

The Deconstruction of Western Metaphysics: Derrida and Merleau-Ponty on Identity

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Many have taken the work of Jacques Derrida to constitute a radical and powerful attack on the whole of the Western philosophical tradition. In a series of books since 1962, drawing on key themes in Ferdinand de Saussure, and in Sartrean existentialism, Derrida has suggested that the central concepts and categories of the Western tradition—substance, sameness, essence, identity, subject, object, inside/outside, etc.—must be *deconstructed*. This means that such notions draw on something outside themselves for their meaning, and this “something” has been overlooked, ignored, and even suppressed throughout the history of Western philosophy. As a result, the zealous desire of Western philosophers to develop a “metaphysics of presence”—a set of concepts which reflect, capture, or otherwise adequately represent reality in human knowledge (however this was conceived by individual thinkers)—has succeeded only in seriously *misrepresenting* it.

Yet despite Derrida’s alleged radical attack on Western metaphysics, there has been little *genuine dialogue* between him and proponents of the view he is attacking. Indeed, at first sight it seems that Derrida and his followers, on the one hand, and those philosophers he is criticizing, along with his many detractors, on the other, are like ships passing in the night. Certainly their radically different approaches to philosophy—and especially to the questions of knowledge, language, and meaning—suggest that each side can have very little to say to the other. All of this has been reinforced by popular misconceptions as well as misapplications of Derrida’s thought. The upshot of this wide divergence between the two sides is that those who take Derrida seriously are much more likely to be sympathetic to, and inspired by, his work than to approach it from a critical perspective, and those who do not take his work seriously tend to be openly dismissive of his ideas. This has led to an

increasing isolation and polarization of both sides. This paper will be an attempt to bridge something of this gap which has opened up between the two camps.

However, I will not attempt to bridge the gap by suggesting that all of these philosophers are really advocating the same position, or that there is sufficient common ground between them from which one could form a consensus view. Rather, I will suggest that *there is enough common ground to enable us to understand both positions fairly clearly—that of Western metaphysics and that of Derrida—and to adjudicate between them.* This move would probably not be welcomed by Derrida, since he resists the view that his work is accessible to systematic presentation, and indeed it has obviously been carefully constructed to resist systematic examination. Nevertheless, I believe that one *can* clearly discern and present the main points of his position in a fairly systematic way, and I hope to illustrate this later. I will go about my task by comparing the general philosophical position of Derrida with that of Jacques Maritain, focusing especially on the notion of *identity*.

My main claim about Derrida's thought can be expressed as follows: he is advancing a thesis (or a view or a theory) about the nature of reality (although he denies this), the key notion of his thesis is the notion of *identity*, and his thesis, although interesting and often profoundly presented, is very implausible and not well supported by argument. My second claim is that Maritain (who I take as an eminent representative of the metaphysics of presence for the purpose of this discussion) advocates a view of identity which concurs with the dominant Western philosophical view attacked by Derrida, and that this traditional view of identity is essentially correct. In the first part, I shall lay out my own understanding of Maritain's metaphysical views on the nature of reality focusing in particular on his view of identity, and employing some of the terminology which will recur in the discussion on Derrida. In the second part, I shall attempt to present as clearly as possible what I understand to be Derrida's philosophical position on identity, and illustrate how this position motivates his attack on the metaphysics of presence. Derrida does not, so far as I know, directly attack Maritain, or Thomistic philosophy, but there can be no doubt that the metaphysics of presence developed by Maritain is a classic instance of the "error" Derrida wishes to expose (and correct) in Western philosophy. Finally, drawing on the analysis in the first two parts, I will present my critique of Derrida's attack on Western metaphysics.

Although I will outline Maritain's view of identity in the first part, I should emphasize at the outset that I believe that the "metaphysics of presence" in Western thought (of which Maritain's view is a particular instance) is correct. In my view, the onus of proof falls on those who would claim that the history

of Western thought is fundamentally misguided. Derrida's position is one such position. Moreover, given the radical consequences of Derrida's position, it is of considerable philosophical interest to attempt an assessment of his alternative to the metaphysics of presence. Accordingly, the main objectives of my discussion throughout will be: i) to state clearly Derrida's position; ii) to examine how he supports his position; and iii) to investigate whether or not his position is true, or at least plausible.¹

MARITAIN ON IDENTITY

Maritain's position on identity is developed in a short section in his main work on metaphysics, *A Preface to Metaphysics*.² I shall rely primarily on this work for an elucidation of his view, supplementing it and clarifying it where I think it is necessary, and occasionally expressing his view in language more typical of the language of deconstructionism. This will be helpful when we come to discuss Derrida's position.

