms that are already in existence before the speaker comes to use them. Derrida, I think, promotes a similar view in urging that whatever meaning an author intends for a piece of writing can, in any present instance, be deconstructed or recontextualized (as well as reconstructed or improved), and so on. Yet what needs to be noticed is that Derrida's first objection to the view of writing in question only amounts to saying that we can interpret a piece of writing apart from what the author originally intended by that piece of writing. This is what we can take to be the weak sense of Derrida's position on the role intentionality in justifying interpretations.

But this is only one step towards the explication of Derrida's conception of iterability, and the next one is both more radical and difficult. He writes,

[T]he intention animating the utterance will never be through and through present to itself and to its contents. The iteration structuring it a *priori* produces into it a dehiscence and a cleft [*brisure*] which are essential.¹⁸

I take his point to be that an author is already in the position of having to interpret his own piece of writing because a word or sign which requires no interpretation is an inconceivable sort of thing. The implication here is that an author's understanding of his own work is as much the product of interpretation as is the reading of his work by others.

From this perspective, even as the author prints a word on a page that very word has already been activated as a sign. Once activated, the identity of that sign includes the possibility of reference to other meanings of that sign, and indeed to the meaning of other signs, so that the meaning of the sign in question is perpetually deferred to other signs. To interpret a word or sign consists in nothing other than the author putting into place a different sign as a substitute for that sign. Derrida's claim here is not only that confining successful communication to the author's original intention is too restrictive but also that there cannot be any such kind of grounding for the production of meaning and interpretation in the first place. This is what we can take to be the strong or radical sense of Derrida's position. On this view, original authorial intention is always deferred or, better yet, it is set adrift in time.

The author's need to interpret the signs in his own piece of writing means that the representational character of writing

cannot be a permanent means of conveying the author's original intention for producing that piece of writing since there is no one unique, self-present moment of meaning to be had at all. Any so-called 'unique, self-present moment of meaning' is itself dependent on other things, including subsequent interpretations of it. Of course, Derrida does not say what is conveyed by a text independently of original authorial intention and this makes his views on the phenomena of verbal meaning all the more puzzling.

But the preceding discussion has helped to clarify some of Derrida's views on the nature of the problems that arise by associating a text's meaning with authorial intention. In particular, it helps to show that Derrida is mainly concerned to challenge a view of meanings as determinate entities; that is, a conception of meaning that is rooted in the metaphysics of presence. This is where Derrida proposes to locate the difficulties with the communicative character of language. For him, not only can we not match word and world but also we cannot link intentionality and meaning in a clear and determinate way. The thesis of *SEC* thus seems to be that no anchoring source can fully ground the production of meaning and interpretation.¹⁹

In light of this thesis, Derrida appears to be saying that no matter how calculated a given theory (e.g., Husserlian phenomenology, Austin's theory of speech-acts, Searle's theory of Intentionality) is in associating intentionality to meaning, such associations are always mediated by signs. And, as Derrida would have it, signs themselves do not gain their meaning by reference to something that is not itself a sign, namely, the presence of

originally intentional power. However, aside from challenging the view that meaning is grounded by an anchoring source, Derrida's thesis only amounts to saying that what counts as intentionality inevitably includes the possibility of a multiplicity of interpretations. In view of this, it seems to follow that when we succeed in discovering something about, say, the author's intention for producing a text, we have successful communication. When we do not succeed then we have misunderstanding or miscommunication. The real epistemic work of what it means to have successful or true communication is left unexplained by Derrida. This is in part what upsets many of his critics. (The next chapter draws out further what Derrida has to say about this matter in discussing his brand of relativism).

We may now close this section with a few remarks pertaining to the thesis of *SEC*. That is, I want now to concentrate on dismissing the strong or radical sense of Derrida's position as this does not seem to properly account for his views on the role of intentionality in justifying the production of meaning and interpretation. But this strong or radical interpretation of Derrida's work does help to explain why it is that he is misunderstood by many critics. To take an example: I stated earlier that Derrida challenges the second principle in Searle's conception of the Western Rationalistic Tradition. But as I argued in this section he would deny the legitimacy of this principle only insofar as we presuppose that meaning is grounded in an anchoring source such as originally intentional power. Yet it appears that Searle would disagree with this reading of

Derrida. That is to say, Searle opts, incorrectly I think, to read Derrida's work as promoting the strong or radical sense mentioned above.

Searle insists that Derrida implies that we are unable to communicate at all. Jokingly--but with a certain seriousness--he writes "Now, suppose I have reached a deconstructionist car mechanic and he tries to explain to me that a carburetor is just a text anyway, and that there is nothing to talk about except the textuality of the text. . . . Whatever else one can say about such situations, one thing is clear: communication has broken down."²⁰ Remarks like this one leave the impression Searle is so determined to find fault in Derrida's work that he ends up whipping a straw man. A clearer example of this pernicious attitude towards Derrida's work is found in Robert Scholes' commentary on *SEC*. A recurring theme in his commentary on Derrida's work is expressed in the view that "'hermeneutic deciphering' is alive and well in most Derridean practice, though openly disparaged by Derrida himself. . . ." ²¹ Scholes' point is that Derrida's texts are themselves interpretations of the texts of other authors but that Derrida purportedly denies we can recover meaning from a text, especially when a text's meaning is associated with authorial intention.

This is a peculiar claim because Scholes cites the following passage in *SEC* that invites quite a different reading: "The perhaps paradoxical consequence of my having recourse to iteration and code: the disruption, in the last analysis, of the authority of code as a finite system of rules; at the same time,

the radical destruction of any context as the protocol of code."²² This sentence is telling. By 'last analysis' I take Derrida to mean that something like a hermeneutic deciphering of meaning remains in effect right up to the point where we are sometimes led astray, that is, when we attempt to anchor a text's meaning in a determinate presence or in a unique self-present moment of meaning.

Derrida, then, does not deny outright that intentionality plays a role in deciding a text's meaning. Indeed he insists that when we interpret the texts of other authors the "category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place. . . ." ²³ I have found no passage in *SEC* that necessarily contradicts this reading of him, and I therefore see no good reason to think that Derrida denies we can associate intentionality with meaning or even that he denies we can communicate with one another. Derrida's principal aim in *SEC* is to explicate some of the difficulties that accompany attempts to associate intentionality and meaning, though he provides few positive claims on how we do go about associating these. With this in mind, I now turn to Searle's "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida" and Derrida's rejoinder to Searle in "Limited Inc a b c..."²⁴

(3) Searle's Reply and Derrida's Rejoinder

In his Reply, Searle criticizes (what he takes to be) the following themes in *SEC*: (1) Derrida's challenge to the view that identifies meaning with the intentions of an author or speaker; (2) Derrida's understanding of the meaning and function of iterability; (3) the distinction Derrida makes between speech and

writing; and (4) Derrida's reading of Austin's theory of speech acts. In what follows, I will reconstruct Searle's critique, along with Derrida's response to him.²⁵

Under the heading "Writing, Permanence, and Iterability," Searle challenges what he views as Derrida's argument that "since writing can and must be able to function in the radical absence of the sender, the receiver, the context of production, it cannot be the communication of the sender's meaning to the receiver."²⁶ This reading of Derrida's argument is problematic. As noted previously, Derrida's position on this matter is that no author will always succeed in totally controlling the production meaning and interpretation because a piece of writing can never fully convey an originally intentional power.

The philosophical implications that follow from this reading of Derrida are quite different than those that follow from Searle's reading of him. Searle's reading implies that intentionality plays no role in deciding the meaning of a text, whereas my own reading implies that there are a number of difficulties involved in equating intentionality and meaning. As Derrida points out: "I must recall that at no time does SEC invoke the absence, pure and simple, of intentionality. Nor is there any break, pure and simple, with intentionality."²⁷ We shall see that Searle's misunderstanding of Derrida's argument inevitably contaminates much of his analysis of *SEC*.

Searle's analysis begins with a challenge to the distinction Derrida purportedly makes between writing and speech. On Searle's reading, Derrida argues that both iterability and the absence of

the receiver from the sender are key elements distinguishing writing from speech. However, Searle argues, the repeatability of signs applies to all forms of communication, and so iterability does not distinguish writing from speech. Searle further argues that any written communication can function in the presence as well as in the absence of the sender or the receiver, and so it too does not distinguish writing from speech. He therefore contends that Derrida is mistaken about what distinguishes writing from speech.

Having revealed what he takes to be Derrida's error, Searle then argues that what does distinguish writing from speech is the (relative) permanence of writing, and it is this idea of permanence that allows each of the elements mentioned above to function as they do. Yet Searle's argument, while essentially correct, is beside the point; it does not apply to *SEC*. At no time in *SEC* does Derrida propose to distinguish writing from speech. As he puts it, "Sarl [Searle] begins again with the question disqualified by *SEC*, what distinguishes 'written from spoken language.'" ²⁸ Indeed *SEC* never tries to distinguish writing from speech but rather it tries to identify a number of interpretive difficulties common to all forms of communication.

Yet, still believing he is correcting Derrida's argument, Searle claims that "the first confusion that Derrida makes, and it is important for the argument that follows, is that he confuses iterability with the permanence of the text. He thinks that the reason I can read dead authors is because their works are repeatable or iterable." ²⁹ Two points are worth mentioning

here. Searle is right to say that Derrida thinks we can read the work of dead authors because they are iterable. He is mistaken, however, in thinking Derrida confuses iterability with the permanence of the text. Let us consider the second point first.

In *SEC*, Derrida associates iterability with the French neologism 'restance,' that is, "remainders or remains, non-present remains."³⁰ Derrida speaks of non-present remains because for him there is always a possibility that some aspect of authorial intention can be communicated to others. Indeed he writes that "the remainder . . . is bound up with the minimal possibility of the re-mark . . . and with the structure of iterability."³¹ He seems to be saying here that it is possible to recover from a piece of writing something like the meaning that an author intended for producing it.

At first glance, it appears that Derrida is making some positive claims of his own about the role of intentionality in justifying interpretations. However this is misleading because Derrida fails to show how intention understood as a determinate presence is to be distinguished from intention understood as 'remainders or remains.' Presumably, he means to say that while an originally intentional power is never simply present, what is present constitutes, well, non-present remains. But Derrida never explains what it means for something to be a non-present remain and I confess I haven't any clear idea on how to help him out here. It may be the case that he is appealing to something like the points raised by Norris and me, but if so then Derrida does

not do nearly enough to suggest that we are on the right track in reading his work in this way.

Yet what seems clear enough is that the remains of intentionality is not to be confused with the idea of permanence. To see this more clearly I turn to the first point, i.e., we can read the works of dead authors because they are iterable. Derrida's use of the term iterability involves a number of meanings, none of which he elaborates upon in *SEC*. Yet, as already noted, iterability means that any linguistic element is repeatable in a wide range of contexts. The letter 'a' can obviously be repeated in very many different words (e.g., car, mechanic, automobile, jalopy) and in very many different contexts. This is what Searle understands iterability to mean, and this is why he confuses it with the idea of permanence. But I also noted that iterability applies both after the production of a piece of writing (in the case of the reader) and to the original production itself (in the case of the author).

It is the application of iterability to the original production of a piece of writing that is important. Derrida writes,

Iterability supposes a minimal remainder . . . in order that the identity of the self-same [intention or presence] be repeatable and identifiable *in, through,* and even *in view* of its alteration. For the structure of iteration--and this is another of its decisive traits--implies both identity and difference. . . . The iterability of an element divides its own identity *a priori*, even without taking into account the fact that this identity can only *determine* or *delimit* itself through differential relations to other elements and that it hence bears the mark of this difference.³²

This passage needs some unpacking. The first sentence points to what was just alluded to, i.e., some aspect of authorial intention can be conveyed in a piece of writing. The following sentences indicate why it is that authorial intention is not always faithfully conveyed. What needs unpacking is the second sentence, i.e., the iterability of an element divides its own identity a priori.

Derrida's point is that we sometimes seek to add--or take away--from the meaning of a word that we employ in our own piece of writing because we usually appropriate (or repeat) the word in reference to some other piece of writing. We appropriate a word from a text that, in the present instance, we seek to summarize or analyze in our own piece of writing. Alternatively, we appropriate a word from a dictionary for our own use. In each case, the limits of what the word in question can mean are in part fixed by what the writer can find out about its past use in other contexts, along with any other pertinent information he brings to the word's meaning. What a word means, then, is in part dependent on what purposes are relevant to the case in question. It is in part for this reason that Derrida insists that no author or speaker can totally control the production of meaning or interpretation.

We now arrive at what is perhaps the most important point of contention between Derrida and Searle. As Searle puts it, "I have left the most important issue in this section until last. Do the special features of writing determine that there is a break with the author's intentions in particular or with intentionality in

general in the forms of communication that occur in writing?"³³ For Searle, there is no getting away from intentionality when we attempt to decipher the meaning of the texts of other authors, and he understands Derrida as announcing a clear break between a piece of writing and the author's intention for producing it. This break can be taken to imply that intentionality cannot serve as a basis or foundation for deciding a text's meaning.

Before discussing the implication of Searle's question, it is worth citing Derrida's commentary on it: "This is called, once again, 'the most important issue'. . . . Since this occurs, indeed, at the end of the section, there is unfortunately a considerable risk that the premises of Searle's reading . . . will bar the way to everything in *Sec* that concerns intention and intentionality."³⁴ Indeed Searle's misunderstanding of Derrida's work from the outset of his essay precludes a proper reading of Derrida's position on this issue. His misunderstanding once again stems from the distinction he thinks that Derrida makes between writing and speech.

In apparent opposition to Derrida, Searle writes that "intentionality plays the same role in written as in spoken communication."³⁵ Contrary to what Searle seems to think, this point is something with which Derrida is in total agreement; intentionality does play the same role in writing as it does in speech. Derrida never tries to distinguish writing from speech, nor does he try to distinguish the role that intentionality plays in writing from the role that it plays in speech. The point that escapes Searle is that for Derrida an author or speaker can't

succeed in totally controlling the production meaning and interpretation, though authorial intention may still be an operative factor in deciding a text's meaning but not as a ground. In fact, it is not clear why Searle would disagree with these points and the only reason I can think of is that he has not grasped them as they are presented here.

At any rate, Searle's Reply is flawed from the very beginning, first in assuming that Derrida denies we can communicate meaning to one another, then in assuming that he tries to distinguish writing from speech, and finally in assuming that Derrida furnishes different roles to intentionality in writing and in speech. Of course, Derrida himself is guilty of extreme vagueness and ambiguity in presenting his views on the role of intentionality in justifying interpretations, not to mention that he fails to say how we can link intentionality to meaning. These sorts of misunderstandings are what lead many readers of the Derrida-Searle dispute (including Derrida himself) to assert that the dispute never really takes place.

(4) Some Concluding Remarks

The claims advanced in *SEC* are meant to call into question what Derrida takes to be a traditional (and crucial) feature of the communicative character of language, i.e., the claim that meaning is grounded in an original anchoring source such as intentionality. The technical term 'iterability' is supposed to explain why there is a decentering of an originally intentional power, a decentering which prevents any piece of writing or utterance from faithfully conveying to other thinking beings

exactly what was originally intended by the producer. This technical term, I have suggested, is a label for certain difficulties that Derrida thinks arise in all attempts to associate intentionality with meaning.

However, the fact that miscommunication is possible because of the difficulties mentioned in *SEC* seems hardly controversial when we get down to the heart of the matter. Derrida's views on the nature of iterability merely lend support to the claim that intentionality is not necessarily a clear and determinate ground for justifying the production of meaning and interpretation. This is what I call the weak sense of Derrida's position. Now, if Derrida's position were different, say, that intentionality could never serve as a foundation for deciding an author or speaker's intended communication, then this would be radical indeed. So far as I can tell, Derrida never says this outright, though it must be admitted that some of his remarks are so obscure that they invite the kind of readings of deconstruction put forward by Searle and others.

However, Derrida's rejoinder to Searle in "Limited Inc. a b c..." is in large part an attempt to expose Searle's failure to grasp the thesis of *SEC*. Searle, like many other critics, mistakenly takes Derrida to be arguing both for the view that we cannot successfully communicate with one another and, more specifically, for the view that we cannot decide at all what an author or speaker intends to say or do. The arguments put forward by Searle must be rejected simply because they do not apply to the thesis of *SEC*.

But what of the widely-held belief among scholars that deconstruction entails relativism? This charge is not surprising. Not even the weak sense of Derrida's thesis excludes the possibility of relativism. That is, a number of Derrida's critics have argued that his advice on how to go about interpreting a text amounts to nothing other than saying there are no rules or responsibilities for deciding its meaning or, more generally, that deconstruction promotes unconstrained interpretation.³⁶ Indeed Derrida's claims in *SEC* do not explain his position on what weight we ought to accord to standard constraints on the production meaning and interpretation.

Derrida goes to some length to demonstrate his point that we can never totally control the production of meaning and interpretation. And this gives rise to certain difficulties with his work. For example, when we interpret texts (or when we interpret the utterances of speakers), are we not left with deciding how much of the producer's intentions is 'present'? That is, how much of what Derrida calls 'non-present remains' is needed to get someone right? Unfortunately, the fact of the matter is that Derrida has said little or nothing about the fundamental question of the role of intentionality in justifying meaning and interpretation.

Because of his failure to explain the role of intentionality in justifying interpretations, Derrida leaves himself open to the criticism that deconstruction licenses the view that there is no theoretical way to determine what role intentionality has in regulating meaning and interpretation.

But if such is the case why should Derrida himself lay claim to having properly interpreted the texts of other authors? Why should he insist upon the view that intentionality plays a role in deciding the production of meaning and interpretation at all? Indeed why is he so resistant to Searle's reading of him?

In the "Afterword" to *Limited Inc.*, Gerald Graff raises similar questions in making the following point:

[I]n the United States at least, the controversy over your work has often become caught up in somewhat unprofitable disputes over whether words can mean anything determinate (i.e., whether your work eliminates all 'guardrails')--something which it seems you've never denied.³⁷

Derrida's long-winded and confusing response to Graff's comment can be summarized as follows:

[D]econstruction should never lead either to relativism or to any sort of indeterminism Otherwise, one could indeed say just anything at all and I have never accepted saying, or encouraging others to say, just anything at all, nor have I argued for indeterminacy as such.³⁸

The contention that deconstruction should not lead to relativism does not sit well with the fact that Derrida fails to explain why theorists cannot just say anything at all about what an author or a speaker intends to say or do. With this we touch again upon the distinction between unconstrained and constrained versions of relativism. An unconstrained version, the reader will recall, implies that all interpretations are equally valid whereas a constrained version implies that we cannot just say anything at all. Derrida clearly favours the latter view over the former. The pressing problem, however, is that Derrida never satisfactorily elaborates upon his position on this important issue.

In the next chapter, then, much of my discussion is concerned to explicate what Derrida has to say about what there is in deconstruction that precludes the view that anything goes. I shall argue that Derrida's work suffers from the kind of ambiguity that I attribute to Goodman's work with respect to his views on the constraints that there are on relativism, i.e., the implication that anything goes. That is, I shall argue that Derrida's textual relativism labours under serious difficulties in that it fails to block the view that anything goes.

Indeed in what follows my final position is that Derrida deprives himself of the means to assert that it is rationally acceptable to accept as true our interpretations of what people think and mean. Put another way, what Derrida's fails to acknowledge is that true or correct interpretations are just those that yield an explanation of a person's verbal or nonverbal behaviour which renders it rational, or at least as rational as it can be. The reason for this, I shall be arguing, is that unlike Davidson and like-minded thinkers, Derrida fails to explain how and why we can be charitable to what a speaker or an author intends to say or do. This, I want to urge, is just what makes Derrida's deconstructionism untenable.

CHAPTER FOUR

RELATIVISM IN ONE OF ITS LATEST FORMS

I never proposed "a kind of 'all or nothing' choice between pure realization of self-presence and complete freeplay or undecidability." I never believed in this and I never spoke of 'complete freeplay or undecidability.' Greatly over-estimated in my texts . . . this notion of 'freeplay' is an inadequate translation of the lexical network connected to the word *jeu*, which I used in my first texts, but sparingly in a highly defined manner. Above all, no completeness is possible for undecidability.

