

## Nothing Outside the Text: Derrida and Brandom on Language and World

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The terms deconstruction and *différance* are central to both Jacques Derrida's work and to poststructuralism generally. These terms attempt to provide an alternative to metaphysical construals of linguistic meaning. I compare Derrida's discussion of linguistic meaning and reference with the contemporary pragmatist, Robert Brandom, arguing that Brandom has important similarities to Derrida. However, whereas Derrida remains committed to metaphysics even as he tries to contest it, Brandom, to his credit, more thoroughly rejects metaphysics.

### 1. Pragmatists and Poststructuralists

Jacques Derrida's more recent works, covering such topics as politics, friendship, and religion, presently generate more discussion and debate than his earlier works. This is not to say, however, that the early works are inconsequential. The later works presuppose the key terms that he introduced in the early texts, such as deconstruction and *différance*. These terms still exercise substantial influence in the academy, especially in social and cultural theory and textual criticism. In the early works, which are now among the definitive texts of the poststructuralist canon, Derrida articulates his position that "nothing is outside the text" (*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*), challenging every philosophical attempt to ground knowledge and linguistic meaning by appeal to some sort of foundation, principle, or entity independent of human history and culture.

Since the classical American pragmatists (Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey), their later twentieth-century heirs (especially Richard Rorty), and other philosophers who give a central place to social practices in their work (like Ludwig Wittgenstein, Donald Davidson, and Wilfrid Sellars) all give an essential role to social activities such as interpreting, experimenting, and classifying in their discussions of knowledge and meaning, a number of studies have compared Derrida and other poststructuralists with pragmatists and other philosophers of the social practical (Stone 2000; Wheeler 2000; Rorty 1982, 1989, 1991, 1991, 1991, 1993, 1996; Mouffe 1996).

In this vein, the present essay puts the early work of Derrida in dialogue with the philosophy of Robert Brandom, a figure who has emerged as one of the foremost contemporary proponents of the pragmatist tradition, and surely its most ambitious systematizer. I am especially interested in these two philosophers' views on the relation between language and the world. Post-structuralism is an important type of social constructivism, the view that sees human activity as constituting, rather than just discovering, knowledge. But it is difficult to find clear expositions in the social constructivist literature of the nature and extent of this constitutive role. Brandom, steeped in the Anglo-American analytical philosophy tradition, is devoted to the ideals of clarity and precision in philosophizing, so he is a worthwhile figure to contrast with poststructuralism. Brandom expresses what we could regard as the American version of "nothing outside the text" when he states that there is "nothing outside the realm of the conceptual" (Brandom 2000, 357).

My aim in this paper is to show that Brandom's version of pragmatism captures what Derrida gets right about language and the world but does not suffer from several significant shortcomings the French philosopher's work exhibits. My strategy is, first, to attempt to make sense of Derrida's claim that nothing is outside the text; second, to pose some critical questions about his presentation of that claim; third, to discuss how Brandom's philosophy addresses problems in Derrida's account; and fourth, to discuss briefly how Brandom's philosophy would handle some of the primary political concerns that motivate Derrida's perspective.

## 2. Derrida on Language and the World

Derrida is a challenging figure to interpret, owing both to the complexity of the topics he addresses and to the allusive, polyphonic, and paradoxical intellectual style he employs. So despite the circulation that the phrase "nothing outside the text" has enjoyed, we should not assume too quickly that we have a firm grasp on what Derrida is saying when he writes it. In staking out a position, it is not Derrida's style to articulate his claims in clear, consistent language or to supply a coherently argued presentation of the reasons for subscribing to his position. Instead, Derrida intentionally seeks to evade every attempt to wrangle his ideas into a systematic, coherent account. In fact, this is central to his strategy of contesting the Western philosophical endeavor to attain a secure grasp on meaning, knowledge, and truth. Nevertheless, much is at stake in understanding what the poststructuralist position on language and reality is, since it has proved so influential.

"There is nothing outside context" is Derrida's gloss on "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*." Context involves principally the semiotic conventions that are established in the social and material institutions of human practices (Derrida 1988, 136–137).<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that Derrida subscribes to linguistic idealism: "The text is not the book, it is not confined in a volume to the library. It does not

suspend reference – to history, to the world, to reality, to being, and especially not to the other” (1988, 137). In saying that nothing is extra-textual, Derrida first wants us to recognize that our accounts of history, the world, reality, and so on are interpretations (“To say of history, of the world, or reality, that they always appear in an experience, hence in a movement of interpretation...”). This much should be fairly uncontroversial. Even scientific and metaphysical realists distinguish between the socially constructed activities of theorizing and interpreting, on the one hand, and the subject matter theorized and interpreted, on the other. But Derrida is saying more than just that. In addition to this hermeneutical claim, Derrida wants to highlight a political one, as well. He wants to emphasize, as Anglo-American philosophers have failed to do, the political backdrop, involving the various interests at work in socio-institutional frameworks, that actively shapes any interpretive undertaking.<sup>2</sup>

But do we have, in addition to the hermeneutical claim and the political one, an even more radical ontological claim? Some have tried to claim that poststructuralists and social constructivists have no radical ontology, but restrict their insights to the two just mentioned, hermeneutic and political. For example, in response to Alan Sokal’s (1996) claim, “There *is* a real world; its properties are *not* merely social constructions; facts and evidence *do* matter. What sane person would contend otherwise?” Stanley Fish (1996) says, “It is not the world or its properties but the vocabularies in whose terms we know them that are socially constructed.” It is hard to believe that Fish has accurately presented social constructivism here. Do realists and poststructuralists really subscribe to the same ontological views? Under one construal of realism, William Alston’s (2002, 104), realists hold that “much of reality is what it is independently of our cognitive relations thereto.”<sup>3</sup> Anti-realism, then, is a commitment to “the view that whatever there is, is constituted, at least in part, by our cognitive relations thereto, by the ways we conceptualize it or construe it, by the language we use to talk about it or the conceptual scheme(s) we use to think of it” (Alston 2002, 97–98).