Before I come directly to Maritain's position on identity, it will be necessary to sketch roughly the main lines of his metaphysics, for without this background understanding one cannot properly appreciate his view of identity. Maritain fits squarely into that tradition of Western philosophers who hold that being is

¹ Richard Rorty draws attention to two different ways in which Derrida has been read by his American admirers. On one side are those who read him as a "transcendental" philosopher, i.e., as a philosopher who is making substantive claims which are either true or false, and for which he offers arguments (and which, if true, could possibly motivate social and political agendas). On the other side are those who see him as having invented a splendidly ironic way of writing about the philosophical tradition in which the playful, distancing and ambiguous features of his texts are emphasized, and not the substance. Rorty prefers to read Derrida in the second way. As a philosopher, I see little value in reading Derrida in the second way. I think the most responsible option is to read him in the first way, especially since this is how he is most often read. Indeed, this is the way in which he *must* be read if his work is to provide philosophical support for social and political conclusions. I argue here that Derrida has little to offer when read as a transcendental philosopher. See Richard Rorty, "Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?" in Gary B. Madison ed., *Working Through Derrida* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 137-146.

² See Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics* (New York: Mentor, 1962), especially 90-96; see also *Distinguish to Unite or the Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. under the supervision of Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), 82ff; see also *Existence and the Existent*, trans. Lewis Galantieri and Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 20-55. For an excellent overview of Maritain's metaphysics and epistemology, see Raymond Dennehy, "Maritain's 'Intellectual Existentialism: An Introduction to His Metaphysics and Epistemology,'" in Deal W. Hudson and Matthew J. Mancini eds., *Understanding Maritain: Philosopher and Friend* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), 201-233.

real, that a large measure of reality is made up of particular beings, and that being can be known. It can be known because there is an essential conformity of the mind to being. Maritain describes being as the "intelligible mystery,"³ a phrase with which he hopes to convey both the fact that being can be known in conceptual knowledge, and at the same time that being overflows conceptual knowledge. In this sense, being is both mysterious and intelligible. Being as a general term refers to that which exists, or can exist, i.e., to *being as such*; and, according to Maritain, it is this which is the subject of metaphysics.

According to Maritain, one initially comes to know being as such through intuition, a term which he inherited from Bergson, a philosopher who had a significant influence on Derrida. For Maritain, being presents itself as an object of knowledge initially in intuition.⁴ Yet unlike Bergsonian intuition, which was non-conceptual, Maritain argues that the intuition of being produces an idea, which is the idea of being in general, or of being as such. This intuition of being as such reveals that being is *transcendental*, i.e., it reveals to the intellect the insight that being is real and is all there is. However, it also reveals to the intellect an insight into the *analogical* nature of being. This is the insight that although all existents have being in common, they also differ by means of their individual essences.

This fact is concretely grasped by abstraction in the act of judgment. In the act of judgment the mind asserts not simply *that* a thing is, but also *what* it is. It grasps a real distinction between the *essences* of things (what they are) and the *existence* of things (that they are). Maritain explains that the act of existing is limited by the essence of a being, which defines the nature of the being. Existence is never given by itself but always with an essence. Nevertheless, both aspects of being are essential features of the nature of reality. The act of existence brings into actuality, if we might put it like this, a potency, which then, because of its essential structure, takes on a certain definite nature, or identity. The essence constrains the act of existence to develop along a certain definite and specifiable path, and maintains the permanence, constancy or *identity* of the object over time, until its demise. This is the structure of reality, according to Maritain, and we get our initial insight into this structure by means of the *intuition* of being. Metaphysical reflection then makes explicit by abstraction and acts of judgment that which has been implicitly revealed in the intuitive grasp of being.

It is important to stress here that Maritain does not hold that *the mind* in the act of judgment divides reality up into that which it has in common (being as such, or existence), and that which gives it discreteness, or separateness

³ See Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics*, 12. ⁴ *Ibid.*, 48ff.

(particular beings, essences).⁵ Rather, he is saying that *this is the way reality is*, and the mind grasps this fact and makes it explicit in the act of metaphysical reflection. In this way, for Maritain, the intellect knows the thing *as the thing really is*; more generally, the intellect knows reality as it really is. This is because of the essential conformity of the mind to the nature of reality. Maritain is definitely an epistemological realist. This brief sketch of Maritain's metaphysics leads us directly to his discussion of the principle of identity.

Maritain's general metaphysical position must be kept in mind before one turns to his view of identity, for otherwise it might appear as if identity for him is simply a principle of thought, or of the mind. This in turn may lead to the mistaken impression that while he can consistently hold that the world in some sense exists outside the mind, the *essences* or *identities* which the mind grasps might still be *mind-dependent*. If this were the case, Maritain might indeed be guilty of the general charge levelled against Western metaphysics by Derrida. However, it is not the case. For the principle of identity, according to Maritain, is not derived from the structure of the mind, but from the *structure of reality*.⁶

In order for the mind to grasp the identity of an object and to know the object fully as it is, according to Maritain, it is not necessary to appeal to anything *outside* the object. But this is not because the mind constructs the identity of an object, it is because the object really has an essence which is then grasped by the mind in an act of intuition, eventually leading to acts of abstraction and explicit metaphysical judgments. For Maritain, the identity of a thing, therefore, is fully presented in our knowledge of its essence, or nature, because this is the way it really is in the external world. It is the identity of the thing which makes it the kind of thing which it is, and which constitutes its permanence, independence, and constancy over time.