---Jacques Derrida¹

This concluding chapter examines five distinct but related issues that inform the relationship between relativism and deconstruction. I shall first consider Derrida's position on the nature of truth and its cognates, along with what status we can attribute to that position with respect to the thesis of relativism. Second, I shall again examine Derrida's views on the meaning and interpretation, though this time I concentrate on the differences between textual realism and textual relativism. This way of approaching the matter best explains the kind of relativism at issue in deconstruction. Third, I shall turn to consider whether relativism can survive the standard criticisms raised against it by its detractors. Fourth, I shall examine a more recently developed objection to relativism in order to point out what I take to be the main weakness of Derrida's version of relativism. Finally, I shall consider, in light of all this, what we are to make of the impact of deconstruction on the contemporary intellectual scene.

(1) Deconstruction and Relativism: Some Preliminaries

It is now time to confront the central issue of this study, namely, the nature of the relationship between deconstruction and relativism. We must determine whether it is in fact the case that Derrida countenances alternative practices of evaluation; whether deconstruction asserts that what counts as true or meaningful relative to one practice need not be true or meaningful to another. Furthermore, we must determine whether Derrida holds the view that any practice of evaluation whatever is as good as any other; whether deconstruction entails the view that anything goes. I begin by recalling the relativist's core theses, then argue that Derrida's deconstructionism entails relativism.

Relativism, as I have construed it, is characterized by four theses:

- (i) All knowledge-claims whatever presuppose some or other practice of evaluation according to which such claims are assessed for truth, correctness or rightness.
- (ii) Scholars and other reflective persons have employed different practices with respect to the same subject matter and sometimes the differences between those practices are ultimate.
- (iii) In cases where the differences are ultimate, it is indefensible to hold that one practice is more privileged than another.
- (iv) Thus, the decision to endorse a given practice over others is arbitrary.

Thesis (i) asserts that without appeal to some or other practice of evaluation it makes no sense to talk about knowledge-claims being true, correct or right at all. Such practices determine what counts as evidence for a given knowledge-claim as well as dictate what weight should be given to such evidence. Thesis (iv), however, asserts that the decision to endorse a practice is arbitrary; it is a matter of choice based on preference,

interest, purpose, and the like. This situation will obtain, according to theses (ii) and (iii), in cases where there is no further norm or criterion to which appeal can be made in order to determine which of a range of competing practices is privileged. So the relativist's basic contention is that to the extent that proponents of competing practices disagree over the norms to be employed in assessing knowledge-claims, their disagreements are not rationally resolvable.

To make better sense of the relativist's basic contention it will be useful to describe in broad outline the slide from the rejection of a transcendental point of view to relativism. This is of interest to us for the sharp way in which it brings out the difference between anti-relativist and relativist positions. From the vantage point of metaphysical realism, for example, any philosophical position which holds that knowledge-claims can be justified only by reference to a scheme, frame or perspective resembles relativism. Hence, it is sensible to examine what the difference is between philosophical positions that reject both absolutism and relativism and those which maintain that the denial of a transcendental point of view entails relativism.

This way of approaching the matter produces a somewhat different perspective on the differences between anti-relativist and relativist positions than that put forward in the first chapter regarding the relativist's denial of absolutism. My claim here is simply that if we can understand what the rejection of a transcendental view entails for the relativist, we will know something more of his reasons for asserting thesis (iv). There is

of course a wide range of philosophical positions between the two extremes of a transcendental point of view and relativism. My aim in what follows is not to provide an exhaustive survey of such positions but rather to identify why relativists insist that the denial of a transcendental point of view necessarily entails relativism.

Metaphysical realism is the philosophical position most often put under attack by relativists. It is, so to speak, the default position against which many other philosophical positions are defined. The most striking features of metaphysical realism can be summed up as follows. Firstly, the external world is comprised of a fixed totality of mind-independent objects.² More simply, there is a real world that exists entirely independent of human representations. Secondly, truth, meaning and reference depend on the accuracy of correspondence between signs and objects. Put another way, knowledge-claims will be true if and only if they correspond exactly to the way things are. There is, on this view, an independent way of deciding which of a range of competing practices will yield true descriptions of reality. Thus conceived, the correspondence criterion entails that there is one and only one correct account of the world. Since knowledge is about a mind-independent reality, and since what counts as true knowledge-claims accurately represent that reality, there can be at most one true and complete account of the world. Metaphysical realism thus places rigorous external constraints on what can properly be said about the familiar world.

Searle's conception of the Western Rationalistic Tradition is at one remove from transcendental realism.³ While he endorses the view that the world is comprised of mind-independent objects, he steps back from the claim that truth and its cognates depend on a one-to-one correspondence between signs and objects.⁴ That is, he settles for a high degree of approximation between statements and facts.⁵ Moreover, he rejects the 'God's Eye' point of view commonly associated with metaphysical realism in acknowledging that the principles he defends may need adjusting here and there over the course of time. But while Searle agrees that what is rationally acceptable can change over time, he holds that truth is ahistorical and changeless.⁶ In accordance with metaphysical realism, he contends that there can be only one true account of the world.⁷ So Searle's conception of the Western Rationalistic Tradition also asserts that there are external constraints which shape our discourses on the familiar world.

In a recent book, *The Construction of Social Reality*, Searle extends his defense of realism to include the nature of social reality.⁸ The question that interests him is "[h]ow there can be an objective world of money, property, marriage . . . in a world that consists entirely of physical particles in fields of force" ⁹ In answer to this question, he attempts to develop a general theory of the ontology of social facts and of the human institutions that support them. Roughly put, Searle argues that some of the objective facts we discover about the experienced world are only facts by human agreement. By this he means that some facts (e.g., specially marked pieces of paper count as

dollar bills) are entirely dependent on the human institutions, i.e., government treasury departments, that create them. These sorts of facts are what he calls 'institutional' facts.

According to Searle, all institutional facts form a part of larger network of facts, which he calls 'social' facts. For him social facts are just those that involve our collective intentionality.¹⁰ By this he means that human beings share intentional states and engage in cooperative behaviour such as the formation of human institutions through which we conduct our personal and professional affairs. The concept of 'collective intentionality' lies at the core of his account of the way social reality is assimilated to physical reality. Indeed he writes that "[t]he central span of the bridge from physics to society is collective intentionality, and the decisive movement on that bridge in the creation of social reality is the collective intentional imposition of function on entities that cannot perform those functions without that imposition."¹¹ I take Searle's point to be that the physical features of a piece of paper are insufficient to fulfil the function of a dollar bill in human society. Dollar bills cannot exist in isolation but only by reference to our collective intentionality through which our complex institutional realities of banking and other systems of exchange are created and maintained.

Searle's account of the structure and maintenance of social reality is of course more complex than presented above, but that need not concern us here. More important for our purposes is his claim that institutional facts "exist . . . on top of brute

physical facts."¹² Brute facts are just those that do not depend on human institutions for their existence. In the absence of collective intentionality, Searle maintains, such things as mountains and molecules will still exist. He proposes to find support for this assertion in his conception of external realism, which he defines as *"the view that there is a way that things are that is logically independent of all human representations."*¹³ Yet he concedes that "I [Searle] do not believe there could be a non-question-begging argument for ER [external realism]."¹⁴ Does this undermine his thoughts on the nature of reality? Not according to Searle. He argues, in effect, that ER is a fundamental background supposition to our understanding of the world around us.¹⁵

In large part, Searle's motivation for grounding institutional and social facts in brute facts is to fend off attacks on realism as put forward by relativists and others. As Searle notes, "many people . . . have argued that all reality is somehow a human creation, that there are no brute facts, but only facts dependent on the human mind."¹⁶ Chapters seven and eight of Searle's book are devoted to analyzing a number of attacks on realism (e.g., conceptual relativism) and to defending the viability of realism against such attacks.

What I find worrisome in Searle's analysis of these issues is the constant shift in weighting he gives to two of the relativist's basic contentions: (i) the contention that systems of representation are mandatory for describing anything; and (ii) that our actual efforts to describe the real world are influenced

by all sorts of factors, including cultural and historical contexts. For example, we find Searle dismissing the idea that different conceptual schemes generate fundamentally different accounts of the same reality or, worse still, generate different realities altogether. For Searle, "The appearance of inconsistency [with external realism] is an illusion" ¹⁷ And yet he insists on a point that the relativist finds appealing. Of each and every conceptual scheme, he writes that "it represents its target under certain aspects and not others. In short, it is only from a point of view that we describe reality" ¹⁸ These are the sorts of claims that relativists (rightly or wrongly) put forward in defense of relativism.

More importantly, the reader will notice that the examples Searle gives in defense of realism are question-begging:

Think of the relation of realism and conceptual relativism like this: Take a corner of the world, say, the Himalayas, and think of it as it was prior to the existence of any human beings. Now imagine that humans come along and represent the facts in various different ways. . . . Next, imagine that all the humans eventually cease to exist. Now what happens to the existence of the Himalayas and all the facts about the Himalayas in the course of these vicissitudes? Absolutely nothing. ¹⁹

Examples like this one would hardly convince the relativist. As noted elsewhere, the relativist would retort that there are no brute facts about the Himalayas apart from the description in which such facts are contained because there is no way to compare a description with a world-in-itself existing apart from the given description. Any such comparison, the relativist contends, is question-begging since it assumes as correct the very description it claims to check.

Now, I do not mean to say that Searle's position is necessarily undermined by the peculiar approach he uses to defend realism. Rather, my point is that the arguments he presents in defense of realism will hardly sway the relativist. For some anti-relativists like myself, Searle's position is intuitively appealing, especially his claim that ER is a core background presupposition to our discourses on knowledge, but it remains open to question whether it is philosophically tenable. Moreover, I shall try to show in a later section that McDowell does as good or better a job at defending realism, and certainly Davidson's argument against relativism is, to my mind, much clearer and indeed more convincing than Searle's.

I shift now to briefly discuss Putnam's internalism once more as it is also relevant to the slide from the rejection of a transcendental point of view to relativism.²⁰ Putnam's internal realism is intended to occupy a middle of the road position between absolutism and relativism, the metaphor for which is: "The mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world."²¹

One of the central themes of Putnam's internalism is the renunciation of the externalist point of view that says there is some fixed totality of mind or frame-independent objects that exist entirely independently of our thought and talk. For Putnam, the objects we encounter in the world do not shape our concepts but rather the reverse; objects themselves are shaped by our conceptions of them. He writes, "We cut up the world into objects

when we introduce one or another scheme or description."²² And for Putnam there are a variety of schemes or practices with which to cut up the world: "There is no God's Eye point of view that we can know or usefully imagine; there are only the various points of view of actual persons reflecting various interests and purposes that their theories and descriptions subserve."²³

However, Putnam's internalism is not, as the metaphor above suggests, completely devoid of external constraints. As Putnam would have it, "Internalism does not deny that there are experiential inputs to knowledge" ²⁴ Here we find Putnam turning back towards the externalist perspective to some degree in saying that there are as a matter of fact some thinly-described data that, while not entirely free of the observer's perspective, provide evidence for a relation of correspondence between signs and things. It is in this spirit that Putnam tries to carve out a philosophical position between a transcendental point of view and relativism. But as noted earlier, a number of Putnam's critics are of a mind that his internalism is not completely successful in avoiding the collapse into relativism. The charge of relativism is made against Putnam, I suspect, because his discussion on what constitutes an external constraint is rather obscure.

For relativists, however, there is no obscurity on the question of what constitutes an external constraint; quite simply, there are none. Given that all experiential input can be interpreted in different ways, there are no mind or frame-

independent objects to which appeal can be made. Put another way, since people's beliefs about the world are determined by their practices of evaluation, and since what is rationally acceptable today may not be rationally acceptable in the distant or even near future, there is no independent way of determining which of a range of competing practices yields the one true and complete account of the world. Thus conceived, relativists hold that the notion of truth and its cognates must be reconceptualized. In this connection, I turn now to discuss how Derrida reconceptualizes the nature of truth and its cognates. This reconceptualization, we shall see, is at a far remove from anti-relativist positions that deny absolutism.

The first thing to notice is that for Derrida all practices of evaluation are contained within institutional settings. He writes, "the value of truth (and of all those values associated with it) is never contested in my writings, but only reinscribed in . . . larger, more stratified contexts."²⁵ This means that truth and its cognates are the product of social practices, that is, of the productive powers of those who work to circumscribe what counts as true or meaningful in this or that discursive practice. The unsettling conclusion of this position is not just that Derrida does not recognize any external constraints on what we can say about the familiar world but also that nothing--no thing--justifies our taking knowledge-claims as being true in the standard, nonrelativistic sense.

Barry Allen has directed his attention to this aspect of Derrida's work in saying that "nothing--no thing--makes a sentence or theory true, not even a social thing like a practice, or a relative thing like a relationship of power."²⁶ Allen here speaks of 'a social thing like practice' and 'relationship of power' because he detects in Derrida's work an appeal to institutional practices of evaluation that are never stable over time. Of this, Derrida himself writes that "[t]he ties between words, concepts, and things, truth and reference, are not absolutely and purely guaranteed by some metatextuality or metadiscursivity. However stabilized, complex, and overdetermined it may be, there is a context and one that is only relatively firm, neither absolutely solid [fermete] nor entirely closed. . . ."²⁷ In turn, Allen takes passages like this one to mean that the "only 'constitution' of meaning, the only 'determination' of reference, the only 'making-true' is the work of the productive powers which evaluate these values and make selected judgments circulate, passing for true, relevant, implied, objective, etc."²⁸ The implication of these citations, as far as Derrida's deconstructionism is concerned, is this: there is no important difference between what counts as true and meaningful for Searle and like-minded thinkers and what passes for truth and meaning in this or that practice of evaluation.

With this line of thinking we reach the sense in which Derrida's deconstructionism entails thesis (iv) of the relativist's position, i.e., that the decision to endorse a given

practice over others is arbitrary. According to Derrida, we cannot single out one practice of evaluation as being more privileged than another. The grounds for so thinking rest with his basic contention that since we cannot distinguish signs ontologically from something that is not itself a sign, there can be no indisputable facts about linguistic meaning. What facts there are about verbal meaning rest only with the practice of evaluation that we endorse. And our practices of evaluation, Derrida maintains, are "the momentary result of a whole history of relations of force (intra- and extra-semantic, intra- and extradiscursive, intra- and extraliterary or -philosophical, intra- and extraacademic, etc.)."²⁹ Given the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs, i.e., what they stand for, and the historicity of our practices of evaluation, there can be no way of showing that any one way of matching word with world is more privileged than another.

This, I think, is what Derrida had in mind when he wrote:

Once this generality and this a priori structure has been recognized, the question can be raised, not whether a politics is implied (it always is), but which politics is implied in such a practice of contextualization. This you can go on to analyze, but you cannot suspect it, much less denounce it except on the basis of another contextual determination every bit as political. In short, I do not believe that any neutrality is possible in this area.³⁰

The a priori structure of which Derrida speaks is the political dimension through which we seek to make intelligible the world around us. This means that what passes for truth, meaning, reference, interpretation, and the like, must be judged as such only from within some or other practice of evaluation; there is

no neutral standpoint to which appeal can be made to determine which of a given set of practices is better than others. But this is not the whole of the matter.

Derrida contends further that where there are practices of evaluation there are interests and purposes between which there can be no argument. Our practices of evaluation, he writes, "will always be formulated in a given context, starting from given forces or interests, against another manner of determining the context and of imposing this determination."³¹ Practices of evaluation are deeply interwoven with certain interests and purposes, which are themselves subject to change over time. What we have here is essentially the claim that what people count as rational acceptability depends ultimately on their interests and purposes, and since these vary from practice to practice, no privileged conception of rationality is attainable.

But conceived as an account of the nature of truth, rationality, reference, and the like, Derrida's position faces some serious difficulties, most centrally: no practice of evaluation in any domain of inquiry is better than any other. The argument for this position is that as different people employ different practices in justifying knowledge-claims, and as there is no privileged way of showing that one practice is more privileged than another, there is no reason to think that the knowledge-claims arrived at by reference to one practice are better justified than the knowledge-claims arrived at by another. This of course amounts to the view that anything goes. I shall return to this problem in a later section.

In the next section, I again take up what Derrida has to say about the production of meaning and interpretation. This time, however, I shall concentrate on the differences between textual realism and textual relativism. The motivation for this approach lies with Derrida's peculiar claim that "'literary audiences' are far less naive and often much better prepared to analyze these problems than certain professional philosophers, with a penchant for pontificating, appear to realize."³² I take his point to be that many literary theorists have come to realize better than anyone else that our practices of evaluation are institutional rather than founded on 'natural realities.' An examination of Derrida's views on this matter will allow us to see more clearly why he cannot dismiss the claim that deconstruction entails relativism. (I note here that Derrida's work is meant to apply to any philosophical context where interpretation is crucial. For our present purposes, however, it is useful to restrict the discussion to what he has to say about the nature of textual interpretation.)

(2) Derrida's Textual Relativism

The textual relativism I attribute to Derrida maintains that the rational justification for an interpretation is contained within some or other practice of evaluation. The standards that make up a given practice not only set for proponents of that practice what they are to do as interpreters, i.e., what strategies interpreters are to employ in producing interpretations, but also they provide reasons for believing in the acceptability of the interpretations produced. Construed in the

way, the justification for an interpretation is dependent on acceptability, where acceptability itself is determined by reference to the standards sanctioned by the proponents of a given practice. What I take to be Derrida's textual relativism, then, holds that one can rationally justify interpretations, but only relative to some or other practice of evaluation.

Crucial to textual relativism thus conceived is the pivotal choice between endorsing a relativism with or without constraints. With respect to the production of meaning and interpretation, a relativism with constraints holds that while there is a range of competing practices (e.g., deconstruction, hermeneutics, pragmatism) which offer alternate interpretations, we are right in ruling out some interpretations as incorrect. A relativism without constraints, on the other hand, holds that all interpretations are equally valid, that a text can mean just anything at all. I want to urge that Derrida's textual relativism is an unconstrained relativism. This point needs to be stated more carefully.

In what follows, I will argue that for Derrida practices of evaluation are formulated relative to interests and purposes, and that since these vary from practice to practice, no stable or privileged practice of evaluation seems attainable. Of this, he writes that "Such stabilization is relative, even if it is sometimes so great as to seem immutable and permanent."³³ There is for Derrida no ahistorical or perspective-neutral conception of rational justification for interpretations. Moreover, I will argue that for Derrida the question of what evidence there is in

a text for determining its meaning or meanings becomes available only within the very act of interpreting. For him, any so-called 'internal evidence' that one might think is in a text "has the structure of a differential trace, and that one cannot refer to this 'real' except in an interpretive experience."³⁴ In short, for Derrida texts do not constrain interpretations but are themselves the products of interpretations.

For textual realists, on the other hand, texts do constrain interpretations in the sense that one can appeal to evidence in the text that is purportedly not dependent on practices of evaluation. It is worth discussing at this time how and why, according to a relativist like Derrida, text-based realism goes wrong. Textual realism can take various forms but I here choose to discuss a highly influential version, namely, E.D. Hirsch's intentional form of textual realism. Hirsch's fundamental conviction is that what a text means is just what its author intends it to mean: "For if the meaning of a text is not the author's, then no interpretation can possibly correspond to the meaning of the text, since the text can have no determinate or determinable meaning."³⁵ The criterion of success for what constitutes a correct interpretation, or what Hirsch otherwise calls an 'objectively valid interpretation,' is just the expression of authorial intention.

He equates textual meaning to the expression of the author's intended meaning, and claims that this can serve as a universal norm that provides an objective method for choosing among alternative interpretations:

As soon as anyone claims validity for his interpretation . . . he is immediately caught in a web of logical necessity. If his claim to validity is to hold, he must be willing to measure his interpretation against a genuinely discriminating norm, and the only compelling normative principle that has ever been brought forward is the old-fashioned ideal of rightly understanding what the author meant.³⁶

Hirsch thus aims to provide an objective method for choosing not only among interpretations that are concerned with a correct expression of authorial intention but also for choosing among all textual interpretations whatever.

The trouble with Hirsch's account is revealed in his rebuttal of the view that textual meaning sometimes has nothing to do with the author's intended meaning. Against this view, he declares that a text's meaning is indeterminate until authorial intention is taken into account. According to him, "This is true even of the simplest declarative sentence like 'My car ran out of gas' (did my Pullman dash from a cloud of Argon?)."³⁷ This sentence is open to a range of interpretations until one recognizes that "[t]he array of possibilities only begins to become a more selective system of *probabilities* when, instead of confronting merely a word sequence, we also posit a speaker who very likely means something."³⁸ He therefore insists that only by attributing authorial intent to a word sequence can one secure a determinate interpretation of the sentence in question. On Hirsch's view, then, the point at which the indeterminacy of textual meaning is dislodged is just when authorial intent is bestowed on the text.