Surely poststructuralists are in the anti-realist camp. At least Derrida is, as we see in passages like this:

Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general. That is why the methodological considerations that we risk applying here to an example are closely dependent on general propositions that we have elaborated above; as regards the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified. *There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*]. And that is neither because Jean-Jacques’ life, or

the existence of Mamma or Therese *themselves*, is not of prime interest to us, nor because we have access to their so-called “real” existence only in the text and we have neither any means of altering this, nor any right to neglect this limitation. ... In what one calls the real life of these existences of “flesh and bone,” beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau’s text, there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the “real” supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. And thus to infinity, for we have read, *in the text*, that the absolute present, Nature, that which words like “real mother” name, have always escaped, have never existed. (Derrida 1976, 158)

Writing, for Derrida, involves human communicative practices generally, whether or not these take the form of words on paper. So when he says, “There has never been anything but writing,” he is saying that the identity of specific individuals, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Therese, is not constituted independently from our practices of communicating about them. Elsewhere, Derrida makes the point more succinctly: “*The thing itself is a sign*” (Derrida 1988, 49). Language, at least in part, constitutes things.

How does Derrida arrive at such a position, and what exactly does he mean by such claims? Since Derrida’s philosophy does not consist of reasoned argumentation, I will attempt to clarify what Derrida thinks and why he thinks it by situating his views in relation to his precursors, especially phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl and structuralists like Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Derrida’s perspective on the relationship between language and the world emerges from, among other things, a combination of a deconstructed structuralism and a deconstructed phenomenology.

As for the phenomenological tradition that informs Derrida’s work, Husserl for one attempts to draw a firm line between the discursive element of human experience and the nondiscursive “stratum” which grounds discourse and meaning. In Derrida’s view, this attempt deconstructs, generating questions and problems that cannot be resolved within the Husserlian framework (Derrida 1982, 155–173). The more intimate relationship between language and being that Heidegger proposes is more to Derrida’s taste. In a discussion of Husserl, Derrida challenges the distinction between symbols and objects. For Derrida it is the trace of *différance* that secures and problematizes mind-word-thing relations. He says, in a discussion of the relation of the mental image of a phonetic sound (the “appearing [*l’apparaître*] of the sound”) to the external, physical existence of the sound (“the sound appearing [*apparaissant*]”): “The unheard difference between the appearing and the appearance [*l’apparaissant et l’apparaître*] (between the “world” and “lived experience”) is the condition of all other differences, of all other traces, and *it is already a trace*. ... *The trace is the*

*différance* which opens appearance [*l'apparaître*] and signification" (Derrida 1976, 65).<sup>4</sup> The trace, for Derrida, is something that is absent but that has left its mark; the trace has effects even when it is no longer present. Derrida uses the term 'trace' to problematize the whole opposition between presence and absence. And so when he speaks of *différance* and trace operating in relation to the distinction between the object and the linguistic/symbolic representation of the object, he intends to present as mutually affecting one another what Husserl wanted to keep distinct. In opposition to a view of reference that sees the objects to which words refer as having their nature independent from the words that refer, he states, "*Différance* is reference and vice versa" (Derrida 1988, 137).<sup>5</sup> If *différance* is reference, then Derrida is saying that the referent of the symbol does not exist independently from the symbol.

As for structuralism, Ferdinand de Saussure (1983) delivered an analytical framework that would motivate some of the most important intellectual movements in the twentieth century, but in doing so in the way he did, he left both structuralists and poststructuralists severely underresourced in their ability to discuss the relationship between language and objects. At the center of Saussure's legacy are three concepts: the sign as signifier and signified, the arbitrary nature of the relation between signifier and signified, and the role that differentiation from other signs plays in constituting each sign. Saussure construes each of these in such a way that leaves the linguistic system carefully insulated from the outside world of objects, and also from human action. The signifier and signified are both mental entities, the former a mental impression of the sound of a word, the latter a concept or idea. Saussure has almost nothing to say about the relation between concepts and objects. He rejects forthwith the theory that language is "a list of terms corresponding to a list of things" (1983, 65). All he gives us by way of indication that concepts have anything at all to do with objects, or kinds of objects, is his brief speculation that the association between signifier and signified must have been established by means of primordial baptisms: "The initial assignment of names to things, establish[ed] a contract between concepts and sound patterns" (1983, 71–72).

Just as poststructuralism was beginning to emerge from structuralism, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss contributes to the entanglement of sign and object, stating his intent "to transcend the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible by operating from the outset at the level of signs" (1969, 14; quoted in Derrida 1978, 281). Lévi-Strauss' views on culture and nature are another important part of the story, since he claims that the culture/nature dichotomy is ultimately indefensible (even if a distinction between the two is practically useful). Poststructuralism came into its own when the fixedness of the link between signifier and signified was challenged. But Saussure's conception of language as a social-psychological structure remained intact, presenting difficulties for any attempt, by structuralists or poststructuralists, to account for language's relation to that which is extra-sociopsychological.

Unfortunately, this is precisely the point at which poststructuralism has had most need of explanatory resources, since here is where criticism has been most severe.

As for Derrida, he sees structuralism as ensuring the unachievability of the ambitions of anyone who “dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes ... the order of the sign” (1978, 292). His poststructuralist semantics takes Saussure’s two principles, the arbitrariness of the signifier/signified relationship and the differential constitution of the sign, and complicates these in three regards. First, on the side of the signifier, he denies that the distinction between the psychological impression of the sound (or mark) of the word and the uttered or written word can be maintained; on the side of the signified, he denies that the distinction between the concept and the object(s) that the concept represents can be maintained. Second, he denies that the concept/object that is the signified is non-linguistic. The concept/object is only intelligible and specifiable in linguistic terms; words and sentences are defined and specified by words and sentences, and those in turn by words and sentences, and so on indefinitely. Any sign’s signified is a signifier in its own right, standing in relation to another signified, and so on indefinitely. Third, the result of the previous two considerations is the disruption and rejection of Saussure’s signifier/signified relation, and thus the Saussurean sign altogether, even though, paradoxically, the sign remains indispensable.

In all three of Derrida’s modifications of Saussure, *différance* is operating, making possible the sign even while disrupting it, and along with *différance*, associated Derridean terms of art like ‘play’, ‘trace’, ‘iteration’, and ‘gramme’. *Différance* finds its genesis in Derrida’s departure from the Western philosophical tradition’s attempt to secure the determinacy and decidability of linguistic meaning through appeal to something metaphysical, external to discourse, whether that is being, God, reason, human nature, consciousness, experience, history, or truth.<sup>6</sup> According to Derrida, the linguistic structure has no established “center,” or transcendental signified, to fix and rigidify the structure itself or the links between the signifiers and signifieds. So the meaning of any sign is elusive, constituted by its differentiation from other signs, but deferred endlessly, as signs can only be explicated in terms of other signs, and those in turn by other signs.<sup>7</sup> For any given sign, the sign is what it is by virtue of its difference from other signs, and these other signs are present in the sign, even in their absence, since it is nothing but the differentiation of the sign from other signs that constitutes the sign. This is the trace, the presence in the sign of the absence of other signs, which are ostensibly excluded from the sign. A given sign, then, is not identical with itself, in that it is simultaneously constituted by what it is and what it is not.

