

DISCUSSION

DERRIDA AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF DECONSTRUCTION

Derrida, the modern father of deconstruction, is the exponent of the "textual activity". He is against the logocentric prejudice and traditional notions of thinking. He appreciates the free play of language as an endless *difference* of meaning. His analysis is beyond all philosophical categories and his influence on literary criticism, sociology, politics, psychology, anthropology etc., is remarkable.

Like the structurlists and other post-structurlists, Derrida is against the traditional metaphysical categories of subjectivity. He was very much influenced by his phenomenological teachers, Husserl and Heidegger and acknowledges his debt as follows :

My philosophical formation owes much to the thought of Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger is probably the most constant influence, and particularly his project of 'overcoming' Greek metaphysics. Husserl, whom I studied in a more studious and painstaking fashion, taught me a certain methodical prudence and reserve, a rigorous technique of unravelling and formulating questions..... In fact, it was Husserl's method that helped me to suspect the very notion of presence and the fundamental role it has played in all philosophies."¹

But it is interesting to note that Derrida extended his deconstructive method to his own masters. For example, in his two works, *An Introduction to Husserl's Origin of Geometry* (1962) and *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), Derrida gives a deconstructive reading of Husserl's philosophy of signification. He argues that phenomenology as a quest for radical origins and beginnings contains within itself the seeds of its own undoing - the possibility of its own self-overcoming. In short, there is the "logocentric spell" in Husserl and Heidegger, according to Derrida. The history of western thinking always centres its understanding on notions of "presence" (*logos*), says Derrida. While commenting on the history of metaphysics in

Writing and Difference (1967) defines it as a narrative of the "determinations of being as *presence* in all the senses of the word". He argues that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the centre have designated the constant of a presence - *eidōs, arche, telos, energeia, ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject), *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man and so forth. Derrida, who is against this logocentrism, argues that through deconstruction it can be shown that there is no such "centre".

Logocentrism, according to Derrida, is phenocentrism. In western philosophy, the logocentric prejudice actually operates through the priority to speech (*phone*) over writing (*Gramme*). One can see this in the writings of Plato. Writing was treated with great suspicion by Plato. It has been argued that in "writing", there is a possibility of other interpretations quite different to those originally intended. Plato in *Phaedrus* says that speech is the only authentic medium of language and writing is merely a debased and derivative function, substituting lifeless signs for the ideal self-present unity of thought and speech. The priority to speech over writing degrades writing as "parasitical on speech, a secondary medium of arbitrary signs, deprived of the authenticating "presence" vested in spoken language. Plato feels that once speeches have been written down, they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them, and they cannot protect or defend themselves.²

For Derrida, writing takes on an extended significance beyond its customary sense. Derrida's "proto-writing" (*archi'écriture*) is that which precedes and places in question the entire structure of assumption which governs traditional thought. The idea of speech as self-presence goes along with a belief in the ability of thought to arrive at an authentic knowledge beyond reach of doubt because it is transparently open to inward self-scrutiny. Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (1967), has shown how this "phonocentric" bias operates across the widest divergences of western philosophic thought by taking numerous examples from Plato to Saussure and Husserl.

The western metaphysics relies upon a series of oppositions - between mind and body, the intelligible and the sensible, culture and nature, male and female, signifier and signified, writing and speech, parole and

langue, diachrony and synchrony - in which one pole is elevated above the other, but can only be so prioritized through denegations of its dependence on its contrary, which generate a fundamental incoherence. Here, the opposites are not maintained in dynamic tension, but are placed in a hierarchical order which gives the first priority. Derrida says that at the point at which the concept of *differance* intervenes all these metaphysical oppositions become non-pertinent.³

Writing, according to Derrida has dual function to play. He uses the term "differance" to denote the dual function of writing as both a *differing* (where each sign differing from the other) and a *deferring* (the endless chain of signs postpones any termination of the chain in some original signified). The functioning of difference *within* speech is the "arche-writing", according to Derrida. Arche-writing is a sort of writing before writing and it cannot be objectively defined. It cannot be reduced to the form of a presence. It is a non-logocentric linguistics, i.e. "grammatology".

According to Derrida, language finds its source in "difference"⁴ as the linguist Saussure had claimed. The arbitrary nature of linguistic signs and their constitution through difference, are the chief notions by means of which Saussure attempted to explain *langue* as a system. The idea of difference completes the insulation of *langue* as a self-contained system. "In language, there are only differences", says Saussure.⁵ Though Derrida accepts Saussurean contribution to the inseparability of the signifier from signified, the problem with Saussure, according to Derrida, is that for Saussure, the signified is a determinate "idea" or a "meaning" fixed by the conjunction of word and thought. This would lead to the view that the signified could exist as the "pure concept" or "pure thought" independent of the signifier.

Meaning, says Derrida, is created only by the play of difference in the process of signification. Writing, for him, does not refer to a script as such, but to the spacing inherent in the notion of difference. Differance permits all thought, speech and writing, and makes possible the opposition between the signifier and the signified.⁶ Differance presumes a "spatial" dimension which is also a "temporal" one. Space is "in" time; it is time's pure living - itself, it is the "outside - itself" as the self-relation of time, says Derrida.⁷

Differance indicates that difference involves an integration of the

"spatial and the "temporal". Derrida by breaking away from the Saussurean distinction between synchrony and diachrony, argues that once this distinction is abandoned, difference is recognised to exist only within the temporal process of deferring, continual loss of present to future and to past. Signification only operates through difference or "trace." It is "origin of all repetition, origin of ideality, ... is no more ideal than real, no more intelligible than sensible, no more transparent signification than an opaque energy, and no concept of metaphysics can describe it."⁸ All signs and all texts include traces of others. Language, for Derrida, is the active force for differentiation present in trace form in all consciousness.⁸

Sometimes, it is argued that deconstruction is nihilism because it criticizes the idea that there is a centre/fixed point. If there is no such fixed point, then it follows that there is no fixed and final meaning to a text. If there is no ultimate meaning, then any interpretation is as good as any other. But this criticism is not proper. Derrida, in one of his interviews, makes it clear that this is nothing but misinterpretation of his deconstruction. He says :

I regret that I have been misinterpreted in this way... people who wish to avoid questioning and discussion present deconstruction as a sort of gratuitous chess game with a combination of signs, closed up in language as in a cave. I totally refuse that label of nihilism which has been ascribed to me. Deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness, but an openness towards the other¹⁰.

For Derrida, no term or text is the bearer of a self-evident meaning. This meaning must be instituted through a further term or text, and the meaning of this in turn by a further term or text, in a process which Derrida names the "logic of supplementary". Meaning is a textual activity, for Derrida.

It has been argued by Peter Dews in *Logics of Disintegration* that Derrida's philosophy of difference is no real advance on a philosophy of identity.¹¹ This would mean that the process or method of deconstruction is nothing but an empty reversal of the domination of identity over difference. Even this criticism is not proper because for Derrida, identity is not something given, something simple, but rather it is a product of both *differing* and *deferring*. Both are included in "difference". Hence deconstruction is not an empty reversal of the domination of identity over

difference.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan Institute for
Advanced Study in Philosophy,
University of Madras,
Madras - 600005.

S. PANNEERSELVAM

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