

Derrida's Questionable Logic

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In *Linguistics and Grammatology*, Derrida (1976) presents his rationale for deconstructing the “metaphysical presupposition” which favors speech before writing. He asks, “Is not the lifting of that presupposition an overthrowing of the landscape upon which the science of language is peacefully installed?” (Derrida, p. 29). He claims that the science of linguistics has as its declared purpose the “subordination of grammatology . . . to the rank of an instrument enslaved to a full and originarily spoken language” (Derrida, p. 29) and he intends to deconstruct this relationship.

My understanding of Derrida's Destruction Theory is that he seeks to undermine the hierarchy of certain natural relationships in metaphysics that are set up as dualisms. According to the biography of Derrida written by J. Reynolds in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2002), Derrida himself has suggested that metaphysics can be defined as “[t]he enterprise of returning strategically, ideally, to an origin or to a priority thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc.” (Reynolds, Sec. 2a). If this natural dualism is taken to be that of the metaphysical original form and its more complex form, as with black to white, negative numbers to positive numbers, and nothing to something, then I would suggest that Derrida has taken aim at the wrong target: the correct pairing of speech and its opposition is not speech to writing, but non-speech to speech, or non-verbal communication to verbal communication. While black is the absence of color, negative numbers are the absence of positive integers, and nothing is the absence of something, the logical intact, normal, pure, original form of speech is the absence of speech - or non-speech; it is not writing. In this paper I will present reasons why I believe Derrida's pairing was wrong and his argument was misdirected.

Virtually all verbal communication is speech. However, while writing is one form of non-verbal communication, it is certainly not the only form. As Derrida sought to find the relationship between the “inside and the outside” of a natural dual relationship (Derrida, p. 35) involving speech, he took only one form of non-verbal communication, writing, and used it to represent the whole. In setting writing up as the inside or outside to speech, he neglected many other forms of non-verbal communication that share the category with writing. These other types of non-verbal communication include many active and inactive forms of expression. Examples include facial expressions, touch, art, dance, photographs, and signals. Certainly a scowl, a punch in the nose, a kiss, Picasso's *Guernica*, an Indian war dance, photos of concentration camp survivors, semaphore, and sign language are all capable of conveying messages effectively without speaking.

In addition, Derrida neglected to consider a unique and interesting form of inactive non-verbal communication: the concept of silence. Indeed, just as someone who falsely says that the natural pairing of integers is positive and negative instead of positive and non-positive misses the very number of zero, by pairing verbal with non-verbal communication, we do not want to miss the important form of communication analogous to zero: silence. Certain instances of silence are possibly the ultimate form of non-speech. While silence sometimes is merely nothingness, when silence is used to communicate a rebuke or anger, for example, its message is strong, clear, and unambiguous.

In summary, Derrida based his deconstruction on the false premise that writing is the natural opposition to speech. In setting up the ideal, or originary form, against its natural derivative form, he should have paired all non-verbal communication, not just writing, with speech. As shown by Aristotle's Principle of Contradiction, the correct opposites should be either "A or not A": either verbal communication or non-verbal communication. Because writing is only one example taken from the larger category of non-verbal communication -- which includes a variety of expressive forms and even silence itself -- Derrida was inaccurate when he portrayed speech and writing as the "interior and exterior" (Derrida, p. 35) of the same relationship. Thus, I believe that Derrida's faulty logic compounded a self-indulgent cerebral frolic masked as an attempt to establish the superiority of writing over speech.

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References

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