Perhaps a crude example will prove somewhat illuminating. The concept of hotness is only utilizable to someone who has a concept of coldness. Otherwise, the concept-user would be unable to distinguish between hot and cold items, but that ability is a precondition of the proper utilization of the

concept of hotness. So the concept of coldness makes the concept of hotness what it is, even if hotness is oppositional to, and exclusive of, coldness. This may clarify, but it does not come close to exhausting what Derrida is up to. The point of deconstruction is to uncover the manner in which texts prioritize one term in a binary conceptual opposition to the exclusion of the other term. Then, the deconstructionist demonstrates how the prioritized term requires the excluded term for its intelligibility and operability. So, for example, Plato and Saussure prioritize speech over writing. Derrida (1976, 1988) attempts to show that the very features of writing that rendered it unacceptable for Plato and Saussure are the preconditions for speech.

When Derrida develops Saussure's principles of arbitrariness and meaning as difference into his *différance*, what was semantic in Saussure becomes, in Derrida's hands, an operation that is both semantic and ontological. "To say of history, of the world, or reality, that they always appear in an experience, hence in a movement of interpretation which contextualizes them according to a network of differences and hence of referral to the other, is surely to recall that alterity (difference) is irreducible. *Différance* is a reference and vice versa" (Derrida 1988, 137). The referents themselves are operated upon and constituted by *différance*. "Every referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace" (Derrida 1988, 148). Additionally,

The trace, where the relationship with the other is marked, articulates its possibility in the entire field of the entity [étant] ... The trace must be thought through before the entity. ... When the other announces itself as such, it presents itself [sic] in the dissimulation of itself. ... The presentation of the other as such, that is to say the dissimulation of it 'as such', has always already begun and no structure of the entity escapes it. (Derrida 1976, 47)

Nothing escapes the order of the sign, and so no final dichotomies between semantics and ontology, language and objects, exist.

One result of Derrida's elision of the distinction between symbol and object is a counter-intuitive view on identity. If it is strange, but perhaps easier to swallow, to speak of concepts as not identical to themselves, it is harder to grasp what it could mean for every object not to be self-identical. Nevertheless, this is what Derrida holds, and so he can say,

Identity is not the self-identity of a thing, this glass, for instance, this microphone, but implies a difference within identity. That is, the identity of a culture is a way of being different from itself; a culture is different from itself; language is different from itself; the person is different from itself. ... Identity is a self-differentiating identity, an identity different from itself, having an opening or gap within itself. (Derrida and Caputo 1997, 13–14)

The radical nature of these claims cannot be overstated. The statement of identity,  $A=A$ , is a cornerstone of logic, and indeed, of Western philosophy. The suggestion that  $A\neq A$  is as provocative a challenge as can be proposed to the philosophical tradition.

### 3. Questioning Derrida's Philosophy of Language

Once we have Derrida's take on language and the items to which language refers in view, to some extent at least, two primary questions emerge. First, we have a problem that Derrida's views seem to contradict the settled results of our commonsensical, everyday ways of using language. Second, we have the problem that despite the fact that Derrida is critical of the metaphysical tradition, his own views are still thoroughly implicated in metaphysics, as he himself admits.

We can consider the way in which our ordinary language contradicts Derrida's understanding of language and reference, first, in relation to his claims about personal identity. "Identity is not the self-identity of a thing," Derrida says, "this glass, for instance, this microphone, but implies a difference within identity." He spoke these words at a discussion at Villanova University, presumably referring to the glass and microphone before him on the table. We assume that prior to the event, some sound technicians, let us say two of them, set up Derrida's microphone and ensured its proper working order. Both technicians have the concept *microphone*. That is, they have an ability to recognize standardly designed microphones, they can form intelligible sentences containing the word "microphone," and they comprehend such sentences spoken by others. When they perceive the object that will soon enough be amplifying the French philosopher's voice, they perceive the object as a microphone. Perceiving the object as a microphone is possible only because each possesses the concept *microphone*. Now according to Derrida, the operations of *différance* infect the identity of the *microphone* concept with the identities of other concepts (and objects). So if we can locate no distinct border between the concept and the object, then the microphone is not identical with itself.  $A\neq A$ .

Derrida's position here presupposes what he takes to be the failure of metaphysical attempts to ground the self-identity of objects. Since metaphysics failed to ground self-identity, there is no self-identity. But the response of many pragmatists will be that metaphysics was never needed to ground self-identity in the first place, and so the failures of metaphysics do not jeopardize self-identity. The self-identity of the object obtains because of the social practices involved in recognizing and referring to objects. When one technician says to the other, "Hand me that microphone," the other responds appropriately. He recognizes that the microphone of which the first technician speaks is the one that he perceives now and has previously perceived. He reaches for it and hands it to the first technician. When the first technician issues her request, the second does not pause, pondering in confusion whether or not that which is not the microphone



is present within the microphone. Both technicians distinguish easily and accurately between that which is the microphone and that which is not. It is precisely the fact that we speak of and act toward objects in these ways, recognizing them as persisting through time and space, yet remaining the same object, that accounts for the identity of objects with themselves.

And what about Derrida's remark that "the thing itself is a sign"? What should the pragmatist say in response? True enough, the various metaphysical solutions that have sought to explain word-world relationships only generate conundrums, and so the recourse to *différance* to explain both the distinction between the word and the world and the effacement of that distinction is understandable. Nevertheless, our everyday practices suggest an alternative explanation. Whatever the relations between words and objects, and there are many no doubt, we distinguish practically between signs and things. From the standpoint of our practical activities, the thing itself is not a sign. The object/concept signified by a signifier is not, in most cases, in turn a signifier in its own right, and we know this because we know that people can and do differentiate, quite easily, between words, on the one hand, and objects, on the other. The word "cat" does not purr and "hammer" does not weigh a pound and a half.

