Derrida and Habermas on Modernity and the Production of Meaning

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Abstract: In this paper, I will contrast the way in which Derrida and Habermas conceptualize both meaning and modernity. In part one, regarding meaning, I identify a diametrical opposition between the concepts of Derridean *différance* and the Habermasian communicative action. In part two, I contrast their conceptions of modernity. It will turn out that Derrida takes a *totalizing* approach while Habermas offers a *differentiated* concept of modernity. I argue that their conceptions of meaning, based on the concepts of différance and synthesis, inform their approaches to modernity. Additionally, I will argue that the Habermasian theory of modernity is preferable due to its sociological explanatory power. I recognize the possibility that this criterion and the focus on modernity itself might do a certain violence to Derrida. Nonetheless, this paper will conclude with a critique of Derrida's theory of meaning, arguing that its political implications are implausible and undermine its credibility.

Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida are arguably the most prominent recent intellectuals of Germany and France. They face off in what Andrew Bowie calls the "German-French debate" (Knellwolf and Norris 121). Representatives of the movements of critical theory and deconstruction, Habermas and Derrida discuss literary theory, social theory and philosophy. This paper will weigh in on this debate. It will focus on the Habermasian and Derridean conceptions of meaning and modernity. Part one discusses the disagreements about meaning and how it is produced, and part two will focus on the debate around concept of modernity. Finally, it will be argued that we ought to adopt a Habermasian theory of modernity and that the Derridean theory of meaning is rendered implausible by its political implications.

1. Meaning

To begin with an analysis of Derrida's understanding of how meaning is produced, it will be helpful to recall the semiotic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), which was undoubtedly highly influential for Derrida. Saussure breaks down the sign into two parts: the signifier (e.g. the word or sound-image 'tree') and the signified (e.g. the concept of a tree). He characterizes the "bond between the signifier and the signified" as "arbitrary" (Saussure 67). Due to this arbitrariness, the signified (e.g. the concept of a tree) cannot explain why its signifier (e.g. the word 'tree') functions as such, i.e. has its particular meaning. Thus, Saussure formulates an alternative explanation of the 'production of meaning' grounded on the situation of words in relation to each other. The *value* of a word is provided by its opposition to all the other words and their values.

Two years before Derrida's pivotal *Structure, Sign and Play,* Barthes recognized the 'prophetic' character of this idea. He concisely sums up the essence of the Saussurean notion of meaning, which holds that meaning results from a division:

> For Saussure imagines that at the (entirely theoretical) origin of meaning, ideas and sounds form two floating, labile, continuous and parallel masses of substances; meaning intervenes when one cuts at the same time and at a single stroke into these two masses. The signs (thus produced) are therefore *articuli*; meaning is therefore an order with chaos on either side, but this order is essentially a *division*. (Barthes 18)

Derrida, too, emphasizes the importance of value over signification. Like Saussure, Derrida does not only present his own conception of meaning. First, he presents the 'history of meaning' that has been prevalent until an event occurs—or something, as Derrida reprimands us, only a naïve mind would call an event—and then proposes his own alternative. This requires some disambiguation.

On the one hand, we find "A history of meaning [sens]—that is, in a word, a history—whose origin may always be reawakened or whose end may always be anticipated in the form of presence" (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 353). In this conception of meaning, for Derrida, the notion of signification is at work. According to this conception, meaning is falsely assumed to be provided by a transcendental signified. A false sense of the 'presence' of the signified in the signifier seems to provide the signifier with meaning.

Derrida criticizes this understanding as the metaphysics of presence and as a "reduction of the structurality of structure" (*Writing and Difference* 353). Presumably, the structure that is 'reduced' by this false assumption of the presence of the signified is the structure of differences that, in Saussurean terms, provide value.

Analogously to the *signified* in linguistics, in the history of metaphysics, a *center* has always been assumed as present. Historically, these centers are substituted and receive different names, such as "essence, existence, substance, subject (…) transcendentality, consciousness, God, man" (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 353)

However, with the emergence of structural semiotics, a rupture occurred, and the presence of the metaphysical center was substituted not by a new center, but a function or a 'non-locus'—language. The resulting absence of a present center or the "absence of the transcendental signified" extended "the domain and the play of signification infinitely" (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 354). Here, the Saussurean influence becomes clear. What he calls the undivided—and therefore *meaningless*—'chaos' is provided with meaning by division. Likewise, for Derrida, after the theory of signification and the metaphysics of presence have been uncovered as naïve and as insufficient to explain the production of meaning, it is clear that "the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present *outside a system of differences*" (*Writing and Differenc*e 354, emphasis mine). This system of differences, amongst other things, is what Derrida calls 'différance'. As constitutive of meaning, différance, is "the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general" (Derrida, Margins of Philosophy 11).