In the language of Derrida, we might say that, for Maritain, being appears to the mind as *presence* (i.e., as an extra-mental self-contained, self-identical reality), but it *also* appears to the mind in its real, particular concrete existences, as *presences*, or as identities. In this way, we capture the univocity as well as the diversity of being. Maritain is careful throughout to say that although the mind grasps the univocity of being, it does not grasp it in its fullness, for being always overflows the mind's grasp of it, overflows the categories of the intellect.⁷ The mind in judgment asserts both that a thing is and what it is but only because of the extra-mental nature of being as *presence*, and of being as *presences*. The principle of identity emerges out of this insight, because as Maritain says, "No sooner do we possess the intuition of intelligible extra-

⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

mental being than it divides . . . into two conceptual objects."⁸ He goes on to say that the mind affirms the following principle: each thing is what it is, where each being "is being given to the mind, and 'what it is' is its intelligible determination. . . ."⁹ It is because being both *exists*, and exists *in a certain way*, that the mind grasps the identity of being. And to grasp the "what it is" (i.e., the essence) of a particular being, we do not need to grasp the "what it is" (i.e., the essence) of any other being, or of any feature of another being, or of *anything* outside the being in question.

Maritain, however, goes further. He holds that the principle of identity also means that being is not *non-being*. This means not only that being exists, and in so far as it exists, it cannot not exist, but—and this will be especially pertinent to our discussion of Derrida's position—it also means that being is *self-identical*. That is to say, we do not need to appeal to anything outside of a particular being in order to grasp its essence or nature. Each being is what it is and not another thing. Or to put it another way, each being contains the means of its identity within itself. In order for the mind to grasp this identity it does not need to appeal to anything else outside the object in question. The principle of identity is thus not, as Maritain puts it, "a law of thought but the first law of objects outside the mind. . . ."¹⁰ It is in this sense and this sense only that the principle of identity can be said to be *self-evident*. It is a self-evident principle concerning how the mind grasps beings as presences only because of the actual nature of beings as presences outside the mind. Similarly, the claim that every being is what it is is not, therefore, tautologous because it expresses not only *that* a thing exists but also *what it exists as*. In short, for Maritain, *a thing cannot exist without having an essence, or an identity*.

So, for Maritain, things exist, they are real and mind independent, they have self-identity (presence), and this presence can be understood by the mind without recourse to anything outside the presence. For this is how the presence *is what it is*, and how it is known by us. It is clear, I think, even from these brief remarks that Maritain is an excellent representative of the metaphysics of presence. His notion of essence, or identity, of the individuality of things, of the discreteness and self-containedness of the various objects of our experiences as they present themselves to the mind, is broadly in agreement with that of Plato (forms), Aristotle (substances), Descartes (clear and distinct ideas) and Husserl (essences). However much these philosophers differ among themselves, their basic understanding of reality as presence is the same, and it is surely no coincidence that all of the major philosophers of the Western tradition each held some variant of the notion of *being as presence*. In the

⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

light of this, it is especially important to examine a theory which holds *not* that Maritain's view of identity is wrong in the details, but that, like every significant view of identity before it, it is fundamentally misguided, and completely off track in its very *foundations*. Hence, we turn to Derrida directly.

DERRIDA'S CRITIQUE OF THE MARITAINIAN VIEW OF IDENTITY

I am especially concerned to attempt to state Derrida's main thesis *clearly*, for it seems to me that this is one of the main difficulties with the philosophy of deconstructionism. Derrida and his disciples seldom provide a clear account of the main points of their philosophy. There are varying reasons for this, of course, not least their claim that they are not asserting a philosophical theory, or even a position, at all. This reluctance to state clearly what it is they wish us to take away from their thought has the effect of at once isolating deconstructionism from philosophical debate, while at the same time protecting it from critical examination.

I want to suggest that a main organizing idea, theme, or motif in Derrida's thought is that of *identity*. The main thesis in his thought can be stated in terms of this idea, and most of the central points he makes revolve around this one pivotal notion. The main thesis of Derrida's position can be stated as follows: *all identities, presences, predications, etc., depend for their existence on something outside themselves, something which is absent and different from themselves*. Or again: all identities involve their *differences* and *relations*; these differences and relations are aspects or features outside of the object—different from it, yet related to it—yet they *are never fully present*. Or again: reality itself is a kind of "free play" of *différance* (a new term coined by Derrida); no identities really exist (in Maritain's sense) at this level; identities are simply constructs of the mind, and essentially of language.