This may seem trite, and of course neither Derrida nor any poststructuralist would deny that we do make these distinctions. In fact, at times, Derrida is quite attentive to the role practice plays in the operation of reference. For instance, he says,

I want to recall that undecidability is always a *determinate* oscillation between possibilities (for example, of meaning, but also of acts). These possibilities are themselves highly *determined* in strictly *defined* situations (for example, discursive – syntactical or rhetorical – but also political, ethical, etc.). They are *pragmatically* determined. (1988, 148)

He explicates pragmatics at greater length:

I consider the context of that discussion, like that of this one, to be very stable and very determined. It constitutes the object of agreements sufficiently confirmed so that one might *count* [*tabler*] on ties that are stable, and hence demonstrable, linking words, concepts and things, as well as on the difference between the true and the false. And hence one is able, in this context, to denounce errors, and even dishonesty and confusions. This 'pragmatics' or this pragmatology ... also entails deontological (or if you prefer, ethical-political) rules of discussion of which I remind my critics when I believe they have failed to observe them.<sup>8</sup> (1988, 151)

These are considerations a pragmatist endorses wholeheartedly. The pragmatist can agree with Derrida that “the ties between words, concepts, and things, truth and reference, are not *absolutely* and purely guaranteed by some metacontextuality or metadiscursivity” (1988, 151). There is no need for them to be. The ties between words, concepts, and things need only be sufficient to accomplish the practical aims of a given situation, such as a request to fetch a particular microphone.

However, despite this occasional recognition of the practical determinations of the very concepts he finds problematic, such as meaning, Derrida and other poststructuralists deny the sufficiency of the practical explanation. For them, the practical distinctions we draw have significance, but ultimately fall short of the full explanation. The poststructuralist’s full explanation employs unobservable, transcendental or quasi-transcendental conditions of possibility (and impossibility), such as *différance*. To endorse this perspective is to hold that our beliefs about objects and identities are, when scrutinized closely, deeply misguided. Derrida says,

In order for structures of undecidability to be possible (and hence structures of decisions and of responsibilities as well), there must be a certain play, *différance*, nonidentity. Not of indetermination, but of *différance* or of nonidentity with oneself in the very process of determination. *Différance* is not indeterminacy. It renders determinacy both possible and necessary. (1988, 149)

This is not easily reconciled with Derrida’s admission that pragmatics plays a decisive role in decision-making. If the practical context “constitutes the object of agreements sufficiently,” then why speak of “nonidentity with oneself”? In our practical activities, we take it for granted that the technician is the technician. She is herself, and no one else is her. When the dean of the humanities division asks an assistant to check with the technician to ensure that all is in working order, the assistant, assuming he is familiar with the technician, is not confused as to whom to locate.

What sort of commitments must Derrida hold that would permit him to reject the technicians’ presumption that the microphone of which one technician speaks is identical to that which the other sees, that it is identical to itself? Despite Derrida’s attempt to announce the closure of metaphysics, his denial of the possibility of self-identity is funded by a positive commitment to metaphysics. Derrida, following Nietzsche and Heidegger, rightly notes that the metaphysical explanations of the philosophical tradition have failed. However, his account of the implications of that failure is as metaphysically loaded as the various realisms, the various metaphysics of presence, that he so stringently criticizes. The play of *différance* on objects, which makes them not identical to themselves, is unobservable. “The play of a trace which no longer belongs to the horizon of Being” is what renders self-identity impossible: “The one differing

from itself, the one in difference with itself, already is lost like a trace in the determination of the *diapherein* as ontological difference.” So how do we discover this trace “which can never be presented: that is, appear and manifest itself, as such, in its phenomenon”? We cannot: “Always differing and deferring, the trace is never as it is in the presentation of itself. It erases itself in presenting itself, muffles itself in resonating” (Derrida 1982, 23). The trace “retain[s] the other as other in the same.” It “*does not exist*,” yet still manages to serve as the condition of meaning, perceptual experience, and signification (Derrida 1976, 62). We begin to wonder whether *différance* is as positively metaphysical as *substantia* and *ousia*.

Derrida thinks we need some explanation as to why it is that metaphysics failed. He tells us that philosophers philosophized presence (of God, truth, being, etc), but failed to account for *différance*. But Derridean *différance* does not replace being and presence, it supplements them. It presupposes them for its own intelligibility. Derrida remains as committed to presence and being as any philosopher he criticizes. His strategy is not to discount presence and being, but to destabilize them. The trace of *différance*, Derrida tells us, is “an inversion of metaphysical concepts” (1982, 24). As such, it is as metaphysically motivated as any variant of presence.

Derrida does not believe that the closure of metaphysics implies the end of metaphysics, since in his view, our language and concepts are irredeemably metaphysical. His attempt to convince us that *différance* is neither a word nor a concept is precisely his attempt to place it outside of the metaphysical commitments that he believes inhere in our practices of signification. According to Derrida, “‘everyday language’ is not innocent or neutral. It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are knotted into a system” (1981, 19). And Derrida admits that *différance*, too, ultimately is caught up in the suppositions of Western metaphysics, even as it rejects those very presuppositions. The metaphysical assumptions are so pervasive that even the attempt to escape them falls incomplete: “For us, *différance* remains a metaphysical name, and all the names that it receives in our language are still, as names, metaphysical” (Derrida 1982, 27).

It is not that Derrida is guilty of contradicting himself in maintaining that *différance* undermines metaphysics even as it is implicated in metaphysics. Rather, his point is that our discourse itself is involved in self-contradiction. Our discourse reveals itself to presuppose metaphysical notions like being and presence but also to presuppose the very thing that undoes those notions, *différance*. So he continuously calls metaphysics into question from within metaphysics. If metaphysics is inescapable, then the pragmatist attempt to escape metaphysics is an impossible dream. Further, as the poststructuralist sees it, the pragmatist’s avowal of a non-metaphysical posture has troubling political implications. The poststructuralist concern is that metaphysical notions are

employed by the powerful to marginalize others, and if these notions are inescapable, then the pragmatists will be especially susceptible to the ill effects of the metaphysical notions, precisely in wrongly thinking themselves rid of metaphysics, and so failing to guard against them. The poststructuralist counsels instead the strategy of acknowledging the presence of metaphysical notions, even while constantly contesting them.<sup>9</sup>

We do not need to accept this assessment of the situation, however. To be sure, we can admit that our ordinary discourse does constantly give rise to metaphysical explanations. Construing people's behavior in terms of intentional actions leads us to think in terms of immaterial souls and minds as opposed to mere bodies, our esteem for correct statements leads us to value truth as some sort of substantial, transcendent property or relation, and so on. The pragmatist, however, thinks that we can account for our practices without these metaphysical notions. "Metaphysics in the pejorative sense," says philosopher Mark Johnston, "is a confused conception of what legitimates our practices.... The only real legitimation of those practices consists in showing their worthiness to survive on the testing ground of everyday life" (1993, 85).

