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WHAT CANNOT BE DECONSTRUCTED? TRUTH

Abstract. In this paper, I discuss the interpretation of the method of deconstruction in David J. Gunkel's *Deconstruction* (MIT Press 2021). I focus on the relationship between deconstruction and truth. I hold that the concept of truth is indispensable for deconstruction since truth introduces correctness conditions for the deconstructive method. However, I claim that truth, being essential and primitive for deconstruction, is fundamentally inaccessible for being analyzed by the latter.

Keywords: deconstruction; truth; Jacques Derrida; Willard Van Orman Quine

1. Introduction. 2. Limitations. 3. Consequences.

1. INTRODUCTION

Deconstruction (Gunkel 2021) is a clearly written and well-argued introduction to Derrida's method of deconstruction. The author's primary goal is to show that deconstruction offers a full-fledged scientific methodology and can be successfully introduced into a philosophical toolkit. The best recommendation for this book is that Gunkel seems to succeed in this effort.

This task is not trivial. On the one hand, a vast amount of research has been done within the deconstructive paradigm. For the last fifty years, deconstruction has significantly impacted literary criticism (Buchanan 2016; Culler 1992; de Man 1979; Hillis Miller 2009), culture theory (Spivak 1998), history (Munslow 1997) and legal theory (Kennedy 2004). An interesting question is why this is the case. What determines the effectiveness of the deconstructive method in social research?

On the other hand, the concept of deconstruction is often overused. In many contexts, it is used as a synonym for analysis.

According to the popular view, deconstruction is a method for breaking complex beliefs into atomic ones and investigating the relations between the latter. However, if the deconstructive method were reducible to the good old-fashion analysis, there would be no need to introduce deconstruction to the methodological toolkit. In this case, deconstruction would only be a fancy French-like word for a well-known concept. Thus, it is crucial to distinguish deconstruction from other research methods.

Finally, it is essential to free the deconstruction method from the myths and misunderstandings that have cumulated around it in the analytical tradition in the last fifty years. For instance, deconstruction is one of the targets of Quine's fierce attack on postmodernism.¹ In the influential discussion between Searle and Derrida, deconstruction is accused of bringing out relativism, conceptual confusion, and methodological anarchism, which is often epitomized by the expression 'everything goes.' To hold that these labels do not rightfully describe deconstruction, we need an explication of what deconstruction is. This way, we can avoid the accusations of relativism and methodological anarchism.

The great value of Gunkel's book is that it introduces clarity into the discussion on Derrida's deconstruction. According to Gunkel, the deconstruction method consists of three procedural steps. First, a negative step to determine the idea's content by investigating the oppositions it involves. For instance, to learn what writing is, we have to know what the concept of writing excludes. In this case, the

1 "A question of tolerance closely parallel to the religious one recurs at a less consequential level in the teaching of controversial subjects such as philosophy. There should be a balanced representation of rival philosophies, it is urged. True enough, if one is concerned only with the history or sociology of philosophy; correspondingly for the history and sociology of religion. But if one pursues philosophy in a scientific spirit as a quest for truth, then tolerance of wrong-headed philosophy is as unreasonable as tolerance of astrology would be on the part of the astrophysicist, and as unethical as tolerance of Unitarianism on the part of the hell-fire fundamentalist" (Quine 1987, 209).

concept of writing is introduced to philosophical discussions as the opposite of speech.

Next, deconstruction investigates the values we associate with the components of the distinctions outlined above. For example, Plato values speech over writing because it gives us direct access to truth, while writing overshadows it. Writing is responsible for overinterpreting and falsifying the ideas we have access to through the spoken word. This set of beliefs builds what Derrida describes as a logocentric tradition in Western philosophy (Derrida 1976), or what Wheeler aptly calls the myth of the magic language (Wheeler 2011). According to this myth, there is a language of thought through which we know what we think about. This language is self-interpretable. Every interpretation of the natural language necessarily refers to it. Like Quine and Davidson (see Wheeler 2000), Derrida denies this myth.

Finally, deconstruction is not only a matter of flipping around the traditional conceptual distinctions to expose the implicit merit of its parts. It introduces alternative concepts, which can also be deconstructed (the process of deconstruction is infinite). For instance, to avoid evaluating speech over writing, Derrida introduces the concept of arche-writing, which denotes the way of accessing truth through the written word. If there is no magic language, then what remains is to seek the truth through a constant process of interpretation. The concept of arche-writing characterizes the infinite process of interpretation. Making sense of our thoughts is an infinite process of searching and self-correcting.

2. LIMITATIONS

So far, so good. Gunkel's explication of the deconstructive method helps us to address three challenges raised at the beginning. First, it explains why deconstruction can be an effective scientific method. Suppose that deconstruction is a matter of rethinking conceptual distinctions. In this case, it can help us to think anew about old ideas

and introduce new ways of conceptualizing some old problems. This is indeed the case, which explains why deconstruction can help us to make progress in science.

Second, deconstruction is not reducible to analysis. Deconstruction is not about reducing complex beliefs into atomic ones. Instead, it investigates conceptual distinctions and the values we associate with them. Furthermore, it introduces new distinctions into our scientific dictionary.

