

Derrida's 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences' :A Critical View

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'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences' was originally a lecture delivered by Jacques Derrida at John Hopkins University in 1966, which was later included as one of the Chapters in his book 'Writing and Difference'. The essay is widely considered as the beginning of post-modernism, structuralism, and, of course, deconstructionism as it questions all notions of 'centre', 'origin' and 'presence'.

Derrida begins by questioning the very legitimacy of the assumption of a 'centre' essential for the concept of 'structure' or 'structuralism'. He accepts that a structure requires a centre to orient and to support it. However, he says, the centre becomes problematic as it remains outside the ambience of structurality. It seeks to obtain the status of a 'transcendental signified' which relates to the logocentric foundation of the Western metaphysics. Logocentrism is the tendency to seek and to legitimize 'centre' and 'presence'. It expresses a fundamental desire for a 'transcendental signified', for something which 'illuminates' all signifiers but itself remains outside the signifying practices. Derrida contests Saussure's view that in the binary of signifier/signified, the two are inseparable, the first invariably referring to the other. He says that the signified itself is not fixed; signified also seeks further meaning (signified) as it exists in a larger signifying process and, thus, it itself becomes another signifier.. So, there is a chain of signifiers and no stable 'signified' or 'presence'. It also means that there is no 'centre' and no 'margin'. The concept of a centre implies 'authority' that arrests the free play of signifiers.

Derrida also questions the structuralist notion of binary difference that produces 'meaning'. He says that binaries are not representation of external reality. They are simply constructions where each signifier needs other signifiers to make meaning. So, each term in a pair of binary opposition seeks to produce separate meaning. He also notes that binaries are arranged in hierarchical order in which one term is always privileged over the other as in 'light/dark', or 'culture/nature'. Referring to the famous structuralist binary of 'speech/writing', he says that 'speech' is privileged for its being immediate, present and original whereas 'writing' is considered a representation of speech and, hence, secondary. Derrida challenges this by saying that writing has qualities to remove and to clarify vagueness of speech; hence, its importance as documentary evidence at many places. Similarly, in the binary of 'culture/nature', as proposed by Levi-Strauss, the privileging of the one over the other is not tenable. With the help of the example of incest/prohibition, he says that prohibition of incest is evidenced in all cultures which renders it natural though it is part of culture. In the same way, Levi-Strauss' concept of 'myth' requires the idea of an 'engineer' who creates myth. But the idea is not tenable as it means that the system is created by something/someone who is outside the system.

Derrida says that the history of Western metaphysics provide instances where the centre/transcendental signified gets replaced by another. Thus, the centre of human society keeps on changing suggesting a 'rupture'. The need for a centre arises from an anxiety that in absence of it (centre/god) everything will be free play and sign would acquire the role of 'supplementarity'. Finally, Derrida proposes two 'interpretations' of interpretative practice: one which is based on structuralism or on science and aims to decipher truth/origin, and the other based on the free play of signs releases the 'text' from any fixed and final interpretation. As the two interpretations are irreconcilable, we have to think of the 'difference' as irreducible 'difference'.