But as relativists would no doubt point out, Hirsch allows for acts of interpreting prior to the point at which authorial intent is conferred on a piece of writing. That is, the relativist will hold that Hirsch cannot retain the claim that textual evidence is not determined by practices of evaluation while also saying that interpreters appeal to supplementary information in the movement from indeterminacy to determinable meaning. More importantly, the relativist would point out that Hirsch maintains that such supplementary information involves adding the presence of authorial intent. Or, to put this another way, while Hirsch rightly says that authorial intention can play a role in textual interpretation, the pertinent point that eludes him is that the supplementary information to which interpreters must appeal is information concerning authorial intent. Such information is the product of what interpreters take the author's intentions to be and so it does not constitute the presence of original authorial intent in what a text conveys.

Hirsch, of course, could say that any collateral information we produce about authorial intent is relevant to inferring what an author *did* intend for producing a text. But this way of reasoning still falls short of what Hirsch needs to make his point since what counts as authorial intent is a context-dependent matter. In view of this, what constitutes authorial intent always involves determining what is being said by the author in what is conveyed by the text. This, however, depends on the practice of evaluation that selects and sanctions what is to count as evidence for what the author intended. Hence, the

relativist would want to say that there is no way of telling what the author *did* intend apart from what an interpreter takes to be evidence of authorial intent.

As an example of what the relativist has in mind, consider what now seems to be a widely accepted interpretation of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.³⁹ Briefly, Kuhn's book is often read as contending that there is no such thing as a rational justification of paradigms and that scientific practice is not governed by rules, and so on. But Kuhn himself has rejected this interpretation of his work, and he does so mainly on the grounds that others have misinterpreted his intentions for producing that text.⁴⁰ Shall we say that what Kuhn's critics think is conveyed by the text is evidence of Kuhn's *real* intentions? Or shall we say that Kuhn's claims about his own intentions are *real* but do not reflect what is conveyed by the text? In either case, the relativist will hold that interpretations of Kuhn's work, including Kuhn's interpretation of his own work, are to be explained by reference to a given practice of evaluation rather than by appeal to something 'real' in the text.

Consider a parallel example from the study of ancient texts. Philosophers--and historians of philosophy in particular--often face the considerably difficult task of interpreting the texts of authors long dead. Suppose they take as the function and object of interpretation the need to retrieve meanings (or intentions) that would have been conveyed by the author to his contemporaries. In such cases, an interpreter will ask questions of the

form "What did the author mean by this word or sentence?" For a relativist like Derrida, to suggest that the interpreter can retrieve or reproduce the very source that founded the meaning of the word or sentence in question seems untenable.

Indeed Derrida holds that any commentary on a text "is already actively interpretive and can therefore open the way to all sorts of strategic ruses in order to have constructions pass as evidences. . . ." ⁴¹ I take the point to be that the question of what a text conveys cannot be settled by appealing to 'internal' evidence that is simply or durably present in a text since the evidence becomes available only when some determination of what is in the text has been made in the very act of interpreting. Seen in this light, interpretations cannot be supported (or refuted) by appealing to evidence in a text that is not predetermined by a given practice of evaluation. But if all interpretations are underdetermined by internal evidence and if interpretations are constructs 'which pass as evidences' for what a text conveys, then this does indeed imply relativism.

At this point we may want to respond against the relativist that while there may be no ideal standpoint of disinterested interpretive practice, there are surely some norms or standards that all interpreters must respect. What sort of norms can be said to constrain the production of meaning and interpretation? Coherence, clarity, consistency, accuracy, and the like, are likely candidates as they are intended to constrain what we can say about what a text conveys. Or what about norms of the form "avoid blatant inconsistencies that are not made on purpose" or,

relatedly, "do not make up things that bear no relation to the text whatsoever"? Does Derrida deny that such norms constrain the production of meaning and interpretation? It seems to me that Derrida would question what we are to make of such norms, that is, how they operate in this or that practice of evaluation.

For Derrida, what constitutes consistency and the like depends on the productive powers that work to select and sanction what counts as consistent or inconsistent in a given context. He writes, "the norms of minimal intelligibility are not absolute or ahistorical, but merely more stable than others. They depend on socio-institutional conditions . . . that in principle may be analyzed, deconstructed, transformed . . ."⁴² I take his point to be that even when norms are well-defined, say, with an eye to the argumentative rigor and logical consistency of textual interpretation, no conception of any such norm is privileged. The grounds for so thinking is that any norm can be ordered and weighed in more than one way.

To make sense of this last point we should look again at what Derrida says about the political dimension of practices: "[O]ne cannot do anything, least of all speak, without determining . . . a context. Such experience is always political because it implies, insofar as it involves determination, a certain non-''natural'' relationship to others. . . ."⁴³ To say that we cannot do anything without determining a context is for Derrida just to say that interpreters make selected judgments for what passes as evidence for a text's meaning. And what passes as evidence implies that there is nothing to a text itself that is

indifferent to the productive powers of interpreters. We can formulate what Derrida has to say about the relativity of practices of evaluation as follows.

Take any literary or nonliterary text. Given (i) all available information about the author's reasons for producing a text; (ii) all available information about the author's choice of interpretive practice (e.g., pragmatism, hermeneutics, phenomenology, ordinary-language philosophy, deconstruction, Hirschian authorial intention, psychoanalytic criticism, Iser's reader-response theory, New Criticism) if any⁴⁴; (iii) the interpreter's own interpretive practice, we can reasonably suppose that any given interpretation seeks to clarify (iv) what is conveyed by the literary or nonliterary text in question. With this formulation, we can state in a general way how Derrida thinks that interpreters work to settle various features of a text into contexts for the purpose of interpreting what is conveyed by that text. (Granted, Derrida himself has never said how we should go about interpreting texts but if we wish to understand the nature of his brand of relativism I think that we shall have to make the leap here).

Suppose an interpreter seeks (pace Hirsch) an explanation of an author's reasons for producing a text. More precisely, suppose the interpreter aims not just to give an account of what is conveyed by a text but rather is concerned with giving a correct account of an author's intentions for producing a text. In such situations, a relativist like Derrida will hold that the interpreter's practice of evaluation, including his specific

interests and purposes, are crucial to his interpretation of a text. They form the background against which some features of the text will appear relevant whereas other features will not, and therefore determines what about the text requires explication. One way to characterize why, according to Derrida, (iii) is a crucial feature of interpretation is to see how it makes a text mean something other than what its author intends it to mean.

In the last section, I made a case for construing Derrida as saying that truth and its cognates depend for their content on practices of evaluation, and that such practices are formulated within larger political-social-institutional contexts, or what in "Signature Event Context" he otherwise calls 'code.'⁴⁵ By the term 'code' Derrida means the collection of rules and conventions to which interpreters appeal in order to specify what counts as evidence for a given interpretation. Codes, then, are essentially the norms and standards that interpreters sanction when they endorse a given practice of evaluation over others.

We need to keep in mind here that for Derrida there is not just one code, i.e., one objectively valid method of interpretation as Hirsch and like-minded thinkers would have it, but that there can be a wide variety of different codes. Indeed, a central point of Derrida's work on the production of meaning and interpretation is to show how "the authority of the code as a finite system of rules" can be deconstructed into a multiplicity of recontextualizations and reinterpretations, that they can be ordered and weighed in more than one way.⁴⁶ The reason for this is that beyond any present code lies a network of conditions,

assumptions, presuppositions, values, interests and purposes on which it depends. For Derrida, the contextual transformation of these conditions, assumptions, presuppositions, values, interests and purposes remains always an open possibility. The effect of this position is that a text cannot by itself define the context in which it is to be 'correctly' interpreted; as Derrida says in "Limited Inc abc . . . , "[f]or a context never creates itself ex nihilo, no mark [sign] can create or engender a context on its own, much less dominate it."⁴⁷

For Derrida, the same condition that makes it impossible for a sign to determine meaning makes it impossible for a code to ultimately determine a text's meaning. The condition that undermines the authority of a sign, of authorial intention and of any given code is what Derrida calls 'iterability.' Iterability, the reader will recall, means that for a sign to be a sign at all it must be readable, i.e., it must be open to interpretation, by someone other than its author or even its intended receiver: "the sign possesses the characteristic of being readable even if the moment of its production is irrevocably lost and even if I do not know what its alleged author-scriptor consciously intended to say the moment he wrote it, i.e., abandoned it to its essential drift."⁴⁸ Derrida's point here is not simply that the author cannot enforce a correct interpretation of his work nor, I should add, is he much concerned with situations where a misinterpretation of an author's work is at issue.

When Derrida speaks of a sign continuing "to produce effects independently" of the presence of an author's intent, what he has

in mind is not simply the claim that a text can have meanings apart from what the author intended--which is a claim that I shall take up below--but rather that a text must from the very moment of its production be free from authorial control.⁴⁹ That is to say, what concerns him is not merely the difference between what an author takes a given sign or sentence to mean and what these are taken to mean by interpreters; what concerns him instead is the fact that there is a *differance* at the origin of signs which "intervenes from the moment that there is a mark [sign]" and, he goes on to say, this is "[l]ike the trace it is, the mark is neither present or absent. This is what is remarkable about it. . . ." ⁵⁰ For Derrida, the failure of linguistic signs, of authorial intent, and of codes to govern interpretation points to a deeper problem about reference.

This, of course, raises the notorious problem about reference dealt with in previous chapters. The technical terms 'trace' and 'supplement' or, likewise, the conception of *differance* at the origin of the sign is for Derrida what makes it untenable to hold the view that the marks in a text or what goes on inside our heads (e.g., intentions, ideas, concepts, mental representations) must determine what our signs refer to. I shall not go any further into these technical terms here. But although Derrida's conception of the ceaseless play of signs makes it impossible for meaning to be fully determined by code, since for Derrida nothing--no thing--can make a sign or a text mean one thing rather than another, there are still the productive powers of scholars and others who work to make signs and texts mean

something. The relative stability of interpretive practices is the only determination there is for a text's meaning.

In this respect, the sense an interpreter makes of (iv) what a text conveys depends on the sense he makes of (i) the author's reasons for producing a text and (ii) the author's choice of interpretive practice relative to (iii) the interpreter's own interpretive practice. The implication of this position is that even if some theorists want to constrain what interpreters can say about (iv) by appealing to (i) and (ii), (iii) may lead different interpreters to put forward competing accounts of (iv). According to Derrida, then, a text derives its meaning from the many varied ways in which interpreters can make sense of (i) through (iv). This is the effect of Derrida's treatment of the production of meaning and interpretation.

Hirsch appears to be aware of this line of thinking when he writes that "[s]ince genuine certainty in interpretation is impossible, the aim of the discipline must be to reach consensus, on the basis of what is known, that correct understanding has probably been achieved."⁵¹ To reach consensus on the basis of what is known is, however, just to say that interpreters deliberate upon those features of a text that are deemed to be contextually relevant in interpreting what is conveyed by the text. Moreover, and more importantly, to reach consensus that a 'correct understanding has probably been achieved' is for Derrida just to say that the validity for an interpretation is determined by acceptability, where acceptability is dependent on practices of evaluation. And, as Derrida would have it, where there are

practices of evaluation, there are interests and purposes between which there can be no argument. But this is not all.

Derrida's textual relativism not only entails that what counts as evidence for authorial intention is relative to practice of evaluation but also that interpretations can serve a wide variety of interests and purposes that are essentially unconcerned with authorial intention. This adds another element to Derrida's textual relativism. That is to say, while Derrida does not deny that accounts of authorial intention can play a role in explaining what a text conveys, he nonetheless complains that the emphasis on intentionality "has always only *protected*, it has never *opened*, a reading."⁵² Though Derrida is anything but clear on this point, I take him to mean that both literary and nonliterary texts may provide opportunities for normative reflection in that they can teach us something new, say, about our complex ethical-legal-political institutions without concerning ourselves at all with the author's reasons for producing a text. Instances of this type of interpretation are plentiful enough.

Take, for example, interpretations of religious scripture. Interpretations of a religious text often have little to do with authorial intention; that is, they are often concerned with how present-day readers have responded to that religious text. One of the goals of this sort of interpretation is to restore or improve understanding of, say, the dramatic or stirring role of a divine figure like Jesus, or of the spiritual import of some mysterious event such as the resurrection, or of the function and

significance of the eucharist, and so on. But, again, any piece of evidence that the interpreter might cite for what the religious text in question conveys is dependent on the practice of evaluation that the interpreter sanctions. So even in such cases the sense the interpreter makes of the religious text will depend in part on what evidence he thinks the text conveys.

Consider a similar example from the study of philosophical texts, say, of the work of Nietzsche. Arthur Danto has proposed an interesting reading of Nietzsche's treatment of the emergence of Western tragedy from early Greek Dionysiac rites.⁵³ According to Danto, Nietzsche saw better than anyone else that there was a moment in Western consciousness when the notion of 'tragedy' became separated from the religious ritual from which it evolved. Danto, however, holds that Nietzsche was not fully aware that the birth of tragedy was accompanied by the notion of representation. In effect, Danto claims that art stands apart from the reality it seeks to represent and takes its proper place as a medium for making knowledge-claims about the world rather than *being* part of the world. The upshot of his interpretation seems to be that those who (like Plato) would censor the arts on moral grounds fail to appreciate the artistic consciousness that has evolved through the emergence of Western tragedy.

Now, we might want to ask whether Danto's interpretation of Nietzsche's work offers a correct account of Nietzsche's beliefs on the emergence of Western tragedy or whether Danto merely uses Nietzsche's texts to tease out his own views on the formation of artistic consciousness. In either case, our interpretations of

Danto's essay will depend on the way in which we organize our considerations of (i) through (iv), as discussed above. That is, Danto's reading of Nietzsche as well as our interpretations of his reading of Nietzsche depends on the practice of evaluation we bring to bear on the issue at hand. On some interpretations of Danto's reading of Nietzsche, the question of whether he gets Nietzsche right will be of little or no interest.

If this is a plausible line of reasoning, then it is difficult to see why we should think, as Hirsch does, that 'the only compelling normative principle . . . is the old-fashioned ideal of rightly understanding what the author meant.' While Hirsch and like-minded thinkers may agree that this is the only relevant norm for them there is no logical necessity for others to think this way as well. That is, it seems to be the case that there can be many different norms between which there can be no argument. Jonathan Culler, for example, expresses the norm that he favours in saying that we need to read texts "as expressing a significant attitude to some problem concerning man and/or his relation to the universe."⁵⁴ This norm is quite different from the norm that Hirsch favours. We can express the gist of Culler's norm as follows.

Why do philosophers and literary theorists continue to read and teach to students the works of Descartes and Pascal? They do so in some cases not because they want to know more about the reasons Descartes and Pascal may have had for producing their respective texts, but because their texts pose enduring questions and concerns about the nature of epistemology, morality,

religion, metaphysics, and so forth. For Culler, if we can understand the answers to these questions and concerns in light of our present situation, we will know something more about our own problems and concerns. And the interpretations that count as correct in this context will be the ones that lead to new epistemic and moral insights about what Culler generally refers to as 'problems concerning man and/or his relation to the universe.' So getting Descartes or Pascal's reasons for producing their respective texts right isn't always pertinent.

This account of Culler's norm expresses the kind of open reading of texts that Derrida finds quite acceptable. But whereas we might want to argue that the possibility of producing such interpretations only amounts to saying that texts can mean something more than what the author intended, Derrida's point is quite different. For him, a text takes on a life of its own in that it can be understood in quite a different way every time an interpretation is produced. A text's meaning does not depend on the contingencies of the producer, that is, of what we know about (i) and (ii) as discussed earlier, for it is always determined by the interpreter's practice of evaluation. In this sense, authorial intent and, even more so, texts themselves do not constrain interpretations but rather what is conveyed by a text is essentially the product of the productive powers of interpreters who make selected judgments on what a text is said to convey. This is a remarkable position indeed and I shall draw out further its implications in the last section in taking up the

influence that deconstruction has had on the contemporary intellectual scene.

For our present purposes, all this is just to say that Derrida's conception of a more open (less constrained) reading of texts means that we can read texts in as many ways as there are practices of evaluation.⁵⁵ Put another way, Derrida not only holds that what constitutes evidence for authorial intent is dependent on what practice of evaluation is at work but also that interpretations can serve a wide variety of interests and purposes over and above the concern with what an author meant for producing a text. So, again, what I take to be Derrida's textual relativism can be construed as saying that there is a wide variety of practices of evaluation to which appeal can be made to determine a text's meaning, and between which there can be no argument.

What is troublesome with Derrida's textual relativism, however, is that it entails the view that disputes between those who endorse different practices of evaluation are impossible to resolve in a rational manner. The grounds for so thinking is that there is no neutral textual evidence, i.e., no determinate entity or presence, and no universal norm to which one can appeal to resolve debates between those who hold and endorse competing interpretive practices. More generally, Derrida holds that insofar as interpreters disagree over what constitutes proper interpretive practices, their differences are not rationally resolvable. So what I take to be Derrida's brand of relativism

amounts to saying that one can rationally justify interpretations, but only relative to a given practice of evaluation.

If the textual relativism I attribute to Derrida is right, it seems inevitable that reasonable people will continue to disagree about what makes an interpretation good or correct. This I find unacceptable. With this in mind, we can now close this section by outlining some of the difficulties that Derrida's brand of relativism labours under. If there are potentially many practices of evaluation to which interpreters can appeal, why should we think it isn't the case that anything goes? In the extreme, why couldn't a community of interpreters hold that a text's meaning can be accessed by emotion rather than reason or even that a text's meaning was revealed to them in a prophetic message announced by the ghost of a long dead author. After all, Derrida holds that we cannot refer to anything 'real' in a text except in an interpretive experience, where such experience is dependent on the practice of evaluation one sanctions.

Might we not conclude at this point that Derrida's textual relativism is an unconstrained version of relativism? I do not see how we can avoid doing so. For there is nothing in Derrida's work which suggests that there are any rational constraints on the choice of interpretive practices. Indeed for him the only constitution of meaning is the work of the productive powers who make a text mean one thing or another. And, according to the claims made in the name of deconstruction, it would seem to be the case that we are completely free to choose what practice of evaluation we like. Doubtless, Derrida himself would be horrified

at such a charge as he insists that "deconstruction should never lead either to relativism or to any sort of indeterminism. . . . Otherwise, one could indeed say just anything at all. . . ." ⁵⁶ To see why this bold assertion is untenable, we need only recall what Derrida's deconstructionism entails with respect to the production of meaning and interpretation.

To repeat, Derrida can be read as saying that texts cannot be supported (or rejected) by appealing to internal evidence in a text that is not predetermined by practices of evaluation. The question of what a text conveys cannot be settled by appealing to internal evidence given that the evidence becomes available only when some determination of what a text conveys has been made. This means that texts do not constrain interpretations but are themselves the product of interpretive activity. And from this Derrida holds that the justification for an interpretation is determined by acceptability, where acceptability is ultimately dependent on one's interests and purposes. But it is difficult to see on this account why there is a real difference between texts being open to a wide range of interpretations, which appears to be the moral of deconstruction, and the view that textual meaning is indeterminate, which leads to the charge that deconstruction entails relativism as well as to the view that anything goes.

In light of this reading of Derrida's views on textual interpretation, should we conclude that his deconstructionism is incoherent? After all, the point of calling someone a relativist is, in most cases anyways, to take a step towards dismissing his work as incoherent. It is not entirely clear, however, that

relativism is incoherent since those sympathetic to relativism have provided some grounds for thinking that this objection to relativism is untenable. This line of thinking is discussed in the next section. Then, in the final section, I shall examine a more recently developed objection to relativism in order to show how and why a relativism like Derrida's goes wrong.

(3) The Charge of Relativism's Incoherence

One common objection to relativism--indeed perhaps the standard objection--is that it immediately proves incoherent, i.e., that to state the relativist thesis is to refute it. If each and every knowledge-claim carries a tacit rider that it is a claim from a particular frame or practice, then isn't the claim to relativism itself relative to frame or practice? If so, the relativist must accept my assertion that relativism is incoherent for me and indeed for all other anti-relativists. In face of this assertion, it would seem that the relativist must either assert that the relativist thesis is absolutely true in which case relativism is false or he must assert that the relativist thesis is only relatively true in which case we need not accept it. We can state the problem at hand as well as the relativist's response to it more generally as follows.