Third, deconstruction is not vulnerable to relativism and methodological anarchism accusations. Deconstruction is not an ‘anything goes.’ It is a well-grounded method that aims at the truth. In contrast to the popular interpretation of Derrida, the concept of truth is preserved in deconstruction. As Derrida puts it: “The value of truth (and all those values associated with it) is never contested or destroyed in my writings but only reinscribed in more powerful, larger, more stratified contexts ... and that within [those] contexts (that is, within relations of force that are always differential – for example, socio-political-institutional – but even beyond these determinations) that are relatively stable, sometimes apparently almost unshakable, it should be possible to invoke rules of competence, criteria of discussion and of consensus, good faith, lucidity, rigour, criticism, and pedagogy” (Derrida 1988, 146; see also Norris 1997; 2002).

Here, however, the limitation of the deconstructive method exposes itself. The concept of truth is primitive and substantially indispensable for the very idea of deconstruction. Derrida holds that the process of deconstruction is infinite – there is never a point when we can stop it. Every newly introduced concept can be deconstructed. However, one can ask how we determine the correctness of such a process of deconstruction.

First, let us note the oppositions introduced within the process of deconstruction are not logical negations. Let us go back to the speech-writing distinction. The logical negation of speech is non-speech. Writing is one of the instantiations of non-speech genera.

However, the distinction of speech vs. non-speech does not logically imply the speech vs. writing distinction. We have to make a choice. From infinitely many instantiations of the concept of non-speech, such as painting, smelling, etc., we have to choose the relevant one.

Now, this does not have to be a problem. Applying any scientific method requires the skills to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant factors. For instance, when measuring temperature, we know that the colour of the thermometer is irrelevant. Knowing the height of the mercury column is essential. At the same time, we can distinguish between the irrelevant and relevant factors because, *ceteris paribus*, we know what we want to measure.

Similar observations apply to the deconstructive method. Introducing the opposition between speech and writing requires that we consider this distinction relevant to our understanding of reality. Deconstructing this distinction brings about knowledge and brings us closer to the truth. However, this is not a consequence of the deconstructive method but its prerequisite. Truth is a primitive concept of this method. If the concept of truth were not established, then introducing new oppositions into philosophy would be an arbitrary process. At least there would be no principled way to avoid the accusations of methodological anarchism.

Second, suppose we introduce a new opposition into our scientific dictionary. Still, we need a correctness criterion to determine whether the new concept is relevant to our understanding of the world. If there were no correctness conditions, then our attempts to describe reality would not be different from exchanging opinions. Some descriptions could sound fancier or bolder, but that is it. Here, however, is where analytical philosophers, such as Quine and Searle, say 'stop.' Knowledge is not sharing fashionable opinions. It concerns truth.

According to this line of reasoning, if one wants to introduce correctness conditions to the deconstructive method, the simplest way is to take truth as the fundamental concept of our descriptions. If a method aims at the truth, then the results of the application of

such method can be assessed according to whether they bring us closer to the truth or not. The concept of truth, however, works as primitive and unanalyzable here. Without it, there is no way to avoid accusations of arbitrariness.

3. CONSEQUENCES

It follows from the above that, unless we have the concept of truth, we can make no sense of deconstruction. However, the method of deconstruction cannot be used to analyze the concept of truth. Deconstruction is based on truth, which sets the correctness conditions and the aim of the method. Truth is indispensable for deconstruction, and it is fundamentally inaccessible to it.

It may seem that this does not have to be a problem. Suppose we take for granted that truth is primitive and cannot be analyzed. Consequently, we can abandon the idea of making sense of the concept of truth. This seems to be the idea Derrida advocates (see Wheeler 2011).

But why on earth should we do so? Taking for granted that the concept of truth is primitive does not imply that we cannot say anything interesting about truth. We obviously can. At least since Tarski, we have made some progress in making sense of the idea of truth. And even if we have not said the last word, no one expects us that we will.

Thus, although the concept of truth is inaccessible to deconstruction, it does not mean that this concept is unanalyzable. It implies, however, that deconstruction cannot give us a theory of truth.

Next, according to Derrida, the process of deconstruction is infinite, for there is no principled way to determine whether our concepts fit the world. How we describe the world seems to be underdetermined by how the world appears to us. Moreover, the meaning of language is fundamentally indeterminable. There is no

way to determine the meaning of the words we use. Words and concepts require a constant process of interpretation.

Fair enough. No fact can determine the meaning of the words we use (see Quine 1960). But what can such meaning be? According to an influential account in the philosophy of language, the meaning of an expression is the same as its truth conditions. To know the meaning of a sentence is to know under which conditions it is true. Derrida's answer is that these conditions cannot be determined.

However, this does not seem right. It is one thing to say that the meaning is indeterminable and another that there is no meaning at all. Let us consider Davidson's truth-conditional semantics (Davidson 1984). According to Davidson, we cannot determine the truth values of a sentence. Yet, we can still hold that the meaning of a sentence is its truth value.

Consequently, the theory of deconstruction cannot give us a theory of meaning. At the same time, it presupposes such a theory. If our world descriptions aim at the truth, then to understand them is to know the conditions under which they are true or false.

Does this entail that deconstruction is useless? No! It is doubtful whether deconstruction can be a useful tool for building a theory of truth and meaning. However, the same can be said about analysis (see Quine 1951). This, however, does not entail that analysis is philosophically useless. Deconstruction seems to be an effective tool to describe the world. The fact that it does not apply to every goal implies that it is not enough to have a tool. It is also necessary to know how to use it.

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