Similar to Derrida and Saussure, Habermas gives an account of an outdated, traditional understanding of language. He tells us that traditionally in European philosophy, language was regarded as an instrument, allowing perceiving subjects to communicate pre-linguistically perceived objects through the means of designation (Cf. Habermas, "Liberating Power" 12f.). According to Habermas, Cassirer was the first to oppose this conception and precipitate the linguistic turn.[1] Cassirer claimed that language contains a productive and generative power primary and constitutive to the objects:

> The object is not that which is given, but that which must first be attained, not that which is determined in itself, but that which must be determined. Because, linguistically speaking, this fundamental

[1] "Cassirer was the first to perceive the paradigmatic significance of Humboldt's philosophy of language; and he thus prepared the way for my generation, the post-war generation, to take up the 'linguistic turn' in analytical philosophy and integrate it with the native tradition of hermeneutic philosophy" (Habermas, Liberating Power 12)

> determination takes place within the sentence, Humboldt's language philosophy asserts the primacy of the sentence over the word, just as Kant's transcendental logic asserted the primacy of the judgement over the concept. (Cassirer, 2003, 122)

This resonates with Saussure, who holds that "[t]here are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language" (Saussure, 112).

However, the departure from this concordance consists in Cassirer's emphasis of the primacy of the sentence over the word. If meaning in language is not derived from designated objects, but rather language constitutes and therefore precedes the objects, what can alternatively provide the meaning that is necessary to constitute the object? For Cassirer, the answer is provided by the Kantian notion of '*judgement*':

> All judgements are accordingly functions of unity among our representations, since instead of an immediate representation a higher one, which comprehends this and other representations under itself, is used for the cognition of the object, and many possible cognitions are thereby drawn together into one. (Kant A69/B94)

Essentially, a judgement is a synthesizing function of thought. It synthesizes its components according to a formal structure found in the transcendental subject. Linguistically speaking, a judgement itself, its unity and its making in the transcendental structures or modes of thought, provides its components with meaning. The functionality of judgements, for Kant, has its root in the transcendental subject. The basic functionalities of judgement include judgements of quantity, quality, modality and relation, each of which is again comprised of other, more particular judgements.

Of course, Habermas does not subscribe to a Kantian transcendental conception of meaning. However, what remains in Habermas is the essential idea that meaning is produced through an act of synthesis. But rather than the transcendental subject, for Habermas, it is the hermeneutics of communicative action that constitutes meaning. In an inter-subjective attempt of mutual understanding, meaning is developed. Its ingredients are provided by two pre-understanding subjects who shift as a result of their exposition to each other. Thus, essentially, the production of meaning is a synthetic process.

Having arrived at the center of the disagreement, we can identify Derridean meaning as resulting from différance, from a necessary play of differences, while for Habermas, meaning is produced through syntheses.

Derrida must believe in the hermeneutic incommensurability of distinct systems of meaning (e.g. the occident, an idiom etc.) in so far as they are, as such, differentiated. A full translation *between* such systems is rendered impossible (Cf. Derrida, "Relevant Translation" 176) due to the fact that meaning is constituted by an infinite play occurring *inside* such a system. For Derrida, this incommensurability leaves available as a starting point for a discussion of a system of a particular meaning only the inside. Furthermore, the infinite relativity constitutive of meaning renders it impossible to isolate specific elements to critique[2]. While Derrida does seem to consider e.g. single concepts, the overall methodology remains the same. Thus, as we will see, when criticizing any particular system of meaning, Derrida is only able to consider the functionality of the system as a whole.

[2] Defending the claim that Derrida *has* a certain agenda or critique–and, thus, a certain normativity–would exceed the limits of this essay.