In the language of textual analysis, what Derrida is proposing is that there are no *fixed meanings* present in the text, despite any appearance to the contrary. Rather, the apparent identities (i.e., literal meanings) present in a text also depend for their existence on something outside themselves, something which is absent and different from themselves. As a result, the meanings in a text constantly shift both in relation to the subject who works with the text, and in relation to the cultural and social world in which the text is immersed. In this way, the literal readings of texts, along with the intentions of the author, are called into question by Derrida's view of identity. Derrida's thesis, however, is not restricted to books or art works, for texts may consist of any set of ever-changing meanings. Hence, the world, and almost any object or combination of objects in it, could be regarded as a "text."

This is the main thesis presented in Derrida's thought. Further, it is, in my view, one of the central themes of postmodernism. Derrida expresses this thesis every few pages in most of his main works, usually beneath layers of rapidly changing, and often barely penetrable, metaphors, double and triple meanings, multiple references, puns, imaginative and often shocking imagery, etc.¹¹ This philosophical/literary style may aid his point that an identity both is not what it is and is what it is not, but it also serves to "mask" this main point from the reader. A lot of excavating is required before one can begin the task of philosophical scrutiny. However, I submit that interwoven throughout Derrida's many readings of philosophical texts lurks mainly this one substantive claim repeated over and over again, and that once one discerns his philosophical style, one can read his work quite easily.¹² Moreover, this main thesis of Derrida's is essentially a very simple thesis, at least when considered mainly in the *abstract* (attempting to get more *concrete* about it will cause problems, as we will see later); it is, therefore, all the more easy to assess philosophically. However, before we can begin this task, it is necessary to elaborate further on Derrida's basic thesis.

Derrida's work, like the work of several philosophers before him from the same tradition, who had a considerable influence on him, including Bergson and Heidegger, is best understood or explained in terms of two main realms, or two main levels. In Derrida's case the realms are the realm of reality (or of

⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹¹ Derrida's main works include: *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays in Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. D. B. Allison (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973); *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Spivak (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins, 1976); *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); *Glas*, trans. J.P. Leavey, Jr. and R. Rand (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1986). For a brief but helpful synopsis of Derrida's major works by S. Critchley and T. Mooney, see Richard Kearney ed., *Twentieth Century Continental Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1994), 460-467.

¹² Many people report (including many who are at home when dealing with complex philosophical issues) that they find Derrida's work unreadable. I believe that there is some justification for approaching much of his work already equipped with an understanding of his main themes. Indeed, some of Derrida's works seem intent on presenting no substantive points at all, and appear purely metaphorical, e.g., his later work *Glas*. It appears as if Derrida's rhetorical strategy in *Glas* presupposes and depends upon knowledge of his previous work (which would be all well and good if his general aim was not to deconstruct "knowledge" in the process!). One of the most helpful summaries of Derrida's central ideas that I have seen emerges in his interview with Richard Kearney, in Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 105-126.

différance), and the realm of identities (or of predication and presence). The realm of reality (or *différance*) is the main realm, for him, and by "main realm" I mean that it is *ontologically prior* to the realm of presence. That is to say, the realm of presence, of identity, of predication, must ultimately be understood or explained in terms of the realm of *différance*. The realm of *différance*, however, is ontologically basic. In the realm of *différance*, there are no identities as we understand them, no self-contained presences, which do not depend for their essential being on anything outside themselves. Rather, this is a realm which is *non-cognitive*, which cannot be fully captured by means of any set of concepts, or logical system which makes things "present" to the mind. As Derrida puts it in *Margins of Philosophy*, "It is the domination of beings that *différance* everywhere comes to solicit . . . to shake . . . it is the determination of being as presence that is interrogated by the thought of *différance*. *Différance* is not. It is not a present being. It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority. . . . There is no essence of *différance*."¹³ So Maritain's view that each thing is what it is and not another thing overlooks completely the realm of *différance*. Maritain has made the mistake of thinking that being, and particular beings, are known by the mind because of the essential structure of reality, whereas it is actually the operating power of naming and predication that produce the "identities" everywhere to be found in his work.

Yet, according to Derrida, the realm of *différance* is also a realm which never occurs *without* cognitive knowledge because our contact with it in human experience always takes place by means of concepts, or predication.¹⁴ It is, therefore, best described by metaphors like *différance* to convey the dual notions of differing and deferring, for *différance* is a realm where *identities are never complete* but are instead always differing and being deferred.¹⁵ This is simply because, for him, the identity of an object *involves its relations*; however, the relations of an object in any system are always changing (differing), and hence meaning (i.e., identity) is forever postponed (i.e., deferred). This realm is also called a *trace*, by Derrida, because the objects of our experience—the identities and presences which constitute human history and human experience—emerge out of it, are somehow "touched" by it, "produced" by it, but are not themselves it. Also, because of their nature as self-identical they do not provide us with any insight (or "conceptual grasp") into this ineffable and inexpressible realm of *différance*. This realm is best hinted at by means of metaphor—because it is the nature of metaphor to

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Margins*, 21-25.

