

Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"

Derrida's essay divides into two parts:

1. "The structurality of structure": An examination of the shifting relationships between structure and centre, and their implications. The results of this examination is roughly the following:

whereas traditionally, a structure was conceived of as grounded and stabilised by a moment of presence called the centre, we are now at a time when that centring has been called into question. And to call the centre into question is to open up a can of worms, destabilising and calling into question the most basic building blocks of thought (Idea, origin, God, man etc.).

2. An analysis of Levi-Straussian structuralism as an instantiation of the problems of thinking through the relationship between structure and centre. The basic point here comes at the end of the essay, and can be stated in one sentence Whereas Levi-Straussian structuralism posits itself as a decentring, it re-creates the centre in a particular way: as the loss of a centre. In other words, *how* one decentres matters; and there is, above all, a crucial difference between conceiving a structure as simply being acentric (of just not having a centre) and between conceiving of a structure as being acentric *because* it has lost a centre it once had. It is precisely these two forms of decentering that are in perpetual tension in Levi-Strauss' work. And, in the final analysis, his "centres" itself upon the very loss of the centre it aims at: absence becomes a mode of presence.

So, let me go through each of these parts in some more detail.

Part One, or When is a centre not a centre?

1. Ante-structuralism:

(a) "structure...has always been neutralised or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a centre or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin" (495): all structures or systems oriented themselves through a centre, a moment at which the substitution of elements ceased, something that fixed or held the structure in place. For example, God in the medieval feudal hierarchy, the king on a chess board, the anterior mental image which the word represents. The centre was conceived as providing in a sense the *raison d'être* of the structure, that which legitimised it, that to which everything could ultimately be referred, that which lent the system its closure. And, further, this centre was associated with the fullness of presence, of being, of positivity, of essence, of being something.

(b) Yet, there was always something of a paradox here: since the centre needed to be both in the structure (part of it), and yet outside (somehow exceptional, something that did not quite obey the rules that all other elements of the structure were subject to). The history of the concept of structure can be read as a series of substitutions of centre for centre, of a chain of determinations of the centre (in terms of being/presence/fullness/positivity)---Plato's ideas, Aristotle's telos, Descartes' ego, Kant' transcendental 'I', Hegel's absolute spirit; these would all exemplify different ways of describing or determining the centre through which the philosophical structure gained its coherence.

A moment of direct relevance to us in this regard will be Foucault's essay "What is an Author?". What Foucault does there is to shift the problem of what an author is, to the question of the cultural anxiety that is implied by the desire to be able to fix the author. For what "authorial intention" provides is precisely a centre, a point of origin, a presence to which the question "what does it mean?" can be referred. And thus far we have seen a relay of such centerings: against the background that "authorial intention" allows us to fix meaning, New Criticism insisted that the "closure of the text" fixes meaning; against both these, Fish initially argues that the "reader" fixes meaning. In each case the structure of meaning grounds itself upon a centre that is seen as being a point of presence, of being, of essence: "author", "text," "reader." And from another angle, Foucault's essay does what Derrida's does: decentres the centre.

2. Then there was structuralism (and its own antecedents/co-cedents, Freud/Nietzsche):

Structuralism would seem to be the antithesis of these earlier, essentialist, present-ist ways of thinking, in that it insists that elements of a structure have no positive essence, no being, but are simply the effects of sets of differential relationships (cf. Saussure's notion that there are no positivities, only differential relationships out of which what look like positive entities emerge). One consequence of this is that Structuralism re-construes the centre *not* as something that precedes the structure, *not* as that which is somehow anterior to and the basis of the structure; rather, structuralism basically rethinks the centre as an effect of the structure. The centre was not simply there, and thus should not be thought of on the basis of presence. This moment is what Derrida calls the decentering, which occurs when one thinks through the structurality of the structure, thinks through what makes a structure a structure. Levi-Strauss' notion of myth is a good example: the "core" of myth, that is, the set of oppositions constituting that deep structure doesn't really exist in the world---it is simply the retroactive point of reference constituted by the differential relationships among the different versions. These are different "versions" of the myth not because there was some basic mythic structure out of which they all grew, but because, through the development of the individual, related stories, a virtual object emerged (like extending backwards the rays reflected from a mirror to construct the virtual image---not a brilliant analogy but along the right lines).