In contrast, Habermas assumes hermeneutic commensurability of systems of meaning — after all, their having a meaning suggests that they each have been synthetically generated in communicative action once before. In an interview in the aftermath of September 11th, Habermas remarks:

> The constant deconstructivist suspicion of our Eurocentric prejudices [i.e. intercultural incommensurability] raises a counter-question: why should the hermeneutic model of understanding, which functions in everyday conversations and which since Humboldt has been methodologically developed from the practice of interpreting texts, suddenly break down beyond the boundaries of our own culture, of our own way of life and tradition? An interpretation must in each case bridge the gap between the hermeneutic preunderstanding of both sides-whether the cultural and spatiotemporal distances are shorter or longer, or the semantic differences smaller or larger. (qtd. in Borradori 36)

Contrary to Derrida's genealogical, retrospective analysis of the production of meaning, Habermas' orientation may strike us as particularly prospective. This results from the irreversibility of the hermeneutic synthesis. Once two parties engaged in communication achieve a mutual understanding, they cannot simply 'unsee'. Meaning and understanding can thus be altered and improved only by further communication. Habermasian critique thus starts from the *status quo* of a flawed system of meaning and insists on a corrective process of producing, through mutual attempts of understanding and communication, a reformed meaning.

2. Modernity

In the following, I will try, to the extent possible, to extrapolate from *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, Derrida's critique of modernity. This formulation is, in a way, misleading because Derrida, rather than focusing his critique on modernity alone, offers a total critique of the western episteme, culture and history. The controversy over *modernity* might present itself as such only from a Habermasian perspective[3]. As we shall see, modernity, if at all, deserves special attention only to the extent that it is a climax of the totality that is the history of metaphysics.

This history of metaphysics, for Derrida, is "a series of substitutions of center for center" (*Writing and Difference* 353). This series of centers includes "essence, existence, substance, subject (…) transcendentality, consciousness, God, man" (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 353.). Against "what has always been thought" (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 352), the center is not self-identical. Rather, it is constituted through opposition to an elusive, intangible alterity.

Despite an exceptional, because *historically specific* passage in which Derrida credits Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger with the "decentering, the thinking the structurality of structure" (*Writing and Difference* 354), this decentering "has always (…) already begun to work" (*Writing and Difference* 354). Thus, although decentering thought finds its most radical expression in those authors, it is perpetual and ahistorical.

However, for Derrida, a genuine decentralization is unfathomable and unattainable. This becomes evident in several passages: "We have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is foreign to this history [of metaphysics]; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form,

[3] Cf. Fraser, 35, emphasis mine: "*As Habermas sees it*, then, the issue between him and Foucault concerns their respective stances vis-à-vis modernity." The same applies to Habermas and Derrida: For Habermas, Derrida presents himself as "a participant in the philosophical discourse of modernity" (Habermas, "Philosophical Discourse" 181).

the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest" (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 354) and "the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself" (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 353).

The opposition of such a necessary center and an equally perpetual, decentralizing momentum thus pervades all of history. Then what makes the moment of Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Freud historically salient to Derrida?

There is some *prima facie* evidence for the fact that Derrida ascribes some 'destructive' capacity to these writers: metaphysical "concepts are not elements or atoms, and since they are taken from a syntax and a system, every particular borrowing brings along with it the whole of metaphysics." Every metaphysical concept, i.e. every concept, is monadically permeated by the whole of metaphysics. "This is what allows the destroyers [Heidegger, Nietzsche and Freud] to destroy each other reciprocally" (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 355 f.).

However, it is important to remark that Derrida does not stipulate the possibility of destruction *simpliciter*. Rather, destruction is possible only to the extent that it is both reciprocal and has as its object specific authorial vocabulary and not metaphysics as a whole. While Heidegger, Freud and Nietzsche can destroy *each other*, they cannot destroy metaphysical complicity in their own text, much less metaphysics as a whole. Any critical or destructive effort is dependent on metaphysical complicity, which "we cannot give up (…) without also giving up the critique we are directing against this complicity" (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 355). The linguistic subject is thus necessarily *subject to* metaphysical language.

In line with this, Derrida argues that "the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws and life his discourse cannot dominate absolutely" (*Of Grammatology* 158). This conception of language as the determinant for a writers' discourse echoes one aspect of the relationship between *langue* and *parole* that Barthes points out in his 1964 *Elements of Semiology*. In it, *langue* is defined as "essentially a collective contract which one must accept in its entirety if one wishes to communicate" (Barthes, 3). However, *langue* not only determines *parole,* but is also constituted by it. Without instances of speech, there would be no such an institution as language. Barthes therefore calls the *langue-parole* relationship 'genuinely dialectic'.