¹⁴ See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 112-113.

¹⁵ See Jacques Derrida, *Margins*, 7-8.

signify without signifying, to communicate without communicating, to refer to something without referring to it—and this conveys something of the Derridean notion of *différance*.¹⁶ Derrida employs many different metaphors to make this same point over and over again: margins, trace, flow, archi-writing, tain of the mirror, alterity, supplement, etc. To get round the problem of giving *expression* to the notion of *différance*, Derrida, following Heidegger, sometimes resorts to the practice of *erasure* to indicate that the “object” (understood now in his special sense) is both present *and* not present, since part of its essence is what it is *not*.¹⁷ This brings us to the realm of *presence* in Derrida, and to the *relationship* between this realm and the realm of *différance*.

According to Derrida, identities arise out of (in some way) the realm of *différance* by means of the violence of predication and conceptual knowledge. Since he holds that consciousness is essentially linguistic, we can say that language produces the identities and literal meanings which constitute our world. And it produces *all* of the identities including the identities of the self, of historical movements, of academic disciplines, of cultural and social meanings, even the identities which make logical thinking, and hence “rationality” itself, possible. It is in this sense that language can be said to do violence to *différance*, or that naming and predication are “violent”.¹⁸ Let us try to illustrate this point more concretely; in doing so, we can also bring out the remainder of Derrida’s essential points.

The identities which human beings grasp in knowledge—of table, chair, desk, of historical events and movements, of the self, of numbers, of moral values, of any self-contained presence, of Maritain’s essences—do not really exist. What exists is the realm of *différance* where there are no *presences* in our (human) sense. Rather, the identities which make up human life and experience emerge over time through the violence of naming and predication. It is this predication that makes identity possible at all in human experience. Language and naming make possible the establishment of identities but only because they “abstract from,” or “pull out of,” the realm of *différance* what is really there not simply, or singularly, as presence, but as (in some way) both presence and absence, in a realm where objects, in the words of one of Derrida’s disciples, are “their own differences from themselves.”¹⁹

¹⁶ For a discussion of Derrida’s thesis concerning the metaphorical features of philosophical discourse, see his essay “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” in *Margins*, 207-271.

¹⁷ See Jacques Derrida, *Margins*, 6.

¹⁸ See Derrida’s essay “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, 79-153, especially 133.

¹⁹ Barbara Johnson in the Introduction to Derrida’s *Dissemination*, xiii.

A further crucial point must now be made. Language and predication produce these identities over history; hence they are not, and are never, the product of any particular *individual* human being. Rather, a particular human being inherits a set of identities already present in the language and culture into which he or she is born, and on which he or she inevitably becomes linguistically dependent. Yet it is obvious that there would be no meanings, identities, presences, if no human beings existed at all. So it is not true to say for Derrida that meaning is *arbitrary*, that, if what he says is true, we are free to interpret any object, or create or produce any meaning, in whatever arbitrary way we wish. While it is true that any meaning (understood in terms of presence) could emerge from history and culture, and that no meaning is sacrosanct, in the sense of being a timeless, trans-historical, or extra-linguistic truth, it is also true that each human subject inherits a set of meanings currently operative in, and constitutive of, his or her cultural and social world. These meanings are operative in our culture, and we as individuals cannot change them by ourselves. Meanings emerge in a flow, a trace, a process of *différance*, but they are not the product of any one individual mind, nor can any one individual mind change them.

It must also be pointed out that Derrida does not claim that the objects of our experience do not exist. Clearly, in some sense they do exist, since the realm of *différance* exists. Yet, equally clearly, the objects or identities of our experience really exist but *not* as they are produced by, or presented to, the mind. For in the realm of *différance*, identities are *forever deferred*. Yet each person will always be born into and will develop into a set of identities and meanings and it is necessary to at least begin philosophical reflection with this set. In this sense, meaning is not locally arbitrary, although it may be ultimately arbitrary.

Maritain—and all of the leading figures of Western “logocentrism”²⁰—have been seduced by the notion of being as presence. Maritain, in his desire to explain reality in terms of both the transcendental and the analogical nature of being—which enabled him to safeguard the Western notions of existence and essence—fails to appreciate the reality of *différance* which is really there, and *which is operative in his work whether he acknowledges it or not*. How are we to handle philosophers who make this mistake? This brings me to the *method* of deconstruction as a way of reading texts.

The history of Western thought has been an attempt to render all of reality intelligible in terms of being as presence. If Derrida is right, this has

²⁰ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 10-18, and 43, for a discussion of “logocentrism.”

obviously been a mistaken approach. It is now necessary, he holds, not to give up on Western philosophers altogether, but to read their work in a different way.²¹ In particular, we must attempt to show how their texts, which attempt to explain the nature of reality in terms of being as presence, actually continually presuppose absence, *différance*, relations, etc., at every turn. It is this task which Derrida is supposed to be carrying out, I take it, in his essays on Western thinkers.