Relativism is thought to be self-defeating because to assert that the relativist thesis is true is to assert that relativism is absolutely true. The tacit rider here is not just that relativism holds true in the practice or practices in which it is asserted as true, but that it holds true for each and every practice; that is, the relativist thesis is absolutely true and

not just contingently true. According to this formulation of the charge of self-refutation, the relativist has subverted his thesis by presupposing the very absolutism being denied.

In his *Logical Investigations*, Husserl expresses his acceptance of this line of thinking as follows:

Anything is true for a given species of judging beings that, by their constitution and laws of thought, must count as true. This doctrine is absurd. For it is part of its sense that the same proposition or content of judgment can be true for a subject of the species *homo*, but may be false for another subject of a differently constituted species. The same content of judgment cannot, however, be both true and false; this follows from the mere sense of 'true' and 'false'. If the relativist gives these words their appropriate meaning, his thesis is in conflict with its own sense.⁵⁷

Husserl's point is that insofar as the relativist seeks to preserve a meaningful semblance to the standard notion of truth he is committed to a concept of truth founded on absolutism. He thus assumes that the terms 'true' and 'false' must be understood in a nonrelativistic way, and so proposes that as a doctrine about rational human inquiry relativism is incoherent.

It would appear to follow that if the relativist aspires to retain a nonrelativistic conception of truth then he subscribes to an incoherent version of relativism. Relativists, however, have responded to this criticism by denying its validity. As one commentator puts it, "[t]he criticism begs the question by assuming the very criteria of truth and acceptability the relativist puts at point. The existence of absolute criteria, upon which the absolutist bases his criticism, is exactly the point at issue, so they cannot be used to fault relativism."⁵⁸ The relativist would thus insist that the charge of self-

refutation works against relativism if and only if absolutism holds true in the first place. The reader will no doubt note, however, that the criticism begs the question if and only if the relativist's dismissal of absolutism is found to be acceptable in the first place.

It is unclear, then, whether this formulation of the charge of self-refutation works against relativism since each side charges the other of begging the question. If this is right, then this line of criticism does little to settle the dispute either way; that is, for or against relativism. This formulation implies, however, that the only options available are absolutism or relativism. We can argue for the existence of absolute standards of rationality or for relativistic accounts of standards of rationality; there are no middle-of-the-road positions between absolutism and relativism. Of course, many anti-relativists would surely disagree. This brings us to a second and somewhat different formulation of the charge of relativism's incoherence.

Relativism is thought to be incoherent because, if knowledge-claims are true only relative to some or other practice, then the relativist thesis is true only relative to a given practice. On this formulation, it is not just that relativism has no validity outside of the practice in which it is made but also that relativism does not follow immediately from the rejection of absolutism.⁵⁹ Seen in this light, relativists fail to acknowledge that while we cannot compare our theories with a ready-made world, and even though all our interpretations

are theory-laden, it still does not follow that we are left with relativism. Hence, to argue that absolutism is untenable is not necessarily to subscribe to relativism but only to a more limited thesis that since there is no 'God's eye' view we must depart from the theory-neutrality of classical theories of knowledge.

There are a number of different philosophical positions that allegedly undermine relativism while at the same time rejecting absolutism. A brief look at Quine's work is useful for our purposes here. Departing from traditional aspirations to ground science as a whole in some or other conception of absolutism, such as the Cartesian search for certainty, Quine insists that with the help of cognitive science we can examine how scientists and others produce empirically verifiable knowledge about the familiar world. Quine maintains, for example, that observation sentences are the means by which we link our sensory stimulations (and what we say about our sensory stimulations) with what is going on in the familiar world. He writes, "Observation sentences are the link between language, scientific or not, and the real world that language is all about."⁶⁰ And while Quine concedes it is possible that our observations (or observation sentences) may mislead us about the structure of the world, this possibility can be taken into account by considering not how the world is but by what sensory stimulations one receives.

To take Quine's well-known example, my observation sentence "There is a rabbit here" may translate another speaker's observation sentence "Gavagai" since, for Quine, the stimulus-synonymy of the two sentences taken as wholes (and in highly

defined situations) warrants us in saying that the other person's sentence contains a reference to rabbit rather than to undetached parts of rabbits. It is this sort of warrant that underpins much of Quine's discussion on observation sentences. Quine's account of the referential character of language is of course more complex than this but that need not concern us here.⁶¹ What is important is that Quine posits a firm link between observation sentences and sensory stimulations. Indeed in his "Epistemology Naturalized" Quine maintains that the stimulation of nerve-endings is all we have to go on in formulating and justifying theories about the character of the familiar world.⁶² In this spirit, Quine claims that scientific versions are better than nonscientific versions in the sense that they are best supported by the available evidence, that is, by the relationship between observation sentences and sensory stimulations. This conception of the legitimacy of science, of how sensory evidence relates to theory, is supposed to defeat relativism. For, as Quine would have it, we are warranted in standing firm in the belief of the superiority of the scientific world view over all others.

But insofar as this line of reasoning is appealing, the fact of the matter is that relativists find Quine's faith in the superiority of science unacceptable. Putnam's critique of Quine's work in light of Goodman's relativism helps to illustrate this point. Putnam writes,

Quine does say from within his versions--the scientific versions he likes--what makes those versions better than nonscientific versions: it is simply that they better predict stimulations of nerve-endings. But Goodman does not agree that the be-all and end-all of versions is just

to predict stimulations of nerve-endings (or to do so economically and in a way that accords with tradition).⁶³

While Putnam does not explicitly endorse relativism, his comments nonetheless point to the line of thinking relativists might employ in rejecting philosophical positions like Quine's. Putnam's point is not just that a representational system is necessary for representing anything but also that there are a variety of systems with which to describe and classify the familiar world.

Goodman, as we have seen, would reject Quine's position on the grounds that the role of cognition is not simply to guide the expectation of sensory inputs. Indeed Goodman is a relativist not only about the content of cognition but also about its purposes. His treatment of the way in which art can expand our perceptual and cognitive capacities is a case in point. For Goodman, the different purposes to which sensory inputs can be put, i.e., what they do and do not imply, makes Quine's faith in the superiority of science untenable. Doubtless, the general conclusion that relativists wish to draw from this line of thinking is that both the form and content of experience admit of a multiplicity of versions (scientific or otherwise) that are equally legitimate. No version, the relativist would say, produces beliefs about the experienced world which are absolutely true or false since no version can lay claim to privileged authority.

The preceding discussion suggests that neither the proponents nor the detractors of relativism have made their case, that is, for or against relativism. But there is an even more powerful and persuasive objection to relativism which has so far

not been considered. I have in mind what we might tendentiously refer to as the 'common ground' argument. Roughly put, this argument aims to undermine relativism in holding that all disagreements between those who endorse competing frames or practices presuppose a large stock of shared beliefs.

Donald Davidson's "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" offers what is perhaps the best account of the common ground argument.⁶⁴ While Davidson's main focus is on the problem of translation and radical interpretation, I see no good reason why his position cannot be applied to textual interpretation as well. Indeed I hope to show in what follows that Davidson's common ground argument poses a serious problem for Derrida's relativistic treatment of the relationship between intentionality and meaning, whether what is at issue is a speaker's intended meaning or an author's intended meaning for producing a text. Davidson's work, I shall urge, best explains how Derrida misconstrues the nature of philosophical theorizing about interpretation.

Derrida vs Davidson

Davidson's philosophy represents a novel shift from his acknowledged predecessors; most centrally, Carnap, Hempel, Reichenbach, Feigl, Sellars, and especially Quine.⁶⁵ This is at least in part due to his break from philosophical empiricism, which holds that the meaning of signs or sentences can be explained in terms of the sensory experiences that would confirm or verify them. To appreciate Davidson's break from the empiricist tradition and what it implies for his views on interpretation, we can look to the importance he attaches to the

thesis of holism, a thesis which in part underpins his formulation of the common ground argument.

The thesis of holism holds that to interpret a sign or sentence we have to be able to interpret other, related signs or sentences. As Davidson puts it, "The meaning (interpretation) of a sentence is given by assigning the sentence a semantic location in the patten of sentences that comprise the language."⁶⁶ With regard to Davidson's break from the empiricist tradition, this means that no sign or sentence--no matter how closely linked it is to sensory experience--will be free from revision based on other sentences regarded as true. On this construal, while a sensory experience, or rather a sensation, can be a cause for having a given belief (e.g., the belief that a thing is yellow), it is not a reason for holding that belief.

This should not be taken to imply that Davidson denies that many sentences may have direct links with sensory experiences. Rather, the point is that he draws a sharp distinction between cause and justification. The reason for making this distinction, Davidson maintains, is that sensory experience is not in and of itself propositional and as such cannot justify an interpreted sentence or belief. Put another way, Davidson holds that only beliefs can justify, or serve as evidence for, other beliefs. This position emphasizes of course Davidson's coherentism, which holds that a belief is held to be true not because it corresponds to something that is not itself a belief, but rather because it coheres with other beliefs held to be true.

On Davidson's coherentist view, the meaning of a sign or sentence depends on its relations to other signs or sentences, not on comparing our interpreted sentences or beliefs with the experienced world. However, the question for Davidson then becomes "How can we maximize the coherence or consistency of our set of beliefs?" Davidson's answer to this question is what is of interest to us here as it brings into play the normative element in his theory of interpretation. Roughly put, Davidson holds the meaning of a sign or sentence depends on its relations to other signs and sentences, and that these relations must be subject to rational constraints, that is, to normative principles of rationality. This is the aspect of Davidson's work I intend to draw on in order to reveal an important inconsistency in Derrida's views on the nature of meaning and interpretation.

In an earlier section entitled "Derrida's Textual Relativism," we saw that Derrida holds that norms of minimal intelligibility such as coherence and consistency depend on the productive powers of interpreters who select and sanction what counts as coherent or consistent in a given practice of evaluation. This position, I have urged, includes all the elements of relativism: the claim that different practices of evaluation endorse different standards of rationality; that what one identifiable group of thinkers (e.g., deconstructionists, pragmatists, New Critics) take to be the meaning of a text (or the truth about the familiar world for that matter) is merely the product of their peculiar metaphysical (and other) commitments; that the choice of which practice of evaluation one wishes to

endorse is an ultimately arbitrary one. But the implication of this position, I have said, is that anything goes since there are no rational constraints on the choice of interpretive practices.

How, then, does Davidson address the question of competing practices of evaluation of the kind Derrida speaks of? Davidson argues, correctly I think, that there must be a large amount of agreement even between interpreters who endorse different practices of evaluation, that is, different interpretive practices. This, however, is something that Derrida would be forced to deny owing to his view on the 'politics' implied in every practice of evaluation, i.e., that no neutrality is possible between different interpretive practices. I shall say more about this in a moment. I turn now to examine in more detail Davidson's common ground argument.

The point of Davidson's common ground argument can be expressed by saying that to recognize disagreement as disagreement, we must first work from a given body of agreement: "[I]f all we know is what sentences a speaker holds true, and we cannot assume that his language is our own, then we cannot take even a first step towards interpretation without knowing or assuming a great deal about the speaker's beliefs."⁶⁷ This means that we must assume that other people share some of our beliefs about logic and rationality if we are to understand their utterances and ways of doing things. If this is right, then we cannot claim that no beliefs are universal, even if we find that some people do not explicitly acknowledge all of the beliefs that we do.

We can reconstruct the relevant features of Davidson's common ground argument as follows. Interpretation essentially involve attributing beliefs and intentions to speakers (or authors). Such beliefs and intentions constitute the basic elements in ascribing meanings to another's utterances and signs. Take any person, x. If we know the meaning of x's utterances or signs, we can try to determine his beliefs and intentions on the basis of how he describes himself and the world around him. That is, if we know x's meanings, we can interpret his language and its signs by matching his utterances and signs with those beliefs and intentions that seem to play a role in specific circumstances. So if we understand x's utterances and signs, which are made manifest in his interactions with the familiar world, we can use this information to identify x's beliefs and intentions.

Of course, knowledge of x's utterances and signs warrants inference to his beliefs and intentions which prompt those utterances and signs only given the assumption that x acts in a rational manner. This means, in other words, that our account of x's verbal and nonverbal behaviour ought to represent him as a rational agent. Without this assumption any belief or intention we attribute to x could be linked to any combination of utterances and signs. More precisely, to explain the utterances and signs of rational agents, we commonly have to give an account of their reasons for behaving this or that way as well as account for the beliefs and intentions underlying those reasons. In cases where the beliefs or intentions we ascribe amount to bad reasons for x saying or doing something, our account will have to be

modified to fit the situation at hand. That is, while there may be circumstances in which unreasonable beliefs and intentions may be ascribed to x, Davidson holds that the ascriptions can be appropriate only against a background that renders them intelligible, say, with respect to the peculiar circumstances in which such beliefs and intentions have come to be held. On this view, while some failure to interpret properly is allowable, too much failure undermines the very possibility of interpretation. But there is cause for concern here. How do we know that x acts rationally in the first place?

According to Davidson, all that can ever be observed is that people utter certain sounds and make certain marks (signs) in certain situations, and that they respond to utterances and signs in certain ways when these are produced by others. Ultimately, this is all we have to go on in interpreting one another's verbal and nonverbal behaviour. But if such is the case how can we know that someone is behaving rationally when he utters certain sounds and makes certain signs in specific situations? Davidson argues cogently that the principle of charity enters into the process of determining x's beliefs and intentions when we observe his encounters with the familiar world, that is, we must proceed to ascribe to him beliefs and intentions that we think a rational agent would acquire from such encounters. As Davidson puts it, "Since charity is not an option, but a condition of having a workable theory, it is meaningless to suggest that we might fall into massive error by endorsing it."⁶⁸ The principle of charity states that we should seek to maximize the similarities between

our intentions and beliefs and those we ascribe to x. This principle thus serves to reduce the indeterminacy of translation and interpretation. This, as we shall soon see, is just what is lacking in Derrida's treatment of the nature of interpretation.

Davidson is quick to point out, however, that there are no clear and precise correspondence rules between x's utterances and signs and his beliefs and intentions, nor between our beliefs and intentions and those we attribute to x. Indeed he holds that the principle of charity "is not designed to eliminate disagreement, nor can it; its purpose is to make meaningful disagreement possible. . . ." ⁶⁹ Davidson is saying here that in ascribing meanings to x's utterances and signs, as well as beliefs and intentions to x, we are constructing a theory that goes beyond the evidence of what we observe x saying or doing in specific situations. And while this is all we have to go with in interpreting x's verbal and nonverbal behaviour, it nonetheless can yield an explanation of x's behaviour which renders it rational. So while Davidson concludes that we can never hope to mechanize translation and interpretation, he holds that we can still minimize differences by attributing a substantial number of beliefs and intentions to x that would resolve puzzlement about his circumstances, including his beliefs about logic, rationality, truth, and the like.

Davidson's position is of course meant to exert powerful constraints on translation and interpretation. He holds, for example, that if we attribute to x the belief that the earth revolves around the sun, we thereby attribute to x the concept of

motion, of planetary motion, of planetary orbits, and the like. And if we instead attribute to x the belief that the earth is flat, we will need to attribute to him the concept of flatness. But we could not attribute to x any such concept if our own practice of evaluation did not acknowledge or recognize those same concepts, of what is and is not motion, what is and is not an orbit, what is and is not flat, and so on. The conclusion that Davidson draws from all this is that even disagreements between rivals who endorse competing frames or practices require a large stock of shared beliefs about logic and rationality. If this is right, then a relativism like Derrida's is untenable since it holds that there are no beliefs about logic and rationality binding on all people or, relatedly, that there are no normative principles which apply across all different frames or practices.

But it is important to note at this time that Davidson's work has not gone unchallenged. In his *Mind and World* John McDowell has urged that Davidson's treatment of the relationship between thought and world leads to radical indeterminacy, the kind of indeterminacy which I attribute to Derrida.⁷⁰ McDowell's contention is that Davidson endorses coherentism only because he recoils fully from what McDowell calls the 'Myth of the Given.' By coherentism McDowell means the view that sensibility or experience has no epistemological significance for justifying our beliefs whereas by the idea of the Given he means the view that there are bare presences which ground our empirical thoughts and judgments.⁷¹ Two points are worth mentioning here.

Firstly, McDowell's treatment of the relationship between mind and world is an attempt to articulate a philosophical position which is, on the one hand, a critique of Davidson's coherentism, and, on the other, a rejection of the idea of the Given. The task McDowell sets for himself is to maintain the viability of the middle way--rooted in the Kantian conception of empirical knowledge as a co-operation of sensibility and understanding--without having his position collapse into either extreme.⁷² I think that McDowell comes close to pulling this off. But there is cause for concern here. Even if anti-relativists like myself find McDowell's position appealing, relativists like Derrida will not. Why? Because McDowell argues for an externalist position, which is just what the relativist rejects outright. From the relativist's point of view, one cannot undermine relativism by simply re-working externalism, no matter how brilliant and provocative the position might be.

Secondly, I think that McDowell's reading of Davidson is mistaken on at least one key point. McDowell holds that Davidson places no rational constraints on what can be said about the relationship between mind and world, or on the nature of the concepts that mediate that relationship.⁷³ This reading of Davidson is unacceptable, and I have alluded to the main reason above: Davidson's conception of the principle of charity places a powerful rational constraint on the production of translation and interpretation. This is what McDowell apparently fails to recognize or at least appreciate in Davidson's work. And this ties in with the first point.

If what we want is a philosophical position that undermines relativism, we cannot simply put forward an externalist position. True, one may find grounds for holding an externalist position, and such grounds may be convincing to many anti-relativists. But the fact of the matter is that relativists will accept no argument that places external constraints on what can be said about the world. If, however, we can find a position which is anti-externalist and which claims to defeat relativism then the relativist must sit up and take notice. This, I think, is what Davidson's common ground argument provides--a means to defeat relativism without appealing to an externalist perspective. In light of this, what I propose to show in what follows is that McDowell's work does not necessarily undermine relativism, that McDowell's reading of Davidson is unacceptable, and finally that Derrida cannot consistently evade the implications of Davidson's common ground argument. This line of thinking will provide us with the means to reveal an important inconsistency in Derrida's brand of relativism.

It will be difficult to capture the full measure of McDowell's work here, but a minimally articulate reading of his position in *Mind and World* goes as follows. Throughout the six lectures that make up *Mind and World* McDowell continually emphasizes the difficulties that both the idea of the Given and coherentism labour under. The idea of the Given, McDowell says, is philosophically suspect not because of its externalist bent but because it "extends more widely than the conceptual sphere."⁷⁴ I take his point to be that the idea of the Given

implies that experiential inputs do not play a justificatory role in the relations between mind and world since such inputs are said to operate outside the sphere of our conceptual capacities.

The crux of the idea of the Given, McDowell holds, can be expressed by saying that experiential inputs are alien forces that operate apart from the involvement of our conceptual capacities in empirical thought. And the problem as he sees it is that since experiential inputs are completely removed from our conceptual capacities, there can be no role for understanding, or what he otherwise calls 'spontaneity.' To put this another way, what McDowell wants is to show that our exercises (our practices) of reaching empirical judgments about the familiar world can be constrained by the world itself, but without eliminating our ability to determine what the world is like by our own lights. As he puts it, "[i]f our activity in empirical thought and judgement is to be recognizable at all, there must be external constraint. There must be a role for receptivity as well as spontaneity, for sensibility as well as for understanding."⁷⁵ In passages such as this one, McDowell makes clear his interest in holding onto the view that there just must be some form of rational constraint from the world on our empirical thoughts and judgments. But McDowell is in danger here of returning to the kind of philosophical perspective that relativists reject outright.

The view that McDowell recommends is that it must be the case that we are capable of judging that things in the familiar world are as our experiences represent them to be. And note here

again that McDowell does not wish to speak of bare presences per se, but of a rational constraint imposed by the world together with the receptivity of one's mind, of the power of the mind to receive representations as they are. Seen in this light, our conceptual capacities are already brought into play before we have any choice in the matter, that is, experience draws into play conceptual capacities that belong to the mind itself. With this line of reasoning McDowell aims to show that there is already conceptual content in what one experiences. This is the sense in which McDowell proposes to evade the charge that he is merely embracing the idea of the Given.