In slight tension with the idea of the subject as *subject to* language, Derrida, too, ascribes at least some degree of autonomy to the writing subject: A writer "uses them [language and logic] only by *letting himself*, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 158, emphasis mine). A writer "commands and (…) he does not command of the patterns of language" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 158). However, in articulating any such 'command', a writer necessarily adopts language and its commands.

In tension with the ahistoricity of Derrida's analysis, when proposing a new, eccentric methodology that does not seek 'full presence,' Derrida particularly contrasts it with interpretations centered around the (historical) "humanism and man" (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 370) and defines this new interpretation *ex negativo* as one that is not concerned with the "inspiration of a new humanism" (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 370). Beyond Derrida's totalizing critique, we can therefore identify a specific animosity against humanism. However, in light of his otherwise decisively ahistorical conception of the perpetual structure of center and periphery, we are justified to understand Derridean modernity as one of many elements of the totality that is the history of metaphysics.

One may ask many questions about the political content and implications of Derrida's take on the discrimination of concepts in the history of metaphysics. Is the history of metaphysics a history of 'mere' intra-linguistic discrimination? How does this justify the radical totalizing critique of western culture and language? Is Derrida's animosity to the history of metaphysics based on its connection to the "most original and powerful ethnocentrism (…) imposing itself on the world"— the logocentrism (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 3)?

I would like to focus on one of these many question in particular. One may wonder about the emancipatory rhetoric of Derrida. This rhetoric poses the question of the normative standpoint of his own project of dismantling humanism as a constituent of the logocentrism. Is emancipation (e.g. from intellectual authority) not a characteristically humanistic ideal? If this is so, what alternative rhetoric remains available for Derrida after his totalizing critique? Formulated in this way, the problem of legitimacy arises for Derrida, precisely because he performs a totalizing, as opposed to a differentiated, critique of modernity. This challenge is mitigated, however, by the fact that Derrida does not critique modernity and history from *the outside*— in fact, he does not believe that taking the outside as a starting point is possible. Therefore, he must not provide an alternative to the object of his critique. Instead, he embraces a 'rupture *from within'* that takes place as structuralism investigates the structurality of structure in the eccentric non-locus that is language. This avoids an incoherence between the impossibility of a critical standpoint on the 'outside' and a radical and totalizing critique of the inside. The problem of legitimacy, however, is not only a problem of formal coherence. Even the articulation of an enterprise such as a rupture from within requires resources whose necessary origin is the inside, again raising the problem of legitimacy.

Habermas strongly opposes the idea of a subjective rationality and forwards the idea of an *intersubjective*, communicative rationality, which can only be actualized in communicative processes *between* subjects. For Habermas, society remains suboptimal and prone to crises not due to the individual subject's failure to achieve rationality's full potential (e.g. due an instrumental rationality caught in a dialectic functionality of emancipation and oppression (Cf. Horkheimer, Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment 36). Rather, Habermas considers mutual communicative efforts on both sides of the communicative process as necessary to the realization of rationality and societal progression.

In the essay *Modernity versus Post-modernity,* Habermas invokes a conception of modernity first developed by Max Weber. Modernity is understood as a process of differentiation of religion and metaphysics into three autonomous spheres: science, morality and art. Those spheres are equipped with their own criteria of validity, namely, truth, rightness, and authenticity, or beauty. This differentiation is the condition which makes possible a process of institutionalization of the spheres. As their own institutions, they could then develop their own types of rationalities, the "cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical, and aesthetic-expressive," respectively (Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity" 8).

According to Habermas, the Enlightenment had two goals. The first goal was to achieve, by means of developing the spheres on the basis of their immanent logic, "objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art" (Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity" 9). Secondly, from rationalization, enlightenment also hoped to benefit everyday life, or, in Habermas' terms, the "lifeworld." This goal, however, was counteracted by modern professionalization and institutionalization of the different spheres which, as a consequence of their professionalization, with-

drew themselves from the "hermeneutics of everyday communication" (Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity" 9).

This differentiation and withdrawal, for Habermas, ground the problem of modernity. This historical characteristic of modernity — rationality's differentiation and withdrawal from 'hermeneutics of everyday communication'— seriously undermines the efficacy of rationality (which is always *communicative*) and thus prepares the grounds for social maladies.