I have presented what I believe to be a fair rendering of Derrida's alternative to the Western notion of identity, along with an exposition of his other main points, and radical it certainly is. I now want to move on in the final part of my discussion to consider Derrida's general philosophical *support* for this position, and assess his critique of the Western notion of identity. A main question which will concern me is: what *reasons* does Derrida offer for why we should accept the truth of his central thesis? What reasons does he offer to challenge Maritain's view, reasons which might cause us to suspect that the traditional view of identity might be widely wrong?

IS DERRIDA'S CRITIQUE SUCCESSFUL?

I wish, initially, to reflect on some straightforward logical difficulties facing Derrida's main thesis. Of course, the first point he might make in reply is that he is not offering a theory about the nature of reality. In no sense, he might claim, is he presenting a *thesis*. And in one sense this might be true, if it means that Derrida is trying to avoid advocating yet another theory which explains the nature of reality in terms of *presence* and *identity*. He is keen to avoid this mistake, a mistake he believes both Heidegger and Levinas made.²² Derrida would add that since *différance* is ineffable and inexpressible one must to some extent use language and concepts, presences and identities, to hint at what is not present, non-identical, non-repeatable, different and absent. All of this I cheerfully grant.

However, despite these qualifications and disclaimers, Derrida does *not* avoid a straightforward *logical* problem which faces his position—that *any* theory, thesis, view, etc., whatever it is, and however it is conceived and presented—is telling us how things *really stand*, or *how things really are*.

²¹ See Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 42-43.

²² See Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas" for a discussion of Levinas; and "The Ends of Man" in *Margins*, 109-136 for a discussion of Heidegger. See also Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, 110.

Insofar as it does this, it is a substantive thesis, and must be firmly within the metaphysics of presence. So not only does Derrida not avoid the metaphysics of presence, but I would claim that it is logically impossible to avoid the metaphysics of presence due to the structure of reality and its relationship to thought. This is a point which Maritain has illustrated clearly in his epistemological realism.

Let me elaborate this point further. The two realms which I have described are part of Derrida's overall view of how things really are. They are supposed to reveal to us how things *really stand*. The realm of *différance*, in particular, tells us that things are never self-contained, never self-identical, never contain their essence simply within themselves, but are always essentially "touched" by those other "things" in the system (whatever this could possibly mean in practice). But since this "touching" is constantly changing and being deferred, meaning, and hence any identities or presences or literal meanings which emerge in and through meaning, are never the whole story. My point is that, if all this is the case, then, for Derrida, it is *true* to say that reality is *différance*, and not presence. This point is clearly supported by the fact that Derrida's works are littered with substantive (or metaphysical) claims *about the natures of language and meaning*, e.g., "The self identity of the signified conceals itself unceasingly and is always on the move."²³ Or: "There is not a single signified that escapes . . . the play of signifying references that constitute language."²⁴ Or: "Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present."²⁵ These are the *literal meanings* which Derrida wishes us to take away from *his* texts.

Derrida's claim that we must use logic (i.e., identities) in order to hint at the realm of *différance* does not, it seems to me, diminish the force of this point one bit. According to him, reality is *this way* (*différance*) and not that way (presence), it has *this* essence and not *that* essence (however difficult it may be to *specify* the essence.) It is *this identity* which Derrida's work is attempting to convey to us. But if reality is this way, and not that way, then we are still clearly within the metaphysics of presence. Let us call *différance* Y, and Derrida's work X. My point is simply that what is going on in deconstructionism is that X purports to tell us about the nature of Y. One can now substitute whatever one prefers for X and Y (e.g., Maritain's work illustrates the nature of reality in terms of being).

What I am drawing attention to here is just a specific form of a general

²³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 49.

²⁴ See *ibid.*, 7.

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, 26.

criticism that can be made of any theory which purports to be anti-metaphysical, in the sense that the theory attempts to rewrite the notion of *identity* in favor of some form of relativism. Derrida's philosophy, when systematically presented and understood, is, I believe, clearly vulnerable to this criticism. It does not seem possible to describe the nature of reality without thereby committing oneself to the metaphysics of presence. Despite the complexity of his exposition, Derrida doesn't seem to come close to developing a theory which avoids the metaphysics of presence. The reply that his theory is not vulnerable to logical difficulties because logic itself is precisely what is being called into question is not available to him either, at least at the beginning of the enquiry. For it is exactly this point about logic which he is supposed to be establishing. This conclusion can only come (if it comes at all) at the *end* of the enquiry. I am suggesting here that this logical problem is insurmountable.