The proper response to the poststructuralist is that the distinction between the signifier and signified never needed metaphysical buttressing in the first place. So signs are not metaphysically imperiled and need no rescue in the form of *différance*, trace, or whatever else. The links between signifiers and signifieds are practically constituted for practical purposes and need only be sufficient for the achievement of the particular aims, and particular types of aims, which led in the first place to the usage of particular signs in particular ways. Our social practices, as Derrida admits, treat "the object of agreements sufficiently confirmed so that one might *count [table]* on ties that are stable, and hence demonstrable, linking words, concepts and things, as well as on the difference between the true and the false." The fact that these practices are contingent and variable accounts for everything that *différance* gets right, without the counter-intuitive notions, such as non-self-identity, that Derrida associates with *différance*. We need look no further than the internal rationales of our practices if we want to explain signifier/signified relationships, or word/world relationships.<sup>10</sup> Derrida's imagination is still too captivated by, too deferent to, metaphysics.

This is precisely the challenge that Gerald Graff poses to Derrida, which Derrida cites: "*If one refrained from ascribing to language a 'longed-for' metaphysical presence, would language then need to be seen as dispossessed of something? In other words, is there not a danger here of keeping certain linguistic superstitions alive in order to legitimate the project of calling them into question?*" (1988, 115). Derrida denies that he is doing this, but I am not convinced of the success of his response. Philosopher John Searle attributes to Derrida the view that "*unless a distinction can be made rigorous and precise it isn't really a distinction at all*" (quoted in Derrida 1988, 115). Derrida rejoins that he does in fact think that conceptual distinctions, to be legitimate, must be

made rigorous and precise. “What philosopher ever since there were philosophers, what logician ever since there were logicians, what theoretician ever renounced this axiom: in the order of concepts (for we are speaking of concepts and not of the colors of clouds or the taste of certain chewing gums), when a distinction cannot be rigorous or precise, it is not a distinction at all.” Derrida claims that if Searle rejects this axiom, then his whole project will collapse: “To each word will have to be added ‘a little’, ‘more or less’, ‘up to a certain point’, ‘rather’, and despite this, the literal will not cease being somewhat metaphorical, ‘mention’ will not stop being tainted by ‘use’, the ‘intentional’ no less slightly ‘unintentional’” (1988, 123–124).

For a philosopher of the social practical, the rigor and precision that Derrida says must mark conceptual distinctions is unnecessary simply because conceptual distinctions do not need to be specifiable in exactness, rather they must be sufficiently distinct to accomplish whatever practical purposes are involved in the specific speech acts that employ the distinctions. When concepts are considered in abstraction from their practical applications, metaphysics flowers, and it is precisely in Derrida’s commitment to the rigorous and precise delineation of abstracted conceptual oppositions, on the one hand, and his need to supplement and ground these oppositions in the play of *différance*, on the other, that he remains committed to the metaphysical project. Consider, as further evidence, Derrida’s remark that “*the trace itself does not exist*. (To exist is to be, to be an entity, a being-present, *to on*)” (1976, 167). In claiming that the trace does not exist, Derrida relies upon classic Western philosophical accounts of what it takes for something to count as existing. He does not challenge the accounts, but accepts them in order to differentiate the trace from those sorts of existents. An alternative strategy is to question the idea that to exist is to obtain the metaphysical status of *to on*. What we take to exist (fictional characters, desks, quarks, gods, minds, numbers) is specifiable in various ways in various practical contexts (see Brandom 1994, 443–449).

When our ordinary language motivates practitioners to appeal to metaphysical entities to legitimate or explain their practices, the proper response is not to introduce new metaphysical terms, like *différance* and trace, into the mix, but rather to contest the very appeal to metaphysics. We have several reasons to do so. For one thing, metaphysical accounts of objectivity invite skepticism. The unverifiability, even in principle, of whatever “I know not what” to which we appeal is fodder for the skeptical argument. This is related to the fact that metaphysical theories typically fail to explain convincingly whatever it is they purport to explain. Insofar as Derrida regards metaphysical notions as the condition for ordinary discourse, he is as susceptible to this criticism as the classical metaphysician is.

Further, the employment of metaphysical categories provides handy tools for authoritarian abuse. Essence, substance, the will of God, truth, and the like, when presented as inaccessible to those outside the religious, theological, philosophical, or political priesthood, have a long history of legitimating

exploitative social relations through securing deference to officials by removing decrees from public criticism. This is a feature of metaphysics that worries both poststructuralists and pragmatists. So we can recognize a worthy political principle in Derrida's denial of the possibility of self-identification: "Once you take into account this inner and other difference, then you pay attention to the other and you understand that fighting for your own identity is not exclusive of another identity" (Derrida and Caputo 1997, 13). Nevertheless, Derrida's reinstatement of metaphysics, his attempt to ground meaning, speech, perception, and ontology in non-existing non-concepts, non-words even, such as *différance* and trace, is far more vulnerable to skeptical denial than *ousia*, *substantia*, *telos*, or any other onto-theology.

Derrida's conclusions, that objects and persons are not self-identical and that nothing exists outside language, stand starkly at odds with the assumptions and distinctions that reside, implicitly and explicitly, in our everyday activities. This limits the appeal and communicability of the important claims, political and ethical, he wants to endorse. Must commonsense be sacrificed to make the claim that "fighting for your own identity is not exclusive of another identity"? Commonsense perspectives are not infallible or immune from criticism, but we should be concerned about the possibility that the anti-realism of post-structuralists effectively puts their claims outside the pale of public scrutiny, in the same manner as onto-theology does for its adherents. At the very least, the counterintuitive anti-realism of poststructuralism delineates a sharp boundary between those in the poststructuralist camp and those outside, minimizing the possibility of communication and intellectual cooperation between post-structuralists and others. For all these reasons, a more thoroughgoing closure of metaphysics should be sought than that which Derrida offers.

#### 4. Brandom's Pragmatist Alternative

Robert Brandom's pragmatist philosophy of language exhibits some important similarities to Derrida's poststructuralism. This is especially seen in Brandom's appropriation of Wilfrid Sellars' criticism of the Myth of the Given. One of the forms of metaphysics that Derrida is concerned to reject pertains to what Derrida calls the metaphysics of presence, which is any entity with which a subject can be immediately related, whether the entity be an idea, a sensation, a phenomenal quality, a physical object, God, or one's self, such that acquaintance with the entity suffices to secure knowledge or ground meaning for the subject. Sellars' rejection of the Myth of the Given is very much in line with Derrida's rejection of presence.<sup>11</sup> Sellars' assault on the Myth involves, among other things, the denial that the meaning of a word is determined strictly by that to which the word refers.