3. Structuralism and its discontents:

So, structuralism advocates acentricity, refuses the positivity of the centre that had so long been thought essential to the very idea of a structure. But does it succeed, or is it another one of those "series of substitutions of center for center," another in the line, for example, of "authorial intention," "text," "reader," and so on. The answer is going to be yes and no---it succeeds partway but doesn't ultimately come to grips with the radical implications of decentering, and thereby ends up being another substitution for the centre it claimed to be doing away with.

For, Derrida argues, even the most radical attempts to think through the absence of the centre, to decentre the centre, remain trapped in a circle (497), which takes the form "of the relationship between the history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics." That is, in order to attack centred structures, one has to make use of concepts that come from them, and in so doing one resurrects these, gives them validity, at the very moment at which one makes use of them.

And this is inescapable. There is ultimately no outside where we can stand, where we can centre ourselves to critique metaphysics; because its conceptual assumptions run so deep we are always caught in them, always part of the game. The most basic concepts we use to try and topple

the structures come from these very structures, and thus we give them back their power at the very moment we are striving to deprive them of it. Now, there are always kinds of questions that need not confront the problem of what underpins them (large areas of physics, e.g., can simply take nature as given, objects as occupying a defined spatial and temporal place), but this simply means that the metaphysical centres have been assumed in the very demarcation of the field (thus, the field of Newtonian physics, e.g. builds into its frame the very assumptions that quantum mechanics later renders unstable---and the theological dimension of this was manifest in Newton, who insisted, for example, on absolute space rather than relative space on essentially theological grounds).

But there are nonetheless different ways of being “caught in the game” and these are not the same, and do not have the same consequences. And through the exemplary case of Levi-Strauss, Derrida (1) addresses this problem of decentering existing conceptual and ideational frameworks while having to rely on the ideas and concepts that constitute them, and (2) examines specifically the implications of how one decenters them, what difference the way in which one enters the circle makes.

Part Two:

Rather than to try and follow through this section step by step, I think it will become clearer if we abandon that attempt and reverse course, starting from near the end of the essay. Specifically, the paragraph on page 509, which I quote extracts from:

“As a turning toward the presence, lost or impossible, of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediateness is thus the sad, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty Rousseauistic facet of thinking the free play of which the Nietzschean *affirmation*...would be the other side. *This affirmation then determines the non-center otherwise than as loss of centre.*”

If there is a thesis that Derrida proposes regarding Levi-Strauss, this is about as close as you are going to get. The basic point is that there are two opposed ways of approaching structures without centres: as acentric or non-centered or as something that once had a centre, but no longer does. And in the case of the latter, that moment of anterior presence, of fullness (that is now absent) haunts the decentered structure, and thus remains present as it were, precisely in the form of an absence. This present absence re-centres the structure at the very moment at which it is claimed that the structure has no centre.

This basic critique also underpins Derrida’s remarks on the structuralist “neutralisation of time and history” (508-9). On the one hand, by “reducing” history, by bracketing it off, Levi-Strauss (rightly) undermines the link between history and the metaphysics of presence (exposes futility of a search for the historical origin, for example).

Let me set aside the question of what “affirmation” of acentricity and free play would look like (Derrida doesn’t himself answer this question, except to acknowledge the problem that such an affirmation could itself be seen as constituting yet another centre). Instead, we need to see that Derrida’s reading of Levi-Strauss repeatedly emphasises the basic tension/contradiction between the claim towards acentricity or non-centricity, on the one hand, and the “supplementary” move whereby acentricity will be re-thought as the loss of a centre. And this unresolved problem constitutes the thread that connects the series of binary oppositions raised in Levi-Strauss: Nature/Culture; Truth/Method; Engineer/Bricoleur etc.

Nature/Culture:

Let us, for example, consider the Nature/Culture opposition. Levi-Strauss begins his own discussion by telling us that despite attempts to repudiate this distinction, it has been impossible to avoid it (Elementary Structures, 3). And he goes on to give this opposition “a more valid interpretation” (4-8) in terms of norm and universality. But no sooner has he done so, he encounters the “fact” which is “not far removed from a scandal”: the incest prohibition, which inextricably mixes up the two poles of nature (universality) and culture (society-specific rules or norms). His solution to this problem will be, as we have seen, to claim that the incest prohibition needs to be thought as the “join” between nature and culture for it is through and in the prohibition that culture emerges as different from but linked to nature (24-25).