Derrida is advancing what he takes to be the *true account* of the nature of reality, and in this sense he is clearly in the Western tradition. For, if his theory is known to be true, then we can say that his theory is known by the mind (however inadequately) as the kind of thing that it is (precisely as *this* kind of thing, and not *that* kind of thing), and that this "knowing" is dictated by the nature of the object, i.e., by *différance*. In other words, being as presence is still the object of knowledge, just as Maritain claimed. Except that in Derrida's case, it is *différance* which is the "presence" (or object of knowledge), not in the sense that it is present to the mind, of course, since Derrida holds that this is not possible, but in the crucial sense that it *exists objectively* outside the mind, just as being does for Maritain.

If Derrida should reply that he is not presenting a *truth* about the nature of reality, then it really is difficult to know what to make of his work. And he is surely not going to suggest that his theory is *false*. A rejection of this pair of categories altogether may be a good rhetorical device in the attempt to *convey* his account of how things essentially stand, but even here he is, as I have illustrated, firmly within the metaphysics of presence. He might reject the notions of the true and the false, understood as objects of consciousness (and hence as products of predication), and claim that he is simply concerned with a *description* of the nature of reality. However, this move will not succeed either in avoiding the metaphysics of presence, for a description is simply another way of illustrating his main thesis, which he is still putting forward as *true*, and hence as *present*. Derrida's claim that *his own work too can be deconstructed* must be seen in the context of this critical point. For this can only mean (a) that different concepts, metaphors, etc., could be employed to illustrate the reality of *différance*, but it cannot mean (b) that *différance might not be the way things really are*. For if it could mean *that*, then we are back in

the metaphysics of presence once again, *and* in the traditional sense!

These are logical difficulties which, I believe, face any position—Derrida's no less than any other—which attempts to reject metaphysics altogether. And, of course, if reality *must* be ultimately understood in terms of presence then we must continue with the traditional debate over which metaphysical account of presence is most adequate. This brings me to consider Derrida's *positive* case or argument for *his* account. Laying aside for the moment the logical difficulties facing Derrida's position, what positive case does he offer for the truth of his views? Here I have to report that I have been unable to find *any* positive argument or supporting reasons advanced in his work in defence of his thesis. I do not think it is unfair to say that he has provided no argument. Rather, his style involves the employment of an abundance of metaphors and rhetorical devices, intermixed with detailed, exhaustive and much-labored readings of classical and contemporary texts, in an attempt to reveal his position. Now let us recall what he is supposed to be revealing. He is supposed to be revealing that reality is *différance*, and that all philosophers who attempt to capture or represent reality as presence, not only distort reality, but actually *presuppose* absence all along. Although *différance* is ineffable, it is, it seems, unavoidable. However, I think that it is clear from a careful reading of any of Derrida's so called "deconstructions" of the work of Western philosophers that rather than illustrate that the philosopher in question *is* using or presupposing *différance*, however unwittingly in his or her text, all Derrida really does is weave into his expository comment and metaphor-laden analysis of the text in question *repeated assertions and statements of his general thesis*. But reasons in favor of this thesis are very thin on the ground.²⁶

²⁶ See, as examples, *Writing and Difference*, 178-181; 278-282; *Of Grammatology*, 6-15; 30-38; 44-50; *Margins*, 7-12; 95-108; 209-219. (Derrida's ambivalence between repetition/demonstration is interestingly alluded to in *Positions*, 52.) As good illustrations of the same tendency in some of the secondary literature on Derrida, see Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), especially Chapters Two and Three. These chapters illustrate two problems which appear frequently in the secondary literature on Derrida. Firstly, throughout Norris's commentary on Derrida's reading of the work of traditional philosophers, Norris offers frequent *statements*, but no *argument* or *reasons*, for his general conclusions. Secondly, he appears to be guilty of making the logically fallacious move from the fact that we *can* (with much inventiveness and energy) read texts in ways other than the literal one, to the fact that this is how we *ought* to read texts, or that there are no literal meanings, or that there is no truth present in a text. The first point may be of aesthetic significance (and it may not), but no *metaphysical conclusions* follow from it. Yet it is metaphysical conclusions which Norris (and Derrida), and others, are supposed to be establishing. See also Jonathan Culler's essay on Derrida in John Sturrock (ed.), *Structuralism and Since* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 154-180, for a very readable and clear overview of Derrida's main claims, but one which

It is also interesting to speculate about whether or not a deconstructionist reading of a text could *fail*, or be wrong? If it could not fail, this seems to imply that *any* reading of a text *is* legitimate, and if it could fail, which is surely the right answer to our question, then yet again we are constrained by the metaphysics of presence. For a "correct" deconstructionist reading implies that there is a certain truth (*différance*) which it is our business to reveal in our reading of a text. We must reveal *this*, and not something else. But this pair of identities illustrates again that we are unable to avoid the metaphysics of presence. But it is fuzziness about just these kinds of issues which has rightly earned Derrida and his disciples the reputation for advocating the view that meaning, and standard logic and rationality, are arbitrary.