Rejecting the Myth of the Given also means denying that we can arrive at any knowledge regarding a situation strictly on the basis of observing the situation, independently from everything else we know and believe. For Sellars,

meaning and knowledge are holistic affairs. One can only know the meaning of one word if one knows the meanings of lots and lots of words. One can only come to knowledge or belief about a particular situation by knowing and believing many things about many situations. To know what the word “shirt” means, one must not just be able to say “shirt” every time a shirt comes into view, one must know that a shirt is an article of clothing, that it is made of fabric, that it is not a living organism, or a number, and so on. Until one knows what one can properly infer about an item from the fact that it is a shirt, one does not know what “shirt” means, any more than a parrot who squawks “cracker” when presented with a saltine knows what the word “cracker” means.

Sellars’ views on meaning, developed extensively by Brandom (1994), bear some strong resemblances to the motif of *différance* in Derrida’s work. Rejecting any stable relationship between a word and its referent (in Anglo-American nomenclature) or a signifier and a signified (as the structuralists put it), Derrida’s semantics has it that the meaning of any word or concept is deferred endlessly from sign to sign in a shifting, unstable network of signs. This is what the term *différance* attempts to articulate: the role of the differences among signs in constituting each sign as a sign, and the deferral of meaning from sign to sign. Brandom and Sellars likewise reject a singular word-object referential relationship. For them, the meaning of a concept or word is a product of the inferential relationships in which the concept or word stands. These inferential relationships are a feature of the discursive practices of human communities, they are not fixed in any Platonic heaven. Something not too unlike Derridean deferral is at work here.

We see this too when Brandom says, “The boundary ... between practices of concept use and the non-concept-using world in which that practice is conducted is not construed as a boundary between the conceptual and the nonconceptual *tout court*. In an important sense there is no such boundary, and so nothing outside the realm of the conceptual” (Brandom 2000, 357). This reminds us of Derrida’s “nothing outside the text.” But to see the extent to which the two philosophers’ views overlap, and the extent to which they differ, we need to take a closer look at Brandom’s account of concepts, and his theory of the relation between language and objects.

Brandom is as opposed to the appeal to metaphysical notions like substance, being, presence, logocentrism, and so on as Derrida is. However, unlike Derrida, he does not rely upon and perpetuate these notions in his attempt to contest them. Brandom’s account of our capacity to use language to refer to objects relies not on metaphysics, but on two types of abilities. The first is the ability to respond differentially to the conditions in our environment. This is an ability we share with rods of iron, which respond to the presence of water in the environment by rusting, and parrots, which can respond to the presence of a cracker by squawking “cracker.” What sets human speech apart from the parrot’s noise, though, is a second type of ability, which is the linguistic ability to issue statements and make inferences.

For Brandom, a concept consists of the inferential role that the term has when used in sentences. But concepts are not just employed in inferences, they are employed in perception and action. A human language-user who has acquired the abilities (a) to respond to the presence of crackers by acquiring a disposition to make the observation report, "That is a cracker," (b) to make such inferences as, "That is edible," "That crumbles when squeezed," "That is not a grape," "That is not a liquid," "That is not red," and "That is not an animal," and (c) to perform actions, such as reasoning, "That is a cracker; I am hungry; I ought to eat the cracker" and then commencing to snack. That the concept is constituted by its inferential relationships with other concepts is a similarity between Brandom and both the structuralists and the poststructuralists, who hold that signs are constituted by their relationships with other signs. However, that Brandom has a place in his philosophy of language for the language-entry moves of observation reports in perception and the language-exit moves of action sets Brandom apart from the other two camps, who are not clear about the way in which our words differ from the things we use them to talk about.

Brandom's philosophy of language is like the poststructuralists' in that he emphasizes the role of human practices in determining the meaning of our speech. For Brandom, the concepts we use are instituted by our social-practical activity. Specifically, the concepts we use are instituted through our activity of applying them: in perception, in inference, and in action. Applying a concept is a normative activity, in that we can apply a concept correctly or incorrectly. I may say, "That is a cracker," when in fact what I am looking at is a cookie. The institution of the norms that apply to concept use is not a one-time affair, but an ongoing result of the continuing use of a concept. Applying a concept is both a historical and social matter. It is social in that when I use a concept, I am not free to use it just however I want to.

If I am using a concept I am responsible to the other members of my community who use the concept in the way they use it. If you tell me, "Regina's dog is a Boston terrier," and I deem you a reliable judge of such things, then I become committed to the proposition that Regina's dog is a Boston terrier. Likewise, if I tell you the same, and you judge me a reliable recognizer of Boston terriers, you will on the basis of my assertion acquire a commitment to the proposition that Regina's dog is a Boston terrier. We can acquire commitments to propositions on the basis of the statements that others make precisely because we jointly recognize the norms that govern the use of concepts like *dog* and *Boston terrier*. Applying a concept is historical in that in using the concepts *dog* and *Boston terrier*, we are holding ourselves responsible to the way the concepts have been used in the past. But we are also holding ourselves responsible to the future, in that someone may learn something new about dogs or Boston terriers in the future – perhaps the breed has a genetic condition about which we don't presently know – and that discovery will affect in the future the conceptual norms governing the use of the concepts we presently use.<sup>12</sup>



Derrida and his fellow poststructuralists, like Brandom, view language and reference as a social-historical product of human discursive activity. However, Brandom's account of just how we institute our conceptual norms captures features of our ordinary language use for which the poststructuralists cannot account, specifically the distinction between the linguistic and the non-linguistic and the stability of identity. In Brandom's philosophy, we institute our conceptual norms in such a way that our assertions are objective, and it is this feature of our discursive practices that secures our capacity to refer to non-linguistic objects and states of affairs and that secures a fundamental determinant of identity, the distinction between an object and that which is not the object. Instituting our norms in such a way that our assertions are objective means several things: that our assertions are about things, that what we assert about something (potentially) affects others' attitudes toward the same thing and vice versa, and that an assertion of ours can be incorrect, even if we ourselves and perhaps even all of our peers think that it is correct. Our concepts are objective like this because we institute them thus.

To paraphrase Hilary Putnam, "Concepts ain't in the head," but rather the content of our concepts is a product of what we use words to talk about as much as how we use the words. In using concepts, we bind ourselves to the objects and states of affairs about which we talk, so that the truth of our assertions about such things is not dependent on our opinion. Brandom has an involved story to tell about how our social practices institute objectivity of this sort. What is important for my purposes is to note that this objectivity is not a feature of something that is independent of our social practices, but rather it is a feature of our social practices, specifically, how we institute conceptual norms.