Understanding modernity as an integral element of the history of metaphysics, Derrida's critique of it must be equally as totalizing as his critique of the history of metaphysics as a whole. As we have seen, the comprehensive scope of Derrida's considerations results directly from of his understanding of meaning. Consequently, Derrida's does not, unlike Habermas, uphold certain modern ideals (e.g. rationality), while critically reflecting upon other aspects of modernity (e.g. the differentiation of rationality and its withdrawal from 'hermeneutics of everyday communication'). Instead, Derrida "takes into consideration 'the Occident in its entirety" (Habermas, "Philosophical Discourse" 161). Derrida conceptualizes the object of his criticism as necessarily pervading history. Thus, he seeks a break, a rupture, or an opening from within.

Habermas proceeds in a more 'conservative' manner in the strictly literal sense that he appreciates and seeks to strengthen certain aspects of modernity. He seeks to utilize the emancipatory, productive power of modernity and to preserve certain ideals, while, in an ongoing effort, criticizing the enigmatic regressive elements (e.g. any obstructions in communicative processes). Habermas' approach thereby circumvents the challenge of the normative legitimacy, as his differentiated critique allows him to spare and occupy certain ideals as his own normative standpoint.

We owe credit to Habermas for offering a theory that regards tangible social circumstances. For example, I hold that, with Habermas, we can give a plausible explanation of a phenomenon of contemporary populism: its blatant denial of scientific facts. Recall that Habermas is concerned with the modern professionalization and, as a result, detachment of scientific, cognitive-instrumental rationality from "the hermeneutics of everyday communication." Fortunately, we need not speculate when it comes to this prediction. In *The Growing Inaccessibility of Science*, sociologist Donald P. Hayes measures a rising incomprehensibility of the vocabulary of prominent scientific journals to non-specialist between 1930-1990. In this article, he identifies both a differentiation and a professionalization of the scientific sphere. While recognizing the possibility that this is conductive to scientific progress, he holds that, at the same time, it "must surely diminish science itself. Above all, it is a threat to an essential characteristic of the endeavour — its openness to outside examination and appraisal" (Hayes 739 f.).

From a Habermasian perspective, Derrida, "[d]espite his transformed gestures, in the end … too, promotes only a mystification of palpable social pathologies; … he, too, lands at an empty, formulalike avowal of some indeterminate authority [of text as opposed to presence]" (Habermas, "Philosophical Discourse" 181).

Both theories present valuable conceptual tools to discern aspects of the history of the occident in general and modernity specifically. The contentious point seems to be the scope of analysis: Habermas presents a more tangible theory. This has the benefit that it can instruct a political strategy. However, Derrida does not seem primarily concerned with the usefulness of his theory nor does he seem to focus on the specific characteristics of modernity as a particular historical phase. Thus, perhaps, Derrida would simply disregard this kind of

criticism as inapplicable and based on a wrong measure. He would presumably accuse Habermas of misidentifying certain ideals as desirable, which are, instead, operative in an oppressive cultural economy.

However, by entertaining suspicions about every present aspect of culture, Derrida is guilty of an appropriation. As soon as something does as little as presenting itself, it is declared as part of a cultural economy, and thus as cooperative with a system of oppression against an unfathomable absent alterity. His theory does not conceptually allow for this Other to partake in presence, i.e. for autonomous representation. Conclusion

As we have seen, both Derrida and Habermas present their own conceptions of meaning, replacing the earlier, naïve model of signification. For Derrida, meaning emerges in a play of differences, or what he calls the différance. From this understanding of meaning, we have explained that the Derridean approach has to start from within (due to the income-mensurability of systems of meaning) and why it has to criticize the whole (due to the infinite play that is the différance). For Habermas, meaning emerges in a synthetic process of communicative action. He takes a prospective approach due to the one-directedness of synthetic processes, and is able to offer a differentiated critique of modernity due to the possibility of systematic improvement guaranteed by the possibility of effective communication. Thus their respective conceptions of meaning inform their approaches to modernity. Additionally, I have argued that we ought to adopt a Habermasian theory of modernity on the basis of its tangible orientation. Derridean theory of meaning has been criticized for its implausible political implications such as the insistence on the impossibility of trans-cultural communication.

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