Not only does all of this mean that Derrida does not appear to give us any reason to accept his view, but it also leads us to ask *why* he does not provide an argument in support of his position. It seems to me that this is because the notion of *différance* is unintelligible in the sense that it seems impossible to give any *meaningful content* to the notion. It appears to be vacuous. *Différance* is not only indescribable, but it does not seem possible to conceive or grasp concretely what it means to say that reality is really *différance*, which, as I have pointed out above, is really to say that there are no identities. It is made impossible partly by the fact that, as Maritain rightly makes clear, the mind through intuition grasps the nature of reality, not only in its existence, but also in its essences, or identities. As Maritain pointed out, this is a self-evident truth. It appears to be simply nonsense to assert the opposite—that the mind (which, for Derrida, means language) "produces" the identities—especially in the absence of *any* clear demonstration of how this occurs.

A parallel case from traditional philosophy will help to illustrate this point. The nature of God, for Maritain, cannot be fully grasped by the human mind, and a certain negative theology is useful in our attempts to gain an insight into the essence of God. However, it is still possible for us to gain some insight into the nature of God; for example, that God is powerful, loving, merciful, etc. Even though our knowledge of God is limited, we can at least know that God exists, and something of the nature of God. But not even a limited knowledge of *différance* is possible. What can it possibly mean to say that the objects or

offers no arguments or reasons for why we should accept these claims as true or at least plausible. Dallas Willard argues forcefully in a recent essay that Derrida's view of intentionality is similarly afflicted by the absence of supporting reasons and argument. Willard illustrates that it is not so much that Derrida's account of intentionality is wrong as that it is really no account at all of intentionality. See Dallas Willard, "Predication as Originary Violence: A Phenomenological Critique of Derrida's View of Intentionality" in Gary B. Madison, *Working Through Derrida*, 120-136.

presences of our experience are “their own differences from themselves”²⁷ or that “*différance* is the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the *spacing* by means of which elements are related to each other.”²⁸ What can it possibly mean to say that the identity of an object is determined in part by its relations to other objects in the same system of meaning, and yet that this is true for all the objects in the system? When Maritain says that the principle of identity is self-evident, he means that we cannot logically conceive of how it could be otherwise. Derrida’s notion of *différance* may be likened to the notion of time-travel: when considered in the abstract it is interesting and meaningful in the sense that one can talk about it, but when considered in the *concrete* it is unintelligible.

It is very difficult to find in postmodernist thought *any clear account* of how language in individual minds, and in history, produces the objects of consciousness. It is highly significant that Derrida never provides one concrete example of how this process works. How does language create, produce, modify the objects of consciousness, such as the self, chairs, tables, etc? It is not enough to suggest, with the structuralists, that *a* only derives its meaning in relation to *b*, *c*, *d*, etc; in short, in relation to the other elements of the system of which *a* is a part. While this might be at least *partly* true (and the “partly” here, of course, is crucial), it must be concretely demonstrated in a few cases in order for us to accept it. This is one of the central theses not only of Derrida’s thought, but of the whole of postmodernism. Yet concrete illustrations of it are in extremely short supply. It is also crucial to point out that while (i) the meaning of *a* may be partly derived from its relation to the other elements in the system of which *a* is a part, it does not logically follow from this that (ii) the meaning of *a* is *constituted* by its relation to the other elements of the system. It is this second thesis which needs to be established by philosophical argument.

It is certainly *interesting* to suggest that Maritain’s notion of identity—where the object is what it is and not another thing, and is known by the mind precisely because this is the ontological structure of reality—might be false. But it is not enough for a philosophical theory to be interesting (especially one with such far-reaching consequences as Derrida’s), it must also be plausible. By giving no descriptions of concrete cases at all to support a positive account of intentionality, I cannot judge Derrida’s position to be plausible.

By contrast, a detailed and very plausible account of intentionality—of the mind’s relationship to being—is to be found in Maritain. One may disagree

²⁷ See note 19 above.

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, 27.

with some of the details of Maritain's account, but surely his basic insight that the objects of our experience really exist and can be known is not challenged by a philosophy so empty of philosophical content as Derrida's? Maritain, of course, was led to his account by reflection on the nature of reality and how it is known by the mind. Now, however much we may disagree over the details, isn't he right to assert that it is the object in the world which becomes the object of consciousness? Isn't it extraordinarily implausible to suggest—especially without any account of how this occurs—that it is in fact language and predication which somehow “produce” the object, the *identity*?

I have discussed Maritain's position on identity as an illustration of the metaphysics of presence, and Derrida's deconstructionist critique of this metaphysics. I have pointed out the specific logical problems associated with Derrida's position, and also suggested that, even if we leave these problems aside, Derrida seems to offer no *positive argument* in support of his thesis. I have argued that this is because the notion of *différance* is unintelligible. On these grounds, I conclude that Derrida does not pose a powerful challenge to Western metaphysics. Insofar as he has no arguments for his main thesis, he poses no challenge to it at all.²⁹

²⁹ I wish to thank Edward Furton, Doug Geivett, and Curtis L. Hancock for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.