Whereas Derrida's position tends to elide the distinction between signs and things, words and objects, Brandom's philosophy wants to preserve and account for that distinction. Of his theory, Brandom writes, "The present account distinguishes sharply between [linguistic] expressions and their referents." His philosophy of mind "does not entail conflating linguistic items with extralinguistic items" (1994, 324–325). In Brandom's philosophy, what he calls discursive practices encompass both our words and sentences and the objects about which those words and sentences talk. Discursive practices involve, principally, perceptions, actions, and the statements that the practitioners actually make and have the capacity to make. In perception and action, the practitioners are in causal interaction with the various objects they encounter in their environment, including other language-users and the non-language-using physical world. So discursive practices are not something set apart from the objects that make up the physical world, they are practices in which language users are in constant interaction with the physical world. Brandom writes,

Discursive practices incorporate actual things.... They involve actual bodies, including both our own and the others (animate and inanimate)

we have practical and empirical dealings with.... According to such a construal of practices, it is wrong to contrast discursive practice with a world of facts and things *outside* it, modeled on the contrast between words and the things they refer to.... What determinate practices a community has depends on what the facts are and on what objects they are actually practically involved with, to begin with, through perception and action. The way the world is, constrains proprieties of inferential, doxastic, and practical commitment in a straightforward way from *within* those practices. (1994, 332)

So when Brandom says that “in an important sense ... nothing is outside the conceptual,” he does not mean to contrast the conceptual with the physical as two different orders altogether. Concepts are determined by the nature of our linguistic practices, specifically, the manner in which we respond to the physical world in perception and action and the manner in which we infer statements from other statements.

Derrida’s concern, and his motivation to conflate linguistic items and extralinguistic items, is that any philosophical account of the distinction between the linguistic and the extralinguistic is committed to some form of metaphysics. However, Brandom shows that this is not the case. For Brandom, what accounts for the distinction between the linguistic and the extralinguistic is not of a metaphysical nature, but rather of a practical one. Our social practices, in particular, our discursive practices, encompass both words and things, but crucially, distinguish between words and things. In other words, our social practices themselves, our practices of speech, perception, and action are such that they facilitate distinctions between the social and the objective. As Stout says,

Whenever one makes a claim, one is necessarily *relying on* (but not necessarily *referring to*) the social practice within which this and other claims acquire their conceptual practices. ... When, in claiming something, one refers to facts or to true claims ... one is still necessarily relying on the underlying social practice. While keeping this acknowledgment in mind, [one] can, without implicitly revoking it, go on to use the conceptual resources of a discursive social practice to discuss all sorts of things, including possible states of affairs in which there are no social practices. (2002, 48)

For Stout, following Brandom, the objectivity of our claims about the world and the objectivity of the things in the world are not founded in metaphysics. Rather, objectivity and also subjectivity “‘precipitate’ out of social practices” (Stout 2002, 50).

We can explain objectivity by appeal to the norms inherent in linguistic practices. In our linguistic practices are implicit, sometimes explicit, distinctions

that account for the fact that we can refer to objects as existing independently from our practices.<sup>13</sup> One such distinction is that between epistemic entitlement and truth. Another is the distinction at work in our practices between attributing commitments to others and acknowledging those commitments ourselves. The norm-governed application of such distinctions in our practices makes it possible for us to take the utterances of ourselves and others as right and wrong, true and false. Our norms make it intelligible and articulable that any person, or even our entire linguistic community, could be wrong about particular beliefs about objects in the world. So the beliefs are objective. Indeed, we can refer to objects and state facts about objects that existed prior to the origin of humanity.<sup>14</sup>

This kind of objectivity ensures that we can speak of the identity of people and things, and indeed, their self-identity, as stable, even if the concepts by which we refer to people and things are inherently relational. That is, in agreement with Derrida, the concept *microphone* is constituted by its differential relationships with other concepts, but Brandom, unlike Derrida, maintains that our discursive practices are such that we employ the term “that microphone” objectively, that is, as referring to a particular microphone that persists in time and space, that is accessible to different people, and that is what it is and not something else. Discursive practices, as Brandom conceives them, differentiate between an “order of signs” and that which is outside the order of signs (contra Derrida’s “nothing escapes the order of the signs”), but encompass both orders.

### 5. The Politics of Inferentialism

The appeal of Derrida’s position does not just result from the persuasiveness or attractiveness of his ontology or semiology, but owes much to the sort of politics that deconstruction enables. The concern with metaphysics and stable, exclusive identities is that they are easily appropriated into oppressive political agendas, as in the case in which one social group promotes the view that it has an essential identity that is superior to another’s and conducts violence against the other group on that basis. It would be incomplete to promote the philosophical merits of Brandom’s perspective over Derrida’s without addressing, even if only briefly, the potential for Brandom’s philosophy to address the sorts of concerns that give Derrida’s poststructuralism appeal.

As we have seen, a major concern of Derrida’s that highlights the importance of *différance*, deconstruction, and the denial of self-identity is, “Once you take into account this inner and other difference, then you pay attention to the other and you understand that fighting for your own identity is not exclusive of another identity” (Derrida and Caputo 1997, 13). This statement captures Derrida’s commitment to a certain type of identity politics and rejection of another type of identity politics. The identity politics that poststructuralism embraces counsels that we attend to the specific situation of certain social groups and not enact policies that are blind to relevant differences between their

situation and that of others. This could result in policies that take into account the differences between women and men in regard to the labor force that pertain to the fact that women bear children and have historically been the primary caregivers for children, for example. Or, for another example, attending to differences may result in policies that grant Sikhs an exception to restrictions on bearing arms. However, regarding social groups as different can also lead to heinous political results, as when one social group regards another as morally inferior and implements practices of repression, exclusion, or even genocide on that basis. So deconstruction is supposed to remind us that no social group has its own particular essence that is exclusive to that social group.