Derrida points out, first, that incest is only scandalous if one is already working with the nature/culture opposition (that is, in the interior of the system). That is, only when one treats the nature/culture difference as in some sense self-evident, can the “fact” of incest prohibition appear to be that which blurs or obliterates the difference. Otherwise, it is not scandalous at all: simply something that escapes that conceptual distinction, which that particular distinction is not capable of dealing with (and in this sense it points to something unthinkable within a particular conceptual system, suggesting even that such unthinkability is not merely accidental but constitutive of the system itself).

Rather than using this “fact” to question in depth the history of the nature/culture opposition, L-S takes a different tack: of radically separating method from truth. He holds on to the old concepts in the field of empirical discovery, while exposing their limits here and there, uses them as instruments even as he criticises their truth value. This approach is “bricolage” and he proffers himself as bricoleur, constrained by the empirical world to operate in a way that is opposed to the mode of an engineer (who can define his terms right down to their very essence). Consider, then, the problem of the bricoleur versus the engineer, or of method versus truth. On the one hand, the bricoleur represents for Levi-Strauss “the discourse of the method,” that is, he is the one who takes up whatever concepts are at hand (nature and culture, for example), without worrying about their truth, and uses them to build and dismantle systems. Bricolage exemplifies for Levi-Strauss a discourse about structure that abandons all reference to a grounding centre. Derrida argues that the notion of the bricoleur depends for its force on what it opposes itself to: the engineer (and the notion of truth he embodies). But once we recognise that there is no engineer, that every finite discourse depends on bricolage, then the very notion of a bricoleur is “menaced”.

There is a further consequence of Levi-Strauss' approach that comes from the entanglement of his own critical discourse with the object it studies. This comes out most clearly in his discussion of myth. For one, his empirical approach to myth embodies powerfully the idea of bricolage: there is no “central” mythic structure or origin upon which his analysis depends. It claims to be acentric, operating by trial and error. Thus, the reference myth he uses is not privileged, but in a sense arbitrarily chosen (he could have picked another one). Likewise, there is no single, absolute source for the myth. And for this reason, Levi-Strauss goes on to say that discourse on myth (that is, his own book) must follow the form of myth itself; it cannot---like the engineer---make his theory of myth as relational into the “truth”; rather, the structuralist analysis must acknowledge and reflect mirage-like quality, the acentricity, of its object (myth). [To cite Levi-Strauss: “unlike philosophical reflection, which claims to go all the way back to its source...my enterprise...has had to yield to [the] demands [of myth].... Thus is this book, on myths itself and in its own way, a

myth" (503).] This insistence on the acentricity of myth ("the stated abandonment of all reference to a *centre*") and the claim that structuralist reading of myth is also myth-like in not having a centre is what Derrida reconstructs on pp. 502-503

But the consequence of this is also that it provides no way of distinguishing between the different (structuralist) readings of myth, since all them become somehow equivalent. It sidesteps the question of the standpoint from which one would be able to compare the "truth values" of different discourses on myth. Hence a peculiar tension in L-S's work between a critique of empiricism (structuralism claims to go beyond the manifest diversity to modes of underlying regularity) and the fact that his work always claims to be empirical (dependent on new information). So that structures underwrite experience (are "prior" to experience) and yet are always dependent upon experience: you never reach the structure in a sense. Hence too the ambiguity of his response to the demand for "totalisation": it is a meaningless requirement because it is impossible (because the empirical field is too vast) and because it is unnecessary (you don't need to enumerate all instances to elaborate the structure).

However, another way of conceiving totalisation would not be based upon thinking of it in terms of an empirical impossibility but because of a "structural" feature of the discourse itself: because of a lack that allows for an infinite circulation within a closed structure.

And by the same token, the idea of "truth" (the discourse of the engineer) turns out itself to be simply a lost ideal, an historical illusion, which we can never have, but which is necessary for this notion of "acentricity" to take hold. What Levi-Strauss' theory of bricolage and method evokes in seeing these as exemplifying "acentricity" is an ideal image of a discourse of pure truth and self-sufficiency, that of the engineer or scientist who would "be the one to construct the totality of his language, syntax and lexicon," who would represent the purity of a meaning present to itself. It evokes this ideal image as something lost, something that no longer exists, and precisely through this loss the discourse of method/bricolage stabilises itself. There is, in other words, a buried, unacknowledged tension in Levi-Strauss' own descriptions between the upholding of an acentric structure of differences (exemplified by bricolage) and the hankering after an idealised, mythic lost presence (the engineer, epistemic discourse) whose absence is what leads to acentricity. It is in the shadow of loss that the bricoleur operates, elevating thereby that loss itself to the level of the centre.

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