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

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The terms deconstruction and *différence* 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).[1] 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