I suspect, however, that relativists would hardly be impressed by McDowell's attempt to overcome the idea of the Given while at the same time retaining an externalist perspective, however modified that perspective might be. For the last step in McDowell's account seems to take us not to experiences which are already in relation to one's conceptual capacities but to extra-conceptual givens. Consider a crucial passage in McDowell's work, which he relegates to a footnote: "[O]ne's control over what happens in experience has limits: one can decide where to place oneself, at what pitch to tune one's attention, and so forth, but it is not up to one what, having done all that, one will experience. This minimal point is what I am insisting on."⁷⁶ With this passage we see how relativists might construe McDowell as signalling a return to the idea of the Given from which he is at pains to distance himself.

For relativists, McDowell's claim that it is not up to one what one will experience supposes, minimally, that the familiar world is just one way and not another, and that the content of experience is necessarily thus and so. Put another way, for the relativist it cannot be the case that the idea of the Given is not somehow minimally worked into McDowell's account since he holds that we cannot help but experience how things are. Granted, McDowell does say that our conceptual capacities are already brought into play before we have any choice in the matter. This does seem to quell the relativist's objection somewhat. However, toward the end of *Mind and World* McDowell opens up another possibility for the relativist: he holds that our conceptual capacities are refashioned over time, that they are not as invariant as he suggests they are in his opening lectures. This provides the relativist with the desired option of subscribing to the thesis of relativism, even if the relativist were to favour some aspects of McDowell's account of the relationship between mind and world.

McDowell's image of openness to change in conceptual content over time is set within the context of what he calls our second nature, our *Bildung*.⁷⁷ Our *Bildung*, McDowell says, "actualizes some of the potentialities we are born with"⁷⁸ He is saying here that our potentialities include a capacity for the 'spontaneity of understanding,' i.e., a network of conceptual capacities, which he holds is normally brought to maturity through our upbringing or *Bildung*. As he puts it, human beings "are transformed into thinkers and intentional agents in the

course of coming to maturity."⁷⁹ McDowell's point is that in familiarizing ourselves with a given language we are introduced to the way in which rational linkages are made between minds and the world. Thus conceived, one's acquisition of a given language presupposes a view of languages as comprising traditions of thought, that is, of historically accumulated knowledge about what the familiar world is like. It is on this very point, I think, that relativists would take issue with McDowell.

The weight McDowell's gives to *Bildung* in the formation of our conceptual capacities suggests that although one tradition of thought may be replaced by another no escape from some tradition of thought is possible. More to the point, in invoking tradition to explain how human beings come to know how the world is like, McDowell opens up the possibility that the familiar world can be made intelligible in diverse and not necessarily consistent ways. Even with McDowell's externalist perspective in place, there is still the serious philosophical prospect that human beings may over time reshape the concepts which mediate the relation between minds and the world. This possibility is what I find worrisome in McDowell's work, and this possibility is precisely what the relativist would want to exploit to his advantage.

For relativists, any talk of a tradition of thought leaves open the possibility that there is no such thing as a schemeless (or privileged) access to reality. The familiar world that one inhabits is always relative to tradition, scheme, frame or practice of evaluation, and different traditions, schemes or practices structure different worlds. Hence, in exploiting

certain philosophical difficulties about perceptual experience, McDowell not only gives an intriguing account of the relationship between receptivity (experiential intake) and spontaneity (understanding) but also he unfortunately gives rise to the spectre of relativism. Once we admit that our *Bildung* plays a crucial role in shaping the concepts that mediate the relationship between mind and world we are on the slippery slope that leads to the view that all traditions of thought may be equally legitimate, since what is real turns out to be a function of what tradition of thought one endorses.

The trick, of course, is to argue that although our *Bildung* plays a crucial role in shaping the concepts that mediate the relationship between mind and world, it is not the case that any tradition of thought (any re-shaping of concepts) will do. However, McDowell has nothing to say about this particular issue, mainly because he is unconcerned with what relativists would likely take to be the relativist drift in his work. Davidson, I believe, handles the drift towards relativism much better than McDowell; not because Davidson makes a case for thinking that some or other conceptual scheme is better than others but for rejecting the idea of a conceptual scheme in the first place.⁸⁰ With this I turn to McDowell's reading of Davidson.

Davidson's coherentism, McDowell remarks, "depicts our empirical thinking as engaged in no rational constraint"⁸¹ This is a very unsatisfactory remark. True, McDowell is right to say that for Davidson experience does not count as a reason for holding a belief. This is indeed a core conviction of

Davidson's coherentism. And Davidson's coherentism does raise the kind of philosophical worry that McDowell is quite concerned to soothe, i.e., how thought bears on reality. But questions of the form "How can we know that what one experiences at any time is a genuine glimpse of the familiar world?" simply are of no concern to Davidson.

Davidson is clear in his writings that there is no need for external constraints on thinking and judging, and that as such there is no need to be concerned with whether his coherentism threatens to disconnect thought from reality, as McDowell suggests that it does. In light of this, it can be hard to see that Davidson's philosophical position foils relativism much better than McDowell's. However, that is just what I wish to argue here. And recall my reason for so doing: no externalist position--no matter how brilliant and provocative--will sway the relativist. Indeed I have said that I myself find McDowell's position appealing, despite the difficulties mentioned above. How, then, does Davidson's position fare better than McDowell's in challenging the relativist?

I take the correct answer to be that Davidson provides a rational constraint on what can be said about the familiar world, and he does so without calling into play any external control on our thinking and judging. And this is something which McDowell fails to emphasize. Indeed McDowell's criticism of Davidson seems directed only at Davidson's rejection of an external constraint, and not of a rational constraint per se. Of course, for McDowell the only rational constraint that will do is that which comes

from outside, that is, from the external world itself. But as I have said for the relativist this position merely prompts a return to the idea of the Given. Davidson, however, recoils from arguing for external constraints and yet still provides a rational constraint to block the drift towards relativism.

We can see what Davidson is up to in rejecting both the idea of the Given (and externalism--including McDowell's rendering of it) and relativism by considering a familiar example.⁸² Suppose an Inuit (or other) tribe comes face-to-face with an equestrian statue. Now suppose that the tribe in question has never seen a horse and indeed that the members of that tribe lack the concept 'horse.' For our present purposes, let us assume that the tribe sees what we would normally call the horse-part of the statue as a 'deformed moose.' With this example in mind, the question we might put to both McDowell and the relativist is this: is the equestrian statue a man-on-a-deformed-moose statue or a man-on-a-horse statue?

Relativists like Derrida and Goodman would insist that the question is unanswerable, or at least that any answer we might give is arbitrary. And the reason for this is that both Goodman and Derrida hold that there are no uncontroversial facts about the phenomena of verbal meaning and, we can here add, about the phenomena of perceptual experience. According to Goodman and Derrida, to argue that what the tribal members call the 'deformed moose' part of the statue is mistaken, or that they are simply ignorant of horses, is futile. As we have seen earlier, the reason both Derrida and Goodman would give in defence of their

position is that the sort of information resulting from perceptual experience of the statue in question is not a uniform function of the statue but differs with the interpretation of what is encountered. The equestrian statue may, like anything else in the familiar world, inform the observer in as many ways as there are interpretative systems. So as both Derrida and Goodman would have it, there can be many equally valid ways of describing the familiar world given that there is no way to compare a description of things in the world with a world-in-itself apart from that description.

McDowell, on the other hand, would surely want to argue that very little of what exists depends on human beings and their criteria for acceptability of a belief. That is, McDowell would likely urge that the difficulties posed by the example in question is merely verbal. This, however, does not sit well with what McDowell says about perceptual experience. As he puts it, "That things are thus and so is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgement if the subject decides to take the experience at face value."⁸³ But if we take what the members of the tribe say about their perceptual experience of an equestrian statue at face value then the question becomes one of *what* exists: is the equestrian statue a man-on-a-deformed-moose statue or a man-on-a-horse statue? Questions of this sort not only give rise to difficulties with the weight McDowell gives to our *Bildung* in deciding what concepts mediate the relationship between minds and the world but

also of general and (for the relativist at least) genuine questions about the nature of reality.

Davidson, however, sets his position against both relativism and accounts of perceptual experience like McDowell's, and what these entail for the relationship between thought and world. For Davidson, in ascribing meanings to utterances or signs, and mental states to the individuals that make such utterances or signs, we are constructing a set of beliefs that goes beyond the evidence, i.e., what we can readily observe about an individual's perceptual experience of the familiar world. And for Davidson there is no room to argue that the mental and semantic facts we ascribe to individuals are related to the evidence in a way that is more than causal. This means, in effect, that while experience is causally relevant to an individual's beliefs and judgments, it has no further bearing on their status as justified by reference to an external world. Davidson's position, then, is that we cannot get outside of our beliefs to a world that exists independently of our thought and talk.

Now, I wish to note here that Davidson's position might well be taken to imply some form of relativism, given the distinction he makes between cause and justification. Not only does it deny any justificatory role to experience but, more importantly, it suggests that there may be many alternative theories which equally well fit the mental and semantic facts we ascribe to an individual's utterances and signs. This, I think, is an issue that has not been much discussed in the literature on Davidson's work, and so it will be insightful here to say something more

about the matter with regards to the nature of textual interpretation.

As noted earlier, Davidson concedes that there is always the possibility of a discrepancy between how we interpret someone's utterances or signs and what that person actually believes and intends. This also opens the possibility, however, that as an interpreter I can judge an author as holding certain beliefs and intentions for producing a text whereas another interpreter could judge the author as holding a different set of beliefs and intentions. Relative to other beliefs that I hold true my opponent's interpretation about what the author is saying and doing is false and mine is true; for my opponent the opposite is the case. But since each of us makes this claim relative to some set of accepted (background) beliefs, neither of us can lay claim to a privileged standpoint.

The problem here is that if all we can ensure is coherence and consistency between our beliefs about what the author intends for producing a text and our background beliefs, say, about what the author is talking and thinking about with regards to the specific issues he brings up in the text under consideration. Of course, the same conditions apply to my opponent who gives a rival account of what the author intends for producing a text. It is difficult to see, therefore, how the problem at hand can be resolved by appeal to Davidson's theory of interpretation.

The problem arises on the realization that for Davidson we may not have knowledge of the causes of beliefs, say, what causes an author to take a particular position on a given philosophical

issue that is raised in the text. But if so then it follows that we would not have adequate knowledge of the contents of the author's beliefs for holding a given position, no matter what we think about his general reasons for producing a text. To put this another way, one might argue that Davidson is in agreement with Goodman and Derrida in holding that there are no uncontroversial facts about the phenomena of verbal meaning, given that we must view of meaning itself as a theoretical construction fixed only by reference to accepted background beliefs. But I think that this line of thinking about Davidson's work is mistaken, even though Davidson himself has insufficiently appreciated its implications for his philosophy. In what follows, I shall try to clarify Davidson's position on this matter.

What Davidson's coherentist position purports to show is that in interpreting the sounds and signs of others, we must find them mostly right about what they think of the familiar world with which they are causally interacting. Put another way, what makes an interpretation of an individual's utterances or signs good or correct for Davidson is that it yields an explanation which renders the individual's verbal behaviour rational, or at least as rational as it can be as in the case of ascribing certain meanings and mental states to an author. For Davidson, most good interpretations, as with most good translations, resolve puzzles about an individual's behaviour. Their success in resolving puzzles, say, in explaining an individual's behaviour which makes it rational, is what makes them good or correct. For

him, there is nothing else that makes an interpretation or translation good or correct.

We should note here more clearly why it is that Davidson's position does not imply relativism. In order to conclude with relativism from Davidson's coherentist position, one would need a premise asserting that different experiences, perceptual or otherwise, are mutually exclusive or at least are not intertranslatable. This, however, is just what Davidson denies. For Davidson, the principle of charity ensures at least some agreement between those who claim to hold different points of view in that it implicitly defines the very notions of logic and rationality. This means, in effect, that the act of interpreting an individual's beliefs or reports of perceptual experiences as being on the whole rational or reasonable involves assimilating their beliefs and reports of perceptual experiences as far as possible to one's own basic beliefs.

To see more clearly what this line of thinking entails, we can turn back to our earlier example of Inuit tribesmen who take an equestrian statue to be a man-on-a-deformed-moose statue. In this case, Davidson would no doubt urge that we can introduce them to the concept of 'horse'--assuming of course sufficient physical or at least perceptual diversity between a horse and a moose so that indeterminacy is not a pressing difficulty. The point here is that we can allow for circumstances in which another individual holds different beliefs while at the same time knowing how to bridge the gap between differences in reports of experiences, perceptual or otherwise. For Davidson, the overall

principles that one uses for interpretation and translation are clear enough--theorists and others concerned with the correctness of translations and interpretations need only seriously consider the issues in question and the criticisms of their views raised by others. They can do this in a number of ways: by sorting through whatever body of evidence supports their views in order to locate and eliminate any incoherencies; by presenting new details in support of their views; by showing that they are not merely rephrasing their initial views in a different terminology; by attempting to get their considered views to flourish in opposing camps, and so on.

Davidson holds, then, that to see an individual as rational one must ascribe essentially the same principles and procedures to them. For him, it is a condition of our making sense of the another individual as being a human being at all--of our being able to ascribe to them mental states, and to assign meanings to their sounds and signs--that we should regard them as having most of the same sensory beliefs as we should ourselves in their circumstances, and as being guided by most of the same principles and procedures for reaching more complicated truths about the familiar world. It is for these reasons that Davidson can claim to halt the drift towards relativism in his work, and to question the viability of the thesis of relativism itself. With this in mind I turn now to examine some of the main similarities and differences between Derrida and Davidson, and to state more clearly the main weakness in Derrida's views on the nature of interpretation.

Although there are considerable differences, there is also a certain amount of common ground between Derrida's philosophical position and Davidson's. Both of them are essentially concerned with the philosophical problem about the way in which a word or sign can ever be about something in the world, and neither is prepared to posit 'mysterious powers of the mind' (e.g., Searle's conception of 'Intentionality,' McDowell's conception of the link between spontaneity and receptivity) to make the connection in what for them is an ultimately inexplicable manner. Moreover, neither of them are prepared to accept external constraints of the kind posited in the name of metaphysical realism. Of this, Davidson writes, "Nothing . . . no thing, makes sentences and theories true: not experience, not surface irritations, not the world, can make a sentence true."⁸⁴ As I have urged in previous chapters, Derrida is entirely in accord with this claim. But their respective ways of getting to this claim and what it entails for the production of meaning and interpretation are rather different.

Derrida takes for granted that, since we only think in signs, our utterances and marks can be deconstructed, recontextualized and reinterpreted in almost endless ways such that competing--and even conflicting--accounts of what x's conveys in his utterances and signs can be equally legitimate; the problem he finds with the communicative character of language is the problem of connecting utterances and signs with what its speaker or author intends them to mean. But while Davidson agrees that ascribing intentions to people is problematic, he rejects the

view that there can be almost endless and equally legitimate accounts of x's utterances and signs. For Davidson, what makes an interpretation true or correct is that it yields an explanation of x's behaviour which renders it rational. And this does not depend on acceptability, where acceptability is ultimately relative to interest and purposes but rather it depends on the network of background beliefs that we hold in common. It is this contention that we need to unpack further against Derrida's position on the production of meaning and interpretation.

Like Davidson, Derrida rejects the idea that there are given facts-of-the-matter, what he otherwise calls determinate entities or presences, that ground the utterance of meaningful expressions. And like Davidson, he holds that to interpret what people say and do by assigning meanings to their utterances and signs is to construct a set of hypotheses about their beliefs and intentions for saying and doing things. This, after all, is what Derrida is doing when he interprets Husserl as failing to see that no pure meaning can be present to consciousness as a foundation which grounds interpretation. But unlike Davidson, Derrida draws the conclusion that the interpretation one puts forward for x's utterances and signs will always be radically underdetermined by the evidence. And for Derrida it would remain underdetermined even if we knew everything about x's reasons for saying or doing something.

According to Derrida, alternative accounts of x's intentions and beliefs will always be available which equally well fit his verbal and nonverbal behaviour. And between these alternative

accounts there is in principle nothing to choose with respect to what makes some interpretations right and others wrong. This applies not only to radical interpretation but to more familiar interpretations as well. That is, while we find it natural to interpret people who use similar utterances and signs in much the same circumstances as we do by supposing that they mean the same by such utterances and signs, Derrida holds that this gives no special claim to correctness of interpretation.

As Derrida would have it, our interpretations are not merely underdetermined by the evidence available to us, i.e., the available data about x's verbal and nonverbal behaviour, they are actually indeterminate insofar as there is no truth of the matter as to what is durably present for interpretation. And the reason for this is the ceaseless play of linguistic signs which refer back not to some self-present origin but to yet other signs. He can draw this conclusion because the only thing that seems clear to him is that what constitutes a sign or text's meaning is what passes for meaning in this or that practice of evaluation. So while we may appeal to information about x's verbal behaviour as evidence for interpreting his beliefs and intentions, we can never include information about what x actually means by his utterances and signs, for what these mean cannot be manifested except in an interpretive experience, where such experience depends on the practice of evaluation at hand.

It is important to note here that Derrida does recognize that the interpretations we regard as acceptable are in general those that observe what Davidson takes to be one of the most

important norms of minimal intelligibility, namely, the principle of charity. Of norms of minimal intelligibility, Derrida writes: "But I believe that no research is possible in a community (for example, academic) without the prior search for this minimal consensus and without discussion around this minimal consensus."⁸⁵ For Derrida, however, norms of minimal intelligibility are little more than a matter of convenience for achieving consensus among interpreters, and interpretations which breach them are not for that reason false or incorrect. The reason for this, if we accept what Derrida's textual relativism implies, is that what counts as a correct interpretation depends on practices of evaluation, which themselves are relative to interests and purposes. And since he thinks that practices are relative to interests and purposes, Derrida can say nothing against those who refuse to accept the minimal consensus of which he speaks.

Where Davidson disagrees with Derrida is in taking the principle of charity as a constitutive principle, a principle which helps to determine if an interpretation is correct. What this means is that an interpreter's practice of evaluation is not the sole standard with which to determine what x conveys in his utterances and signs, and so he can reject as incorrect interpretations that textual relativists like Derrida would have trouble disregarding as false. The reason for this difference is that Davidson sees the purpose of translations and interpretations of texts as providing an explanation of it which will render it rational. So interpretations that ascribe to speakers and authors wildly contradictory beliefs and intentions--which is

always a possibility on Derrida's conception of more open or less constrained reading of text--will fail in their task. Of course, this is not to say that there won't be cases in which it is wrong to interpret texts as being the product of an irrational agent. But such interpretations will still have to be made intelligible in light of which the agent's peculiar intentions and beliefs have come to be held. And while this does not remove completely the indeterminacy of interpretation with respect to the possibility that there will be a number of equally valid interpretations, it does allow for much less indeterminacy than anything that Derrida and other relativists could expect.

The principle of charity is of great importance to Davidson because to interpret another's intentions as being on the whole reasonable essentially involves assimilating his intentions and beliefs as far as possible to one's own, given that we standardly consider it rational to believe what is correct and regard our own beliefs as being correct. But, again, this does not preclude our taking others as being irrational in certain circumstances (or with respect to certain issues), as we come to know that we ourselves are mistaken at times. But in such situation we generally know how to correct our mistakes, and as I suggested earlier we can do so in a number of ways: by sorting through whatever body of evidence supports our views in order to locate and eliminate any incoherencies; by presenting new details in support of our interpretations; by showing that we are not merely rephrasing our initial views in a different terminology; by attempting to get out considered views to flourish in opposing

camps, and so on. This does not mean that we are (or can be) right about everything; we can be wrong through misconstruing the evidence for what x's conveys in his utterances and signs or by failing to appreciate the limit of our information about x's circumstances.

But Davidson is not so much concerned with cases in which our interpretations might be mistaken as with cases in which we need to regard many of another person's intentions and beliefs to be reasonable as a condition of translation and interpretation. To put this another way, Davidson's point is that when we assume the correctness of another person's beliefs and intentions we only assume their conformity with what we take to be reasonable. The result of this is that we have some assurance that there will be a fundamental conformity among everyone's basic beliefs, regardless of what practice of evaluation they claim to endorse.

Now, Davidson recognizes that this way of looking at the matter may leave open the possibility that the fundamental agreement we hold in common is an agreement that is ultimately false, say, that the picture of the familiar world that we share might be a mistaken one. However, Davidson rejects this possibility as essentially incoherent. And the reason for this is that for him no sphere of truth and its cognates can be totally independent of what we take them to be. As Davidson puts it, "we may depend on the attitude of accepting as true . . . as the crucial notion" in translation and interpretation and he goes on to say that "the guiding policy is to do this as far as possible, subject to considerations of simplicity, hunches about the

effects of social conditioning, and of course our common sense. . . .⁸⁶ In cases where our beliefs and intentions are for the most part agreed by everyone, we can safely conclude that such beliefs must on the whole be true. This is something about which Derrida can have nothing to say, save for the claim that the only determination of truth and its cognates rest with the productive powers of those who work to determine what counts as true.

