

Deconstruction in a nutshell

It is usual when discussing a philosophical term to begin with a brief overview of its originator and its meaning. Let us begin, then.

The term 'deconstruction' derives from the work of Jacques Derrida:

I have never claimed to identify myself with what may be designated by this name. It has always seemed strange to me, it has always left me cold. Moreover, I have never stopped having doubts about the very identity of what is referred to by such a nick-name. (Derrida, 1995, p. 15)

Despite his reluctance to be associated with 'such a nick-name', Derrida was often asked to define deconstruction:

What is deconstruction? Nothing, of course. (Derrida, 1991, p. 275)

...deconstruction doesn't consist in a set of theorems, axioms, tools, rules, techniques, methods... there is no deconstruction, deconstruction has no specific object... (Derrida, 1996, p. 218)

...deconstruction is neither an analysis nor a critique... I would say the same about method. Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one... It must also be made clear that deconstruction is not even an act or an operation... (Derrida, 1991, p. 273)

...deconstruction loses nothing from admitting that it is impossible. (Derrida, 1991, p. 272)

Deconstruction is nothing, it is not a method, not a technique, not even an act, because a 'deconstructive reading attends to the deconstructive processes *always* occurring in the texts and *already* there waiting to be read' (Payne, 1993, p. 121). The deconstructive process comes not from the reader/critic but from the text itself; it is already there, it is the tension 'between what [the text] manifestly *means to say* and what it is nonetheless *constrained to mean*' (Norris, 1987, p. 19). To say that deconstruction is impossible is therefore to acknowledge 'the impossible desire of

language... to make present the permanently elusive' (Payne, 1993, p. 121).

There is no method to deconstruction because texts *literally* deconstruct themselves in their impossible attempt to employ language as a 'transcendental signifier' (Usher & Edwards, 1994), that is, as a way of 'pointing' at some eternal truth or other. As Spivak (1976) observes, 'All texts... are rehearsing their grammatical structure, self-deconstructing as they constitute themselves' (p. lxxviii). All that the deconstructionist needs to do, then, is write, because in the final analysis, deconstruction *is* writing. Furthermore, it is writing with no preconceived goal; as Barthes (1970) put it, '*to write* is an intransitive verb', a verb without an object, an end in itself. Deconstruction manifests itself in the *process* of writing rather than in the product: 'Deconstruction *takes place*, it is an *event* that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject' (Derrida, 1991, p. 274).

But if this is indeed the case, then deconstruction is impossible in another and more tangible sense. Firstly, the process of deconstructive writing produces a second text as a supplement to that which it seeks to deconstruct, which is itself (in Spivak's words) self-deconstructing as it constitutes itself. Secondly, there is no single authoritative and 'correct' deconstructive reading/writing of any particular text. Therefore, each text contains within itself the possibility of a vast number of supplementary deconstructive texts, and each of those is likewise open to further deconstruction *ad infinitum* in an infinite regress. As Spivak (1976) points out, 'The fall into the abyss of deconstruction inspires us with as much pleasure as fear. We are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom' (p. lxxvii). But we do not even need to *write* in order to fall into the abyss. The very act of reading creates a new and different text; that is to say, *reading writes*.

Deconstruction: an impossible method. But as McQuillan has observed, Derrida's assertion that deconstruction is not a method (*'pas de méthode'*) can itself be deconstructed: 'The word *pas* in French means both "not" and "step", so this ambiguous phrase can be translated as either "not a method" or "a methodological step"' (McQuillan, 2000, p. 5). Thus, in keeping with his insistence that deconstruction cannot be tied down to a single meaning, Derrida reveals that his early work from the 1960s consisted *precisely* in an attempt to formulate such a strategy or methodological step that he elsewhere claims to be impossible:

... I tried to work out ... what was in no way meant to be a system but rather a sort of strategic device, opening onto its own abyss, an enclosed, unenclosable, not wholly formalizable ensemble of rules for reading, interpretation and writing. (Derrida, 1983, p. 40)

Not a system, then, but an *ensemble of rules* for reading, interpretation and writing. It is not entirely clear what these rules might be, but Spivak gives us some clues in her 'Translator's Preface' to *Of Grammatology*:

To locate the promising marginal text, to disclose the undecidable moment, to pry it loose with the positive lever of the signifier; to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it; to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is always already inscribed. Deconstruction in a nutshell. (Spivak, 1976, p. lxxvii)

As well as the general descriptor of deconstruction *as to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is already described*, we can discern three clear strategies by which such a dismantling might be accomplished.

- *To locate the promising marginal text*, that is, to write of, in and at the margins, 'seizing on precisely those unregarded details (casual metaphors, footnotes, incidental turns of argument) which are always and necessarily, passed over by interpreters of a more orthodox persuasion' (Norris, 1987, p. 19).
- *To disclose the undecidable moment, to pry it loose with the positive lever of the signifier*, that is, to expose the practice of double coding (or what Spivak calls 'double-edged words') in order to demon-

strate the antithesis always already present in every thesis.

- *To reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it*, that is, to expose and challenge binary opposites in the text, to expose the unacknowledged (and perhaps unconscious) taken-for-granted power hierarchies within the text, to reverse them, and finally to pull them apart.

But of course, deconstruction is not (only) this. 'Deconstruction is not what you think' (Bennington, 1988, p. 6).

The bottom line, the degree zero, of deconstruction, lies in this: 'deconstruction is the active antithesis of everything that criticism ought to be if one accepts its traditional values and concepts' (Norris, 1991, p. xi). Criticism traditionally seeks to establish the authorized meaning of the text, the *original* meaning placed in the text by the author. Deconstruction consists in putting this authority 'out of joint' (Derrida, 1995, p. 25). Deconstruction is the enemy of the authorized/authoritarian text, the text that tries to tell it like it is, including this one.

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