A pragmatist who subscribes to Brandom's philosophy can embrace both of these political positions, endorsing a politics of recognizing relevant differences but refusing essentialism, just as the deconstructionist does. However, when it comes to explaining her or his commitment to these strategies, the pragmatist has a very different approach. In contesting essentialism, the deconstructionist has to appeal to metaphysical principles like *différance*, trace, and their counterparts, like being and presence. The pragmatist, on the other hand, locates the problem in faulty inferential practices. Essentialists endorse, implicitly at least, inferences such as, "if x is a member of social group Y, then x is p," where p is some characteristic, oftentimes a term of commendation, like intelligent, industrious, responsible, or some term of approbation, like violent, irresponsible, immoral, lazy, or what have you. The pragmatist wants to contest these sorts of inferences, but the contestation does not involve appeal to metaphysical entities. One important way to contest such an inference is to show exceptions, members of the social group who do not exhibit p and members of other social groups who do exhibit p. This achieves the result Derrida is after, showing that fighting for an identity is not exclusive of another identity.

In addition to contesting specific inferential practices, a pragmatist of Brandom's persuasion can have a broader strategy of social criticism that is worth comparing to poststructuralist social criticism. Such a pragmatist's social criticism shares some key assumptions with the poststructuralist. Both pragmatists and poststructuralists are critical of the Western philosophical tradition with its appeal to notions, usually metaphysically freighted, such as the will of God, consciousness, experience, reason, ideas, and forms, insofar as these notions are employed to legitimate social arrangements as natural and necessary, as opposed to historically contingent. The recognition that the norms and institutions of society are contingent and power-laden motivates efforts to make them different from the way they currently are, and this is an insight that both pragmatists and poststructuralists share.

Further, like the poststructuralist, Brandom's views result in a double fallibilism, epistemological ("I might be wrong in my belief that q") and semantic ("My grasp of the meaning of concept c is imperfect"). As Brandom says, "Our norms for conducting ordinary conversations among ourselves are the ones we use in assessing interpretations. There is never any final answer as

to what is correct; everything, including our assessments of such correctness, is itself a subject for conversation and further assessment, challenge, defense, and correction” (Brandom 1994, 647). Such fallibilism, when it motivates a willingness to subject one’s own commitments to critical scrutiny and engenders sensitivity to the claims of those who contest one’s commitments, can have important political ramifications. Here again, the crucial difference between this approach and that of poststructuralism is that this approach, in criticizing the traditional metaphysical notions and the repressive uses to which they have been put, is willing to forego the metaphysical notions altogether, and if need be, contest every appeal to them, whereas the poststructuralist remains beholden to traditional metaphysics even while calling it into question.

As outlined in texts such as Pinkard (1994) and Stout (2004), one promising strategy of the pragmatist social critic involves identifying norms that are present in a community’s social practices and subjecting them to critical scrutiny to determine which can be endorsed and which should be rejected. This strategy is most effective as immanent criticism, which is conducted by identifying contradictions that inhere in the explicit and implicit norms and commitments that the social group embraces. So, for example, a society that is committed explicitly to democracy and political equality, but that structures its representational politics in such a way that wealthy elites exercise far more influence in the process of public policy formation than the lower classes do is evidencing an internal contradiction in its practices.

The pragmatist social critic aims to expose the contradiction and then hold the members of the society responsible to its stated commitments to democracy and political equality. The critical leverage in this strategy is provided by norms and principles that the members of the society have already (ostensibly) embraced, and so there is no appeal to obscure metaphysical notions like *différance*. And so, in short, whether at the level of philosophical theorizing, of concrete engagement in political discourse, or of social criticism, the pragmatist approach to language evidences a thoroughgoing rejection of the metaphysical notions to which the poststructuralist remains captivated, without sacrificing the crucial insights that the poststructuralists have gotten right.

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## NOTES

1. “Text” for Derrida is a broader term than particular works constituted by paper and ink. ‘Textuality’ refers to the structures, processes, and materials involved in sign-making and sign-interpreting in whatever forms they take.

2. “There is always something political ‘in the very project of attempting to fix the contexts of utterances’. ... The question can be raised, not whether a politics is implied (it always is), but which politics is implied in such a practice of contextualization” (Derrida 1988, 137).

3. This entire clause was italicized in the original.

4. For the sake of consistency, I have rendered all the various spellings of *différance* in translations and texts as *différance*.

5. “The text ... does not suspend reference – to history, to the world, to reality, to being, and especially not to the other.” But these referents are confined (linguistically? phenomenologically?), they only “appear in an experience” and “in a movement of interpretation,” and they are subject to the play of *différance*: “To say of history, of the world, of reality, that they always appear in an experience, hence in a movement of interpretation which contextualizes them according to a network of differences and hence of referral to the other, is surely to recall that alterity (difference) is irreducible” (Derrida 1988, 137).

6. Derrida sees the fixation of meaning as undecidable, but not indeterminable: “I do not believe I have ever spoken of ‘indeterminacy’, whether in regard to ‘meaning’ or anything else. Undecidability is something else again. ... I want to recall that undecidability is always a *determinate* oscillation between possibilities (for example, of meaning, but also of acts)” (Derrida 1988, 148).

7. Derrida (1976, 49) appeals to C. S. Peirce on this, but it is not clear that he gets Peirce right. “If it can be granted that every sign requires to be interpreted, in Peirce’s sense, by some further sign, what further consequences follow from this? An immediate and at first sight highly paradoxical consequence follows: namely that, since the interpretant of any given sign is itself at least capable of acting as a sign, it requires, in virtue of that capacity, some further interpretant which must itself be capable of acting as a sign and must therefore require some further interpretant ... and so on indefinitely.” But Derrida ignores the role practice plays in terminating the series of deferrals. For Peirce, “This endless series is essentially a *potential* one. [Peirce’s] point is that any actual interpretant of a given sign *can* theoretically be interpreted in some further sign, and that in another without any necessary end being reached: *not* that such a series must, *per impossible*, be realized in fact before any given sign can actually signify at all. On the contrary, as Peirce frequently points out, the exigencies of practical life inevitably cut short such potentially endless development” (Gallie 1966, 126). Derrida’s shortchanging of the “exigencies of practical life” will be an important topic later in this essay.

8. On “grammatology” see Derrida (1984, 27–28) and Evans (1990).

9. Jeffrey Stout helped me think through several of the points in this paragraph.

10. The terminology of rationales internal to practices is Johnston’s (1992, 103).

11. Richard Rorty (1991, 110, 116) notes the affinities between Sellars’ rejection of the Myth of the Given and poststructuralism.

12. On instituting concepts through applying them, and on the social and historical dimensions of concept use, see especially Brandom (2002, chap. 7).

13. For the full story of the manner in which objectivity “precipitates” out of social practices see Brandom (1994, chap. 8) and Stout’s discussions of Brandom in Stout (2002; 2004, part 3; 2007).

14. See Brandom (2000, 160–162) and Stout (2007).

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