Thus while Davidson's account of the principle of charity is intended to reduce the indeterminacy of translation and radical interpretation, Derrida's brand of relativism only serves to increase indeterminacy to the point where anything goes. This, I think, is what is ultimately wrong with Derrida's facile talk of the ceaseless play of signs, of the 'trace,' of the 'supplement,' of the differance at the origin of the sign, and what he thinks these entail for the production of meaning and interpretation. Put another way, the problem is not so much whether our signs fail to make contact with an independent reality but whether we can speak intelligibly about what goes on in the familiar world. If the only evidence is what passes for evidence in this or that practice of evaluation, for example, that there are no uncontroversial facts about the phenomena of verbal meaning except insofar as facts count as facts in this or that practice, how can there fail to be radical indeterminacy here?

Many of those who are somewhat sympathetic to Derrida (such as Rorty) have found reason to criticize him over the pressing problem of radical indeterminacy. Indeed, other factors besides one's interests and purposes have to be allowed for in assessing

the correctness of knowledge-claims, such as the principle of charity of which Davidson speaks or, likewise, the claim that we share a large fund of beliefs about the familiar world. Although aware of this, Derrida gives too little weight to it. And while he might contend that different orderings and weightings can be given to the principle of charity, the whole enterprise of interpreting verbal and nonverbal behaviour is itself founded on the larger enterprise of providing an overall theory to rationalize behaviour by ascribing to them a network of beliefs and intentions that we hold in common. This position essentially undermines Derrida's textual relativism.

Moreover, it is important to note here that in describing the enterprise of translation and radical interpretation Davidson is not arguing for the existence of a privileged basis which makes some or other practice of evaluation more appealing than others. Rather, his point is that to the extent that we share common ground, there is no sense in talking about there being alternative practices of evaluation of the kind that relativists like Derrida would regard as acceptable, that is, as being essentially independent of one another. So when Derrida asserts quite confidently that each and every practice of evaluation implies some sort of politics between which there can be no argument, he fails to note clearly that between different practices there will be a large stock of background beliefs that serve as common ground upon which to produce interpretations.

What a number of Derrida's adherents and critics fail to appreciate is not only that deconstruction entails relativism--

and an unconstrained relativism at that--but also that Derrida's talk of the metaphysics of presence and of the ceaseless play of signs does not carry the implications that deconstructionists have supposed. Certainly, not all philosophers can be properly accused of endorsing 'logocentrism.' Davidson, for example, certainly makes no logocentric claims about the referential and communicative characteristics of language, that is, he does not propose to halt the play of differance by positing transcendental signifieds, ready-made ideas, and so forth. In short, not all philosophers dream of acquiring ahistorical and changeless truths and meanings as Derrida sometimes suggests they do.

The big difference between the work of Derrida and thinkers like Davidson is the negative slant Derrida gives to the production of meaning and interpretation. For Derrida, all meaning can be deconstructed, destabilized, recontextualized, and reinterpreted whereas for Davidson they can be reconstructed, restabilized, improved, and so on. Derrida's fixation with the metaphysics of presence, i.e., the pressing need to battle those who think that things that are durably self-present, diverts his attention from the real task of determining how we can communicate with one another as well as make sense of the familiar world despite the problems with metaphysical realism, the correspondence theory of truth, and the like.

More importantly, what Derrida takes to be the fundamental insight that truth, meaning, reference to be determinate depends on nothing other than the productive powers of those who work to sanction what counts as true or meaningful is hardly news. When

Allen and others assert that "[l]ike Davidson, though with a deeper appreciation of its implications, Derrida can say that nothing--no *thing*--makes a sentence or theory true" we can say that like Derrida, but with a deeper appreciation of its implications, Davidson can say that as participants in social life we have to share certain beliefs and presuppositions, undertake certain idealizations, be bound by certain norms of minimal intelligibility, and so on.⁸⁷ We can and of course should interrogate the limits of these norms of minimal intelligibility as Derrida does, but not to the exclusion of what makes these indispensable for our interpretive inquiries.

The trouble with Derrida's deconstructionism is not only that it entails an unconstrained brand of relativism--insofar as it entails that anything goes with respect to the choice of different practices of evaluation--but also that this doctrine poses the rejection of the metaphysics of presence and of absolutism as essentially entailing deconstructionism. What gets left out are all the philosophical positions such as Putnam's, Quine's, and especially Davidson's which are non-absolutistic and which emphasize reconstruction over deconstruction. Indeed we should ask in light of all this questions of the form "What positive contribution does Derrida make to a philosophy of non-presence?" To questions of this sort, I can find no clear answer in Derrida's work.

Conclusion

Debates about the nature and implications of Derrida's deconstructionism are in some respects unusual. They are unusual not because there is a wide variety of different viewpoints on his work but because while almost everyone wants to refute what he says in the name of deconstruction, usually by raising the charge of relativism as a step towards dismissing deconstruction as incoherent, no one has yet explained how and why relativism is entailed by deconstruction. I have tried to resolve this problem by giving an account of the kind of relativism to which deconstruction leads. But by now the reader will no doubt agree that making the connection between deconstruction and relativism isn't easy, in part because Derrida is rather evasive about what deconstruction does and does not imply. Derrida's refusal to state clearly his position on philosophical issues such as the referential and communicative characteristics of language is just what many of his readers find so frustrating.

Searle, we have seen, proposes to trace the crisis in higher education to a more fundamental crisis in knowledge, a crisis he thinks has arisen as a result of the influence that Derrida's deconstructionism and related movements have had on the contemporary intellectual scene. But because Searle believes that deconstruction and French post-structuralist thought in general sustain much of the current attack on the traditional university with its traditional epistemic and ontological underpinnings, he resists the idea that the aim of deconstruction is to critique the ideals of truth and rationality rather than to reject them

outright. I think Searle is for the most part mistaken on this point.

Searle, for example, reads Derrida as denying any link between intentionality and meaning and thus implies that according to Derrida we cannot communicate with one another. However, in the interest of gaining a clearer understanding of Derrida's thought I have tried to point out where Searle goes wrong, though I am entirely in agreement with him in holding that Derrida is anything but clear on the role of intentionality in justifying the production of meaning and interpretation. And as I have said in the concluding remarks of chapter three, Derrida's failure to explain clearly the nature of intentionality leaves him open to the criticism that deconstruction licenses the view that there is no theoretical way to determine what authority intentionality has in regulating meaning and interpretation. I think that this criticism is very telling.

Much of Derrida's treatment of both the referential and communicative characteristics of language lies with the enormous elasticity he gives to the technical terms in the deconstructive vocabulary; most centrally, what he calls 'trace,' 'supplement,' 'iterability,' 'differance,' and the like. While the object and function of these terms are quite difficult to explain clearly, I have urged that they are best understood as labels for (or at least as expressing) difficulties with the phenomena of verbal meaning, difficulties that Derrida thinks have been overlooked or marginalized by Western thought on language. And the difficulties to which Derrida alludes in his writings have to do with what

linguistic signs refer to, stand for or represent. Put simply, Derrida holds that a sign refers back not to some durably, self-present origin (e.g., a referent, perception or intention) but to yet other signs.

As I tried to show in various ways in chapters two and three, Derrida draws the conclusion that signs must always refer back to other signs because he maintains that any attempt to distinguish a sign ontologically from something that is not itself a sign is untenable or at the very least arbitrary. And because he thinks that any attempt to differentiate signs from nonsigns is untenable or arbitrary, he holds that there are no indisputable facts about linguistic meaning. This is unprecedented in that it entails that there is nothing to a sign, i.e., what it does and does not imply or what it does and does not refer to, that is indifferent to what we say it implies or refers to. Yet I have urged that we should not take Derrida's position as saying that there is no such thing as truth or, relatedly, that we can say nothing intelligible about the familiar world or even that we cannot communicate with one another.

However, the pressing problem with Derrida's views on the nature of truth and its cognates can be summed up roughly as follows: if signs refer back to still other signs and if the only determination of meaning lies with the productive powers who work to settle what a sign implies or refers to according to some or other practice of evaluation, and if there are bound to be all sorts of different practices of evaluation between which there

can be no argument, how can Derrida possibly avoid the charge of relativism? This line of thinking raises two pressing questions, questions that I have addressed in chapters one and four, namely, the question of what relativism represents and the question of what kind of relativism is at issue in deconstruction.

In response to the first question I have presented the thesis of relativism as amounting to the denial of three genera of absolutism, i.e., foundationalism, universalism and objectivism. I have also urged that the relativist's basic contention is that there is no such thing as a privileged basis. This means, in effect, that in any domain of inquiry no practice of evaluation is more privileged (more defensible) than any other. And I have also explained that Goodman and like-minded relativists complicate matters considerably in maintaining that while there is no privileged basis we can still distinguish what he calls 'right' from 'wrong' versions. But I have urged that while Goodman's brand of relativism is stimulating, it is not entirely convincing.

The problem I find with Goodman's account of relativism is that he seems incapable of blocking the view that one can make up any practice of evaluation that one likes. That is, Goodman argues that what counts as a 'right' version in any domain of inquiry is one that fits with practice. But he says nothing about what constrains the choice of practice, much less about what constrains the *making* of practices. The obscurity surrounding the notion of 'fittingness' lies at the root of Goodman's problems with regards to his defence of relativism. For this reason, I

have urged that Goodman fails to show why it is not the case that anything goes. Moreover, I have suggested at the end of the first chapter that this is precisely the problem with Derrida's brand of relativism, i.e., that it leads to an unconstrained version of relativism according to which anything goes.

In response to the second question, then, I have called the kind of relativism to which deconstruction leads a 'textual' relativism. And to draw out as clearly as possible what Derrida's textual relativism entails, I have concentrated on his treatment of the production of meaning and interpretation with respect to the distinction between textual realism and textual relativism. This approach to Derrida's work helps to illustrate the kind of relativism at issue in deconstruction. In particular, I have put forward the view that Derrida's textual relativism essentially entails that the rational justification for an interpretation is contained within practices of evaluation.

To clarify the implications of this last point I have tried to show that according to Derrida the norms and standards that make up a given practice not only set for proponents of that practice what they are to do as interpreters but also they provide reasons for believing in the acceptability of the interpretations produced. Furthermore, I have argued that for Derrida the justification for an interpretation is dependent on acceptability, where acceptability itself is determined by reference to the norms and standards sanctioned by the proponents of a given practice. On my account, then, Derrida's textual

relativism holds that one can rationally justify interpretations, but only relative to some or other practice of evaluation.

Indeed I have argued that Derrida's textual relativism not only entails that what counts as evidence for authorial intention is relative to practices of evaluation but also that interpretations can serve a wide variety of interests and purposes over and above the concern with getting authorial intention right. To explain what this implies I have tried to explicate the role that Derrida thinks interests and purposes play in the production of meaning and interpretation. In short, the sense an interpreter makes of (iv) what a text conveys depends on the sense he makes of (i) the author's reasons for producing a text and (ii) the author's choice of interpretive practice relative to (iii) the interpreter's own interpretive practice. The upshot of this position is that even if we want to constrain what interpreters can say about (iv) by appealing to (i) and (ii), (iii) may lead us to give competing accounts of (iv). As Derrida would have it, a text derives its meaning from the many varied ways in which interpreters can make sense of (i) through (iv). The consequence of this position is that there can be a wide variety of norms of interpretive inquiry between which there can be no argument.

But this is unacceptable as it entails that we can never really reach agreement on what makes an interpretation correct. Put another way, Derrida's work implies that insofar as we endorse different practices of evaluation, there is no way of rationally resolving our disagreements about the correctness of interpretations. And to express more clearly why Derrida's

position is unacceptable, I have raised the charge of relativism's incoherence with respect to the view that anything goes, i.e., that all interpretations whatever are equally valid or, likewise, that we can say just anything at all about what a text conveys. That is to say, since Derrida's textual relativism entails that there are potentially many varied practices of evaluation to which interpreters can appeal, there is no good reason to think that it is not the case that anything goes. Indeed Derrida fails to show what can possibly constrain the choice of practices of evaluation. In view of this, I have said that since Derrida's textual relativism ultimately implies that anything goes it is therefore incoherent.

I have complicated matters, however, in suggesting that perhaps we cannot readily conclude that Derrida's work is incoherent since relativists have rejected the standard charge of self-refutation, i.e., that to state the relativist thesis is to refute it, in various ways and for different reasons. More precisely, in taking up some of the more common formulations of the charge of self-refutation, and in finding that relativists may have good grounds these formulations of that charge, I have urged that we must look for other ways to undermine relativism. With this in mind, I have tried to show that the common ground argument--especially the version of this argument put forward by Donald Davidson--is effective against Derrida's textual relativism and indeed even against the thesis of relativism in general.

Roughly put, Davidson's position is that we must assume that other people share at least some of our beliefs about the familiar world if we are to understand their utterances and ways of doing things. This does not mean that there are clear and precise correspondence rules between what we take to be an individual's utterances or signs and his beliefs, nor between our beliefs and those we attribute to that individual. Like Derrida, Davidson holds that there is a philosophical problem about how a word or sign can ever be about something in the world. Nor, I have said, is he prepared to accept external constraints of the kind posited in the name of metaphysical realism. For, like Derrida, Davidson holds that nothing--no thing--makes sentences or theories true. But their respective ways of getting to this claim and what it entails for the production of meaning and interpretation are quite different.

Unlike Derrida, Davidson holds that the principle of charity enters the picture in the sense that it serves to reduce the indeterminacy of translation and interpretation. Davidson gives much weight to the principle of charity because he holds that to interpret another's intentions and beliefs as being on the whole reasonable essentially involves assimilating his intentions and beliefs as far as possible to one's own, given that we standardly consider it rational to believe what is correct and regard our own beliefs as being correct. This is something about which Derrida has nothing to say, save for the claim that the only determination of truth and its cognates rest with the productive powers of those who work to determine what counts as true.

In short, whereas Davidson's account of the principle of charity is intended to reduce the indeterminacy of translation and radical interpretation, I have urged that Derrida's brand of relativism only serves to increase indeterminacy to the point where anything goes. This is what is ultimately wrong with Derrida's conception of the ceaseless play of signs and what he thinks it entails for the production of meaning and interpretation. Hence, the problem is not so much whether our signs fail to make contact with an independent reality but whether we can speak intelligibly about the familiar world with respect to both the referential or communicative characteristics of language. In light of this, I have argued that when Derrida asserts that each and every practice of evaluation implies some sort of politics between which there can be no argument, he fails to note clearly that between different practices there will be a large stock of background beliefs that serve as common ground upon which to produce interpretations. If this is right then Derrida cannot consistently claim that no beliefs are universal.

These misunderstandings can rightly be taken to mean that deconstruction entails an unconstrained brand of relativism--insofar as it implies that anything goes with respect to the choice of different practices of evaluation--and that it poses the rejection of the metaphysics of presence and of absolutism as entailing deconstruction, or as we can now put it, his textual relativism. However, what gets left out of Derrida's reading of Western thought are all the philosophical positions such as Davidson's which are non-absolutistic but which deny relativism.

Thus, unlike Davidson and others, Derrida has little to contribute towards showing what a non-absolutist (or post metaphysics of presence) philosophy looks like, i.e., what it does and does not imply.

What, then, can we say about the impact of Derrida's deconstructionism on the contemporary intellectual scene? It is still too early to tell what the long-term effects will be, but the main worry, as I see it, is this: the texts which commonly make up part of the reading list of a liberal education in the humanities in today's universities--such as the Bible, selected works of Plato, selected works of Aristotle, readings in medieval and Renaissance literature and philosophy, including Dante, Thomas More, Augustine, Machiavelli, and of moderns such as Voltaire, Pascal, Descartes, Kant, as well as Darwin, Marx, Freud, and so on, can be interpreted and re-interpreted in as many ways as there are practices of evaluation that relativists like Derrida would have to recognize. The pressing problem is not just that Derrida and like-minded thinkers allow for too many (or any and all possible) ways of interpreting these texts but that there is no way to discriminate, and to teach students to discriminate, between what is good and what is bad or what is true and what is false.

And this is essentially because Derrida and his followers see a 'political' dimension in discursive practices that have apparently been overlooked or marginalized in Western thought. The argument can be stated in the following way: since each and every practice of evaluation in any domain of inquiry will

inevitably have a political dimension, that is, they will always be formulated relative to certain interests and purposes, there is bound to be all sorts of interests and purposes between which there can be no argument. As such, there is no way of showing which political dimension is better (or more privileged) than others. Derrida concludes from this line of thinking that our practices of evaluation have to be deconstructed or otherwise transformed, though of course he never says what they should be transformed into, if anything at all.

Perhaps the most frustrating feature of the influence that Derrida's deconstructionism has had on the contemporary intellectual scene is that the underlying issues of what it means to deconstruct texts seldom come out in the open. While Derrida often presents himself to readers as only putting core assumptions about the referential and communicative characteristics of language to a rigorous scrutiny through the magnifying glass of deconstruction, he fails to show clearly why his deconstructionism is not self-destructive. On the other hand, Derrida's critics have so far failed to show how and why deconstruction is self-destructive in that beside the present study there is little by way of rigorous analysis on the relationship between deconstruction and relativism. My account of the kind of relativism at issue in deconstruction contributes to showing why deconstruction is self-destructive insofar as it entails an unconstrained relativism according to which anything goes. This study also helps, I think, to clarify some of the current confusion surrounding the thesis of relativism.

End Notes

Preface

1. John Searle, "Rationality and Realism, What is at Stake?" *Daedalus* 122 (1993): 55-83.
2. Plato: *Theaetatus* trans. F.M. Cornford, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Bollinger Series, Pantheon Books, 1961), 856.
3. M. Burnyeat, ed. *The Sceptical Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
4. This is at least in part due to some powerful criticisms of relativism. Perhaps the most pressing criticism is the charge that relativism is self-referentially incoherent, in that to state the relativist thesis is to refute it. That is, either the relativist must argue that relativism is absolutely true (in which case the relativist has subverted his own thesis) or he must argue that relativism is only relatively true (in which case we need not bother hearing him out). But of late some philosophers sympathetic to relativism have urged that contemporary versions of relativism may be immune to the standard criticisms of relativism. I shall have cause to consider this line of thinking in the fourth chapter of this study.
5. Jacques Derrida, "The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations," *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. Alan Montefiore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 45-50.
6. My main reason for setting aside the first two kinds of research on deconstruction is that they do not explain the relationship between deconstruction and relativism and because there is already much work being carried out in these areas. See, for example, Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Also, see Mark Okrent, *Heidegger's Pragmatism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), especially chapters one and two. Also, see Douglas Donkel, *The Understanding of Difference in Heidegger and Derrida* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), especially chapters two and three. Also, see David Wood, *Of Derrida, Heidegger, and Spirit* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), especially chapters one and three. This list makes no pretence to completeness.

Introduction

1. Jacques Derrida, "Cogito and the History of Madness," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1978) 62.

2. In this study I shall adopt the convention of using single quotes for odd or vague terms and double quotes for citations.

2. For a good discussion of this topic see chapters one and two in Barry Allen, *Truth in Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Allen notes, for example, that "Aristotle defines truth for classical philosophy: 'to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true'" (9). According to Allen, this view endures in modern philosophy, but in revised forms: "Thus the significance, from Descartes to Kant, Husserl, and Moore, of subjectivity: a domain where thought and existence are unified; where what is judged and said cannot fail to coincide with what is" (32).

3. Hume's claim that perceptions can only lead to other perceptions casts doubt on the assumption that language can accurately depict the world. See Book I, Part IV in David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. P.H. Nidditch, 2nd edition, (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1978), especially 180-218. The literature on this aspect of Hume's philosophy is extensive. See, for example, chapter twenty-two in Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of its Origins and Central Doctrines* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1941), especially 465-473.

4. See especially book five in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974). The literature on Nietzsche's treatment of this matter is extensive. See part one in Glen T. Martin, *From Nietzsche to Wittgenstein: The Problem of Truth and Nihilism in the Modern World* (New York: Lang, 1989), especially 78-84. Also, see chapter seven in Martin Werner, *Philosophical Finesse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), especially 267-273.

5. The sources and major proponents of the view that the core ideas in deconstruction are attributable to Nietzsche are too well known to require exposition here. Similarly, the influence of deconstructionist thought on the contemporary intellectual scene has been widely discussed. See "Theory and Politics of Postmodernism: By Way of an Introduction," *Postmodern and Society*, eds. Roy Boyne and Ali Rattansi (London: MacMillan, 1990) 1. Also, see "Cultural Influences on American Literary Criticism," Art Berman, *From New Criticism to Deconstruction: The Reception of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 60-82. See also chapter four "Postmodernism and Literature," Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 103-131.

6. Martin Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Krell and Frank Cappuzzi (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) 52.

7. By 'the delineation of various forms of presence' I mean that, for Heidegger, our explanations of the presence of a thing's 'Being' appeal to further things and their features or relationships. For example, we explain tables and chairs in terms of the work of craftsmen, of the raw products from which they are made, of the molecules to be found in such raw products, and so on. This example illuminates the point that what goes on when knowing or perceiving occurs is historically conditioned. That is, there remains a difference between various forms of presence and the presence of the 'Being' of a given thing. One of the fundamental philosophical problems for Heidegger (and for Derrida as we shall soon see) is not whether we can have access to reality unimpeded by perspectival distortion but rather whether knowledge of a thing's 'Being' is enhanced or reduced by bringing out the various forms of presence that a thing can have.

8. J. Sallis, ed., *Heidegger and the Path of Thinking* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1970) 10.

9. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 27. Emphasis in the original.

10. I shall here restrict myself to mentioning the difference between Derrida and Heidegger's philosophical thinking on this matter as it is not possible in this Introduction to accommodate more than only a fraction of what Derrida says about Heidegger's work. However, what I do say about Derrida's reading of Heidegger pertains particularly to Derrida's treatment of the metaphysics of presence.

11. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 9.

12. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* 131.

13. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976) 11. In chapter two, Derrida accuses Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Saussure, Levi-Strauss, Husserl and many others of assuming the primacy of speech over writing.

14. Derrida, *Grammatology* 12. In the preface, Spivak notes that "Derrida uses the word 'metaphysics' very simply as shorthand for any science of presence" (xxi).

15. It may be the case that Derrida is merely reacting negatively to one or more of the modern conceptions of realism according to which the world is comprised of independent objects and states of affairs that we directly perceive when we train our senses on them. But this seems insufficient as an explanation of what Derrida means by presence since there is a wide range of realist theories and he

never clearly states which theory is under attack in his writings. Moreover, other scholars before Derrida have done a fair job of criticizing modern conceptions of realism and it would be uninteresting if this is all that Derrida means.

16. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) 47.

17. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 50. Emphasis in the original.

18. Derrida borrows the terms 'sign,' 'signifier' and 'signified' from the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. See Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966). In this book, Saussure defines a linguistic sign as "the combination of a concept [signified] and a sound image [signifier]" (67). The brackets are mine.

19. It is worth noting here that Derrida's way of addressing philosophical topics and issues complies in large part with what Richard Rorty calls the 'linguistic turn,' i.e., the recent trend in philosophy that subordinates inquiry into intellectual topics or issues to a prior inquiry into language. See Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967) 3-8.

20. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973) 51.

21. Derrida's conception of signs calls into question the phenomenon of moral perception, understood here as the faculty which enables us to perceive the moral character of situations directly and accurately. For a good discussion of the nature of moral perception see Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 298-306; Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970); Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) chapter one; Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) chapter two.

22. By the communicative characteristic of language I mean the view that people are able to accurately communicate thoughts, ideas and meanings to others. By the referential characteristic of language, on the other hand, I mean the view that a language and its signs can be used to refer to objects and states of affairs that are said to exist independently of that language and its signs.

23. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988) 21.

24. Derrida, *Grammatology* 49.

25. Jacques Derrida, "Sending: On Representation," *Social Research* 49/2 (1982): 324.

26. Indeed Quine and others have gone so far as to try to persuade Cambridge university not to confer an honorary doctorate on Derrida on the grounds that his work is anti-philosophical.

27. The proponents of the view that deconstruction leads to relativism are many. See Juergen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987) 53. Also see, Hilary Lawson, *Reflexivity: The Post-modern Predicament* (London: Hutchinson, 1985) 14. Also, see John McGowan, *Postmodernism and its Critics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) x-xi. Also, see Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990) 7. Also, see Martin Schiralli, "Reconstructing Literary Value," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 25 (1991): 116. Also, see William Bywater, "The Paranoia of Postmodernism," *Philosophy and Literature* 14 (1990): 79. Also, see Henry Veatch, "Deconstruction in Philosophy," *Review of Metaphysics* 39 (1985): 316.

28. Part of what motivates the belief that deconstruction entails relativism is, I suspect, that many writers have insisted that Derrida is merely a post-Nietzschean philosopher. Yet there is still much disagreement about the extent to which Nietzsche's philosophy is relativistic and so this way of approaching the matter is inconclusive. See, for example, Alan Schrift, *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 1990), especially 150-159. Also, see chapter four in Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), especially 103-108.

Chapter One

1. Joseph Margolis, *The Truth About Relativism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) ix.

3. The various difficulties with relativism have been much discussed of late. See Mark Okrent, "Relativism, Context and Truth," *The Monist* 67 (1984): 341-358. The charge that relativism is incoherent was made as far back as Socrates. See Plato's "Theaetetus" in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Bollingen Series, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963) 845-919. But in recent years a number of attempts have been made to overcome the difficulties with relativism. In a series of articles Jack Meiland has tried to make a positive case for relativism. See his "Cognitive Relativism: Popper and the Argument From Language," *Philosophical Forum* 4 (1973): 406-421. See, also, Jack Meiland, "Concepts of Relative Truth," *The Monist* 60 (1977): 568-582. See, also, Jack Meiland, "On

the Paradox of Cognitive Relativism," *Metaphilosophy* 11 (1980): 115-126.

4. Paul Feyerabend has promoted a simple form of relativism and a complex form of relativism, though he writes in a manner that fuses these forms in intricate and not necessarily in consistent ways. See Paul Feyerabend, *Science in a Free Society* (London: New Left Books, 1978). In this book, Feyerabend writes that "Protagorean relativism is reasonable because it pays attention to the pluralism of traditions and values" (28). He seems to think that Protagorean relativism has universal application. But he also discusses how different cultures and civilizations have developed and redeveloped a variety of critically-reflected upon intellectual standards: "[R]ational standards and the arguments supporting them are visible parts of special traditions" (27). Feyerabend here emphasizes what is sometimes called the intersubjective or complex form of relativism. So the problem is that he fails to explain why and how Protagorean relativism gets linked both to a subjective form of relativism and to an intersubjective form of relativism. This confusion pervades much of his work on relativism.

5. For a good discussion of this matter see Susan Haack, "Reflections on Relativism: From Momentous Tautology to Seductive Contradiction," forthcoming in *Philosophical Perspectives II: Metaphysics*, E. Tomberlin, ed., (Oxford: Blackwell).

6. For a good discussion of the varieties of relativism see Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

7. Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 52.

8. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978) 2-3.

9. There are many theorists who challenge the traditional conception of a world that exists independently of human representations but nonetheless question the viability of relativism. For a good discussion on this matter see chapter one in David Papineau, *Reality and Representation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), especially 1-3, 12-13. Also, see chapter seven in Roderick Chisholm, *The Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), especially 86-92. Also, see chapter nine in Jonathan Dancy, *Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985), especially 130-139. See, also, chapter one in Harold Joachim, *The Nature of Truth* (New York: Greenwood Publishers, 1969), especially 9-19. Also, see chapter seven in Bruce Aune, *Knowledge and the External World* (New York: Routledge, 1991), especially 195-207. Also, see J. Perry, "The Problem of the Essential Indexical," *Nous* 13 (1979): 3-21.

10. See chapter three of his *Reason, Truth and History*, especially 49-54. Metaphysical realism, Putnam says, holds that "the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'" (49).
11. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* 54. Emphases in the original.
12. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* 54.
13. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* xii. Indeed Putnam's internal realism is remarkably close to Goodman's irrealism.
14. A number of Putnam's critics have remarked that his internalism fails to block the drift towards relativism. See, for example, Michael Levin, "Reality Relativism," *Aspects of Relativism: Moral, Cognitive and Literary*, ed. James E. Bayley (Maryland: University Press of America, 1992). In this essay, Levin discusses the work of what he calls the 'pre-relativist Putnam' thereby suggesting that Putnam's later views are indeed relativistic (77).
15. Harvey Siegel, "Relativism," *A Companion to Epistemology*, eds. Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992) 428-429.
16. For analogous accounts of this matter see Harvey Siegel, "Relativism, Truth, and Incoherence," *Synthese* 68 (1986): 225-259; William J. Wainwright, "Meiland and the Coherence of Cognitive Relativism," *Metaphilosophy* 17 (1986): 61-69; Edward Beach, "The Paradox of Cognitive Relativism Revisited: A Reply to Jack W. Meiland," *Metaphilosophy* 15 (1984): 1-15; R.B. Brandt, "Relativism Refuted?," *The Monist* 67 (1984): 297-307; the Introduction to *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*, eds. Jack Meiland and Michael Krausz (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1982); Richard Bett, "The Sophists and Relativism," *Phronesis* 34 (1988): 139-169.
17. Harre and Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism* 5.
18. Harre and Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism* 4.
19. For a good discussion on Kuhn's disclaimers see Harvey Siegel, "Objectivity, Rationality, Incommensurability, and More," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 31 (1980): 359-75.
20. Harre and Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism* 5.
21. Meiland, *Concepts* 571.
22. See G. Harman, *The Nature of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

23. See A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (London: Cohen and West, 1952).
24. Derrida, *Grammatology* 158.
25. Derrida, "Afterword," *Limited Inc.* 136.
26. Derrida, "Afterword," *Limited Inc* 137.
27. For a good discussion of this maxim see W.V.O. Quine and J.S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief*, 2nd. edition (New York: Random House, 1978) 129.
28. John Searle, *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) vii.
29. Anna Weirzbicka, *Semantics, Culture, and Cognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 10.
30. Israel Scheffler, *Science and Subjectivity* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967) 47.
31. Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 4.
32. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Harvester Press, 1978) 94. In this book Goodman restates and broadens his account of relativism which initially made its appearance in a comprehensive form in his *The Structure of Appearance*, 3rd edition (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1977).
33. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* 92-93. By apparent motion Goodman means the observation of moving light when there are, according to the physicalist at least, just distinct flashes.
34. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* 92.
35. Phenomenalism can be expressed by saying that what we take to be perceivable or meaningful objects in the world can be reduced to sense data. By way of contrast, physicalism can be expressed by saying that all sense data can be reduced to the physical objects or states of affairs to which such sense data are said to refer.
36. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* 4.
37. Putnam, *Reflections* 610-611.
38. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* 7.
39. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* 109.
40. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* 61.

41. Goodman, *Reconceptions* 116.
42. Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters* i. The insertion is mine.
43. Goodman, *Reconceptions* 56.
44. Goodman, *Reconceptions* 54. The emphasis is mine.
45. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968) 52-57.
46. Goodman, *Reconceptions* 55.
47. Goodman, *Reconceptions* 55.
48. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* 107.
49. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* 138. Goodman seems not to have sufficiently worked out his views on the relation between truth and rightness since the notion of 'fit' is not defined in precise terms. But in his *Reason, Truth and History*, Putnam endorses Goodman's notion of fit: "The whole purpose of relativism, its very defining characteristic, is, however, to deny the existence of any intelligible notion of objective 'fit.' Thus the relativist cannot understand talk about truth in terms of objective justification-conditions" (123).
50. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* 134-139. In these pages, Goodman's discusses various aspects of what constitutes 'good' practice in different domains of inquiry.
51. Putnam, *Reflections* 617.
52. For a similar discussion of this matter see Israel Scheffler, "The Wonderful Worlds of Goodman," *Synthese* 45 (1980): 210-209. Also, see Harvey Siegel, "Goodmanian Relativism," *The Monist* 67 (1984): 359-375.

Chapter Two

1. Jacques Derrida, "Afterword," *Limited Inc.* 141-142.
2. There are of course other technical terms that could be discussed such as re-mark, pharmakon, restance, and so forth. However, I confine my analysis to the technical terms mentioned here because they best serve to explain Derrida's position on the referential character of language and because of their frequent usage in his writings.
3. Rodolphe Gasche, *The Tain of the Mirror* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). In chapters eight and nine Gasche provides an analysis of some of the key terms in the deconstructive

vocabulary, each of which he calls an 'infrastructure.' These analyses are, to my mind, the most important features of his book.

4. Richard Rorty, "Is Derrida A Transcendental Philosopher?," *Working Through Derrida*, ed. Gary B. Madison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993) 137-146. Similar arguments appear in other essays by Rorty. See his "From Ironist Theory to Private Allusions: Derrida," Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 122-137. Also, see his "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida," *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) 90-109.

5. Gasche is the main proponent of the view that deconstruction can be construed as a philosophical methodology. But this line of reasoning has recently come under challenge. See Joseph Margolis, *Interpretation Radical but Not Unruly* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 293. Also, see Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction 1*.

6. Rodolphe Gasche, *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) 7. This new book is primarily concerned with Derrida's later writings, beginning with the publication of *Glas*. But in the Introduction Gasche restates the arguments that purportedly support his reading of deconstruction in his *The Tain of the Mirror*.

7. Gasche, *Tain* 165.

8. This line of thinking is endorsed by the proponents of the mutual advantage theory of morality, which can be traced to 'Hobbesian' theories of morality. However, it is sometimes argued that 'Hobbesian' theories are not, strictly speaking, theories of morality at all. If this is right, then deconstructionist-minded thinkers like Derrida would hold that the concept of 'ethics' contains within it a trace of its opposite.

9. Gasche, *Tain* 123.

10. Jacques Derrida, "Some Questions and Responses," *The Linguistics of Writing*, eds. Nigel Fabb, Derek Attridge, Alan Durant and Colin MacCabe (New York: Methuen, 1987) 262. The emphasis is mine.

11. Rorty, *Transcendental* 140. The brackets are mine. Rorty's understanding of the term 'philosophy' is that it can be defined only loosely, that is, as the name of an academic department or by choosing a list of writers who share certain concerns and interests. But in neither case does he think that philosophy amounts to an autonomous discipline that can lay claim to having privileged answers to ultimate questions.

12. Rorty, *Transcendental* 143.

13. Rorty, *Transcendental* 139. The emphasis is mine.

14. Rorty, *Transcendental* 139. The insertion is mine.

15. Rorty, *Transcendental* 140-141.

16. Both Gasche and Rorty agree that there is as yet no final and decisive reading of Derrida's work. In *Inventions of Difference*, Gasche states that "It cannot be a question of who is right or wrong, of simply deciding about the essential Derrida versus what of him has been appropriated or distorted" (20). In "Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher" Rorty states "But perhaps it is just too soon for a judgment to be rendered on whether Gasche or I am looking at Derrida from the right angle, or whether we both may be squinty-eyed" (146). As I have tried to show, both Gasche and Rorty are a bit 'squinty-eyed' in their readings of deconstruction.

17. Saussure outlines two principles in this section, the second of which he calls 'Principle II: The Linear Nature of the Signifier.' However, the first principle is most important as it contains arguments leading to the view that there is no one-to-one correspondence between word and world. Derrida's treatment of Saussure's work is set out mainly in three chapters "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing," "Linguistics and Grammatology," and "Of Grammatology as a Positive Science," each of which is in the first part of his *Of Grammatology*.

18. Saussure, *Linguistics* 65.

19. Saussure, *Linguistics* 66. The insertions are mine.

20. Saussure, *Linguistics* 118. Emphasis in the original.

21. Saussure, *Linguistics* 120. The philosophical implications of this view of language and its signs is not new to philosophy as Derrida seems to suggest. As noted in the Introduction, Hume's view that perceptions can only lead to other perceptions also suggests a recognition of the thesis that there can be no precise one-to-one correspondence between word and world.

22. Barry Allen, "Derrida, or Difference Unlimited," *Truth in Philosophy*, 99-100.

23. Jacques Derrida, "Semiology and Grammatology: Interview with Julia Kristeva," in *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981) 19-20. In "Irrealism and Deconstruction," *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) Hilary Putnam endorses Derrida's treatment of this matter in saying: "[T]he very notion of a sign's meaning, as something separable from the sign, collapses. . . . Derrida makes

clear his wholehearted acceptance of this line of thinking. . . ." (125).

24. Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification," *Writing and Difference* 25.

25. Derrida, *Grammatology* 50.

26. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973) 5. The insertion is mine.

27. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay, vol. 1 (New York: Humanities Press, 1970) 269-333.

28. Derrida, *Speech* 64.

29. A similar point is made by J. Claude Evans. See his *Strategies of Deconstruction: Derrida and the Myth of the Voice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), especially 97-110. But his treatment of this matter shows, at best, that Derrida is not sufficiently precise in his critique of Husserl. What it does not show is that Derrida is mistaken about the theme of the metaphysics of presence that underlies the Husserlian project.

30. Derrida, *Speech* 64.

31. Others have addressed this issue from similar perspectives. See Juergen Habermas, "Beyond a Temporalized Philosophy of Origins: Jacques Derrida's Critique of Phonocentrism," *Philosophical Discourse on Modernity*, especially 168-175. Also, see John D. Caputo, "The Economy of Signs in Husserl and Derrida: From Uselessness to Full Employment," *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988) 99-113. Also, see Joseph O'Leary, *Questioning Back: The Overcoming of Metaphysics in Christian Tradition* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985) 36-48.

32. Derrida, *Speech* 65. Emphasis in the original.

33. I follow Spivak's interpretation of the term 'trace' in the preface to *Of Grammatology*: "Derrida, then, gives the name 'trace' to the part played by the radically other within the structure of difference that is the sign. (I stick to trace in my translation because it 'looks the same' as Derrida's word; the reader must remind himself of at least the track, even the spoor, contained in the French word)" (xvii). Similarly, Derrida writes in *Of Grammatology* that "difference cannot be thought of without the trace" (57). Jonathan Culler *On Deconstruction* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982) endorses a similar view in saying "The sound sequence *bat* is a signifier because it contrasts with *pat, mat, bat, bet, etc.* The noise that is 'present' when one

says but is inhabited by the traces of forms that one is uttering, and it can function as a signifier only insofar as it consists of such traces" (96).

34. Gasche, *Tain* 177.

35. Derrida, *Positions* 52. Derrida is reacting to critics who claim that deconstruction has been modelled on Heidegger's philosophical project. Against this view, he insists that one cannot model a philosophical project on something that must itself be deconstructed.

36. Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la Philosophie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972) 73. I here cite Irene Harvey's translation of this passage as set out in her book *Derrida and the Economy of Differance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 120.

37. Derrida, *Speech* 156. In *Writing and Difference* Derrida makes a similar remark: "The trace is the erasure of selfhood, of one's own presence, and is constituted by the threat or the anguish of its irremediable disappearance, of the disappearance of its disappearance. An unerasable trace is not a trace, it is a full presence, an immobile and uncorruptible substance, a son of God. . . ." (230).

38. Jacques Derrida, "Deconstruction and the Other," *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, ed. Richard Kearney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) 123.

39. Derrida, *Grammatology* 50. Emphasis in the original.

40. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *Writing and Difference*, 292. Emphasis in the original.

41. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, trans. John H. Moran (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1966) 5-74.

42. Newton Garver, "Derrida on Rousseau on Writing," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 74 (1977): 663.

43. Garver, *Derrida* 670. Garver is in part referring to Rousseau's commitment to the theme of 'phonocentrism.' That is, Rousseau thinks that in speech we can have an immediate encounter (unmediated by signs) with feelings or passions.

44. Rousseau, *Essay* 9.

45. Rousseau, *Essay* 14.

46. Rousseau, *Essay* 15.

47. Rousseau, *Essay* 21.
48. Garver, *Derrida* 669.
49. Derrida, *Grammatology* 11.
50. Derrida, *Grammatology* 167.
51. See Jacques Derrida, "Differance," *Speech and Phenomena* 129-160.
52. Derrida, *Speech* 129. Derrida notes that the French vocabulary has not yet developed two separate verbs for the latin 'differre' though the senses 'to differ' and 'to differ' are preserved in the same French verb *differer*. The neologism 'differance' is supposed thus to link together difference and deferral and thus refers to both spatial and temporal difference.
53. Ernst Behler, *Confrontations: Derrida/Heidegger/Nietzsche*, trans. Steven Taubeneck (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1991) 71-72.
54. Derrida, *Speech* 130.
55. Gasche, *Tain* 194-195, 204.
56. Gasche, *Tain* 194.
57. Richard Rorty, "From Ironist Theory to Private Allusions: Derrida," *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* 124. Rorty insists that differance is a word since Derrida has established its conventional usage in deconstruction.
58. Garver, *Derrida* 195-196.
59. Derrida, *Positions* 40. Emphasis in the original.
60. Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 95. Emphasis in the original. Culler's treatment of this issue has been roundly criticized by Searle. See John Searle, "The World Turned Upside Down," *Working Through Derrida* 172-174.
61. Irene Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Differance*, 206.
62. Derrida, *Speech* 88.
63. Derrida, *Speech* 85. It is the conjunction 'and' in this passage that is important to the discussion at hand.
64. Derrida, *Grammatology* 65. Emphasis in the original.
65. Harvey, *Derrida* 215.

66. Derrida, *Grammatology* 144-145.

67. Derrida, *Speech* 134.

Chapter Three

1. John Searle [*A World of Ideas with Bill Moyers*], dir. Bill D. Moyers, New York; Etobicoke, Ont.: PBS Video; Educational Centre Ltd., 1989 (30 min.).

2. John Searle, "Rationality and Realism, What is at Stake?," *Daedalus* 122 (1993): 55-83. I have chosen this essay because it summarizes some of the fundamental principles that lie at the core of many of the philosophical systems in the Western Rationalistic Tradition.

3. Searle, *Rationality* 61.

4. Searle, *Rationality* 68. Of course, Searle might argue that while some epistemic principles are open to challenge, the conception of objectivity cannot be challenged. If this is the claim Searle wishes to defend, he fails to make this point clear.

5. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," trans. Jeffrey Mehlam, *Glyph* 1, eds., Samuel Weber and Henry Sussman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) 172-197. This essay also appears in conjunction with "Limited Inc a b c..." in Gerald Graff, ed., *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988). However, all references are to the essays published in *Glyph*.

6. The issue addressed by Austin which is of primary interest to Derrida is whether so-called 'ordinary' speech-acts can ever be ordinary enough as to constitute a clear standard against which to judge exceptions to that standard. For Austin and for Searle 'ordinary' speech acts can constitute some sort of standard against which to measure serious from non-serious discourse while for Derrida it cannot. Derrida's position rests on the claim that any sign must be able to be repeated, that is, taken out of context from its original moment of production. For Derrida, however, to repeat or take a sign out of context is to alter that sign's meaning. In the strictest sense, then, Derrida holds that repeatability is impossible without some alteration to a sign's meaning. The upshot of Derrida's position is that intentionality is an insufficient ground for deciding the correct meaning of any communication. I shall not, however, be concerned with Derrida's reading of Austin. While much has already been written on whether Derrida gets Austin right, too little has been written on what Derrida has to say about the role of intentionality in justifying interpretations. This is the aspect of Derrida's work that concerns us here since it points directly to his treatment of the communicative characteristic of language.

7. Derrida, *Signature* 193.

8. Derrida, *Signature* 172.

9. Both Searle and Rorty criticize Derrida's emphasis on the idea of impurity. Rorty, for instance, thinks that Searle "is very acute in remarking that many of them [Derrida's arguments] depend upon the assumption 'that unless a distinction can be made rigorous and precise it isn't really a distinction at all.'" (Richard Rorty, "Deconstruction and Circumvention," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984): 22). Searle and Rorty, however, appear to miss the point. Derrida is not arguing that 'impure' words, ideas or concepts must be discarded. Rather, his point is that there are no pure words, ideas or concepts to which we can appeal in making (philosophical or other) distinctions and it is for this reason he poses the question. The basis for his emphasis on impurity seems to rest with the idea of the trace. For Derrida, no word, idea or concept is pure since each contains within itself the trace of other words, ideas or concepts.

10. Derrida, *Signature* 173. Derrida, however, fails to say which forms of communication do not involve the transmission of meaning.

11. Derrida, *Signature* 174.

12. Derrida, *Signature* 176.

13. Derrida, *Signature* 176. Derrida is here referring to a passage in chapter three of Condillac's *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*.

14. Derrida, *Signature* 179-180.

15. Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 110. The emphasis is mine. I note here that Norris' explication of this dispute is mainly concerned with Derrida and Searle's reading of Austin's views on speech-acts.

16. Norris, *Deconstruction* 110.

17. Norris, *Deconstruction* 110.

18. Derrida, *Signature* 192.

19. Derrida applies the conclusions drawn above to signatures and to Austin's theory of speech acts. I shall not examine his treatment of these issues since the focus of *SEC* is not any particular philosophical theory but a general philosophical space that he calls 'writing.' It is this conception of writing that is of interest to us here.

20. Searle, *Rationalism* 81.

21. Robert Scholes, "Deconstruction and Communication" *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1988): 281. Others have made similar remarks. For example, see John M. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989) 13. But as I try to show, Derrida does not deny that the authorial intention plays a role in deciding a text's meaning and so his reaction to Searle's reading of him seems warranted.

22. Derrida, *Signature* 180.

23. Derrida, *Signature* 192.

24. John Searle, "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida," *Glyph* 1 (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1977) 198-208.

25. As noted earlier, I shall not consider either Searle or Derrida's respective treatment of Austin's theory of speech acts since I am mainly concerned with Derrida's own position on the production of meaning and interpretation.

26. Searle, *Reply* 199.

27. Derrida, *Limited Inc* 193. Emphasis in the original.

28. Derrida, *Limited Inc* 183. True to his playful style of writing, Derrida begins this essay by transforming Searle's name to 'Sar1' in order to demonstrate the point that no author can ever succeed in fully controlling the production of meaning. The insertion is mine.

29. Searle, *Reply* 200.

30. Derrida, *Limited Inc* 188. Derrida acknowledges that the translation of the French neologism 'restance' to the English term 'remainder' presents some interpretive difficulties but he insists that it is adequate for the discussion at hand.

31. Derrida, *Limited Inc* 189.

32. Derrida, *Limited Inc* 190. The brackets are mine.

33. Searle, *Reply* 201.

34. Derrida, *Limited Inc* 192.

35. Searle, *Reply* 201.

36. See Michael Fischer, *Does Deconstruction Make Any Difference?* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). This is but one of a number of recent books on deconstruction which contends that the claims of deconstruction lend themselves, as Fischer puts it, to

"tendencies that in various ways call into question our capacity to decide on the meaning of literary (and nonliterary) texts" (xi). See, also, Alfred Louch, "Critical Discussion," *Philosophy and Literature* 10 (1986). Louch maintains that Fischer and like-minded critics are right to argue that deconstruction "should be taken to imply a license to say anything at all" (327). There are of course many other writers who hold such views on deconstruction.

37. Jacques Derrida, "Afterword," *Limited Inc.* 142-143. Original emphasis omitted.

38. Derrida, "Afterword," *Limited Inc.* 148, 144. Original emphasis omitted.

Chapter Four

1. Jacques Derrida, "Afterword," *Limited Inc.* 115-116.

2. For a good discussion of the implications of this position for the realist see Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth*, second edition, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), especially 17-25.

3. As we saw in the previous chapter, Searle maintains that the six principles he tries to safeguard against attack are minimal standards of rationality that any discursive practice is forced to meet. To recall, these principles are (i) that reality exists independently of human representations; (ii) that one of the functions of language is to communicate meaning; (iii) that truth is a matter of the accuracy of representation; (iv) that knowledge is objective; (v) that logic and rationality are formal; and (vi) that these standards cannot be discarded. Indeed he declares that "[m]any of the features of the Western Rationalistic Tradition . . . are essential to any successful culture" (Searle, *Rationality* 58). However, there are some subtle differences between Searle's position and the foregoing conception of metaphysical realism.

4. Searle, *Rationality* 61. Here, Searle writes that while there are portions of reality that are indeed social constructs "it is a foundational principle of the Western Rationalistic Tradition that there are . . . large sections of the world described by our representations that exist completely independently of those or any other possible representations."

5. Searle writes that "the correspondence theory [of truth] . . . is just shorthand for all the enormous variety of ways in which statements can accurately represent how things are" Searle, *Rationality* 65. The insertion is mine.

6. Searle discusses this feature of the Western Rationalistic Tradition in reference to what he calls its 'self-critical' feature. See Searle, *Rationality* 56-59.

7. Searle, *Rationality* 69. Here, Searle writes that the "scholarly ideal of the tradition is that of the *disinterested* inquirer engaged in the quest for *objective* knowledge that will have *universal* validity." Emphases in the original.

8. John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995). In chapters one through five, Searle is mainly concerned with giving an account of the ontology of social facts. While this aspect of his work is interesting, I shall concentrate my analysis on chapters six through nine which are, to my mind, more directly to what is at issue here.

9. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* xi.

10. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* 23. For Searle's account of this concept see pages 23-26 and 37-39 in particular.

11. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* 41.

12. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* 35. See pages 120 through 125 for a more detailed account of his conception of the relation between institutional facts and brute facts.

13. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* 155. Italics in the original.

14. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* 184. The insertions are mine.

15. For a more detailed account of this point see the last chapter in Searle's *The Construction of Social Reality*, especially the section titled "A 'Transcendental' Argument for External Realism," pages 183 to 189.

16. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* 2. Included in Searle's list are Michael Dummett, Nelson Goodman, Thomas Kuhn, Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty and, of course, Jacques Derrida.

17. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* 163.

18. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* 176.

19. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* 164.

20. Putnam himself defines his position in relation to metaphysical realism. See chapter three of his *Reason, Truth and History*, especially 49-54.

21. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* xi.

22. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* 52.

23. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* 50.
24. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* 54.
25. Derrida, "Afterword," *Limited Inc* 146. In his own end note to this very same passage Allen suggests that in his early writings Derrida might be read as contesting, if not destroying, truth. However, Allen also suggests that this does not undermine the conception of truth as that which merely passes for truth.
26. Barry Allen, *Difference Unlimited* 25.
27. Derrida, *Limited Inc* 151. Emphasis in the original.
28. Barry Allen, *Difference Unlimited* 24.
29. Derrida, "Afterword," *Limited Inc.* 145.
30. Derrida, "Afterword," *Limited Inc.* 136.
31. Derrida, "Afterword," *Limited Inc.* 135. In this passage Derrida speaks of 'political evaluation' and not of the practice of evaluation per se. However, it is not untenable to suppose political evaluation incorporates certain practices of evaluation.
32. Derrida, "Afterword," *Limited Inc.* 134.
33. Derrida, "Afterword," *Limited Inc.* 145.
34. Derrida, *Limited Inc* 148.
35. E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969) 5. Emphasis in the original.
36. Hirsch, *Validity* 26.
37. Hirsch, *Validity* 225.
38. Hirsch, *Validity* 225.
39. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
40. See Kuhn's second edition of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1970, "Postscript 1969," 174-210 and his "Reflections on my Critics," *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 231-78.
41. Derrida, "Afterword," *Limited Inc* 146.
42. Derrida, "Afterword," *Limited Inc* 147.

43. Derrida, "Afterword," *Limited Inc.* 136.

44. Of course, not all philosophers and literary theorists explicitly endorse a particular frame. Many carry around a mixture of ideas from different frames combined in sometimes unreflective ways. But at the very least, every philosopher and literary theorist will appeal to some set of interpretive strategies and assumptions over others.

45. Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Glyph 1* 180.

46. Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Glyph 1* 180.

47. Derrida, "Limited Inc abc . . .," *Glyph 2* 220. Emphasis in the original. The insertion is mine.

48. Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Glyph 1* 182.

49. Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Glyph 1* 177.

50. Derrida, "Limited Inc abc . . .," *Glyph 2* 190.

51. Hirsch, *Validity* 17.

52. Derrida, *Grammatology* 158.

53. Arthur Danto, "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33 (1974): 139-48.

54. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1975) 115.

55. The desire for a more open reading of texts is also given special attention by Gadamer where he writes that "the meaning of a sentence is relative to the question to which it is a reply, ie it necessarily goes beyond what is said in it. . . ." And he goes on to say "[s]imilarly, the literary critic, who is dealing with poetic or philosophical texts, knows that they are inexhaustible. . . ." Still later he says that "[t]he voice that speaks to us from the past--be it text, work, trace--itself poses a question and places our meaning in openness" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garret Barden and John Cumming (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975) 333, 336, 337.) We should consider him, in passages such as these, to be arguing that less constrained interpretations can sometimes provide novel insights into our current problems and concerns about the experienced world. In such cases, seeking a correct interpretation of authorial intention ceases to be of primary interest.

56. Derrida, "Afterword," *Limited Inc* 148, 144.

57. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Vol. 1, 140. For a similar discussion on this matter see Jack Meiland's "On the Paradox of Cognitive Relativism," especially 120-131.

58. James E. Bayley, "Introduction," *Aspects of Relativism* 3.

59. This sort of objection to relativism has been raised in the work of Richard Kirkham. See his *Theories of Truth: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), especially chapter two entitled "Justification and Truth Bearers". Also, see Michael Williams, *Groundless Belief: An Essay on the Possibility of Epistemology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), especially 7-12, 60-71.

60. W.V.O. Quine, *Pursuit of Truth*, revised edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 5.

61. Quine insists, for example, that most sentences and especially highly theoretical sentences such as those found in the hard sciences will require us to build up a highly complex set of translational hypotheses. This is because such sentences depend on background beliefs that are not themselves manifested in our present observations. It is for this reason that Quine asserts that what we must start with is non-theoretical sentences such as those linked to present observations and to sensory stimulations in particular to make sense of the familiar world.

62. See W.V.O. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), especially 69-90. Also see his *Theories and Things* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981) for the view that scientific knowledge is all-encompassing in the sense that it is superior to other ways of knowing.

63. Putnam, *Reflections* 617.

64. Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) 183-214. See also Donald Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," in Ernest Lepore, ed., *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 307-19.

65. For an account of the influence of these writers' thoughts on Davidson's work, see his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), especially 261-75.

66. Donald Davidson, "Reality without Reference" in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 225.

67. Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" 196.

68. Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" 197.

69. Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" 196. The insertion is mine.

70. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

71. For a good summary of this view Lecture II in McDowell's *Mind and World*, especially 24.

72. Kant's thought quite obviously has a central place in McDowell's view on the way in which thought bears on reality. I shall not, however, consider Kant's work here as McDowell's reading of Kant is not at issue, nor does Kant's thought figure in my objection to relativism.

73. See Lecture I in McDowell's *Mind and World*, especially 14-18.

74. McDowell, *Mind and World* 7.

75. McDowell, *Mind and World* 9.

76. McDowell, *Mind and World* 10.

77. McDowell's treatment of the notion of *Bildung* takes place mainly in chapters five and six.

78. McDowell, *Mind and World* 88.

79. McDowell, *Mind and World* 125.

80. Davidson is against both the proponents of relativism and those he calls 'monotheists, i.e., those who think that there is but one frame or scheme. Of this, he writes "For if we cannot intelligibly say that schemes are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are one" (198).

81. McDowell, *Mind and World* 14.

82. I shall here take up a familiar example that relativists take to be a genuine philosophical concern about perceptual experience and the nature of reality. For a similar rendering of this example see James E. Bayley, *Aspects of Relativism* 7-8.

83. McDowell, *Mind and World* 26. McDowell argues further that "things are thus and so is also, if one is not misled, an aspect of the layout of the world: it is how things are" (26). For a relativist like Derrida, however, the question remains as to whether we can ever show how one may not be misled with regards to McDowell's account of the relation between minds and world.

84. Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" 194. Emphasis in the original.

85. Derrida, "Afterword," *Limited Inc* 146.

86. Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" 195-196.

87. Barry Allen, "Difference Unlimited," *Working Trough Derrida* 24-25. Allen, I think, fails to explain the weaknesses of Derrida's deconstructionism and instead concentrates mainly on Derrida's attack on the metaphysics of presence and what this entails for the production of meaning and interpretation.

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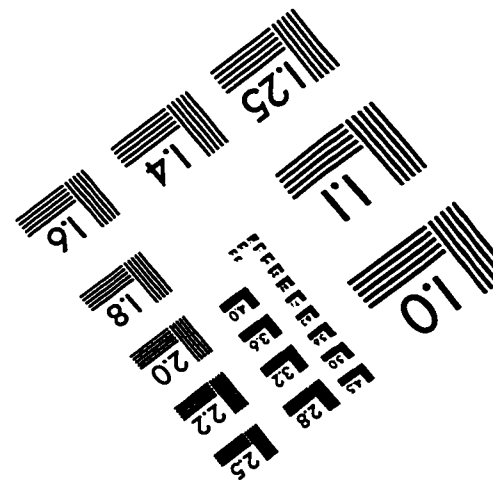
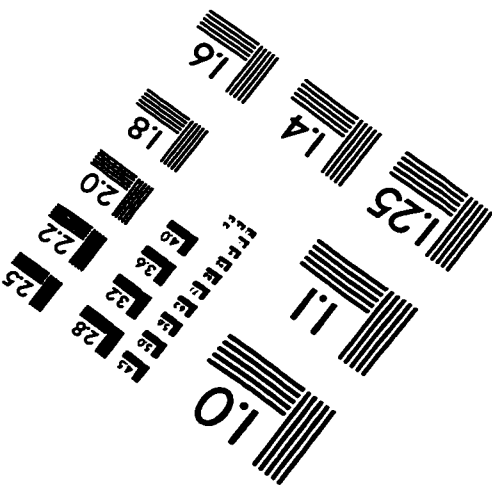
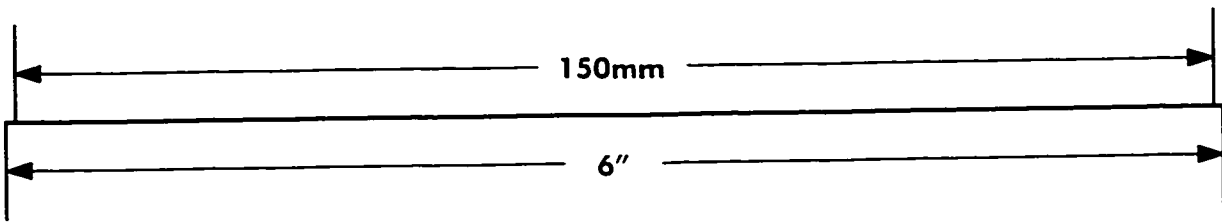
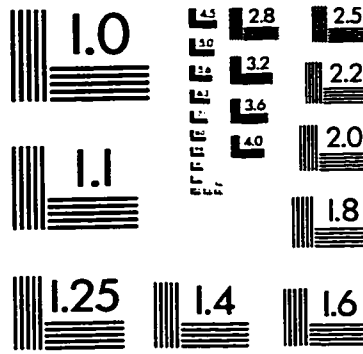
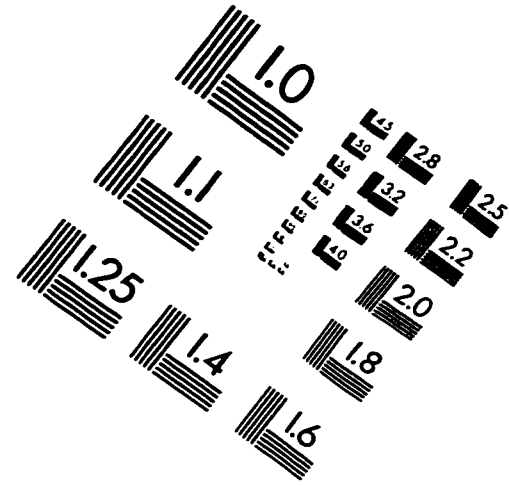
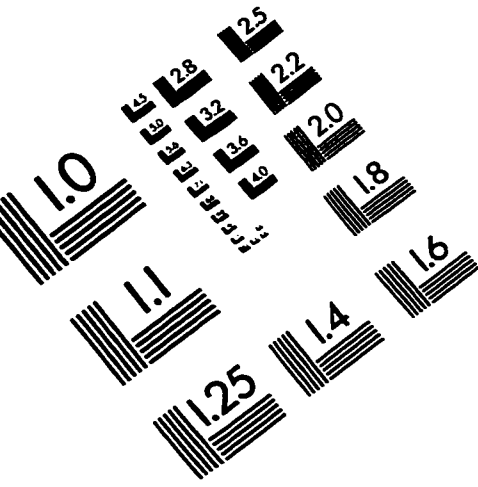
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